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PRIA

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Panchayats and PRIA's Programmatic Interventions: Experiences since the 73rd Amendment

PRIA is an international center for learning and promotion of participation and democratic governance. It promotes people centered development initiatives within the perspective of participatory research, the essence of which is "Knowledge is power".

An area of PRIA's programmatic work is on Strengthening Institutions of Local Self Governance. The overarching mission of the Centre for local Self Governance is to contribute towards making Panchayati Raj and Municipal Bodies effective institutions of local self-governance. Our mission is to work towards promotion of policies, institutions and capacities that strengthen the voice and participation of the disenfranchised ones. We believe that informed, empowered citizens participate in deepening democracy with respect and tolerance for plurality and diversity. The rationale for the work is to enhance the potential for community participation and responsibility in their own development, that is, people centered and people-controlled development that PRIA and its partners have always promoted.

Strengthening Panchayat; Raj Institutions as institutions of local governance is a strategic focus for the work of PRIA and many of its partners. The Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organizations has worked together to evolve a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy over these years. Currently, PRIA and its Partners are working together with this evolving comprehensive and multi-dimensional intervention strategy to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions in 12 states, namely - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya. Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh.

The rationale for this intervention is to enhance people potential for community participation and responsibility in their own development, that is, people centred and people-controlled development that PRIA and its partners have: been promoting. The constitutional provisions provide new opportunities and possibilities for building up leadership from among women and dalits (SC/ ST). The Panchayati Raj Institution can also become the basis for further elaboration and strengthening of civil society in the country. The said intervention is multi-sectoral. We believe that only a strong, participatory, responsive and accountable government at the local level Can fulfill people's aspirations and their needs. The Panchayati Raj Institutions have to be supported by strong voluntary action. The people's bodies like Gram Sabhas need to be strengthened for a healthy co-operation between community organizations and Panchayats. Finally, governmental policies should create an enabling environment for Panchayati Raj Institutions to act as vibrant and thriving institutions of local-self governance.

PRIA's perspective on Local Governance (PRI and Municipalities)

1. Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities are to be viewed as institutions of local self-governance, and not as mere implementers of centrally determined development programmes. Bottom-up comprehensive planning, based on micro-planning exercise, is to be the basis of self-governance. Panchayati Raj institutions should not be allowed to become the third tier of development administration.
2. Emphasis must be placed on active participation in decision making by women and other weaker sections with a view to enhance their role, status and leadership in local self-governance.
3. Intervention in strengthening Local Self Governance should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SC, ST and Dalits.
4. Institutions of local self-governance should assert their access to and control over local natural and human resources being available with State and national governments.
5. Strengthening Institutions of local self-governance will entail clarity of their roles, systems of governance, accountability, transparency and interlinkages.

With PRIA's mission the Centre of Local Self-governance along with its NCRSO's have chalked out its mission towards promotion of policies, institutional and capacities that strengthen the voices and participation of the disenfranchised section of the society.

Local Self-governance Mission:

1. Large-scale interventions simultaneously aimed at:
 - ❖ Authentic information dissemination among citizens, Gram Sabha and Ward regarding their rights and responsibilities;
 - ❖ Building the capacities and mechanisms for effective exercise of leadership by women and dalits in elected fora (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad/Municipalities); Access to and control over resources by these bodies;
 - ❖ Micro-planning and local resource mobilization by these bodies as a vehicle for bottom-up development as well as instrument of accountability to the community
 - ❖ Public policy reform to create enabling environment for local bodies to act as effective self-governing institutions.

Repositioning of programmes in collaboration with the NCRSOs to assure:

 - ❖ Scaling up of impact in each state
 - ❖ Coverage of new states
 - ❖ Collaboration with all existing players to enhance impact
 - ❖ Motivation of new actors to take-up the issue of strengthening PRIs and municipalities
 - ❖ Large scale public education to promote participation in democratic governance,
 - ❖ Needs to be planned to energize and activate urban Nagarpalikas and Municipalities.
2. Motivation of citizens and activate participation in local governance by formation and knowledge support

3. Comparative programme of research and action need to be initiated to enable collective learning, capacity building and advocacy in the future.
4. Information sharing needs to be systematized and translated into local language and complemented by websites to address Panchayats as well as Municipality issues in an integrated perspective.

PRIA's work involved a range of actors: Regional Support Organisations, Voluntary Agencies and partners, government agencies and officials, Community Based Organisations and elected representatives in Panchayats. In this work, PRIA (and its partners) received very significant support from the Government of India, in the Ministry of Rural Development.

PRIA's strategic intervention (1995 - till date) may be divided into three phases. During its first phase covering the period 1995-97, it had five components: -

- Orientation, Training and Educational Support,
- Preparation and Dissemination of Educational Material
- Micro-planning or bottom-up planning
- Research and Documentation, and
- Influencing Government.

This intervention strategy was reviewed in 1997 and in the light of our field insights and experiences, the programme was restructured. In the second phase of ongoing intervention (1998-2000), more emphasis was laid on Direct Strengthening, Promotional activities, Research and Advocacy and Networking. The intervention was planned so as to have a multiplying effect. Three strata of target group were identified. The first stratum consisted of persons from PRIA and NCRSOs, who work with persons from local VAs, who form the second stratum. The third stratum constitutes the elected Panchayati Raj Institution members (as well as the Gram Sabha members). Local VA's closely interacts with the third stratum on a regular basis. By the end of the second phase, PRIA and its partners have covered more than 15,000 elected representatives of about 1,500 gram Panchayats, 600 Panchayat Semites in more that 100 Zilla Panchayats by involving about 300 voluntary organisations.

With the third phase, begins a new programme for improving the functioning of PRIs in India. The programmatic priorities include: Scaling up to achieve minimum critical mass in the states where the programme have been implementation and its extension to new states, on an intensive scale, like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Maharashtra and West Bengal. Inclusion of 5 Schedule areas which have been covered by the Extension of Panchayati Raj Act, 1996, is also sought to be part of the design of intervention. The programme activities at the state level will be done at three levels. The list will be intensive area of activity which will be carried out in a field based unit at the block level. In a given block the programme would cover all the Gram Panchayats through the strategies detailed below. The second area of activity will be more extensive work covering a large area as well as other stakeholders. The third area of activity will be research and advocacy e.t the State level. Besides the state level intervention, the national programme will include strengthening the National Resource Centre and undertaking Research and Policy Advocacy. Some of the experiences in our joint endeavors since the enactment be summed as :

The Panchayati Raj Experience since the 73rd Amendment

1. Participatory Democracy

Panchayati Raj (in the post 73rd Amendment set up) signifies a shift in the mode of governance, as well as a deepening of democracy as people/citizens experience it. In the pre-amendment era, citizens experienced, representative democracy in terms of periodic exercise of the ballot to elect an MLA/MP. Their day to day contact with democratic governance was confined to reading newspaper reports/listening to radio reports/viewing telecasts about the proceedings of legislatures. MLA's/MPs were viewed as remote, distant figures, not easily approachable. Governance was viewed largely in terms of centralised, top-down decision making not amenable to democratic values of transparency, accountability and participation in decision making. The delivery of services and funds in the centralised, top-down mode, engendered a sense of dependency at the cost of local initiative and innovations.

In stark contrast to the above experience, Panchayati Raj Institutions (even in the limited period of 5/6 years since the 73rd Amendment) clearly represent

- Direct participatory democracy in terms of enabling citizens to attend Gram Sabhas and call to account the Gram Panchayats, not only in terms of voting periodically;
- An opportunity for participation in the decision-making process for those sections of rural society, who were at the periphery/margins of the communities (especially women, dalits and adivasis) in terms of social opportunities and economic status;
- An assurance that the electoral verdicts would not be overturned/over ridden by arbitrary/discretionary administrative fiat.

There is today, an environment where PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) are recognised as an integral part of the edifice of the vibrant democracy in India. The fact that we have recently witnessed mass popular enthusiasm and participation in the second elections to PRIs in Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh despite considerable hurdles, offer concrete evidence that the widely perceived lack of political will can be overwhelmed by the urge to participate in governance. The scale of the election campaigns, the innovative methods of campaigning, the massive turnout of voters, are confirmation that Panchayati Raj is of special value to the people whose interface with institutionalised governance has been so discouraging and exclusionary. This should help dispel skepticism about potential of grassroots democracy. Democracy decentralisation seems to go hand in hand with participation at the community level and with more efficient government.

What is implicated in the process, is the reversal of the view that PRIs are mere organs of implementation of agendas, which are centrally/externally determined.

2. Women Participation in Public Affairs

The other significant area of impact relates to the widening of political space for participation by women and other socially marginalised sections of society. A study of Women's Leaderships in PRI's (PRIA, 1999) covering six states noted that:

- 25% of elected women representatives observed a visible change in their status within their family after they had been elected
- About 60% of the women (elected representatives) said that they would encourage women to stand for elections;
- A similar number of women (60%) were contemplating contesting PRI elections again.

The change in the perceptions of the elected women representatives is staggering given the limited opportunities available in a patriarchal social system. Perhaps, equal, if not more significant, is the impact that women representatives have created by providing role models for other women: like a small pebble cast into a still pond, the ripples would persist and widen. Case studies documented (PRIA and NCRSO's: Participatory Bottom - up Planning: Report on National Workshop 1998) have already established the fact that most women saw their work within Panchayats as empowering and as a period of self-growth. Similarly, new leadership of Dalits has emerged at the grassroots level by breaking the traditional barrier of the caste system.

3. Social Mobilisation, Local Development, Social Transformation

PRIs have shown the potential for sustainable development through mass participation and transparency in local planning. In states like Kerala, West Bengal, etc. PRIs have successfully harnessed popular participation to develop a momentum which ensures that elected representatives (legally responsible for deciding on local spending priorities) acted in accordance with people's wishes. The people, themselves, were involved not only in making demands but also in taking decisions on how to improve their lives and their communities.

There are several examples all over India, of PRIs being able to facilitate/mobilise local resources for locally determined priorities. There is also evidence of PRIs being able to shift resource allocation from obvious infrastructure projects or service sector activities to investments. which enabled increases in production and productivity. The participation in the decision making regarding local planning through PRIs have helped to inject a sense of confidence in die people's own abilities and capacities to negotiate outcomes with higher levels of governance as well as other institutional frameworks.

Finally, the impact of PRIA and its partners work in Strengthening self-governance can be assessed in terms of its contribution in influencing the present discourse on devolution and decentralization of Governance, of the need to enable participation in development. Several State Governments have taken initiatives to make block transfer of funds to Gram Panchayats so that they can undertake expenditure in accordance with locally determined priorities. In West Bengal, the entire process of land reforms (and the consequent social transformation) was piggy backed on vibrant Panchayats. Even those who view PRI's in instrumentalist terms, recognize that efficient delivery of services and the accountability of the delivery system cannot be seen independently of each other, and, that Panchayats offer an institutional frame work for linking the two. Local development projects (donor supported) in their search for sustainability of developments processes, have been focusing on Panchayats as the continuing institutional framework which combines the possibilities of political change with potential for accountability and transparency.

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