



Knowledge. Voice. Democracy.

PRIA

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Village Democracy and Civil Society

Experiences from PRIA's Programmatic Interventions

I. Introduction

India is a country of kaleidoscopic diversity. Its ancient and rich civilisation has been shaped by various combinations of geo-political, economic, social and demographic forces, which produced a rich variety of institutions, social movements, traditions, system of belief and practices. This Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic of one billion people living in 25 States and 7 Union Territories is governed in terms of the Constitution, which is federal in structure with unitary features. The traditional social norms coexist with liberal democratic institutions in an uneasy, ambiguous, and contradictory relationship. One of the major limitations of Indian parliamentary democracy has been its centralised nature. The centralised democracy in India has failed and pendulum has moved towards participatory and responsive government. Indians want a participatory and responsive democratic government. PRIA's study on Civil Society in the New Millennium discerns a shared dream of citizens of India. Indians want peace, education and socio-economic security. They want to act and act responsibly, towards shaping such a society and governance.

About 75 % of India's population live in more than half a million villages. Village communities and their organisations have been in existence in India for over centuries. In olden days, Panchayats were functional institutions of grassroots governance in almost every village. The village Panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial. However, the autonomy of Panchayats gradually disappeared owing to many reasons. But the recent Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 which came into force on 24th April 1993, was meant to provide constitutional sanction to Panchayats and establish 'democracy at grassroots level as it is at the State level or National level.¹³¹ Except 3 north-eastern states (having tribal councils) and two urban UTs, all the States/UTs coming under the purview of this Act have amended their Panchayat Acts in conformity with the Central Act. The Gram Sabha or village assembly has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system. There are three tiers of Panchayats at village (Gram Panchayat - GP), intermediate (Panchayat Samiti - PS) and district (Zilla Parishad - ZP) levels. The states having population not exceeding 2 million have not constituted the Panchayat at intermediate level. As a result, at present, there are about 3.4 million representatives of Panchayats at all levels comprising 31,98,554 at the village level, 1,51,412 at the intermediate level and 15,935 at the district level. These members represent 227,698 Gram Panchayats, about 6,000 Panchayat Samitis and about 500 Zilla Parishads. All the seats in a Panchayat at every level are filled by elections from respective territorial constituencies. Not less than one-third of the total seats for membership as well as office of chairpersons of each tier have been reserved for women. Reservation for weaker castes and tribes (SCs, STs and Backward - Dalits) have been provided at all levels in proportion to their population in the Panchayats. To supervise, direct and control the regular and smooth elections to Panchayats, a State Election Commission has been constituted in every State and UT. The Act has ensured constitution of a State Finance Commission in every State/UT, for every five years, to suggest measures to strengthen finances of PRIs. To promote bottom-up-planning, the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district has been accorded constitutional status. An indicative list of 29 items has been given in Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. Panchayats are expected to play an effective role in planning and implementation of works related to these 29 items. The spirit of the Constitution visualises Panchayats as institutions of self-governance. However, giving due consideration to the federal structure of our polity, most of the financial powers and authorities to be endowed on Panchayats have been left at the discretion of concerned State Legislature. Consequently, the powers and functions vested in PRIs vary from State to State.

The constitutionally decentralised institutions have come into being. But they can't be a solution to one and all ills of governance. The reality is quite harsh. The distribution of rural assets and powers is heavily skewed in India - the bottom 39 % of rural households (belonging to lower castes) own only 5% of all assets, while the top 5 % own 46 %. The literacy level among SC/ST and women is quite low. Rigid patriarchal structure inhibits women participation in public affairs. Moreover, majority of the elected representatives are first timers with little or no prior knowledge of functioning of PRIs, Most of the women's PRI members are illiterate and have to comply with social taboos and patriarchal values They are 'expected' to be shy and submissive resulting in weak articulation skills. So it is not easy for the rural weaker section to actively participate in development process. Also at local levels, the powers held by individuals have traditionally always superseded the limits legitimised by social institutions. If the people and their institutions are not active, the state and its institutions, whether in centralised or decentralised form. are forced to assume leadership of the people. Under these conditions, people's ability to exercise options in civil society interactions and within social hierarchies often becomes the requisite condition for the local government to be responsive and accountable. The present paper is an attempt to capture the contours of relationship between civil society and the institutions of local self-governance in India. It is an attempt to share some of PRIA's rich and varied experiences related to institutions of local self-governance in general and their interactions with civil society organisations in particular.

2. PRIA Panchayats and Civil Society

PRIA is an international centre for learning and promotion of participation and democratic governance. It promotes people centred development initiative, within the perspective of participatory research. PRIA promotes deeper understanding of the mosaic of civil society actors and enhances their contributions in democratic governance in society. It also contribute towards making Panchayati Raj and Municipal bodies as effective institutions of local self-governance, For the last five years, PRIA , Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs) and other partners of PRIA have undertaken strategic intervention for strengthening PRJs in 12 States. These States are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh- accounting for about two-third of the rural population of India. The rationale for this intervention is to enhance the potential for community participation and responsibility in their own development, that is, people centred and people-controlled development that PRIA has always promoted. The constitutional provisions provide new opportunities and possibilities for building up leadership from among women and Dalits (SC/ST). The PRIs can also become the basis for further collaboration and strengthening of civil society in the country. A broad framework of strategic intervention was developed on the following principles:

1. The PRIs are to be viewed as institutions of local self-governance, not as mere implementors of centrally determined development programmes. Bottom up planning, based on micro-planning exercise, is to be the basis of self-governance. The PRIs 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. Interventions in strengthening PRIs should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SC/ST and Dalits.
4. The PRIs should assert their access to and control over natural and human resources as well as other development resources available with the state and the national government.
5. Strengthening PRIs will entail clarity of their roles, systems of governance, accountability, transparency and inter-linkages.

(a) Strengthening Voluntary Action and PRIs

One of the primary strategies of PRIA's work comprise of capacity building. It entails direct strengthening of capacities of a citizen, citizen organisations, voluntary development organisations, support organisations and network and coalitions of such organisations to democratise democracy at local level, a variety of local civil society organisations have been involved in strengthening PRIs. In many areas, successful conscientisation, group building and promotion of local leadership among marginalised sections have already been achieved through the efforts of voluntary organisations and activists. As a result, these voluntary agencies (VAs) and activists were enabled and mobilised to play a more direct role in the promotion and strengthening of PRIs. Therefore, building capacity and encouraging participation of such VAs and activists is an important strategic intervention.

PRIA began a programme of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in collaboration with its partners Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs) in mid-1995 in 9 states of the country. This Phase-I lasted two years, and built on the initial exploratory work undertaken by PRIA following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated the Panchayati Raj Institutions as bodies of local self-governance. Phase-II of the programme was launched in September 1997 following a review of Phase-I. New strategies, deeper breakage and broader partnership characterised this joint programme in Phase-II. It covered 12 states, nearly 1500 gram panchayats, more than 15000 elected representatives, working with six Regional Support Organisations and other key partners.

PRIA's Strategic Review mandated a long-term commitment towards strengthening Local Self-governance (LSG). A programmatic review" was conducted during June-August 1999 to identify next steps in the elaboration of the programme for strengthening local self-governance. Discussions on the findings and recommendations of Panchayati Raj Institution review have since been carried out by PRIA and NCRSOs.

The Review established the relevance of the mix of intervention strategies carried out in the programme during the past two years. The uneven development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in different states (arising largely out of the socio-political environment and civil society engagements) necessitates a more judicious and synergistic mix of these various interventions. The range of interventions available to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions as institutions of local self-governance need to be applied differently in different contexts and stages of development of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Four broad categories of interventions are designed to respond to the programmatic priorities and strategies for strengthening PRIs. These categories are: 1. Promoting Public Ownership (Information Dissemination, Public Education, Linking Civil Society, and Accountability), 2. Building Capacity (Gram Sabha, Elected Representatives, New Leadership, Structural Functioning, Negotiating with Administration, and Networking), 3. Local development (Micro-planning, Resource Use, Matching Funds, and Managing Services), and 4. Research and Advocacy (Monitoring Strategies, Online Feedback, Policy Implementation, Policy reform, Creating Enabling Environment and knowledge Building). In the following pages, we will discuss some of our experiences related to PRIs.

(b) Strengthening People's Participation

In every village there is a people's body called Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. It is the only forum which provides opportunities to all the adult villagers to directly participate and suggest what can and need to be done for their own village and how. Only a strong Gram Sabha can ensure the acquisition of the capacity in the many to regulate authority. If not made accountable to the community, Gram Panchayats have a tendency to become Sarpanch (chairperson of GP) Panchayats. Gram Sabha serves to keep Gram Panchayat accountable.

Gram Panchayats across the states have been constitutionally mandated to ensure that the Gram Sabha meetings be held at least twice a year. But in reality, in most of the places, Gram Sabha meetings are held on paper only (3) Most of the GS members are unaware of their rights and responsibilities as GS members. Many of them can't distinguish between the GS and the GP of the village. It has been also found that villagers in general are not informed about the GS meeting. Even if informed, women may not participate due to social customs. Lack of a common venue for the meetings (and the distance to be travelled to attend the GS meeting) where GS is too large is also a barrier in people's participation in GS meeting.

Information dissemination to the people, the process of Bottom-up-Planning or Micro-Planning are some of the most effective ways of strengthening participation of people in their own development. The local civil society organisations play a vital role in strengthening people's participation (in local governance) through these processes. It also helps civil societies to strengthen their voice in people centered people's development.

As per Article 243-G, Panchayats are constitutionally mandated to prepare plans of economic development and social justice. Thus, every Panchayat has to prepare a plan taking into account local needs and local conditions. The whole process develops a framework of agreement within the Gram Sabha about development priorities. Villagers sit together to prioritise the community problems, prepare a list of resources available and ask the Gram Panchayat to implement the plan. Since the Plan is implemented year around, it provides a more rigorous framework for the Panchayat to be accountable to Gram Sabha. A plan, facilitated by local organisations and local community groups like youth and Women groups, allows villagers to scrutinise and judge the performance of their GP.

These organisations and GS play constructive role in augmenting Panchayat resources by enabling Panchayats to mobilise internal resources as well as to negotiate effectively with the government to provide resources to implement the village plans.

VDCs, Local VA and Kehar Gram Panchayat

Kehar is gram panchayat in Mandi district of H.P. PRIA initiated micro planning process in this Gram Panchayat with the help of a RTDC, a local VA. Being active in the area, the RTDC has close linkages with community organisations of Kehar. This Linkage facilitates the whole process smoothly. It also ensured that the process involve all the sections of Kehar Gram Sabha.

With the help of RTDC the village Development Committees (VDCs) for each ward of the Gram Panchayat were constituted. These VDCs comprised of 15-20 members from different groups of Gram Sabha. PRIA, RTDC, VDCs and Gram Panchayat have collaborated to influence district government. The government has provided resources and the plan is being implemented. During the whole process, the GP as well as CSOs acted in close affinity to strengthen each day.

(c) Collaboration with Community Groups

In every village there are a number of functional groups like Self Help Group (SHG), Community Based Organisation (CBO), Village Development Committees (VDC). Their interaction, co-operation and conflict with local bodies is an area of current debate in India. Besides statutory bodies like GP and GS, there are a number of non-statutory participatory groups in almost every village. These groups may be of two types. One emerging from community's own need and initiative, that is, community driven groups like Youth Groups, Mahila Mandals (Women Groups) or even Caste Panchayat. Other type of groups is those which are created by external agencies/projects/programmes, usually, for a specified period. These groups possess specialised expertise and have a close linkage with their creators (external agencies). For example, Govt. of India's project District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) created a Village Education Committee (VEC).

For effective collaborations of community organisations and PRIs, the GS should be made aware, active and strong. In every Gram Panchayat, there are sector specific standing committees like Health committee, Education Committee, Social-justice Committee, etc. Each committee is headed by Sarpanch or a member of the GP. An institutional mechanism may be developed so that these specialised organisations have close interaction with specialised standing committees of GPs. In this regard, project-based committees should be strengthened to be more effective, autonomous and participatory. The civil society groups, like CBOs and NGOs, can play a very effective role in facilitating collaboration between community groups and the PRIs. However, our experiences in 9 States reveal that there is no structured institutional mechanism to build a relationship between these two types of bodies. Some policy changes are required in this regard.

d) Policy Advocacy for Enabling Environment

Public and policy environment for people's participation in governance is inadequate, if not downright hostile. Positive support from Union and State governments are required for genuine and functional devolution of financial resources and authorities to PRIs. It requires intense advocacy efforts to influence policy changes at Union and State levels. Policy advocacy entails influencing policies from the vantage point of enabling participation and empowerment of marginalised. It comprises of

Kaliram is a village in Kaithal block of Haryana. The Sarpanch of this GP, an educated man, is a member of VEC. Both the Headmaster of the village primary school and the Sarpanch take initiative in enhancing enrolment of children in the school. Sarpanch took the initiative to organise competition for school going children and also sponsored Ma-Beti Mela (Mother-Daughter Fair), organised at the school. Both the events were successful in enhancing community participation in village education. Sarpanch monitors the attendance of teachers and teachers are not resentful of this fact. They feel that this monitoring should be adopted in all schools. However, in Khandalva village of the same block, there is no linkage between GP and VEC. The school is in very poor condition and the indifference of GP also inhibits village participation in school affairs.

systematic and ongoing monitoring of existing policies, their implementation and reformation. PRIA promotes citizen advocacy not just professional advocacy.

To advocate changes in government policy, in addition to public pressure, macro level well documented 'proofs of ground reality' become imperative. So, PRIA and NCRSOs are engaged in systematic documentation of different processes. The participatory research aiming at building capacity of the people and CSOs are regularly undertaken. Simultaneously the findings of these studies are widely disseminated to create pressure (from different quarters) for required policy changes. The recent study on the Status of Functions and Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India sensitised citizens, media, NGOs, bureaucrats, ministers and political parties about rather weak status of finances of PRIs. A number of pro-Panchayats initiatives were taken by different governments. Even Planning Commission of India, as admitted by its Deputy Chairman in a letter to PRIA, was influenced by this study to create a task force in the Commission to review rural development schemes of the government. PRIA in her role of the point person for a high-powered task force (sub-group) constituted by Government of India, has made some concrete recommendations for strengthening of Gram Sabha. These recommendations, when accepted by the government, will go a long way in strengthening local self-governance and consequently the civil society in India.

3. Lessons Learnt:

India is the largest democracy of the world. It signifies, among other things, the aspirations of our people and the vision of our leaders. True democracy emphasises decentralisation of governance. The institutions of local self-governance should be strengthened to be participatory, responsive, transparent and accountable. For these citizens should be educated and people's bodies like Gram Sabhas must be strengthened to act as custodians of grassroots democracy. The capacities of PRI members should to be enhanced through training and workshops. The top-down model tuned government officials need to be sensitised to the new realities of local self-governance.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions should be given control, responsibility and authorities over all the resources lying in their geographical jurisdictions. They should be held accountable for local matters by their voters, the Gram Sabha. It must be ensured that women and Dalits participate actively and effectively in the local self-governance. The state-led and other types of project committees should collaborate (not be played up as competitors) with PRIs and PRIs should provide a space to these community organisations.

The NGOs have played a very effective role in making people more and more conscious of their roles and rights. Through processes like micro-planning, special emphasis on weaker sections, participatory research studies and advocacy, people's participation has greatly enhanced in 'intervened' areas. However, the sustained and more aggressive interventions are needed to deepen democratic local self-governance keeping state as a reference. Research and policy advocacy have to be promoted on an extensive and sustained basis to improve different aspects of local self-governance. The whole intervention needs to be scaled up. And it requires a scaling up of creative individual and collaborative efforts of Civil Society and the Government to strengthen local self-governance.

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