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**PRI**

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# Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: Impact of Participatory Planning Interventions

## 1.0 Background:

1.1 As has been already mentioned, the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act, has for the first time attempted to turn planning on its head by giving power to the people so as to ensure their involvement and participation in the development of their panchayat. This bottom-up planning or participatory Planning tries to involve the participation of Gram Sabha in the planning process, provides an exercise for mobilisation and allocation by local community, builds the scope for negotiation with the authorities, helps in developing a framework for ensuring accountability of the elected representatives, and give options for horizontal expansion. This was the rationale for Participatory Planning as a strategic intervention undertaken by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and the Network of Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs).

1.2 During the course of our activities in Panchayati Raj during the past two and a half years, quite a few impacts have been visible. This paper has tried to highlight some of the important impacts under the following four heads:

- (1) At the Panchayati Raj Institutions level
- (2) At the Community Level
- (3) At the Voluntary Development Organisation's level
- (4) At the Government's Level

## 2.0 PRI Level

### 2.1 More awareness of roles and responsibilities:

There was found to be an increased awareness amongst the Gram Panchayat members regarding their roles and responsibilities as illustrated by the following:

2.1.1 In Jamunia Tank panchayat of Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh sub-committees of the panchayat were already existing with given roles and responsibilities but were non-functional. One year after the intensive intervention of the NGO, Samarthan, the Panchayati Raj members of the weaker sections raised the issue of the improper functioning of these sub-committees and called a meeting. A meeting was held in which all members attended and the responsibilities were freshly given with a view to make the committees functional.

### 2.2 Increase in understanding of roles and responsibilities:

2.2.1 In the whole process of bottom-up planning efforts have been made to involve women in the decision-making process. In Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh, our initial efforts taught us that women representatives are not participating in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings due to culture, tradition and attitude of the people. Gradually, the efforts were made towards: -

- (i) Organising separate meetings and discussion with women only
- (ii) Promoting local women leadership
- (iii) Promoting network of women panchayat representatives

The effort organised women of the villages in coming together for attending Gram Sabha meetings. The increase in the presence of women prompted them to raise issues like drinking water, health facilities, etc. Building capacities of promoting the network is helping them in having access to the information because the line department and administration are regular invitees in these meetings.

2.2.2 Similarly in Dhana panchayat of Haryana where micro planning initiatives were being undertaken, it was observed that initially the participation of women representatives was very low. The male representatives would sit together and take decisions amongst themselves for the

development of the village. Priya committed to strengthen the capacities and participation of the weaker sections, made several attempts to firstly sensitise the male members to involve the women representatives in their meetings and discussions and secondly mobilised the women representatives to participate more in panchayat affairs along with their male counterparts. It was noticed that, gradually the women representatives began to get involved with the planning process and in the June Gram Sabha meeting Nasib Kaur, a woman panchayat representative of Dhana, stood in front of the entire village and raised several pertinent issues along with the demand that these should be put on the record so that the Sarpanch is held accountable to solve them. She now participates in all meetings and discussions along with the other panchayat members, expressing her opinions and taking initiative whenever required.

## **2.3 Changing Priorities**

It was observed that most of the panchayats prior to any external intervention, viewed development in the limited sense of infrastructural development i.e. construction of roads and buildings primarily. However, it has now been observed that those very Panchayats are now taking up social issues and having a lot of discussions around the cause and effect of these, for example

2.3.1 The Naikela and Durgawas Panchayats of Rajasthan have now started taking a lot of interest the subject of Rural Primary Education and Rural Health. Earlier this subject was not discussed nor did it form a part of the agenda for their Gram Panchayat meetings.

2.3.2 During the process of planning the people of Kehar panchayat, Himachal Pradesh, had started raising social issues like caste, class, structure etc. Collective discussion and analysis had also led the Sarpanch to increasingly take up more of these cases and resolve conflicts. Both at his and if necessary, outside.

## **2.4 Increased Participation of PRI mem~ belonging to the weaker sections:**

2.4.1 In several areas of intervention like Jamunia Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh and Khetavas Panchayat in Haryana, it was observed that the elected, representatives belonging to the weaker sections were participating more actively in meetings. In Khetavas, the representatives of the sapera (snake charmer community) for the first-time not only attended but also brought forth the various problems of their ward e.g. electricity in the GP meetings. Prior to the micro-planning exercise in that panchayat, their participation was minimal but now they participate actively in panchayat functioning and decision making.

## **2.5 Implementation of plan:**

Panchayat members are now actively pursuing the implementation of the plan which had emerged from the intensive involvement of the NGO, Panchayat member and the Community.

2.5.1 In Dhana Panchayat, Salawas Block, Haryana the Sarpanch and other PRI members went about actively mobilising both internal and external resources in order to implement the first priority given in the plan, i.e. additional Water taps in the village. Surprisingly, this issue was raised by women and was made the first priority in the list of developmental work to be carried out. The Sarpanch being a male, upper caste member took great initiative to implement this priority. Earlier, there was only few people in the panchayat, now there are 16.

2.5.2 Similarly, the Panchayati Raj members of Jamunia Panchayat, sat together and identified various resources both within and outside the village to address the problem of drainage in their Panchayat. They were successful in getting some funds from the District Administration as well as pooling in some of their own resources for the completion of this project

## **2.6 Increased skills/capacity**

2.6.1 In Kerala where similar micro-planning initiatives had taken place, the Panchayat members were observed to have developed skills of facilitation in Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings in order to enhance participation and discussion as opposed to one-way communication style that was adopted earlier by the Sarpanch and Ward members in these meetings.

2.6.2 The Sarpanch of Dhana panchayat, Haryana who was actively involved in the entire micro-planning process demonstrated this increased capacity to plan when he went to the District authority with a full project plan giving details of the number of moms in the schools, number of teachers. rate of dropouts, etc. The purpose being he and his panchayat wished to improve the school and make it more conducive for learning.

## **2.7 Ability to Negotiate:**

2.7.1 Active involvement in the planning process has increased the confidence and negotiation power of the panchayat members as in the case of the women Sarpanch of Jamunia Tank panchayat who, along with the Head Master, demanded the facility of middle school in her Panchayat. As the school building belongs to the panchayat, they threatened to disallow the government to run the school till the fifth class unless middle school was provided. Their demand was met by the district authorities resulting in a functional middle school (till standard VII) in their panchayat.

2.7.2 Similarly in Dhana Panchayat, the Sarpanch and Panchayat members negotiated with the government to employ their local youth in implementation of government schemes as opposed to hiring contractors as they had now become aware of the large levels of unemployment in their panchayat.

## **2.8 Recognition by neighbors:**

2.8.1 In Kerala, the members have begun to give utmost recognition of the participatory philosophy and participatory planning process, so much so that two more panchayats have approached the NGO (from Wynad district) to assist them in carrying out similar initiatives in their panchayats. In Madhya Pradesh, the neighboring panchayat Raipura, inspired by the activities in Yamuna Tank has taken the initiative of forming youth groups to construct an internal road.

## **3.0 Community Level**

### **3.1 Increase in attendance and participation in the Gram Sabha meetings: Raising issues of accountability**

3.1.1 The Gram Sabha members of Kehar Panchayat, Himachal Pradesh has decided on a beneficiary list in the Gram Sabha meeting. Due to some reasons, few of the names in the list prepared by the Gram Sabha members changed when it reached the block office. In the next Gram Sabha meeting, the community demanded an explanation from the Panchayat for the change in the beneficiary list.

### **3.2 Formation and functioning of voluntary groups**

During the process of micro-planning and after, several voluntary groups were formed who took initiative and responsibilities to plan follow-up on the emerging plan.

3.2.1 In Dhana Panchayat, Haryana, a volunteers group was formed having representation of both men and women from different wards. This group played a key role in the entire participatory planning process. During the follow-up it was decided that they would start a village information centre in the

panchayat and different individuals of the community took responsibility to organise and run this information centre.

3.2.2 As a result of SSK 's intervention in Pipra panchayat (District Kushinagar) in U.P., Youth Groups have been formed and taken the initiative to build roads, school, etc. with local contribution. This is in the process of being built.

### 3.3 Local Contribution and Initiative:

3.3.1 The community members in Dboladhatta village, Durgavas panchayat, Rajasthan, took the initiative to collect Rs.2000 for maintaining and running of the village school, thus demonstrating a feeling of ownership towards their own development

3.3.2 Despite delay in panchayat elections in Bihar, the Aam Sabha of Belhi panchayat, Bocham Block, Bihar, had undertaken the participatory planning process and made a plan for their panchayat. They had also managed to get the Block authorities to accept their plan and followed-up its implementation.

3.3.3 Electricity being one of the low priorities emerging in the Dhana micro planning, the community members along with the Sarpanch took the initiative to install electricity poles in the different wards of the panchayat when there was Jess staff available from the electricity department for this work.

### **3.4 Clarity on different issues**

3.4.1 It was observed that the micro-planning process led to clarity on several issues like in Kerala, where there was a severe water problem and the panchayat was under the impression that this problem was due to shortage of water in that area. Several discussions led to the clarity that the problem was not due to the shortage of water but a problem of management the pipe had been damaged at several places and the community thereafter took the responsibility to repair and maintain the water source.

### **3.5 Negotiation/Fight against corruption:**

3.5.1 In Jamunia Tank Panchayat, Himachal Pradesh, the community took action against the line department officials who were demanding a share in a latrine building project. An inquiry was conducted and things were accordingly put back in order.

3.5.2 Similarly in Dhana panchayat, Haryana the community observed that the quality of cement that was being provided by the block to build latrines was not good. Community members along with the help of the panchayat returned the cement ~ and stopped work. As a result, new good quality cement was sent by the block authority for proper completion of the task.

### **3.6 Change in perceptions**

3.6.1 In almost all the States where Participatory Bottom-up Planning initiative was carried out, it was observed that the community was beginning to discuss issues related to health, education, caste, gender, conflicts, encroachment, unemployment etc. as opposed to earlier discussions which revolved among infrastructural development only.

## **4.0 Voluntary Agency Level:**

### **4.1 Horizontal Spread**

4.1.1 It was observed that in several of the states where the RSOs had carried out micro-planning initiative, other voluntary organisations were coming forward to start similar initiative in different areas. The Pradhan of Kehar panchayat, Himachal Pradesh, who also has a NGO called Rural Technology and Development Centre (RTDC) is interested in carrying out participatory bottom up planning in five other neighboring panchayats.

In Haryana, a voluntary organisation operations in another district is seeking educational support from PRIA to do a similar exercise in his area of intervention. Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh, many voluntary agencies are interested in starting similar process in their areas of intervention. Large state level programmes like DPEP have taken the initiative to involve Samarthan to start similar processes in a few districts. In Bihar, several organisations are requesting SSK to conduct training programmes in micro-planning for their functionaries. Other VAs have also started these initiatives in 12 districts of Bihar.

4.1.2 Similarly in Rajasthan, insights from sector specific plans carried out by UNNATI have been used by other local organisations like MMVS in their project areas. SSK in U.P. had trained 48 VAs in the State and recognising their skill in the area of training organisations/ institutions like State Institute of Rural Development, Lucknow, Centre of Concern for Child Labour, New Delhi, etc. invited SSK as a resource organisation to provide training on the new Act to elected Panchayat Representatives.

### **5.0 Government level**

In many of the states where participatory bottom-up planning has been carried out. the Government has given due recognition to the process as well the emerging plans. Since the Government is an important stake holder in the entire process efforts were made to involve them continuously.

5.1 Jamunia Tank Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh was given an award of Rs 25,000 for their efforts by the district administration. Prior to this effort, visits by the District Collector and other officials was very infrequent but now they frequently visit the area and even send other senior officials to visit this Panchayat.

5.2 In Dhana Panchayat, Haryana. visits of block officials was a rare phenomenon but after the intervention block officials are regularly invited and visit the area. The sarpanch who was a shy and quiet man, has developed immense confidence and demands the presence of officials to his panchayat for Gram Sabha meetings and other developmental activities. Even the panchayat secretary, who rarely visited the area is now coming at least once a month for maintenance of the records."

5.3 Similarly, in Rajasthan, the Adult Education Department has adopted the participatory planning methodology at the block. level.

5.4 In Bihar. several individuals who have received training in this process have become resource persons of Government's training programmes in their respective districts.

5.5 SSK. in collaboration with the networking agency, U.P. Voluntary Action Network (UPVAN), in Uttar Pradesh had a meeting with concerned Government officials at Lucknow in which their efforts in Panchayati Raj were enunciated. Their role was given due regard and the Government officials evinced an interest to collaborate with SSK in future. Negotiations between the two are continuing.

## **6.0 Conclusion:**

6.1 The impacts highlighted above are some of the important ones which we feel will have far reaching implications in the future. It should be noted that we have had a comparatively short period of active intervention with the panchayats. Many new developments are lacking place which in due course will have a lasting effect on the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Hopefully, they will serve to strengthen the institutions in a way to truly become a vehicle for social change.

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**Participatory Research in Asia**  
42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110062  
Ph:+91-011-29960931/32/33  
Web: [www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org)