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**The Civil Society and Panchayati Raj
Institutions
By**

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The growing preference of countries around the world, to be more democratic in its form of governance, has ushered in much recognition to the Civil Societies in various arenas of Indian polity. Indian Constitution guaranteeing decentralized democratic governance, by including the PART IX, has resulted in providing a new focus to the civil society to deepen democracy and their presence. The present paper attempts to capture the contours of relationships between civil society and the institutions of Local Self-Governance in India. It is an attempt to share some of PRIA's (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) and its Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs) efforts in strengthening such institutions in 15 states of India.

Civil Society: Epitome of democracy

'The importance of Civil Society in India is linked to the future of democracy. One of the... tasks of civil society in India is to.... bridge the gap between democracy in the formal structure of governance, and the absence of the necessary conditions for the Realization of democracy.'

- Jayal, N.G. (2001)

Civil Society has through the years gained the interest and recognition from their focused contributions towards democracy, social justice and peace. They have had their own history in India, through the various movements for freedom, the evolution of liberal economy, polity and knowledge. These and many more have contributed to the defining and redefining of the term 'Civil Society'. However, it is believed that it is the rise of capitalism that led to a clearer distinction between political and non-political and thus prepared the grounds for the emergence of civil society as a separate domain, to be seen independent from, yet dependent vis-a-vis the state.

It is difficult to find a definition that encompasses the whole gamut of activities undertaken by the Civil Society. But one thing is certain, definitions tend to identify the civil society by the various roles it has undertaken. Civil Society is a term used to distinguish a whole set of organisations, institutions or entities from the governmental and statutory bodies. In the era of retreating government, privatisation, free-market, contracting out work, structural adjustment, decentralization, restructuring, deregulation, empowerment, etc., formulation and implementation of public policy appears to be undertaken by non-governmental organisation(s). Civil society has a wider coverage. Political parties, trade unions, interest groups/ associations, co-operations are also non-government organisations and form part of the Civil Society.

The Civil Society, as De Tocqueville maintained, provided a bulwark against the tyranny of the central executive in democracies. In democracies these voluntary organisations were necessary as an intermediating layer between the ruling elite's and the masses to prevent the abuse of power and to allow the ordinary citizens to participate in the political process. This essentially political role of voluntary associations in maintaining freedom, which was De Tocqueville's main concern and principal insight, still remains valid. While the line of thought among the Indian social scientists like Rajani Kothari who stated that civil society appears as the "take-off point for humane governance". it includes, within its ambit, a variety of contemporary social movements, ecology movement's, women's movements and the peace movements - which seek to restore the principle of good life in the conduct of human affairs. At the same time, the civil society also incorporates a "network of voluntary, self-governing institutions in all walks of life". Collectively, these organisations provide the "grass roots model of mass politics in which people are more important than the state". Kothari clearly associated civil society with people centric institutions; forum in which people participation is directly linked in managing their own affairs. Since their focus is on people participation, voluntary associations and

Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) of all kinds are regarded as agencies of civil society. What brings these diverse institutions together is the fact that they stand outside the state, offering an alternative to the state-sponsored forms of development.

Andre Beteille, influenced to some extent by Tocqueville, did not hold the same view as Kothari, who stated that civil society could take over the state's role. Rather, he saw the civil society as a by-product of the modern state, that is, the modern constitutional state. He argues that the well-being of this modern state was dependent on diverse forms of mediating institutions that linked different individuals to each other on the one hand and on the other, negotiated between the citizens and the state. This is because, according to Beteille, a society with only individuals (or citizens) at one end and the nation (or the state) at the other were not only difficult to live in but difficult to conceive. The presence of mediating institutions therefore; was a universal feature of all human societies, which resulted in making up of the civil society". What is interesting to note in his explanation of civil society is that for him the state and the civil society are complementary and not alternatives to each other. According to Beteille, the state performs certain indispensable functions and if those are subverted and undermined, civil society would wither in the bud.

There are many theories like the ones discussed above. Most of them claim that, the inefficiency and the irresponsiveness of the state have brought the civil society into the foray, 'as an alternative to the state'. Instances of the failure of governance agencies to protect the interests of the underprivileged groups have created a situation in which the disillusionment of the marginalised group and their consequent alienation from the process of governance has become conspicuous. It is in this context that the Civil Society's space became the arena for voluntary groups to raise their voice. Hence, the growing non-accountability of the state to the citizens became the driving force of civil society action in recent years.

Therefore, for this discussion Civil Society is restricted to voluntary agencies or those institutions or bodies that are free associations of free people, who come together, with an objective of bringing about social and economic change, with special emphasis on the marginalised sections. They are neither profit-making nor political in character". They are not opposed to the government (or the state) but for the purpose of democratic governance observe vigilance and criticality towards the working of the state.

Why Civil Society in PRIs

India has a complex form of governance, which is a mixture of both centralised and decentralised mode of polity. Most would agree that it is the Conner, where the government takes most of the decision in the working and development of the country and the citizens' role is limited to just electing their representatives. Moreover, conscious decision making in allocation of public resources for public good has been seen wanting in this form of governance, this has resulted in the rise of disillusionment and alienation of citizens', particularly the poor and marginalised from the functioning of the state.

This is extended even in the context Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. Acquiring a constitutional status in 1993, it gave the vision of a democratic governance down even to the village level, with essential elements of a) Decentralisation of the state's developmental functions, finance and functionaries, b) providing them with autonomy so that they would function as 'institutions of self-government and c) ensured participation of people in development as well as accountability and transparency of the government to the people.

With time these local bodies began to be treated as the third tier of implementation of development policies and programmes designed by higher tiers of government. This negates the essence of local bodies as institutions of local self-governance. Despite clearly defined constitutional responsibilities

of local bodies (like the Gram Panchayats, Gram Sabha and so on), higher tiers of executive and administration continue to take decisions about the use of resources, thereby usurping the authority of local bodies.

Needless to mention the lack of information flow, funds, lack of linkages between the three tiers, lack of transparency in functioning coupled by bureaucratic procedures and non-accountability of line department officials, all reflect the inefficiency and irresponsiveness of the institute to the interest of the people.

These fallout's have bidden a negative repercussion to governance at the grassroots. It has created a general lack of interest amongst the people, which is largely resulted from the lack of information, disenchantment with the system and apathy. The co-existence of traditional systems bus relegated the participation of citizens especially women and other marginalised sections to the peripheries. Meetings such as the Panchayat meetings or the Gram Sabha meetings rarely take place, and if they do so, they hardly meet the minimal required participation of the people. The lack of participation of 'unaware' ward members (especially women and Dalit members) in Panchayat meetings is a matter of concern.

The opportunities for Women and Dalits to come into the fore of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through elections have faced many structural and institutional constraints. The raja action or acceptance of these groups is based on a combination of factors pertaining to gender bias, caste-based prejudice and cultural taboos (widow). The lack of adequate support from the state functionaries, with regard to their roles and responsibilities has affected their functioning considerably.

Participatory planning has seen a growing interest among the government wing. But much less is done to bring in people's participation. Moreover, people have been so used to the top-down planning approach that they do not want to get involved in a process unless they see some direct gain from it. Needless to say, the process of participatory planning is intensive, raises people's expectations and is time consuming. Due to administrative procedures at the block level and the district levels, the results are usually delayed. Control of development resources, indifference and lack of power sharing brings about a sense of frustration and apathy among the community members. Realistic planning is still a distant dream.

Through the years it has been found that the Chairpersons of the Panchayats, especially Sarpanchs lack the skill in financial management and they eventually depend on the Secretaries of the Panchayats. Audit and accounts are not taken seriously. In general, the self-generating revenue of PRJs is negligible in comparison to their income from governmental grants. Their income pattern poses a question mark over financial sovereignty of the Panchayats.

Moreover, capacity building efforts by various agencies (including government and non-governmental sectors) lack sustainability in the sense that these efforts seem to be sporadic. The government of Uttar Pradesh have just managed to train 2% of the elected members (a survey taken in 1997-98 of the total elected members). Training of government official who are working with the elected Panchayat representatives was either absent in many states or rather inadequate? In many states, training could not be imparted to all. Hence, many of the elected members (especially the ward panchs) did not receive any form of structured training during the first term.

Even the Panchayat Secretaries (Panchayat Sevaks/ Gram Sevaks) have not been trained to work with these institutions. In Rajasthan a two-year training course planned for Panchayat Secretaries, was eventually reduced to and completed in just 45 training days. The growing concern of transparency, accountability, self-management and self-governance in the PR Is has drawn Civil Societies' attention to the PRI. The fact that mere framework of politic! I democracy is not sufficient.

It may provide necessary conditions for good governance to emerge but does not guarantee the same. It needs agencies apart from the government to ensure that democratic forms of governance persist. The best agency in this respect is the Civil Society. Hence, Civil Society initiatives are concerned with the bridging the gap between what is constitutionally provided and its frequent violation, as well as between appropriation of developmental benefits by the dominant groups, and non-delivery of basic services.

Roles of Civil Society in PRI

The need of the hour is to make these institutions, as envisioned in the constitution, as institutions of self-governance. But for that to become a reality, civil society interventions were not enough. A space has to be created wherein the Panchayat institutions, state and the civil society work in partnership towards that goal.

A partnership with Civil Society and local self-governance has brought to the surface the various roles that civil society took on in strengthening the institutions in India. These initiatives have brought out results that are worth sharing. The following experiences are primarily based on PRIA and its network of Collaborating Regional Supporting Organisations (NCRSOs) experiences in direct Strengthening of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India from 1994. The concept of 'direct strengthening of PRIs is intrinsically associated with the issue of 'power to the grassroots' as well as peoples access to decision making the programme continues to be governed by the overarching perspective, which in brief is:

1. The programme views Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as institutions of democratic governance and not the tail end of a service delivery hierarchy;
2. Places special emphasis on the need to promote active participation in decision making, by group; like women, dalits and tribals;
3. Recognizes that the key to local development lies in enlarging the community's access and control over local natural resources, through Panchayats.

To this end the NCRSOs has worked together to evolve a comprehensive and multi dimensional strategy over the years. Currently, PRIA and its Partners are working together with this evolving comprehensive and multi-dimensional intervention strategy to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions in 15 states, namely - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh.

The rationale for this intervention is to enhance people potential for community participation and responsibility in their own development. The constitutional provisions provide new opportunities and possibilities for building up a strong base for democracy to function, leadership from among women and dalits (SC/ST) and self-managed systems of development. The said intervention is multi-sectoral. We believe that only a strong, participatory, responsive and accountable government at the local level can fulfil 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 organisations 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.

Through networks the spread and outreach of the civil societies (PRIA and Partners) have taken an intermediating and supporting roles in its endeavors to strengthen PRIs and democracy at the grassroots, most of its efforts are aimed at enhancing community participation and responsibility in

development, that is people-centers and people - controlled development, with special emphasis on women and marginalised section like Dalits and the tribals. The how and what regarding the various interventions has found PRIA and its partners playing diverse roles towards building a healthy co-operation between community organisation and the panchayats. These would be elaborated under five intensive efforts namely Public Awareness and Information dissemination, Capacity building efforts, facilitating efforts in Micro Planning, Networking and Collaborating efforts and Advocacy efforts.

A) Public Awareness and Information dissemination efforts

Information has become a commodity that each citizen has a right to attain. But in a country of one billion does information of a particular scheme become known to one and all? I will not speculate on this point. Information also has a direct bearing on participation. Promotion of citizens' participation also requires sustaining authentic and timely information. Several interventions demonstrate the role of civil society in assuring timely delivery of information for informed and legitimised decision making by the local bodies.

Panchayat Resource Centers (PRC) by PRIA and Partners have been placed in twelve states of the country. These centers are effectively catering to the information need of villagers and other citizens. In total there are Forty-six PRC managed by local community based organisations at the Panchayat Samiti offices have been able to disseminate vital information regarding the functioning of PRIs as well as sensitise the Gram Sabha members about their roles, responsibilities and rights. These PRCs in various states have, provided a regular platform for the members to share their experiences, views and ideas about Panchayati Raj. They have also provided better linkage of the elected members with the Panchayat Samiti, Timely information about resource funds has helped Gram Panchayat in effectively undertaking local development initiatives.

Information also becomes the basis for assuring accountability of elected representatives and local bodies. The Right to information is a fundamental tenet for assuring such transparency and accountability in the, decision making and resource utilisation actions of local bodies. Information especially written docs not cater to the knowledge base of people that are illiterate, in collaboration with various local and community based organisations, various awareness programmes have been organised with innovative means of communication to reach these sections of society.

Samarthan, a civil society in Madhya Pradesh, formed a youth group of 30 persons in Sehore district. This group was involved in creative communication methodologies. Through street plays, puppets, and cycle rallies this group has been able to effectively convey the message related to Panchayati Raj Institutions. In states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, similar awareness programmes with traditional communicative medium such as dance, music, plays were used to sensitise the people to choose a right candidate prior to the panchayat elections.

These forms of intervention have helped to reach people that have been alienated by the governing system. It has installed in them the feeling of belonging, and worth in the functioning of the system and increased their participation there on.

In ensuring free and fair Panchayati Raj elections with participation of marginalised groups like women and dalits, found PRIA and its partners implementing programmes of Awareness campaigns, these awareness programmes were conducted with much support for the Ministry of Rural Development (MORD) in building up informed citizenry for the Panchayat elections.

In Bihar, after a long wait of 23 years, Panchayat Elections was declared to be held on April 2001. CENCORED a local NGO, was faced with a challenge of building an aware citizenry, who were

deprived of electing their own representatives. Their efforts included building a common platform for civil society to come together for spreading awareness through a Campaign. This resulted in 356 voluntary agencies, community based organisation and other individuals coming together to set up 1500 information centers at the block level in the 33 districts. The volunteers were seen in Kurtas with four colours dyed in green (the colour of ballot paper for Mukhiyas), black (colour of ballot paper for Gram Panchayat member), blue (the colour for panchayat Samiti members) and red (the colour of ballot paper for Zilla Parishad member) as a means of building informed citizens.

Similar Awareness campaign under the name of Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) have been carried out in the state of Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

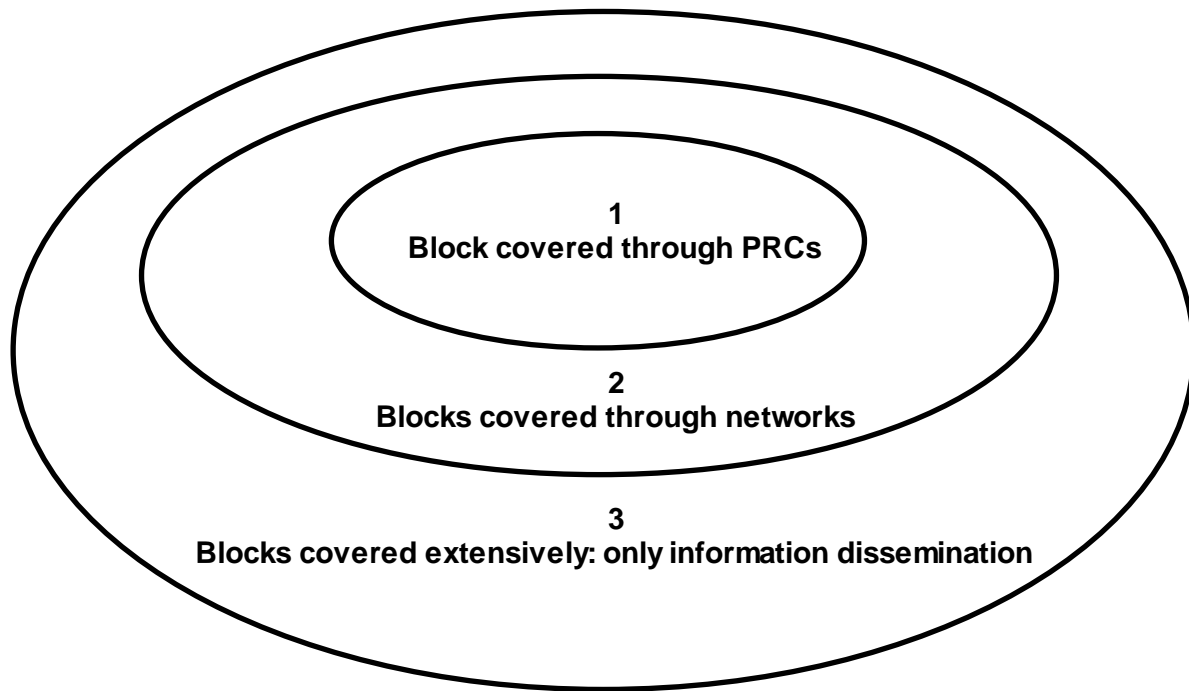
B) Capacity building Initiatives

Another area of important contribution of civil society organisation in effective functioning of the PRIs, has been building the capacity of new local leadership, especially in the case of women, dalits, tribals and other underprivileged sections of the society. The role that the civil society has taken is that of a trainer, that would enhance the capacities of elected members in order to be better equipped in discharging their responsibilities. This included, building their confidence, providing timely information, enhancing their skills and creating opportunity for continuous learning for them.

PRIA and its partners have through the years modified their approach to capacity building initiatives. They have molded their capacity building initiatives into phases - the first being that of a Panchayat Pratinidhi Jagrukta Abhiyan (PRJA), a one-day campaign that aims at orienting the newly elected members on important aspects of PRI, roles and functions. Such initiatives have been implemented in twelve states of India at the block level. The second phase involves a rigorous capacity building initiative that is based on the need assessment arising from PRJA.

Capacity building is not only restricted to just the elected members. Citizens are also provided continuous support by civil society organisation in understanding the functioning of PRIs as well as their own responsibilities. India can boast of being one among those countries that has ensured citizens the responsibility, guaranteed by the constitution (by installing Gram Sabhas), where each and every individual has an opportunity, to play a role in deciding his/ her own destiny as well as in ensuring an accountable government. In making these Village Assemblies (Gram Sabha) in rural areas effective, articulated and vibrant has become a challenge for civil society. Internal divisions based on caste, gender, education, political affiliation, and religious persuasion are impediments in these local communities. Unless these differences are overcome through sustained civil society organisations, Gram Sabhas is unable to play an effective role in promoting local self-governance.

In Madhya Pradesh, with Gram Swaraj being implemented since 26th January, 2001, Gram Sabhas take place every month. Samarthans, took it on themselves to spread awareness regarding the new ideology of people's participation passed by the state legislation. Along with their network, they launched a Gram Sabha Campaign in 18 blocks of 13 districts. Their campaign was designed at three-levels of intervention. First level of intervention encompassed those blocks where PRCs were situated, the second level of intervention done through local community based organisations or Samarthans network and the third level of intervention consisted of those blocks covered extensively (through information).



Gram Sabha Mobilisation in Madhya Pradesh

Efforts went in training volunteers, distribution of booklets, Ward level and Mohalla level meetings, door to door campaigning, and use of video films. Building the future generation of leaders as well as searching new avenues to reach out to women in order to equip them with a better understanding of the role of PRIs and enhancing their participation has found civil society come up with innovative ways to achieve the task.

CENCORED, a partner of PRIA facilitated the creation of Kishori panchayat or adolescent girls' panchayats in Bochahan, Muzaffarpur. In 1997-1998, this novel experiment with girls between the age group of 7- 17 years was tapped as being a potential source and channel to reach women at the panchayat level. The rationale behind forming the Kishori Panchayat was that, as these girls were more inter active with the outside world and close to women members of their families, they could spread awareness regarding PRI issues to them. This initiative was seen not only to energise interest among women in the panchayats hut also to provide some sort of security in attending village meetings, reading circulars and voicing their opinions. It was also felt that this initiative would pave the way for the future, when these girls attain the age of taking active part in the panchayat. In the recent election this novel experiment paid off well, when these small groups moved around in their own villages to get the women in purdah and the elderly to cast their votes.

C) Facilitating efforts in Micro-Planning

The concept of micro level planning of involving people in plan formulation and implementation has been in vogue right from the days of implementation of community development programmes, where people's role and participation has been continuously stressed. Yet in practice putting people in the centre of planning process has remained a dream. Increasing participation, especially of women and marginalised sections of the community, is another arena that civil society have influenced and implemented programmes. Facilitation in identifying local needs, prioritising the same and implementing programmes have been possible when capacity building intervention have been made

in collaboration with local community based organisations, the state as well as some established rapport at the local level.

In collaboration. with a local NGO, PRIA facilitated participatory micro planning process in Kehar Gram Panchayat of Mandi District in Himachal Pradesh. The Village Development Committees (VDCs), made for the purpose were facilitated to comprise of members from different castes and gender of the villages in that panchayat. They were made responsible for preparing and implementing the panchayat plan. These VDCs, ensured accountability of the Gram Panchayat to make and implement the plan. They pressurised (and assisted) the panchayat to negotiate with villagers, block and the district level officials to mobilise internal and external resources for implementation of Plan.

The Civil Society facilitation thus enabled local bodies to engage in participatory bottom-up micro-planning processes to determine priorities and design programmes which address locally appropriate needs of different segments of local society. This capacity building intervention also enables greater engagement of different sections of local society in the planning process, thereby enhancing ownership of plans and programmes implemented by local bodies.

D) Networking and Collaborative efforts

Efforts in sustaining the effort of building critical masses, periodicity of supporting the making of people's plan and information dissemination involved in building up a common platform for voluntary organisations to come together, collaborate and form linkages. These networks act as a force in promoting and giving voice to the voiceless. It builds the space on which different association could converge towards one goal.

PRIA along with its partners on initiating a pre-election voters awareness campaign in Andhra Pradesh had to build a platform in order to mobilise local resources and associations on the idea of building a critical mass for the panchayat elections. A 'Forum for Panchayats' was formed with seven large organisations along with their own networks. Through this forum almost fifty per cent of the panchayats were covered.

Similar form of networking was seen in Tamil Nadu wherein associations came under the heading of Tami Nadu Campaign for Panchayati Raj (TCPRI) in disseminating information about Panchayat elections in all the 29 districts of the state. These networks have not only been used for disseminating programmatic intervention activities but also have served in shaping and developing interventions and innovations to strengthen PRIs.

Civil society roles have also taken up efforts in linking up and forming networks among elected members at the Panchayat level. These have proven to be beneficial in solving local problems, inculcating interdependence and self-worth.

In Haryana, Barwala block of Panchkula district, a full-fledged network of 24 Sarpanchs (6 of which are women) have come together on several occasions to solve various problems. This network has solved the growing menace of flies in their block that was spreading various diseases. Now they are preparing to discuss with the local administration about the sale of forest produce to increase revenue of the block.

E) Advocacy Efforts: Advocacy efforts have also seen the presence of civil society, in collaboration with the citizens of the state.

Gujarat election was due on December 2000, for 13,500 but on the 4th November

2000, by an ordinance of the government, election was postponed. The reason for the postponement was ascribed to the prevailing drought situation in the state. Various NGOs voiced their dissatisfaction, claiming that by electing a new government at the panchayat would supplement the chance of focused relief operation. But such reasoning was not heeded. UNNATI, a partner organisation of PRIA., called a meeting of NGOs on 10th November 2000 to discuss the plan of action in the light of the decision of the state. The meeting resulted in the launch of a "**Panchayat Bachavo Lokshashi Abhiyan**". For this purpose, a committee was formed. This committee took two decisions. Firstly, to write a letter to the chief minister asking for elections before December 2000 end so that panchayats can effectively participate in the Drought situation, and secondly, to collect a quick reaction/ opinion poll from both women and men voters from parts of Gujarat.

Quick assessment of the polling that were conducted and collected from 1529 voters of eight Taluka spread over different parts of Gujarat. 92 % voters were in favour of villagers to the Chief Minister along with signatures of 27723 voters (60% of which were male and 40% of which were female) that covered 14 districts and 2134 villages. All these were sent with intent to plead for immediate election so that elected representatives can manage the drought situation. There was a wide coverage by the print media

Face-to-face meetings were organised between the Committee, the State election authorities and the Secretary of Chief minister to discuss about the deference of election. Letters written, cited examples of various states in India where action was taken to bring about panchayat elections on time. Such example was collected and sent to the ministry. Constant reminders were issued to the state election commissioner to play their role of the people so that they can elect their Panchayat. Such efforts could have propelled the Government to declare election to Panchayats on 23 December 2001.

Efforts in highlight issues related to the Panchayats and their positive work have seen the collaborative effort! of Civil Society and the media. The outreach of the print and electronic media is much wider from that of the Civil Society. Partnerships in efforts of information and advocacy have found these two institutions side by side.

PRIA and NCRSOs for the purpose of outreach constituted a National Media Task Force, which consists of media journalists of both the national and regional levels. The main aim of such a force is to highlight issues of local governance and to enable the national newspaper to report in detail on various aspects of the working of panchayats in the Country. The Media taskforce have been actively covering the various issues related to Panchayat elections (violence, auctioning, inducements), women leaderships and Civil societies efforts in enhancing citizens' participation.

Such efforts have been beneficial in comparative perspective and advocacy issues regarding strengthening Panchayati Raj. It has also provided avenues in tapping other forms or media like the Radio and television as tools for information dissemination and spreading awareness on the working of PRIs.

Civil society has also found themselves pursuing the role of enhancing and working towards a social just society. This has led to taking up issues that revolve around the age - old movements of Dalits in bring them on an equal footing in governance.

In western Rajasthan, UNNATI, began a campaign for the rights of Dalits. This was called as the 'Dalit Adhikar Abhiyan', to curb and challenge discriminatory practices prevalent in the region. This campaign took up mobilisation and capacity building initiatives of the Dalit community to fight against discrimination, as well as sensitising other people such as the government officials, the police, media, other civil society actors and the judiciary machinery. This has given rise to about one

hundred and seventy-five cases related to discrimination or Dalits and set the ball rolling on inquiry about them by the National Commission of Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribes (NHRC) and other civil society institutions.

Such organised campaigns for the cause of dalits have been few and documentation of such efforts has been lesser still, but emphasis and constant raising voice regarding untouchability has put such issues back on the agenda of civil society.

Future aspects of Panchayati Raj and Civil Society

These roles undertaken by civil society are diverse, as one has discussed above, but where these all converge is the essence, that is in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions. In attempting to assess the impact of the NCRSOs activities over the year it has to be admitted that the numbers are still small compared to the scale and spread of Panchayats. The strategic mix of activities can be seen as addressing only the tip of an iceberg in a sense: the large mass underneath (in terms of local level inertia, institutional indifference and civil society apathy) could help sink the whole intent of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments.

These attempts towards reaching the goal of strengthening local self -governance in India, could be likened to that of the fly in Aesop's fable, that sat upon the chariot wheel and said, "what dust do I raise". With all respect to Aesop, raising dust is not an activity entirely without value. There is a need to clear the dust, which has settled upon institutional mindsets with regard to participation and governance. Again, if sufficient number of "flies" could gather and sit upon the chariot wheel, the dust raised could be considerably greater- a multiplied effect.

That is to say, it is not the laws, amendments that strengthen the institutions or the system in the societies, hut the people within the system that want the change. The difference cannot be made with one or two agents. It requires the effort of the collective in 'raising the dust' that has settled: in the minds of the people regarding governance and Panchayati Raj. Attempts should be made to bring local self-governance on the agenda of all civil society wherein they could play a supportive role to build a healthy and co-operative Conn of governance at the grass-roots. This would result in building up people's critical consciousness, leading to a common understanding for a common action towards a common goal.

AWARENESS — INFORMATION — MOTIVATION — ACTION

With the cases and instances shown in this article, it has become increasingly clear that 'external' pressures from Ole civil society organisations in support of local bodies have created the necessary capacity and collective will needed for effective functioning of local bodies as institutions of local self-governance. The need of the hour is that lo sensitise other institutions to take up the issue and concern of Panchayati Raj as an agenda in their perspective of good governance. And if the vision and mission of the gamut encompassed in the Civil Society are the same, then surely meanings and results will follow.

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