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PRIA

case study

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Voluntarism in Strengthening Local Self Governance

in Una District. Himachal Pradesh

By

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I. Background

PRIA is an international Centre for learning and promotion of participation and democratic governance. PRIAs involvement with Panchayati Raj Institutions dates back to 1994; the year in which consultation meetings took place to explore the ramifications of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and the role of NGOs and Voluntary Agencies in its wake. During such consultations, PRIA saw an opportunity of working towards its broader objective of women's empowerment and social justice while working within the Constitutional agenda of local self-governance.

The work of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions is based on the essence of Participatory Research philosophy and the perspective of PRIA which is "Knowledge is Power". This implies that enhancing access to knowledge, demystifying expertise and synthesising experiential knowledge of ordinary citizens contribute to empowerment.

PRIA along with the Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations have been working in 15 states including Himachal Pradesh. The major focus of its programmatic intervention involved -conducting orientation and training workshops for NGOs to persuade them to play a role in realising the Constitutional intent of local self-governance, training and capacity building, research, participatory bottom-up planning (micro planning), preparation of educational materials and working with the government.

So far programmatic intervention by PRIA and Partners has covered more than 15,000 elected representatives of about 1,500 Gram Panchayats, 600 Panchayat Samitis in more than 100 Zila Panchayats. Many new partners have been joining us in this process as we expand our outreach of such intervention in the third phase (2000-2002) to other states, eventually covering the entire country.

Our multi-sectoral strategic intervention covers nearly 300 voluntary organisations who are actively involved in strengthening Gram Sabhas and leadership of women and scheduled caste/ scheduled tribe representatives. Now Bottom-up participatory planning has now spread to nearly 60 Gram Panchayats. Attempts to influence government officials at local, district and state levels have reached out to more than 3000 personnel. To enable access to information for Gram Sabha and PRI leaders, 120 village, block, district and state level Information Resource Centres have already begun to function.

2. Voluntarism

Voluntarism in broader sense implies to the positive action taken by individuals to extend help to a cause. The spectrum of voluntarism ranges from forced voluntarism to induced voluntarism to paid voluntarism to fostered voluntarism.

For us, it is the true inner feeling which leads to action for betterment of the society or render positive change in the social system.

3. Ex-servicemen as Volunteers in Una District, HP

PRIA's efforts in strengthening Local Self Governance in Una, HP needed volunteers for local governance processes. Being a retired army officer's wife, I was keen to tap the potential of this disciplined force. And HP with its culture of taking pride in serving country through defense services, has an enormous reservoir of Ex-servicemen. As

they have a secured financial future and also because of picturesque valley and rich traditions, most retired servicemen from other ranks opt to come back to their villages.

To begin with, an NGO which is being run by an ex-serviceman was identified. It took some time to convince that strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions are the base for all other activities. It was a professional relationship drawing from personal army background. Finally, in mid-1999, the NGO head got convinced and started working on this issue. It was true voluntarism institutionally as he experimented with his own resources. This may be considered as a case of fostered voluntarism in strengthening LSG.

The successful Gram Sabha meeting at Dhamandhury panchayat was the turning point. In this Gram Sabha meeting, a woman stood up and said that the tailoring teacher from neighboring panchayat will not be allowed to teach the young girls of Dhamandhry. Later on BDO had to revert back to its original appointment letter. This experience helped all involved in the process that how important it is to work on this issue.

The success of this intervention had replicating effect on other panchayats. The Head of the organisation then tried to convince local Ex-servicemen and finally a meeting was organised at Nari on 21st May 2000. The meeting was attended by Pradhan, Up- pradhan and Mahila Mandal members of twelve panchayats of Bangana block'. The distance between block head quarter and these panchayats are on an average Forty Kms. The purpose of this meeting was to pass a resolution so that these twelve panchayats come under Una block. This meeting was attended by beside Ex-servicemen - Zila Parishad chair person, Una and Ex MLA, Una. Following this meeting a deputation comprising thirty men and women met DC, Una. He recommended the case with a favorable note to Director, Panchayati Raj and Rural Development. Outcome of this intervention was positive. Due to this pressure, GoHP has finally reversed the order whereby twelve panchayats which were 50 kms away from Bangana block became part of it. Now they remain as part of Amb block as earlier. This gave a boost to Ex-servicemen and this may be taken as example of induced voluntarism.

On 9th March 2000, a meeting was initiated by Ex-servicemen of Bhadsali Panchayat to open a Panchayat Resource Centre (PRC) whereby villagers can get all the information regarding panchayats from the centre. The expenditure of this meeting was met by local contributions. Although not all were ready to contribute, as some were not convinced, with peer pressure they were forced to do so. This may be considered as forced voluntarism.

Ex-servicemen from Bhadsali organised a meeting on 9th June 2000. 114 participants including all local Ex-servicemen, mahila mandal members, Pradhans, Up-Pradhans, Panches, Panchayat Secretary and Gram Sabha members participated in the meeting. The meeting focused on how should Panchayat Resource Centres function as an information centre. They discussed that the resource centre is not getting any information from any quarter, hence the initiative was taken to follow it up with BDO and district headquarters for the information. It was also decided that PRIA and EEG would follow it up.

The issues discussed include -

1. 10% GS members did not attend the GS meeting. The need and importance of GS members was discussed and posters for forthcoming panchayat elections were distributed for display in different prominent areas in the village.
2. After the election, microplan process will begin but prior to that data will be collected and kept ready for analysis. Since the situation, need and demand of people normally do not change, hence it was decided to do this preparatory ground work prior to actual plan for the panchayat.
3. PRC was to be registered with State govt so that all information reaches there.

The impact was as follows:

1. Ex-servicemen initiated the meeting and discussed the difficulties faced by them and their rights and roles as Gram Sabha were discussed.
2. The expenditure of refreshment was borne by the community.
3. Media on its own took initiative to cover the meeting.
4. Need to develop rapport with district administration to attend the meeting at PRC was unanimously agreed upon.
5. Ex-servicemen took special interest in future course of action.

The outcome of this meeting is that the representative of District Administration has started attending the meetings and taking follow up actions.

Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaign was organised in second round of Panchayat Elections in Himachal Pradesh in December 2000. On 13th Nov 2000 a meeting was organised at Nari with twin purpose:

To motivate Ex-servicemen of non-intervening areas to utilise their leisure time in strengthening Local Self Governance and to take active part by Ex-servicemen in pre and post-election processes. A General to a Naib Subedar was the range of twenty-four ex-servicemen who attended the meeting.

I have proposed PRC organiser (an ex-serviceman) at Bhadsali for MIND fellowship. If it comes through this will be an example of paid voluntarism.

Learnings

1. Cashing on the strengths - leisure time, dedication to the work, punctuality, sound financial backing, they agreed to help in pre and post-election processes through Ex-servicemen League of Una.
2. Tapping the true voluntarism spirit of part of society which has maturity and willingness to be involved in good cause
3. Ex-servicemen can be effectively utilized in other States specially Rajasthan and Haryana where there is culture of joining defense forces. Dealing with Ex-servicemen in the beginning there is a need to generate awareness about their strengths and the utilisation of its strength for betterment of society it clicks.
4. Still being rank conscious, care should be taken while addressing them it works.

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