

Trajectory of PRIA's Work

The history of PRIA's work is one of continuity and change over three decades. There are some recognisable hallmark phases, though work in each phase is not water tight. Many national and international political, economic and sectoral developments from an earlier phase have influenced and shaped decisions in a subsequent phase.

Phase 1: Systematising local knowledge for empowerment (From 1981 to 1986)

At the time of PRIA's conception and birth, the planetary arrangement of national and global forces was very specific. At the national level, the new Congress government (led by Indira Gandhi) had come back to power, after a failed experiment of Janata Party government. The 'total revolution' movement led by Jai Prakash Narain in the early 1970s had mobilised students and youth on an unprecedented scale. Many such youth groups of the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (Student Youth Struggle Brigade) became disillusioned with formal party politics, and set up voluntary action groups around this period.

At the international level, recognition for people's participation had just about begun following FAO's Rome conference, which pronounced the criticality of organisations of the rural poor; and WHO's Alma Ata Conference, which defined community participation as a building block of primary health care. Nicaragua's Literacy Crusade had galvanized adult educators in support of liberation struggles. International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) anchored the regional networks of participatory research, and the First International Conference on Participatory Research was held in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia in 1980.

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) grew out of engagement in the International Participatory Research Network. As the node for the Asian Regional Network of Participatory Research, PRIA was active in building knowledge and capacity for participatory research in a variety of settings. PRIA applied concepts and practice from the international network to its work in India, and also began to actively influence the network and activities of the ICAE in the international arena.

The principal activities in the first phase were promotion of participation, use of participatory research methodology, and documenting, valuing and disseminating indigenous local knowledge. The participatory research activities by PRIA helped to promote included indigenous knowledge of forest-dwellers and tribals around deforestation; local knowledge of families displaced due to land alienation and dams; and experiential knowledge of workers on issues of occupational health and safety. The cornerstone of the programme on gender inclusion was a mini-MBA course for rural home-based women workers and activists and a literacy and livelihood programme – both built around the lived-in knowledge of rural poor women.

PRIA's work with participation and empowerment facilitated exchange of ideas and experiences to train workers of field-based groups in creating and using that knowledge to strengthen their work.

Phase 2: Building competencies as change agents (From 1986 to 1991)

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“PRIA has been able to provide voice to the Dalits and generated awareness among them to demand their rights”

Mr. Vidyanand Vikal, former Chairperson, State Commission for Scheduled Castes, Government of Bihar

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PRIA had begun emphasising capacity as learning for empowerment and learning to value our experiences and knowledge. The principal activity in the second phase was to use participatory research and adult education in development practice to promote participation. The focus on learning as empowerment emerged in practice as participatory training methodology in Training for Trainers' workshops with grassroots activists and change agents. Training of Trainers' programmes became vehicles for self-development of change agents in the development sector. This helped facilitate critical self-reflection and to build competencies as change agents.

In 1986, a 'code of conduct' for the voluntary sector in India had resulted in major galvanisation around the country. Mobilisation against this externally imposed 'code of conduct' on voluntary organisations created, for the first time, the identity of 'the sector'. PRIA began to recognise the relevance of forging a sectoral identity of the voluntary sector as a whole in India, and gained visibility as a spokesperson for the sector, focusing on relations between government and NGOs and creating an enabling policy and legislative environment.

PRIA remained active internationally as an important actor in adult education and participatory research. It provided leadership to the Participatory Research Network in developing and writing about the theory and practice. PRIA staff increasingly took on leadership roles in adult education operating regionally, such as Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE,) and internationally, such as ICAE.

Phase 3: Institutional strengthening of civil society (From 1991 to 1997)

During the 1990s, PRIA focused on innovation in developing and application of methods and tools for institutional strengthening of voluntary organisations. Systematic opportunity for learning skills was provided through the training of field workers of grassroots organisations to build internal capability, in particular through the MIND (Management in Development) Fellowships. Learning in workshops was supported with hand-holding support in the field. This helped catalyze civil society initiatives in under-developed regions of India.

It was during this time that PRIA began analyzing how 'civil society' is formed. Learnings from such research was used to facilitate and build new networks and platforms of civil society to promote an identity for the sector. Sectoral advocacy on promoting participation and empowerment was enabled through systematisation of local experiences and monitoring global institutions.

The role and relevance of support organisations as part of the movement of NGOs was demonstrated and articulated. The contribution of support, intermediary and bridging institutions in promotion and capacitation of voluntary organisations was established. Regional Support Organisations (RSOs) were catalyzed, ensuring close relevance to the needs of partner organisations. These organisations shared the same inspiration, philosophy and perspectives of PRIA. This network of collaborating RSOs continues to work together to strengthen and complement each other. PRIA also acted as the Asian Regional Support Organisation for civil society organisations across Asia.



“We learnt multi-stakeholder dialogue as a tool for advocacy from PRIA... it is a wonderful tool for organising people”

Ashok Kadam, Parivartan, Maharashtra



Internationally, PRIA facilitated local, national and global civil society coalitions and platforms for knowledge sharing, and asserting collective and autonomous identity. PRIA coordinated the engagement of southern grass-roots voice in monitoring The World Bank's Participation Policy; and enabled and supported a global coalition of multiple stakeholders to articulate capacity building of Southern NGOs. As a member of the NGO Working Group, PRIA helped organise and implement the policy to foster participation in World Bank projects and the first outside evaluation of those projects.

Phase 4: Accountable local governance (From 1997 to 2001)

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were a turning point in Indian democracy not only because they introduced institutions of local self-governance in the country, but also because they instituted a provision for reservation of seats for traditionally marginalised communities (Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes) and women. Globally, local governments were being institutionalised in nearly 80 countries. PRIA's experience with strengthening civil society organisations reinforced the need for people-centred and people-managed development. Decentralised local self-governance provided a constitutionally-mandated context for local control over community resources and its sustainable and equitable use for socio-economic development. It is in this background that PRIA began its work in strengthening local self-governance institutions (Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies). Engagements with the newly constituted Panchayati Raj Institutions included building capacities on micro-planning and advocating for decentralised planning among government officials at state, district and sub-district levels.

Nationally, PRIA focused on strengthening leadership capacity at the grassroots, particularly of women. PRIA's leadership trainings for elected women representatives focuses on providing information on laws and rules; self-development; mentoring, guidance and handholding; and establishing social networks for support.

Mobilising gram sabhas (village meetings) for collective participation were started. The flagship programme designed to promote citizen engagement with processes of local self-government was the Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaign (PEVAC). PRIA first undertook a PEVAC in a few gram panchayats Mandi and Chamba districts of Himachal Pradesh in 1995. Since then PRIA has conducted (along with partners) PEVACs in 11 states across India.

Systematic effort to engage with academic institutions, departments of social sciences and social work and catalysing local partnerships with grassroots civil society organisations was also made in this phase. Academics and students were trained in participatory research and participatory development for generating knowledge from the experiences of the marginalised.

Going beyond a programmatic focus on women's empowerment, PRIA institutionalised its interventions on gender mainstreaming. Gender audits of civil society organisations and government institutions were initiated. PRIA was one of the first civil society organisations in India to set up an Internal Complaints Committee to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace (in accordance with the Supreme Court of India guidelines).

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“PRIA works for educating voters and makes them conscious of discharging their duties as responsible citizens”

Dr Sushil Trivedi, Retd. IAS and Ex. State Election Commissioner, Chhattisgarh

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PRIA continued to promote the development of international institutions and policies to support the civil society sector. Activities related to building civil society knowledge and identity were undertaken in both Indian and international arenas. With colleagues from the World Bank Working Group, PRIA helped organise the initial meetings of what became the International Forum on Capacity Building (IFCB), a forum which advised a wide range of donor and civil society organisations on the nature of useful capacity building activities. PRIA spearheaded studies on the civil society sector such as *Civil Society in the New Millennium in Commonwealth Countries*, *Non-profit Sector in India* and *Civil Society and Governance in India and Beyond*. As a founding member of CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, PRIA helped to define the conceptual and institutional base for what has become the largest transnational network of civil society organisations.

Phase 5: Governance from below (From 2002 to 2008)

As India was 'shining' a couple of years into the new millennium, the central government announced the policy to stop bilateral aid. Voters brought in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at the centre, and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj was created. A series of progressive legislations were enacted – Right To Information, Employment Guarantee, Forest Rights. The National Policy on Voluntary Sector was announced. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission was set up to make recommendations on improving governance and administration in India.

PRIA's focus on governance issues grew out of the work done with strengthening panchayats in the previous phase. The slogan 'Governance Where People Matter' was initially created for PRIA's 20th anniversary celebrations. Along with empowering citizens to demand their rights, PRIA adopted the approach of reforming governance from below. PRIA was associated with the founding of FIM-Forum for Democratic Governance, which helped build convergence of local and international initiatives to advocate for increased transparency and accountability of global governance institutions like the UN, World Bank, IMF and WTO.

PRIA worked to create multi-sectoral coalitions and platforms for shared learning and building a common agenda. PEVAC, PRJA (Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan) and continued gram sabha mobilisation focused on voters' awareness, capacity building of elected representatives, and working with State Election Commissions, State Finance Commissions and other provincial actors. By convening engagements between the voices from below and the powerful from above, agencies responsible for delivery of public services were brought in direct dialogue with the citizens who receive them. This promoted accountable governance, which is key to meeting the aspirations and needs of citizens.

Studies on citizenship and governance enlarged the scope for civic mobilisation and engagement in a global perspective. PRIA was an active member in the Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Development Research Consortium organised by the IDS (Institute for Development Studies). This network brought together researchers from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the UK to study citizenship in more than 20

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“PRIA has helped to build a large movement for citizens to use that space [of Panchayati Raj Institutions] to use their leadership, their voice to bring about democracy from below”

Dr. John Gaventa, Coady International Institute, Canada

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countries over a ten-year span. PRIA also led the Commonwealth Foundation programme on Citizens and Governance.

Phase 6: Multi-sectoral engagements for deepening democracy (From 2008 to 2013)

The 'war against terror' spread far and wide. Global coalitions of civil society worked together to 'make poverty history'. Fuel, food and financial crises hit the world; European and North American economies faced meltdowns. Citizens protested, demanding equality and freedom in the Arab region and 'Occupy Wall Street' occurred everywhere. Indian governance institutions and elected representatives were caught in webs of corruption.

This galvanized civil society movements around the country to demand deeper accountability of all public institutions, officials and leaders. PRIA focused on promoting accountability practices for reforming institutions through Right To Information, social audits and other social accountability mechanisms.

With rapid urbanisation in India and Asia, mobilising the voices of the urban poor and building youth leadership became an urgent agenda for action. Gender remained a focus. Campaigns against female foeticide and violence against women were started. PRIA's efforts in gender mainstreaming and prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace gained recognition with increased demand for its participatory training modules across civil society organisations and corporates.

As new information technology became accessible, PRIA invested in systematising practice at the grassroots to enable distance learning for practitioners by establishing PRIA International Academy. PRIA has adopted a mixed mode of learning to systematically share its knowledge and capacities with other development actors. It has supported initiatives in India and internationally to establish mutual knowledge engagements between grassroots and institutions of post-secondary education through community-university partnerships. These efforts gained recognition when the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education was established in 2012, with Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, PRIA and Prof. Budd Hall, Professor, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria, Canada, as Co-Chairs. It is for the first time that a UNESCO Chair has its home in two complementary but distinct institutions – a northern academic institution and a southern community based research organisation.

Phase 7: Reconnecting with Roots (2013 onwards)

PRIA's work at the grass-roots currently focuses on:

- Addressing violence against women in educational institutions, health centres and public spaces
- Mobilising the urban poor to access housing rights and sanitation services
- Innovative solutions for universal access to water and sanitation
- Capacity building of government officials and students of participatory research

In recent years, PRIA has supported leadership of young women and men to work together to bring about changes in attitudes of their families and in the responsiveness of government to help eliminate violence against women. The successful piloting of the Kadam Badao Campaign, a youth-led campaign to prevent violence against women in rural Haryana, is being scaled up to other cities. Youth from urban poor communities are learning new technologies, like GPS and mobile-based surveys, to provide community feedback to municipalities on water and sanitation services. PRIA is supporting the decentralised planning

efforts of the Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh governments by building capacities of district and panchayat officials.

Successful innovative solutions applied locally are scaled-up provincially and nationally. Practical knowledge generated from such innovations is shared on global platforms through coalitions and consortiums. PRIA also learns from the practices and innovations of others. The essence of such mutual sharing and learning is based on the principles of South-South cooperation.

Distance education, through PRIA International Academy, is being strengthened as the vehicle to advance the knowledge dissemination and capacity building roles of PRIA. PRIA's education courses have been integrated into its different thrust areas and programmes to support professional capacity building of practitioners. Field exposure visits, use of IT and social media, and other blended approaches to learning are becoming critical elements in capacity building and knowledge dissemination.

Building capacities of young professionals on participatory methodologies is an area that PRIA is paying greater attention to. It has been 40 years since the concept of participatory research was first articulated. While PRIA's efforts in practising and refining the methodology of participatory research has promoted greater acceptance in institutions and academe, opportunities for training the next generation of practitioners, scholars and champions of participatory research in developing countries have not been keeping pace. PRIA has re-committed itself to building linkages with academic and practitioner organisations for such training efforts. Academic and research partnerships for teaching participatory research and community engagement of higher educational institutions is a focus area, particularly through the work of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education.

The role of private business and philanthropists in socio-economic development of countries like India has grown. PRIA has begun engaging with these new constituents to strengthen their involvement in and support of citizen participation and accountable governance.