State of Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh

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PRIA
About PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia, PRIA, is a non-profit voluntary development organization based at Delhi, India, which has been promoting people centred development initiatives within the perspective of participatory research. It aims to strengthen popular knowledge, demystify dominant concepts and promote experiential learning and people's participation. For nearly two decades, this has been the basis of supporting empowerment of the poor and the oppressed in PRIA's work. It learns about challenges of promoting people's participation and democratic governance through local grassroots action via systematic documentation. It facilitates learning through sharing of its research findings and capacity building, by promoting a conducive environment and supportive public policies towards this end. PRIA operates locally, nationally, regionally and globally.
3 August 2002

Dear Friends,

For panchayats to function as institutions of self-governance is still a distant reality. However, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has paved the way towards this direction and enabled the panchayats to act as institutions of local self-governance. It has also facilitated the governance process of our country from representative democracy to participatory form of democracy.

The varied experiences of PRIA and its partners over the last seven years in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh has brought mixed results. This book highlights the potentials and constraints on various aspects of functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions today.

It envisages the state of Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh and the extent of devolution of powers and functions to the PRIs and what needs to be done to make these bodies function as institutions of self-governance.

The insights that PRIA has gained are derived from the experiences of working directly with the gram sabha as well as PRIs towards promoting a vibrant decentralised democracy at the grassroots. It critically analyses various aspects of functioning of panchayats and has derived lessons and suggestions for future action with the perspective of panchayats to act as institutions of self-governance and accountable towards gram sabha.

People’s participation in governance will take place only when Panchayati Raj Institutions begin to function as institutions of self-governance and Panchayats are able to facilitate the process of prioritising issues for preparing participatory bottom-up plan by gram sabha and its implementation through meaningful participation. Therefore, Panchayats should be promoted to function as institutions of governance rather than mere subcontractors of implementing development schemes and programmes.

We appeal to you to use your good offices to enable Panchayats to function as institutions of local self-governance in Himachal Pradesh.

Best wishes

Sincerely

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1 Introduction

The origin of panchayats in Himachal Pradesh goes way back to 1908, when Raja Bijai Chand of Kehloor (Bilaspur) established the Quami (caste) Panchayat in his state. During that time, three major castes - the Brahmins, Thakur Rajputs and Rajputs were recognised by the Raja of Bilaspur for this purpose. Though the Quomi panchayats were established for these three major castes but these panchayats were not just caste panchayats. Prior to this, the ‘Gram Vidhas’ settled disputes and conflicts. People used to assemble at a convenient place and honestly and impartially give decisions.

The Raja of Bilaspur also constituted a central health and education committee to manage the problems of health and education in his state. This committee, along with Quomi panchayats, could be considered as panchayat institutions in the state. It was partly elected and partly nominated with one chairperson and ten members. For this the state was divided into five constituencies, from each constituency one person was elected and remaining five members were nominated by the ruler. The state also had halqa and pragana councils with their pradhans, up-pradhans and secretaries. The pragana councils had more or less the same functions as the panchayat samitis in other states.

The new state of Himachal Pradesh adopted the Punjab Village Panchayat Act, 1939, as the first step towards introduction of a panchayat system in 1949 and also established a total of 186 panchayats in its four constituent states namely Mahasu (45 gram panchayats), Mandi (33); Chamba (54), Sirmour (54). In 1950, the Punjab Village Panchayat Act was extended to Bilaspur State also.

Panchayati Raj system in Himachal Pradesh was established in a statutory form under the provisions of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1952 in the year 1954 in order to bring the working of panchayats in tune with the local conditions and with the growing aspirations of the people for democratisation. This act authorised the state government to establish a gram sabha for a village or a group of villages and a tehsil panchayat for every tehsil or sub-division. The president of the gram sabha was the pradhan, who, along with the up-pradhan, was to be elected for three years from amongst the members. The executive committee of the gram sabha, also elected, was called gram panchayat.

The Himachal Pradesh panchayati Raj Act, 1968 was enacted to incorporate the major recommendations of Balwantray Mehta Committee. Accordingly, a panchayat samiti was constituted for every block. Provisions were also made in the 1968 Act, for the constitution of three-tier system of Panchayati Raj i.e., Gram panchayat at village level, panchayat samiti at block level, and zila Parishad at district level. However, only two-tier panchayati Raj system was established throughout the State i.e., at the village and intermediate (Block) level namely gram panchayat and panchayat samiti.
With a view to bring the law relating to Panchayats in conformity with the Provisions of the Constitutional Seventy-third Amendment, the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1968 was repealed and the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 was enacted in this State with effect from 23 April 1994. Himachal Pradesh was among leading states to bring the new Act within one year of the Constitutional Amendment. In accordance with the Constitutional Seventy-Third Amendment Act, the State Government established Gram Sabha or village assembly as the institution of direct democracy at the Gram Panchayat level. A three-tier Panchayati Raj system, i.e. Gram Panchayat at Village level, Panchayat Samiti at intermediate level and Zila Parishad at district level were established. The State Legislature, by law, made provisions for all the seats in a Panchayat at every level to be filled by direct elections from respective territorial constituencies. Not less than one-third of the total seats for membership as well as offices of chairpersons of each tier has been reserved for women. Reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have been provided at all levels of Panchayats in proportion to their population. Provisions are also made for every Panchayat to continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting. Elections to Panchayats are to be held before the expiry of its duration for five years. The State Election Commission has been constituted to supervise, direct and control the regular and smooth elections to Panchayats. The State Finance Commission has also been constituted to suggest measures to strengthen finances of Panchayats. Constitution District Planning Committee (DPC) at the district level has been envisaged to promote participatory bottom-up planning. An indicative list of 29 items have been inserted to the State Panchayat Act as given in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, for preparation of plan and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice. In spite of the spirit of the Constitution, which has visualized Panchayats as institutions of local self-governance, the State Legislature viewed these institutions to be effectively involved in the local administration and development activities.

The present paper is an attempt to summarise findings from PRIA-Himachal Pradesh’s report on “The State of Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh”. This report focuses on various aspects of functioning of panchayats in Himachal Pradesh. It includes gram sabha, functioning of PRIs, Finances of PRIs, participatory bottom-up planning, leadership of women and other weaker sections, capacity building initiatives and panchayat elections. Findings shared in this paper are primarily based on the experiences of PRIA-Himachal Pradesh and its partners actively involved in strengthening panchayati raj institutions in Himachal Pradesh with the civil society since 1995. This report analyses the State policies vis-à-vis the ground realities in order to present a holistic picture of the state of Panchayats in the state.
Gram Sabha: The Institution of Direct Democracy

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has made a historic landmark by providing constitutional status to gram sabha and transformed the democratic set up of our country from representative democracy to direct democracy at the grassroots. It has enabled citizens to directly participate in local self-governance in identifying and prioritising issues and problems of village/s, individuals and panchayats (VIP) and to prepare plan for economic development and social justice. As a result gram sabha members are privileged to participate in the development of their village and panchayat. As per Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, the State Government can constitute gram sabha by declaring any village or group of contiguous villages with a population of not less than 1000 and not more than 5000. In Schedule-V areas, the gram sabha can be constituted with a population less than 1000. Keeping in view the geographical location, lack of transport and communication and administrative convenience, the government can constitute a gram sabha comprising village or group of contiguous villages having a population either less than 1000 or more than 5000. At the request of gram sabha, the government can increase or diminish the gram sabha area by including or excluding any village or group of villages or alter the headquarters or name of the gram sabha or cease the sabha area. Provided that the gram sabha area can be changed only on completion of the term of the elected members of the existing gram panchayat.

As per the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994, there shall be an Up-Gram Sabha for each ward of a Gram Sabha. Every Up-Gram Sabha shall hold two general meetings in each year and shall convene and preside over by the concerned Ward Member. She or he shall also record the proceedings of the Up-Gram Sabha meetings. The time and place of the Up-Gram Sabha shall be fixed and notified by the concerned Ward Member. 15% of the total families residing in the area of the ward shall be nominated by the Up-Gram Sabha to the general Gram Sabha meeting provided that one-third of the nominations shall be women.

Every person who has registered her/his name in the Legislative Assembly roll and resides in the sabha area is the member of that gram sabha. No person shall be entitled to register her/his name for more than one-gram sabha. As per Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act 2000, every gram sabha can hold four general meetings in each year and every meeting is to be held on the first Sunday of January, April, July and October. As per the Act, 2000, required quorum for the general meeting of gram sabha is at least one-third of the total number of families represented by one or more members of the gram sabha. However, if the meeting is adjourned for want of quorum, at least one-fifth of the total number of families having one or more members of gram sabha can constitute the quorum for holding the adjourned meeting. The meeting of the gram sabha is convened and presided over by the Pradhan of the gram panchayat, in her/his absence Up-Pradhan and if both of them are absent, a member of gram sabha is to be elected for presiding over the meeting.
Ground realities

1. In 86% of gram panchayats, the general meetings of gram sabha were held without quorum, whereas only 5% of the panchayats conducted the gram sabha meetings with one-fifth and 9% with one-tenth of the required quorum. Caste, class and political factors played a predominant role in the gram sabha meetings.

2. The gram sabha members were indifferent and apathetic towards the gram sabha meeting. Most of the gram sabha members have a feeling that attending the Gram Sabha meeting is just wastage of time, because nothing generally happens in these meetings. Only discussions take place and resolutions are passed, which hardly get implemented. Either it is found in the proceeding book of the gram panchayat or in the files of the block office.

3. The panchayat does not get resources from the government as per the proposals submitted or the resolutions sent by the gram panchayat. This is because most of the resources given to the gram panchayats (by way of the state and centrally sponsored schemes) are tied in nature. The allocation of funds or schemes is decided by the block or district administration, which has hardly given priority to the resolution submitted by panchayats. Even the gram panchayats are not able to generate their own resources (which are found to be negligible as compared to the grants received from the state or central government) to implement the activities as per the prioritised needs and issues of the gram sabha. Moreover, no follow-up had been made by the gram panchayat to the decisions taken by gram sabha.

4. For poorer sections, the only agenda for them is related to selection of beneficiaries and if the discussion related to that particular agenda is over, immediately they leave the place, thinking that their work is done and now it is the responsibility of the gram panchayat to discuss other matters and take decisions. Therefore, agenda of the gram sabha meeting in most of the cases was found to be either selection of beneficiaries or issues related to infrastructure development.

5. In most of the cases, the Pradhans do not want to organise gram sabha meetings with people’s participation. They have a feeling that organising a gram sabha meeting is a problem because they have to face the public. Many issues that were raised by the gram sabha members, the panchayat (especially the pradhan) could not be handled due to lack of knowledge on that particular subject or due to the complexities of the issues. Moreover, due to lack of awareness regarding their duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis gram sabha, they hesitate to organise gram sabha meetings.

6. Significant reasons for lack of quorum in the gram sabha meeting are the difficult geographical terrain, lack of proper communication facilities and the gram panchayat spread over kilometres, the distance ranging on an average over 5-10 Kms.

7. Accountability of gram panchayat towards gram sabha (as village assembly or institution for direct democracy) has not been ensured so far. It is due to lack of awareness among the gram sabha members regarding their duties and responsibilities. The gram panchayat hardly considers the suggestions of gram sabha. The suggestions given by the gram sabha is not binding on gram panchayat, in spite of statutory provision. Accountability of gram sabha is more towards the government functionaries due to certain official procedures such as
8. Attendance and participation of women in the gram sabha meetings is largely affected due to the statutory provisions. As per the provision of the Act, one or more family members would represent the quorum for gram sabha meetings. In a patriarchal society, families are mostly represented by a male member. Therefore, it has not only affected the attendance but also participation of women in gram sabha meetings. Moreover, representation of family certainly affected the direct democracy thus, trying to make it representative democracy.

9. Most of the gram sabha as well as gram panchayat members were unaware of the agenda of the gram sabha meeting. Lack of awareness among the gram sabha and gram panchayat members regarding the functions of gram sabha accounted for the failure of the gram sabha meeting.

10. In most of the cases gram panchayat made false promises to fulfil the quorum, which had resulted in dissatisfaction and frustration among the gram sabha members. Most of the meetings continued for maximum one-hour (meeting generally started around 2.30 p.m. and ended at around 3.30 p.m.) due to which, hardly any significant outcome has been made in the meeting. No proper sitting arrangements were made for the gram sabha members. Almost all the meetings were held outside the panchayat bhawan.

11. Role of panchayat secretaries in the gram sabha meetings was indifferent and apathetic. Even in some cases, the panchayat secretaries had not attended the meeting. They were either absent or sitting in the office at the time of gram sabha meeting.

12. Strange relationship between pradhan and up-pradhan was found to be one of the significant reasons for defunct gram sabha. Moreover, gram sabha members were politically divided and issues raised by gram sabha members were politically motivated in some places. Caste feelings were apparent in some of the gram sabha meetings and hence active participation remained low.

13. Authoritarian style of functioning of the pradhan in some cases severely affected participation and the decision taken by the pradhan without considering the suggestions of gram sabha. In many cases pradhans also ignored the members of gram panchayat while taking any decisions.

14. The Vigilance Committee (VC) is functioning as a parallel committee to the Gram Panchayat, which is affecting the functioning and also paralysing the development of the GP. Even the state government made the Gram Panchayat a suspicious body by keeping the VC as a supervising authority to assess the work of the Gram Panchayat which not only undermines the role and functions of the Gram Panchayat, but also of the Gram Sabha as constitutional bodies.
Suggestions

1. The agenda of the gram sabha meeting must be included in the notice given by the gram panchayat, which should also be amended in the state Act. Though after the enactment of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Second) Amendment Act made the number of gram sabha meetings from two to four, but the general agenda items for four-gram sabha meetings have not been specified so far. However, other than the general agenda item, which is given in the Panchayati Raj Act and Rule, gram panchayats should be allowed to fix their own agenda for the gram sabha meetings.

2. Agenda item for the up-gram sabha meeting should also be specified in the notice, when circulated to the up-gram sabha members. Dates of up-gram sabha should also be fixed on holidays. At least one month should be given between up-gram sabha and gram sabha meeting, so that problems and issues identified and prioritised at the ward level are consolidated at the gram sabha. Therefore, the dates for up-gram sabha should be held on the first Sunday of March and September in each year.

3. Responsibility to disseminate information regarding gram sabha should be vested with members of gram panchayat for their respective wards. Copies of the notice should also be given to the existing mahila mandals; self help groups (SHG), and youth clubs. This is so that different sections like women, youth, marginalised sections should also be made aware of the gram sabha meetings and its agenda. The NGOs working at the grassroots should also be given a copy for disseminating information at their own level.

4. Besides issues related to selection of beneficiaries and infrastructure development, agenda should include other socio-economic issues like health, education, sanitation, water, etc.

5. Participation of women and other weaker sections should be ensured and promoted in the gram sabha meetings. As specified in the Second Amendment Act 2000, quorum for the general meeting of the gram sabha, representation of at least one-third of the total number of families represented by one or more members of gram sabha should be substituted with one-fifth of the total number of its members that includes at least one third of women. Similarly, for the adjourned meeting, representation of at least one-fifth of the total number of families represented by one or more members of gram sabha should be substituted with one-tenth of the total number of its members that includes at least one third of women.

6. Training on the following aspects should be given to the members of gram panchayat especially pradhan: developing leadership skills, how to conduct gram sabha, how to facilitate the meeting, how to face the public and tackle the situation, how to develop self confidence, how to supervise income and expenditure statements maintained by Panchayat Secretary; administrative matters of gram panchayat, conflict resolution capabilities, developing interpersonal relationships, how to mobilise people’s support and confidence. Exposure visits can also be organised for the elected representatives at regular intervals, to learn from the field.

7. It has been observed that most of the government staff members deployed for the purpose of gram sabha meetings were unaware of their duties and responsibilities in gram sabha meetings. This had certainly hindered the effective functioning of gram sabha, since the new amendment was enacted. Therefore, it is indeed necessary for the state government to
issue notifications in these directions so that the staff assigned the responsibility for the gram sabha meetings should be well aware of the functions of gram sabha and its meeting. Secondly, an orientation programme can be organised for them before gram sabha meetings. Learning materials and guidelines should also be issued to these officials to make the meetings effective.

8. It is necessary to involve the civil society in strengthening gram sabha. There is a need to develop a collaborative effort among the government, PRIs and civil society. Because there are several NGOs actively engaged in strengthening panchayati raj institutions in the state and have rapport with the gram sabha as well as gram panchayat. Moreover, they have the strength to organise people and enhancing their participation, especially women and weaker sections in developmental activities. Besides many youth clubs, mahila mandals are also working at the panchayat level. Their support can also be mobilised by the state.

9. The media can also play an effective role in creating awareness. Though there have been some efforts by the state government to involve the print and electronic media for spreading messages about gram sabha meetings but it needs to be done in a more systematic manner like episode wise programme can be developed in the form of skit, drama which can be broadcasted through radio focusing especially on women and weaker sections. Article on functions of gram sabha, roles and responsibilities of gram panchayat and gram sabha members in the gram sabha meeting can also be published in the newspapers episode wise, which will certainly create awareness among the people.

10. Suggestions given by gram sabha in the meetings should be binding on gram panchayat. Resolution passed in the gram sabha meetings should be displayed on the notice board for the gram sabha members at least for a week for their observations and comments. Finally, it should be sent to the concerned department with necessary modifications based on the suggestion of majority of gram sabha members.

11. In the context of ward sabha and Gram Sabha, the Vigilance Committee needs to be abolished in order to make these bodies responsible for social audit. Social audit can be done either in the ward sabha meetings pertaining to the work done at the respective ward level or gram sabha meetings, if it is related to the panchayat.
Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Gram Panchayat among the three tiers is considered as the basic unit of local self-governance. Therefore, proper functioning of gram panchayats is the most essential factor for strengthening grassroots democracy. The basic philosophy of local self-governance is to give ‘voice’ to ‘voiceless’ people living in more than 5,00,000 villages in India and to break long years of ‘culture of silence’ and dependence on external mediators. This will also safeguard the fact that the ideal of ‘power to the people’ does not degenerate into the ‘power to the powerful’.

Gram Panchayats are designated as the first tier of self-governing institutions in PRIs. Gram Panchayat is an executive body of gram sabha that elects from amongst its members a Pradhan, an Up-pradhan and ward members of gram panchayat. As an elected body at the village level, Gram Panchayat is expected to play a significant role in economic development and social justice at the village level. It is expected to develop a comprehensive village level plan and its implementation through people’s participation towards effective self-governance. The major constituent for effective functioning of the gram panchayat is its meeting where members of gram panchayat get an opportunity for discussion and decision on various issues and problems related to village and panchayat. One of the most important aspects for sustainable development of the panchayat is its financial resource, which can be generated through its own resources by collecting taxes, fees and non-tax revenues. Moreover, it can also mobilise human resources for planning and implementation of various development programmes. The panchayat can also mobilise resources available with the State and Central Government in terms of schemes, grants-in-aid, statutory grants, etc. As an institution of local self-governance, the Gram Panchayat should be accountable towards the gram sabha. The government functionaries working at the gram panchayat level should also be made accountable towards the gram panchayat for its effective functioning.

**Ground realities**

1. The dates of the Gram Panchayat meetings were decided by the BDO in consultation with the Panchayat Secretaries, accordingly the Gram Panchayats were informed. As per the statutory provision, Gram Panchayat meetings shall be held at least once in a month. However, in most of the cases, the meetings are held twice a month on a regular basis at panchayat headquarters. One of the most significant reasons for irregularity of meetings is due to the absence of Panchayat Secretary in the gram panchayat meeting. 80 percent of the gram panchayat members on an average attend the gram panchayat meetings regularly.

2. In most of the cases, the pradhan presided over the meeting. There are instances when pradhan was absent; the meeting was postponed to the next date because as per up-pradhans, they don’t have the seal in their name to put signature and seal on the proceeding register. Even pradhan and panchayat secretary do not provide space for them to hold the meeting. Moreover, panchayat secretary does not provide proceeding register to other members of Gram Panchayat to write the proceedings of the meeting, in absence of Pradhan. Though there has been statutory provision but in reality it was found that it was difficult for the up-pradhan to implement such decisions in the absence of pradhan.
3. The agenda of gram panchayat meetings is largely focused on infrastructure development such as provision of drinking water, construction and repair of roads, culverts and bridges; school buildings, mahila mandal bhawans etc. Social issues like health, education, sanitation, etc. have hardly been placed as an agenda item.

4. Participation of the members in the gram panchayat meetings is relatively higher as compared to gram sabha meetings. While women's participation as elected representatives is relatively higher in the gram panchayat meetings as compared to the gram sabha meetings.

5. Pradhan as head of gram panchayat plays three different functions in gram panchayats - administrative, development and judicial functions. As far as their roles in gram panchayats are concerned they are considered as political leaders, executive heads for developmental activities and head of nyaya panchayats within the periphery of gram sabha.

6. Most of the pradhans were functioning as individuals rather than working as teams. They used to work in isolation rather than mobilising support of the up-pradhan or ward members. Moreover, they used to work as mere implementers of government schemes and programmes by assisting them in achieving targets for various poverty alleviation programmes and other rural development schemes of the state or central government. Pradhans were made contractors in the hands of Block Officials. They used to sign contracts with the Block Development Officer (BDO) to get funds for any construction activities. Due to this reason pradhans are also treated like contractors and were also brought under the control of block officials and made accountable towards these functionaries.

7. The standing committees in reality are defunct. Hardly have any gram panchayats formed any standing committees that are functional. This is primarily due to the lack of clarity about the roles, functions and powers of standing committees, functional roles and relationship between gram panchayat and standing committees.

8. As per statutory provision, the list of functions entrusted to PRIs under the Panchayati Raj Act 1994, is quite impressive but, they are more like a list of subjects, without clarifying which functions or projects are to be performed at which level of PRIs. However, at present many functions assigned to PRIs are routinely being performed by the departments of state government, leading to lack of functional responsibility for both levels of government. Moreover, finance and functionaries of PRIs are largely under the control of state government.

**Suggestions**

1. The Government of India vide its letter dated 6-11-95 asked the state governments to restructure the DRDAs by making ZP chairperson the ex-officio chairperson of the governing body of DRDA. Accordingly in HP, the chairperson of Zila Parishads has been made chairperson of governing body of DRDA, thus relieving Deputy Commissioner of this charge. But this is only a partial integration as DRDA still remains an independent body and DC continues to exercise all the executive and financial powers in it. Secondly, members of ZP except chairperson are not associated with the working of DRDA. As DRDA is the most important body of rural development at district level therefore, its complete merger with ZP should be done.

2. The district level officers of department of Agriculture, Horticulture, Animal husbandry, Rural development and Education who deal primarily with the function to be performed by
the Zila Parishad at district level should be brought into the fold of Zila Parishad and should be accountable to ZP. An Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer equivalent to the Deputy Commissioner in seniority and status should be posted as the Secretary of the Zila Parishad. The Secretary ZP under the control and guidance of ZP should coordinate the multi-disciplinary team of officers and report their work to the ZP. She should be responsible for coordination amongst the head of various functional departments. As far as technical inputs are concerned the line hierarchy from higher level should be available to the line hierarchy of lower level.

3. At Zila Parishad level the system of committees needs to be strengthened, so that specialised subjects can be discussed in depth and expert from outside can also be co-opted to the committees. Moreover, the committee system ensures fuller participation of elected members in the decision-making.

4. The staff working at various levels of PRIs especially the line departments should be brought under control of the concerned Panchayats. These staff members should be made accountable to their respective panchayats for all intent and purpose. It includes employment of these staff persons, administer and supervise their work, initiate ACR of these employees, taking appropriate disciplinary action if required, disbursement of salary etc. For exercising such powers and responsibilities sufficient staff should be given to the Panchayats.

5. For division of functions between the State Government and PRIs, the first criterion is the economy efficiency. By this test the services, which benefit the local people should be provided by panchayats if they benefit most of the people living in their local area and by the state government if they benefit the entire state. The second criterion is the nature of task. If standardised, uniform provisions and procedures are important then that the State Government should administer it. If adoption to local circumstances and preferences is important, it should be the panchayat’s responsibility. The third criterion is that entrustment of function should be based on technical competency and professional skill available at a particular level.

6. Various standing committees functioning at the Panchayat level, as parallel bodies to the Panchayats should be brought under the control of Panchayats. Pradhan or Up-Pradhan should be made chairpersons of various standing committees. Demarcation of roles and responsibilities of various standing committees should be spelt out.

7. For effective functioning of gram panchayat, each panchayat should have an independent panchayat secretary, who should be brought under the control of Gram Panchayat. As far as reporting of the panchayat secretaries is concerned, they should be made accountable to the concerned Panchayati Raj department such as Panchayat Inspector or DPOs rather than the BDOs. The ACR of Panchayat Secretaries should be written by DPO and initiated by concerned Gram Panchayat.
4

Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Panchayati Raj Institutions are supposed to act as institutions of local self-governance. This can only happen when panchayats are fiscally autonomous and able to manage the affairs and development of panchayats by their own. However, the financial status of PRIs in Himachal Pradesh has been very weak since its inception. These elected bodies are largely dependent on government grants to manage their own affairs and development initiatives. So far development of panchayats is done at the mercy and discretion of the state government. The grants are released to panchayats on ad-hoc basis. Panchayats become parasites on the state government to do their own development. Even though there have been a number of provisions made in the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, to make PRIs function as institutions of local self-governance but so far it is not visible at the grassroots.

Ground realities

1. The income of panchayats can broadly be classified as own tax revenue, own non-tax revenue (non-tax receipts and fees) and grants. The taxes levied by the Gram Panchayat include only house tax. The share of local rate and the land revenue given to the Gram Panchayats assigned by the State government. The fees being collected by the Gram Panchayats include the judicial fee, certificate fee and ration card fee. Non-tax receipts from which the Gram Panchayats generate own revenue include rent, interest, proceeds from auction and fees from fairs and festivals. The panchayats received Grants-in-aid from the State and Central Government. Other two tiers of PRIs have not been empowered to levy taxes.

![Income of Gram Panchayats (1995-98)](image)

2. The average annual income of PRIs over the three consecutive financial years from 1995-96 to 1997-98 show increasing trends. In 1997-98 there is a sharp increase in income of the GPs, PSs and ZPs because these three tiers received significant amount of grants from the Central Government.

3. As per State Finance Commission Report, the Gram Panchayats are today in no position to even meet the nominal committed expenditure they are supposed to carry out. Historically, so far these bodies have more or less entirely depended upon the grants from the State Government, of which an overwhelmingly large portion is objectified. It also emerges that
these bodies despite having been in existence for over three decades have not made any serious effort to raise resources to the full potential in the context of existing areas of resource raising or explore newer areas for raising resources.

4. As compared to the total income, average own revenue mobilized by the GPs for three consecutive financial years has been found to be 6%. The own income of the gram panchayats (6%) as compared to the funds received (94%) is found to be negligible. However, the own revenue of the GPs has declined over the years because the government grants to the GPs have increased manifold.

5. During 1995-98, out of the total expenditure incurred on 29 items as specified in Eleventh Schedule, 41% has been spent on item no. 13, i.e., construction and renovation of roads, culverts, bridges, ferries and water ways; 34% is spent on item no. 17 i.e., construction of school buildings and 6% on item no. 29 i.e., maintenance of community assets. Therefore, 81% of the total expenditure is spent on construction activities. Where as, 2% each on health and sanitation; drinking water and non-conventional energy resources.

6. There is lack of awareness among the gram sabha members in general and elected representatives (other than the chairpersons) of PRIs regarding the financial status of panchayats. Especially the chairpersons of all the three tiers of PRIs usually manage the financial affairs of these democratic institutions with support from the secretaries. Hardly any members of all the three tiers are involved in the financial affairs of PRIs at respective levels. As per statutory provision, it is mandatory for the gram panchayat to present its income expenditure statement, grants received, etc. in the gram sabha meeting and secondly, there is also provision of social audit but very few gram panchayats have followed this process. It is due to lack of awareness among the gram sabha members and therefore, the gram panchayats get undue advantage.

7. Other significant issues raised by the members of PRIs are regarding the involvement of contractors in the infrastructure development projects at gram panchayat level. They alleged that a large proportion of the grants for development works are given to the contractors for its implementation at GP level due to their political and official connections. Most of the members also expressed their concern regarding the quality of work done by contractors, which is sub-standard and the funds are misutilised. Moreover, the development works done by the contractors have a very short life span.

Suggestions

1. In Himachal Pradesh the present level of user charges by PRIs is very low. The State Finance Commission in its report observed, 'the issue of user charges for various services has been evaded for long, but it will increasingly become imminent that such charges will need to be levied. Resources which can legitimately be raised will require to be raised and no alibis will help sustaining the current scenario for long'. Thus, now user charges on utilities like water supply, irrigation, etc. should be based on the criterion of cost recovery. However, the government has given power to gram panchayats to collect water user charges, which is a welcome step in this regard. But more such powers should be vested with gram panchayats to collect other user charges to raise their own income.
2. To improve the tax collection the following action should be taken— at present only the GP has the power to raise resources through taxation. Now the taxing power should be given to all the three tiers to raise their own income. There should be some penalty for non-collection of taxes. Like State Finance Commission in its report recommended that, ‘in case some local bodies do not collect the statutory levies, the resources transfer recommended through this report of Commission should not be released. Compliance to collect taxes at the local level should only qualify these bodies for availing the resource transfer from the consolidated fund of the state’.

3. To improve revenue generation by PRIs incentives should be offered by the state government. Like in the state of Rajasthan, cash awards for development work are given linked with revenue generation by PRIs. In Tamil Nadu, 15% of the transfer from general state revenues are set aside for incentives like matching grants for rural local bodies.

4. For integrated functioning it is recommended that budget, non-plan and plan of the departments (for the functions transferred to PRIs) should become part of zila parishad budget. The state budget should be split into two, providing separate budget for PRIs as is the case in the state of Karnataka.

5. In Himachal Pradesh there are various schemes like Local District Planning (LDP), Decentralised Planning (DP), Backward Area Plan (BAP) under which funds are provided to district administration. As all these funds basically pertain to decentralised planning, therefore these funds should be made available to District Planning Committee. There is also a need to strengthen planning capability at GP and PS level, to get clear prioritised plan from them, for further integration in the district level plan. The state government should ensure that fund allocations need to be made to PRIs based on the annual development plan prepared by PRIs.

6. PRIs should be strengthened to ensure proper maintenance of accounts. Therefore, training on financial management and accounting should be provided to the PRIs with the help of NGOs.

7. PRIs should be allocated untied funds based on the prioritised needs of the gram sabha through their consolidated annual development plan. The needs should be prioritised at the respective ward levels and consolidated at the gram sabha for enhancing people’s participation in mobilising own (natural, physical and human) resources and implementing their plans. Panchayats should be encouraged to utilise funds on socio-economic development.

8. No contractors should be involved in the construction work at gram panchayat level. All the work at the gram panchayat level should be done through the respective gram panchayat.
Participatory Bottom-Up Planning

It is gradually becoming a widely accepted fact that planning done at the national level is not always locally relevant, for each local area has its own potentials, problems and needs. Planning in India so far has been done at the macro level i.e., top-down method has been followed. It is now being realized that unless the people are involved in directing and controlling the process of development, no real (human) development will take place. In order for this to happen more powers regarding decision making, planning, budgeting, etc. need to be given to the villagers. Therefore, decentralization of governance and development planning is a pre-condition for the realisation of untapped growth potential. This is because the needs of the people, the resources, the ecological setting, the social milieu and traditional knowledge of the people are all local specific. Only a decentralised structure of government can facilitate direct participation of the people. Thus, there is a need for effective village-level institutions to organise and involve the people in controlling and managing their resources to solve problems and generally to improve quality of life.

**Ground realites**

1. Though the State Government has passed an order to ensure micro planning as the basis for preparing development plans of the gram panchayat but it is not sufficient, a lot needs to be done at the panchayat level. One of the most significant issues is to change the mindset of the government officials at lower levels i.e., at gram panchayat, block and district level. Whatever policies are made at the state level, until and unless they are implemented at the grassroots, they have no impact. To do so it is the lower level officials who have to shoulder responsibilities. But still most of the officials are indifferent towards micro planning and also lack understanding of the subject. Therefore, there is need for orientation and training of these officials on micro planning and how to enhance people’s participation.

2. The PRIs hardly give priority to the micro plans prepared by the gram sabha rather they put their own agenda and plans separately. There are no organic linkages among the three tiers for an integrated participatory bottom-up planning, because each tier submits its plan to the DPC separately.

3. One of the significant issues is the constitution of DPC, which has to play an important role in planning. However, in reality, even after seven years, most of the districts do not have the DPC and hardly any district has the functional DPC. Therefore, consolidation and preparation of micro plan at the district level has not yet been made and the whole planning process has been affected.

4. Though it has been notified that 75% of various grants would be sanctioned on the basis of bottom-up plan but so far it has not been implemented at the ground level. Very few panchayats that had already prepared their micro-plans did not get the grants as per their micro-plans. Funds are allocated to them based on top-down approach, from district administration to PRIs, as decided by the State Government. A large percentage of GPs did not prepare such plans as they were apprehensive of the impact of micro-plans.

5. The Government has raised the expectation level of the gram panchayats as well as gram sabhas, people have again started coming for the gram sabha meeting with lots of expectations and it started showing results in terms of attendance and participation in gram sabha meetings. But at the same time, the State government has not been able to allocate resources in the manner as it is notified, which has further raised issues among the gram sabhas and gram panchayats about the outcome of preparing micro plans.
6. Participation of women and weaker sections in decision-making and implementation of the plan is found to be very low. It is one of the most significant factors, why issues related to socio-economic development has not been raised in gram sabha meetings. Moreover, the planning process is concentrated upon infrastructure development. Social issues like health, education, sanitation, prohibition etc. hardly gets priority in the agenda of the PRIs.

7. Lack of information dissemination to the gram sabha regarding date, time, venue and agenda, has resulted in ineffective gram sabha vis-a-vis planning. Though the state government has fixed the dates for the gram sabha and therefore, the planning process. But in the absence of a clear-cut agenda of the gram sabha meeting it does not motivate the people to attend the meeting. Therefore agenda of gram sabha meeting with a focus on planning needs to be disseminated well in advance to the gram sabha.

Suggestions

1. In order to make micro planning an integral part of the planning process of the gram panchayat and its effective implementation there is a need for convergence and collaboration among PRIs, the State Government and civil society. All these institutions have their own strengths and limitations.

2. The State Government has the resources in terms of physical, financial and human, which have not been optimally utilised for the development. Secondly, it has its own limitations in ensuring people’s participation in the development process whereas the NGOs have the strengths in this area. Therefore, NGOs support can be mobilised in this regard.

3. The State Government can make the policies and ensure that policies are effectively implemented at the grassroots. It can ensure the participation of government officials in providing technical support to the gram sabha during micro planning process.

4. It should release the grants-in-aid on time based on micro planning prepared by the gram sabha and further ensure that the plan must be prepared by the gram panchayat through the gram sabha.

5. The State Government should create a data-base at the block, district and state level regarding issues and problems of gram sabha, resources required to implement micro plans, constitution of DPC in the districts, follow-up of micro-plans submitted by gram panchayats.

6. NGOs have the ability to ensure people’s participation to a large extent in the development initiatives. Moreover, they are directly working with the people and institutions at the grassroots. Therefore, they have a better understanding about the ground realities and rapport with the community. Moreover, they have the skills to facilitate the process of micro plan and enhance people’s participation especially women, other weaker sections and tribals in identifying and prioritising issues, preparing micro plans and motivating people for its effective implementation by mobilising their own resources and external assistance. NGOs can also play the role of capacity building of elected representatives of PRIs, government functionaries, gram sabha members, members of micro planning committee as well as the other civil society actors.

7. Above all, PRIs as democratically elected bodies have the enormous potential in the process of micro planning and mobilising people’s support and co-operation in the planning and its implementation. Especially gram panchayats need to play the most significant role in the planning process such as organising meeting, disseminating information, resource mapping, ensuring people’s participation in identifying and prioritising their issues and problems, making comprehensive bottom-up plans, mobilising resources for its implementation and follow-up of plans. Moreover they have to play a catalytic role among the gram sabha, civil society, government and other tiers of PRIs.

8. Participatory bottom-up plan needs to be started at the lowest level i.e. at the ward level. This is because in a state like Himachal Pradesh which has difficult geographical terrain and the gram sabha is spread over kilometres, in which case it is not feasible to organise planning process at the gram sabha level. This is one of the most significant reasons for failure of gram sabha over the years. Though the state government made the amendment for ward sabhas, but it has not yet shown the result, which needs to be emphasised further.
6
Leadership of Women and other Weaker Sections in Panchayats

Women’s participation in politics is an important step towards social equality and economic development. Till date rural women have been subjected to all kinds of discrimination and have been denied equality of status and opportunities in the social, economic and political spheres. Despite constituting nearly half of the country’s population, the women have remained marginal to the democratic process in their own thinking and in the minds of others. Women are very poorly represented in the various policies and decision-making bodies, which so vitally influence their lives. Perhaps the main reasons for this are the deep-rooted gender-biased social attitudes and practices and lack of organisation to voice their concern.

After the enactment of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1993, women’s representation and participation increased quite radically due to one-third reservation of seats for them in the local bodies. The Panchayati Raj legislation and its effective implementation have added another level in political participation. This landmark constitutional amendment has paved the way for women to find a prominent place among the panchayat representatives.

**Ground realities**

1. **Profile of women elected representatives:**

   - **Size:** On an average there are 2-4 elected women members in a sample gram panchayat. Majority of them has been elected for the first time and on reserved seats. 17% of the women elected representatives in the sample area have been elected from the unreserved constituencies.

   - **Age:** Most of the women PRI members are from the middle age group, i.e., between 30-40 years. At the gram panchayat level, the average age of the elected members is 38 years whereas, at panchayat samiti and zila parishad levels; it is 34 and 32 years respectively. Reservation for women in panchayats allowed the younger generation to get involved in grassroots politics not only at gram panchayat level but also at the panchayat samiti and zila parishad level. It has also broken the long tradition of leadership pattern, which was the domain of the village elders.

   - **Education:** 16% of women gram panchayat members are illiterate. 22% of them have studied only up to primary school, 20% up to middle, 30% up to high school, whereas only 12% have studied higher than the intermediate level. However, among these illiterate women elected representatives, there are effective leaders who proved that illiteracy is not a hindering factor for managing the affairs of panchayats. It all depends on the individual’s attitude
and thinking, self-confidence and strong determination.

- **Occupation**: The main occupation of the Pradhan or the Ward Member is agriculture, which carries 77%, while 19% are housewives and 4% are running family business. Though this responsibility has added a new dimension to their lives as well as to the society, and bringing a large percentage of women (as elected representatives and gram sabha members) in the mainstream of development, but at the same time it has increased the burden of women from the family to the society. As a result, in many cases women face resistance from within the family and a role conflict between the desired roles and expectation of the family. Most of these women elected representatives belong to economically well off families. It is due to the fact that in 50% of the cases, the husbands are in service. In 33% of the cases, the family members of the elected women members have prior or present political experience, mostly being panchayat representatives.

- **Experience**: 60% of the women PRI elected representatives are eager to contest the next PRI elections. Many of the Ward Members would like to contest for the Pradhan’s post. However, 22% of women PRI members also feel that they were better off before getting elected. A few women members said, “At times people are not satisfied with the work we have done. They were better off before becoming a Pradhan. Now there are a few enemies also.”

2. In many cases, women as elected representatives and gram sabha members are crowded out from participation and decision making process of the PRIs. It is due to the gender bias, indifferent and apathetic attitude of male counterparts or government functionaries, caste and class factors. However, there are instances where women representatives break barriers, raise their voices and establish themselves as effective leaders. Women’s knowledge, confidence and assertiveness within society and their families have been boosted by their new positions. There is also evidence that decentralised reservation encourages greater participation of less educated and more disadvantaged women, which otherwise would have been highly unlikely.

### Suggestions

1. One of the significant landmarks made through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is empowerment of women and other weaker sections. It is not possible only by way of reservations. There is a need to provide them information, knowledge and the means to become effective in their roles as elected representatives. Thus, a greater emphasis should be made on the following:

- Awareness generation
- Information, knowledge and skills through training
- Education
2. **Capacity building**: Training is a vital necessity for the effective functioning of the women PRI members. Most of them lack knowledge and awareness regarding their roles, duties and responsibilities as members. A group of 30-40 women elected representatives should be imparted training in order to make the training effective. Participatory training methods including role-plays, simulation, group exercises, small and large group discussions, case studies, etc. can be used. Separate trainings and exposure visits should be organised for women.

3. Moreover, in order to overcome the attitudinal problem towards women that exists in several cases; gender sensitisation workshops and trainings can be organised for the various stakeholder groups related with PRIs.

4. **Educational Material**: Preparation of relevant educational material in a simplified version for the PRI members - their roles, duties, responsibilities, government schemes etc. This is more so because most of the women have been elected for the first time with no prior knowledge of the functioning of PRIs. Thus there is need for dissemination of relevant information to these elected representatives.

5. **Audio-visual means of information dissemination**: It has been seen that though the government and voluntary organisations do prepare educational materials, often they are hardly read by the target groups, especially women. After completion of household chores, agricultural work and panchayat work, they hardly get time to read. Moreover, rural women who have mostly studied till primary or middle school are not in the habit of reading. Thus, other means of information dissemination is necessary. This can be through exposure visits to effective panchayats, CBOs. Use of cultural media including street plays, songs, movies, puppet shows, videos, orientation programmes, panchayat melas, etc. can also be effective media for information dissemination and creating awareness among the women elected representatives. A slot can be provided on AIR and Doordarshan especially for Panchayati Raj on a regular basis. Electronic media is a very powerful form of information dissemination.

6. **Panchayat Resource Centres (PRCs) as a means of information dissemination**: In every panchayat a PRC can be set up at a central place which will serve as a library-cum-reading room and where all types of information related to panchayati raj and rural development will be available. Besides serving as a library, this resource centre can also be a place where people can meet and discuss on various issues. Moreover, training/orientation centres especially for women and other weaker sections can be established here. Meetings, trainings, discussions can also be held here. Thus, on the whole the PRC will serve as a place of learning and exchange of ideas and information, where people can raise their concern and are able to learn from each other.
7

Capacity Building Initiatives

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution not only provided constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, but also greatly widened the scope of the functions, duties and responsibilities of the newly elected representatives. Increase in the awareness level and knowledge base of these people especially women and those belonging to the weaker sections was thus very essential. Therefore, capacity-building initiatives are an important aspect of strengthening local self-governance by building capacity of the elected representatives of PRIs, the gram sabha members who will eventually play the role of watchdogs in making panchayats accountable and transparent. Capacity building interventions in Himachal Pradesh have been undertaken by the joint collaborative efforts of NGOs and State Government, network of NGOs and other civil society actors. Capacity building can be in the form of trainings, campaigns, exposure visits, information dissemination in the form of manuals, posters, pamphlets, etc. through panchayat resource centers.

Ground realities

1. Most trainings conducted by government functionaries have been high in content and low on impact, relying mostly on outdated, one-way, lecture techniques in classroom settings with little or no scope or concern for trainee-participation. Their purpose was to deliver lectures, without taking into consideration the level of awareness, understanding and interest of the participants. Moreover barring a few, most of the trainers/instructors either from the Government Training Institutes or government functionaries who have in-depth understanding of the subjects, were not able to distinguish the difference between training of trainers (ToT) and training of elected representatives. Therefore, their approaches to both the trainings were the same, which has resulted in lower level of participation and merely fulfilling the formalities.

2. Participatory training methods used by a few NGOs have been the crucial factors behind the high impact of training which is reflected in a clearer understanding of the contents by the participants, and more significantly, in generating debate and discussion and a yearning for more—a clear pointer towards the beginning of the internalisation process. Further, the strategy of using experienced PRI representatives as resource persons in some sessions has had a very positive effect in demonstrating the practice of the participation principle and the resultant ‘feel of empowerment’.

3. In many cases, there was no proper seating arrangement made during trainings organised by block or district administration—where the training hall was too small to accommodate all the participants. Lack of proper arrangements such as training materials like black boards, chalks and dusters, flip charts and markers, etc. also affected training to a large extent.
4. Most of the trainers from the government side were not able to distinguish the difference between training of trainers (ToT) and training of elected representatives. What would be the key aspects of ToT as compared to training of elected representatives? The trainers of ToT did not differentiate between the role the trainers would play in the training and the role to be played by elected representatives after the training. They consider both the trainings similar and therefore their approach is also similar to both the trainings.

5. Most of the trainings conducted for the elected representatives are conventional in nature such as classroom teaching and focussed on the theoretical understanding of panchayats such as 73rd Amendment Act, provisions in the Act and Rule. Hardly any emphasis has been given to the practical aspects of functioning of panchayats, on how to develop leadership skills, on how to conduct meetings, supervise work and accounts of panchayats, and on how to deal with the government officials, etc.

6. One time capacity building intervention in the form of training organised by the government for most of the elected representatives, hardly assisted newly elected representatives especially women and other marginalized sections in gaining their confidence and competency to work as people’s representatives in panchayats. Moreover, trainings organised for most of the elected representatives after three to four years of coming to power has been found to be less or of no significance.

7. The collaborative efforts for capacity building between government and civil society organisations were found to be fruitful.

Suggestions

1. There is need for the trainers/instructors of Government Training Institute or government functionaries to undergo training on participatory training methods, to make trainings effective and people-centred. It can be done with the help of NGOs who have the expertise and experience of conducting participatory training.

2. The collaborative efforts for capacity building between the government and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) need to be strengthened. Because the government has enormous potential in terms of resources such as human, financial as well as infrastructure. But it does not have the experience and expertise to conduct people-centred trainings by using participatory training methods. On the other hand, the NGOs have the potential in this regard. Therefore, collaborative efforts will certainly make the training more effective where the government can provide necessary resources and NGOs can act as resource persons/ facilitators for TOT and training of elected representatives.

3. Moreover, developing various training and learning materials can be developed through this collaborative effort, where the government can provide theoretical understanding of the subject matter and NGOs will substantiate with participatory concepts.

4. It is indeed necessary for the government to review/evaluate the present strategy and accordingly develop a new training strategy and a time bound action plan in
collaboration with NGOs which includes structured training programmes, concurrent contact programmes; information dissemination using folk and traditional methods, print and electronic media, information technology and panchayat resource centres, exposure visits to model ‘panchayats’ and experience sharing.

5. Moreover, additional/special training programmes for women and marginalized sections; joint trainings or interface between elected representatives and government functionaries; special skills trainings to standing committees, Gram Sabha, citizen groups on micro planning, social auditing, etc.; bringing new actors under the capacity building umbrella, for example – officials and functionaries of the departments transferred to Panchayats; identifying and strengthening capacities of the State and district level co-trainers including instructors of Panchayati Raj Training Institutes, NGOs, former PRI members and government functionaries on participatory training methods; use of participatory training mechanisms and periodic evaluations should be made.

6. Continuous and sustained capacity building efforts need to be carried out through the collaborative efforts between the Government and NGOs. A team of trainers should be developed at the block or district level to provide continuous trainings to the elected representatives.

7. Trainings should be focussed on the practical aspects of functioning of panchayats, how to develop leadership skills, how to conduct meetings, supervise work and accounts of panchayats, how to deal with government officials, how to mobilise external resources, etc.

8. Panchayat Resource Centres could be established by the State Government in collaboration with CSOs as well as Panchayats to act as a centre where all information and data related to Panchayati Raj and other line departments is available, to organise trainings and other events for capacity building and creating awareness among the PRIs and gram sabha, to strengthen Gram Sabha for making the panchayats accountable and transparent by ensuring participation of women and other weaker sections, to provide counselling services to panchayat members on various panchayat related issues, to act as an information centre during the pre-election voter’s awareness campaign and other such events.
8

Panchayat Elections

One of the historic landmarks made by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, was ensuring participation of women and weaker sections such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) through reservations. However, reservations cannot change the traditional patterns of socio-economic and political structures in the villages; break the ‘culture of silence’; create awareness among citizens and ‘empower the powerless’. There must be an enabling environment and appropriate interventions are required to improve the self-confidence of women and weaker sections and create forums for dialogue to enhance their participation in democratic governance.

In order to enhance the participation of common citizens in democratic grassroots governance, there is a need for citizen’s participation in choosing the right candidates and making the democratic institutions accountable and transparent. The first step towards achieving these is to make the citizens aware of their rights and responsibilities and enable them to actively participate in the PRI elections. It can only happen when women and weaker sections participate equally in the whole process. Otherwise a large percentage of population will be left out in the first step towards democratic governance.

In order to make this happen, citizens need to be made aware of and informed about PRIs as institutions of local self-governance. Citizens need to understand their rights and responsibilities to act effectively in grassroots democracy, local associations and organisations. Citizens need to demonstrate assertive, caring and ethical leadership. Citizen’s capacity and confidence need to be developed and encouraged to enable them to have dialogue with public institutions, officials and leaders on issues affecting their lives. Citizens need to show solidarity, generosity and mutual support towards fellow citizens.

Keeping this in mind, PRIA along with partner NGOs and CBOs in the state started the Pre-Election Voter’s Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) for the PRI elections in Himachal Pradesh during December 1995. This campaign was the first of its kind to create awareness among the citizens by civil society in the state. The objectives of the campaign were: to enhance citizens’ participation especially women and other weaker sections in the election process, by nominating and electing right candidates and reducing the selection of dummy candidates. To create an enabling environment for free and fair election; to involve CSOs during PEVAC in order to create awareness among the citizens, and to mobilise the support of CSOs to make the election process effective. The whole campaign was divided into three broad phases: pre-actual campaign, during the actual campaign and post-actual campaign. In this context, ‘actual campaign’ means a minimum of 15 days campaign mode prior to elections.
Ground realities

1. The findings that emerged from the process are: the votes were being prepared through a house-to-house survey in some of the villages. In such villages, the reports of missing names were very few. In other cases, the votes were prepared by sitting in the houses of few persons. In such villages the number of the omitted candidates’ names reported were very high. Certain resident persons who had voted in all previous elections found their names missing from the list. The reason could be negligence of the persons making the list rather than any personal or political issues. There were problems while filing of complaints. The date for entry into the voter’s list was fixed as 1st January 2000, while the elections were held in December 2000. As a result, many young people were left out and voiced their concerns.

2. Considerable confusion prevailed over the reservation of seats for the women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBC). The OBCs’ reservation was added to the list after the announcement of the dates of elections. Thus, very few persons were aware about the status of the reservation in all the three tiers. This proved to be an effective activity as it established the organisation’s rapport in the panchayats and paved the way for PEVAC.

3. Though reservations provided an opportunity for women to hold various positions in PRIs but there are women candidates who had contested elections on their own and without the support of their family. It has also been observed that women have started asserting their rights and voicing their concerns and issues in front of the public. They were also able to challenge the indifferent male attitude during the PRI elections. During the election process, issues related to gender emerged. Most of the women and fellow women candidates raised the social issues, which are adversely affecting the lives of women such as alcohol, women’s exploitation, bad health, etc. as the main agenda for election and also most of the women said that they would vote for those candidates who would solve these issues. Whereas for men issues related to infrastructure development formed the main election manifesto.

4. Elections to the PRIs in Himachal Pradesh were held on time. On an average 6 candidates contested for the post of Pradhan in PRIs election- 2000, irrespective of sex. It is evident for general as well as reserved constituencies for women.

5. Many of the voters got confused and complained that the polling personnel did not explain the procedures well. Moreover, as, they were not allowed to talk to others inside the polling booths; they did not ask other voters present in the booth. Voters also said that even the symbols and colours used for different candidates were similar and confusing. This was mainly in the case of non-literate and old people.

6. In a majority of the polling stations, women polling personnel were present. On an average 40% of the polling personnel were females, which helped the women to vote effectively. Many women voters expressed their satisfaction and said that the provision of employing more women personnel was very helpful.
7. Factors like party politics and caste played a pre-dominant role in PRIs election. Data revealed that 14% of the respondents did vote on the basis of the above-mentioned factors. Several candidates campaigned on the basis of caste factors and asked the voters to vote on caste lines.

8. The State Election Commission had taken proper initiatives to make the election free and fair. In sensitive booths, extra police personnel were deployed to avoid any violence during election. In the intervened areas 48% of the sample respondents agreed that violence in the PRIs election has been reduced due to PEVAC, whereas 17% of them said that violence has been reduced not due to PEVAC but because of state government initiatives.

9. Around 10% of the women candidates contested for the post of Pradhan from the general constituencies. Among these women contestants, most of them had been Pradhans earlier and due to the rotation of seats as per the reservation policy of the government, their seats got de-reserved and those women ex-pradhans filed their nominations again from the unreserved seats. Some of the women members, who had earlier been ward members also tried to contest for the post of Pradhans and other posts in Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. Some of them won the elections against men because of their good track records as Pradhans in the last five years. Some women candidates contested against men from the general seat for the first time. This was the case in 3% of the intervened areas. These women were either members of Mahila Mandal or SHGs or motivated by NGOs or CSOs. A large percentage of women who contested for the first time in PRIs election were mostly from Mahila Mandal.

**Suggestions**

1. Pre-election voter’s awareness campaign for PRIs should be organized throughout the state, to create awareness among the citizens regarding their duties and responsibilities as voters and gram sabha members. Civil Society Organizations can establish a network for initiating such campaigns at the panchayat level.

2. Before finalizing the electoral rolls, it should be displayed on the notice board of gram panchayat at least for 15 days or some conspicuous places, so that voters get a chance to register their names. Accordingly, the final list should be published and displayed. The voter’s list should be updated before three months of elections, so that most of the youth get an opportunity to register their names as voters.

3. Reservation of seats should be made public well in advance, so that there should not be any confusion at the last moment in filling and filing nominations.

4. Distinct coloured ballot papers and symbol should be allotted to the candidates of each tier, so that it should not create any confusion among the voters.

5. More and more women polling personnel should be deployed in the polling booths to encourage women to participate in the election of PRIs. CSOs should also motivate women to contest from the unreserved constituencies.
Ways Forward

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has paved the way for the establishment of three tiers of panchayats at the village, intermediate and district level to function as institutions of local self-governance. It has also provided an opportunity for the gram sabha to act as an institution of direct democracy. In conformity with the 73rd Amendment Act, the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act came into effect in 1994 with a view to ensure effective involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions in local governance, including administration and development activities. A three-tier panchayati raj system was implemented in the state. Even though the responsibilities and functions have been devolved to the panchayats to a great extent but due to lack devolution of powers in terms of funds and functionaries it has largely affected the functioning of panchayats as institutions of local self-governance. Moreover, due to overlapping of functions among three tiers as well as between the line departments of the state and panchayats also made these bodies feeble.

Gram Sabha and ward sabha need to be strengthened through the collaborative efforts between government and civil society organisations. The state government should involve the civil society organisations in creating awareness among the citizens and elected representatives regarding the needs and importance of gram sabha through campaigns, dissemination of material such as posters, pamphlets, manuals, etc. The standing committees at various levels of panchayats need to be strengthened and they should work in association with panchayats rather than as parallel bodies. Moreover, DPC should also be made functional. Women’s participation in ward and gram sabha meetings needs to be ensured through legal provisions in the State Act and by creating awareness. Issues pertaining to socio-economic development need attention in the gram sabha meetings. This can be achieved when participation of women in the gram sabha meetings increases.

Training should be imparted to the representatives of all tiers of panchayats in general and gram panchayats in particular on the following aspects: local self-governance and its meaning, leadership skills, how to conduct gram sabha, how to facilitate GS and GP meetings, how to face the public and tackle the situation, how to develop self-confidence, how to supervise income and expenditure statements maintained by Panchayat Secretary; administrative matters of gram panchayat, conflict resolution capabilities, developing interpersonal relationships, how to mobilise people’s support and confidence. Training on the above aspects should be conducted by the non-governmental organisations having expertise and experiences in this regard. Exposure visits should also be organised for the elected representatives at regular intervals, to learn from
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the field. Attitude of the government functionaries especially working at the GP, block and district level needs to be changed towards PRIs. This can be done through regular orientation and trainings.

The media can also play an effective role in strengthening PRIs by providing information for creating awareness and generating debate on various issues of panchayats as well as by influencing policy at the state level. Though there have been some efforts made by the print and electronic media for spreading messages on panchayats but the effort needs to be done in a more systematic manner like episode wise programme can be developed in the form of skit, drama which can be broadcasted through radio focusing especially on women and weaker sections. Articles can also be published in the newspapers on a regular basis, which will certainly create awareness among the people. Media can also provide space to the civil society organisations for writing various issues of local self-governance.

The State Government should devolve more powers in terms of funds and functionaries to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The functionaries working under various line departments as well as at the gram panchayat level should be brought under the control of panchayats. State Government should provide untied grants to the panchayats based on their micro-plans. The taxation power should be given to all the three tiers of panchayats and more buoyant taxes should be assigned to the panchayats for raising their own income. Incentives should be offered to the panchayats by the state government to improve revenue generation. Compliance to collect taxes at the local level should only qualify these bodies for availing the resource transfer from the consolidated fund of the state. Mapping of resources will help panchayats for optimum utilisation of local resources and generating their own revenue. User charges for various services such as water supply, irrigation, etc. need to be levied by panchayats and should be based on the criterion of cost recovery. There should be obligatory minimum tax rate to ensure tax efforts and to reduce scope of subversion. Panchayats are also encouraged to generate their revenue through productive economic activities at respective levels. As Himachal Pradesh is the potential state for tourism and fruits and vegetables, therefore necessary steps should be taken by the state to empower panchayats to generate income through these sources. The state government should transfer certain natural resources to gram panchayats such as samlat land, khad, etc. which can be managed by panchayats, for initiating gainful economic activities. These initiatives will make the panchayats self-sustainable and facilitate their growth and development.
1. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI as common term for both rural and urban) are to be viewed as Institutions of local self-governance, and not as mere implementers of centrally determined development programmes. Bottom-up comprehensive planning, based on micro-planning exercise, is to be the basis of self-governance. PRIs should not be allowed to become 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 PRI should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SC/ST and dalits.

4. PRI should assert their access to and control over natural and human resources, as well as other development resources being available with state and national governments.

5. Strengthening PRIs will entail clarity of their roles, systems of governance, accountability and transparency and inter linkages.