Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institution in the North-East: Sikkim

A Report

उत्तर-पूर्व : सिक्किम में पंचायती राज संस्थाओं का सशक्तिकरण –
एक रिपोर्ट
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PREFACE

The Decentralization of Government from central to local levels is crucial for democratisation, the promotion of equity and people’s participation in development. After the 73rd Constitutional Amendments Act (CAA) passed in 1992, Sikkim passed their State Act and conducted two rounds of Panchayat election (1997, 2002). There are visible Political Commitment in the State towards decentralization. Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) published a detailed Panchayat Election Manifesto on the eve of the Panchayati Election 2002. PRIA with the Support from Ministry of Rural Development; Government of India initiate a Action Research during 2002-2003 to understand the role of decentralized bodies and also Mapping of Civil Society Organizations and their role in the State.

The Study process began in February 2002 with a State level workshop at Gangtok and SIRD, Karfecto. All the senior person right from Chief Minister to ZP Presidents. Officials participated in this workshop. Subsequently, PRIA interacted with many Civil Society Organizations in East and South district. The CSO’s are primarily involve in women’s Empowerment; Income Generating activities, health awareness, environment conservation, Horticulture etc. Very few organizations are addressing local self-governance or decentralization issues. There is a lack of clarity on how to address this. Moreover, political panchayat and one party rule also restrict CSO’s participation and involvement. After a series of small interactions, a group of CSO went to Bihar to have an exposure on the Panchayat situation in this state. We also facilitated a small scale PEVAC in few pockets. Posters, pamphlets prepared in local language and disseminated. However, participation was comparatively less due to unanimous election of candidates in number of places.

After the election in October 9th 2002, a State Level workshop organized on ‘Role of VDO’s towards strengthening PRI” during October 23-24. Over 60 VDO representatives attended this workshop. They are from all the four districts. The workshop discussed various issues related to PRI and what will be the role of VDO’s and how to play this role. Learning materials like posters, pamphlets, experience sharing and work from other states also shared. This workshop generated clarity and collective interest among the VDO’s to work for Panchayati Raj.

Along with orientation of VDO’s, PRIA also study the state of PRI in the state and the state of SIRD. Subsequently a series of dialogue held with the State Administration, District Administration to develop Policy framework on Panchayati Raj, and at SIRD to strengthen State level training Centre. Subsequently, in July 2003 a devolution framework and its operational details announced. A number of responsibilities given to the local bodies- financial power, Gram Sabha based planning etc.
PRIA also played role in strengthening the process in select places of South district. Also involve Civil Society Organizations to link with the Panchayat. The report provides the process of intervention and some key findings and learning's.

We extend our sincere thanks to Ms. Kesang C. Bhutia, Binod Adhikari who were actively involved in the study and follow up process. We extend our gratitude to the officials of RDD department, SIRD faculty, district Administration, Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat members as well as community members with whom we interacted for long hours to explore the future Path. We also extend our gratitude to VDO’s who realized the importance of Panchayati Raj and decided to work in this direction.

We also extend thanks to PRIA Colleagues for their advice and support in carrying out the study.

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March 2005
Chandan Datta
Executive Summary

I. Decentralization Policy and Strategy
   - Supportive policy framework in place
   - However no strategic framework and time bound action plan till early 2003
   - Highly sectoral approach prevails.
   - On may 13’ 1998activities of various departments transferred to various level of PRI, however, these are not operationalized fully till July ‘2003
   - Ground reality is quite favourable for decentralizations. Political will exist. A detail panchayat election manifesto (2002) of SDF provided a political framework for decentralization and rural development in the state.

II. Legal Framework
   - Good Act (1993)
   - However, lack of inter-department coordination overlap and duplication of task

III. Financial Resource Base
   - PRI still dependent on RDD funds, other departments are still work independently to ZP, GP, GS.
   - SFC recommendations partly implemented on July ‘2003
   - Common framework for budgeting at the GP, ZP and state level being developed after July 2003

IV. Planning Process
   - Insufficient commitment & framework to institutionalize participatory planning till July 2003
   - Overlap and duplication of role e.g. MLA’s and GP MLA’s and ZP
   - Lack of awareness, information base about the role and responsibilities of GS, GP, ZP.
   - Lack of coordination among the departments with GP, among the ward level committee (set up in 1996) and ward members, GS, GP
   - Confusion and conflict as District and Gram Panchayat be the planning unit and not the MLA constituencies. These are being addressed.

V. Involvement of Weaker Groups including women
   - Representation of women and other weaker persons are there, most GPs are not elite led. However their effective participation should be further enhanced.

VI. Capacity Building of Members & Staffs
   - This is the weaker area in the decentralization process in the state
   - State level training Institute was very weak till Mid 2003.
• Various forms of capacity building information sharing through CIC, exposure and peer group interaction, trainings on functional area (how to conduct the meetings, how to convene meetings, planning, involvement and participation of people etc. to be covered. Awareness leads to action.
• More interaction among the state, district GP level staff and members required.
• Cabinet committee on Decentralization recognizes the involvement of others - CBO, VDO, NGOs, local groups. However, their involvement are limited. arty based (that too single party) panchayat system restrict the involvement of others.

Based on our study, analysis and interaction with the Rural Development Department (RDD) some policy framework prepared and being implemented which includes

1. Placement of staff from concerned department at GP including RD
2. Higher allocation to GP and ZP
3. Gram Sabha based participatory planning, Planning Schedule (GS to state level prepared)
4. Involvement of local communities including VDOs.
5. Strengthening of SIRD – Training Institute
6. Infrastructure development of GP.

Therefore, some positive change are visible from July 2003 onwards.
Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in the North-East: Sikkim - A Report

1. Introduction

1.1 Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim: A Brief History

The emergence of the Panchayati Raj System in Sikkim can be traced back to the Sikkim Durbar Act of 1965. The act stipulated the Gram Panchayat units, composed of revenue villages, with various decision-making provisions. The members of these units were elected for a three years term and Mandals were appointed as village heads. Only those persons paying taxes such as land revenue or house tax were eligible to vote or contest in such elections. Then came the Sikkim Panchayat Act of 1982, which more or less reinforced the provisions laid down as part of the Durbar Act, and remained in force till 1993.

In 1993, the Sikkim Panchayati Raj Act was passed whereby the Panchayati Raj Institutions were reorganized. This Act provided two-tier system - the village level and district level, (Gram Panchayat at the Village level and Zilla Panchayats at the District level) of governance. Under the new system, the elected heads are addressed as Sabhapati at the Gram Panchayat level and Adhayaakshya at the Zilla Panchayat level. Since the population of Sikkim is less than 20 lakh there was no provision for intermediary level of Panchayats.

Ever since the enforcement of the Panchayat Act in 1993, the government of Sikkim made remarkable amendments in the Panchayat Act from time to time, to empower and strengthen Panchayat system in the state. One such amendment was made in 1995, in which the two villages in North Sikkim- Lachung and Lachen were given the provision of continuing their traditional system of local self-governance known as 'Dzumaa'.

2. Structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions

2.1 Gram Sabha

As per provisions laid down under the Act, the Gram Sabha consisted of all the people whose names are recorded in the electoral list. It was mandatory for the Gram Sabha to meet twice a year, for which the required quorum was 1/10th of total number of Gram Sabha members. The Sabhapati of the concerned Gram Panchayat usually presided over the meeting. The Gram Sabha looked into matters like the selection of the beneficiaries under various government programmes, reviewing the annual statement of accounts and presenting a report on administration.
2.2 Gram Panchayat

There are all together 159 Gram Panchayats in Sikkim, 48 Gram Panchayats in East District, 49 Gram Panchayats in West District, 42 Gram Panchayats in South District and 20 Gram Panchayats in North District. The membership of the Gram Panchayat was restricted to a minimum of 5 members and a maximum of 9 members who were directly elected. From amongst the elected members, the Sabhapati, one Upsabhapati, one Sachiv were selected based on a consensus. The term of office of the members was co-terminus with the term of the Gram Panchayat that is 5 years. Provisions was made for the appointment of a Rural Development Assistant (RDA) by the Government whose duty was to assist the Gram Panchayat in matters related administrative work. For any meeting to be conducted by the Gram Panchayat the required quorum was two-thirds of the total number of elected members and passage of any resolution had to be on the basis of a majority vote.

To enhance participation of the marginalized groups, in every Gram Panchayats seats are reserved for STs, SCs, and women in proportion to their population on rotational basis. Provisions have been made to ensure that the members of the marginalized community could also be elected as Sabhapati and Upsabhapati. If the Sabhapati and Upsabhapati were found to be incapable in discharging their duties and responsibility, they were removed on the basis of a no-confidence motion supported by two-thirds of the total number of members constituting the Gram Panchayat.

For facilitating funding requirement for various development works, it was mandatory for the Gram Panchayat to maintain a Gram Panchayat Fund.

Table 1: Membership of Gram Panchayat in Sikkim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gram Panchayats</th>
<th>Total Number of GPs</th>
<th>Total Number of Members</th>
<th>Scheduled Castes</th>
<th>Schedule Tribes</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
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<td>Percentage</td>
<td>159*</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
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* includes 2 in Lachung area of North Sikkim.

2.3 Zilla Panchayat

Sikkim has four districts with its district headquarters at Gangtok (East District), Gyalzing (West District), Namchi (South District) and Mangan (North District). There are all together 92 Zilla Panchayat members in Sikkim, 27 in East, 22 in West, 23 in South and 20 in the North. The Zilla Panchayat has its office located at the district head quarters. All Sabhapatis, MLAs and MPs in the district are the ex-officio members of Zilla Panchayats. The Collector is the ex-officio secretary of the Zilla Panchayats. The District Development Officer looked after the affairs of the
Panchayat Raj. The Rural Development Department took care of the administration of Panchayat Raj. The Zilla Panchayat controlled and supervised the administration of the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), and all functions and schemes assigned to DRDA more space by the state government were implemented under the supervision of the Zilla Panchayats.

To enhance participation of the marginalized groups, 6% of the seats are reserved for the SCs, 25% of the seats for the STs and 33% for other backward castes. One third of the total seats were reserved for the women.

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<th>Table 2 : Membership of Zilla Panchayat in Sikkim</th>
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<td><strong>Total Number of ZPs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Zilla Panchayats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
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3. Functionaries of Different Levels of Panchayats

3.1 State Level

Amongst the functionaries, the highest decision making authority at the state level was the Ministry for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. The remaining authorities were the Commissioner-Cum-Secretary of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj, as well as the Director, Panchayati Raj.

Decisions on policy related to Panchayati Raj are taken at the head office located in Gangtok. Planning and budgeting exercises are also done at Gangtok for all the districts of Sikkim in consultation with the Zilla Panchayats. Other important bodies associated with the Panchayati Raj system in Sikkim are the State Finance Commission and the State Election Commission. Both of them are also located in Gangtok.

The State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), an autonomous institute under the Department of Rural Development situated at Karfectar, South Sikkim, imparted training to the elected members of Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat. Skilled personnel from other government departments as well as line departments also took part in this exercise.

3.2 District Level

In Sikkim, each district had one Zilla Panchayat Bhawan. The Zilla Panchayat consisted of one Zilla Adhyaksha, one Upadhyaksha, Zilla Panchayat Members, District Development cum Panchayat officer (DDO), Assistant D.D.O and a Panchayat Inspector. Each Zilla Panchayat Bhawan was provided with an
Engineering cell, administrative and accounts staff. All heads of the different departments of the district were members of Zilla Panchayat.

The District Collector was the Ex-officio Secretary of Zilla Panchayat. The funds that are sanctioned for different work are placed at the disposal of the District Collector. To facilitate the planning work, in each of the four districts of Sikkim there was a District Planning Committee. It consisted of the following members:

(a) The Adhyaksha of the Zilla Panchayat (Chairman)
(b) The District Development officer-cum-Panchayat officer (Member Secretary)
(c) District Collector
(d) Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Assembly constituencies comprised in the district
(e) 3 members of Zilla Panchayat besides the Adhyaksha
(f) An economist/senior administrator appointed by the State Government

The District Planning Committee consolidated the plans prepared by the Gram Panchayats & the Zilla Panchayat based on which a draft development plan for the entire district was prepared. The chairman of District Planning Committee forwarded this development plan, as recommended by the committee to the State Government for further action.

3.3 Gram Panchayat Level

In Sikkim, each Gram Panchayat had a President, a Vice President, a Secretary and some members depending upon the population of the Gram Panchayat. About 70% of the Gram Panchayat members were trained in SIRD. There was one Rural Development Assistant (RDA) appointed by the Government for each Gram Panchayat to assist the Gram Panchayat in administrative works.

4. Powers and Functions of the Panchayati Raj Institutions

Performance of any Panchayat largely depended on the Devolution of Power. Apart from this, the performance also depended a lot on the power to make decision. A part of the objective of the present study was to understand the powers and function that existed with the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim. The table below illustrates powers and functions that exist with the Panchayat Raj Institutions in Sikkim. Further details of the Devolution can be referred to in Annexure 1.
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Powers and Functions</th>
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| Gram Sabha    | - Mobilizing voluntary labour and contributions in kind & cash for the community welfare programmes  
                 - Identification of beneficiaries for implementation of developmental schemes pertaining to the village  
                 - Rendering assistance in the implementation of developmental schemes  
                 - Annual statement of accounts of the Gram Panchayat (GP)  
                 - Report in respect of development programmes proposed to be undertaken during the current year  
                 - Promotion of unity & harmony among all sections of society in the village  
                 - Promotion of programme on adult education within the village, and  
                 - Other matters as the State Government may specify. |
| Gram Panchayat| - Sanitation, conservancy & drainage and the prevention of public nuisance  
                 - Curative & preventive measures in respect of any infectious disease.  
                 - Supply of drinking water and the cleaning & disinfecting the sources of water storage.  
                 - Maintenance, repair and construction of village roads;  
                 - Removal of encroachments on village roads and other public places;  
                 - Management of common grazing grounds, burning places & public graveyards;  
                 - Supply of any local information which the District Collector or District Development Officer-cum-Panchayat Officer or Zilla Panchayat may require, in areas within the jurisdiction of the GP.  
                 - Organizing voluntary labour for community work and works for the upliftment of its areas.  
                 - Tax on fairs, melas, haats and other entertainments.  
                 - General sanitation tax for the construction and maintenance of public latrines and for the removal & disposal of refuses on a regular basis.  
                 - Fixing water tariff;  
                 - Setting of utilization fee for maintenance of public latrines;  
                 - Fixing the fee for cattle grazing on lands under the jurisdiction of the GP. |
| Other Duties  | - Setting up of primary, social, and facilities for technical or vocational education;  
                 - Setting up of rural dispensaries, health centers, maternity and child welfare centers.  
                 - Minor irrigation  
                 - Grow more food campaign  
                 - Care of the infirm and the destitute  
                 - For every GP there shall be constituted GP fund on the basis of recommendations made by the State Finance Commission and there shall be placed to the credit thereof;  
                 - Management of contributions and grants, if any, made by the Central or the State Government or the Zilla Panchayat or any other local authority.  
                 - Management of loans, if any granted by the Central Government or the State Government. |
5. Findings

Despite all these arrangements, it is pity that the PRI system in Sikkim is yet at its nascent stage. The role of the PRI members and role of the people though well defined, yet they only remain in papers. The participation of people in gram sabhas was reportedly very low. In fact very few people including Community Based Organizations (CBOs) know about the importance of Gram Sabha. On several instances it was found that the CBOs and PRI members of the same village were not even aware of each other's activities. Even the reservation for women in Panchayat, though it is present is yet to transform into some form of reality. Of the total number of the Gram Panchayat members, 32% of the members were women. Likewise participation of the SC and ST community was also found to be 17% and 31% respectively. The following paragraphs present an account of the ground realities that existed with regard to various aspects of the Panchayat.

5.1 Participation and level of awareness of Gram Sabha

The ignorance of the people about Panchayati Raj Institution is visible from the fact that in almost all the villages, the word 'gram sabha' appeared alien to them. In fact in most of the cases it was found that there was a huge gap in the organization of Gram Sabha. The level of ignorance was also visible amongst the administrative officials on issues of Gram Sabha mobilization. Further barring a few individuals, villagers were not clear about the importance of Gram Sabha. Even the active members of CBOs, a group of literate youths were not aware of Gram Sabha. In instances where holding of Gram Sabha has been reported it was found that the Panchayat members held Gram Sabha meeting in their homes in which only selected community members and PRI members attended. On issues of Selection of beneficiaries of various Government Schemes, in most cases the selection of beneficiaries was done directly by the area MLA with the help of PRI member on party basis. Interestingly in some villages the Gram Sabha meetings were being held solely with the effort of CBOs and Self-help groups. Despite such initiatives, the event was marred by poor participation. In brief low participation and poor awareness of Gram Sabha was mainly because of the following reasons:

- Lack of awareness on the holding of the Gram Sabha
- Low literacy level
- Lack of awareness amongst the women of their rights, resulting in poor participation.
- Though people showed enthusiasm in the Gram Sabha organized initially, lack of visible results on the decision arrived at in such meetings, to answer the development needs of the village have acted as a dampener hampering future participation.
- Existence of gap between the community and PRI members
- Absence of proper infrastructure where Gram Sabha could be organized.
- Lack of interest amongst the district officials about the village affairs.
Findings and Suggestions: (November 2002)
Gram Panchayat Level

Findings:

i. The GP meetings are not held regularly (Act says fortnightly meetings)

ii. Documentation is adequate and documents are not available.

iii. Documents, register (what ever mentioned) not yet handover to the newly elected body in many areas.

iv. GP Ghar is not in use for GP work/office purpose. There is tendency to show GP Ghar as damaged. In reality it is not so.

v. Majority of the GP members are new and inexperienced. Their understanding, perspective are limited to perform.

vi. Panchayat have no staff. RDAs who are supposed to ‘assist’ GP are simply not available at GP. They are inadequately trained. Their roles, tasks etc. are not clear, understood by every body.

vii. Orientation of members (1997-2002 period are limited on average one orientation training attended by the members that too in 1997-98 even some members not attended any training.

viii. Allocation to GP is coming from only RDD. The amount is hardly 15-25 pc of the total expenditure in the GP in a year.

ix. No internal resources generation, no tax, levy imposed.

x. No comprehensive plan prepared at GP level.

xi. GS, GPs decisions on selection of beneficiaries, schemes etc. more often alter by others like MLAs.

xii. In many places, ward level committee (since 1996 functional at the ward level) are taking decisions than ward member or GP through GS.

xiii. GPs are not involving other groups like SHG, education, watershed groups. In some places they are good, articulate.

Suggestions

i. Panchayat should function from the panchayat ghar and meetings should be held there, records should also be kept there.

ii. Use notice board for communicating people

iii. Role, task, functions of RDAs should be clearly spelt out and communicate to them, support them to play that role.

iv. Extensive orientation to be provided to the members and RDAs on perspectives and various functional areas. On site orientation, exposure etc. to be planned.

v. GS based comprehensive planning to be initiated. Involve all the departments working at the local level; consider local natural resources, human resources and developmental resources available from the outside. Every department to address this plan.

vi. The proposal of cabinet sub-committee on decentralization on forming steering committees should be implemented.
Zilla Panchayat Level:
Main Findings: Based on our survey November 2002
i. ZP meeting are irregular. Instead of quarterly meetings half yearly meetings are being held. Resource constraint and lack of role, functions, finances to follow up the decisions are the reason put forward for this.
ii. Various departments are more often functioning independent to ZP. Even in ZP meetings district level heads of various departments are not participating.
iii. At the ZP meetings some of departments share their plan, activities but this sharing are not planned, systematic ZP offices are not aware, informed about what other department are doing.
iv. There are wide gap between the president, vice president and other members in role, status, facilities.
v. There is no internal resource generation at the ZP level
vi. Devolution to ZP level is very limited
vii. At the ZP level a few support staff are available.
viii. ZP becomes a recommending body to various departments.
ix. Most of the development related decisions are taken outside the ZP and GP level. MLAs are taking the small to major decisions, MLAs are concerned about their constituency level development. Therefore, district based development took a backseat.
x. There is not much relationship between the ZP and GP. Linkage between the two tiers is not clear.

Recommendations:
i. There is a need to strengthen ZP. Just giving Minister of State Status does not mean devolution at the district level.
ii. Formation of standing committees as proposed by the cabinet committee on decentralization should be operationalized. Standing committee should comprise district level department officials, members. This will provide coordination between the ZP and departments and also provide work and responsibilities to various ZP members.
iii. ZP should be the body where all the activities of the district should be decided than implemented by various other departments. Even part of the allocation goes directly to the department at the district level but the planning should be done in consultation with ZP.
iv. A senior level full time staff should look after of ZP.
v. Meeting of ZP should be organized regularly. The ZP building should have an office room for the standing committee members. Linkages among the tiers should be clear; more frequent interaction sharing is necessary. ZP president, vice president should spend more time at the GP level.
5.1.1 Some Selected Cases on Gram Sabha

In Pastanga village in the East District of Sikkim, one gets to see the existence of strong community initiatives. The community here have been mobilizing voluntary labour in their ward for all the village development activities like promotion of eco-tourism, construction and renovation of roads, tree plantation or maintenance of telephone lines. But they neither have heard about Gram Sabha nor have they had any meeting in their ward. The ward Sabhapati (who is a women) does not stay in the village that has further created problems for people. Since the Gram Sabha was not aware of the Gram Panchayat functioning, there existed a major communication gap between these two bodies.

In sharp contrast to the Pastanga village is Sawney village in Singtam area of Sikkim, which had a better story to tell. In this village, people have reported regular organization of Gram Sabha meetings, which were quite well attended. Such a forum was used to hold discussion on annual statement of accounts and the various development programmes that was proposed to be undertaken during the financial year. To a great extent the credit for the Gram Sabha mobilization go to the members of SHGs and Community Based Organizations. Their good relation with the ward Panchayat member has made it possible to organize Gram Sabha on a regular basis. Despite these efforts there existed some limitations as in most of the cases the decision-making power remained with the political leaders and without whose consent the Panchayat members were unable to arrive at any decision.

5.2 Functioning of the Gram Panchayat

At the Gram Panchayat level one of the most critical factor affecting the functioning of its members was their poor literacy status. As a result of this their dependence on Government Officials was very high which in several instances led to manipulation of the work. Infact the control of the government officials was so strong on the system, that it overshadowed the role of the elected representatives of the Panchayat. This has also weakened the inter-linkage between the two tiers of the Panchayat.

From the common people’s point of view, in the absence of a Gram Sabha, the Gram Panchayat members were not accountable to anyone. This has resulted in a feeling amongst the people that the PRI members were deliberately did not hold any meetings or shared information. They further believed that Rural Development Assistants were also most if the time remained absent.

On the other hand, RDAs reported of their own limitations, which they felt was the result of the dominance exerted by their superiors from the Rural Development Department (RDD). They felt that their duties and power were not clearly spelt due to which their performance got affected. They further reported that they were often given to do the odd jobs in their departments.

Further a common necessity identified by the members of the Gram Panchayat and the Rural Development Assistants was that they needed capacity building
exercise to be organized by the State Institute for Rural development. The PRI members felt that, they were not well equipped to handle complicated office works and by the time they learn their work, it was time for the next election. They also felt that they were quite underpaid. The dependence of Panchayat bodies on the state government for financial support has also curtailed their freedom to work independently.

5.3 Women in PRI
Women participation has been an issue of concern for quite sometimes now, because of its universal appeal, Sikkim being no exception. In Sikkim, since there was hardly any Gram Sabha taking places in villages, it was difficult to assess the participation of women in village meetings. The fact that women were not much involved in various development works became obvious from the fact that in the meetings that are organized by the CBOs, the numbers of women were reportedly very low. Some of the reasons that were put forward for the low participation of women were lack of interest, their shy nature, and obligations towards their family, early marriage with illiteracy and male dominance in public affairs being the most glaring factors.

Even the 33% reservation provided to enhance women's participation in Panchayat has failed to produce any result, as women did not have much of a say in the decision-making process. Their illiteracy and lack of awareness about their roles and responsibility has acted as a deterrent factor. In cases where women were found to be heading the Gram Panchayat, their presence was only in namesake as in most of the cases their male counterparts usually took the decisions. There are exceptions primarily where political connections is strong. This situation was not limited to the villages alone, but could also be seen amongst the Panchayat members in the district level.

The poor literacy status of the Panchayat members was one of the worst amongst the deterrent factors as even the government officials felt that in the absence of proper literacy level it was very difficult to communicate with the PRI members because of their inability to read and write.

However in exception to the above problem, it has been found that in some GP's, women are doing quite well. Some of them have also gone for trainings outside Sikkim. Amongst the factors that have acted as a facilitator were the support the women from the village received from the Voluntary Health Association, and NGO in Sikkim, and their own determination. This is also the place where Gram Sabhas were organized on a regular basis in which women actively took part.

The reality suggests that women have still not been able to take advantage of provisions that has been laid down by the government to enhance their participation. Making them aware of their rights is very crucial at this juncture. In this endeavor CBOs, NGOs and SHGs along with government departments can play an important role.
5.4 CBOs and Panchayati Raj Institutions

A discussion with the CBOs, on the role and functions of Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayats indicated lack of awareness of the members of most of these organizations, about Gram Sabha and the functions of Gram Panchayat. They were also not very aware about the various areas in which the Panchayat was capable of working.

The institution of Panchayati Raj was highly politicized in Sikkim. People saw it as a means to become a political leader and occupy a seat in the Secretariat. It was absolutely an uphill task to make people understand that NGOs/CBOs could play an important role in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions, as most of them felt that these two bodies were kind of opponents in the development race. This was evident in all the villages where CBOs were active. In some places their contact is limited only to inviting Panchayat members as guests in the programmes or for their signatures on important papers.

The growing number of NGOs in districts was also a cause of worry for the local politicians. The NGOs too, on their part did not want to offend the political leaders in any ways because they were in awe of them for funds. Therefore to them, working on issues of Panchayati Raj would mean inviting trouble. Therefore they felt safer to work on non-controversial issues like community health, immunization, tree plantation etc.

6. Devolution

The Cabinet Sub-Committee on Decentralization submitted a report. The report says that the government has set aside 10 per cent of the budget of every department for panchayat for development of the villages. This is definitely a positive step towards decentralization of power to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. After October 2002 election, in July 2003 government took few steps towards devolution. Many of our recommendations were accepted. One important decision is gram sabha based planning. Each gram panchayat was allocated funds to implement the plans. Instructions given for make gram panchayat to function as village secretariat. All the village level functionaries are to sit in the gram panchayat and gram panchayat to act as a village secretariat. ZP also strengthens with technical personnel like planning officers etc. But it is also necessary for the government to ensure that the fund reaches the villages and not mid-way. Both the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayats have to be strengthened and made aware of their roles and responsibility. The government now has to be more responsible and also has to keep an open mind by including local groups and CBOs in realizing the goal of strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institution in Sikkim.
Annexure

Present Status Of Panchayats- Devolution

- The provisions of 73rd amendment fully accepted. Elections were held 1997 and 2002.
- State Finance Commission has been constituted and submitted its report.
- **Status of devolution regarding Funds, Planning, and Staff or infrastructure.**
  - Funds- is routed to the Panchayats only through Rural development department and not directly to Panchayats.
  - It has been decided by the Government that 10% of the total fund of each department will be given to the Panchayats. (June, 2002), more devolution in July 2003
  - 10% of land revenue and house tax collected within Panchayat units is transferred to Rural Development department for disbursement. The Panchayats are also authorized to collect certain taxes on certain items. Despite this income of Panchayats is inadequate.
- Plans are still prepared through various departments of the government, only sending demands to the various departments reflects local participation and these demands are adjusted in the plans by the department.
- Some staff is transferred to the Panchayats, to monitor development activities of the Panchayats yet they are not answerable to the Gram Panchayats as they draw their salary from the parent department.
- Panchayats control over development work is limited to making recommendation and selection of beneficiaries and at the implementation level deciding on the contractor.
- Panchayat members who select the beneficiaries decide a “Committee of Implementation”.
- The state Panchayat Act has made provision for formation of District Planning Committee. Initiatives are taken to make District Planning Committee functional.