Participatory Research in PRIA’s Projects: An Exploration
Keywords: Participatory Research, PRIA, participatory planning, mobilisation, awareness, conscientisation

Abstract: PRIA has pioneered the concept of Participatory Research (PR) in bringing about social change among the marginalised in India. For three decades, PRIA has not only built capacities of/trained grassroots development workers to incorporate the PR approach in their work, it has used the PR methodology in implementing its own projects.

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the application of PR methodology in some recent interventions of PRIA. How have the principles and methodology of PR been incorporated into project activities, and were there any PR outcomes in the project? How was people’s knowledge valued? Did the project entail production of new knowledge, new learnings? Did local actors (panchayat leaders, community) have a role in production of that knowledge? What use has been made of that knowledge and by whom?

The paper begins with a very brief overview of the PR approach and the potential outcomes of adopting this approach. The next section describes the PR methodology and suggestive PR outcomes in each initiative. The last section summarises the PR outcomes from the four initiatives.

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PRIA’s projects are always premised on participatory principles; all or many stages of a project incorporate PR principles and methodologies in implementation. To appreciate the application of the PR approach and methods, we begin with a brief overview of PR, followed by a description of the initiative from the perspective of PR. Results are viewed as PR outcomes, which are summarised in the last section.

1. Participatory Research: A Brief Understanding

The essential premise of PR is recognition and utilisation of knowledge for purposes of transforming the relations of power in social systems. This perspective allows the knowledge production function to be carried out in ‘engaged’ stances – where learning about the dynamics of a social-political system (be it a community, an organisation, programme or region) is closely linked to bringing about changes in that system to achieve certain desirable public goods of equity, justice and peace. PR methodologies are thus used to both learn about realities and also transform the same towards such desirable public goods.

Another crucial aspect of PR is linking knowledge production with mobilisation – in terms of conscientisation, awareness raising, collectivisation, getting together to address a problem, with or without external help. There is a very close link between knowledge, learning and mobilisation to act to solve a problem.

PR methodologies essentially involve:
- Involvement in the process of research
- Respect for people’s own capability and potential to produce knowledge and analyse it.
- Qualitative data collection and analysis, leading to planning and taking action. Existing problems can provide the initial motivation for engagement.
- Groups of people engaging together, most importantly in collective analysis of a given situation.
- Raising awareness among the people in the situation, who become more knowledgeable through their engagement. They become critically aware of their situation and possible ways to change that situation.

The application of PR methods can result in any or all of the following outcomes.
- **Systematising indigenous, local, experiential knowledge**, and bringing it to the attention of other stakeholders.
- **New knowledge is built on participants’ existing knowledge**: What has been done with the new knowledge created? Have people/institutions been motivated to create and use the new knowledge to solve some concrete problems in the daily lives of communities?
- **It creates informed options**: The process of collectively understanding, analysing and interpreting the information collected provides many alternatives. Is the community now empowered to accept and reject options on an informed basis?
- **People learn to exercise control**: Has the community been energised to take responsibility for their own reality? Are they motivated to solve their own problems?
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- **It becomes a collective process:** One of the elements of PR is people learn to come together, collectively seeking and analysing information. Many a time this forms the seed of a rudimentary people’s organisation. Did the process initiate the process of organisation-building or strengthen existing organisations?

2. **Improving Health Services in Rajasthan**

Creating change in gender (power) relations and gender sensitivity requires the coming together of elected representatives, government and civil society. In the Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) carried out in 2010 in Rajasthan, PRIA focused on the topic of gender as a poll platform for electing candidates. Two issues – maternal mortality and sex selective abortion – emerged as priority areas of concern from among the community. These were used as entry points to sensitize panchayats on gender and to discuss the issues with the communities in order to create demand from the communities for health service delivery to focus on these issues.

Entrenched patriarchy in Rajasthan stigmatises a woman’s life from birth to death. Technology (sex determination tests) has unfortunately become a tool to disempower the girl child even before she is born. Sex selective abortions (which are illegal) are conducted on women because of the traditional preference for a male child. Maternal health is poor because women are not given enough nutrition during pregnancy and immediately after giving birth. All women are aware of this, and a vast majority have been subjected to such practices.

It was then the women panchayat members who were first approached when PRIA began raising the issues of maternal health and sex selective abortions; they know their own reality and being community leaders could bring these issues back to the larger community. These issues were twinned with social accountability measures (monitoring primary health care centres and anganwadis for availability of nutritious food for pregnant women, vaccination, registration of pregnancy, etc).

The Social Justice and Social Welfare Committee (SJSWC) is an important mandated committee of the panchayat. Many such committees had to be made functional first because they had been formed only on paper. The issues of maternal health and sex selective abortions were brought onto the agenda to initiate discussions in SJSWC meetings. Information regarding the PCPNDT (Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques) Act was given. Being of the community, committee members have knowledge of a family conducting an abortion. They are well aware of the private health centres and mobile vans which provide sex selective abortion services in violation of the Act. SJWSC members soon began monitoring cases of maternal deaths and sex selection in their communities, and began counselling families (which were thinking of undertaking a sex selective abortion) to help them make better, informed choices. The entire village community was sensitised when the issues were facilitated for discussion in gram sabha meetings.

The Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC) is another link between the gram panchayat and community. The VHSNC was capacitated through trainings to help members perform their duties more effectively. Emphasis was given
on creating an environment to prepare a community-driven micro health plan. The VHSNC had to ensure that the health plan was in harmony with the overall local plan.

Processes of planning, budgeting and implementation of annual panchayat health plans were facilitated to make them more gender sensitive and responsive. Initially, majority of the panchayat members were not sure if they could participate in the health planning exercise because they have always viewed planning as a specialised, expert-driven activity. Sensitisation of panchayat members in the first two years of the project was very helpful in taking the health planning process forward and in focusing the plans on gender issues.

- The planning exercise began with a training for members of civil society organisations to orient them on the process of decentralised planning and how to facilitate the preparation of health plans at the gram panchayat level. They were trained in PRA tools, methods and principles, and on how to identify and map available resources for health and women at the community level. Most importantly, specific data from the health and panchayat line department officials (panchayat secretaries, ANMs, ASHAs, etc) were shared. Copies of NRHM health plans were provided to all the trainees for analysis of the planning process and budgetary allocations. The workshop was made participatory through simple learning tools like interactive discussion, group work and role play, and the film “Spandan” (on PRA tools and community engagement in the planning process) was screened. At the end of the training, a follow-up action plan was prepared by the participants to undertake health planning in their respective areas.

These members of civil society organisations went on to forge the link with the panchayat committees to assist them with preparing the community-based health plan and to get it approved by the gram sabha. Capacities of civil society organisations working in these communities were built to provide long-term handholding support to help institutionalise the processes.

- The current NRHM health plan (including the last year’s financial allocation for health) for each gram panchayat and relevant secondary health data for each gram panchayat/block/district was procured to bring the existing knowledge to the community. Modifying/tying in community demands with existing allocations and higher-level plans greatly enhances the viability of the participatory health plans.

- A block level orientation meeting with key stakeholders (panchayat representatives, citizen leaders, interested government functionaries, youth groups) who can spearhead the planning process at the gram panchayat level was organised and an action plan (with specific responsibilities and timelines) prepared.

- Village level meetings with VHNSCs to discuss the NRHM plans were held. VHNSCs had earlier been sensitised to the issues of maternal health and sex selection, and discussions around the NRHM plans were facilitated to focus on
these gender issues. Additions/deletions/corrections were made to the plans for each village from this perspective.

- Once all the village level meetings with VHNSCs were over, the village plans were consolidated (at the panchayat level) to be presented to the SJSWC in the gram panchayat.
- In meetings with SJSWCs at the gram panchayat level, both the original NRHM health plan and modified plan prepared by the VHNSC was presented and shared. Important information regarding the estimated resources (through initial resource mapping) available with the gram panchayat for health was also shared. A joint meeting of VHNSC representatives and SJSWC representatives finalised a need-based health plan focused on gender (around the issues of maternal health and sex selection) for the entire gram panchayat. Since the SJSWC members had also been sensitised in the early phases of the project, there was common understanding of the issues.
- This gender-focused health plan prepared jointly by the SJSWC and VHNSC was then shared with the entire gram panchayat.
- Suggestions received from the gram panchayat members were incorporated into the plan.
- This was the health plan presented in gram sabha meetings in each village to get their approval. The gram sabha meeting was facilitated to focus on the solutions to the identified health problems, prioritising the solutions, and identifying the available resource base. Demands raised by women and girls to address their own health issues was given space for discussion.

Through this exercise, 70 gram panchayats have prepared participatory health plans, duly approved by gram sabhas. This was a unique experience for the gram panchayats since this was the first ever planning exercise they had engaged in.

The panchayats did not want the plan to merely remain on paper. Taking charge of ensuring they can bring about change in their circumstance, nearly 70 per cent of these panchayats have initiated implementation of some components of the health plan from their own resources (including available resources under other schemes). Where panchayats have not been able to implement their plans on their own, they have approached their panchayat samitis and zilla parishads to access resources from the governmental health delivery system (such as District Health Society). Community monitoring of health services is being done based on these plans.

District and state level institutions at different levels were also engaged with to enable supply-side responses to these demands. PRIA has consolidated all the 70 health plans into a district-wise comprehensive document and is advocating at block, district and state levels through multi-stakeholder dialogues. These dialogues highlight district-specific health issues to the authorities, and seek support from district authorities for implementation of the participatory health plans. They brought the panchayats, people and government on one platform to promote conversations and convergence around health issues as identified in the plans. It was very significant in improving inter-
departmental and inter-sector linkages as valuable suggestions were received from the health department, panchayat department and elected representatives. These gender responsive participatory health plans have influenced the process of planning, budgeting and implementation of annual plans of local governments, which was completely lacking earlier. Learning from this planning process for health, communities can now undertake resolution of other problems.

3. Learning to Confront Violence Against Dalit Women in Haryana

PRIA has been working to bring about participatory social change, especially for the Scheduled Caste (Dalit) community in Haryana, for nearly a decade now. PRIA has worked with panchayats and municipalities in Haryana so that they can function as true units of self-development to help them achieve the goals of social justice and equity. Through its innovative and participatory approaches, PRIA has established a considerably strong network in the state. Long-term involvement with the community highlighted the issue of public violence against women, especially Dalit women, as a social barrier that disempowers women from attempting to claim their rights. Over the past two years, PRIA has worked to address violence against Dalit women through:

- Strengthening responsiveness and accountability of local self-governance institutions, in particular Social Justice Committees, to utilise their social and politico-administrative powers to deliver concrete results in ending violence against Dalit women.
- Building capacities of women, especially young Dalit girls and boys, to enable their engagement with these committees and avail of legal provisions.
- Building multi-stakeholder involvement to collectively voice the issue of violence against women at different levels.

Women are often seen as a symbol of a community’s prestige and this is equally true of the Dalit community. Violence against Dalit women is a systematically utilised tool to deny the entire community opportunities, choices and freedom at multiple levels. An outsider violating the honour of their women signals the powerlessness of Dalit men to protect their womenfolk. Often Dalit men and boys retaliate with similar brutal measures on upper castes in their attempt to seek justice. This perpetuates a cycle of violence.

Dalit women are placed in a contradictory and difficult position of choosing between their families/communities and the attempt to seek legal redressal for atrocities. It is not unusual to find them being disowned or ostracised by their own family members and the Dalit community at large. Dalit men have been known to turn their wives away for daring to raise their voice against injustices.

This systematic undermining of a Dalit woman’s self-respect and dignity, her acceptance of the lowest position she occupies in India’s social and economic hierarchy, poses a major challenge for the empowerment of Dalit women. Legislation, socio-economic development programmes and institutions representing society alone cannot bring about social change. It is vitally necessary that the principal stakeholder, i.e., the woman, be empowered in order to claim her rights from the institutions of local self-government that are mandated to implement development programmes.
3.1 Strengthening SJCs to play their mandated role

In order to protect the interest of Dalits, women and other marginalised communities from social injustice and other forms of exploitation, panchayati raj institutions have to constitute Social Justice Committees (SJCs) at all levels. The SJC has a distinct identity within the panchayat structure. It is empowered to identify development requirements in the village with particular emphasis on the needs of marginalised communities and make recommendations to the panchayat at all levels to include these demands in its budget. The panchayat has a duty to undertake the implementation of these projects upon receiving sanction from the administration.

Community members in the intervened areas under this project were not even aware of the role of SJCs. Rapport building preceded formation of these committees. Members were identified through various meetings that were initiated by the field animators and on the basis of nominations by the sarpanch.

Understanding the reality of their village was crucial in getting the panchayat members to recognise the extent of the problem in their communities. Most sarpanches claimed that the problem of discrimination simply did not exist since they had not received any complaints on this issue. Community members were engaged in developing caste profiles of the intervened villages, not to identify them for economic benefits but to learn the caste dynamics and discriminatory practices against Dalits in their villages. When the caste profiles and the information on the nature and extent of discriminatory practices gathered from the community was shared in a series of interactions of panchayat members with the Dalit community, they realised the gravity of the situation and the need for an SJC became a strong felt need. These interactions enabled the panchayat members to understand the reality of the Dalits and the Dalits to gain confidence in expressing themselves. These interactions, where the more influential social group understands the reality of the disadvantaged, are powerful in changing mindsets and assuming responsibility to give equitable access to benefits.

PRIA held meetings with the block development officers who were also unaware about the statutory requirement for the formation of SJCs. The block development officer of Sonepat block called a meeting of all sarpanches to inform them to form SJCs in their villages. Prior understanding of the Dalit’s reality coupled with the mandated requirement from the government authority catalysed the formation of SJCs in many villages.

To be effective, SJC members were trained in their roles and functions. The orientation was based on the principles of participatory training. A variety of methods were used to engage the participants and elicit their views and responses. These included screening of a film on panchayati raj, small group discussions to understand the various forms of violence faced by the Dalit community and the ways that these can be prevented. The use of an envisioning exercise to identify and prioritise key issues to be addressed proved to be an effective way for the SJC members to face the reality of violence against the Dalit community.
The orientation programme culminated in the development of action plans. These plans included incorporating specific issues of villages and actions that can be taken up by the respective SJC’s to address the same.

3.2 Raising awareness in the community

Strengthening SJC’s went hand in hand with raising awareness among the Dalit community of their rights and benefits. Awareness of laws and how to make use of them was imparted by the PRIA team along with members of Sanjha Kadam Nari Network (PRIA’s partner CBO in Haryana) in group meetings organised in Dalit hamlets. Village Information Centres were activated to bring all women together to discuss the problem. In the monthly meetings, Dalit women talked about the atrocities faced by the Dalit community, and women from the general category and other castes began to understand the consequences of violence against the Dalits, for themselves and their communities at large. The issue of discrimination and violence against Dalit women no longer remained an issue of Dalit women alone, at least in some of the villages.

3.3 Empowering Dalit youth

Youth are the future and their involvement in the awareness campaign on violence against Dalit women was considered crucial. PRIA has earlier formed groups of young girls belonging to the Dalit community (called kishori groups) in a number of panchayats in Sonipat district. Leadership and analytical capacities of these groups have been built to enable them to raise the issues of young Dalits girls within their community and in panchayat meetings. These groups were targeted under this project to be sensitised on gender, to understand the nature of patriarchy, gender discrimination and the socialisation processes which culminate in violence against women in general and Dalit women in particular.

In a first-of-its-kind intervention for PRIA, young Dalit boys were also brought together on the same issue. The work with young adolescent girls and the overall experiences in the project pointed to the importance of sensitising the young boys of the community as one of the ways to end violence against women. Two youth groups were formed. Monthly meetings were initiated where the boys were given a platform to talk about the importance of being the youth of today and their role in society, the peer pressure they face and to articulate for themselves the reasons they believe compel them to resort to violence as a means of resolving issues. As with the kishori groups, the boys were also sensitised on gender and the norms and nature of patriarchy leading to gender discrimination and violence against women.

A variety of games, role play and group discussions were used in the sensitisation workshops. Writing, on charts, words which are used in their daily lives to define girls and boys helped them understand the difference between sex and gender. For both the boys and the girls, this was new knowledge, of referencing the distinction between girls and boys based on the difference between gender and sex.

The topics of career, festivals, games/toys and proverbs were used to aid group discussions on what these meant for a boy and for a girl. This helped the girls realise
that from their childhood, every game played, clothes bought, what they are told to do and how they are expected to behave is a set norms that arises from a patriarchal society. “Now I understand why I and my younger sister were bought kitchen sets and my brother a motor cycle,” said one participant.

The mothers accompanying the girls were formed into a group and asked to map their entire day – from the time they awoke till the time they went to bed. This was then discussed with the young girls along with their mothers. It made the girls realise that their mothers were always busy with household chores, doing things for others; they had no time for themselves. These young girls felt empowered to change the way they encountered these patriarchal norms, to make space for themselves in their families and in society. Many mothers expressed the realisation that they did not want their daughters to have the same life they have.

Group discussions were also held on the different forms of abuse. Valuing a participant’s knowledge of his/her own reality, they were facilitated to give examples of such violence from their local areas. The kishori groups formulated agendas for action to tackle the problem of violence against women and to continue discussions in their own monthly meetings.

Monthly meetings of the youth groups of boys continue to break barriers in discussing sensitive topics. The boys are eager to understand the problems faced by women and finding solutions for the same. They come armed with topics they want to discuss in these meetings. One of the boys shared, “Only as a community can we put an end to violence against women. We want to learn more and help.” Such empowerment will be successful in breaking the vicious cycle of violence that has already consumed many youth of these villages.

4. Social Accountability in Urban Areas of Bangladesh and Cambodia

Most Asian cities suffer deficits of democratic practices, particularly participation, transparency and accountability mechanisms. Urban governance institutions often fail to deliver services effectively and equitably and lack responsiveness towards the most marginalised. Organised civic action and participation helps to ensure accountability.

The urban poor contribute substantially to the economy of a city. Yet, their voice and demands are ignored not only in planning for the city but also in the provision of basic services. Enhancing their access to information and developing social accountability mechanisms in partnership with elected municipalities can improve delivery of basic services to the marginalised in cities. Using this approach, PRIA (in collaboration with PRIP Trust in Bangladesh and SILAKA in Cambodia) worked on improving the provision of basic services to the most marginalised families in Rajshahi, Bangladesh and Takhmao, Cambodia.

Water and sanitation services were chosen to improve accountability and delivery. Improved access to water and sanitation has differential impact on women and men, particularly in reducing the drudgery for women. In most low-income areas of developing cities, women spend a considerable amount of time fetching water from
outside sources. Similarly, as most of the households in such slums do not have toilet facilities, women suffer great discomfort and indignity as a result of this lack of privacy. Therefore, improved availability and access to water and sanitation services would definitely improve the quality of their lives.

4.1 Demanding accountability: Citizen monitoring of basic services

Citizen monitoring of services was achieved through mobilisation and training of community members. Capacities of the urban poor households to engage in regular, sustained and constructive dialogues with municipalities through monitoring and demanding quality services were enhanced.

Improvement in services needs to be measured against baseline data. Teams collected data from sample households representing different strata (high, medium and low income groups; ethnic minorities, socially excluded, slums dwellers, etc). The information collected through the survey was validated and verified with the citizens, before finalising citizens’ reports on the city-wide status of the basic services of water supply and sanitation.

Door-to-door information sharing and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held to understand the issues and challenges of the citizens regarding water and sanitation services. Gradually the concepts of participation, engagement and demanding accountability were also introduced. Women and youth citizen leaders/ facilitators from the marginalised communities were trained on leadership and development, good governance and communication, advocacy, roles and responsibilities of the city corporation and the community, and participatory monitoring and evaluation. Refresher trainings were also organised.

The citizens were thus mobilised to form neighbourhood committees. Emphasis was put on the inclusion of representatives of the youth, women and marginalised groups in these committees. Guidelines for the formation of these committees were laid out, with roles and responsibilities.

Once the groups were formed, regular meetings were facilitated. Based on their experiential knowledge, members began to identify key issues from their area and discussed them with the local elected representatives. It was in these meetings that they acquired new knowledge on the concepts and tools of community monitoring.

Armed with the new knowledge on community monitoring tools and with the information from the citizens’ report, the neighbourhood committees prepared a framework for monitoring public services in their local areas. They collectively identified the change indicators for monitoring these services, and prepared formats for data collection at the ward level to aid monitoring of the identified services on a quarterly basis.

Over the period of a year, the process of community monitoring was routinised. The data collected from the regular monitoring was consolidated into a community report. The neighbourhood committees now felt confident enough to share the information and negotiate with the local authorities about their concerns related to water and sanitation. Interface meetings were organised with the concerned municipal officials.
to share the findings of community monitoring as well as discuss important emerging issues.

Awareness in the wider community on the need for citizen monitoring was generated. The campaign and IEC material was designed in the local language in consultation with citizens. In Bangladesh, ‘gamvira’ (local drama/street plays) carrying messages about the roles of the city corporation and citizens were held. In Cambodia, a march was organised in which citizens walked to the municipal office with placards and banners. As a part of the campaign, discussions and public hearings were also conducted, where citizens directly interacted with the elected representatives and municipal officials.

The neighbourhood committees have provided the citizens with a platform to discuss their issues and concerns. With a mix of women, youth, senior citizens, etc, from different walks of life, they are vibrant bodies where opinions, suggestions and ideas are shared and deliberated. The formation of these neighbourhood committees has given citizens a means to channel their voice. There is now increased participation of citizens on issues of governance and social accountability.

As a result of the community monitoring being undertaken by these committees, municipal authorities have become more responsive and accountable to the communities. In Bangladesh, the municipal authorities on demand from the citizens shifted a garbage disposal site from front of a public school to another locality. In Cambodia, after neighbourhood committee members shared the issue of garbage not being collected from their area with the municipal authorities in an interface meeting, the garbage collection van started collecting the waste from their area.

4.2 Improving service delivery: Institutionalising social accountability tools

Along with greater accountability, it is imperative that municipalities become transparent to the citizens. Institutionalising social accountability mechanisms aids transparency and effective service delivery. Promoting and institutionalising social accountability tools and approaches in the municipalities facilitates demand for transparency and accountability by the citizens themselves.

Building capacities of municipalities to institutionalise social accountability mechanisms and to include the needs of urban poor households in planning was required. Municipal officials were facilitated to articulate their knowledge of the barriers to effective service delivery and the deficits in their organisations. Building on this self-awareness, capacities on accountability tools were developed through a round of trainings and orientation meetings to strengthen their ability to deliver services and build rapport with communities.

The accountability tools of citizens’ charter, information disclosure and grievance redressal system were institutionalised in the two municipalities of Rajshahi and Takhmao.

The citizens’ charter was prepared after reviewing any existing citizen charters, policies or guidelines in the two countries. Municipal officials also reviewed the
citizens’ report and neighbourhood committee monitoring reports to understand the needs of the citizens. The formation of the Social Accountability Facilitation Committee (SAFC) comprising municipal officials and elected representatives of the identified wards was facilitated in Takhmao. This committee, after a round of meetings and dialogues, finalised the charter on water and sanitation services. Once the charter was prepared, it was shared widely with the citizens so that they could make optimum use of the information. In Rajshahi, the critical points of the charter were shared with the citizens during the monthly neighbourhood committee meetings. Citizens in both countries found the information very useful and some of them have also benefited from that information.

The issues for the information disclosure formats were identified based on the needs of citizens garnered from the citizens’ report and the monthly meetings of the neighbourhood committees. In Bangladesh, citizens demanded information on solid waste management whereas in Cambodia it was related to water supply. The concerned department provided the relevant information for filling the formats. A consolidated information format was then shared with the citizens and the neighbourhood committee members to take their feedback and approval before finalising the formats.

In both Bangladesh and Cambodia, a system of grievance redressal has been developed and piloted by the municipal authorities. Information regarding the grievance redressal system was disseminated to the citizens. With this knowledge, citizens are confidently going to the ward offices in Rajshahi and lodging their complaints. In Cambodia, the SAFC has started the process of gathering the complaints at one place and then forwarding them to the respective departments.

5. Using Local Knowledge and Action for Community-based Development in Tribal Areas

Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (also known as PESA) promote people-centric governance and provide a central role to the gram sabha. PESA is a simple yet comprehensive and powerful law that empowers villages of Scheduled Areas to directly address issues that emerge in their daily lives. PESA politically empowers the village community to plan its own development, manage natural resources and resolve conflicts in accordance with traditional customs and practices. Under PESA, it is mandatory that states having Scheduled Areas make specific provisions to give wide-ranging powers to tribals on decision-making for their own development.

Water is a critical resource required for survival, sustenance and advancement of any community. Chhattisgarh abounds in water bodies – rivers and streams, lakes and tanks. Most water bodies at the village level were managed by traditional, community-based systems. Over the years these systems have begun to break down in the face of social and economic changes and due to the emergence of alternate structures of authority. Water bodies and structures that were created or regenerated under government programmes have not been very successful in aligning or integrating themselves with community-based needs and have not recognised or supported traditional systems.
In the rural areas of Chhattisgarh, especially in the Scheduled Areas (where tribals reside), there are a host of problems related to access to regular and clean drinking water. Provision of water for farming is another problem faced by the tribal communities. Pollutants and contamination of water sources have severe negative effects on a community’s health as well as agricultural production. PESA provisions are intended to intrinsically protect the resources of tribal communities and empower them to act against forcible acquisition of these resources.

Today, strengthening state control over common natural resources, weakening of people’s customary rights and acquisition of the individual’s and the community’s natural resources for (mostly private) industry in violation of PESA provisions is the leading flashpoint in several Scheduled Areas of Chhattisgarh. State emphasis on industrialisation leading to land alienation and exploitation of common resources has given rise to conflicts. Lack of proper governance to address the issue of common property (of which water management is a part) compounds the problem. The state is also emerging as a principal violator of the very laws it is meant to uphold, e.g., ignoring a gram sabha’s opposition (under PESA) to land acquisition, and calling village assemblies under heavy police presence to push through land acquisition plans. Tribal communities are tragically ill-equipped to navigate available institutional mechanisms and legislation to mitigate their problems.

Addressing the issue of accessibility to regular and clean water, effective management of water, including planning, developing, recharging, distributing and managing the optimum use of water resources, is important. To ensure this, active participation of the community in managing water resources, especially drinking water and irrigation resources, becomes essential. Within the context of Scheduled (tribal) Areas it is essential that the gram sabha is actively involved in the management of water resources.

PRIA pursued a year-long action research in Chhattisgarh on implementation of PESA, with special focus on water. Intensive intervention was undertaken in five panchayats of Korba district (Jambhar, Sonpuri, Chuhiya, Songurha and Dondhru).

5.1 Valuing local knowledge

Initial interfacing and networking with key stakeholders (local groups, government officials and elected representatives) on issues related to PESA helped prepare baseline information on the status of the implementation of PESA at the state and district level. Criteria for selection of data collection tools and framing of questionnaires/interview schedules was done with specific reference to gram sabha ownership of water resources (drinking and irrigation water) and strategies that would ensure greater gram sabha management of water resources. The key findings reflected lack of awareness about PESA in most government departments and inadequate implementation of PESA provisions in the intervening district, especially in relation to functioning of the gram sabha and participation and control of gram sabha on water bodies and water related schemes. It also provided insights into the current governance system at the local level. Knowledge of the local institutional strengths and weaknesses helped in identifying capacity building needs of these institutions and leaders responsible for implementing PESA at local levels.
Evidence of effective management of water bodies (especially drinking water and irrigation) by tribal communities (in Scheduled Areas) and their traditional community-based structures was collected. Nine cases of best practices of community-based water management as per traditional practices and culture were documented across three districts of Chhattisgarh. The cases highlighted the potential and relevance of encouraging community-based water management practices, along with access to modern water provisions like hand pumps, etc. It was the value accorded to this local, traditional knowledge that formed the basis for the subsequent interventions under the programme.

5.2 Envisioning a future together

Communities articulated a vision to better manage their water resources based on their local, traditional knowledge combined with understanding and analyzing their felt needs and aspirations and the new knowledge of PESA and the functioning of gram sabhas they had acquired.

For each of the five sample panchayats, a baseline report on status of water (number of hand pumps, tube well, ponds, wells, canal, etc) was prepared with the participation of villagers using various PRA techniques. The report was shared with the gram sabha and panchayat members. The time, date and place of the sharing meeting was decided in consultation with the sarpanch and panchs. Information about the meeting was communicated through traditional methods like beating of drums in the village, and through letters and door-to-door visits.

The findings of the report were verified by the participants and active discussion on the issue of water took place in this meeting. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences of conducting the survey and the village mapping exercises. The facilitators shared the major problems related to water in the panchayats. The community decided to communicate the major findings of the report by writing them on the wall of the panchayat bhawan. Regular meetings of the gram panchayat were demanded so that panchayats could function properly. At the end of the meeting, a report was given to the sarpanch for the record.

Panchayat level meetings were organised for developing a vision on water management. To ensure active participation of the gram sabha and panchayat representatives, the date, time and place for the meeting was decided in consultation with the sarpanch and other ward panchs. The sarpanch issued a formal letter to all ward panchs, the panchayat secretary, rojgar sahayak, and field level functionaries of the Public Health and Engineering Department and the Agriculture Department. Information with the community was shared by pasting notices in important places in the villages, announcements by beating of the drum and by visiting each household.

Based on the information of the baseline survey shared earlier, the problems related to water were identified through brainstorming exercises. The problems were then prioritised by the community. An analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) of the abilities of their panchayat to address the issue of water management for the community was facilitated.
The participants then collectively wrote their vision of “where do I see my panchayat after five years, especially regarding managing water for my community”. They wrote their “dream” on sheets of paper, which were pasted on the walls during the meeting so that everyone could read each other’s vision.

The envisioning exercise aided the communities to identify reasons for mismatch between the plans and outcomes of the administrative structure vis-à-vis their expectations. Communities collectively discussed guidelines for preparing water security plans for each panchayat. The envisioning exercise was the vehicle to generate awareness at local level on PESA provisions and governance systems.

The active involvement of gram sabha members in the meetings held to share the baseline report, the envisioning exercise and approving the vision has energised the gram sabha as an entity. These interventions have activated the gram sabha to come together, undertake collective analysis of a problem, and explore collective solutions. Gram sabha procedural issues like the need for a one-third quorum, ensuring a resolution is passed on decisions taken, and ensuring inclusion of marginalised communities in the meetings have all strengthened the gram sabha as a local governance institution.

The numerous vision statements articulated during the envisioning exercise were finalised into an all-encompassing vision in meetings of the Technical Support Group (TSG). (One TSG was formed for each panchayat.) The TSG comprised panchayat elected representatives, gram sabha members, the panchayat secretary, rojgar sahayak, and ground level staff of the Public Health and Engineering Department and the Agriculture Department. The TSG discussed solutions and integrated them with existing schemes for water related work, ultimately preparing a one-year action plan for the panchayat. A financial estimation for undertaking the proposed activities was also discussed.

At the district level, a envisioning exercise was conducted with representatives from various community-based organisations, state government officials and elected representatives of the sample gram panchayats. The purpose of this exercise at the district level was to help conceptualise building a model village through implementation of PESA.

5.3 Mobilization for action

Collective envisioning of a future brought the community together to take control of the action required for their own development.

As per the Chhattisgarh PESA act, any scheme needs gram sabha approval before it can be implemented at the community level. Efforts were first made to put up the plan for discussion in the gram sabha agenda and to ensure maximum participation of the community in that meeting. The dates of gram sabha meetings are declared by the state government. The agenda and letter for the gram sabha meeting were sent by the janpad panchayat, but it reached the respective panchayats only two or three days before the scheduled date of the meeting (although, as per the Act, information about the gram sabha meetings should be disseminated at least seven days prior to the meeting). Information including date, time and place of the meeting were written and
pasted at important places in the village, the meeting agenda was disseminated to households, and ward panchs were requested to inform and bring villagers from their wards to the meeting. The one-year action plan prepared for water management as part of the participatory visioning exercise was presented and approved in the gram sabha meeting.

Gram panchayat meetings were held in each gram panchayat to discuss the approved annual action plan and vision statement for managing water resources in the community. Each sarpanch called the panchayat meeting, and an official letter from the gram panchayat was issued to all ward panchs to attend the meeting. Rich discussions took place on every aspect of the water management plan and vision, and only then were they approved and passed.

The visions and one-year action plans approved by the gram sabha and each respective gram panchayat were compiled by PRIA in the form of a single vision document for all the five sample panchayats. A multi-stakeholder meeting of the presidents and members of the janpad panchayat, government officials, elected representatives of the respective gram panchayats, representatives from civil society organisations and the media was organised at the Korba janpad panchayat to share the vision document and the process of preparing it.

The active involvement of the sarpanch and ward panchs in the participatory vision development has provided space to enhance their capacities through the “learning by doing” approach. Further, spaces for the gram panchayat to engage with the janpad panchayat and then for both to engage with the zilla panchayat have been powerful learning platforms.

The debate around community-based management of resources (through the model of water management) has been made central in the strengthening of local governance institutions. Government officials and elected representatives have learnt to collaborate together to understand problems and find possible solutions keeping the gram sabha at the core of the planning and implementation process. The community has gained knowledge on PESA provisions and the functioning of the gram sabha. But most importantly, the local community has learnt to value their traditional knowledge of managing water. Coupled with the new knowledge on PESA provisions they are enabled to gain control over their own resources, and take responsibility to create a more viable and sustainable model of development for themselves.

6. Summary of PR Outcomes

The PR approach adopted by PRIA builds on the premise Knowledge Is Power. The outcomes resulting from the work done by PRIA in the four interventions described above are testament to the success of this approach.

Traditional, experiential knowledge is valued:

- In all four interventions, participants’ own knowledge based on their local reality was put centre-stage and was the starting point of co-creating new knowledge and action. In the health intervention in Rajasthan, women panchayat members, who were first approached when PRIA began raising the
issues of maternal health and sex selective abortions, used the knowledge of their own reality to bring these issues to the larger community. In Haryana, women’s own experiences regarding the violence they face was discussed to raise awareness of these issues in the community, and to find a voice. Among the urban poor, the day-to-day reality of the status of water supply and sanitation standards in their neighbourhoods was used to create their own indicators for monitoring these services. Best practices of community-based water management as per traditional practices and culture across three districts of Chhattisgarh were documented. Communities articulated a vision of how to better manage their water resources based on this documented local, traditional knowledge combined with analyzing their felt needs and aspirations and the new knowledge of PESA and the mandated functioning of gram sabhas that they had acquired.

New knowledge is built:
- In Rajasthan, the current NRHM health plan (including the last year’s financial allocation for health) for each gram panchayat and relevant secondary health data for each gram panchayat/ block/district was brought to the community.
- In the youth groups formed among the Dalit boys and girls in Sonepat, new knowledge (that of referencing the distinction between girls and boys based on the difference between gender and sex) was realised when they collectively discussed and articulated for themselves the societal pressures that compels them to perform gendered roles.
- Information collected through the surveys conducted in Bangladesh and Cambodia was validated and verified with the citizens in committee meetings, before finalising citizens’ reports on status of basic services of water supply and sanitation. It was in these meetings that slum dwellers acquired new knowledge on the concepts and tools of community monitoring.

It creates informed options:
- In Rajasthan, SJWSC members soon began monitoring cases of maternal deaths and sex selection in their communities, and began counselling families (which were thinking of undertaking a sex selective abortion) to help them make better, informed choices. The subsequent health planning process brought the panchayats, people and government on one platform to promote conversations and convergence around health issues as identified in the plans.
- In Sonepat, the kishori groups empowered young girls to change the way they encountered patriarchal norms to make space for themselves in their families and in society. Many mothers expressed the realisation that they did not want their daughters to have the same life they have.
- A baseline report on status of water (number of hand pumps, tube well, ponds, wells, canal, etc) was prepared with the participation of villagers using various PRA techniques in Chhattisgarh. The findings of the report were verified by
the participants and active discussion on the water issue took place in gram sabha meetings. The local community realised they could use this new knowledge together with their traditional practices to gain control over their own resources, and take responsibility to create a more viable and sustainable model of development for themselves.

**People learn to exercise control over their own lives:**

- Initially, in majority of the gram sabhas in the intervened panchayats in Rajasthan, the panchayat members were not sure if they could participate in the health planning exercise because they have always viewed planning as an expert-driven process. The decentralised planning process for health plans enabled the communities to envision a future together. Taking charge of ensuring they can bring about change in their circumstance, nearly 70 per cent of these panchayats have initiated implementation of some components of the health plan from their own resources (including available resources under other schemes).

- In Bangladesh and Cambodia, citizens were mobilised to form neighbourhood committees. Armed with new knowledge on community monitoring tools and with the information from the citizens’ report, the neighbourhood committees prepared a framework for monitoring of public services in their local areas.

- The formation of these neighbourhood committees has given citizens a means to channel their voice. The neighbourhood committees felt confident enough to share the information and negotiate with local authorities about their concerns related to water and sanitation. There is now increased participation of citizens on issues of governance and social accountability.

- Dissemination of information regarding the grievance redressal system among the slum population in Rajshahi gave them confidence to go to the ward offices and lodge complaints.

**Process of collective understanding motivates communities and institutions to initiate social change:**

- Understanding the reality of their village was crucial in getting the panchayat members of the villages in Sonepat to recognise the extent of the problem Dalits face in their communities. When the caste profiles and the information on the nature and extent of discriminatory practices gathered from the community was shared in a series of interactions of panchayat members with the Dalit community, they realised the gravity of the situation and the need for an SJC became a strong felt need. These interactions, where the more influential social group understands the reality of the disadvantaged, are powerful in changing mindsets. Equally, prior understanding of the Dalit’s reality coupled with the mandated requirement from the government authority catalysed the formation of SJC in many villages.

- In the monthly meetings, Dalit women talked about the atrocities faced by the Dalit community, and women from the general category and other castes
began to understand the consequences of violence against the Dalits, for
themselves and their communities at large. The issue of discrimination and
violence against Dalit women thus no longer remained an issue of Dalit
women alone, at least in some of the villages.

- In Cambodia and Bangladesh, municipal officials were facilitated to articulate
  their knowledge of the barriers to effective service delivery and the deficits in
  their organisations. This aided the process of institutional strengthening of
  municipalities to become more effective in performing their mandates.

Social change becomes a collective process:
- The envisioning exercise in Chhattisgarh aided the communities to identify
  reasons for the mismatch between the plans and outcomes of the
  administrative structure vis-à-vis their expectations. Collective envisioning of
  a future brought the community together to take control of the action required
  for their own development. The gram sabha was activated to come together,
  undertake collective analysis of the problem, and explore collective solutions.
- The envisioning exercise to identify and prioritise key issues to be addressed
  proved to be an effective way for SJC members to face the reality of violence
  against the Dalit community and to develop action plans.
References:


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