Innovations in Civil Society
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The journal on Innovations in Civil Society is published biannually, in July and January each year, by PRIA.

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The issue of the potential of civil society in influencing governance is at the core of development thinking and practice today. The issue is intricately woven around the discourse of 'deepening democracy'. Democracy encompasses the responsibility to govern in a responsive, accountable and transparent manner. Deepening of democratic governance implies a reform in the role of state; decentralisation of public administration and devolution of responsibility for public services to politically mandated public institutions; partnership between principal societal actors in the making and implementation of public policy, and management of public resources. A dynamic, strong and progressive civil society, by providing many potential avenues for political, economic and social expressions, can directly stimulate the involvement and commitment of people to participate for stronger stake in the governance.

This issue of the journal focuses on the potential of civil society for reforming governance. In the context of the growing demands for local self-governance, civil society provides a meaningful perspective and methodology of intervention. As a perspective, it is a socio-political space for expression of citizenship. Thus, civil societies mobilise poor and marginalised for collective action to change the fundamental structural differences, injustice and discrimination in the society by providing them the access to resources, knowledge and opportunities. They amplify the collective voices of poor and marginalised to get access to and control over resources, which support their livelihood, to get access to justice and social services; they engage in negotiations through deliberation or dialogue in public forum or through activism as pressure groups, or through active interfacing with the institutions of governance.

As a space for engagements, civil society provides methodological tools for promoting such expressions. They play a crucial role in civil society building to develop and strengthen effective voices on access to and use of public development resources. The process of collective conscientisation and organisation building and supporting new leadership among various social groups like women, dalits, tribals and other similar marginalised groups over the past two decades has resulted in new stirrings of citizens’ collectives.

The thematic section of the journal brings out the potential ways civil society can contribute towards reforming governance institutions.

Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay in his article on *Strengthening Citizen Leadership for*
Democratising Development dwells on interventions to reach the hitherto excluded local informal community based initiatives and citizen associations to enable access to their rights and entitlement through collective engagement. The initiative could significantly alter the balance of power and resources in favour of marginalised. Mandakini Pant in her article Potential of Self-Help Groups for Enhancing Women's Participation in Local Self Governance addresses the question of agency of women in PRIs by deliberating on the potentials that some SHGs have displayed to make PRIs responsive to the concerns of women. Vishwamohan Prasad in his article on Civil Society Initiatives in Bihar: Raising the Bar attempts to analyse the effectiveness of diverse civil society formations in improving governance in different spheres of life by highlighting some recent case exemplars from Bihar. The initiatives have been characterised by self-motivation, spontaneity and inclusive citizen actions. In addition, political willingness, patronage and healthy competition among the actors for gaining recognition and appreciation for their efforts made these initiatives remarkable.

Civil society strengthening is highlighted in the practice section of the journal. Vaishali Lonkar, Shrinivas Rao and Rashmi Panigrahi in their article Civil Society Initiatives for Strengthening Local Self Governance: Key Issues and Strategies describe the role of civil society organisations in Pre Election Voters Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) to ensure a free and fair election; to encourage voters to make the best use of their rights of franchise, to enhance voter information on all aspects of elections, to encourage participation of women and members of SC/ST communities, both as voters and as candidates, to generate awareness on responsible electoral behaviour and check participation of dummy candidates. Swati Dogra in her article on Ex-Servicemen as Citizen Leaders: An Attempt in Hamirpur District of Himachal Pradesh gives account of the programme in building leadership of the Ex-Servicemen to promote citizen engagement in collective actions towards reforming governance. Salma Ganai in her article on Strengthening of Social Justice Committees in Sabarkantha, Gujarat describes the role of civil society organisations in reviving a constitutional body named Social Justice Committee. Purvi Dass in her article on Participatory Training of Animators describes a training programme for the animators. The change agents i.e. the field workers or animators working at the community level have a crucial role in developing effective citizens' voice in decision making about the access and use of development resources for public good.

The books reviewed in this journal are linked to the contemporary discourse on civil society.
STRENGTHENING CITIZEN LEADERSHIP FOR
DEMOCRATISING DEVELOPMENT

Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay

ABSTRACT The promotion of collective conscientisation and organisation building among women, dalits, tribals (and similar marginalised groups) over the past three decades has resulted in new stirrings of community-based groups and associations. These community-based associations have been playing a key role in supporting the new leadership of women, dalits and tribals in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies in India. Yet, many of these informal, local leaders and their associations and networks remain fragile and weak. Sustained capacity building support in the form of information sharing, exposure, networking, handholding and training is not easily accessible and available to them. There has been a growing realisation that enhancing access to and control over development resources and process by the poor and marginalised would require deepening the democratic processes. Active citizenship, collective citizen action and strengthening citizen leadership are at the core of effective democracy. The paper defines citizenship, citizen leadership and the roles of citizen leadership in building good society and engaging governance institutions for deepening democracy.

I. Introduction

The present reality of Indian society is characterised by increasing inequality, discrimination and conflict. The problems of poverty and marginalisation have got intertwined with issues of conflict and security. As voices of hitherto excluded groups of people begin to get articulated, society lacks the mechanisms to channel them into constructive and transformative engagements. Visionary citizen leadership at the grass roots can play a meaningful and constructive role in this context.

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In India, as in much of the developing world, the promotion of collective conscientisation and organisation building among women, dalits, tribals (and similar marginalised groups) over the past three decades has resulted in new stirrings of community-based groups and associations. Many of these collectives have come about as a result of the development programmes like promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs), User Committees (Forest Protection Committees, Water User Association, Watershed Committees etc.). Many more have been promoted by intermediary voluntary development organisations as new collectives (sangham, mandal, sangathan, samiti, andolan, etc.). Many of these have attempted to transform traditional associations (like youth groups, ghotul, baisi, etc.) into contemporary actors.

The growing demands of local self-governance through a variety of legislative and constitutional provisions for devolution and decentralisation have also drawn many of these local, informal groups and associations into active roles. These community-based associations have been playing a key role in supporting the new leadership of women, dalits and tribals in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies in India. Their contribution enhances the accountability of the local elected representatives as well as supports a more transparent and participatory democratic functioning by the new leadership.

In recent years, there is an increasing realisation of the role of civil society in promoting socio-economic development. Small, local and informal associations and their alliances are playing a key role in policy reform and implementation from the vantage point of the poor and marginalised. However, the interests of underprivileged groups remain unarticulated unless and until initiatives are taken to organise them and empower them to question the government agencies as well as to engage with them. The interests of the subaltern groups were articulated only when an organisation intervened to address them as a collective and raised their concern vis-à-vis the state. (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002)

Citizens are able to act more often when they are part of a collective. A neighbourhood organisation, a local union, a youth group, a village committee are all examples of various types of collectives. Individuals who get associated with such collectives, who have access to such formations, who have experience of participation in organisations are able to sustain their engagement and activism (The Commonwealth Foundation, 1999).
The growing democratisation of traditional power relations in civil society and the failure to create a rational basis for generating new leadership through formal political institutions are at the heart of the increasing authority vacuum in Indian politics. This is where the leadership of visible citizens can make a significant difference. Citizen activists can build the bridge – between citizens and the state. Leadership of citizens is exercised when they act to build society and improve governance. Recognition, visibility and promotion of such citizen leadership is the key to this. Citizen leadership is also exercised when they enable other citizens to act - when they promote citizen activism in society and polity (Kohli, 1991).

Yet, many of these informal, local leaders and their associations and networks remain fragile and weak. Sustained capacity building support in the form of information sharing, exposure, networking, handholding and training is not easily accessible and available to them. Recent trends in linking capacity building merely to project delivery and financing through demand (“user pays” principle) has resulted in higher order, supply-side, structured, expert-based approaches to capacity building, largely confined to intermediary associations (Tandon and Bandyopadhyay, 2001).

The citizens' assessment of the present reality is that of dissatisfaction. Basic needs remain unfulfilled. The need for associations is not being met either. Citizens find growing individualism and self-centredness in communities and families. Narrowly and newly defined identities are creating tensions and conflicts in societies. There are growing disconnections between citizens within a community and hostility towards other communities. Citizens also find that their own connection with and participation in the governance of their communities and societies is limited or absent. This further increases their sense of alienation in society and dissatisfaction with the present reality (The Commonwealth Foundation, 1999).

This article is based on PRIA's experience to reach to hitherto excluded local informal community based initiatives and citizens associations to enable their access, their entitlements and rights through a process of collective engagement. The initiative to strengthen citizen leadership came at a time when strengthening the coalitions of citizens' leadership at the grassroots could significantly alter the balance of power and resources in favour of the marginalised.
II. Democratising Development: Core Elements

There has been a growing realisation that enhancing access to and control over development resources and process by the poor and marginalised would require deepening the democratic processes. Active citizenship is at the core of effective democracy. Active citizenship can be promoted and nurtured by engaged citizen leadership and access to proactive citizen associations.

1. Role of Citizens

It is true that citizens are disillusioned and disappointed with the present context in society. Many citizens are overwhelmed by the immediate situations in which they live. They are struggling to survive and feed their families. Insufficient time, information, energy or resources restrict their participation in society and governance. However, citizens see a wide range of roles for themselves to access services, associations and participation. One of the roles that they see for themselves is that of active citizenship. Many citizens want to take responsibility and practice citizenship. They not only want to play their own roles in society, but also want the democracy to allow and encourage them to play roles in wider public arenas. Citizens want to engage public agencies, officials and leaders to make their views known, to seek information, demand accountability and monitor the policies and programmes of different government agencies and departments.

Citizens can contribute significantly when if they are organised into collectives. The process of collectivisation with other citizens helps to overcome individual hesitations and obstacles to participation. The sum total of limited time, limited energy and limited ability can be a great deal more than that of the individual parts. Mutual help and solidarity is a part of citizen action. Their capacity, confidence, and cooperation are significantly enhanced in a collective endeavour. Collective citizen action can mobilise their energies, talent and resources to enable them to overcome their hesitations and limitations and feel empowered to act for the common public good.

Citizen leaders can play significant roles that enable the contributions of fellow citizens to build a just society. The inspiration and leadership given by a capable and committed citizen leadership who have organised and enabled the participation and contribution of other citizens must be nurtured and strengthened. These citizen leaders can share information, build awareness and mobilise other citizens to build a just society and to engage with governance institutions. Such citizens enable, animate and facilitate citizen
participation and engagement. Various factors such as access to information about their situation, about government policies and schemes, about emerging opportunities and threats in the society enable such citizen leaders to play their valuable leadership roles in society. Citizen leaders must get the opportunity for wider exposure, beyond their immediate context. This enables them to compare their own reality with other contexts, share experiences with other activists and learn about new ways of doing things. Citizen leaders must also get access to training and support structures. Such access builds their confidence, supports their initiative and risk-taking, and enhances their strength to undertake action (The Commonwealth Foundation, 1999).

2. Understanding Citizenship
The term ‘citizenship’ has been discussed, defined and understood at different point of time in the political history. There have been different traditions in citizenship thoughts throughout the discourse. While some of these thoughts have supplemented the existing thoughts, others have given rise to inherent polarity. These polarities are many a time competing with each other, which needs to be considered while defining citizenship. This is especially true in the Indian context. Some of these polarities are discussed in the following section.

(a) Individual and Collective: In the Western context citizenship emphasises individual choices. It is considered that individuals act ‘rationally’ to advance their interests in the society. This emphasis on individual choice is based on the faith that the state will provide the necessary protection and welfare provisions in exercising individual choices. However, it does not recognise the fact that individual choices are restricted by the inherent structural inequalities in society. In the Indian context individual choices are also conditioned by collective choices of the community. In a hierarchical society the choice and interest of the powerful is often projected as the collective community choice. It is a fallacy of the community.

In the Indian context the community and the individual have to be considered together. Collective communitarian living is part of individual living as well. Being part of society a person should create conditions and opportunities for self-development as well as for the common good and welfare of the entire community with particular focus on the poor and marginalised.
(b) Rights and Obligations: Rights and obligations are at the core of citizenship. Citizenship as 'rights' is understood as a formal status granted by the state. Individuals are entitled to specific universalised rights enshrined in law. Citizenship as 'obligations' is understood as the political participation of all citizens as their duty.

Rights are conceived as political (e.g. rights to vote), civil (e.g. protection of private property, freedom of speech, liberty of the person), social (e.g. not to be discriminated against on the basis of caste, class, religion or gender and equal access to basic services like health, education etc.), economic (e.g. equal access to employment and sources of livelihood) and cultural (e.g. protection and preservation of traditional culture). It is a matter of choice for the individual to claim and exercise rights. Some of them are formalised in law while others are not. The role of the state is to protect citizens in exercising their rights. Many argue that it is not enough. Exercising choice or claiming rights requires resources, power and knowledge. This is particularly so when powerful interests are portrayed as 'common interests' as against the 'individual interests' of community members (Jones and Gaventa, 2002).

The institution or the person against whom the claims are made influences the outcomes of claiming rights. Thus the other side of the rights coin is an obligation to respond and be held accountable. Since the processes of claiming rights are inherently political and are played out as struggles between the interests, power and knowledge of differently positioned actors, the poor and marginalised citizens who are most disadvantaged in relations of power and resources are those least likely to be conscious of and able to assert their claims to rights (Jones and Gaventa, 2002).

Rights and obligations go hand in hand. Every right has a corresponding obligation. For example, if citizens have the right to vote, it becomes the obligation of citizens that they should not be prejudiced or to be influenced by the distinctions of caste, class, religion and gender. Universal suffrage is a right guaranteed by the Constitution. However, a large number of citizens fail to discharge this obligation due to many reasons. This general apathy stems from the scepticism of citizens about the legitimacy of political institutions.

(c) Constitutional and Humanistic Definition of Citizenship: The Constitutional definition of citizenship in India emphasises on 'domicile in the territory of India'. Citizenship could be acquired either by birth or by residing in the Indian territory
for a certain amount of years. By virtue of being a citizen, the state is obliged to protect certain rights of every citizen. However, there are many instances where certain ethnic and social groups have been perpetually denied their due rights. PRIA’s study (Pant, 2004) showed how the nomads of Rajasthan are denied all kinds of rights. The public institutions do not even recognise them as residents of the country since culturally they do not have permanent residence. There are instances of conflict related to a person’s identity as a citizen - by virtue of birth or by virtue of dwelling in a place. Perhaps, every Indian is familiar with the concept of ‘Bhumi Putra’ (son of the soil). In recent times politically motivated movements around a narrow identity in Assam, Maharashtra and other states are pointers. In these states an Indian citizen from another state has been treated as an alien and the person denied access to job opportunities in public institutions or from exercising her/his civil rights like protection of private property. Citizenship definition should therefore go beyond the Constitutional definition and include humanistic values and norms.

(d) **Nation-State and Citizenship:** While citizenship is bestowed on a person by the state, in a democratic setup the state derives its legitimacy from the citizens who voluntarily allow themselves to be governed by their elected representatives and if citizens collectively refuse to offer legitimacy the state loses its identity. So there is a relationship between a citizen and the state. The state could be defined as people organised for governance within a definite geographical territory whereas a nation is people psychologically bound together having a common will to live together for the future. The modern state is limited by national frontiers. We are members of the state within whose frontiers we are born and we can change our state allegiance or nationality only with the specific permission of the state to which we wish to belong.

To summarise, it can be said that citizenship means ‘full membership of a community’. The membership entails participation by individuals in the determination of the conditions of their own association without any discrimination on the basis of caste, ethnicity, religion or gender. Citizenship is an overarching civic identity produced by and productive of a sense of belonging to a particular nation-state. Citizenship is a status, which bestows upon individuals equal rights and obligations, liberties and constraints, powers and responsibilities.
A citizen may be regarded as a person who enjoys social, political, civil, economic and cultural rights, who is part of a nation-state and society and who has certain rights and obligations. An active citizen should be aware about the reality, be willing to work to change the reality, be striving for common public good and be promoting collective efforts in their own community.

Active citizenship not only involves rights but also engaging with public institutions and reforming society. With some exceptions, very few citizens are participating in society building or interfacing with the governance institutions. Citizens are by and large sceptical about participating in development efforts or claiming their rightful place in governance institutions. It is true that there are numerous barriers, which inhibit the participation of citizens. Many citizens are grappling with every day problems – poverty, livelihood, or lack of awareness and information. Active citizenship can overcome these barriers. Practicing active citizenship, especially by extremely disadvantaged and marginalised groups, requires systematic learning opportunities to create the confidence and the necessary capacities required to play this role effectively.

3. Understanding Citizen Leadership

Leadership in the community context could be understood as a process of influencing and motivating people for bringing positive social change in favour of the marginalised sections of society. Leadership is that humanistic quality through which a person tries to fulfil the needs of the community by securing its cooperation and by establishing credibility.

A citizen leader is an individual who has the ability to represent, to govern, to provide direction and to seek acceptance of a particular section or group. Furthermore, a leader has a direction, necessary energy and ability to influence for achieving common public good (desired social change).

Therefore, in the process of promoting citizen leaders, the attributes of citizenship and leadership should be considered together. A good citizen leader should be an active citizen and should have the ability to shoulder responsibility.

The relationship between individual leadership and the collective is a dialectical one rather than hierarchical. The collective enables the nurturing of and provides grounds for ensuring the public accountability of leadership. It implies transparent and democratic
decision-making within the collective, nurturing inter-personal and inter-associational relationships, honest sharing of how resources are mobilised and utilised and an appraisal of performance in relation to the stated objectives of the collective. The leadership is viewed as an interactive process with emphasis on intermediation capacity. It implies that the leadership would be able to play key roles bringing additional resources (information, material, expertise, fund etc.) from ‘outside’ agencies and ensuring the effective use of internal resources. It also means ensuring informed participation of individuals and different interests groups within the collective.

III. Roles of Citizen Leader

Citizen leaders are expected to play a variety of roles. However, the following two sets of roles are of prime importance.

1. Society Building
The first important function of a citizen leader is to contribute towards building a society, which promotes norms and values, related to associative and inclusive life. Citizen leaders must aspire for a society, which promotes equal justice to all the citizens. A society, which does not allow any person to be discriminated against based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, gender or age. Such a society can be achieved if citizen leaders play three important functions.

(a) Facilitating Social Mobilisation
It includes mobilisation of the poor and marginalised for collective action. Individual action is important in society, however, it may feel powerless in the face of powerful interests of the advantaged sections of society. Collective action and collective empowerment are powerful tools to change the fundamental structural differences, injustice and discrimination in society. The purpose of social mobilisation and collective action may range from engaging in self help construction work in a village or neighbourhood (like building a road or cleaning of ponds) to exercising rights over natural resources (like protecting forest or common property resources) to large-scale protest activities (like protest against acquisition of agricultural lands).

(b) Overcoming Social Exclusion
The society in its present form is deeply stratified and hierarchical. The structural and other forms of inequalities based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and age reinforce
social exclusion. The resources, knowledge and opportunities in mainstream society are denied to the poor and marginalised. One of the functions of citizen leaders is to facilitate the poor and marginalised in accessing resources, knowledge and opportunities.

(c) Managing Differences/Divisions
In a democratic society plurality should be seen as an asset. However, when society is fragmented across hierarchical stratification it may lead to discrimination against and exploitation of the poor and marginalised that are at the bottom of the hierarchy. In both cases conflicts around interest and priority are inevitable. One of the functions of citizen leaders is to manage and resolve these conflicts within the community through negotiation and consensus. Citizen leaders must be sensitive enough to understand that the poor and marginalised feel powerless in such conflict situations unless an external facilitation process helps their interest to surface.

2. Engaging Governance Institutions
Governance is defined as the structures and processes of public decision making for mobilising public resources for the common public good like health, education, drinking water and other service provisions. Several public institutions are responsible for decision making related to the governance functions of a society. The citizen leaders must be aware about those public institutions and how their decisions related to common public good affect the lives of citizens. They should not only become aware about these structures and processes but also actively engage in decision making so as to espouse the interest of the poor and marginalised. The citizen leaders can engage governance institutions in the following three ways.

(a) Amplifying Voice
For generations the powerful people in society suppress the voices of the poor and marginalised. In order to make the governance institutions responsive to the needs and aspirations of dalits, tribals, women, children, person with disabilities, their voices must be mobilised so that the decision makers can hear them. The citizen leaders should be able to amplify the collective voices of the poor and marginalised to get access to and control over resources, which support their livelihood, to get access to justice and social services.

(b) Engaging in Negotiation
In order to bring about changes in society, changes in the fundamental power relationship
are absolutely necessary. The desired development outcomes cannot be achieved without altering the power differentials between dalit and non-dalit, tribal and non-tribal or women and men. The development outcomes cannot be sustainable with a massive power gulf between 'haves' and 'have nots'. Any alteration in the existing power relationship would require a process of negotiation between two parties. Experience shows that external facilitation always helps the poor and marginalised in such negotiations with a view to changing the power relationships. The citizen leaders should act as external facilitators in such negotiations. They should encourage, mobilise, educate and build capacities of the poor and marginalised to negotiate with the powerful. The citizen leaders must understand that such political negotiations may involve conflicts. Therefore, these conflicts must be resolved by engaging in dialogue with the powerful.

(iii) Enhancing Credibility

Years of exploitation, deceit and discrimination have made the poor and marginalised sceptical and frustrated about political leadership and governance institutions. In order to win the heart of these citizens, the citizen leaders must earn credibility in the community. This credibility can only be earned when the citizen leaders actively support the struggle of the poor and marginalised in amplifying their voices, negotiating with the powerful, overcoming social exclusion and fighting discrimination and mobilising their views in decision making processes and structures. The citizen leaders must earn a reputation in the community as "whatever this person says, also does."

The citizen leaders should also earn a good reputation in the eyes of representatives from governance institutions. It can be earned through personal attributes like honesty, punctuality, seriousness, understanding and sensitivity. The citizen leaders must be taken seriously by the political leadership and officials and seen as individuals dedicated to the cause of social change.

Society building and engaging governance institutions are cyclic in process and are based on knowledge, attitude and the skill of citizen leaders. So in order to perform these roles we require different individuals or even one person who can perform multiple roles. In addition to this a leader should have clear vision/direction, for example, what is the basic purpose of organising regular SHGs meetings? Are they meant for economic development only or are they also providing a forum for discussion on other social issues emerging within the society? Further, how can these meetings be organised in such a way that the excluded sections of society like the disabled, the disadvantaged (widows, dalits, tribals,
old aged, minorities etc.) find a space to voice their views, along with the process of society building.

IV. Conclusion

There has been renewed opportunity for citizen actions and engagement through the renewed interests on the role of civil societies. Recent trends in the socio-political arena characterised by local level decentralisation and mechanisms for the political participation of the hitherto marginalised and poor have provided a new climate to foster citizen leaderships and citizens' associations. However, very little input has been provided to strengthen and encourage these leadership initiatives.

By and large, most of the development initiatives by the governments, bilateral and multilateral donors and NGOs have resulted into the formation of community groups or associations to ensure the responsibility for delivering specific programmes. However, the process of conscientisation – mantra of the voluntary actions in the 70s - has not been adequately addressed through these community formations.

Till date, the perspectives on individual rights have, by and large, guided the capacity building interventions. Although this is a necessity, it is not sufficient to enable citizens to assert and interface with other intermediary development agencies including NGOs and government institutions. The perspective of collectivisation and engagement of the citizens in collective actions has not been addressed in a systematic manner. A strengthened leadership would be able to effectively interface with other institutions, access information and other resources from government, local bodies, NGOs and market institutions.

Our understanding suggests that capacity is a multi-dimensional and complex attribute. It covers the totality of a collective's organised effort to fulfil its stated purpose in relation to its identity.

The critical component of capacity is the intellectual and analytical ability of the collective. It implies clarification of perspectives, its analysis of the given social reality, its moral and ethical base and articulating its independent thinking and position on issues of contemporary concern. Therefore, the capacity for self-reflection and learning is an important arena.
The second critical component is institutional capacity. It implies building, nurturing and enhancing internal and external relationships and linkages, which provides legitimacy and ground for engaging in civic actions.

The capacity of a collective to manage its internal norms is crucial to foster and pursue its purpose. In this context the internal capacity to relate and respond to the external environment and become adaptive and resilient is a prerequisite. Therefore, enhancing capacity for management and the development of groups and associations are important.

Experience suggests that a material resource base is an important element of capacity for local groups and associations. It is this capacity which in fact provides a strong ground for taking an autonomous and independent political position on issues, that affect their lives.

A wide range of capacity building interventions including structured educational interventions like training, workshops, conferences, regular hand holding support, exposure visits and networking must be provided to nourish, develop and strengthen citizen leadership.

References


The Potential of Self-Help Groups for Enhancing Women's Participation in Local Self-Governance
Mandakini Pant

Abstract
Self-Help Groups (SHGs), formed to encourage savings and credit activities are increasingly being recognised as one of the more effective methods of socio-economic development of women. They are now moving beyond their mandate of economic self-reliance to participate in the over all affairs of society through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The facilitation of voluntary development organisations (VDOs) has strengthened their collective voice. This article, by deliberating on the potentials that some SHGs display to make PRIs responsive to the concerns of women, addresses the question of women's agencies in PRIs. The paper draws on the findings of PRIA's synthesis study on The Potential of Self-Help Groups in Enhancing Women's Participation in Local Self-Governance. The study was carried out in collaboration with three voluntary development organisations, Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC) in Uttaranchal, Samarthan in Madhya Pradesh, and Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) in Uttar Pradesh.

I. Context

(a) Local Self-Governance and the Agency of Women
The exclusion of poor rural women from participation in public decision-making is a matter of serious concern. The absence of minimal needs; the lack of access to critical resources such as credit, land, information, education, skills; and the denial of opportunities and choices, disempower them. Without any sense of power whatsoever,

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their participation in decision-making is minimal, both at home and within the community.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in 1993 and the ensuing State Acts on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) seeks to correct the prolonged marginalisation of vulnerable women from the political process and decision-making, by giving them the opportunity and space to influence and shape policies. The CAA envisages a system of governance, which is responsive to the needs and aspirations of the local community, where informed and inclusive participation of all citizens, across caste, class and gender, in planning and administration ensure the system's accountability to the local community. The salient features of the Panchayati Raj System, established through the CAA, are as follows:

- **Three tiered structure.** *Gram Panchayat* at the village level; *Panchayat Samiti* or *Kshetriya* or *Janpad Panchayat* at the block level and *Zilla Parishad* at the district level.

- **Fixed five years' tenure.** State Election Commissions to conduct elections for the local bodies.

- **Financial resources** to panchayats for functions and responsibilities entrusted to them. State Finance Commissions to allocate budgetary resources and the power for mobilising revenue to local bodies.

- **District Planning Committee** (under Part IX A of the Indian Constitution) consolidating all the bottom up planning processes undertaken at various levels of PRIs and integrating rural and urban planning processes at the district level.

- **Devolution of powers and functions** as listed in the Eleventh schedule to enable PRIs to function as institutions of self-government. These include health, education, agriculture, drinking water, forestry, sanitation, livelihood, women and children etc.

- **A gram sabha,** the village assembly of all adult voters.

- **Reservations** for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the membership and for the chairperson's post. One-third of all seats are reserved for them in the membership. Reservation for the chairpersons' post for SC/ST is proportionate to their population.
- Reservations for women in the membership and the chairperson's post. One-third of all seats are reserved for women in all the positions which includes chairperson post and membership at all the three levels. Reservation for SC/ST women is proportionate to their population. This is made as one third of seats out of the one third of the seats reserved for women in total.

Rural women now have the opportunity and space to influence and shape policies. As elected representatives they can directly participate in public decision-making. As gram sabha constituents they articulate their concerns, take part in the planning of development programmes and allocation of resources, as well as seek accountability from the PRIs in the gram sabha meetings. This would hopefully change the adverse gender bias in policy formulation progressively.

The case studies on women's representation and participation in PRIs reveal mixed impacts. On the positive side we find that despite their low level of literacy, women have become articulate and have begun asserting their voice. They regularly attend PRI meetings. They have often used their elected authority to address several critical issues such as children's education, drinking water, family planning, hygiene and health, provision of roads and electricity. They have also brought necessary focus on alcohol abuse and domestic violence by men on to the agenda of political campaigns (Nambari and Bandyopadhyay 2004). On the negative side, we have had reverse stories of inert participation. The masculinity of the political process continues, with men as the only real political actors. According to PRIA's study on PRIs in six states, the existing dominant male political leadership often pushes their family women to contest elections (as their proxy). This ensures that they retain the seat and the power within the family, with women behaving only as token representatives (PRIA, 1999). Where this did not happen, the elected women representatives become the targets of character assassination. Their male colleagues still treat them with indifference during the meetings. The bureaucracy too is relatively less responsive to them. Women from low caste groups seldom wield any real political power due to the strongly entrenched notions of caste and gender hierarchy within society (Anandhi S, 2002; Niranjana, 2002).

A close look at the post 73rd Amendment phase of PRIs in states vis-à-vis women's representation and participation in it brings to light the fact that the ideal of a strong, truly representative and responsive PRI is still a distant dream. Decentralisation has
by and large been in the nature of de-concentration of government activities and not the devolution of authority and functions. PRIs are merely acting as implementing sub-ordinate agencies of state. The weakness of PRIs in many ways adds to the hegemony of political leadership and bureaucracy.

The panchayat’s weak accountability to gram sabhas has impeded their importance. Gram sabhas as a forum where citizens participate in the planning and allocation of resources, sanctioning of development programmes; panchayats implementing the development plans with citizens closely monitoring the process has not materialised. As the role and functions of the gram sabha are inadequate, the villagers do not feel they are stakeholders in governance. Gram sabha meetings have become meaningless rituals primarily aimed at rubber-stamping the decisions already taken.

Insistence on a certain number alone – as members or as heads - may not lead to enhanced and effective participation of women in the governance of PRIs. One has to contend with some crucial constraining factors such as institutional arrangements, diverse patriarchal forces, socio-economic positioning of women, etc., which limit the ability of women in participating actively and meaningfully in PRIs, in articulating their concerns and in influencing and shaping policies. The simplistic appeals for increased political participation of women in gram sabhas generally overlook some ground realities: the odd timings of gram sabha meetings, settlement pattern of the village and long distances to be trekked, problems of quorum and procedures adopted for finalising development plans and projects, manipulation of discussions by dominant groups, restrictions on the mobility of women outside the home, inability of poor women wage workers to lose a day’s wage, illiteracy and lack of awareness about the new system of governance. These severe limiting factors often create cynicism amongst women towards the gram sabha as an effective instrument of participatory local development (Sharma, 2004). Thus, leading to the poor participation of women in gram sabha meetings and even when they do attend meetings the articulation of their views and priorities is very poor.

Access to social resources encompassing the social networks, associations and connections, which people draw on in their search for survival, security and dignity, assumes importance in this context. Grassroots women collectives such as the Self-Help Groups (SHGs), albeit organised to act for their own socio-economic development, as
community based organizations can also address concerns relating to women and activate their participation in PRIs.

Self-Help Groups have proved to be an effective strategy for poverty reduction and socio-economic development by mobilising micro credit and savings. An SHG is a membership organisation of individuals primarily from the poor sections of society who are mobilised to form SHGs for savings and credit activities, to address their immediate needs and priorities of poverty alleviation. The members take on economic activities in a systematic manner, participate directly in decision-making and share the risks, costs and benefits on an equitable basis. Ownership of wealth – the capital fund through savings and credit as well as enterprise and access to resources for sustainable livelihoods can effectively alleviate their poverty and also mitigate the psychological consequences of being poor. Enhanced organisational leadership skills not only increase women’s economic options and promote their sense of worth but also empower them politically.

Studies on SHGs have reported a number of changes in their lives, which could be deemed as empowering. Women have gained control over produce and income. Self-earned income has instilled in them a sense of pride and the confidence of managing on their own. Membership of the SHG and easy accessibility to loan and engagement in micro-enterprise facilitated the women’s inclusion in household decision-making. They are now able to negotiate with their husbands on crucial matters. The training programmes have reinforced a collective identity among its members. The learning and exchange between women’s groups enhanced their confidence. Meetings and sharing of experiences have made them sensitive to each other as well as to the community’s needs. They are emerging as strong power groups. They negotiate confidently with government officials, moneylenders and outsiders (Pant, 2004). There are a few cases where PRIA’s partners have successfully mobilised women SHGs to participate in the local governance processes and institutions. The results clearly indicate that these groups have overcome the social and political exclusion of poor women directly by addressing their financial exclusion and indirectly by working in cohesiveness over issues concerning women beyond their mandate of savings and credit, to local self-governance. It is hoped that these positive changes may eventually lead to broader based political participation.
(b) Conceptualising SHGs as Change Agents for Enhancing the Participation of Women in Local Self-Governance

This paper addresses the question of women's agency in PRIs. Agency is the ability to define and articulate needs and priorities and to act upon them. In this paper, agency refers to women's political participation in decision-making to articulate their needs and priorities for rights, entitlements and provisioning of basic services. The paper begins with the assumption that SHGs are an effective interface for poor women to constructively deal with the panchayats. They have the potential to (a) provide a basis for collective action around both wider community and gender needs in panchayats and (b) lobby for inclusion of women's interests in panchayats. The paper explores the participation of SHGs in the village panchayats and its outcome to see whether the process can really contribute to greater agency of women in articulating and claiming rights.

(c) Underlying Premise

For poor women, PRIs as the governance institutions are clearly central in the operationalisation of rights. They want PRIs to meet their basic needs through the provision of essential services, ensure livelihoods to them and promote sustainable development on the principle of equity and social justice.

Despite the statutory provision of women's participation in PRIs, they are unable to participate effectively in the public decision-making process. They experience difficulties in gaining access to essential services such as health, education, water and sanitation facilities and even housing and infrastructure.

An effective civil society can make institutions of governance responsive and sensitive to the needs of the poor and the marginalised. Organised self-help groups as community based organisations of poor women can provide the poor and marginalised women in the village with intangible resources like information, social networks and associations, which in turn promote their self-confidence and strengthen their ability to exercise agency.

A conscious collective action around a common or shared concern for the provision and protection of rights can make the voices of poor women heard. The participation of SHGs in the planning process and their clear articulation of poor women's concerns can make the governance mechanisms accountable to them. It can enhance the efficacy
of PRIs by acting as a pressure lobby and promote development by advancing their interests and that of the community in turn.

The SHGs’ achievements in bringing about a desirable outcome, in turn, can act on the deeper structures of constraints, which explain poverty, inequality and discrimination of women in society.

However, the SHGs strength to achieve its goals will depend on a number of conditions viz., a strong organisation of their own, access to resources and opportunities, strong capabilities built through education, information, skills and confidence and freedom of choice and action. External facilitators such as voluntary development organisations (VDOs) play a crucial role by educating, organising and mobilising women purposively and consciously around a common or shared concern for bringing women’s concerns to the centre stage of local self-governance and catalyse the social change processes.

The paper draws on the findings of PRIA’s synthesis study on The Potential of Self-Help Groups in Enhancing Women’s Participation in Local Self-Governance. The study, by analysing SHGs’ political participation and their outcomes, has explored their potential in enhancing women’s participation in panchayats. The study covers many women SHGs in three economically backward states of northern India viz., Sehore Block in Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh, Sohawal Block in Faizabad district and Sadat Block in Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh and Naugaon Block in Uttarkashi district of Uttaranchal. It also analyses the capacity building initiatives of Samarthan, Madhya Pradesh, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) Uttar Pradesh and Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC) Uttaranchal.

The paper has six sections. Section 1 briefly describes some general characteristics of SHGs. Section 2 describes the nature of participation of SHGs in the processes of governance. Section 3 focuses on the positive changes in women collectives in terms of their ability to exercise their agency for improving their well being and taking initiatives to bring about wider changes in the community. Section 4 highlights the presumptions about the SHGs' potential in mobilising women to participate actively in governance. The presumptions are drawn on the basis of discussions on the participation of SHGs in panchayats.
II. The Self-Help Groups: Some General Characteristics

The formation of SHGs begins with savings. Members contribute a saving deposit commonly decided upon by the group. After SHGs have built up suitable savings, say in a period of about one year, they are able to access credit for their members against their pooled resources. Loan allocation to members is based on group solidarity rather than on formal collateral. SHGs take collective decisions on issues relating to the selection of borrowers, the selection of enterprise, fixing the amount of loan and the rate of interest, the terms of repayment, disposal of profits, etc. Collectivisation of vital economic interests has, by default, also imbued SHGs with a political role, especially in so far as the participation of its members in local self-governance through PRIs is concerned.

Expectedly, SHG members are linked together by some common bond or the other, such as caste and community, skills and activity, (relative) prosperity and poverty, etc. These bonds and affinities play an important role for the progress and success of SHGs. SHGs in the present study mostly comprised of poor women belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Castes (OBC). They came from families with small landholdings, ranging from one to five acres. Many were landless labourers. Their average age ranged from 20 to 50 years. A large number of SHGs' members were illiterate, some could only sign their names and very few had studied up to class VIII.

Minimum savings per member in the SHGs in the study was Rs. 10/- per month, and maximum was up to Rs. 50/- per month, with the average monthly saving being between Rs. 20/- to Rs. 25/- per month. The group corpus built through the aggregation of savings and interest on lending, was supplemented with a revolving fund sanctioned as cash credit limit by the banks. SHGs in the study have received cash credit limits from the banks ranging from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 25,000.

SHGs in the study have taken up local enterprise, individually as well as collectively, based on locally available resources such as files and folders, durries and soft toys, incense sticks (agarbatti) and preserved foods such as badi, papad, achaar, sewing and embroidery, animal husbandry and fishery, horticulture and cooperative farming, small
shop-keeping etc. The access to economic opportunities and empowerment to take advantage of those opportunities; have enabled many poor women to make strategic choices and overcome their vulnerabilities to poverty.

The VDOs facilitated the group formation. The SHGs received trainings on group management, leadership development and problem solving and conflict resolution. At the level of federation the training component included financial management, resource mobilisation, legal aspects and decision-making. For accounts and documentation the training component included maintenance of records, annual plans, budget, project proposals and writing minutes of meetings. Enterprise development involved trainings in enterprise promotion, feasibility and other technical and management aspects. Empowerment implied raising awareness on women’s issues and convergent actions. Training on gram sabha and Panchayati Raj included the role and function of the gram sabha, the rights of a person attending the gram sabha, the proper way of conducting a gram sabha, provisions of Gram Swaraj under the Panchayat Act, process of removal of a sarpanch by a gram sabha, responsibilities of standing committees of gram sabha and micro planning.

The SHGs received a variety of learning opportunities. Practical learning through study tours, visits to best practice projects, hands-on training and demonstration projects, face-to-face interactions with experts, practitioners and government officials, were some of the ways in which they were trained. These activities exposed them to new ideas and strategies, built self-confidence and created an enabling environment for experimentation and innovation. Training on gram sabha and Gram Swaraj involved inter-active discussions between the SHGs with the field worker acting as the facilitator and the resource person of the subject. Methods of imparting training largely comprised of discussions during group meetings, open community meetings, exposure to work done by panchayats and the panchayat’s financial statements of panchayats.

The study found many SHGs developing themselves as important interest groups in the local political process, especially as ushered in by the 73rd CAA. Some SHG members had been elected representatives in PRIs. They headed the village council and assembly (gram sabha and gram panchayat) and were active members of various
village committees on health, education, security and social justice. Active involvement in PRIs enabled them to take up their cause in the village bodies and participate in decision-making and the governance process effectively.

III. Participation in Public/Political Spaces for Collective Action

The SHGs under study were found to have extended themselves as participants in over-all matters of the village community through PRIs, beyond the initial purpose and scope of their existence as economic collectives. This participation has taken many forms, such as pro-actively aiding panchayats in the implementation of their programmes, attending and speaking out in gram sabha meetings, deliberating and debating in public forums for making claims to rights and entitlements, forming pressure groups, leveraging access to resources, setting agenda and even altering rules and norms through intensive interfacing.

(a) Pro-Active Participation in Panchayats’ Programme

The SHGs have participated pro-actively to aid panchayats in their programmes. The SHG in Sehore Block, Madhya Pradesh, for instance, has voluntarily undertaken the construction of soak pits and renovation of the community well. During the Pulse Polio campaign they ensured that all the children in the village were immunized. They have broached objections in the gram sabha on the list of families identified under the BPL survey.

Samarthan had been briefing the groups on the process of the BPL survey that was undertaken by the state government during 2003-04. The groups were informed about the rights of the gram sabha in finalising the list of BPL families. As the first list of BPL families was released the group members realised that the list did not include poor families instead it has taken account of well to do families that owned tractors. The women’s group raised this issue in the gram sabha and along with the sarpanch went and submitted a memorandum in the Zilla Parishad.

Interviews, Samarthan
(b) Gram Sabha Participation

(i) Attending the gram sabha
Prior to the participation of the SHGs in the study areas none of the women had attended gram sabha meetings. Women participated in meetings only to seek approval for their application for social security pension or to seek solutions to specific problems related to employment or land. The gram sabha was seen primarily as a male domain. “Men should go, women have no place there” (Admi jayen mahilaon ka kya kaam).

The SHGs have made the women realise the importance of the gram sabha. They, now regularly attend the gram sabha meetings. They still remember the gram sabha meeting that they had attended for the first time. “Initially in the first two-three Gram Sabhas we just sat and came back.” They sat with a long veil (ghoonghat) over their faces. Villagers, particularly men, reacted derisively. Their sarcasm is obvious from their crude remarks “Where have you come!” (“Yahan kahan aa gayee ho!”). Women members belonging to the Scheduled Caste were particularly subjected to embarrassing remarks.

The sheer persistence of the women members has currently led to a situation where the number of women in a gram sabha is more than the number required for the quorum. Women other than the members of SHGs also attend the meeting. The sarpanch, Sarju Bai, Bijora, Sehore Block in Madhya Pradesh corroborated the regularity of attendance of members of the SHGs in the gram sabha in her interview.

"The women from the SHGs come regularly to the gram sabha. They have also motivated other women in the village (who are not members of any SHGs) to come and attend the Gram sabhas."

Interviews, Samarthan

The women have taken conscious steps to ensure that they get the information about gram sabha meetings regularly. The members of Gyan Ganga SHG in Sehore Block, Madhya Pradesh reported that earlier the village watchman (chowkidaar) would not come to their locality to announce the gram sabha meetings. They confronted him and made him promise that he would inform them in advance about the gram sabha meetings, in addition to informing all the villagers in their locality. Since then the
chowkidaar comes regularly to inform them personally about the meeting. SHGs in Uttarakhand hired a “paswan” (drum roller) to inform all villagers about the agenda of the panchayat meetings.

(ii) Speaking out in the gram sabha
Initially, women members spoke on proposals of the SHG for seeking the approval of the gram sabha. The issues were discussed in detail in the group meetings prior to the gram sabha meeting. The internal meetings helped the women overcome their ‘stage fright’. They were prepared with the agenda and the facts. Now of course they speak confidently, taking up issues on their own. Narrative of Prem Narayan, up-sarpanch of Bijora validates this fact.

“There was apprehension that the sarpanch would siphon off the money received for the construction of the school building’s boundary wall. Since the women from the group (Naya Prakash Group) were regularly attending the gram sabha meetings and knew the budget and were monitoring the implementation of the scheme, the sarpanch could not do any thing.”

Interviews, Samarthan

Needs and concerns of SHGs have compelled the members to speak out in the meetings. The construction of the community building, the construction of a cement road, approval of the list for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families in the gram sabha, starting the mid-day meal in school, repair of the hand pump and expressing disapproval on the quality of the toilet constructed in the school etc., are some of the issues that have led the members to speak out in the meetings. For instance, the construction of a platform made the Gyan Ganga group, (Bijora, Sehore Block, Madhya Pradesh) participate in the meetings. The gram sabha passed a resolution approving the place for the construction of the platform. When the gram sabha realised that they would have to make monetary contributions there were voices of dissent including that of the sarpanch. The women members stood strong in their resolve. They contributed money, mobilised additional funds and got the platform constructed. The success of being able to get resources for the task demanded has led the SHGs to ensure that some of their members do attend and participate in the gram sabha meetings.
The SHG in Naugaon Block, Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand has volunteered in the cleaning and clearing of paths, laying of water pipes for the regular supply of water and collecting fodder. They are also tackling social issues such as starting an anti-liquor drive. They have implemented a number of government schemes such as Gram Swarozgar Yojana, Gram Samridhi Yojana, Balika Samridhi Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana; Indira Awas Yojana, mid-day meal scheme in primary schools and Sulabh Sauchalaya.

(c) Making Claims on Rights and Entitlements
SHGs have participated in a range of issues. Their actions are in the nature of articulation of demands for service, making complaints against poor service, demanding quality of service, claiming entitlements and raising issues for development.

(ii) Placing demands for service
SHGs have used the gram sabha forum to place demands for a specific service. For instance, Heerapur village, Sehore Block in Madhya Pradesh and Kimi, Naugaon Block in Uttarakhand did not have an anganwadi centre. The women members brought up this issue in the gram sabha and demanded an anganwadi centre in their own village. The SHGs in Kimi, Naugaon Block, Uttarakhand have also placed demands like the setting up of a dispensary and the laying out of more water pipes in order to enhance the productivity and well being of the village.

(ii) Making complaint about poor service
Naya Prakash group, Bijora, Sehore Block in Madhya Pradesh came to know from the school teachers that the school was not providing a mid-day-meal to the children. As the mid-day meal was the panchayats' programme, they made a complaint to the Jan Shikshak Prabhari at Sehore. The sarpanch and the panchayat secretary were compelled to start the mid-day meal programme in the school. Members of Lakshmi group, Sehore Block in Madhya Pradesh had complained about the non-functioning of the hand pump in their village. This complaint was recorded in the gram sabha and a resolution was passed to get the pump repaired. The hand pump was subsequently repaired within three days of the complaint being made.
(iii) Demanding quality service
The SHGs in Madhya Pradesh realised that the parents were withdrawing their children from the government school and enrolling them in the newly opened private school because of a teacher's poor performance in the school. They raised this issue in the gram sabha and demanded that the current teacher be replaced with a better teacher and ensured that there was overall improvement in the school functioning so that the students were not withdrawn and placed in private schools.

(iv) Claiming entitlements
SHGs from Sehore Block, Madhya Pradesh have raised issues of widow pension and employment under government schemes. In one of the meetings of the gram sabha women members from the group raised the issue of getting employment under the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana. The sarpanch agreeing with the group took up this issue at the district level with the concerned officials. The women from the groups were able to get employment in road construction.

(v) Raising issues for development
The SHGs from Naugaon have helped in getting a school sanctioned for the village. They have taken up with the panchayat, important issues such as land rights and forest rights. Currently high on their agenda is the issue of women's health. There is no hospital nearby. Nearly 50 per cent of SHGs in Ghazipur and Faizabad districts in Uttar Pradesh have raised social, environmental, health and economic rights related issues in the gram sabha and gram panchayat meetings such as old age pension, drainage system, hand pumps and ponds to solve the water problem, health, income generation and villagers rights to information, knowledge and awareness in panchayats.

SHGs from Ghazipur and Faizabad districts interfaced with the various governmental officers/representatives for discussing and finding a solution to the problems at the local level. They discussed various issues and problems of health such as Pulse Polio, schemes as SGSY (Swarnajayanti Grameen Swarozgar Yojana) and various socio-economic issues like marriages, housing, and women and child development programmes. They interfaced for stepping up initiatives like action for road construction, helping to select the right beneficiary, monetary help to poor families to marry their daughters and public monitoring of the social development projects at the village level.
(d) Interfacing with Representatives of Political Institutions

(i) Putting pressure on the sarpanch

The panchayat was laying down a pipeline so that water could be made available at different points in the village under a particular scheme. One colony had been completely overlooked, even though the pipeline was passing through this area. The women of the Gyan Ganga group, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh questioned the sarpanch and informed him that the panchayat would not be able to draw water if tap connections were not provided to the houses in their colony. The sarpanch had to bow down to the demands of the group members.

The women of Nai Roshni raised their voices against the sarpanch’s absence from gram sabha meetings. When their group facilitator informed them of the provisions of the Act related to the recall of the sarpanch, the women members spread the message in the village that they would use the recall provision against the sarpanch. The Sarpanch was under pressure and now attends the gram sabha meetings regularly.

In many villages the gram sabha meetings often take place despite the lack of quorum. The members from the groups would return from the meeting as it was deemed cancelled, but the sarpanch would conduct meetings after the women members had left. He would then send them the register to sign to record their presence in the meeting. The members refused to sign the register as holding a meeting without the required quorum was illegal and the meeting was held without their participation. This created pressure on the sarpanch and he had to mobilise the required number of persons in the village so that the quorum was ensured.

(ii) Developing linkage with the sarpanch

Over a period of time a healthy relationship has developed between the sarpanch and the group members. Three factors seem to have contributed towards the development of this relationship, viz., the role of the intervening agency, the aspiration level of the sarpanch and the high motivational level of the women members. The Pradhan of Kotyal Panchayat, Naugaon Block in Uttarakhand in conjunction with the her SHGs interacted with the Block Development Council demanding the setting up of a dispensary with a full-fledged woman doctor specialising in general and reproductive
health care, an immunisation drive for women and children and the setting up of a proper and adequately staffed anganwadi.

The panchayats in Naugaon Block are also involving the SHGs in a number of initiatives such as, entrusting the SHG with "Rakeet Bandhaan" in which a person would be hired to guard the crops and decisions on the payment terms (cash or kind) to be made and the construction of a kitchen for the Shiksha Samiti of a school.

The sarpanch of Khamlia, Sehore Block, Madhya Pradesh regularly supports the SHGs in all their endeavours. The meeting of the gram sabha is always timed as per the convenience of women (around 11 am) and he does not start the meeting until all the women have arrived. For him the SHGs in the village are an important vote bank as they represent 40 different families in the village. The sarpanch has found the participation of women useful. He had attended Samarthan's programme on the training of elected representatives of the PRI's where he along with other elected representatives was sensitised on the possibilities of the SHG as a mechanism to facilitate the empowerment of rural women.

Interviews with pradhans in Uttar Pradesh have revealed that the participation of SHG members in gram panchayats has ushered some positive changes. Employment opportunities have increased. Migration has been reduced. Women members are economically empowered. They are able to raise their voices against inhibiting social practices like the veil system. They have knowledge about government schemes. Their decision-making capacity has increased. Village pradhans want the SHGs to raise the issues of allotment of 'Patta' (title deed), ration cards and hand pumps pro-actively in open meetings of the gram sabha. They look forward to the cooperation of SHGs in local resource development and other developmental works of the gram panchayat. They opined that SHGs were important for panchayat development, as the work done by these groups and the panchayats was similar.

(iii) Developing linkage with other government officials
SHGs from Naugaon Block, Uttaranchal make it a point to interact directly with the block officials at the Nyaya Panchayat. They knew that the Nyaya Panchayat could be a powerful forum where the women could redress their grievances.
The SHG members from Ghazipur and Faizabad districts discuss the various issues of their village with the government officials. They have meetings with the Gram Vikas Adhikari and the secretary to the gram panchayat pradhan to serve the interests of the women and their community in a constructive manner.

(iv) Inter-locking of inter-institutional membership
Some members of the SHGs in the Sehore Block of Madhya Pradesh are also members of the standing committee of the gram sabha such as Shiksha Samiti and Swasthya Samiti. According to the Panchayat Secretary, the women members from the group insisted on knowing as to why the meetings of the standing committees were not taking place. Parvati Bai from Lakshmi group is the President of the Standing Committee on Education (Shiksha Samiti) of the gram sabha. In one of the meetings of the committee she complained that the school did not have a proper roof. Other members in the committee did not pay heed to her complaint. She reported this to the group in its routine meeting. The members took up the matter in one of the gram sabha meetings.

Gita Bai a member of the Asha group, Sehore Block in Madhya Pradesh is also the panch of the gram panchayat. She attends the meetings regularly. She signs the documents or register only after she is apprised of what is written in the document. The elections to the gram panchayat are going to be held in January 2005. The members of Gyan Ganga are currently assessing the chances of one of them standing as a panch.

Members from various SHGs from Ghazipur and Faizabad districts in Uttar Pradesh are either currently elected representatives or have been elected representatives earlier. The SHG members are ready to participate in the next panchayat election.

IV. Outcomes of Political Participation

Findings of the study suggest that collectives, when empowered with information, skill and awareness were able to exercise independent agency and challenge set power relations. Women groups are emerging as strong power groups. They are influencing the agenda of governance by ensuring that the needs of poor women are given priority. Their higher levels of political and community activities may be seen as challenging
deep-seated social norms and being truly transformative. The outcomes of their political participation are visible on two planes: within the group and within the larger community.

(a) Outcomes within the group

(i) Increased self-confidence
The successful implementation of programmes following the gram sabha meetings has increased the self-confidence of the group. Their confidence is apparent in their plans for the future where they want to undertake a number of community-based activities. They are no longer shy and silent women. Now when they have a problem they interface directly with the concerned officials.

(ii) Group solidarity
All SHGs in the intervention area of the organisations under study are members of federations. Members of federations meet regularly. The learning and exchange between women's groups has enhanced the women's sense of solidarity. Meetings and sharing of experiences has made them sensitive to each other as well as the community's needs.

(iii) Securing economic benefits
SHGs have made a significant impact on the wider financial and labour market. The experience of managing collective economic enterprises such as, the weekly market and the trading federation has brought the groups closer and has infused in them a tremendous sense of confidence to take up future challenges collectively.

(iv) A mutual support group
SHGs by nature and mandate aim to usher in people centric development and empower the disempowered. All SHGs in the study are essentially women collectives whose members are alienated from public space. The members of SHGs are poor. They hold the least political power. As a majority of its members are drawn from marginalised communities such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes, they do not have a social standing. The group provides the space for poor and lower caste women to interact and organise themselves, build their capacities to manage money, address social issues and highlight concerns of the poor communities in local planning and development processes. As collectives women are not powerless and
vulnerable. They are negotiating rights, claiming entitlements and interfacing with concerned authorities to influence governance.

(b) Outcomes within the larger community

(i) Pressure groups
The groups in the study have aptly demonstrated their ability to work as a pressure group in the village. They have not only picked up issues that would have only benefited the group (e.g. construction of the platform), but also issues that benefited the community as a whole (e.g. repair of hand pump, construction of cement concrete road). These groups have been able to generate these successes through sheer perseverance and regular follow up with panchayat representatives.

The SHGs negotiate confidently with the sarpanch, government officials, banks and outsiders. They are intervening in gram panchayats to safeguard citizens' rights and interests. They have raised issues in gram sabha meetings related to the basic needs of the community such as access to drinking water, the construction of a road, houses for the poor, old age pensions, cleaning of hospitals and a ban on liquor. SHGs do not rule out the possibility of contesting elections to participate directly in local self-governance as members of gram panchayats. In addition they are building up a consensus within themselves to become members in as many standing committees of gram panchayats as possible to give leverage to development plans in different aspects of village life.

(ii) De facto leadership roles
The SHGs are influencing women, other than group members, in the village. They have succeeded in mobilising the village women to attend gram sabha meetings. The women interact with them and share their views and opinions with them in the hope that group members being more articulate would be able to speak on their behalf in the meetings. SHGs have demanded social and political action on issues relating to the rights of women. They have assumed a de facto leadership role for the women in the village.

(iii) Awareness generation
They have become a strong force mobilising the women in the village by disseminating information on a variety of topics as the gram sabha, health, nutrition, sanitation,
education and various schemes of government departments such as the installation of hand pumps, mid-day meal programme, to secure benefits for themselves and the community.

(iv) Proactive citizenship
SHGs take pro-active roles in decisions relating to the welfare of the village. Their regular and strong presence at the panchayat and gram sabha meetings ensures that village issues are resolved. They have voluntarily participated in many community activities such as plantation of trees, the Pulse Polio campaign, the cleaning of the panchayat house, repairing the damaged and broken roads and implementation of a number of government schemes.

(v) Building social capital
There is a distinct change in the attitudes of villagers towards the activities and meetings of SHGs. The opinions of SHGs are considered significant in village meetings. This has led to the building of social capital in the village. The active participation of women groups and the work undertaken by them has helped in leveraging funds for village development.

(vi) Social inclusion
The past developmental experience has shown that communities are unable to break their cycle of poverty, as they remain socially excluded, especially from the decision-making processes. Women in rural areas had always formed a large part of this socially excluded group. The SHG has enabled the women to bridge this gap and come in contact with institutions of governance, namely the gram sabha and the gram panchayat. In some cases they have also been nominated to these institutions. As women are making a space for themselves in the institutions where decisions are taken, they have also become recipients of information (e.g. process of BPL survey) and have increased access to resources (e.g. leveraging panchayat funds for the construction of a road and a boundary wall for the school building).

V. Potentials of SHGs as Change Agents: Emerging Ways

By nature and mandate both PRIs and SHGs have the same objectives – (a) ushering
people centred development and (b) empower the disempowered. Experiences of the post-73rd Amendment phase indicate that women's participation in PRIs has remained rhetoric. The opportunities for women's participation in deliberative as well as decision-making processes of the gram panchayat have been minimal. Their participation is not significant enough to make the institutions responsive to their needs and priorities. The study findings clearly indicate that SHGs are providing a support base to women from marginalised communities by their community level activism. By amplifying their voice in gram sabha meetings and with firm interfacing with other institutions like government departments, cooperatives, financial institutions and PRIs, the SHGs have created opportunities for poor women to access rights and entitlements such as the provisioning for social services and access to and control of resources, which support their livelihood. This has largely been due to their training for a role in the panchayats and gram sabha.

Though the experiences of the SHGs' collective action in the study are by no means sufficient to draw any definite conclusion; yet, their success stories have generated insights on the ways they can enhance political participation by women in the panchayats. Following are the ways they can enhance women's participation in PRIs.

(a) Ensuring Accountability of the Gram Panchayat

SHGs as active, articulate and organised citizenry have acted on a range of issues holding the panchayats responsible for their performance in terms of use, production and distribution of public resources for the common public good. Their actions can be classified as those involving interface with the administrative machinery and those involving self-help. Amongst those involving interface with the administrative machinery, some actions are in the nature of articulation of demands, others are actions for implementing existing project provisions. Self-help actions include collective problem solving efforts that are within the reach of citizens. SHGs have taken pro-active roles in decisions relating to the welfare of the village. Their regular and strong presence at gram sabha meetings ensure that village issues are resolved. They are making gram panchayats accountable to the gram sabha. Self-help actions by SHGs have been many. We have seen instances of SHGs where women being aware of their rights and responsibilities have organised themselves to do constructive community activities through their own efforts.
(b) Mobilising the Gram Sabha
SHGs as pressure groups are representing those people whose interests had not been articulated before. Women from disadvantaged communities in particular, get the opportunity to exercise control over the decision-making process and ultimately take responsibility for things, which affect their lives. SHGs by mediating and negotiating have helped to build sensitivity of the gram panchayat to local problems, needs and interests. Their active participation in the gram sabha and regular interfacing with the sarpanch and government officials have ensured development of local specific plans, optimal use of existing resources and generation of additional resources, equitable and just distribution of resources and increase in people’s self esteem.

(c) Support to Elected Representatives
Getting women to govern implies that they have the skills and capacities to access information, mobilise and manage resources and interact with multiple actors. For effective participation they need to be backed by the strength and support of SHGs. Experience of the previous two rounds of the panchayat election clearly show that women who have been leaders of SHGs or were supported by SHGs in contesting the local elections were full of confidence that they would work for the betterment of the village. The study findings show that SHGs do not rule out the possibility of their members contesting elections to participate directly in local self-governance as members of the gram panchayat to leverage development plans in different aspects of village life.

(d) Creating Social Reciprocities
Social reciprocities influence the effective functioning of local governance. The study findings indicate that the pro-active engagement of SHGs enabled rapid development within their community. They have addressed a wide range of women’s practical needs by taking on community leadership roles. They have forced panchayats to respond to the issues of concern for women such as drinking water, health care, construction of road, houses for the poor, old age pensions and a ban on liquor etc. When SHGs organised themselves to intervene in village panchayats to safeguard women’s rights and interests by raising issues in gram sabha meetings, they could successfully pressurise gram panchayats into meeting the concerns of the community. By doing this they
have reframed the village priorities. The relevance of social reciprocities in creating good governance is amply evident from this conclusion.

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CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVE IN BIHAR: Raising the Bar
Vishwamohan Prasad

ABSTRACT Civil society initiative in itself has become a much talked about phrase in the social development fraternity. A state like Bihar with all the features that prove it to be a backward state visualises "civil society initiatives" as the ultimate alternative to bring about a positive change in the overall socio-economic condition of society. Recently Bihar has witnessed a few examples where civil society initiatives have succeeded in energising and supporting the existing governance mechanism in playing their role in a more effective manner with the help of local civil society groups. An attempt is being made here to analyse the effectiveness of diverse civil society formations in improving governance in different spheres of life by highlighting some recent cases. The initiatives have been characterised by self-motivation, spontaneity and inclusive citizen actions. In addition, political willingness, patronage and healthy competition among the actors for gaining recognition and appreciation for their efforts made these initiatives remarkable.

1. Background

"Civil society initiative" in itself has become a much talked about phrase in the social development fraternity. A state like Bihar with all the features that prove it to be a backward state visualises "civil society initiatives" as the ultimate alternative to bring about a positive change in the overall socio-economic condition of society. Only these initiatives can influence the governance structure and functions to achieve the desired changes.

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In the backdrop of the state being considered as the main player in social development, particularly in a democratic set-up in a country like India, the ineffectiveness and failure of the governance structure gives rise to serious discontent among the citizens/community. In the light of such conditions it has become a common phenomenon that citizen groups come forward with their own initiatives to complement the state’s role for common public good. Recently Bihar has witnessed a few examples where civil society initiatives have succeeded in energising and supporting the existing governance mechanism in playing their role in a more effective manner with the help of local civil society groups. An attempt is being made here to analyse the effectiveness of diverse civil society formations in improving governance in different spheres of life by highlighting some recent cases. These cases are notable for their creative approach, bold and timely action in a collective manner.

2. Exemplars of Civil Society Initiatives

A. Management and maintenance of public utility system in Katihar
Katihar town is a neo-urban area with influences drawn from adjacent states like Assam and West Bengal. Katihar is well known as an important commercial centre due to the jute industry. The divisional headquarter of North Eastern Railways is situated here, and a mixed population belonging to the Hindu and Muslim communities is a feature of its demographic composition. There are a large number of small and medium market players involved in different trades and occupations. One of the key distinguishing features of the town in particular and the district in general is the presence of a large number of civil society organisations (CSOs) differing from each other in terms of perspectives, approaches, affiliations and circumstances of origin. The range of CSOs includes organisations based on caste affiliations, professional associations, youth clubs and NGOs, involved in various social welfare activities.

Problem
The town has long been facing an acute lack of civic amenities due to the lack of basic infrastructure and even poorer maintenance of whatever little exists, a crumbling delivery mechanism, lack of resources and above all the government authorities’ indifferent attitude towards these problems. On the other hand the community has been baffled about their role in solving these problems. The different stakeholders had been aware
of the complex situation in the town for a long time, but due to a lack of local initiatives there was no improvement in the situation. These are some of the complexities of an urban area, arising out of the state’s interference in the local bodies’ affairs as manifested in hasty super cession, dissolution or use of such mechanisms by which the state could exercise undue control over these elected local bodies. In the pre-74th Constitutional Amendment Act period, these trends were rampant all over India.

Initiative
An impasse of the kind described above cannot and should not be allowed to continue for a long period of time. At this juncture, a group of citizens took the initiative to take this opportunity to bring about a positive change in the existing situation. The most vital questions they had to address were:

- Where to start?
- How to mobilise other stakeholders?
- How to meet the additional resource requirements?
- What should the mechanism be?

With all these major challenges ahead, enthusiastic groups like Lions Club, Young Friends Association and other CSOs started to think in a collective manner. Of course, they also had the support and guidance of some committed local political leadership. After several rounds of discussions and brainstorming, they identified the local government hospital as the starting point of their intervention. They persuaded the government officials to provide support by formalising a new arrangement for civil society partnership in the maintenance and upkeep of the government-run facility. The nomenclature for this initiative was coined as “God lena” (adoption/fostering). With the basic construct of rules, regulations and norms 18 wards of the hospital were adopted by different CSOs, which were to be maintained and managed by them. A committee comprising multi-stakeholder representatives was there to keep a watch on the developments and progress of the process. Local contributions, MP and MLALAD funds and resources from other external sources were raised to meet the requirements.

Outcome
The overwhelming response of the local citizen groups ensured that within a short
duration, different groups adopted 18 wards of the hospital. The services of the hospital were improved in terms of cleanliness, the availability of personnel, the maintenance of records and upgraded facilities. The government hospital now could be compared with any private nursing home (claiming to be a better service provider). The impact was quite visible with the number of patients increasing and appreciation from all constituents of society. The example of hospital adoption became a model of replication and other public utility structures like parks, community halls and public wells and ponds were adopted on the same pattern. Katihar town has shown an alternative path for a citizen centric development method.

B. Citizen Initiative on Sanitation Campaign in Madhubani
Madhubani town is the heartland of the Mithila region of Bihar. Madhubani is a medium sized town with a population of around 70,000. The total area of the town is spread over 3.5 sq. kilometres across 18 urban wards. The annual recurrence of floods, a large number of ponds and numerous other water storage structures are distinct features of the district. This district is well known for its traditional paintings, cultivation of Makhana and a predominance of agrarian occupational pattern. The socio-economic development indicators are not very different from the state average, depicting backwardness.

Problem
Sanitation conditions within the town area were one of the major concerns of the inhabitants. A faulty and inadequate drainage system aggravates the problem of overflowing drains. In addition, the perennial shortage of municipal staff and frequent strikes by the staff adds to the misery of the citizens. The Municipal Council has been unable to deal with the problem due to the lack of political will. On the other hand the local community demonstrated utter apathy before a system that was unwilling to deliver its promises. It was, a piquant situation where the citizens were discontent, the elected representatives were struggling to find a solution and the appointed officials were taking shelter behind a maze of rules and regulations.

Initiative
Intervention in the urban area by PRIA, DRC (District Resource Centre) in Madhubani town was the first step towards mobilising the local community and stakeholders for collective thinking and action. The DRC performed the catalytic role
of mobilising the community around local development issues. The main area of concern that emerged during the preliminary round of discussions with the community leaders, elected representatives and citizens of the urban area was the problem of sanitation. Due to the lack of initiatives the problem of poor sanitation remained in limbo. To start with a citizen centric campaign, ward level committees (Mohalla Samiti) were formed to mobilise the citizens through a mass awareness campaign. Citizens along with the representatives of urban local bodies took the lead in cleaning their wards. Rules and regulations were formed regarding the maintenance of dustbins, decongestion of the drainage system was undertaken, a system for the disposal of garbage was generated and contributions were collected from the residents to pay the sweepers. Apart from that, residents of the ward themselves devoted their time as Shram Daan to clean their locality.

Outcome
The problem that was once considered the sole domain of the municipal body was taken up through the self-initiative of citizen groups. The dependency on the municipality and their staff was minimised. The impact of this campaign was so great that the local municipal body came forward with the idea of a sanitation campaign in the entire town, under the joint collaboration of citizen collectives and the municipality. The same model of citizen centric campaign is being replicated in other wards of the town.

C. Citizen Initiatives in Natural Disaster: An Example from Muzaffarpur
Muzaffarpur claims to be one of the major business centres of the state. The district is also famous for its litchi production and textile market. The district is predominantly inhabited by the agrarian community in rural areas, but the urban areas are equally vibrant in terms of political activity, its proximity to the state capital and a plethora of CSOs. Floods are a common feature of the district recurrently affecting the low-lying part of the district. Yet, in many ways Muzaffarpur is like any other typical part of the state besieged as it is by poor infrastructure, lack of civic amenities and the ineffectiveness of the local government functionaries.

Problem
The year 2004 witnessed one of the most severe floods in the state. Muzaffarpur district was also one of the most severely affected districts where 11 blocks out of 16
were inundated and almost 60% of the population of the urban and rural areas was by
affected by this disaster. The suddenness of the floods and the lack of preparedness on
the part of the government and the local community resulted in the manifestation of
many serious problems. Thousands of people were forced to live on highways,
embankments and other makeshift shelters. There was an acute shortage of the
immediate requirements of relief in terms of food, clothes and health facilities. On the
other hand the local administration was inhibited in its ability to extend support to
victims situated in remote areas and in very large numbers. The communication system
was disrupted and people were cut-off from other parts of the state. Since there was
extensive damage to houses, cattle, crops, food grains and fodder, a large number of
people eagerly looked forward to external humanitarian assistance.

Initiative
Muzaffarpur district is an intensive intervention site for various development agencies,
but in the wake of recent floods the response in the initial stages was not very satisfactory.
A District Resource Centre (DRC) at Muzaffarpur run by CENCORED was aware
of the day-to-day developments of government relief measures; but the slow progress
in this regard compelled the local CSOs and media representatives to take the initiative
to ensure more efficient relief operations. During a meeting with a DRC led delegation,
the Tirhut Commissioner solicited the support of local citizen groups in this regard.
A meeting convened by the local administration and facilitated by DRC received a
very enthusiastic response from CSOs/CBOs, institutions and other associations. It
was decided that the CSOs would facilitate the relief operations being run by the
local administration. Apart from that the citizen groups and small community based
organisations like SHGs (Self Help Groups), Youth clubs, Mohalla Samities etc. also
contributed whole-heartedly for this genuine cause.

Outcome
The overall outcome of this initiative was more efficient and effective relief operations
by the government and other agencies involved in the district. Local volunteers could
distribute the relief materials even in the remotest of the villages. Health camps with
the help of local medical professionals were organised and a mass awareness campaign
was undertaken to make the community aware of the preventive and curative measures
to be taken to avoid water borne diseases and post flood epidemics. This response by
the local CSOs was an example of the citizens’ spontaneity and within a short time period volunteers covered all the 11 blocks for relief works. Local associations and residents of the district contributed relief material worth Rs. 52 lakhs. The long-term benefit of this initiative was the formation of a local forum of 124 CSOs, which is determined to take up the issue of floods for preparedness and advocacy.

3. Key features of initiatives

Though the initiatives at the three different places varied in their approach, issue and role of stakeholders, there are some features, which are common in all. The common features of the initiatives make the credibility of civil society as an universal phenomenon in all the social construct. On the other hand stakeholders across the sectors of society make such initiatives a success. The key common features can be summarised as

a. **Self-motivated and spontaneous:** The initiatives were not project or scheme driven rather were an outcome of the community’s and leaders’ self-realisation of wanting to make a difference in the existing system and situation. Being an endeavour beyond the limitations of any project or structured programme brings about a sense of ownership among all those involved in the initiative. On the other hand similar initiatives under the banner of any department or NGO are considered the sole responsibility of the concerned agency, where the community plays the role of beneficiary, without obtaining a deep-rooted belongingness.

b. **Culture of inclusion:** The entire approach was extremely inclusive in nature so as to include all the possible stakeholders across the line of political affinity, class based demarcation or government or non-government identity. The collectivisation of efforts resulted in the convergence of expertise and resources for a common goal.

c. **Political willingness and patronage:** It was observed in all the above-mentioned cases that the political leadership, whatever the level or tier was quite enthusiastic in their response. They also used these initiatives as an opportunity to create a base for themselves across the party line or caste based public support. The involvement of political leaders was helpful in influencing the local administration and in resource mobilisation.
d. Healthy competition among the actors for gaining recognition and appreciation for their efforts: it was a common feature in all the three instances that different actors involved in the task had generated a feeling of competition to perform their best. The incentive for them was appreciation from the existing government and society. As a result the whole-hearted efforts ensured the best outcomes of these collective efforts.

4. Conclusion

The cases discussed and analysed above are important pointers to the fact that in an economically backward Bihar, where a system of accountable, transparent and responsive governance is as much needed as in any other state, the voice and actions of civil society holds true promise. Bihar has been a subject of much debate lately because of a crumbling edifice of 'once-upon-a-time' robust institutions. To many academics, thinkers and social scientists, citizen action perhaps is the only answer. Such actions by citizens and their collectives could result in improved governance. Though the cases discussed here mainly pertain to urban Bihar they go a long way in raising hopes that the result would not be different for rural Bihar.

The cases clearly delineate the fact that good practices are indeed replicable. These cases also suggest that an individual’s or group’s catalytic role in mobilising larger public participation is the starting point of any such action. There is not even an iota of doubt that the sustainability of a citizen-centric and citizen-led initiative would be assured if its support base were large enough. One fact about citizen initiatives is arguably true that large or small, sporadic or sustained, every initiative contributes in some measure to reforming governance.
Civil Society Initiatives for Strengthening Local Self Governance: Key Issues and Strategies

Vaishali Lonkar, Shrinivas Rao and Rashmi Panigrahi

ABSTRACT The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts has provided ample space to the representation of women, dalits, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs) and the marginalised sections of the society in local self-governance. It has provided a benchmark in democratic decentralisation by the devolution of powers to the local level of governance entity viz., panchayats and municipalities. The meaning of local self-governance can be perceived as the involvement of the local people in planning, implementation and monitoring the local development. The paper draws upon the experience of building a civil society platform in the state of Chhattisgarh. Civil society organisations played an important role to educate the citizens on the electoral processes and importance of local self-governance institutions. It highlights the challenges of civil society building and citizenship education.

1. Introduction

Democracy is considered to be the best available form of governance. Democracy is seen in two ways, one that – it is the best of the government and the other that citizens are supreme (power in the hands of the people). The very first line of the Preamble of the Constitution of India starts with WE THE PEOPLE, which articulate that the citizens of this nation, who have the opportunity and right to choose their representatives, are entitled to demand accountability and settle on the direction of growth and development of the country. Democracy does not finish when elections are over. Elected representatives are still under public scrutiny by being accountable to the people and by keeping people well versed with the decisions taken on their behalf.

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Local governments (panchayats and municipalities in India) have always been considered to be representatives of local aspirations and needs to the provincial and federal governments. These governments play a significant role in the planning and welfare of the citizens living in rural and urban settlements.

The state is expected to devolve some of its powers and resources to local bodies and to shed some of its functions in the direct management of economic and social activities. The government is expected to move to a type of governance: “collective decision making in which the government acts as one stakeholder among many”.

The meaning of local self-governance can be perceived as the involvement of the local people in planning, implementation and monitoring the local development. The inception of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts has provided ample space to the representation of women, dalits, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs) and the marginalised sections of society. It has provided a benchmark in democratic decentralisation by the devolution of powers to the local level of governance entity viz., panchayats and municipalities.

II. Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Local Self Governance

To establish real democracy in the country, to achieve social justice and equality in society, there is a need for strengthening the institutions of local self-governance (LSG) – municipalities and panchayats.

The term implies involvement of the local people in the development of the local area. This refers to the involvement of the local people in planning, implementation and monitoring. As such the term LSG is not new, although it is as old as mankind. It is quite obvious that for the development of any area, the local people are the best policy makers and resource providers. Nobody else can represent them in articulating and addressing the local issues/problems with its correct solution. The term also refers to the decentralisation of powers and resources for holistic development. Power in the hands of the people at the grassroots will ensure justice and development in the true sense.
To enhance this concept of strengthening local self-governance institutions, the Indian Constitution has provided the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts with the aim that these institutions should not merely be treated as implementing channels for the developmental schemes and programmes. It also ensures the participation of the marginalised sections of the society viz. women, dalits, SCs, STs and other backward castes (OBC) to have their say in the process of decision-making. The development of any area will not be possible until and unless the voiceless are encouraged to participate actively and contribute to society and be benefited as well.

If we look back into history, the government in the 1960's launched the community development programme without involving the community. The programme failed because whatever was planned was not within the framework of people's needs. The felt needs of the local people were different and were not addressed anywhere in the plan. People will not be concerned about their area development when they and their views are not considered. Development has a definite connotation that it should be always bottom-top but not vice-versa.

The other thrust area is of participation, which is responsive and inclusive, so that citizens can participate in the public sphere and make their own contribution towards the common good.

Responsive and inclusive governance means being heard and consulted on a regular and continuing basis, not merely at election time. It means more than a vote; it means involvement in decision and policy-making by public agencies and officials. Responsive and inclusive governance involves the eradication of corruption, favouritism, nepotism, apathy, neglect, red tapism and self-serving political leaders and public officials. It means a democracy that works for all.

Arnstein (1969), argues that the essence of authentic participation is power sharing. The World Bank, for example, considers 'participation' as a means of making its development projects function better, of helping people to cope with the economic consequences of adjustment policies and of countering the threat to governability posed by the rising exclusion of people policies.
A good society therefore, depends upon a blend of economic, social, and political factors. If people's basic needs were not met, they tended to see a good society in terms of the fulfilment of basic needs. If their needs were met, they tended to look further 'up' the hierarchy of needs. An important conclusion is that a good society is not just a matter of money. Material factors are necessary, but do not constitute a sufficient condition of a good society.

Civil society is given a paramount role. This term includes: NGOs, women's organisations, cooperatives, self-help groups and other types of civil society organisations, both secular and religious. These actors are expected to play a greater role in the development process in many parts of the world. It can also be understood by thinking that a civil society is about association, both formal and informal, with others – to do things which need to be done and which are not, or cannot be, done by the state or by the market.

One key problem limiting the understanding of civil society is that it is largely invisible. Self-organising in groups, clans, tribes or castes has been the driving force of culture, regulating relations between people and providing them with a sense of identity long before the rise of the nation-state demanded that people identify with a particular country.

It is clear that the term civil society is a highly ambiguous social construct that can be used in a variety of ways. The most common uses are as follows:

- Anything that is not government;
- The sphere of interaction between the state and the market;
- NGOs: variously called voluntary organisations, charities, non-profits, third-sector organisations and civil society organisations;
- Community organisations: variously called civil society organisations, citizens’ organisations, people’s organisations, village associations, networks of kith and kin, women's groups and clans;
- Social movements: coalition or broad based organisations that form a bulwark against global capitalism and press forward issues relating to consumers, women, land, race and the environment;
- Citizen action: what citizens do to improve their living and working conditions;
- The press and media, the freedom of which is a vital part of civil society;
Even the definition of civil society depicts that it is more than a metaphor; it is individual and collective action, sometimes through NGO’s and sometimes not, in pursuit of the common public good.

The role of civil society in the local body elections can be seen as:
1. Platform creator;
2. Awareness generator;
3. Resource provider;
4. Networking;
5. Advocacy;
6. Capacity building

Civil societies play a very crucial role in the rural and the urban area elections by strengthening the local self-governance institutions by people’s empowerment.

*The status of ULBs and PRI’s in Chhattisgarh*

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<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>998</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bilaspur</td>
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<td>250</td>
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<td>Korba</td>
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<td>354</td>
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<td>Janjir Champa</td>
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<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raigarth</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>710</td>
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<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>146</strong></td>
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III. Local Body Elections and Role of Civil Societies in Chhattisgarh

Campaign Strategies and Activities for PEVAC in Chhattisgarh

India being the largest democracy in the world, goes for elections every five years at all the levels of governance - it could be the Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and the local body elections - Panchayat and the municipalities.

The state of Chhattisgarh that was previously in Madhya Pradesh is going for local body elections, for the first time, after its conception as the 26th Independent state (in the order) of India on 1st November 2000.

As a matter of fact, the government conducts elections and makes the arrangements only a month before that, with the hope that the elections should be free and fair.

The provisions in the Constitutional Amendments have some far reaching implications with respect to democratic governance and local development. By providing one-third reservation for women and a proportionate reservation for other socially excluded and deprived sections (tribals, dalits etc), the constitutional framework for local governance mechanisms in India has enormous potential for affirmative action. One of the most important roles for these local governance institutions is to plan for local development and ensure social justice in a vast country like India; this democratic decentralisation has enormous challenge. In rural areas, nearly a-quarter million local bodies exist. Nearly three million elected representatives are there in these local bodies, of which nearly one million are women.

The elections for the local bodies (panchayats and municipalities) in Chhattisgarh were scheduled between December 2004-January 2005. PRIA along with its partners developed the Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign - PEVAC intervention at the grassroots level. Civil society organisations (CSOs) across the state intervened in a proactive manner to create a favourable consciousness level among the voters. This is found to strengthen democratic institutions and lead to increased and active participation of the people in governance, both rural and urban. The activities undertaken and the steps and methodologies which are proposed for the campaign are given below.
Coverage
The Pre Election Voter’s Awareness Campaign has been conducted intensively and extensively covering 40 urban local bodies. The four intensive sites are Rajnandgaon, Dongargaon, Adbhar and Ambikapur. The extensive PEVAC is being conducted in ten districts covering 36 municipalities.

PEVAC Strategy

Preparatory plan
Before the start of the campaign, time and effort had gone into planning and preparation for the large-scale intervention on awareness generation for local bodies elections. The state was divided in to five clusters on the basis of geographical proximity. These clusters are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL No.</th>
<th>Municipalities</th>
<th>Districts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Raipur</td>
<td>Raipur, Mahasamund, Dhamtari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rajnandgaon</td>
<td>Durg, Kavardha, Rajnandgaon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sarguja</td>
<td>Sarguja, Jashpur, Koriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Raigarh</td>
<td>Raigarh, Janggar Champa, Korba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bastar</td>
<td>Kanker, Bastar, Dantewara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The perspective building and capacity building efforts in PEVAC were mainly in the form of organising workshops, meetings and trainings for the voluntary development organisations involved in the process. These included the following:

- Cluster level workshop with CSOs for voters awareness campaign – June to August, 2004
- State workshop on the role of the voluntary sector and other stakeholders such as media, academia, SEC in the local body elections – 10th and 11th August 2004.
- Meeting at the district level with partners and networks for coverage data updating and PEVAC strategy formulation – September - October 2004.
- Media workshop with the state and district media for engaging media in voter’s awareness.
Preparation and publication of materials for pre-election awareness campaign

Pre and Post Nomination Phase: Awareness generation campaign

Information Resource Centres
The campaign on filing of nominations started with the setting up of Information Centres in some centres for the dissemination of printed material. The material disseminated provided information on the filing of nominations to those probable candidates coming from the marginalised sections of society, as well as, assisting them in completing the nomination forms.

Communications Tools
The popular communication methods used for candidates and voters' awareness were - rally, cycle rally, wall writing, nukkad natak, puppet shows, banners depicting the four different colours of the ballot papers etc. A lot of innovative methods of mass communication were developed by the NGOs in various parts of the state, which will be used for effective campaigning.

Activities in the pre-nomination phase:
The focus of the campaign during this phase has been on the candidates, especially women and dalit candidates.

The information centres will be established in intensive districts that would be run by PRIA or by partner NGO's. The educational material will be distributed to the candidates and voters through these information centres.

These Information Centres are expected to play a very active role in the pre-nomination phase, when the major focus is on the candidates - informing them about the election rules, ballot papers, nomination forms - filling up the forms correctly and filing nominations.

Information dissemination through Information Centres
In order to provide information to the voters and the candidates, especially in the pre-nomination phase, the main strategy was to set up information centres in the partner
CSO office from where the information could be disseminated. There is an Information Centre at the state level in the PRIA State Resource Centre office.

The role of the State Level Information Resource Centre is as given below.

- To co-ordinate the activities at the cluster level through the steering committee and to create a platform for representatives to come together and share experiences.
- Organisation of training programmes related to pre-election awareness campaign, communication strategies, process documentation.
- Preparation and printing of educational material to be disseminated through the Information Centres. Liaison with government functionaries and the local media. Other than this the State Resource Centre would seek guidance from the advisory committee on various issues. It would collect information and disseminate it.

Communication tools for the campaign
Cultural shows at regular intervals in the villages, including street plays, puppet shows, and songs

- Mobile information centres
- Cycle rally
- Wall writing
- Posters and pamphlets
- Door to door campaign and meeting with target groups
- Know your representative (community-candidate interface) in the selected towns. Awareness generation will be centred on the following issues.
- Technicalities of contesting the elections from the nomination phase till result declaration
- Importance of choosing just and able members for urban local bodies, gram panchayat, janpad panchayat and zilla parishad
- The need for dalits and women to come forward and participate as candidates.
Post-nomination phase
In the post-nomination phase, the focus is on the voters with the objective of the maximum participation of voters in the electoral process.

The educational materials thus focus on the following aspects: election procedures for the elections in the gram panchayat, four votes for four posts, different colours of ballot papers, the information about ULB election procedures, electing just and able candidates, voting without fear, discouraging corrupt practices in elections, criteria for ideal candidate etc.

Materials to be prepared and disseminated for the campaign
Posters on
- Voters List Updating
- Hum kisko chune?
- Mahilayon ka adhikar avem Bhagidari.

Posters on other issues suggested by the steering committee would be published.
Pamphlets and handouts on various issues including voters list updation.

IV. Challenges in Citizen Engagements

i. Groupism
ii. Political pressure
iii. Bureaucratic inertia
iv. Corruption – corrupt officials, elected representatives and bureaucracy
v. Financial constraints
vi. Fewer NGO's working on the issue of governance
vii. Indifferent attitude of the government and the community
viii. Patriarchal society
ix. Greed for money, power and position
x. Inaccessible reach – government’s pessimistic attitude
xi. Increased scepticism among the citizens towards functioning of LSG
xii. Lack of transparency, accountability among elected representatives, awareness and indifferent attitude on accepting duties, rights, and responsibilities of the citizens
xiii. Availability of enabling environment for the selection of suitable leaders
xiv. Administrative insensitiveness towards delivering the services to the public
xv. Poverty
xvi. Illiteracy
xvii. Gender discrimination

V. Conclusion

Under the banner of civil society organisations, the NGO’s working for development through different programmes can not work efficiently until and unless the local bodies like municipalities and the panchayats are strengthened, which means participation of the marginalised and the unheard.

When we talk of development as such at the micro level (panchayat level), we focus on strengthening the basic unit of governance at the village level that is the gram sabha. The gram sabha is a common platform for the discussion of issues/problems for the community. Yet, in reality, the major challenge is the increased amount of inertia and people’s pessimistic attitude due to illiteracy and other such factors at the village level.

It is the same with the Urban Local Bodies where the mohalla sabhas are also dormant due to citizen’s inertia caused by the bureaucratic attitude and mal practices like corruption, personal biases towards town level development.

So, the major thrust area should be to encourage the right candidates be elected as people’s representatives where in women should be given top priority as representatives, as they constitute 50% of the total population in the country.

NGO’s could be sensitised on this particular issue of strengthening governance, as empowerment of the local body institutions only paves the road to development. The NGO’s could attempt to build a perspective on the role of civil society organisations in strengthening local self-governance through various workshops and meetings.
EX-SERVICEMAN AS CITIZEN LEADERS: AN ATTEMPT IN HAMIRPUR DISTRICT OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

Swati Dogra

ABSTRACT People want to influence the power structures and they want a say in their governance. They are willing to be motivated for negotiating a position for their participation in decision making in those areas in which they see a direct stake. When we as participatory researchers working on local self-governance, venture into the field and confront a critical mass, we join hands with them to seek practical results. By this we not only hope to see small changes in the political environment of these people, but also within the individuals whom we are looking at as civil society building agents. The Ex-Servicemen League in Hamirpur district of Himachal Pradesh is one such critical mass that is now engaged in mobilising local organisations and influencing government machinery just as it has discovered a space for itself in the decentralised governance structure.

Backdrop

The spirit of voluntarism has long been a part of Indian Tradition. Our society, with deep-rooted religious beliefs, constantly evoked the participation of people (through their time, efforts and money) for a greater common good. Charitable structures like schools colleges, hospitals, shelters and temples exemplify the spirit to “give back” within individuals and organisations. Even the movements fighting against injustice and inhumanity (prevalent both in our traditional structures or otherwise), which attempted rejuvenating our values through progressive alternatives, highlighted the spirit to “speak for others” and bring about positive change.

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No matter how compartmentalised our lives may be, people are drawn together, they share, they seek reaffirmation of their individual selves in each other, they congregate and they do so for a purpose. The purpose could be very banal and everyday or very structured, regular and organised.

Nevertheless, wherever people get together processes of small and big group formation start to occur. As they define their goals and purposes of existence groups get bound together. As the groups turn into organised bodies they position themselves in the socio-political set-up, particularly when they become alternate service providers or create systems that can smoothen the available politico-economic service structure. The oneness of any group calls for a common identity. And it is the leaders from within who tend to exemplify this group as well as the group’s solidarity towards a goal.

Such voluntary congregations can take the shape of CBOs, CSOs, NGOs, VDOs, and SHGs. They activate civil society by utilising the space available for the inclusion and participation restored for citizens. Civil society groups also shoulder development and welfare initiatives. They can and many do play the role of accessing the democratic set-up of our country available for active citizen engagement.

The constitution itself provides structured space for people to avail their democratic rights and perform their citizen duties beyond the voting exercise, particularly in the context of villages and small and medium towns. It is here that the aware and active citizen collectives at the grass root level can utilise themselves by pro-actively getting involved in strengthening the local self-governance.

The Identification

PRIA's Civil Society Building Program enthusiastically began in October 2002; to facilitate a network of civil society and communities based organisations as well as to strengthen citizen leadership for realising the idea of equity and justice through a people centred approach in governance.
Hamirpur, located in the lower Himalayas occupies the smallest area on the map of Himachal Pradesh, but as a district it capacitates the highest density of population in Himachal Pradesh. Being a part of Jullunder-Trigarta Empire in ancient India ruled by Bhum Chand who founded the Katoch dynasty and fought the Mahabharata War besides the Kauravas, a legacy of warriors has dominated the history of this belt.

In this backdrop of kingship, the Rajput dynasty formed a cherished part of Hamirpur’s popular warriors who upheld successive peaceful and prosperous kingdoms.

This Hindu dominant region retains its legacy of Katoch rulers by actively opting for the defence services as a way of paying back to mother earth through their strength and courage just as their ancestral kings did. Apart from a large population of youngsters joining and serving the armed forces there are many senior citizens who have returned from their duties. Due to their presence Hamirpur has the highest ex-servicemen population. The civil society building intervention could not overlook this immense strength of ex-servicemen as it took shape in October 2003. After focused interaction with them it was realised that many of these ex-servicemen were looking for ways to serve the nation. Despite being actively involved in welfare associations and charitable trusts, they felt that they had more potential than was actually being used. Therefore, to create an opportunity where their un-utilised potential could be explored, we intervened to link them to the Panchayati Raj Institutions at the Gram Panchayat level.

**Components of the Program**

- **Issues at Stake** were to capacitate ex-servicemen as citizen leaders/civil society animators conjoined with an attempt to strengthen the Ex-Servicemen League from within and address issues of social exclusion that the ex-servicemen face especially when they return from the defence services for good.

- **Objectives of the Intervention** were to explore the potential of ex-servicemen, the needs of their league, the spaces where they can create a niche for their league and utilise their abilities in strengthening local self-governance through strong civil society pressure groups.
• Inputs and attempts made for addressing these objectives included structured trainings and hands-on field support. The following were the capacity building initiatives undertaken by the District Resource Centre, Hamirpur:

• Vikas Utsavs — development fairs celebrated as launching pads in a cluster of Gram Panchayats where ex-servicemen planned to work

• Orientation and Trainings — on the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, local-self governance, citizen leadership and micro planning.

• Planning and Sharing Workshops — for issue identification, setting targets, assessing progress and brainstorming. These sessions were also useful to share the problems and constraints encountered in the field and dwelling on some strategies to tackle the same.

• On-site support — areas where micro-plans were to be initiated a hands-on support to the ex-servicemen as civil society animators were provided to facilitate their linkage with the local groups and Panchayat elected representatives.

• Linkage with other Civil Society Bodies — organisations like Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, Gyan Vigyan Samiti and NABARD initiated their rural development schemes in areas where the ex-servicemen had built strong liaisons and networks.

• Others — PRIA [as a partner organisation] participated in the various ventures undertaken by the league like rallies, press conferences and network meetings just as they extended their support in observation of Gram Sabhas, quick assessment of BPL Survey, evaluation of environment conservation projects of DRDA etc.

Insights on the process

A Strength Weakness analysis, which was initially conducted of both ex-servicemen as individuals and as a league brought out the following:

• Honesty, integrity, determination, efficiency, commitment to targets and tasks, were their individual strengths, while as a league it was their impartiality,
freedom from any political affiliation along with a staunch devotion to the welfare of their brethren that made them a group with tremendous potential.

- Nevertheless they pointed out the fact that they could not avoid hierarchies, which hinder their selfless attempts as members of an organisation and civil society. The league remains scattered, which curtails any desire to voice its demands in an effective manner.

- Also, ex-servicemen face adjustment problems when they come back home as civil society is not as disciplined and regimented as the life they have been used to.

During the forthcoming trainings and meetings with ex servicemen one also sensed a strong dislike that they had towards women getting reservations and a bias towards their ability to be leaders. When they ventured out as field workers they found it difficult to accept if they were not heard and given importance. They also were extremely vocal and expressive about their ideas and perceptions and got into arguments with government employees and elected representatives, if they found them to be casual or incompetent.

As they shared these field experiences and opinions they were asked to introspect in groups as to why people do not give ex-servicemen the respect they felt they were due. Simultaneously, a strategy to tackle the above was also drafted:

- Questions like what makes the ex-servicemen different and how this difference can create issues of adaptation, how the league cannot work as a parallel body and must blend with the rest of the society, the urgency to look beyond ranks and rigid structures so that a strong collective could be built, looking out for supportive non-service background groups who can help them gain greater acceptance.

- Some of the solutions were: working at short-term result based projects so people develop some confidence on ex-servicemen, engage with already available groups like Mahila Mandals and SHGs who are not only supportive but also enthusiastic and influential.
In the meetings and workshops we saw how ex-servicemen had liaised with many women leaders of the Gram Panchayats and were addressing their internal issues along with utilising the skills of these women to collect people for micro-planning ventures. They were getting a hands-on experience of the strength that women groups have and realising the value of women's participation. As they joined hands with new groups in the Gram Panchayats they expanded the base of their league. They were enhancing their bargaining ability and also addressing the issues of the league from within. Their process of rapport building with the government and elected representatives while forming micro-plans was helping them to discover more and more authorities whose support their league could utilise.

So, broadly the capacity building programme had a broader base, larger goal and multiple development issues under its reach. Ex-servicemen were targeting specific Gram Panchayats to make peoples' priority based plans, which would reach completion. The responsibility for the same would be jointly shared. The issue of development here was not infrastructure but activating the available structures. The animators in the process formed a chain for one another, like PRIA helping in the capacity building of some ex-servicemen citizen leaders, they in turn mobilised their counterparts and other CBO leaders, the latter motivating and congregating people in groups and so on. The idea was to build networks not only within the gram panchayats in which the micro-plans were being made but also across gram panchayats.
1. Forming an NGO called Ex-Servicemen Welfare Action Committee as a sign of solidarity of all the league members who were enthusiastic to take up leadership roles.

2. Linkage with Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and opening of three village libraries under the supervision of ex-servicemen.

3. Community mobilisation and micro planning on local issues, which could seek resolution through efforts by the local residents themselves.

4. Linkage with NABARD to set up tailoring centres and dairy cooperatives at the village level

5. Linkage with Gyan Vigyan Samiti and Family Welfare Department for spreading awareness on key health and gender issues.

6. Documenting Gram Sabhas, BPL survey assessment, building database of the villages they were located in.

- Safety, maintenance and upkeep of the available educational, health and sanitation facilities were the issues around which the citizen leaders focused their community mobilisation process.

- The need to involve more and diverse interest groups in order to have a strong and effective voice. This entailed an understanding on the concept of exclusion i.e., how marginalisation is contextual and the leaders must ensure a space for the ones left out. The ex-servicemen took up issues of women who were hesitant to do so themselves, they also made micro-plans in Harijan bastis where basic facilities were not available.

- The need to reform existing structures rather than create parallels ones. The ex-servicemen realised the importance of civil society in democracy and the significance for it to be active.

- Building a strong network, which expands at the grassroots and extends to the mainstream too.

Today, the ex-servicemen affiliated with PRIA have formed a vibrant district level NGO called Ex-Servicemen Welfare Action Committee in order to access schemes for local development and facilitate networks across the blocks of Hamirpur. Their enthusiastic public meetings and rallies are displaying their impeccable strength as
civil society agents. Their long-term goal is to form a unit at the district level comprising of women, youth and retired personnel called the Purva Sainik-Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Sangathan. By getting support from broader society the Ex-Servicemen Welfare Action Committee struggles not only to get justice for retired armed personnel but also unwaveringly struggles for accountable and transparent governance. By prioritising people’s needs through micro planning they are gaining recognition in the eyes of the district administration. They have become the voice of the marginalized [be it the war-widows, retired hurt army men, dalit bastis, women groups]. Their aspiration towards a multi-faceted development, their desire to utilise their unexplored potential and unchallenged honesty and integrity towards the nation has certainly found a vocation in the Innovative Civil Society Initiative in District Hamirpur.
STRENGTHENING SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEES IN SABARKANTA

Salma Gai

ABSTRACT Social justice is one of the corner stones of the Indian constitution. Yet, a large number of people do not have access to it. How do we give social justice concrete shape? Who will provide support in giving it concrete shape? How will the citizens realise that they will get social justice through governance institutions? The present article attempts to answer the above questions. It focuses on the role of civil society organisations in reviving a constitutional body named Social Justice Committees.

I. Meaning of Social Justice

Social justice means equality in law or justice for all. In the absence of social justice Fundamental Rights as enshrined in Part III of the Indian constitution hold no meaning. In India a large number of people cannot access justice due to poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and vulnerability. Social justice cannot be achieved unless a new socio-economic order is raised on the foundation of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) as enshrined in Part IV of the Indian Constitution. The directive principles are dynamic and have the potential to enrich the rights provisions.

Elements of social justice

In our constitution the DPSP have been elaborated in such a way that state power can be used to fulfil the elements of social justice, for example to promote welfare for all, reduce inequalities, universalise education, fulfil the basic necessities of life

* Salma Gai was working with Civil Society Building programme in PRIA, New Delhi.
(food, health, shelter), reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, equal distribution of wealth, equal voting rights without any discrimination and many others. Though more than 50 years have passed since the adoption of the constitution we are still far away from realising the basic requirements of social justice. The main factor, responsible for this, is the societal structure, which is based on hierarchy, patriarchy, gender, caste and class. Although people are equal in terms of political rights and voting rights they are not truly equal within the societal structure. In this context the biggest challenge faced is that the Supreme Court or the High Court can direct the government to enforce fundamental rights, but not the directive principles of state policy.

Civil societies and social justice

Civil society organisations can play a pivotal role in providing concrete shape to the ideas of social justice. They can make the citizens specially the marginalised sections like the Dalits, tribals and women realise that they can get social justice through governance institutions. These organisations on one hand can put enough pressure on the government and on the elected representatives to ensure that the basic necessities like primary education, health facility, housing, safe drinking water, electricity, roads etc., necessary for leading a dignified life are ensured to these vulnerable sections without any discrimination. On the other hand, they can try to enhance and build the capacity of these groups so that not only do they become aware of their rights, but also at the same time assess their needs and demand the same from the system itself. This process of articulating the demands ensures an accountable and efficient government.

This article highlights a case and focuses on how through the joint efforts of civil society organisations a constitutional body named the Social Justice Committee was revived by one of PRIA’s partners UNNATI in the Sabarkanta district of Gujarat.

II. Gujarat Panchayati Raj Act and Social Justice Committee

It is a well-known fact that Panchayati Raj came into effect in Gujarat on 1st April 1963, under the Panchayati Raj Act, 1961. Although Panchayati Raj in Gujarat
remained in the forefront and the panchayats played a leadership role in the areas of development and justice, there was no notable change in the economic and social condition of the Dalits, Adivasis, backward classes and women of this industrially developed state. In order to ensure that the Dalits, Adivasis, and other backward classes get adequate protection and representation, the government decided to appoint a high level committee in 1972 to suggest basic reforms in the Panchayati Raj. This committee was under the chairmanship of Shri Zinabhai Darji. The committee found that there is a general impression among Dalits and Adivasis that Panchayati Raj is not good. The backward and weaker sections of the society especially at the gram panchayat level have not been able to associate themselves with the new Panchayati Raj system mainly because of the dominance of the upper castes. To ensure that these classes may develop economically and get social justice within the framework of the Panchayati Raj institutions the committee recommended the constituting of the Social Justice Committees (SJC) at all the three levels of panchayat - Zila panchayat, Taluka panchayat, and Village panchayat. It was also recommended that the committee for social justice would represent the majority of the members from the weaker sections of society. As a result of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, the new Panchayat Act came into effect in Gujarat from 1994, but the SJCs have not really been active even in this new situation.

*What is a Social Justice Committee?*

The Social Justice Committee is a mandatory body and is a part of the Panchayati Raj at all the three levels in Gujarat. It consists of three to five members. The membership of the SJC is open to all those who are elected in the GP (Gram Panchayat) and belong to the SC/ST community. It must have one member from the Valmiki community as well as one member should be a woman. If for some reason there are fewer or no members of the SC community in a panchayat the members can be co-opted from the Gram Sabha in order to form the SJC. According to the State Act the objective of the SJCs was to protect the interest of the socially and economically backward sections of the society, especially SC/ST, women, and other backward classes, landless labourers, small and marginalised farmers.
III. Unnati's Role in Formation of Samajik Nyaya Manch (SNM)

UNNATI is working on Panchayati Raj for the last seven years in various areas of Gujarat. In Sabarkantha district, which is considered one of the backward districts in terms of economic and social development, UNNATI is functioning through its PRC (Panchayat Resource Centre) in the Khedbrahma block. During the PEVAC (Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign), UNNATI got the opportunity to build strong and fruitful relations with some of the local NGOs, engaged on the issues of Dalits and women at a smaller level in their respective blocks. This was the moment when UNNATI and other like-minded NGOs decided to form a collective and named it the Samajik Nyaya Manch (SNM). SNM is a collective of 12 voluntary organisations, which are working, intensively in their respective blocks to activate SJC's.

On 22nd February 2003 the formal structuring of the SNM took place in which all the members unanimously selected a president, a vice president, a secretary, vice-secretary and a convenor for the respective posts. The main objective of the SNM is ‘to include all sections of the society without consideration of caste or gender, into the mainstream of development processes through the framework of governance.’ It was also decided to undertake a study so as to know the status of the SJC at the village level, to know about the condition of the marginalised sections particularly the Dalits, and also to understand their socio-economic constraints. The findings of the study revealed that in most of the GPs the SJC's were only on paper and the members of the committee were chosen by the panchayats without telling them.

Capacity building inputs to Samajik Nyaya Manch
In order to build the capacity of the members of the Samajik Nyaya Manch a series of orientation and training programmes were organised by UNNATI so as to build their knowledge, skill and attitude.

- On March 26-27, 2004 an exclusive training was organised by UNNATI for the members of SNM on the theme of “Social Mobilisation and Advocacy” so that they understood the process of social mobilisation and raised issues at the concerned levels and also to orient them on how to do advocacy.
- A three day Training for trainers was organised on the following issues of PRI with the focus on specific provisions of the Act, procedures of panchayat functioning, functions of the panchayats, different government schemes etc.

- Perspective Development Workshop – The focus of this three-day workshop was to facilitate a perspective of development, especially for the inclusion of the marginalised in the processes and to build an understanding of the framework of governance.

- Orientation of PRA – The three different techniques of PRA were explained, with the emphasis on how to adapt and use the techniques in their ongoing work.

- Writing Skill Workshop – The objective was to build the capacity of the participants for better process documentation and reporting of their activities so that it could help in future activities as also advocacy with the government and media.

- Workshop of Communal Harmony – Some of the members were oriented on issues and aspects of communal harmony by ACTION AID

- Orientation on the issues of mentally enabled – The objective was to sensitise the participants to the issues faced by the physically challenged and their need for better access to facilities.

UNNATI also oriented them on the following issues – panchayats, natural resources, rights and women and participatory methodology. The SNM members were invited and made to participate in all these ongoing programmes of UNNATI so that the capacity of SNM could be strengthened, further they are also informed about and sent by UNNATI for capacity building programmes run by other organisations.

IV. Samajik Nyaya Manch's Efforts to Activate Social Justice Committee (SJC's)

After receiving several capacity building inputs on the issue of panchayats and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the relationship between the panchayats and social justice committees, panchayat extension to scheduled areas (PESA), and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) etc. Samajik Nyaya Manch tried and initiated the process of activating social justice committees in two ways. Firstly, they tried to initiate the
process of involving the government machinery. They were aware that the process of activating constitutional machinery would not be fruitful unless they had the support of the governance institutions. For this purpose they organised a one-day meeting with all the chairpersons of the taluka level in the meeting hall of the Zila panchayat. The meeting was presided over by the president of the zila panchayat. The focus of the meeting was to discuss the present status of SJC\text{s} and the strategy to activate them. This resulted in a follow up and an action plan was designed in which it was decided that the chairperson of each taluka panchayat would write a letter to the taluka development officer who would in turn write a letter to the t\textit{alati} for looking into the formation of the SJC in the village panchayats where they have not yet been formed.

Secondly, during the training programmes the SNM members made an effort to make the chairpersons of gram panchayat from each block ranging from (40-60) realise the benefits of making a network of their own. This was done so that in the future when organisations withdraw from the field they could survive on their own and could look after the working as well as the functioning of these samitis (SJC). Therefore, networks of GPSJC were formed. One network was formed at the taluka level having an executive body of 10-15 members who would be responsible for their respective gram panchayats. Another network was formed at the district level with two members of each taluka network. The president and the secretary of the taluka level are nominated for the district level network, or those who are active participants, giving their time, interest and monetary expenses. The idea of forming such networks both at the taluka and at the district level was to ensure a voice on those issues, which cannot be solved at the gram panchayat level, but can be dealt with by the network at the taluka level. Similarly, the district level network would carry the task further and grapple with issues that demand the attention of the district and state administration.

\textit{Capacity Building of Members of SJC}

In order to strengthen the capacities and build the confidence of the chairpersons of SJC the following training sessions were organised.

- Formation and status of SJC
- Relationship between SJC and village panchayats
- Functions of SJC
• Whom do we consider weaker sections of society
• Administration of SJC
• 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Social justice

In addition to the above inputs the SNM organises orientation programmes after every three to four months at the block level in which all the members of the SJC (40–60) are invited to participate in the programme. Such capacity building programmes continue and are repeated in the eight blocks after regular intervals. The issues raised are:

• To conduct regular meetings of the SJC as well as of the network?
• How to conduct a meeting?
• How to deal with the Talati, as most of the times the Talati a panchayat secretary tries to delay the meetings of the SJC and what they can do in such circumstances?
• What kind of issues can be solved through the SJC like, land, water, electricity mostly related to infrastructure development?
• How to raise issues and at which platforms?
• What are their rights and privileges?

Methodology followed
In order to make the training programmes more lively and participatory in nature an attempt was made to involve the participants in all the sessions with the help of role-plays, small group discussions, questions and answers. All these activities developed a sense of understanding among the participants and as a result their attention was riveted on three basic aspects namely:

• What should the SJC do now?
• What are the constraints regarding their functions?
• What should be done to neutralise these constraints?

District level Sammelan
Owing to the mountainous three months of efforts by UNNATI and the ‘Samajik
*Nyaya Manch*, it was decided to give this process a final shape in the form of a Sammelan of the social justice committees on 1st September 2002. This Sammelan was organised at Dr. Nalinkant Gandhi Town Hall in Himmatnagar. This kind of a sammelan was held for the first time in the 40-year history of the Panchayati Raj in Gujarat. This was the first time that SNM got visibility and linkage with governmental officials. (Here one can see that efforts were made from two sides. On the one hand GP SJC were oriented during the study and on the other hand the SNM tried to put pressure from the higher authorities to activate them with a high hand.) This process of organising a meeting at the Zila level not only provided recognition to the dormant SJC but also a feeling of responsibility towards them was awakened among the officials.

V. Impact of the Training Programmes

1. **Actual formation**: Presidents of the Taluka panchayat social justice committees made efforts for the formation of said committees in all the gram panchayats of their blocks. They also instructed the taluka development officers in written regarding the same. In this way the process for the formation of the committees where they were not in existence started. Village and taluka panchayats became active in this regard.

2. **A distinct identity**: Space has been provided for the social justice committees in numerous village panchayat buildings along with the nameplate of the president for identification. A list of the committee members is also added along with the panchayat member's name on the notice board of most of the panchayats. This has developed a distinct identity for the committee in the village panchayat. As a result, the villagers and the weaker sections of the society have come to know about the role and powers of the SJC s as they deal with all the developmental activities of the GP. Moreover the Taluka level SJC chairpersons have their separate chambers, phones and visiting cards.

3. **Social Justice Committees are addressing the issues of social discrimination**: The most important one is the issue of *Shamsaan land* for the Dalits. They have been using a particular area as *shamsaan* land for many years that is not recorded in the panchayats records. This has been reported by the SJC s and they have
passed resolutions to incorporate the same in the panchayat records. In order to solve this issue all the SJC chairpersons and Dalit leaders together gave a memorandum to the Taluka Development Officer and submitted a memorandum, which includes designating graveyards for Dalits and also plots for their houses. Copies of the memorandum have been forwarded to different government officials like the Mamlatdar, District Development Officer and District Collector. There was a demand for calling meetings of the GP SJC's in the block headquarters.

*Celebration of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar birth anniversary at Bharota village of Prantij taluka SNM members decided to celebrate the birth anniversary of Baba Saheb every year in the village where social injustice and atrocities on women and Dalits is very high. Seeing the boycott and other injustices meted to the marginalised sections of the society the celebration took place in Bhagrota village on 14th April 2003. All like minded NGOs and members of the Dalit community gave their wholehearted support in organising the event. The objective of the celebration was to highlight the issues plagueing this village among the concerned authorities.*

4. **Mid-day meals:** In Idar block of Sabarkanta due to the efforts of the chairpersons of SJC's the issue of discrimination during the distribution of mid-day meals was also addressed.

5. **Benefits of government schemes are disbursed properly:** Through the SJC the benefits of the government schemes, meant for the marginalised sections of the society, were implemented properly without any discrimination.

### VI. Future of Social Justice Committees and Issues Ahead

SNM perceives the future of SJC's in a positive way. Today with SNM's ongoing efforts in the form of training programmes and orientations for the capacity building of the SJC members, they have not only been activated but have also started functioning effectively.

- The formation of networks at the taluka and at the district level has provided a platform to the members of the Social Justice Committees to share their experiences
with each other. As a result through this forum they have tried to address the grievances as well as have articulated the demands of their community to the officials at the taluka and Zila level. The networks have not only provided them an identity, but also ensured the accountability of each GPSJC chairperson to conduct the meetings after every three months and address the issues with the help of resolutions.

- Moreover with the ongoing programme on Dalit leadership the SNM have not only started the procedure of community awareness on the issues concerning their life, but have also identified some of the citizen leaders who can be future SJC members with inbuilt capacities to raise the concerns of their community either on the issues related to discrimination of minorities, women issues, atrocities and many others.

Issues ahead

- An important issue of concern is to remove internal conflicts within the Dalits as most of the times the higher-class Dalits are responsible for violating the rights of the lower class and the practice of un-touchability existing within their community.

- Today after two years of continuous struggle and orientation programmes the SJC members are now in a position to take action. Due to SNM's limitations on legal expertise and the prevailing socio-political environment they are lagging in the march ahead on legal issues (the most important one is the issue of Shamsbaan land for the Dalits) In order to overcome this hurdle the SNM members are trying to build relationships with those organisations and groups who are experts in legal matters like Lawyers Collective, BSC (please give expanded form) and Centre for Social Justice.
PARTICIPATORY TRAINING OF ANIMATORS

Purvi Dass*

ABSTRACT The strategic plan of PRIA’s ‘Governance Where People Matter’ model aims to improve the life of marginalised families. This happens when they take an active part in the effective use of resources. Field workers or animators interact with them in rural and urban areas to make it happen. This article describes a training programme held in Lucknow for the animators. It presents the training methodology of innovatively converting the learners’ problems into a learning situation. Though the training was planned, it developed in participatory ways from the learning needs of the participants, which came out during the training itself.

Background

Concerns for ‘Governance Where People Matter’ mandate the inclusion of citizens’ interest at the centre of public decision-making and the active and meaningful participation of citizens in all matters that govern their lives. Such an approach requires new forms of relationships, new forms of engagement between citizens and governing institutions; it involves a fundamental rethinking of the ways in which citizens’ voices are articulated.

Civil society, in this context, provides a meaningful methodology of intervention. Hence, it helps to develop an effective citizens’ voice in decision making about the access and use of development resources for public good at the district, provincial, national and international levels. It also takes initiatives to strengthen their capacities through awareness generation, training as well as coalition building.

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The change agents i.e., the field workers or animators working at the community level have a crucial role in setting in motion PRIA’s strategic model of ‘Governance Where People Matter’. It is, therefore, essential that they are prepared and trained to enable them to play their role efficiently.

A training workshop was organised in the recent past to evolve an effective programme of training for field animators, the change agents. The training took place at Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra in Lucknow. About 47 field animators, selected from PRIA and partner organisations in 12 states, participated in it.

Assessing the training needs
The session began with a brief self-introduction of the participants as well as the facilitators. The objective was to help the participants get to know each other as well as to get organised for new knowledge.

The training programme design was tentatively planned, on the basis of our assumption of PRIA’s strategic model of ‘Governance Where People Matter’ as well as the understanding of the animators about people centric governance. The need for training in fact had emerged from concerns expressed in several formal and informal meetings with the staff working directly and regularly with the animators as well as with the heads and senior staff of organisations. To fine-tune the training needs further, the animators were asked to express their expectations.

The expectations ranged from ‘how to work with poor women’, ‘how to develop women leadership’ to ‘how to mobilise the Gram Sabha’. They wanted to know more about tribal, urban and rural governance. The participants wanted to enhance their understanding of government functionaries at the block level and the internal management of the Panchayat Resource Centre and Urban Resource Centre*. Other key expectations included information on the role of the animators and the development of the potential to fit in that role; better reporting and documenting skills. The expectations in fact matched the training needs as expressed by the heads of organisations and senior staff.
Objectives of the Workshop
The objectives, derived from the expectations, were short, crisp and simple.

- To develop a holistic understanding of the model ‘Governance Where People Matter’ and
- To develop their knowledge and skill to play their role effectively.

The content and method of the workshop then flowed accordingly.

Contents and Methods

1. Changed identity of social work
This session focused on the changed identity of social work and their role as building blocks. The small group discussion and sharing with others was enriched by the lecture method. After the first half-day session the participants found it difficult to sit on chairs in a formal manner. It was decided that the tables and chairs be removed and people sit on mattresses. This sitting arrangement also made it more convenient for the facilitators to use different participatory methods of learning.

2. Model ‘Governance Where People Matter’
Keeping in mind the framework of the convergence mode of all interventions ‘Governance Where People Matter’ was explained through the lecture method. Diagrammes helped to bring clarity. The building blocks also understood the important stakeholders in their area.

3. Internal processes of community based organisations
The importance, role and internal processes of community-based organisations were explained. The methods used were learning games and analysis of cases. Two processes mainly communication and conflict resolution were emphasised upon.

4. Gram sabha mobilisation
An innovative approach was to merge the importance of communication with the focus on Gram Sabha mobilisation. This was done through role-playing. The creativity of the participants surfaced when six groups expressed different ways of doing it.
5. **Roles of building blocks, the animators**  
This session was linked with the animators' roles. The method adopted in this session was a small group discussion followed by presentations. The groups had listed many roles but the participants selected only practical and appropriate ones. The selected roles were incorporated and woven in a short drama, which was then enacted. The impact was very positive. Even the non-vocal participants began articulating their views.

6. **Effective use of resource persons**  
The next session was on the ways to deal with the resource persons. Facilitators/animators often face difficulties either due to the shortage of resource persons in a block or urban areas or their highhandedness. The role-play method was used to convey different ways of handling resource persons. A play showing how to use the Block Development Officer, as a resource person was an instant hit.

7. **Importance of Information**  
The importance of information and its sources was shared. The focus of the session was on the use of Panchayat Resource Centres (PRC) and Urban Resource Centres (URC). The panel discussion, a variation of the lecture method was used. The panelists were grass-root practitioners who had just returned from a tour of Sri-Lanka. A panellist said that the information needed by the community should be available in these centres. Then it would be successful and owned by the community.

8. **Field Visits**  
The expectations of the animators would not have been met unless they had seen how a PRC or URC was run. So, a field visit to a model District Resource Centre was organised. This was followed by visits to Panchayat Resource Centres or Urban Resource Centres as per the individual's interest.

The impact of the field visit was tremendous. After returning from the field visits some of them decided to decorate and do up their centres creatively. They have done this very imaginatively on returning to their own Panchayat Resource Centres or Urban Resource Centres.
9. Society building
The key elements, which enhance society building, were highlighted through small group discussions. The groups made their presentations through ‘songs’. The video coverage captures their intensity. Group No II won the competition. The judges were two students of the School of social work from Chitrakoot University. They were at Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra for a summer placement as part of their curricula. Their informal interaction with the participants made them curious and they wanted to attend one of the sessions. The facilitators allowed them to be the part of the learning process for this session only.

10. Future action plan
The last session was on future action plans. The action plan was prepared for the next three months to give them an idea of planning. The participants became emotional while making their presentations and started expressing their feelings about the time they had spent together. This made it difficult for them to finish their presentation in the given time slot. This posed a big challenge to the facilitators.

11. Evaluation
At the end of the session the participants evaluated the workshop. The method used was the pasting of charts on the wall. Each chart had a point to evaluate. These points were evaluated either on a scale from 0 to 5 or through candid comments. The participants were not supposed to write their name while giving their evaluations.

Some highlights of the workshop:
• A major problem was communication. The participants from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa knew neither English nor Hindi. Identifying a person who could express the viewpoints solved the problem.
• The experiences shared were personal and practical. Humour was present all along.
• Showing a film on every day helped in dealing with the issues differently.
• Some participants took keen interest in reading the learning materials. They would clarify each point by discussing it with other participants and the facilitators.
• The cultural program helped them relax. They enthusiastically danced to the catchy tribal folk song ‘Rongobati’ from Orissa.
• The learning environment was perfect with the arrangement of outdoor games for those who were interested.
• Some participants took the initiative to ensure that they took all the learning materials with them. Volunteers sat through the night to ensure that they got the correct addresses on the computer. Thus, a new network was formed.

End Notes

*Panchayat Resource Centers are information centers opened at the Block level by PRIA and partners for in-depth work in selected panchayats (intensive coverage). For the rest of the panchayats of the same Block it is done through key actors of the panchayats (extensive coverage). Similarly Urban Resource Centres focus on a few selected wards intensively and the remaining wards of the same District extensively. These centres converge at the District level and are considered as the experimentation ground.
GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY


Prof John Keane, a leading political thinker, traces the recent development of a powerful idea of global civil society - a political vision of a less violent world founded on legally sanctioned power sharing arrangements among many different and intermingling forms of socio-economic life. In the face of terrorism, the rising tide of xenophobia and anti-globalisation tirades the pressure for defence of civil society is mounting. This implies not only a new democratic way of living but also a brand new democratic thinking about contemporary matters like global markets, uncivil war, university life and governance with global reach.

One of the significant propositions that the book makes about global civil society is that it enables individuals, groups, and organisations to organise as well as deploy their powers across borders despite the remaining existing constraints of time and space.

Prof Keane begins the book by portraying the characteristics of big ideas. He claims that 'global civil society' is a big idea, which has a fresh potency. He explores not only the historical origin and rising nature of global civil society but also analyses its contemporary meaning and uses and future political potential. He familiarises us with five descriptive categories — unfamiliar word, catalysts, cosmocracy, paradise on earth and ethics beyond borders.

For describing unfamiliar words, he says that global civil society is a worldview different from society, which has evolved following the military defeat of Islam and the efforts of Christendom, totalitarian violence of fascism and Marxism-Leninism. Global civil society is a response to the rising need for economic and political deals at the global level. He suggests the usage of the phrase 'global civil society' with caution because many discrepancies and disagreements are evident in it despite an elementary consensus on it. Some scholars try to view global civil society as a way of analysing empirical contours of the past, present and emerging social networking at the world level, in
pragmatic terms. It is to be noted that in practice these different modes of explanations are overlapping and complementary to each other. Dr John highlights the empirical contours of civil society as essential for clarifying empirical scope and complexity, strategic capacity and normative potential of global civil society on the one hand and its limitations on the other. He has raised the issues of global civil society being a national or a global phenomenon in the context of the binary opposites of global civil society and domestic civil societies, how exactly these two levels are interrelated, how citizens climb up and down the ladders in between and how dimensions like national and global and inside and outside are clearly demarcated or separated within these two opposing sets of forces and processes operating within global civil society. These however, have not been clearly explained. He takes a simple example of jeans to explain the normal pattern of complexity in the globalisation of civil society.

John Keane describes tradition, purism, turbo capitation (i.e., market forces), market, violence, etc., as catalysts for the emergence, growth and development of global civil society. He, historically, traces the emergence of civil society from the primitive social formation of Islamic and European civilisations. The process of global civil society was spreading along with the increase in the process of global imperialism, which was full of violence that occurred while searching for new markets and political hegemony. The positive effect of this process is noticed in a vast increase in the intermingling of western culture with the rest of the world and producing a ‘hybrid’ of all cultures. He has also mentioned the need for inception of various national and international organisations, their role in bringing legal harmony, peace and good governance to world society. Civil society has emerged under the prevailing conditions of great fear and violence with global parameters by its autonomous power of moral choice and moral action. The market forces (turbo capitalism) are the principal energisers of global civil society and they produce great inequalities among voluntary organisations. He has briefly sketched the acquiring business enterprising nature by developing commercial departments and media Internet strategies by civil society organisations, which dissolves divisions between corporate and civil society organisations.

The author summarises the interacting dynamics and overlapping structure of civil society successfully by using an analytical category of cosmocracy. It is a term in which the whole world is coming under the influence of a new form of governmental power, which is a form of government, sui generis in nature, the first ever, that reflects
over world polity and its dynamics ascribed with global effect. The world polity makes it a system of World Wide Web of interdependence of action and reaction and a complex mélange of a network of legal, governmental, political and military interdependence. For the sake of convenience, the system of governance with decision-making authority in the core of cosmocracy is described in various forms of governmental space. Cosmocracy is a conglomeration of political power, cemented together with laws and legal procedures and has been a legislation of the governmental system with a multilateral legal network. He traces, in detail, the contradictions of its symptoms, its paralysing effects on the whole cosmocracy, by looking carefully into the most pertinent structural problems—political entropy, unaccountability problems, dominant power, fatalism, etc., logged within the structure of cosmocracy.

Dr Keane elaborately explains how higher education, ideologies, importance, growth and heavy investment in higher education, violence, etc., can create a paradise on earth in global civil society. The higher education institutions not only play the role of host to thousands of conferences, research institutes and teaching and publishing programmes, but also frame various policies and strategies for winning contracts, students and prestige within global society. They nurture scientific knowledge, technologies, business methods, teaching skills and personal and professional contracts across borders. Explaining higher education as an ‘ivory tower’ a modern day equivalent of Roman eborum as an exotic place of temporary seclusion that withdraws from the harsh realities of the world. He also draws on the growth, role and function and the changing transformation of the university as a multiversity in higher education. He summarises the observation of various scholars like Edward Gibbon, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Clark Kerr, etc., about university/multiversity in higher education. The spread of higher education helps in stabilising and strengthening global civil society. He points out the triangle of violence - caused by nuclear states, post cold war, uncivil war and terrorism in the various parts of the globe - Asia, Africa, Europe and America, in this regard.

The descriptive category of ethics beyond borders deals with a rising awareness of the factual growth of civil society, encloses an important insight of a breathtaking complex, which is a space of multiple differences, dynamic in nature, some of which are closely related or are even in open conflict. Now, a vital and philosophical question with practical implications arises that global civil society has become a heavily contested term, which contains a huge variety of ethical ways of life and its heterogeneity that
cannot be reduced to one definition inasmuch as human condition is riddled with ethical disagreement at the head of global civil society. In this regard he talks of the views of various scholars like Chantal Mouffe's, Carl Schmitt, T Hobbes, etc.. Not only has he raised the critique of global civil society based on universal principles, the omnipresent possibility of conflict and the need for legal and political regulations among others, but also touched upon the points in its defence. Overall, the book is a well-organised attempt to give holistic information about global civil society despite some pitfalls. All those who are interested in civil society will find the book valuable and thought provoking.

Reviewed by
Haresh Narayan Pandey
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CIVIL SOCIETY


‘Civil Society’ is both a perspective and methodology of intervention. As a perspective, it is that socio-political space which is between the state and the family/citizen. As a space for engagements, it is seen as both individual and collective initiatives for the common public good. While the former provides a mandate for civil society to operate as a socio-political space for expression of citizenship, the latter provides methodological tools for promoting such expressions. The changes in the world over in the recent past in polity, economy and society have been particularly important in pressing us to rethink civil society’s role in matters related to governance.

What is civil society? What is so specific about civil society that we need to understand the governance by referring to this sphere? The term in fact has been variously interpreted. Different perceptions, meanings and manifestations associated with the term need to be deciphered and put into context in a given historical location. The narrow interpretations would otherwise erode its potential as a force for positive social change. A rigorous critique of the idea of civil society would offer explanatory power and practical support to problem solving in both established and emerging democracies. The book ‘Civil Society’ by Michael Edwards is a step in this direction. It responds to growing interests and confusions in this subject.

Michael Edwards has presented the discourse on civil society in an informed manner. He begins with a historical account of the growth and evolution of the idea of civil society and explains the reason behind the spurt of growth of this idea in the Post-Berlin era. He addresses the inclusive and exclusive debate that is going around civil society in the current scenario by raising questions such as – “is civil society a part of society like associational life, or like liberal democracy, or an arena for public discourse? Or is it a combination of these approaches.” “Is civil society a part of the government or a safety valve against the misuse of statecraft?” “Is it part of the market or the
alternative to a market?" "Is it part of the agenda for promoting the interests of a certain section of society or for the growth of pluralism?"

He feels that the time has come to define the word with a clear connation or a clear view about each interpretation in play. Clarity about the idea will enrich the debate about its potential and limitations. Till now the dominant voice in the debate has given the space to view that civil society is a part of society like the voluntary organisation, Forgetting that there is another idea about civil society that has much to offer. This has further raised the people's expectations that civil society deliver the goods. It is expected to organise social services, govern local communities and solve the unemployment problem, save the environment and rebuild the moral fibre of society at large. In this context he quoted the Peruvian leader Mario Pardon "don't asked us to carry more than our capacity and then blame failure on us", because we can't carry the load. Association life should not be treated as a magic wand, which should resolve the intractable, social, economic and political problem of society or have answers to every problem.

In recent times philosophers have developed a new set of theories about civil society as the "public sphere". In its role as a public sphere, civil society becomes the arena for reconciling differences among society through debate and arguments and arriving at common or public interest. It is about giving space to the minority and underprivileged section of society in the affairs of society. Its importance lies in being the only route to reach a legitimate normative consensus around a plurality of interests. Then he comes to the conclusion that a combination of theoretical approaches of civil society as an associational life, public sphere and good society increases its utility as an idea of explanations and a vehicle for action. Civil society as an idea qualifies as a big idea, because it helps us to interpret and change the world simultaneously. It offers both a touchstone for social movements and a practical framework for organising resistance and an alternative solution to social, economic and political problems. The essence of civil society is collective action - in associations, through the public sphere and across society. This book offers a balanced view of civil society and predicts its optimistic growth in coming years.

Reviewed by
Nitesh Kumar
PRIA, New Delhi
THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC EMPOWERMENT

Sitharaman Kakarala, HIVOS, 2004

The book being reviewed is one in the Technical Report Series which is part of HIVOS-India Regional Office's effort to participate actively in the debate and dialogue in India on issues of human development.

The book comprises an introductory section on HIVOS policy sectors and thrust areas of work in the country, the Dutch position on various issues as well as extracts from other key HIVOS publications.

Introducing the twentieth century as one of paradoxes, as some of its powerful ideas — equality (gender, racial and social), development, human rights, democracy etc. — were defined not in terms of their positive 'realisation' but the distinct 'lack' thereof. Development for instance was defined more in terms of its non-achievements: abject poverty, lack of access to livelihood, inhuman living conditions and a general absence of well being.

A core concern of 'development' has been the democratic empowerment of the poor and marginalised and poverty reduction. To achieve this, the strategy has been that of civil society building, — strategies that facilitate 'citizenship' opportunities and enhancement of democratic participation and those that address the needs and concerns of the economically and socially disadvantaged.

The author traces the changes in the nineties, the shift in development discourse from nation building to civil society building (CSB). By the second half of the nineties almost all major donors had reformulated their development goals and policies with unanimity in terms of goals and greater convergence on the approaches to achieve these goals. The Multi donor groups (MDGs) are seen as an illustration of such a consensus. And central to all this was the emergence of CSB as the core consensus strategy for poverty reduction. What distinguished this new 'avatar' of CSB was — a) instead of aiming to make the state accountable, it aims to facilitate the replacement of existing 'state spaces' by private actors from within, b) the focus shifted from
citizen empowerment to community empowerment.

One of the basic attempts made by the author in this paper is to highlight the near lack of dialogue between different groups in civil society discourse and the implications of this for democratic transformation.

It has been pointed out that there is a reluctance to engage with the issue of defining civil society. The 'working definition' of the World Bank, the most widely used in contemporary literature, for instance uses the term 'civil society' to refer to a wide array of non governmental and non profit organisations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations (World Bank-OED 2003). The problematic issues in this definition are: a) 'Civil society' is generally employed as if it denotes an undifferentiated social fabric and means something inherently positive and good. There is no acknowledgement in this of intercommunity tensions and contestations and the dynamics of power relations within civil society. b) A co-operative relationship between state, market and civil society is emphasised which is not the ground level situation.

This is followed by a literature review of existing studies on 'social capital' and the 'visible' and invisible problems that they highlight. There is also a brief discussion on participatory governance and its implications on civil society actors, especially in the context of Andhra Pradesh.

The paper positions itself as an attempt at critically engaging with changing currents of mainstream developmentalism, with a close focus on the idea of civil society building. While it does set the stage for this to a certain extent, in its rather brief concluding suggestions it raises more questions than answers and leaves the reader dissatisfied.

Other aspects of the book are an annotated bibliography of important publications on community participation, decentralisation and democratic empowerment. A bibliography of Indian studies, which would have been of better use if it had been categorised subject wise is yet another feature.

All in all, this book is an important resource for those in the development sector at large and specifically for practitioners of 'civil society building'.

Reviewed by
Srijana Krishnamoorthy, PRIA, Himachal Pradesh
About PRIA

PRIA is a civil society organization, that undertakes development initiatives to positively impact the lives of the poor, marginalized and excluded sections of the society, by encouraging and enabling their participation in the processes of their governance. It strives for achievement of equity and justice, through a people centered approach, focusing on 'Citizens'- 'their participation and inclusion', 'awareness and empowerment' and 'their democratic rights'.

PRIA recognizes the value of people's knowledge, challenges traditional myths and concepts, raises awareness of people's rights and promotes experiential learning. It applies a multi-dimensional strategic approach to creating knowledge, training and capacity building of stakeholders, public education and policy advocacy and intervenes at various levels of the demand and the supply segments, to reach out locally, nationally and globally.

Operating under two broad themes 'Reforming Governing Institutions and Civil Society Building', PRIA's people centred interventions aim at promoting active participation of the poor and marginalized in the effective utilization of resources through local governance. It engages itself in strengthening of Panchayati- Raj Institutions and municipalities, promoting environmental and occupational health, facilitating a strong network of civil society organizations, promoting citizen leadership, monitoring policies and programmes of bilateral, multilateral and government agencies, to achieve an agenda of 'Governance where People Matter.'

PRIA proactively involves and engages a range of stakeholders including academia, media, donors, civil society organizations, trade unions, private business and government agencies in its efforts and provides a platform for a multi-stakeholder development approach.

PRIA is an International Centre for learning and promotion of participation and democratic governance.