National Seminar on
Democracy at Grassroots: Fifty years of Panchayati Raj in India
(March 5-6, 2010)
Sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi

Seminar Note

The Preamble to the Constitution of India acknowledges the ultimate, supreme and sovereign power of the people. In accordance with the basic philosophy of the Constitution, the creation of people's power is one of the primary tasks of nation-building. This is possible only when the citizens have an active role in the formulation, implementation as well as monitoring of policies and programs related to their development. Citizen's participation is thus an essential ingredient of a democratic system. Given the vastness of the country and its far-reaching diversities, effective participation is possible only when the process of governance is adequately decentralized and democratized. Local self-government is part and parcel of this process of democratization and decentralization. A genuine democracy implies a bottom-upwards pattern of power-sharing and not a top-downwards pattern. In pursuance of this philosophy, Article 40 of the Constitution of India promised: "The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

On October 22, 2009 Panchayati Raj completed fifty years of its journey. It was on this day that the journey began from Nagaur in Rajasthan. Since than we have seen three generations of local self-governance institutions in villages under the rubric of Panchayati Raj. Till the nineties, this was the responsibility of the states and the states did come up with different strategies of addressing the challenge of democratic decentralization. The first generation institutions were initiated in states like Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra. These initiatives though bold turned out to be administratively and politically innocuous since the existing political establishment converted the PRIs into their extension departments. The second generation of PRI was introduced in West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka where the intervention strengthened local political mobilization and also unleashed support for the state level players to confront their political adversaries at the Centre.

The third generation of PRI was an outcome of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act which sought to introduce uniform structures all over the country and made it mandatory for all the states to adopt it within a definite time period. The initiative thus slipped out of the hands of the states. It is commonly believed that this change was a consequence of political design emanating from the top and the demands of party functionaries at the bottom. However, this generation of PRI has given space to the disadvantaged sections of the population to assert themselves at the grassroots: the women, the SC, ST and the OBCs. States had to adopt the constitutional provisions even if unwillingly. A massive army of leadership has emerged in the rural areas which no political party or administration can ignore. This change is one of the essential features of the

democratic upsurge in rural India. Most of the states have had more than three rounds of elections under the new dispensation. The process of deepening and broadening of the democratic enterprise is irreversible in spite of bottlenecks. The involvement of civil society organizations has strengthened the PRI in good measure. There have been a good number of success stories at the Panchayat level.

At the same time, the new set of institutions has come in for lot of criticism. There is a widespread perception that the structure is without adequate strength to enable it to function properly. There is a dearth of functions, functionaries and finances to make the new generation of PRIs effective agencies of self-governance. Lack of political will is another bottleneck. It is also believed that Panchayats continue to be extension departments of higher levels of administration. Service delivery has become the major preoccupation of these bodies which has obstructed initiative at the local level. Rampant corruption is another bane of these grass root democratic bodies. Critics have also questioned the democratic nature of the emerging institutions, pointing out that the new leadership has further strengthened entrenched interests in the villages under a new garb. Of no less concern is the rigid and uncooperative attitude of local level administration which stunts a free play of democratic mobilization at the village level. It has also been pointed out that leadership by proxy has hampered the rise of socially deprived groups for whom reservation had been provided. Many such problems have prevented the emergence of PRIs as effective agencies of local level democratic self-governance.

It is in the light of these factors that the proposed National Seminar endeavors to evaluate, analyze and interpret the three generations of PRIs in India with a focus on the third generation institutions. The major sub-themes of the seminar are going to be:

- Philosophy and politics of Democratic Decentralization
- Structure, impact and deficiencies of First Generation of PRI
- Second Generation PRIs: the three models of Kerala, Karnataka and West Bengal
- 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and consequent State Enactments
- PRIs: the third tier of democratic governance or appendage of the two tiers
- PRI-NGO Interface: Creating synergies and expanding the Democratic Space
- PRI in Scheduled Areas: PESA law
- Challenging feudalism at the grassroots: Experience of Rajasthan

These themes are only suggestive in nature. Presentations pertaining to the overarching theme of the Seminar are welcome. **You are requested to send an abstract of your presentation by February 10, 2010. A line of confirmation with a tentative title of your presentation will enable us to make required preparations at our end. Needless to say that the Department will reimburse your travel cost (upto II AC) and extend local hospitality during your stay here.**