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# Society For Participatory Research in Asia

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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Bhopal Sammelan**

About 1400 people representing over 400 organisations and Panchayat leaders gathered in Bhopal for a three day **Sammelan** and planned to take action to secure accountability of public officials, agencies and departments to strengthen democracy.

Organised by PRIA and its partners and hosted by Samarthan, Bhopal, the Sammelan was a rallying point for social activists, development workers, trade unionists, panchayat members - past and present, tribal and women leaders, youth representatives and students from 16 States- Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh to express solidarity with each other, through cross boundary exchanges and networking.

Major steps planned were:

- ◆ A campaign to make governments, public sector officials and agencies accountable
- ◆ Educating the general public on civil rights and responsibilities
- ◆ Recognising new leadership in women, dalits and adivasis
- ◆ Campaign to vest control over land, forests, water and animals with local bodies
- ◆ Getting like minded people/organisations together on a single platform.

The major objectives of the Sammelan was to provide individuals, organisations and agencies working on issues of strengthening democracy, governance and deepening citizen participation, a platform to enable a process of active communication and networking and to develop a strategy for the future.

The Sammelan was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Shri.Digvijay Singh. It began with the lighting of a lamp by women Panchayat leaders followed by a banner parade by the representatives of participating organisations and groups.

The Chief Minister along with Dr. Humayun Khan, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, UK, released the India country report of the Global Study "Citizens and Governance" (**Civil Society in the New Millennium**) - a study conducted by the

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Commonwealth Foundation in association with CIVICUS, in 45 countries across the globe. In India the study was conducted by PRIA and its partners in 10 states. Dr. Khan, in his speech, emphasised that to ensure peace in the region, citizens' rights and democratic governance is crucial.

The programme of the Sannelan focused around 5 themes - Citizenship, Empowerment, New Leadership, Accountable Local Self Governance and Participatory Social Development. Participants representing different language groups - Hindi, Oriya, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi and Gujarati - engaged in dialogue with their contemporaries from other states, sharing experiences in the twelve discussion groups organised around these themes.

The discussions highlighted that the realisation of citizenship comes not from birth but by a sense of belonging and ownership. Ownership and belonging can be realised only when individuals and groups feel that their contributions to the development process are valuable and that they are responsible and accountable - to themselves, and to the community in which they live.

A highlight of this sharing was the exchange of addresses among the participants. Each participant was provided with at least two post cards to note down the addresses of two new friends - with a promise to continue the relationship initiated during the Sannelan.

The Information Technology room gave participants the chance to experience the wonder of the world at their finger tips through the use of the Internet. Alongside was "Anubhav" a room set up by PRIA's Committee Against Sexual Harassment (CASH), to give the women attending the Sannelan a space to sit back, relax and share experiences.

Besides this, every evening, a cultural programme gave participants another opportunity to share with the rest of the world a little bit of their culture through songs, dances and skits. An ongoing exhibition of traditional art and crafts, as well as development publications served as a back drop for this exchange.

The Sannelan closed with a panel sharing, presentation of state action plans, followed by participants tying together colourful squares of cloth as a symbolic sharing of each individuals learning and agenda for action, which she/he takes back from the Sannelan.



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