

Pre Election Voters Awareness Campaign for Local Government Elections in 2009 –2010

Background

PRIA, along with a network of partners, has undertaken a programme to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) from 1995 onwards. This programme draws its inspiration from the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution and the opportunity that this legislative measure has provided to shape participatory democracy as the engine for local economic development and social justice. At present, this programme is being implemented to different extents, across almost all the states in India. The key strategies underpinning the programme are common to all the interventions in these states and cover the following areas:

- Information Dissemination
- Capacity Building
- Policy Advocacy

One of the very important components of the programme, which PRIA has evolved, is the Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC). It is an intensive campaign prior to the elections to Panchayats, which has been found to be very effective in enhancing qualitative participation of marginalised citizens as voters and candidates. Campaigns have been undertaken in the past with support of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) in most states, where the elections to Panchayats have been conducted since early 2000. Accordingly, PEVACs were undertaken in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Orissa, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Uttarakhand.

On the basis of these campaigns conducted by PRIA and its partners in the past, the following findings have emerged:

- a) Voter interest in elections to Panchayats tends to be much higher when compared to elections to the State Legislative Assemblies or to the Lok Sabha.
- b) However, unlike in the elections to Legislative Assemblies/Lok Sabha, there is very little or no interest shown by the organised political parties in elections to the Gram Panchayats. Similarly, media (both print and electronic) pay little attention (and provide less space) to elections to the Gram Panchayats. Consequently, the public education function and information dissemination essential to enable an informed electoral choice is largely missing in the elections.

- c) The gaps in information are particularly significant in respect of women, dalits and adivasis in rural communities, considering the fact that the 73rd Amendment creates specific space and opportunities for representatives from such marginalised groups. The gaps are exacerbated by the fact that information flows assume a basic level of literacy.
- d) Despite the reservations provided for women, dalits, adivasis and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in Panchayats, (though in Rajasthan posts of chairpersons of Village, Block and District Panchayats are not reserved) a large proportion of candidates from such marginalised groups are perceived to be 'proxies' for elite groups or male kin (in the case of women) in rural communities. There is a clear need to mobilise support from similarly marginalised groups in favour of such candidates, so that their tenures in electoral office truly reflect the interests they represent.
- e) Given the newness of structures (State Election Commission) and procedures (rotation of reserved constituencies), the official machinery charged with the conduct of election experiences difficulty in responding adequately to the demands made on their roles.
- f) Compared to Legislative Assemblies/Lok Sabha elections, the process of elections to Panchayats and Municipalities are fairly complex, since the voter has to cast votes simultaneously for different tiers of Panchayats involving different sets of ballot papers and featuring a new set of election symbols, which are not the familiar political party symbols.

Rationale and Purpose

The basic objective in designing and undertaking PEVAC is to create an enabling and conducive environment for a free, fair and smooth election process. The objectives of PEVAC include creating awareness among the voters and candidates to play their role as citizens by exercising their rights without fear or favour. For instance, to sustain the voter interest in elections to Panchayats with timely, authentic, relevant information to enable an informed choice. The information would include, inter alia, electoral registration procedures, voting procedure, voting arrangements, etc. The PEVAC would provide sustained support to women, SC/ST and other backward communities and encourage their participation both as voters and as candidates. It would also generate awareness on responsible electoral behaviour, thereby checking participation of dummy candidates.

Current realities suggest that because of varying reasons, contestants would be making commitments as per popular priorities of people in Panchayats and Municipalities. Unfortunately, in the list of the publicised priorities, some issues, which are closer to the hearts of people, also get lost. Delivery of services, though important, often dominates the list of promises made by contestants. There is an urgent need to make special efforts to bring in focus the importance of social issues like **a) Sex Selection; b) Child**

Marriage; c) Dowry; and d) All Forms of Violence against Women, including sexual harassment.

Key Objectives

- a) Making citizens aware and sensitised on issues mentioned above through specific Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) materials and popular folk means of communication. A special focus on the status of elected SC women in the political structures should also be highlighted through these BCC materials and other campaign strategies.
- b) Providing specific learning materials to contestants to help them understand the importance of issues mentioned above and also the concrete ways to address them in their constituencies.
- c) Providing BCC material on the issue of 'Sarpanch Pati' emphasising the right and the importance of women elected representatives to perform their role as elected members.
- d) Encouraging the contestants to take up violence against women in politics as an election mandate.
- e) Launching media campaign by facilitating thought-provoking stories/articles/jingles in local newspapers, TV and FM radio.
- f) Appeal by significant others (Social, Political and Religious leaders)
- g) Interface with women's networks
- h) Interface with State Election Commission (SEC) and State/District administration to bring out a policy document, wherein a concrete definition to violence against women in the electoral processes is laid out, distinguishing it from the ambit of domestic violence. The Supreme Court Guidelines on prevention of sexual harassment need to be broadened to cover prevention and addressing of sexual harassment of women elected representatives within their constituencies. This would also include violence against women during the period of campaign.

Strategy and Output

The PEVAC would seek to establish liaison with the SEC concerned as well as the State Administration at the earliest possible, so that an effective partnership is established for timely dissemination of information (electoral rolls, delimitation, symbols, electoral procedures and model codes of conduct) through channels other than the official, conventional channels. Such a partnership would also enable the campaign to interface

with the District Administration and the electoral machinery, whose roles are critical to the exercise of democratic choice.

The overall strategy of the campaign would be:

- a) Platform building for collaborative partnership between State Government (Department of Panchayati Raj and SEC), its field offices (DPROs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) and resource providers at the state level; Zilla Saksharta Samities, Yuvak Mandal, Mahila Samakhya) at the micro level; and PRIA at the national level.
- b) Formation of a state-level steering committee with representation of state-level CSOs, Donors, networks, Media and academia representatives for ongoing support to sub district level actors in terms of strategic inputs or direct support.
- c) Orientation of CSOs and volunteers to run the campaign in their respective field of activities.
- d) Linkage building with SEC, District and Block administration to ensure flow of authentic information to community targeted in PEVAC.
- e) Supporting field-level orientation programmes with innovative IEC materials, radio programmes and onsite support.
- f) To ensure collective effort of the PEVAC actors in ethical manner by consensus based self-imposed code of conduct.

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