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**PRIA**

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## **Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaign (PEVAC)**

PRIA's work in strengthening local self-governance institutions has been guided by the need to promote people-centred and people managed development. In the first round of elections 10 Panchayats, following the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, PRIA had undertaken small experimental steps to map the process. It was seen that the extent of citizen's participation in the process was negligible. Over the years, experiences in working on a programme to strengthen Panchayat has also shown that the presence of competent and appropriate candidates is a critical condition for good governance. Also, participation of citizens including women and the marginalized sections of the society, in the process of electing representatives to Panchayats is vital for ensuring accountable and responsive Panchayats. The need to promote the engagement of aware and informed citizens in the process of elections to the Panchayats, prompted PRIA and partners to plan awareness campaigns prior to the elections.

With support from MORD. PRIA and its partners conducted PEVACs in the states of "Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan. Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, where the second round of Panchayat elections were held and in Bihar which underwent the first ever elections since the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The following table gives details regarding the period of campaign and elections in the states where PEVAC was conducted.

	Rajasthan	Madhya Pradesh	Haryana	Uttar Pradesh	Kerela	Himachal Pradesh	Bihar
PEVAC period	Dec 99- Feb 2000	Jan-Feb 2000	Feb- March 2000	April-May 2000	July-Sept 2000	Nov-Dec 2000	Nov 2000 onwards
Election held on	29 Jan-4 Feb	28 Jan ,1 & 7 Feb 2000	12 & 16 March 2000	14,17,20 & 23 June 2000	Phase I- Sept 2000 Phase II- Nov 2000 Phase III- Jan 2001	December 2000	April 2001

It is worth pointing out that plans for conducting similar PEVACs had been at an advanced stage for elections scheduled in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. However, the plans had to be shelved on account of the elections being postponed.

### Objectives

The objectives common to the campaign were:

1. To promote an enabling environment for Panchayati Raj Institutions, by creating a platform of civil society organisations ready to address the need for democratic decentralisation.
2. To influence voter behavior in respect of elections to Panchayats.
3. To influence the behavior of candidates in the elections.
4. To influence the election machinery in order to provide for a free and fair poll.

## Activities

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives various activities were undertaken in the above states by PRIA and its network of Regional Support Organisations. The range of activities covered the pre-nomination stage and went on to the nomination, post-nomination and post-election scenario. where an impact assessment of the campaign was undertaken. In order to achieve critical mass as well as visibility, with respect to the campaign, it was decided by PRIA and its partners that the nature of the campaign will be both intensive as well as extensive. Through Intensive coverage, all Gram Panchayats in a Block were covered by the campaign in terms of meetings with gram sabha, mahila mandal etc. to mobilize active participation of citizens in the election process. The intensive coverage included awareness generation programmes, use of posters, pamphlets, etc. Extensive coverage included distribution of posters, pamphlets, and audio cassettes etc. through local organisation in blocks which were outside the area of intensive intervention. The broad objective was to campaign intensively across 10% per cent of the Gram Panchayats and to help extend the outreach of the campaign to another 40% of the GPs.

- **Planning and Steering the Campaign:** The State Resources Centers on Panchayats set up by PRIA or its partners in the above states acted as the nodal points for facilitating the campaign. For greater outreach of the campaign, pooling of resources and synergetic outcomes. SRCs in each state mobilized a large group of like-minded organizations- NGOs, Media, Academia and activists. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, SSK coordinated with their existing state level networking organization, UPVAN (Uttar Pradesh Voluntary Action network). In Haryana various stakeholders were involved like Mahila Mandal members, Youth Club members, University lecturers, School teachers, Anganwadi workers, Gram Sevaks, other NGO's etc. Subsequently, workshops were held for formulating joint strategies in planning, implementing and monitoring the campaign.

A steering group was constituted to take decisions on issues like media strategy, the number of posters, pamphlets, the spread of the campaign and who will do what during the campaign. For example, to maximize awareness of the people regarding the concept of PEVAC. PRIA in Himachal Pradesh organized a ten minutes talk through the All India Radio, Dharamshala. This was broadcast in the 'Trigarth Ki Awaz', a regional programme on the rural lives of Trigata region. The steering group of each state also liaised with the administration, and the State Election Commission to enlist their cooperation for the smooth conduct of the programme. In many states. this helped in accessing information regarding voters list, reservation status etc.

- **Preparation and Production of Campaign Materials:** During the planning meetings, joint decisions were taken regarding the strategy for communication to be used in the campaign, the quantum of material to be prepared and the distribution strategy. The major materials prepared for the campaign were posters, pamphlets, audio and videocassettes, etc. Care was taken to ensure that materials prepared were culturally sensitive, in the local language and in keeping with the local ethos and customs of the people. Local artistes were encouraged to participate in the preparation of materials. In Uttar Pradesh, as part of the joint initiative and collaboration, SSK and the State Election Commission developed a poster depicting the internal arrangement or the polling booth. Both SSK and the Commission shared the printing cost and the responsibility of distribution of the posters. Samarthan, in Madhya Pradesh distributed booklets like 'Panchayat Sabha Vikas', and 'Panchayat Chunav Digidarshika'.

- Campaign to create awareness amongst voters: This included a mix of activities like awareness generation programmes, use of campaign materials like posters/pamphlets/slogans etc. To enhance the outreach and effectiveness of the campaign, the steering groups adopted various strategies like slogan writing, puppet shows, bicycle and jeep rallies, padayatras, nukkad natak, street corner meetings, face-to-face programmes etc. An innovative method was followed in Madhya Pradesh where pamphlets were specially read out so as to reach out even to the illiterate sections of the population. Special attempt was made to reach out to the less informed or marginalized sections of the population. The street plays enabled the villagers in general to identify themselves with the character in the play and understand the code of conduct to be followed in the election. The plays enacted used an interactive approach by involving the audience who were to answer the various questions that came up. The people were even shown the colour of the ballot papers for different posts and the voting timings through the plays.

CENCORED in Bihar adopted a novel method for imparting message about ballot papers. The field level workers dressed themselves in kurtas dyed in four colors: Starting from the neckline, the kurta was dyed in green (the colour of ballot paper for Mukhiyas), black (colour of ballot paper for gram panchayat members), blue (the colour of ballot paper for panchayat samiti members) and red (the colour of ballot paper for zilla parishad members).

In Kerala, 45 awareness generation programmes were conducted by SAHAYI in 28 selected Panchayats in 3 blocks to enable the citizens to improve their understanding of the nature and importance of Panchayati Raj Act, election procedures and voters' rights, the qualities of the candidates, importance of promoting women and SC/ST participation and leadership. Moreover, to develop the leadership potential of prospective women contestants, leadership development trainings were conducted, for groups of women.

PRIA Haryana utilised the opportunity created by the 'Women's Day' celebration to promote the message of the relevance of women's participation in the election process in terms of campaigning and providing moral support to the women candidates and in making conscious use of votes during the elections.

In the above states, posters carrying the message of various aspects of election were pasted at prominent public places. Audiocassettes developed for the purpose were played in mobile vans, panchayat ghar, buses, tea shops, barber shops etc. In some places, people were contacted at the weekly bazaars so that information could reach far off places. Door to door campaigning was also adopted. CENCORED focused its publicity efforts at the local fairs and melas across Bihar, in order to reach the widest possible audience.

PRIA and its partner organizations made extensive use of the media during the campaign. A National Media Task Force was set up consisting of both national and regional, local media personnel. The task force consisted of a select group of journalists who write on social issues. The objective being to deepen the engagement of media with issues of local self-governance and to enable the national newspapers too to report in detail on the various aspects of elections of respective states. Emphasis was given to focus the attention of media personnel to PRIA's perspective on working with Panchayats and to highlight issues other than just violence and corrupt practices during election. For example issues like condition of women and dalit contestants, factors contributing to 10 women contesting on general seats etc.

Accordingly, PRIA facilitated the visits of the members to the states where PEVAC was going on. This enabled them to get a first-hand understanding of PEVAC and the election processes. Separate dialogues of media with NGOs and with government officials like the State Election Commission, Panchayati Raj officials etc. were also facilitated.

The outcome of these efforts have been the reporting of socially relevant articles, new stories etc. in leading newspapers, and also in the Economic and Political Weekly, the Grassroots etc.

The electronic media was also extensively used by partner organisations in the campaign process. For instance, PRIA - HP with the guidance of the All India Radio station of Dharamshala prepared a 40 seconds jingle on the main objectives of PEVAC. The slots for radio broadcasts were booked for 10 days, with one slot in the morning and one in the evening. SSK, UP participated in a talk show titled 'Panchayat Chunar - 2000' on Doordarshan along with the State Election Commissioner. CENCORED in Bihar adopted a media strategy which involved identifying journalists from the print media (both Hindi and English) and the electronic media, sensitising them in the panchayat issues, taking them to the field and providing them with materials. Consequently, news stories on the actual situation were highlighted in the media.

#### Outcomes

- An immediate and major outcome of PEVAC was the scaling up of work by partner organizations as shown in the table below.

State	Districts	Gram Panchayat	% Coverage
Rajasthan	12	846	9.1%
Madhya Pradesh	33	3818	12%
Haryana	12	600	10%
Uttar Pradesh	15	1303	2.2%
Kerala	4	88	8.4%
Himachal Pradesh	10	584	19%
Bihar	33	938	7.7%

- PEVAC helped build a wider platform of various stakeholders for programmatic interventions and energizing interest of citizens in strengthening PRIs. This involvement of civil society organisation led to the sensitization of increased number of people on issues related to Gram Sabha and PRIs.
- The campaign helped sustain the interest and involvement of various actors even after the campaign.
- Another major outcome was the increased participation of women, dalits and weaker sections in the election process. Women were encouraged to contest on unreserved seats. Motivated by the partner organisations women even conducted rallies in support of women candidates.
- The methodology used by the partner organisations in awareness generation like folk based mass media was well received by the people. This helped to a great extent in reducing the percentage of invalid votes and to focus attention on candidates who distributed liquor and money. It also enabled the voters to distinguish between

dummy and genuine candidates. At many places dummy candidates did not win because of people's awareness.

- It was found that the process of polling had become easier for the people in the area covered by PEVAC's as the voters had prior idea about the number of ballot papers. the colour of each ballot paper etc.
- The number of nominations being rejected were also found to be decreasing in areas of intervention. For example, in Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, the rate of rejection of nominations had decreased from 25 per cent in the last election to a mere 10 per cent in the present election.
  - During the elections in Bihar, CENCORED focused on the formation of 'shanti dals' (peace committees) so as to ensure peaceful election in the state. The 'shanti dais' facilitated peaceful electoral campaign by providing the candidates guidelines on model code of conduct formulated for the panchayat elections by the State Election Commission. This made the people aware of the roles and responsibilities of the polling agents. They liaised with the police and administration with a view to prevent violence.

#### Challenges/ Lessons learnt

- In the initial stages partner organizations had to deal with the tendency amongst the people to associate the organizations conducting PEVACs with political panics. It took time for the people to understand that these organizations were independent of any party affiliations and that the campaign itself was completely apolitical.
- Dissemination of information was found difficult in the areas of extensive campaign, mainly due to the lack of mass base in these regions and limited time.
- In some places, the absence of women members in the campaign team was a hindering factor in that it became difficult for campaign to approach female members of households.
- It was seen that in many cases, even though women had won the elections, they were still influenced by the decisions of male kin and are yet to develop self-confidence to take their own decisions. This is an issue which needs to be addressed by capacity building and networking strategies.
- In Haryana, a woman belonging to Alika village of Ratia Block in Fatehabad district was encouraged to take up the challenge of being a polling agent to which she agreed. On the polling day, she closely observed the women who came to vote. She would remove the veil off the face of the women voters to check their identity and in one case she objected to a woman who came to vote for the second time. The matter was referred to the polling officer, who appreciated her efforts, This illustrates the need for polling arrangements. which provide visible roles for women polling officials.

## • Postponement of elections: Case of Gujarat

In Gujarat, the decision to hold elections to the Gram Panchayats was announced in advance and people were eager to participate in the election. NGO groups were planning for voter awareness campaign. It was all of a sudden that the Government of Gujarat passed an ordinance on 4th November stating the postponement of the Gram Panchayat election. The reason given for the postponement was the prevailing drought situation in the state. It is obvious that the decision was wholly due to political reasons.

Reacting to this situation, Unnati called a meeting of NGOs on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November to discuss the plan of action. Afore than 40 NGOs participated in the meeting where various issues like the current drought situation, cost of election, past experiences of other states with similar examples, strategy for people's involvement etc., were discussed. A Panchayat Bachavo Lokshahi Abhiyan was launched. Further, a committee was formed and two major decisions were taken. Firstly, it was decided to write letters to the Chief Minister asking him to hold election before the end of December and secondly to collect quick reaction/opinion from male-female voters from various parts of Gujarat. The next day, NGO volunteers collected opinion of 1529 voters from 8 talukas spread over different parts of Gujarat. It was found that

92% voters were in favour of election. Within 15 days, 3000 letters were sent by the villagers consisting signatures of 17, 723 voters (60% male and 40% female) to the Chief Minister asking for immediate election so that the elected representatives can help manage the drought situation meaningfully. There was wide coverage by the print media.

Letters were also sent to the State Election Commissioner. Members of the committee met the State Election authorities and Secretary to the Chief Minister. But the official response was indifferent. Constant reminders were sent to the State Election Commissioner to favour Panchayat election. As a last resort, efforts were on to take legal action in this matter. However, the efforts received a setback when Gujarat experienced the massive earthquake in January 2001

- The haste with which delimitation of constituencies were done, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, caused confusion among the villagers as to which ward they belonged to. This was also reflected in the number of nominations that were rejected just because people filed their nominations from the ward/ gram panchayat of which they were no longer inhabitants. Campaigns in the future, in other states, need to address issues like transparency in the delimitation process and the timely sharing of information pertaining to delimitation.
- Irregularities in voters list, declaration of sensitive booths, counting anomalies, discrimination against the underprivileged in filing of nomination etc. were other concerns observed by the partner organisations during the campaign and election process. These observations point to the need for such campaigns to encompass awareness building on pre-election processes (like voters list publication and correction) as well as efforts to ensure prompt response by administration (two lacunae in the process of elections).

### **PEVACs and Strengthening PRIs**

- The large platform of civil society organisations formed by partner organisations for PEVAC and the enhanced interest of these CSOs in issues of local self-governance have helped form a launching pad for PRIA and partners for future interventions, on



a much broader scale. The campaign approach used in PEVAC has helped to evolve similar approaches to issues like orientation of newly elected representatives and mobilisation of citizens for participation in Gram Sabhas. The platform developed for PEVACs. offers the possibility of an immediate scaling up of the programme to strengthen PRIs, thereby helping the efforts to achieve a critical mass.

- Lessons/ concerns emerging from experience in conducting PEVAC have helped refine the strategies and the methods for future interventions in the states where elections to Panchayats are due.
- Advocacy efforts based on the experiences of conducting PEVAC are proposed to be taken up with the policy makers and especially the State Election Commission, Already, the advisory panel on decentralisation. set up by the NCRWC, has been lobbied by PRIA in this regard and the panel has come out with strong recommendations so as to protect the constitutional mandate for timely elections, held in a fair and free manner and assured by a State Election Commission.

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