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**PRIA**

2005

## **Pre-Election Campaign in Bathiyat and Mela Blocks of Chamba District**

In Chamba district pre-election intervention was carried out with the help of ICDS Project functionaries. Initially during our field visits attempts were made to establish contact with the NGOs in the district. As such contacts were established with three resource persons only.

Two resource persons who had contacts with local Mahila Mandal extended their help to disseminate the pamphlets and posters prepared by PRIA and its support organisations.

The idea of working with the government department was conceived after the our visit to the CDPO office. We were informed that the CDPO, Chuvani is a very active person and takes keen interest in social welfare activities. So a visit was arranged to his office to chalk out a workable strategy with open mind. We were ready to follow any strategy suggested by them. During our first visit we had discussion with the Senior Assistant, Mr. Kaul, He showed keen interest in the PRIA's plans for Pre-election campaign. He proposed that PRIA should hold a meeting for Anganwari workers, in which they should be made aware about new Panchayati Raj Act. It was felt that AWW have greater reach. As she already has rapport established with the villagers, it would be easy for the villagers to accept her words. If the AWW is made aware she can disseminate the information to various households. This can be done along with their regular field duties. The proposal well suited PRIA's strategy which emphasised on local participation. Our aim was to create interest and awareness in people on the issue of Panchayati Raj so that they can further disseminate the information to the masses. If we try doing the entire campaigning on our own, it would take ages plus would need ample manpower.

Anganwari workers have their routine monthly meetings at CDPO office at the end of each month. It was decided to provide them information on Panchayati Raj during these meetings. It would save any additional mobilization of time, money and effort. The routine meetings scheduled for the month of Nov' were as follows:

20th: at Chuvani, consisting of AWWs from Chuvani, Raipur and Hawar circles.

21st at Chuvani, consisting of Sihunta and Balana circles.

22nd at Banikhet, consisting of Banikhet, Mel and Batri circles.

23rd at Chamba, consisting of Chamba and Keedi circles.

24th at Mehla, consisting of Mehla circle.

These AWWs belong to two blocks, namely Bathiyat (Chuvani) and Mehla. There are 264 Anganwaris in these blocks which are looked after by five Supervisors

As decided, the meetings were attended. A general format which was followed is as follows:

Each routine monthly meeting of the AWWs was attended by approximately 45 AWWs. After completing their routine work, two hours' time was given to the PRIA's representative to provide information on Panchayati Raj.

The interaction was initiated by motivating the participants to share their information PRI. The first point which everyone talked about was women reservation. They were

enthusiastic about it. But why? They were asked to give reasons to prove that the reservation for women is good. Women then talked about better hearing of women issues~ more openness with women Pradhan, better understanding and dealing of village problems. All this would gradually lead to improvement in the status of women.

However, all this change is not easy. Women might have to face lots of problems to bring this resolution. These problems maybe outside and/or inside one's house. Due to our male dominated society or more appropriately our socialization pattern, women are not allowed to move and talk freely. They have developed a feeling of dependence on her male counterparts. As a child she is dependent on her husband and this dependence continues till old age, by way of dependence on her son. All this has affected her hesitation about contesting for panchayat elections. On her own she is not coming forward, it is only after a backing/support from the male members of her house that she is contesting. In the houses where women are not getting the support, they are not able to contest. Generally, their participation is opposed on the grounds of social allegations lesser time for housework, untimely moving out of the house. people's accusations about bad character, etc. It is only when the family members are understanding and encouraging that women can participate actively. There are cases when women are getting encouragement at home but are still facing problems at the community level. The society is not ready to accept a woman at the decision-making level. If the women start travelling frequently and meeting various officials, everyone develops doubts about her character. All these retards her ability to function actively.

Here comes the role of Mahila Mandal. Being a women's group, it has certain moral duties towards the contesting women candidate. They can extend their support at all the three levels namely individual, family and community.

At the individual level the mahila Mandal members can encourage the women to contest. They can assure their support for the future panchayat activities. The main thing is to assure the women candidate about MMs support to-her.

At the family level, MM members can talk to the family members of the women interested to contest and motivate them to support the women from their house. If they have objection to the women's moving alone, they can be assured about her being accompanied by one of the MM member. The family members should be realized the importance of the women's participation in panchayat activities.

At the community level, MM members can try to make the senior members understand the importance of women candidate.

However, all this requires sincere efforts on the part of Mahila Mandal members. Similar effort is expected from AWW. Being a distinct entity in the community, she holds a separate and slightly influential position. During her field visits she can make effort to make the people understand the importance of women entering the political arena through the reservation of seats for them in the panchayats. She should try to encourage the active women to contest the elections. It is very essential that an active woman gets elected otherwise the provision of reservation would fall flat rather affect the whole system negatively. It is true that initially the elected women candidate might not know everything and hence might commit some mistakes. But this should not result in her rejection and total abandonment.

It is very essential for everyone to at least know the main provisions of Panchayati Raj Act. The Act makes the three-tier system mandatory. There would be Panchayat

at village level, block level and district level. 1/3rd reservation would be there at each level for women candidates. This would be done on rotation basis. Reservation for SC, ST and OBCs would be done in proportion to their population. The area with greater population of these categories would come under reservation. Details were provided about the roles and responsibilities of elected members at all three levels. The functions of Election Commission and Financial Commission were also highlighted. The participants had the feeling that large amount of money will come for the panchayats, and hence Pradhans would exercise great power. This misconception was removed by clarifying the role of Pradhan and the level of funds available for village welfare. Pradhans would be getting limited funds directly (through JRY), however they would have a major role to play in the selection of beneficiaries for various government schemes. In case the Pradhan is not carrying out his/her duties properly, Gram Sabha can have a no confidence motion against him/her.

It was a general feeling among the women that if they are not contesting the elections, they need not be bothered about the reservation of women. They need to develop a sense of responsibility as a member of gram sabha member. They should attend the panchayat and gram sabha meeting regularly. Attending shouldn't just imply physical presence rather women should actively participate in the discussions and give their views and suggestions. Their responsibility doesn't end with mere casting of five votes (for Panch, Up-Pradhan, Pradhan, BDC member and Zila Parishad member). There is much more to the responsibility of a responsible citizen. An individual's responsibility begins from the selection of the right candidate. The definition of right candidate may vary from person to person, it is very subjective. However there are certain traits which are commonly seen for an ideal representative. These include:

- \* Sincerity
- \* Understanding about local needs
- \* Ability to communicate properly
- \* Patience to listen to people
- \* Capability to make plans
- \* Educated

While casting a vote care should be taken that a hardworking person is elected. He/she should be able to carry out his/her duties efficiently. The voter shouldn't get biased because of religion, caste, money and power. Mistake once done can be painful for the next five years. It is easy to criticize someone. But the point is what effort we are ready to make to ensure the efficiency. As a villager we are always ready to criticize the Pradhan, but do we ever analyze ourselves and carry out the responsibility of being a gram sabha member. The situation is very much similar to the AWWs situation. The villagers always talk about the corruption done by AWW, but do they ever come and ask her what problems she is facing in carrying out her duties. Maybe if they talk some solution can be traced. This implies to the situation of Pradhan also.

It is always better to choose a Person in light of his/her expected role and responsibilities. So attempts should be made to make everyone aware about the roles and responsibilities of the panchayat members. Pradhan is expected to make plans at the village level in accordance to the resources available at the village itself. The dependence on government resources should be avoided. The distribution of village funds is in the hands of the Pradhan, so it is very important that he/she prioritizes the needs effectively. Panches can give their suggestions for this purpose.

All this requires a person who is ready to listen to the people and prioritize the needs accordingly.

After having this detailed discussion on various aspects of Panchayati Raj, the discussion moved on PRIA's expectation from the participating AWWs. It was accepted that AWWs are overburdened with the expectations from them, and then if we also start imposing some responsibilities on them, it was quite natural that AWWs would get irritated. She is the basic unit of implementation of ICDS project and that itself is weak. They are hardly paid anything, but there is an endless list of expectations. Amidst such circumstances if we also add on their work, it is not justified.

Hearing all this AWWs extended their full cooperation and assured the speaker of a good work. They were requested to disseminate the information they have received to other women of their panchayat. They were given 15 pamphlets of each type (Main provisions about Panchayati Raj, Women's role in Panchayati Raj, and Information on election procedures). These pamphlets were to be disseminated among the literate and influential people of their panchayat so that they may read it and further pass on the information to others. Along with these pamphlets they were given two posters, with qualities of a good candidate written on it. These posters were to be pasted on some prominent spots of their village.

AWWs, were requested to motivate the active women. to stand for elections. In case any lady is facing problem at any level. AWW should try to provide her support and at the same time she should support from other women in the community. This is the need of the hour. If we do not support each other, we might fail and hence would become a laughing stock in front of all others who are opposing the provision of reservation. It is very essential for women to be present during panchayat meetings and provide moral support to the elected women candidate. It may so happen that alone she might not gather the confidence to speak. We have to take care of even minute things.

She should try to remove the misconceptions prevailing at village level about education being an essential condition for contesting for elections. There is also a need of creating awareness about the role of gram sabha. All this would require extensive counselling by AWWs.

With these words and assurances, the meeting was terminated.

In the meeting organised at Chuvani on the 21<sup>st</sup> good response was received. The AWWs of two panchayats suggested to have similar meeting at their own panchayat area. They took the initiative to organise the women's gathering. Amidst such enthusiasm. Two meetings were organised on the 25<sup>th</sup> at Sihunta and Simoth.

In Banikhet and Mehla meetings the AWWs were not participating actively. They were hesitant about speaking in front of their senior officer, CDPO. This was traced as a major problem for all the women. They showed inhibition in front of their elders. Communication problem was felt in front of senior officials as well. This inhibition can greatly affect their performance as an elected representative. Hence stress was laid on motivating them to speak and open up in meetings. It was conveyed that without efficient communication the elected women can become a major failure. So even if they don't learn anything new during the meeting, at least they should try to speak in front of a big gathering and develop more confidence.

According to the original plan, video film on women's role in PRI was to be shown to the participants. But unfortunately due to non-availability of video, the films couldn't be shown. However, a copy of each cassette namely 'Aahat', 'Hum Raaj Karengay' and 'Tu Zinda Hai', video film was given to the CDPO, Chuvari. He would be showing these cassettes whenever possible.

Besides these meetings for ICDS functionaries~ two more meetings were organised for Mahila Mandal members of Sihunta and Simoth panchayat. These meetings were also organised on the same lines.

The first Mahila Mandal meeting was organised at Sihunta, and a poor response was received. After a long wait few women turned up. Later when the reason was such poor participation was sought, it was found that most of the women had gone for agricultural work. It was a peak season of agriculture and the women had gone to either earn their living or to help in their own farm. In both the cases it was an important event and hence couldn't be missed.

So, the wrong timing of the meeting resulted in its failure. Even though there were poor participation, AWW had carried out her duty efficiently and had arranged for a VCR. So 'Aahat' video film was shown. While summing up the movie, stress was given on the unity of women (which was felt to be lacking in Sihunta).

The second Mahila Mandal meeting was organised at Simoth, which was actively attended by the women. They had skipped their day's work and had come to attend the meeting. The women were enthusiastic about the elections and were well aware. They were symbol of unity. The advantages of a cohesive group functions were appreciated.

Overall the AWWs showed good response. But seeing the practical constraints like geographical situation and lots of other job responsibilities some gaps can be expected.

### **CONSTRAINTS:**

1. The geographical situation makes it very difficult to commute fast. Villages are situated at large distances which would make it difficult for the AWW to cover all the households and hence there would be restricted impact.
2. Language problem. Though the local- could understand Hindi but still once it was spoken in flow and with speed, they used to lose track. Also difficulty was faced by the participants to put across their message (as they could generally speak Hlmachali and the speaker couldn't understand it). So, there was restricted communication.
3. Direct intervention was very limited. The intervention was through a communities representative (AWW) who was already overburdened and frustrated. So there is an element of dependence.
4. The presence of CDPO during the meeting retarded the participation of AWWs.
5. The participants had come to attend the meeting from far places and hence had to leave early. This provided little for discussion. In hills, the buses are very few and the last leaves quite early. All this effected their concentration in latter part of the meeting.

## Impact

1. It had a good impact on the AWWs. They were made aware about many aspects of Panchayati Raj and their role in it.
2. An open discussion was followed by the acceptance of number of roles AWWs were supposed to play. The sympathetic hearing of their genuine day to day problems (although the solution was beyond the purview of the meetings) had a positive impact on them. It was strongly felt that they would try to disseminate the information along with their day to day field work.

## RADIO PROGRAMME DONE ON PRI

An interview was given by PRIA employee, Namita Malik, for a rural programme names 'Trigart Ki Awaz'. It dealt with information about PRIA, PRIA's PRI intervention in Himachal Pradesh and the strategy adopted for the same. The programme was broadcasted in 16/11/95 at 6:30pm from Dharamshaala FM channel.

Mr. Manas and Mr. Shaimender, program directors at the Dharmshala Radio Station have showed interest in arranging more programmes for us in future as well.

## IMPACT:

The programme had a limited viewership of Dharamshala rural people only. This was mainly due to its being an FM. channel. Generally, in Himachal, people listen more to Jalandhar and Shimla Channel.

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