



Knowledge. Voice. Democracy.

PRIA

2001

Seminar on Pre-Election Voter's Awareness Campaign (PEVAC)

CONTEXT

For the past seven years, PRIA and its partners have been working for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions. A range of interventions are associated with our PRI programme like capacity building, awareness generation, research and advocacy, micro planning and information dissemination. Our experience over the years reveal that citizens participation in election process was negligible. Also, the presence of competent and appropriate candidates is a critical condition for good governance i.e. an appropriate and accountable Panchayat. The need to promote the engagement of aware and informed citizens, especially women and marginalised in the process of elections, prompted PRIA and partners to plan awareness campaign prior to the elections. This took the form of Pre Election Voters' Awareness Campaign (PEVAC). PEVAC was launched in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where second round of Panchayat elections were held and in Bihar which underwent PRI elections were held after 23 long years. During PEVAC, we have come across variety of issues associated with Panchayati Raj institutions and therefore, it was important to share our experiences with various institutions and stakeholders. After outlining the context of the seminar, which was chaired by Chief Election Commissioner, Shri J.M. Lyngdoh, Dr. Rajesh Tandan, PRIA welcomed the participants and State election Commissioners,

OVERVIEW OF PEVAC: Seminar provided an overview of PEV AC regarding the need, activities, and emerging issues.

NEED (WHY PEVAC)

- a. Strong interest among voters and their high turnout (65-70%)
- b. Complexity of polling process e.g., different colour of ballot papers and intricacy of symbols etc.
- c. Lack of information regarding nomination papers, fees etc.
- d. It has been often seen, that in democratic processes, Dalit, women and other disadvantaged groups get marginalised and need has been felt to enable their participation both as candidates and voters.
- e. Free and fair poll has always been challenge before us and for that facilitation of institutional responses is needed such as
 - State Election Commission: For Timely information on polling
 - State Government. For providing security arrangements
 - Local Administration For making nomination papers available
 - Media: For the coverage of polling details

Keeping in view the pre-election needs for strengthening the Panchayats, PEVAC has been launched with the following objectives

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

ACTIVITIES DURING PEVAC (HOW?)

The range of activities covered the pre-nomination stage and went on to the nomination, post nomination, polling stage and impact assessment of the campaign. On the whole, PEVAC included following activities:

- A) Building the Network: PRIA and its partners mobilised a larger group of NGOs, academia, CBOs, media and other like-minded organisations for the greater outreach of the campaign. For example in Andhra Pradesh, forum for Panchayats was set up in every district and in Bihar, CENCORED made a network of 350 voluntary organisations for PEVAC.
- B) Reaching the voters and candidates: In undertaking this campaign variety of approaches have been used to reach the voters and candidates. These approaches acted as means to generate awareness among people. In general. Posters, pamphlets, audio and video cassettes, padyatra and group discussions have been extensively used across the states, besides these, innovations were done by various states. In Himachal Pradesh for instance radio broadcasts were used to convey the message. In Madhya Pradesh. posters were prepared keeping in view the illiterate and marginalised sections. Street corner meetings were organised in Uttar Pradesh, while street plays were commonly used in other states as well. In Bihar, information centres were set up at block level to fulfil the information gaps. Special attention was given to preparation of campaign materials in local language and formulation of approaches for women and illiterates, so that they could engage themselves meaningfully in the process.
- C) Enabling the Access to Information: Information regarding electoral rolls, reservations and polling arrangements were disseminated. In Rajasthan, Margdarshika was prepared, while in Bihar information about different colour ballot papers was conveyed by volunteers with the help of wearing Tiranga Kuna.
- D) Promoting media Engagement: Prior to PEVAC, National Media was force was organised for covering the Panchayat Election Process. The emphasis was also laid on highlighting the positive aspects of Panchayat elections, as most of media cover issue like violence, booth capturing etc. In Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, stress was also given to coverage by Hindi Newspapers. TV clips on importance of women participation were also shown on Doordarshan prime time in Andhra Pradesh.
- E) Support for Candidates: Candidates from marginalised sections like women and Dalit often hesitate to contest because of lack of support and in PEVAC an attempt was made to provide the support mechanism to these candidates. For example, in Kerela SHGs, Dalit Batwjan Forum in Andhra Pradesh and Mabila Mandals in Haryana and Himachal helped in building support for marginalised groups.

EMERGING ISSUES

Issues during PEVAC were

- There is tendency of state governments to postpone Panchayat elections. For instance, in Gujarat drought conditions and later earthquake became excuse to postpone the PR! elections. In fact it has been felt that these crises could have been solved in a better way with the help of PRIs.
- Ensuring SEC' s role as neutral and independent authorities is still in question. Their tenure, conditions of appointment and financial powers are not adequate and not uniform across stales.
- SECs have not been given the responsibility of processes like notification. Preparation of electoral rolls, delimitation and reservation of constituencies and its

rotation. Constitutionally they are responsible for the supervision, direction and control of PRI elections but at present their role is fragmented.

- The Standards for Panchayat elections is not similar to that of Parliamentary assembly elections. For example, two child norm has been applied in Rajasthan as eligibility criteria for contesting PRI elections and there is no such norm for the Parliamentary or assembly elections.
- Money and muscle power also affects the Panchayat elections and it in turn affects the degree of people's participation and overall quality of leadership.
- In several states, cases of "manufactured consensus" in form of uncontested elections and auctioning of Panchayat posts are taking place and this is an obstacle in the democratic process.
- Enabling participation of marginalised sections, and women and Dalits acting as proxy candidates is the major issue to be solved.
- How to influence institutional behavior according to prevailing socio economic and cultural situations.

COMMENTS FROM DISTINGUISHED PANEL OF THE STATE ELECTION COMMISSIONERS

In response to overview of PEVAC, State Election Commissioners of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Orissa shared their views and also highlighted some state specific issues, as following

- Postponement of Panchayat elections has taken place in many states like Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and it hinders the democratic process. On this, the SECs of Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh said that elections in their states have taken place without any delay. The SEC of Rajasthan stated that during election times, employees of state government departments went on strike which state government thought to it as an excuse for delaying the elections but here SEC Rajasthan played a vital role by persuading State government to conduct the elections on time and Staffs of central government were deployed. This depicts that SECs have to take initiatives in promoting regular PRI elections.

In Orissa delay in PRI elections is due to reorganisation of Gram Panchayats which has to be based on census of 2001. The issue here is that data will be available by 2003 and question is will these elections be postponed for another two years'

- "All the SECs except Gujarat stated that delimitation of constituencies and deciding over rotation of reservation are in the hands of State governments and many a times this leads to lack of transparency. Since SECs are to supervise, control and direct the electoral processes, the responsibilities of different phases should go under SECs including delimitation of constituencies and rotation of reserved seats. At least SEC can act as an advisory body to the state government while delimiting the constituencies, rotating the reserved seats and issuing the notification.
- " SECs also face problem of inadequate finances and staff facilities.
- Reservation of seats have been provided to women candidates in all the states, even then they are not able to perform independently and they are representatives only for name sake and reservation of seats is not giving the desired results. Giving example from Rajasthan SEC stated that many a times husbands of women representatives take decisions on behalf of their wives and therefore, the new post of "Sarpanch Pati/ Pradhan Pan" is commonly seen. The issue before us is to empower them so that they could be actively involved in the whole democratic process. In Madhya

Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh degree of women participation has increased in the second term of PRIs.

- Besides representation of women, another issue is involvement of women in electoral process. In Rajasthan. For example the turnout for women voters is 6% lower than the men voters due to high rate of illiteracy and social restrictions.
- On making people aware of electoral rules, SEC Rajasthan states that in their state, SEC try to convey people about the rules and therefore percentage of invalid votes is low (3.5%). He also laid emphasis on uniform colours of ballot papers across the states.
- Although there is no provision for involvement of political parties in majority of states at Gram Panchayat level, political parties are often involved indirectly. This leads to incidence of violence and also affects the quality of leadership.
- Incidence of uncontested elections/auctioning of Panchayat posts are seen in several states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and even Gujarat. In Gujarat State government is promoting such processes by giving incentives which has increased from Rs 2000 in last PRI term to Rs. 100,000 this year. Last year there were 27 Panchayats without Bity election and this year when incentives have gone up, the whole democratic process is in question.
- There is also a need to educate and sensitise people at grass root for electing the right candidate.
- All SECs unanimously agreed that PEVAC is a good effort and fulfils the objective of strengthening democratic process at the grass root Since Panchayat elections consist of several phases, PEVAC should start even prior to elections i.e., during preparation of electoral rolls. It has been seen that people are not responsive during this process and there is need to make them aware of incorporating their names in electoral rolls.

Conclusion

Concluding the seminar, Chief Election Commissioner said that our villages face a wide range of problems like, illiteracy and inequality in terms of caste, gender and class. Therefore. holding elections mechanically are not going to solve the problems of rural areas and PRIs have to be made more effective. Keeping this in account. we should emphasis on following aspects:

- Ensuring regular elections
- Ensuring free and fair elections as well as making people aware of the importance of good leadership.
- Checking the uncontested elections which is absolutely undemocratic
- Ensuring empowerment of women.

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