

CITIZEN INITIATIVES AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Experiences from India

SUMONA DASGUPTA



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Citizen Initiatives and Democratic Engagement

List of Abbreviations

ADC	Additional Deputy Commissioner
BDPO	Block Development and Panchayat Officer
CENSORED	Centre for Communication Resources Development
COVA	Confederation of Voluntary Associations
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CWS	Centre for World Solidarity
DBF	Dalit Bahujan Front
DDNN	Deccan Development NGO Network
ECI	Election Commission of India
EPG	Empowered Participatory Governance
EVMs	Electronic Voting Machines
FIR	First Information Report
GSM	Gram Sabha Mobilisation
IAS	Indian Administrative Services
IFCB	International Forum on Capacity Building
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti
NEW	National Election Watch
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
PCMU	Procurement and Contract Management Unit, PRIA
PEVAC	Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign
PRI	Participatory Research Institute
PRIA	Society for Participatory Research in Asia
PRJA	Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan
RGF	Rajiv Gandhi Foundation
RPSC	Rajasthan Public Service Commission
SEC	State Election Commission

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SEWA	Society for Education and Welfare Activities
SP	Superintendent of Police
TOT	Training of Trainers
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Foreword

It was during a discussion with local citizens in some villages of Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh in October 1995 that the suggestion was made to us at Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) that we start an exercise to inform voters and candidates about the salience of the forthcoming elections to institutions of self-government in India. These were the first elections to be held following two Constitutional Amendments to the Constitution of India (the 73rd and 74th Amendments) which conferred constitutional sanctity to units of local self-government and made elections to these bodies mandatory.

The PRIA field staff along with a handful of local activists made a modest attempt in 2–3 blocks of Mandi and Dharamshala districts of Himachal Pradesh to inform some citizens about their rights to elect their panchayat representatives (as representatives of rural local self-governing units are called in India) in the elections held during December 1995. This small effort taught us several lessons, and suggested that a deeper engagement is necessary to support women and others from historically-disadvantaged sections to contest these elections without fear or favour. Their active participation as candidates could not be taken for granted. This was because their election to units of self-governance would clearly challenge the existing power relationships in India's village communities across the country. The disturbance of the existing status quo that is inevitable in the processes of social transformation would necessarily bring turbulence of varying degrees in its wake. Consequently, the newly-elected representatives needed to be supported in this period of transition both during and after the election to the (now constitutionally endorsed) local institutions of self-governance.

However, by the time this idea of civil society intervention gained momentum the first round of elections under the

new amendment acts of India that provided a constitutional sanctity to rural and urban units of local self-governance was already completed. PRIA began to discuss these ideas with its partner civil society groups in other states, and it was decided to attempt a campaign that came to be known as Pre-Election Voters' Awareness campaigns (PEVAC) well in advance of the second round of panchayat elections beginning in 2000. The subsequent PEVAC experience taught us the value of this campaign not only for the voters and contestants, but also for election authorities.

For us, the scale of PEVAC in 2000 was immense; no such civil society engagement in formal electoral process had been attempted in India (and for that matter in any other country) before. The support from some of the State Election Commissions (SECs) further encouraged PRIA to scale it up in the next round which began from 2004–05. Nearly half the rural population of the states where PEVAC was launched (estimated to be about 150 million voters from the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat) was covered by a coalition comprising several hundred civil society groups in each state. For the first time, PEVAC was also launched in urban municipalities.

As the fourth round of panchayat elections started from January 2010, the model of civil society engagement has been substantially institutionalised. PEVAC has demonstrated the potential for inclusive democracy based on dialogue and participation of the people. Sometimes, the civil society interventions have taken the form of a more institutionalised programme such as the Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan (PRJA).

This book entitled *Citizen Initiatives and Democratic Engagements: Experiences from India* by Sumona DasGupta tells the story of this campaign, and captures its excitements and constraints, its possibilities and limitations as experienced by actors in the field. DasGupta anchors this story in the larger global discourses on deepening democracy and the book will consequently be of interest to all those interested in issues

related to comparative democratisation as well as the scope of civil society initiatives in India.

The book critically assesses the strategy and methodology of this large-scale campaign and its follow ups. In explicating the strategy of the campaign it also examines the role of the SEC in initiating and sustaining democratic engagements at the grass-roots level. In fact in the course of the PEVAC experience, PRIA also learnt a great deal about the electoral system in the country, and the ways in which it needs to be further reformed, if the citizens' faith in democracy is to be sustained and deepened.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has recently celebrated 60 years of its existence. It has acquired a strong reputation as being an independent and non-partisan regulator of elections to assemblies and parliament in India. Its expertise is sought internationally, and its procedures are recognised as robust. This was, however, not the case till recently. It was only during Mr T. N. Seshan's tenure as Chief Election Commissioner (1990–96) that debates around the independence of the ECI were foregrounded and best practices institutionalised. The SECs are less than 20-years-old, and the critical question is, what are the precedents we can draw on from the experience of the ECI to ensure that the SECs remain non-partisan and impartial since the success or otherwise of local-level elections will depend on this. What has the ECI done to pass on its best practices and expertise to the various SECs? The irony is that many states in the country today continue to have two different sets of electoral rolls — one prepared by ECI, and another by SEC because ECI has not modified its classification of voters to bring it in line with the jurisdictions of panchayats and municipalities!

The SECs assume importance because of the radical transformative experiment that is sought to be brought about by the amendment acts that empowered local units of self-governance. One such move was the affirmative action for women, and historically disadvantaged communities in India, such as members of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes

in panchayats and municipalities which have resulted in much deeper and broader involvement of the electorate. Thousands of daily labourers and homemakers who have not had access to formal literacy are now contesting elections to these local bodies. While this book describes and assesses several networks of civil society organisations (CSOs) who have attempted to support these newly-elected representatives in the aftermath of the campaign to elect them, it also recognises the role of the impartial SECs in this regard.

While the initiative has come from CSOs the experiences of these PEVACs seem to suggest that election authorities have played a catalytic and supportive role in several states. Many SECs have promoted greater participation of citizens for contesting elections and for voting. Several SECs have recognised and supported civil society coalitions for election promotion, monitoring and observer roles (strictly on a non-partisan basis). These experiences have made elections to local bodies far more inclusive than assembly and parliamentary elections today. This book explores this new experiment in building synergy between the SECs and CSOs.

In some fundamental sense, elections to constitutional bodies provide the foundations to democracy. Democracy flourishes if the citizens have faith in electoral processes and authorities, if they have the belief in making a choice, if they respect the electoral process. Voter registrations, voting percentages, choice of candidates and options exercised all depend on informed and active citizenry. Civil society has an important role to play in this regard. Election authorities can encourage and support such engagements by civil society.

Citizen Initiatives and Democratic Engagements: Experiences from India is about the role of CSOs in making elections to local bodies inclusive and the challenges involved in this process. The dominant narrative is about the campaigns carried out by civil society to make such elections inclusive — for candidates, voters and citizens alike. In essence then, this book is about politics of democracy, and politicisation of civil society engagement in deepening democracy. Much more needs

to happen to scale-up civil society engagements in deepening democracy. This is all the more relevant now that the Women's Reservation Bill is in parliament and civil society can support those women who want to contest assembly and parliament elections in a similar manner. With 50 per cent reservation for women in panchayats now, there is a greater requirement of support for them as well. And much more acknowledgement, and encouragement, needs to be provided for linking civil society with the politics of democracy.

February 2010

Rajesh Tandon
President, Society for Participatory
Research in Asia (PRIA)
New Delhi

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Campaigns for Citizen Governance: A Conceptual Overview

In 1993 and 1994, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were passed in India. Hailed as pathbreaking and transformative in their potential to deepen democratic decentralisation, these acts provided, for the first time since Independence, a Constitutional sanctity to institutions of local self-governance at the rural level (Panchayati Raj Institutions [PRIs]) and urban local levels (municipalities). It then became mandatory for all states in India to enact their own local self-governance acts in keeping with the letter and spirit of these amendments unless they were specifically exempted from them.¹ By 1995 many states were getting ready to initiate elections for local self-governance units under the new laws.

In the same year (1995) an ambitious and massive civil society campaign was launched in India to inculcate voters' awareness in states that were about to go to the panchayat/municipal polls. The campaign mode was also extended to sustain democratic engagements in states once elections to local self-governance units had taken place. This marked the beginning of a new and unique experiment with democracy that looked beyond its macro-institutional, structural dimensions to

¹ No amendment of the Indian Constitution extends to the state of Jammu and Kashmir unless so extended by an order of the President under article 370 (1). The provisions of these amendment acts also do not apply to some areas such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, hill districts of Mizoram and Darjeeling in West Bengal for which special hills councils are set up.

engage with a more dialogic, deliberative form of democracy. The fact that the campaigns were entirely citizen-led gave it yet another special characteristic.

What actually took place on the ground was a chain of interrelated campaigns. The first of these was named PEVAC (Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign), followed by PRJA (Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan) or the initiative to prepare and energise the institutes of rural local self-government and finally the Gram Sabha Mobilisation (GSM) campaign to equip the lowest tier of local self-government known as Gram Sabha in rural India to play a proactive role in ushering in a culture of transparency and accountability. Together, the campaigns sought to promote worthy citizen leaders and collectives to participate in local self-governance. One of the keys to deepening democracy and creating conditions for social transformation is to ensure that worthy candidates contest elections. Newly-elected members also need support to equip them with knowledge and skills to make informed choices and function as autonomous agents. These emerged as the operating guidelines of the citizen-led campaigns and programmes which were initiated and led by a civil society organisation (CSO) called Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). PRIA worked on the premise that grass-roots intervention can be meaningful only if it is based on the lived experiences of the people and empowerment comes out of knowing and engaging with their world and catalysing their roles in social transformation. This cardinal principle informed the manner in which the campaigns were designed.

What started off as a campaign led by PRIA, however, snowballed into a huge civil society campaign that built strategic networks with CSOs across the country. The media and the State Election Commissions (SECs) — entrusted to ensure fair and free elections for local bodies — were also part of this alliance and network which provided the collective support on which the campaign was built. Using innovative and participatory methodologies born out of years of engagement