

Pre-Election voters' awareness campaign in Rajasthan – a journey

12

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- engaging in independent and critical analysis of societal trends and issues, development policies and programmes; and,
- enabling dialogue across diverse perspectives, sectors and institutions.

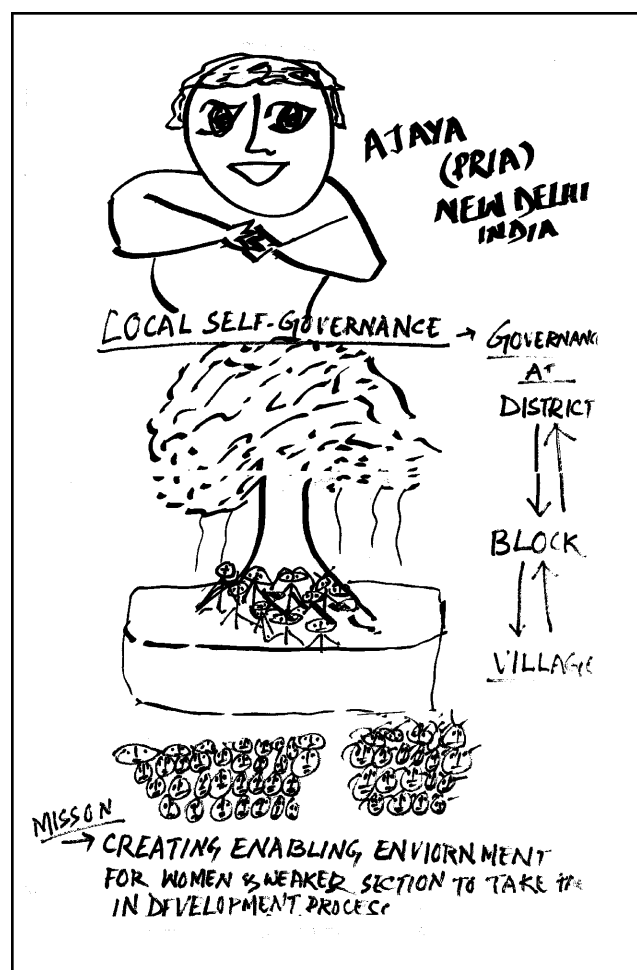
In 1999, PRIA embarked on a programme to increase citizen participation in governance through a pre-election voters awareness campaign.

The pre-election voters' awareness campaign

We did this pre-election voters awareness campaign in Rajasthan, between January and February 2000, with our partner organisation 'Unnati' (which means 'development' in Hindi). I was co-ordinating this campaign in two districts, namely Jhunjhunu and Sikar. There has been a change in the constitution that says that women and the 'weaker sections'¹ of the community have to make up a particular proportion of the seats in local government bodies called the Panchayati Raj institutions. Many of these women and 'weaker sections' get elected for the first time, without any political experience and with little or no literacy. Most of these newly elected representatives are not aware of their duties and responsibilities, so most of the functions and responsibilities in the Gram Panchayat² are carried out by the spouses or male members of the family on behalf of the women Sarpanch³.

Against this backdrop, we decided to do a pre-election voters' awareness campaign focusing on women and the

Figure 1 Ajaya's portrait (from IDS workshop, May 2000)



weaker sections as well as other citizens in general. We wanted to help to make them aware of their duties and responsibilities, citizens' rights, how to vote and how to choose good leaders, so that when they got elected, they could do better work for the village and for the society as a whole.

1 'Weaker sections' is the Government of India's term for men and women who are poor or from minority ethnic groups. They call these ethnic groups scheduled castes and schedule tribes as there are special laws concerning their status.

2 Gram Panchayat is the institution of local self-governance at the village level.

3 Sarpanch is the chairperson of the Gram Panchayat.

What do they think...?

We decided to use traditional forms of communication like puppet shows (*Kath Putli/Hast Putli*), folk theatre (*Kala Jatha/Nukad Natak*), song, dance, music, procession (*padyatra*) etc. These are forms of communication related to folk culture and scripts are based on local dialect and village realities. We found that there were some people working in the rural areas who knew how to use video, so we mobilised their support in making a video too. There's a situation I can tell you about, which is in Kasli village.

The Panchayat elections are a very political campaign and people sometimes think we're campaigning for the political parties, so before we start the programme, we invite people to hear what we're going to do and why we want to do this kind of programme. So when we entered the village, we started announcing the programme, and asked the people what they wanted to know about this programme.

They said that '*if you're trying to do this folk theatre, we're very interested in seeing it, but how are you going to show us about good leaders?*'. We asked '*What are your criteria for a good leader?*' They told us what they thought; '*someone who is concerned about our problems, involves and mobilises the support of men and women in the development process*', (*'Jo hamare samasyaon ke prati gambhir ho, jo mahilaon ko gaon ke vikas mein sath leke chale, jo vikas karyo mein logon ka samil kare aur unke sahyog le'*) they replied. They also said that the leader who is getting elected should work for the village and not for himself, not acquiring resources for his own house or his own family, but for the development of the village.

Secondly one member of the group also said, '*whoever gets elected should involve all the people in the village development, so that he/she makes participatory kinds of decisions*', (*'jo bhi jite, wo jarur gaon ke sabhi logon ko gamin vikas mein samil kare, ta ki wo sarb samatii se decision le seke'*).

So the villagers told us what they thought a representative should do and what we should include in our folk theatre.

My personal journey

I would like to share my experiences in the campaign, which I call my personal journey where I faced lots of challenges, risks, but also derived lots of hopes and aspirations from it. What are the challenges? What are the risks? Challenges, because when I started the project, I had little knowledge and experience of using participatory development communication in creating awareness but, at the same time, I love to work in new areas which are more challenging, therefore my expectations and hopes were high.

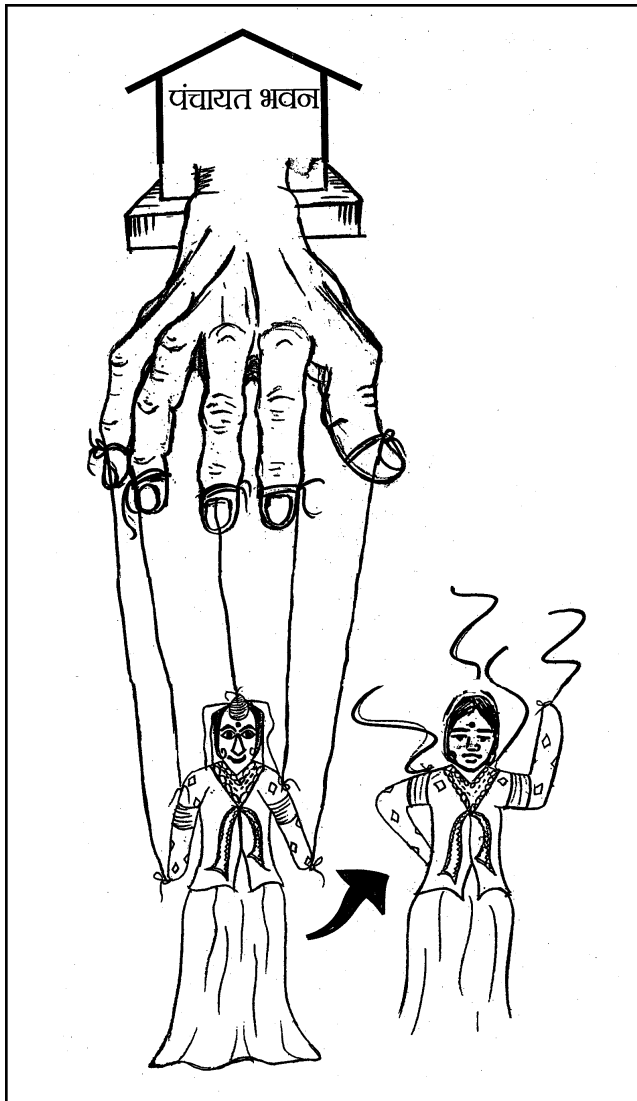
Back in November 1999, the team members within my organisation, PRIA, had a detailed discussion on how to prepare the printed materials such as posters, manuals and pamphlets. The task was very tough and I was assigned the responsibilities of getting the posters and pamphlets done within four days. I organised a meeting with colleagues who had prior experience in the field of campaigns. The meeting continued after midnight. '*How can we prepare the scrip for preparing audio cassettes, do the rehearsal in different languages, record and make more than 15 copies in different languages, where do we organise the Indian musical instruments like harmonium, tabla, dhol, jhanjhar, bansuri etc?*' Some of the colleagues felt that it was very difficult for them to do, even that it was beyond their reach, '*Bhaiya ye to bahot kathin kam he, apne bas ka nehin he*'. They also said that '*we have to prepare strategy for our own field areas, therefore we cannot spend much time with you*'.

But this was not the end of the story; rather it was the beginning of taking up a challenge filled with risks working with a handful of people. With great determination, I motivated other colleagues and I must say in this process I found really committed colleagues who were ready to support this initiative and who were willing to take the risk with me. One of the people I am talking about is Dayal Bhat, from Nagor district of Rajasthan. He has his own organisation that has had lots of experience in such field awareness campaigns despite having fewer educational qualifications. What I am trying to say is that I found popular knowledge comes from one's own experience and learning-by-doing is more useful than the scientific or professional knowledge. He came forward and extended his support to work with me. This boosted my self-confidence in facing the Herculean task before us.

Next day he went to Nagor to bring some local artist from his own organisation and also arrange for musical instruments that we were to borrow for the campaign. On 5th January we focused on designing the poster. On that day an interesting incident took place. I was talking to the colleagues of Unnati regarding the design needed for the poster and where we would get the artist to do that. On the same morning, when I went to their field office, we bumped into an old colleague of Dayal's, an artist by profession but working with an NGO in Rajasthan, who was visiting Unnati for some other purpose. Taken by our enthusiasm, he decided to try his hand at our ideas. I explained the idea/concept to be developed in the design. The concept that needed to be put on paper (pictorially) is as follows. A woman, who is elected for the first time through reservation⁴ was totally under the control of her

⁴ Reservation refers to the change in the Indian constitution that says that women and the 'weaker sections' of the community have a particular proportion of the seats in local government bodies 'reserved' for them to contest.

Figure 2 Should we be puppets or act for ourselves?



husband or other male members of her family who were supposed to do the work of Gram Panchayat on her behalf. This was shown like this: one masculine hand with strings holding a puppet in front of the panchayat bhawan (office of Gram Panchayat), in the second step she is struggling to release herself from the control of the masculine hand showing the strings broken and she's free (see Figure 2). Finally she proves herself as an effective leader by conducting meetings and convincing people, which is shown in the third step where she is talking to the villagers who are convinced by her approach. I explained to the artist and he asked me to show my hand as a model to start drawing the picture, but after some time he told me "you have very soft hand, so I am unable to draw a masculine hand, we need a real masculine hand" – ("yaar tumha ra hath bohot soft he, isse ek sakt hath ka tasbir banana muskil he, yehana par ek sakt hath ki jarurat ye"). We called the Driver, Haji Bhai, whose hand was masculine enough, the artist was happy with this and he drew the picture.

In the afternoon with the help of the local people and NGOs, we finalised the script for the audio cassettes using the local dialect, songs and lyrics. We rehearsed the show with all the team members, with the musical instruments. It took one and half days to get ready. On the seventh afternoon since we had first started planning, the team went for a recording, which took six hours to complete and another six hours to get 900 copies made. Within this period we also printed the campaign pamphlets and posters. And by the eighth afternoon, we had produced all the printed materials and audio cassettes and in the evening, these were distributed to the partners, local community groups working with us, who came to collect the materials from different parts of Rajasthan.

After the preparation of developing the script, we had a rehearsal for the puppet show, 'nukad natak' which involved almost 70 local people divided into five teams. Each team went to some of the villages for pre-testing to get an immediate feedback from the communities themselves. One of the key suggestions that came from these communities was that the programme looked more like a cultural programme, and the real message wasn't coming across. So we made some changes in the script and agreed them with the teams of local people.

We start the programme

Finally we launched the campaign programme on 21st January, only 10 days before the Panchayati Raj elections. I would start my day at 7 am and end at around 2 am. The Jeeps (vehicles) used to come at 7.45 a.m., when the drivers (team members) would load the posters, pamphlets, Margdarshika (Manual), microphones and sound boxes on to the jeeps. It is interesting to point out that the drivers of the vehicles also became a part of the team. Their jeeps were hired for 13 days at a stretch. On the first day, they behaved like hired people without much input in to the team. Then in the evening, I had a meeting with the three drivers and explained to them clearly about the programme after that day's experience in the field. They asked questions regarding the programme and were finally convinced that its intentions were good. From the second day onwards, they were active facilitators in the process, through collecting and distributing all the materials and they started announcing with microphones to bring people together when we would enter the village. They would also pack food for other team members. They took responsibility for time management, reporting in the scheduled time. Moreover, not only did they play a major role in making the campaign effective but their motivation and commitment also inspired other team members to contribute towards the success of this effort.

One of the key components in this process to make it successful was due to the efforts made by the teams of

local people. Let me tell you the story of these team members, which is very interesting. There were five teams in total in the campaign process in Sicker District. In each team there were five members, 25 in total. Most of them were from a *Katchi Basti* (Slum), with thatched and mud houses with very poor living conditions. Most of them had educational qualifications up to 7th grade and belonged to Schedule Castes. But they have very rich experience in doing puppet shows, street theatre, song, dance, music etc. They have organised several campaigns related to family planning, health issues, social issues (like *Sati: when a woman sets herself on fire when her husband dies*) for the government and NGOs before, and therefore had much experience in this field. They took the initiative in preparing the script for the puppet shows and street theatre with the concept of voters awareness. They developed a very good script, which was widely appreciated by the people. Moreover, their performance and presentation attracted public attention and conveyed the messages. They used to dance in such a good way and with colourful costumes, attracting people and also in some cases involving people to dance with them in the programme. In between the dance and song, they would convey the messages to the people in a dramatic fashion. They were so motivated that they would do more than five programmes a day, starting from 9.30 a.m. until the evening.

In conducting '*Padyatra*' (foot processions), we invited about 500-600 students from the schools and they brought banners about good leadership, women's rights and fair democracy. We started the procession through the village. Before that, we took the tabla, harmonium, and other musical instruments on jeeps and went through the village and into the gullies, announcing the programme and asking people to come. All the children and villagers walked with us. Some of our team members did acrobatics, and one jumped through fire to attract people to join us. During the procession, over 1000 people joined in as we went, women included, which was unusual because of cultural taboos. We gathered at the 'chowpal', the platform where people get together for public events.

At the platform, we explained, using folk theatre, with song, dance and music, why we were inviting the people and how we were going to explain about the rights and responsibilities of common citizens, how to choose good leaders, what role the women could play in Panchayats etc.. We started the programme with the patriotic song – '*we are one; whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian, we all are brothers and sisters, the pride of nation is our pride, we stake our lives for its pride*' – '*Hum ek hein, hum ek hein; Hindu, Muslim, sikh, Isai; Apas mein hum bhai, behen; Des ki saan hamari saan, uske khatir jaan kurban*'. People enjoyed the music, dance, puppetry (hand and string puppets) and also received the messages. When

Box 1 Mohini Devi

Mohini Devi is the '*Sarpanch*' (chairwoman) of Sonasar Gram Panchayat (village government) of Alsisar Block in Jhunjhunu District. She is a young woman in her late twenties and has been elected for the first time. She has studied up to higher secondary (XIIth Standard) and is well aware of her position as a *sarpanch*. She had support from her husband and in-laws to stand for the election who were very well aware of her calibre. They are proud of her courage in fighting against all the customs and social taboos, against which she turned the tide, such as '*ghoonghat*' (women covering their heads) under which she had to act as a *sarpanch*.

The first hurdle was that she cannot talk in front of her elders in the panchayat without taking off her *ghoonghat* or purdah for which she faced a lot of problems. But being a bold woman and backed by her family, she started to work without the *ghoonghat*. This was her first victory and she came out with flying colours, and from then there was no turning back. Initially she was under tremendous pressure from her relatives and villagers who were criticising the way she was working and blaming her for not devoting much time to her family and her in-laws. But she kept going, and within five years of her being a *sarpanch* she has done a lot of development work of considerable value. The remarkable change she has brought was organising women's groups to come and freely discuss their problems. Above all she has banned the consumption of liquor from the village due to violence against women. For this she took help of her fellow women and went to the District Magistrate's (administrative head at the district level) office and sat in *dharana* (protest) until her objective of banning the consumption of liquor was achieved. She got full support from the district magistrate for all the work she has done.

There were a number of men in the village who tried to distract her from her job by disturbing the development work she undertook, but she stood very strong in front of their vested interests and today, Sarpanches of Jhunjhunu district swear by her name. The men who opposed her at the beginning, now are praising her and trying to extend their support in all aspects.

we asked people afterwards what impression they had of the programme, it was the men who replied. They said that they liked the programme, but it was focusing more on women. "*You ask them to come out, but they should take responsibility for themselves, and if they come out, who is going to do their work in the house?*"

I explained that we were equally concerned about the men's problems and issues; "*...but just think that the government has given responsibility to women, at least 33% of women should come to the main platform to take on their responsibility, why can't you allow them to do so?*" – "*hum purson ke samasya ke prati utna he gambhir hein, par aap ye sochiye jab sarkar ne 33% arakan mahilaon ke liye rakha he, tub unko to age ana he pade ga, aur kaam samahalna hoga, to aap log unke kyon na madad kare...?*"

Some people accepted the fact that women should come out and shoulder responsibility in the affairs of the Panchayats but others did not and said that we couldn't

carry on with such messages in their village. We found this particularly the case of the politically influential people or people having influence through caste or class. After some time we changed our strategy slightly and aimed our programme at the men too and talked about gender. I shared some of the cases of some successful women elected representatives, who, in spite of many hurdles, proved themselves as effective leaders (see Box 1).

It's a difficult journey...

I would like to share some of the difficult experiences we faced during the campaign. In some villages, people asked questions related to our political affiliation. In the village in Doodwa, in Dantaramgarh Panchayat Samiti⁵ (Sikar), after we did the puppet show, one of the men asked me the objective of the programme and from where did we get the funds – *" aap ke is programme ka udesya kya he, khana se pesa milta he"* . When I explained to him the objectives, he was satisfied but kept asking about the funding part. I told him that we got funds from the Ministry of Rural Development – *" hum logon ko Ministry of Rural development se fund mila he"* . Then he started linking according to his own logic. *" Mr Mehria is the Minister of State for Rural Development and he is from BJP⁶, therefore you are campaigning for BJP"* – *" Yeh Ministry mein Meheriaji Rajya Mantri hein, jo ki BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) ke hein to aap bhi BJP ke honge"* . The reason was that this minister is the Member of Parliament from their constituency, so he thought we were doing this campaign for his party. I sat with him, as it was important for me to get the message across and I explained that we were not doing campaign for any political party, but for the benefit of the common citizens without any vested interest on our part. I showed him some of the literature and other people of the village also helped to clarify his doubts.

An incident happened when we entered the village Lalasi, where there were obstacles regarding our use of folk media, especially from the upper caste, political sections of the community. They obstructed our way into the village, wanting to know why we were doing the programme and we had to satisfy their demands before we could enter the village. They also ordered us to do the campaign in favour of their candidate or for their political party. We tried to convince them but failed. We agreed to show and convince them about the programme but we were not ready to do the campaign for their party. We refused and left the village.

Another similar incident happened in Jhunjhunu, when one of our team was travelling by jeep in Chidawa (a small

⁵ The local government at the intermediate level in between District and Gram Panchayat

⁶ A political party

town) and was stopped by the police. They asked about the programme and when the team members explained the issues to them, they were not convinced and asked for a bribe. Even after the team members showed them the Government permission letter, they were still forced them to pay the bribe and ultimately they were told that if they didn't give money, then the vehicle would be stopped. So the team members finally gave them Rs.200/- to release the vehicle. The reason being that they didn't want to waste their precious time and activities. But it was not the end of our campaign here. We had a discussion with the higher authorities, along with our partner organisation, whose head is also a popular journalist. Finally action was taken against the officials who took the bribe and eventually the money was returned.

What happened next

The puppet shows definitely changed peoples' opinions. The shows don't only entertain people, they also have a message. They give out different kinds of social and political messages. When we asked people what their reaction to the show was, we found that more than half the villagers had watched the programme and they said that they thought the puppet show and the poster we used were very effective. People (especially women) said that this poster was very appealing, that it had a very good message for women and it showed them what they had to do. They said; *" The government has given us the opportunity to do this so we have to come forward"* . In their informal discussions, collecting water or sitting together, they said they discussed these things and decided to take the initiative. The voting percentage for women turned out to be very high.

The women, irrespective of indifferent male attitudes and views, were very interested in the programme, since the folk media and other forms of communication had included examples of women views and experiences. For example, there was the case of a woman candidate who was elected representative and has proved herself to be a very good leader over the last five years. We developed her case study as a part of our folk media programme, and after seeing the programme, the voting percentage of women increased from 60% to 75% in the areas where we showed it.

So we found that all these different media, street plays, puppet shows, video, posters, pamphlets, song and dance etc., drawing on the real stories of the people, have all helped in providing space for the voices of women and the weaker sections of communities in the whole process.

As a result of this campaign, a nation-wide strategy has been developed by our organisation with other partners from different states to carry forward similar activities.

The process behind this campaign has provided a model for other states as well as many NGOs who started such activities in the state Panchayati Raj elections.

At last while concluding, I want to say that it's the beginning of a journey. It is the beginning of the process which is ongoing. I still remember the song which I used to read in my school days, written by the great poet Robert Frost:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Therefore, it is an incomplete journey. A lot still needs to be done to enhance participation and create awareness among the citizens who have to take their own decisions in shaping their destiny.

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