

# **CIVIL SOCIETY FORMATIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS WITH GOVERNANCE**

**Julie Thekkudan  
&  
Dr. Rajesh Tandon**

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**Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)**  
**42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 062**  
**Phone: 29960931-33, 29956908, Fax: (91-11) 29955183**  
**Email: [info@pria.org](mailto:info@pria.org), Website: [www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org)**

## ***Introduction***

The escalation of interest in civil society and subsequently in issues of governance has been a recent outcome of significant events in politics and economies the world over. The term ‘civil society’ is not easy to define and over the years it has had many connotations to it. A Tocquevillean interpretation of civil association regards civil society as performing the task of a watchdog in a democracy. At times, civil society is regarded as a bridge between the individual and the family, on the one hand and the state institutions, on the other. Civil society is also seen as a site for contestation, where the contest is against state power and the attempt is to either replace it or reform it<sup>1</sup> (Tandon and Mohanty, 2003: 63). Often, civil society is regarded as what it does or should do rather than what it is. The withdrawal of the state, along with the rise of the free market and the liberalisation of market forces, has led to a further prominence of civil society (Milner, 2001). Civil society is seen to be inclusive of all non-state actors as a part of civil society. It also legitimises free market enterprise and private sector capitalism from which has arisen the notion of non-profit organisations<sup>2</sup> (Tandon and Mohanty, 2003: 63).

In this paper the term civil society is defined as a collection of individual and collective initiatives for the ‘common public good’ (Tandon in Tandon and Mohanty, 2003: 64). This definition of civil society looks at a public arena or a space that is free, open and accessible to all, even the subaltern. It is also seen as a movement for advancing various causes like women’s rights, dalit rights, human rights. It comprises of a set of organisations that provide an opportunity to families and citizens to get together to debate, discuss and decide public good. Civil society, in this sense, views its actions as challenging the hegemony of the centralised state.

Governance<sup>3</sup> is regarded as the joint responsibility of the state, market and citizens in the process of looking after public resources for the common public good (Tandon in Tandon and Mohanty, 2003: 67). The aim of governance is to transcend state-centrism, moderate the rapacity of the market and exorcise extremist orientation from civil society (Oomen in Tandon and Mohanty, 2003: 129).

Civil society initiatives in governance can be seen in five specific areas:

- Civil society contributes towards the influencing, formulation and prioritising of public good. By providing space for the voiceless, civil society is instrumental in challenging the dominant notions of public good and highlight alternatives to that conception.
- Civil society facilitates and contributes to the public negotiations for public good. Policy making on various issues are the result of public negotiations between various stakeholders. It presents the various perspectives and experiences based on its own work in micro settings, by monitoring the impact of previous and related policies, redirecting the focus towards the larger public good and providing the marginalised with a voice in such negotiations.
- Civil society also collaborates with the different institutions and constituents of the state to ensure their proper functioning with transparency and accountability.

- Civil society acts as a check on the role of the market, private enterprises and the rampant search for profit that has been increasingly legitimised in almost all countries.
- Civil society plays an essential role in assuring self-governance of public institutions that take recourse to public resources. It is responsible for establishing and maintaining standards of transparency, equity, clarity of vision and purpose and consistency in the pursuit of public good.

This paper looks at civic engagements in governance in the context of Pre Election Voters Awareness Campaign (PEVAC). This campaign was a grassroots initiative by PRIA and partner organisations to mobilise the citizens to actively participate in issues of local governance, the basic manifestation of which is the elections for the Panchayats. A detailed account of the campaign is outlined in the first section of the paper. The second section analyses the various organisations that were part of the civil society network in the districts of Madhubani in Bihar, Kangra in Himachal Pradesh and Vishakapatnam in Andhra Pradesh on the basis of an associational typology. The third section looks at the nature of civic engagement with governance at various levels of government, various issues of engagement and the different modes of engagement. The last section looks at the impact of these civic engagements on governance at the grassroots level in the country.

## *I*

### ***Contextualising Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaign in Madhubani, Kangra and Vishakapatnam***

Traditionally, village communities and Panchayats have been the basic unit of governance in India. The village Panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial. However, the autonomy of Panchayats gradually disappeared owing to many reasons. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act in 1992 was meant to provide constitutional sanction to Panchayats and establish democracy at grassroots level as it is at the State level or National level. PRIA's efforts in strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions have a decade long cherished history throughout the country. The main objective is a more people centred and a more people managed sustainable development with the thrust on participatory local self-governance.

For development to be sustainable and benefiting the people as a whole, people's participation and collaborative efforts between governing institutions and citizens and good governance is of vital importance. Elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions are seen as stepping-stones in the direction of ensuring people's participation and good governance. It provides the space to Gram Sabha members to elect a person of their choice who would represent and fulfil their needs and interests. Panchayat elections are opportunities to have decisive say in the structure of governance at local level. Free, fair, peaceful and participatory election processes ensure that people have the opportunity to elect candidates who are responsive and accountable leaders. Awareness regarding the choices of candidates during elections, rights and responsibilities of the elected representatives and the citizens result in genuine development options available have to

all sections of society. PEVAC stands for Pre Election Voters Awareness Campaign. It is a process with a series of activities involved at different levels with the involvement of different stakeholders. The PEVAC is essentially non-political in nature and seeks:

- To create an enabling environment for a free and fair election
- To encourage voters to make the best use of their rights of franchise
- To enable voters to cast their ballots properly
- To enhance voter information on all aspects of elections, enabling voting with appropriate discernment
- To encourage participation of women and members of SC/ST communities, both as voters and as candidates
- To generate awareness on responsible electoral behaviour, thereby checking participation of dummy candidates

PEVAC aims at making people aware about the importance of their participation in election (as voters and/or candidates), how to participate (delimitation of constituencies, reservation of seats, nomination procedures, registration as voters, notification of elections), how to become eligible for voting (inclusion of name in voters list), how to actually cast their vote (ballot papers, timing and place of voting) and who should they vote for (worthiness of candidates). The various tools for communication in PEVAC have been slogan writing, bicycle rally, *padyatra* (march), *nukkad natak* (street-corner plays) or *kala jatha*, puppet shows (*kathputli* or *hasthputli*), *mahila sammelan* (women's gatherings), *metadata jagrukta mandal* (voters awareness committee), electronic media coverage, poster and pamphlets and distribution of audio cassettes. It has also meant the networking of CSOs, association with governmental machinery and engagement with the media.

PRIA, along with various partner organisations, has since 1995 (in Himachal Pradesh) been actively engaged in PEVAC whenever Panchayat elections are due in all the 12 states that it works in. The objective is to ensure citizens empowerment in matters of local governance. In Bihar, the first round of PEVAC was undertaken in the year 2001. In 2006, PEVAC was undertaken intensively in three districts of Madhubani, Muzaffarpur and Khagaria. The terms intensive and extensive are specific to PRIA and indicate the depth of its activities in a given area. Intensive areas are those where the aim for 100 per cent coverage in all the blocks of these districts. The term extensive, on the other hand, indicates limited coverage of blocks in the district. Hence, in Bihar, the other 35 districts were extensive areas and the endeavour was 50 per cent coverage. The district of Madhubani has 21 blocks or talukas and 399 panchayats. PRIA and CENCORED (or Sansarg) along with seventy-four CSOs (civil society organisations) were associated with the PEVAC campaign for the Panchayat elections held in June 2006. The main activities of PEVAC included encouraging voters to cast their vote and in that process to select appropriate candidates, helping candidates in filing nomination forms, sensitising voters through *nukkad natak*s, dummy elections, *padyatras*, facilitating meetings like *anna-samna* (face to face meetings between voters and candidates), training programmes and workshops for citizen leaders, disseminating information through poster and pamphlets and creating an interface along with different stakeholders.

In Himachal Pradesh, the District Resource Centre (DRC) at Kangra has been working toward the empowerment of the poor and the marginalised, especially women, to actively participate in issues of governance. Initiatives have centred on motivating, mobilising and facilitating the participation of women in Gram Sabhas, ensuring the organisation of ward sabhas and the ascertaining of genuine need based development of the citizens by enabling developmental planning by the citizens. In this attempt, PRIA has been working with 15 partner organisations in 14 blocks in Kangra. Categorised as either intensive or extensive partners, the latter focused mainly on organising community meetings, pasting posters and pamphlets and dissemination of information. Intensive partners actively participated in the dissemination of the delimitation and reservation process, voters list updation process, engaged with the block and district administration in this respect and engaged with the media. There have been 10 extensive partners and 5 intensive partners associated with the campaign in Himachal Pradesh.

In Andhra Pradesh, the focus has largely been on the empowerment of the tribal regions of the state. The aim was the orientation, especially at the Mandal level, of SHG members, citizen leaders to contest elections and to promote good candidates to ensure active participation in issues of governance. In 2006, PRIA conducted PEVAC for the first time in Vishakhapatnam with 25 partners in 26 Mandals. PRIA worked intensively in two Mandals of G. Madgula and Padmanabham in 5 Gram Panchayats each. Extensive areas were divided into three clusters, the first cluster was the tribal belt of Paderu consisting of 11 mandals, the second was Narsipatnam consisting of 12 mandals and the last cluster of Yelamanchili covering 13 mandals. Extensive partners were responsible for dissemination of IEC materials, posters, pamphlets, audiocassettes, slides to be displayed at movie theatres and VCDs on *kala jatha*. In their intervention areas, the partners' attempts were to incorporate awareness on the right to vote and curtailing bribes given to citizens in the form of alcohol or money in exchange for votes. In the intensive areas, along with activities mentioned above, PRIA also carried out announcements on the issues of PEVAC through loudspeakers mounted on auto-rickshaws, wall writings and information booths in one Mandal in Padmanabham. PRIA was also responsible for the coordination of all PEVAC activities. In addition, there was the constant awareness generation among SHG members and citizen leaders at the Mandal and the village level.

## ***II***

### ***Civil Society Structure in PEVAC***

The structure of civil society presented in this article is based on the classification of associational types within the meaning of civil society as given above. Human beings associate with others to pursue common purposes that they cannot pursue on their own (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002). Most of the CSOs that have been involved in the campaign are largely intermediaries. Intermediary civil society organisations serves as a moderator among individual citizens, between them and macro state institutions, like the bureaucracy, judiciary, legislature and police. These associations are formed by a group of citizens to advance a broader societal cause or larger public good. There are several types of intermediaries that have been active in the PEVAC campaign.

Types of Civil Society Organisations	Areas of Study		
	Kangra	Madhubani	Vishakapatnam
Community based organisations	SHGs, Mahila Mandals, Mahila Networks, Youth Groups	SHGs, Mahila Mandals, Mahila Networks, Youth Groups, Nehru Yuva Club, Federation-Cooperative, Kisan Sangathans	SHGs Youth Groups
Service delivery & mobilisational intermediary	Urban, Tribal and Hills Advancement (UTHAN), Nari Shakti Sangathan Samaj Sevak Parishad (SSP), Association for Social and Hill Advancement (ASHA), Kangra Mahila Sabha (KMS), Trigarth Basundhra, NISHTHA, Nav Nirman Kalyan Samiti (NNKS)	Ghogardhia Prakhn Swaraj Vikas Sangh (GPSVS)	Chaitanya Bharti
Advocacy intermediaries	Jagori	Samathamulak Samj Vikas Kendra (SSVK), Sakhi, Samajek Chetna Kendra, Madhubani Sewa Ashram	Rural Energy for Environmental Development of Society (REEDS), Society for Social Welfare, Education and Ecology Protection (SWEEP)
Support intermediaries	PRIA	CENCORED	PRIA

### Service delivery and mobilisational intermediaries

Service delivery organisations of civil society have largely focussed on education and healthcare. Over the years, these organisations have expanded the range of development issues within their purview to include water, sanitation and micro-credit. In addition, many institutions of care like orphanages, homes for the destitute and the elderly are also run by such intermediaries. Several organisations also help organise and empower local communities and marginalised to demand their own rights and have a greater participation in development. This approach is often inclusive of service delivery (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002).

In Madhubani, Ghogardiha Prakhn Swaraj Vikas Sangh (GPSVS) was involved in the Jayprakash Narayan's Total Revolution Campaign. As part of the campaign, GPSVS adopted Jagatpur, then a part of Ghogardiha Block, for developmental work through activities like land redistribution, women's empowerment, legal awareness of women, literacy for women, reproductive and child health and issues of livelihood. Its main vision

was Gram Swarajya and it advocated the formation of Gram Swarajya Sabha in the Village Committee.

In Kangra, Samaj Sevak Parishad (SSP) was established in 1998. The organisation's initial activities included income generation activities for women through tailoring and stitching classes, typing and shorthand classes and education for women through condensed courses held at different locations in Rait block. SSP has now expanded its scope of work to cover reproductive and child health (RCH) and child development.

Urban, Tribal and Hills Advancement (UTHAN) has been involved in issues of local governance. In the past two years the activities of the organisation has expanded to cover issues of women's empowerment, health and environment with a keen desire to engage in income generation drug de-addiction in the district.

Association for Social and Hill Advancement (ASHA) is primarily focused on women's empowerment. It started its activities in 2000 with two *palna ghars* (crèches) and over the years it has expanded to include herbal gardening, diary keeping, organising awareness camps for the poor and illiterate women. There are plans to start a family-counselling centre in the near future.

Kangra Mahila Sabha's initial focus was on child development and it later branched out to include activities on women's empowerment and rural development. It had initiated its activities with 3 crèches for children, which has grown to 10 crèches. It has facilitated income generation activities for women like tailoring, typing and shorthand, condensed education courses and awareness generation. As part of its rural developmental activities it has been involved with watershed project in community organisation, training and planning of SHGs and Watershed Committees.

An offshoot of Samariddhi Mahila Gram Udayog Sangathan, Trigarth Basundhra began its activities in 2003 with women SHGs in income generation activities, like the production and sale of pickles, chutney and candies, especially that of amla, making greeting cards and other such handicrafts, planting of amla and mango saplings. The organisation is now approached by various block level institutions to deal with environmental issues like planting of amla, anar and mango trees. Government institutions approach the organisation now to work on projects related to water. It has expanded its activities to work on *yuva mandals* and *mahila mandals*.

Nav Nirman Kalyan Samiti has worked on women's empowerment, focusing mainly on enabling women, especially widows, to access their husbands' pensions and providing legal advice to women. It has expanded its activities now to include agriculture and environment. It provides vermi-composting facilities for some beneficiaries, conducts water scarcity awareness camps, income generation activities linked to both agriculture and environment.

Nari Shakti Sangathan, was established to help women have access to out of court settlement of matrimonial disputes. It also works on orphan children, destitute, disabled,

widow remarriage and divorcee remarriage. It is an authorised counselling centre in the district with its located in the Police Headquarters in Kangra.

NISHTHA, Rural Health, Education and Environment Centre in Rakkar was founded in 1998 to work for the benefit of the hill people in the Kangra valley. The primary activity of the organisation was a health centre. It has now expanded its activities to include other activities on community health like a nutritional programme for schoolchildren; health awareness and empowerment workshops for women and youth, clean water provision, environmental projects and events to foster local co-operation like a solid waste management experiment in the village, herbal cultivation and promotion of the use of traditional herbal remedies. It also has a community centre with income generation activities like tailoring and stitching, computer education classes, cultural activities for the youth to promote the local culture of the area along with a theatre group, library, a gymnasium, a kitchen for community meals and a refuge for the chronically or terminally ill and women in need.

In Vishakapatnam, Chaitanya Bharti, was established in 2000. Its activities included residential bridge schools for children and trainings for SHG members in livelihood promotion in 2 mandals of Koyyuru and Golugonda. National Environment and Education Development (NEED) started in 1992 with the main focus on SHG formation in 2 mandals, subsequently expanding to 2 more mandals. Today it has promoted 420 SHGs in 4 mandals. It is also actively involved in the prevention of child labour and community forest management.

#### Advocacy Intermediaries

Some intermediary civil society organisations have been set up with an explicit purpose of advocating a particular cause. Environment, gender, human rights, child rights and Panchayati Raj institutions could be some such causes (ibid.). In Madhubani, Samathamulak Samaj Vikas Kendra (SSVK), Jhanjharpur has largely been associated with flood relief activities in 17 Panchayats in Lakhnaur district, Bihar.

Though Sakhi was formally registered in 1999, it was associated with ADITHI, a NGO, in a project aimed at empowerment of fisherwomen by enabling their access to government ponds on lease, equipping them with technical and managerial skills, providing start up capital support to them and consequently contributing to a steady enhancement in their income levels. Subsequently, it also initiated work on organising the poor fisherwomen into groups and their registration as a women's cooperative society. It expanded its activities to include the components of health and education focusing on reproductive and child health and the education of girl children in the age group of 6-14 through running of non-formal education centres. This project was registered under a separate organisational identity, Sakhi. Working in Andhrathari (8 Blocks), Darbhanga (2 Blocks), Muzaffarpur (1 Block) and recently Motihari district, Sakhi has also taken up works relating to women issues in areas like micro-credit, domestic violence, alcoholism, dowry, human trafficking, relief distribution, disaster management and flood preparedness.

There were smaller organisations in Madhubani which a part of the campaign. Samajek Chetna Kendra, Kheri, works on issues relating to flood relief and flood preparedness, dalit empowerment in 40 villages in Madhepura district. Madhubani Sewa Ashram, Benipatti works on child labour. Although it has recently started its activities on this issue it wants to actively push this issue within the developmental domain.

In Kangra, Jagori began its activities in Himachal Pradesh in 2003. An intermediary civil society organisation with a focus on advocacy on women's empowerment, its core issues are violence against women, women's health rights, gender sensitive education, sustainable agriculture, environmental awareness, declining sex ratio and single women. Its main activities are centred on community based women's empowerment programme, fellowship programme for young women, school programme with adolescent girls and boys, sustainable agriculture and setting up a women's learning centre.

In Vishakapatnam, Rural Energy for Environmental Development of Society (REEDS) initiated its activities in 1990 with special emphasis on the fishing community, women's empowerment, child education and a rights-based approach to natural resources management. It works in 60 villages in 3 Mandals of Nakkapalli, S.Rayavaram and Rambilli.

Society for Social Welfare, Education and Ecology Protection (SWEEP) works in 3 Mandals of the East Godavari Districts among the tribal communities of Konda Reddy, Konda Kawra and Kondadora. Established in 1995, its focus is largely on tribal issues, community forest management, non-timber forest products, child labour and issues of governance.

### Support intermediaries

Intermediary civil society organisations that have been set up to provide support to other community based organisations or other intermediary organisation are known as support intermediaries. Support functions include research and information sharing, capacity building and networking activities. Support intermediaries could be theme-based or more generic (ibid.). In Madhubani, CENCORED is one such intermediary civil society. Established in 1989 it is a state level support organisation providing training to field level voluntary organisations. It aims to promote and strengthen people centred development with special focus on women, children and the marginalised sections of the community through grassroot partners. Its intervention in Panchayati Raj dates back to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in 1992. With the passing of the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act in 1993 it became clear that all people centred development would be based on the Panchayati Raj institutions. It tied up with PRIA to work on issues of local governance in Bihar. It has gradually diversified into policy advocacy on issues related to governance and development, networking of CSOs and strengthening civil society building in the state, reproductive health and PRIs and urban governance related activities.

### Community-based Organisations

There have been other informal community-based organisations like SHGs, Mahila Mandals (federation of SHGs), Mahila Networks and youth groups that have played a small but very significant role in the PEVAC activities. A growing category of membership civil society organisations is local self-help groups. Self-help groups (SHGs) are spontaneously formed to serve the needs of their members. SHGs help share resources, enable mutual aid and support and build collective strength. Many SHGs take the initiative to address the problems facing their communities. SHGs in Vishakapatnam have played an important role in the campaign to generate awareness on the rights and responsibilities of voters. SHGs were largely from the fishing community or the community that was involved in toddy tapping. The other activities that were undertaken by the SHG as livelihood were broom making, buffalo purchasing and sale of tendu leaf. Along with SHGs, informal youth groups have also contributed their efforts in PEVAC. The members of the youth group are daily wage labourers working in agriculture or picking coconuts. Their intention was also to help in the solving of village conflicts amicably. They have also formed an informal committee to stop the hire of outside labour for activities within the village, as it leads to a shortage of work for them.

### **III**

#### ***Nature of Engagements***

The different types of engagement by various civil society organisations within PEVAC have been drawn up in the form of a table. As is evident from the table, civil society organisations at the grassroots, often the informal civil society group like self-help groups, women's federations, women's network, and youth groups, lack the resources to reach out to a larger audience. Their outreach is largely the people in their immediate vicinity and therefore, their role in PEVAC activities is mainly the dissemination of information for the conduct of free and fair elections, clarifications on the process of casting one's vote, the necessity of choosing the right candidate who would be keen on bringing development to the village, generating awareness on bribes by the candidates, maybe contesting elections themselves or supporting a member who has filed her/his nomination papers. In Bihar, they had formed Peace Committees to supervise the polling process at the booth. They were armed with important telephone numbers like that of the police personnel at all levels, telephone numbers of the functionaries at the State Election Commission, to report in case if any violence at the polling booths. Their role was to ensure peaceful elections. In this respect, they also had moderate interaction with the local media.

Advocacy intermediaries are largely responsible for dissemination of information, sensitising and mobilising citizens to actively participate in the election process by contesting elections, casting their votes and voting for the right candidate who would genuinely work towards the development of the village and the block. The sphere of

<i>The types of engagement in the governance process as highlighted by Types of CSOs</i>	Types of Engagement in the Governance Process									
	Dissemination of Information	Sensitization & Mobilisation of Citizens	Capacity Building & Support	Interface with Govt (Block)	Interface with Govt (District)	Interface with Govt (State)	Interface with Media (Block)	Interface with Media (District)	Interface with Media (State)	Interface with SECs
Community-Based Organisations	SHGs, Mahila Mandals, Mahila Networks, Youth Groups, Nehru Yuva Club, Federation-Cooperative, Kisan Sangathans	SHGs, Mahila Mandals, Mahila Networks, Youth Groups, Nehru Yuva Club, Federation-Cooperative, Kisan Sangathans								
Advocacy Intermediaries	Madhubani Sewa Ashram, Sakhi, Jagori, Samajek Chetna Kendra, REEDS, SWEEP	Madhubani Sewa Ashram, Sakhi, Samajek Chetna Kendra, REEDS, SWEEP	Jagori	Madhubani Sewa Ashram, Sakhi, Jagori, Samajek Chetna Kendra, REEDS, SWEEP			Madhubani Sewa Ashram, Sakhi, Jagori, Samajek Chetna Kendra, REEDS, SWEEP			
Service Delivery & Mobilisational Intermediaries	UTHAN, GPSVS, SSK, ASHA, Nari Shakti Sangathan, Trigarth Basundhra, NNKS, KMS, NISHTHA, Chaitanya Bharti	UTHAN, GPSVS, SSK, ASHA, Nari Shakti Sangathan, Trigarth Basundhra, NNKS, KMS, Chaitanya Bharti	UTHAN, SSK, ASHA, GPSVS, NISHTHA	UTHAN, GPSVS, SSK, ASHA, Nari Shakti Sangathan, Trigarth Basundhra, NNKS, KMS, NISHTHA, Chaitanya Bharti			UTHAN, GPSVS, SSK, ASHA, Nari Shakti Sangathan, Trigarth Basundhra, NNKS, KMS, NISHTHA, Chaitanya Bharti			
Support Intermediaries	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored	PRIA, Censored

influence for such intermediaries is limited to the village and the block levels. In addition, these intermediaries also interact with the media at the block level. Very few advocacy intermediaries have been able to extend their scope of activities to capacity building and support for citizens.

Most of the service delivery and mobilisational intermediaries are also limited to the block level in the scope of their outreach. Such organisations have been successful in dissemination of information, sensitising and orienting citizens regarding their responsibilities in the election process at the Panchayat level, interacting with government officials and the media at the block level. But those organisations that have had a longer experience with issues related to the election process have been able to extend their influence to include capacity building of citizens by providing them with training on their rights, responsibilities and duties in the three tier-scheme of local governance. This may be an indication that organisations require some handholding and exposure to the issues relating to local governance for a period of time before they are equipped to deal with governance issues on their own. Some people who have been associated with these organisations have gone on to contest elections on their own as they feel that they are able to see governance from the perspective of the people, especially since they have the experience of the grassroots.

But it has been the support intermediaries like PRIA and CENCORED that have provided the vital link that connects all the stakeholders across the vertical hierarchy, whether it is providing the interface between the government across the state, district, and block levels, the local, regional, and the national media and the interface with constitutional bodies like the State Election Commission. They also play the leading role in the coordination of the entire process of PEVAC across the intervention sites. They provide the link between the governmental hierarchies and the grassroots.

#### ***IV***

### ***Impact of Civil Society Engagement with PEVAC***

#### ***For Government Agencies***

***Ensuring free, fair and peaceful elections:*** With the engagement of various CSOs in PEVAC and more awareness and greater involvement of citizens in the actual election procedure on the part of the citizens have reassured government agencies of free and fair elections. This becomes evident by the formation of Peace Committees by community-based organisations for ensuring a peaceful voting procedure.

***Greater outreach of the qualitative aspects of the electoral procedure:*** The governing institutions are often not in a position to disseminate information to every citizen regarding voting procedures, influence the voting patterns of citizens and provide them with informed choices on election and developmental issues. Mostly the marginalised and the under-represented are ignored altogether in the developmental process. Since CSOs often work among the marginalised and the under-represented, like women, tribal communities and dalits, they are in a better position to disseminate information regarding issues of local governance.

***Ensuring transparency and accountability in government:*** The first step toward ensuring transparency and accountability in governance is the selection of deserving candidates. With the selection of genuine candidates greater transparency and accountability is ensured in governing institutions.

### ***For Citizens and Communities***

***Increased awareness among villagers:*** CSOs have stated that there has been an increase in the awareness among citizens regarding developmental issues vital to the growth of the village. Villagers on the whole are more aware of the necessity to vote and more importantly, to vote for deserving candidates who would be involved in the development of the village. They are aware of bribes candidates offer in exchange for their votes and the ill consequences of such kind of voting. In Madhubani, in all areas where the posters were pasted villagers have identified with the concept and the organisation. Candidates have expressed interest in putting up the campaign posters in their respective areas as extra emphasis for their candidature. The songs composed especially for the campaign were played over the loud speakers at the market place, leading to instant recognition. Villagers were seen vigorously nodding their heads in agreement during the *nukkad natak* enactments regarding the ill effects of the practice of bribes and alcohol in exchange for votes. In small gatherings, after the enactment, there were heated debates regarding the same. Even children seemed to be aware of these ill effects as evident from the impromptu questioning of the children who were the most enthusiastic viewers of the *nukkad natak*s.

***Increased participation of genuine citizens in the developmental process:*** Organisations have felt that more deserving candidates have come forward to contest elections in Madhubani in 2006, especially women and candidates from the Scheduled Caste community. Those that have been in power in the past have felt threatened that their power and prestige are at stake given that citizens are becoming more empowered and aware of their rights and responsibilities. In Madhubani, villagers have raised the need for candidates to reside in the Panchayat. In previous elections, often, the Mukhiya would promise all the votes to a particular candidate on the basis of some bribe or understanding and all villagers would comply with these directions of the Mukhiya. In election of 2006, this process has been thwarted in some villages due to the awareness of the villagers. In Kangra, Kangra Mahila Sabha has felt that the ward members who had been elected to the post for a long time were apprehensive that the organisation was instigating others for their removal by telling the citizens about the schemes that were available and thereby, taking away their powers and perks associated with the post. But due to the fact that the elected representatives had not taken up developmental works for the villagers, they lost the subsequent elections and more deserving candidates were elected.

***Increased participation in Gram Sabha meetings:*** In Kangra, organisations have felt that more citizens are now aware of their rights and responsibilities regarding voting and their presence at Gram Sabha meeting. With the continuous capacity building of the citizens, UTHAN feels that it no longer need to urge the citizens to demand information from the Gram Panchayat. The citizens on their own are now competent enough to badger the Gram Panchayat for information on developmental works in the village. There is a deeper

understanding of the issues relating to developmental work at the level of the common citizen.

**Women's empowerment:** In Madhubani, citizen leaders have felt that with a reservation of 33 per cent, men leaders put forward their wives who were not in a position to even sign on official papers. Most organisations have felt that in this election there has been a vast difference in the outlook of the women candidates. Women candidates have campaigned on their own without any male presence even till 10 o'clock at night. In the *nukkad sabhas* (street corner meetings) women candidates have come forward to talk about the issues on which they are contesting the elections and the reservation of women. Although this is a start there is a need for continuous awareness generation for their empowerment. There should be interventions that women candidates do not become corrupt like the male elected representatives. Changing the mindset and thought processes of these women candidates would be the start of empowering other women in the village. Organisations acknowledge the changes in the status of women in the village. Girls have taken to riding cycles in the village. Husbands, who earlier did not allow their wives to be seen outside their doorstep, are now escorting them in the village as candidates.

### ***For Civil Society Organisations***

**Efficient networking:** Although in Madhubani the district level network is still at a nascent stage, it has been set in place by the campaign. Though there was a tendency to work only in their demarcated areas, the idea of working beyond and utilising the expertise of other CSOs when required is beginning to take root. In contrast, the campaign in Kangra has led to the formation and strengthening of a network of CSOs working on various issues thereby calling on each other's expertise in case it is required. For example, the primary activity for NISHTHA has been community health. When a member of the organisation questioned the Gram Panchayat for the lack of the quorum in the Gram Sabha meeting, Mohinder Sharma, Project Officer for NISHTHA, was told that the villagers were unaware of the date for the Gram Sabha meeting. He offered to put up posters at the community health centre informing the villagers of the date of the Gram Sabha meeting. At least 40-50 villagers would visit the community health centre every day with another 100 odd youth coming to the community centre. This would ensure that by the date of the Gram Sabha all villagers would know about it. Organisations are finding the important linkages between their areas of work and Panchayati Raj and how working on Panchayati Raj provides a new dimension to their work.

**Confidence of intermediaries for scaling up activities:** Some CSOs in Madhubani have taken the lead in guiding the campaign and providing leadership to other smaller organisations. With more experience in grassroots work and with more human resources at their disposal, they have been in a position to provide this guidance. In Kangra, some of the CSOs have had a longer association with the campaign and thus have built up their capacity to work independently on issues relating to Panchayati Raj.

**Identity formation of various CSOs:** In Kangra, intermediary CSOs have noted a perceptible increase in their recognition among the citizens and the governing institutions on the whole. Some have acquired an identity that is independent of PRIA in that they have been associated with various government bodies in their own right.

***Deeper roots in communities:*** The CSOs in Madhubani have perceived important linkages with various developmental issues and issues of local governance. For instance, with recurrent floods in Bihar and the increasing dimensions of its effects on the common people, Vinod Kumar from SSVK feels that disaster management and local governance issues have strong linkages, which needs to be greatly strengthened. He feels that only when there are representatives in Panchayat institutions who are genuinely involved with the development of the area would relief efforts reflect the genuine needs of the people affected by any disaster. Hence, he feels that it is essential to strengthen and impart a central role to the Panchayats in developmental activities.

***Credibility in governance:*** PRIA and its partners have received genuine recognition and appreciation for the work that they have pursued so far. Government officials have been appreciative of the campaign, as they have felt that such activities are very essential. Requests for an audience with representatives of governing institutions are promptly agreed upon. Moreover, governing institution representatives have also ensured that the audience is uninterrupted as it often happens that the representatives are trying to multitask whilst giving an audience to various people. PRIA staff recounts that the Additional District Commissioner would stop her secretarial staff from interrupting the meeting with them, largely an outcome of the good work undertaken during the campaign.

With globalisation becoming deeply entrenched in global and national politics, significant changes have been witnessed in the role of the polity, economy and society within nations. There has been a significant shift from a notion of government to a concept of governance. This has, in turn, led to the emergence of multiple actors in the institutions of market, citizen groups and civil society organisations influencing deliberations concerning governance and the associated reshaping of notions of citizenship. In India, the state still remains the central actor in governance. More than fifty years of independence, rural India is still beset with problems of poverty, lack of access to food, health, water and sanitation, security, shelter and the protection of rights enshrined in the Constitution. For an overwhelming majority of citizens the state remains the main provider of resources, despite the shrinking of state resources and the shift to neo-liberal framework. Policy-making is still in the hands of the bureaucrats in New Delhi. Local governance as envisaged by the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts is yet to become genuine governance by citizens. It therefore become imperative to explore the actual practice of citizenship and citizen participation has to be more than as a voter during elections and a beneficiary at other times. The notion of citizenship is intrinsically linked to the existence of civil society. Civil society is the primary site for the actual practice of citizenship and is a pre-requisite for a vibrant citizenship and democratic practices. For the constant building of civil society, it is essential to have civic engagements in the articulation and formation of developmental priorities and decision-making concerning the same.

Civic engagement on local governance issues is an important aspect for civil society organisations like PRIA. The primary objective is to create an enabling atmosphere for citizens to participate actively in the deliberations on developmental priorities, decision-making and implementation of policies. Civil society organisations see such engagements

as a platform for highlighting and addressing other developmental issues that are often not considered as priorities in governance, for instance disaster management. Civil society organisations in states with a longer history of such civic engagements on issues of governance at the local level are able to discern the impact of this convergence of interests in governance. For instance, civil engagements in Himachal Pradesh has shown a greater level of understanding of the dynamics of such engagements than in states like Andhra Pradesh where such engagements are a recent phenomenon. On the one hand, there is no denying that such engagements are essential for addressing a wide range of issues. On the other hand, one can question the agency of such convergence to effectively deal with matters that have no priority or political will. Issues that require political will at all levels of government need to be addressed separately at times to impart a seriousness that may be found lacking at the level of local government. There could also be a need to constantly monitor such engagements as being truly representative of the genuine development needs and priorities of the people. Given the circumstances at the level of local government, the capacity of elected representatives need to be built to address the diverse issues raised by such engagements. A critical question related to such engagements would be the sustainability of such engagements. Such participatory engagements would also be meaningful when the state and national government is helpful in activating and energising these engagements by treating these platforms as representation from citizens on which action is required. It may not be sufficient to have active citizenship without any implications for that citizenship. This could then entail a greater role of citizenship education just not for the citizens but also for those current a part of government to make the impact of citizens visible on the making and workings of development and democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Theorists like Keane and Chandoke subscribe to this view of civil society. The failure of communism in East European countries and the fall of military dictatorships in Latin America, Africa and East-Central Europe led to an upsurge of citizen participation in political action. Citizens demonstrated a desire and a competency to engage in political and social good. At the same time, there was a realisation of the strength of collective action. Actions on the part of collectivities were characterised as 'civil society'.

<sup>2</sup> The rise of free trade, modernisation and liberalisation gave rise to this approach to civil society. Cohen and Arato conceptualise civil society as a sector separate from the state and the market. With the addition

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of the market as the third agency, the state has become tri-partite. The market, although lacking moral significance or loyalty as the nation state, plays a greater role in taking over more responsibilities, as there is a reduction in state power.

<sup>3</sup> It is a concept popularised by the World Bank in relation to its experience of failure of its economic policies in African countries due to bad governance. The conceptualisation of bad governance in turn led to the conceptualisation of good governance. A narrow definition of governance is equated with state functioning or functioning of the government. Good governance in this narrow sense is the efficient functioning of the state and its institutions and the promotion of equity and justice (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002). The assumption is that good governance is ensured with elections taking place, checking corruption, transparency in government dealings and human rights promotion. But this narrow sense of governance does not encapsulate the complexities involved in governance. It ignores the existing social inequalities that affect the functioning of the state and deprive some communities from having a voice in the conception of public good (Tandon in Tandon and Mohanty, 2002: 11).