

"I had never thought of standing for election in my whole life. But in order to make the existing system better, we have to initiate the change process ourselves", says Anandita Sharma, GidhanPatsanda Panchayat, Bihar.

INTRODUCTION

SWEEP or **Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Electoral Processes** is an extensive pre-election campaign undertaken in the fifth and final year of a state's Gram Panchayat election cycle. SWEEP is aimed to increase women's participation in the electoral processes both as aware voters and informed candidates. SWEEP not only advocates the rights of a voter or a candidate, it also looks into the need to support marginalized candidates and women contesting from non-reserved seats. Overall the aim of the SWEEP campaign is to increase the visibility of women in the entire electoral process as – voters, citizens, candidates and electoral officers/agents.

OBJECTIVES OF SWEEP

- * To advocate for fair, gender sensitive and violence free elections in Panchayats
- * To ensure/increase participation of women in the electoral process (voters, candidates, agents) focusing on dalits, tribals and minorities
- * To encourage women to contest from reserved and un-reserved seats and claim their political space and right
- * To redefine the concept of leadership; leading to the identification of a 'good' leader (for both voters and candidates)
- * Promotion of an enabling environment which encourages women's participation internally (within the family) as well as externally (community, village, Panchayat, civil society, State-level); conduct an 'election watch' to track incidents of violence, corruption and exploitation
- * Increase in THP's own understanding of women's political participation in the context of caste/power relations/party politics, as a learning which can be used as a base for designing future program strategies and engaging with multiple stakeholders, especially the State Election Commission.

"When I came to this Panchayat after my marriage, the elders advised me to always remain in veil and consider it as my legacy like other social norms. However, today, when I have been re-elected as a Ward Member and Vice-President, the same elderly people do not see anything wrong in me not being in veil; rather they respect me as a leader."

Laxmi Devi, Vice President, Panchayat



SWEEP: BIHAR AND ODISHA

Context: In **Bihar** Panchayat elections took place in April-May 2011. Though it was the second term with 50% reservation, it was the first time the reserved seats were not rotated. In **Odisha**, Panchayat elections took place in February 2012 where for the first time 50% of the seats were reserved for women.

Outreach: In **Bihar** the SWEEP campaign was undertaken in 1065 Panchayats, 71 blocks and 27 districts and it reached out to approximate 21,30,000 persons. In Odisha, 1108 Panchayats, 50 blocks across 14 districts were covered during the campaign reaching out to approximately 25,00,000 citizens. Though 9 of the intervention districts in Odisha have a Maoist insurgency problem, there was no threat to the programme during SWEEP.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF SWEEP

- * **Social taboos and patriarchy were challenged in many ways:** Women challenged and negotiated with power structures to step out independently to both vote and stand for elections; they decided their own election manifestos
- * **Increased women's visibility during entire election process:** Women stepped out as candidates, informed voters, polling agents and counting agents
- * **Enabling gender sensitive environment for women to participate in elections:** Relatively violence free elections in both Bihar and Odisha; in Odisha no threat posed by Maoist groups
- * **Simplified, complete and accurate information:** For largely non-literate rural populations, especially women, the material distributed enabled them to participate in election as aware citizens
- * **Successful networking with the State Election Commission:** support garnered enabled a violence free environment for women
- * **Working partnerships established with other civil society organizations**



STRATEGIES ADOPTED AND PROCESS OF SWEEP

SWEEP is implemented through both an intensive campaign to engage directly with women and an extensive campaign to build an enabling environment for women to participate fearlessly in elections. Support of the State Election Commission (SEC) and Panchayati Raj Department is accessed for timely information on the process of elections and seeking relevant permissions and support to conduct the SWEEP campaign in sensitive districts of Bihar and Odisha.

Interventions and impact in Bihar: 14,767 men & women trained through 45 simulation camps; 1,928 women trained through 47 potential leadership workshops; 7,670 women & men access 16 SWEEP resource centres; 30,000 men & women attended 1,034 village meetings; 68,697 men & women attended 429 street plays over a period of four months in 20 districts; 517 rallies taken out in 47 blocks with a participation of 25,850 women; radio programme broadcast in all 38 districts of Bihar reaching out to 3.8 million households; 50,000 posters, 40,000 pamphlets and 49,000 stickers distributed and over 200 articles published in 13 newspapers supporting the SWEEP campaign.

Interventions and impact in Odisha: 1,449 men & women trained about election process through 23 simulation camps; 2,438 women trained through 68 potential leadership workshops; 376 men and women attended 7 district level meetings; 3,157 men and women attended 50 block level meetings; 20,127 men & women attended 224 village meetings; 42,911 men & women attended 229 street plays over a period of one and half month in 7 districts; mobile campaign and rallies reached out to 26,348 citizens; 18 Gender Panchayat Resource Centres were opened in 18 blocks for four months disseminating election and other information to 2,829 citizens; radio jingles outreach to all 30 districts reaching out to 16.5 million households; 50,000 posters, 51,000 leaflets, 40,000 stickers distributed during campaign.



CASE STUDY

In 2006, when 50 per cent reservation for women was announced for the first time in Bihar, a villager of Jangara Tola commented and said, “Now, the buffalo feeders will run the Panchayats?” Listening to this, Podharia Devi turned around and replied, “We will do what you have never thought of. Just give us a chance.” From then onwards till now, Podharia Devi has never ceased to deliver. She has been efficiently working towards building sewers, providing job cards, jobs, and full wages to labourers along with other important development works. Living in a damaged hut herself, Podharia Devi has provided Indira Awas and social security pensions to the needy. As a result of her good work, Podharia Devi got re-elected as a Panchayat member again in 2011. She belongs to Indrapuri Panchayat in District Rohtas.

BIHAR SWEEP RESULTS

- * 90% members of THP facilitated EWRs federations re-contested in the Panchayat elections in 2011
- * More than 50% federation members got re-elected to Panchayats
- * 1454 women acted as proposers during Panchayat elections
- * 30 women were nominated as polling agents by potential women candidates
- * 1120 women were nominated as counting agents by women candidates

