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Elections

**Best Practices under
the Democracy Partnership**

The Asia
 Foundation



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Elections

Best Practices under the Democracy Partnership

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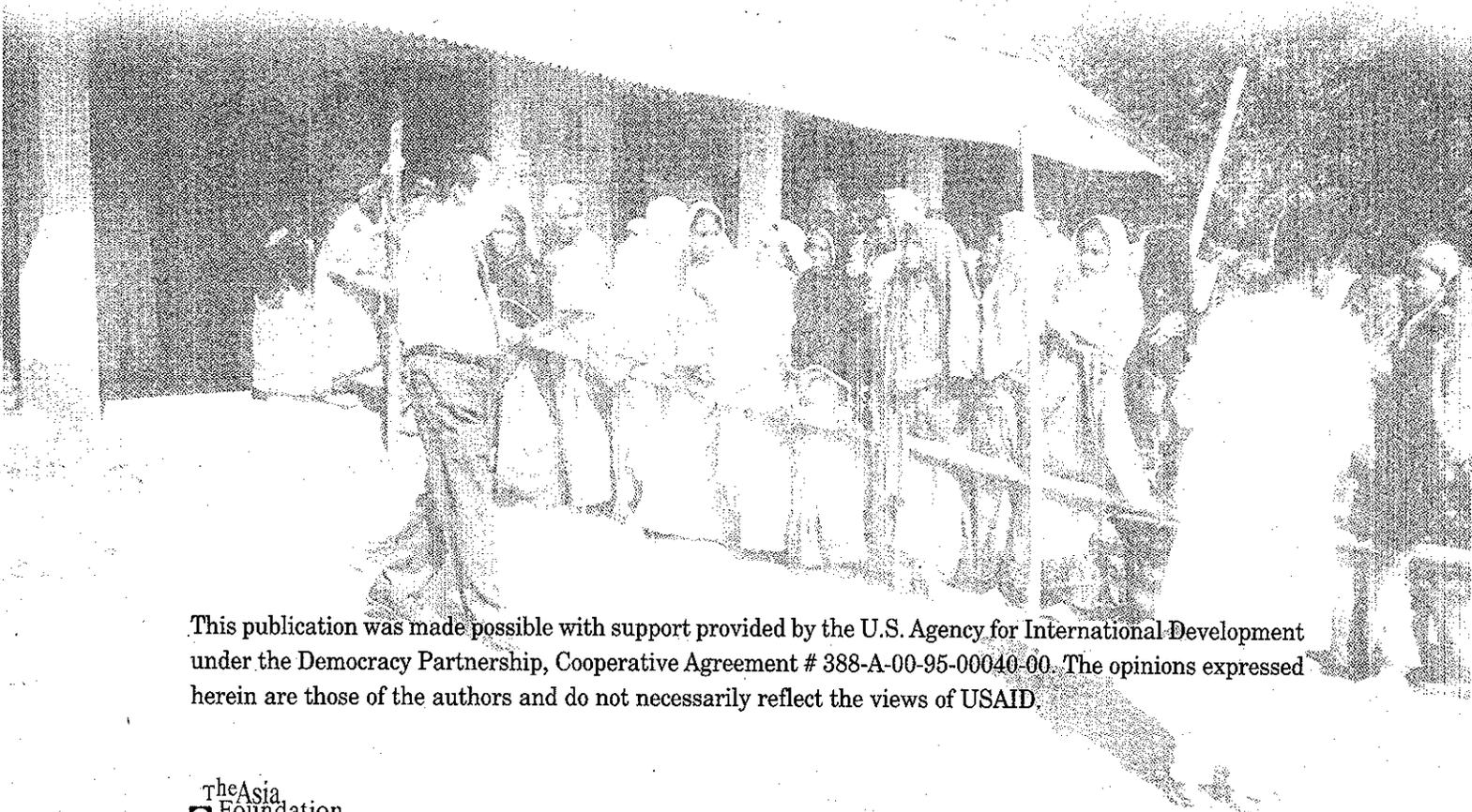
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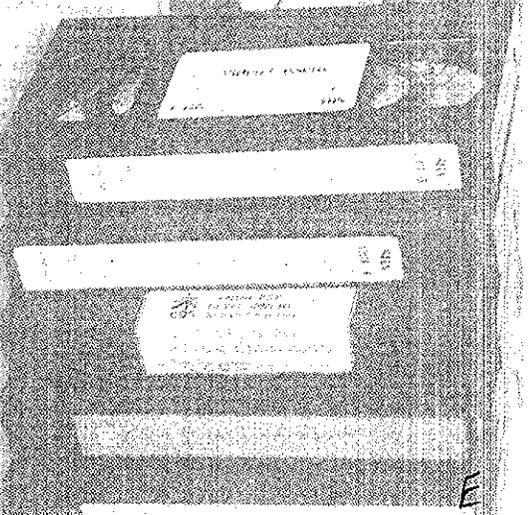
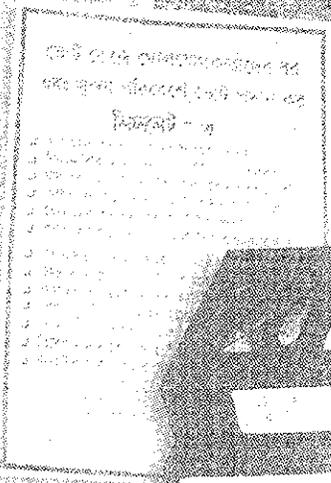
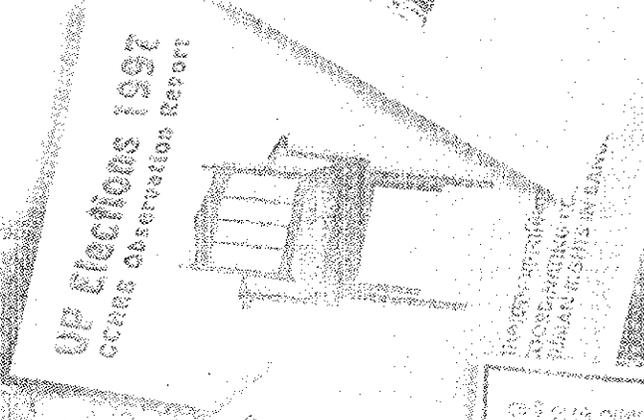
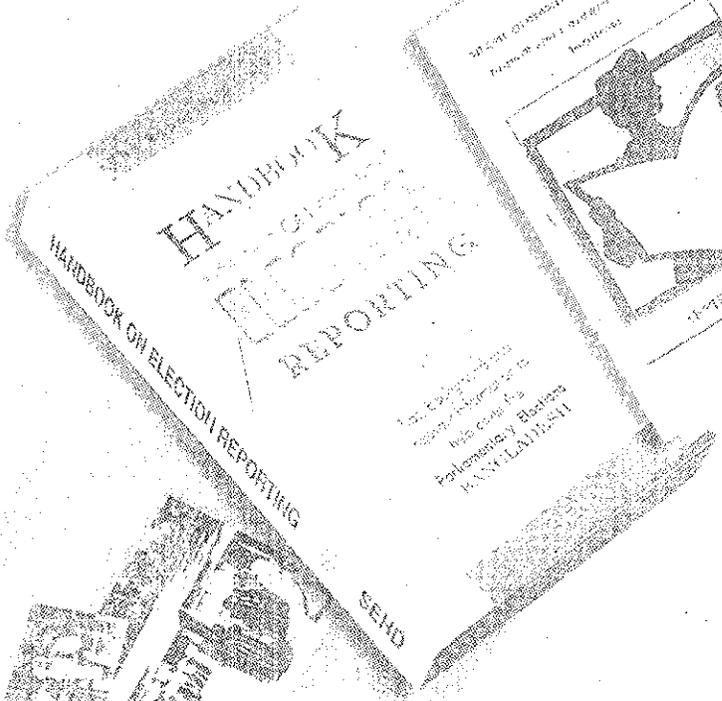




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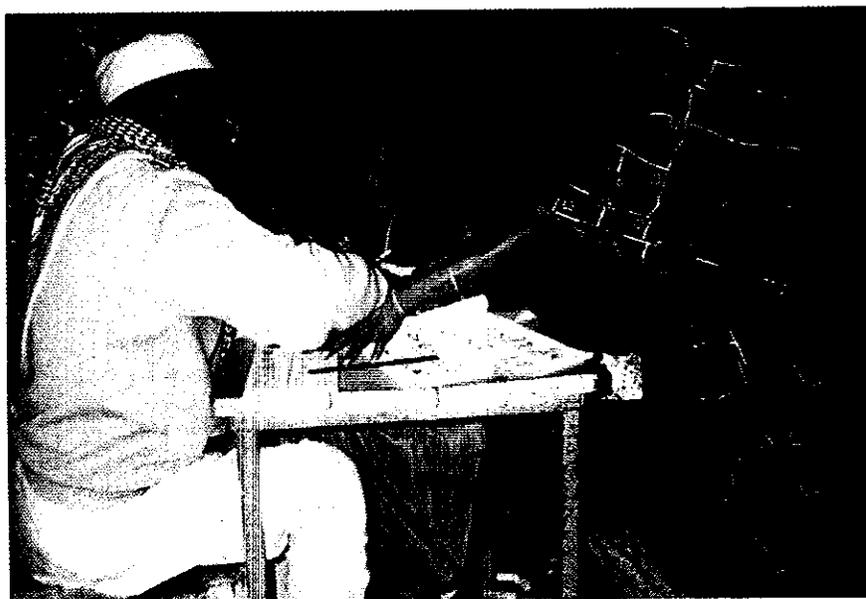


Introduction

The Democracy Partnership (DP), established in 1995 between the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and The Asia Foundation, was designed to encourage local NGOs to work with community associations and local elected bodies to improve local governance and rural justice. The Partnership represented the first major donor effort to improve governance in rural Bangladesh. The DP also engaged the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) as a decision making partner in the first years of the program. Though most DP resources were directed to the local level, the Partnership also supported efforts to affect national policy, legislation, jurisprudence, and electoral processes thought to have a direct impact on local empowerment. Specific areas of activity included promoting citizen advocacy; ensuring free and fair elections; improving the performance and accountability of local elected bodies; increasing awareness of legal rights; and promoting alternative dispute resolution through village mediation boards.

Election-related programs were a significant component of the Democracy Partnership. The objectives of election activities were to provide effective voter education programs, with particular focus on women, both as voters and as candidates; to improve the quality of election monitoring and reporting; and to advocate for needed reform of structural and institutional barriers to the free and full participation of the electorate. With these challenges in mind the DP identified eight NGOs to conduct election related programming in largely rural areas. While some projects began just prior to the country's sixth parliamentary election in February 1996, the majority of projects were geared toward the 1997 local level Union Parishad (UP) elections. The Union Parishad level was deemed important because it is the lowest level of local governance, representing an uninterrupted period of democracy extending back 100 years, as well as the only level of local government in Bangladesh allowing for the election of its leadership.

Women, widely disadvantaged in every area of life throughout rural Bangladesh, were a natural focus for the DP seeking to increase political



representation in local governance. The 1997 UP elections were a strategic entry for programming because they were the first local elections allowing for the direct election of women. While three seats on each Union Parishad were reserved for women prior to the 1997 election, Act No. 20 of 1997 specified that these reserved seats had to be filled by direct election rather than through nomination by the Union Parishad, as had been the prior practice. While the seats were still reserved, the new provision meant women had to campaign and learn to be accountable to voters. The DP saw this as an opportunity to work with traditionally disempowered women, to develop their political and campaign skills, and to strengthen their voice on issues of import to all women in their communities.

The role of the media in the election process was another important focus of the DP. One partner NGO, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), conducted a training program on election reporting for journalists which helped expand the discussion of issues, involved the press in the voter education process, and resulted in broader and more nuanced media coverage of the elections.

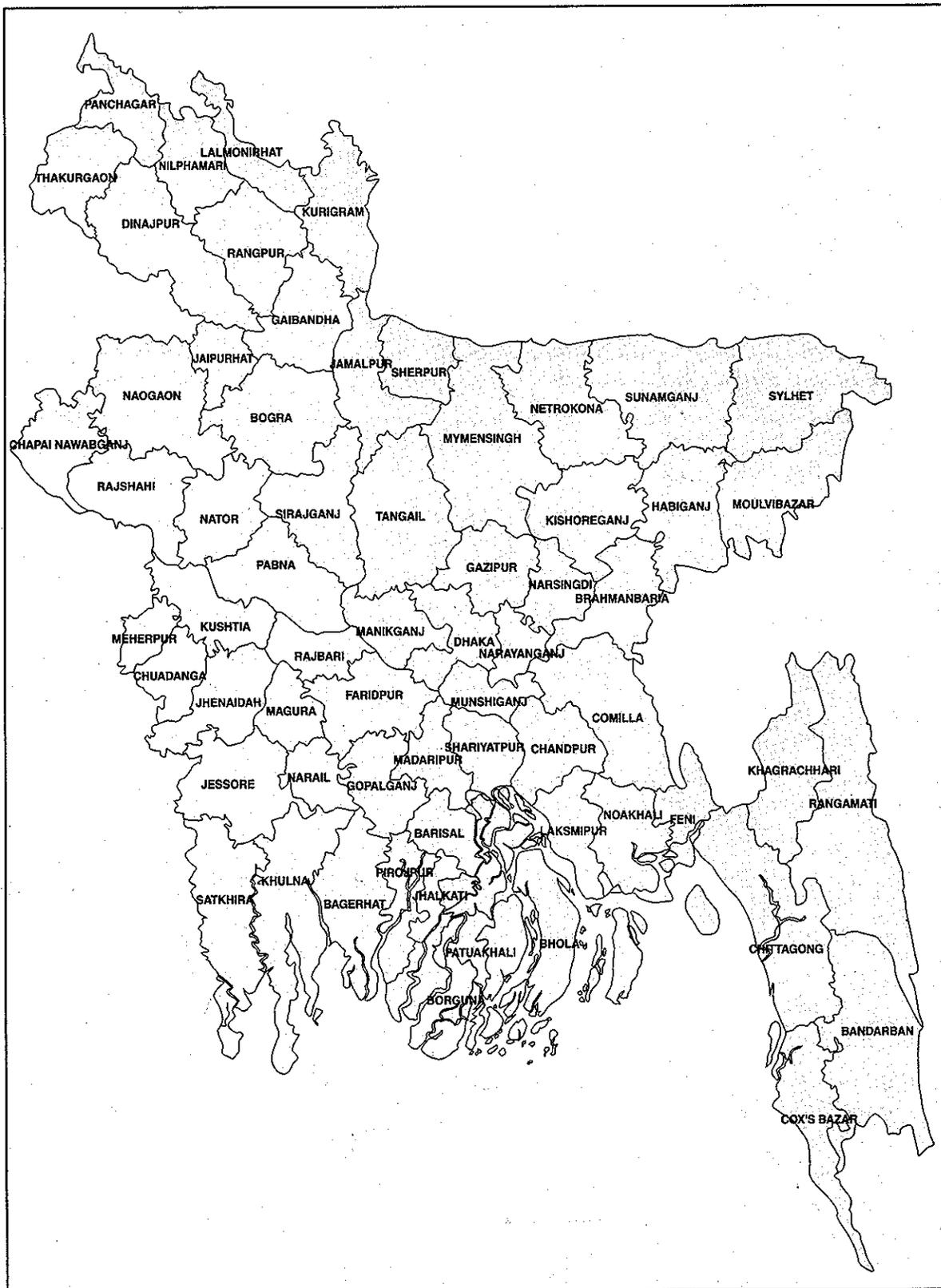
Democracy Partnership NGOs and their Programs

Voter Education

Democracy Partnership-supported NGOs provided voter education and civic awareness training through seminars, workshops, and community meetings. Voter education programs focused on participation of women, the role and responsibilities of elected Union Parishad members, and voters' rights. Some partner NGOs used community theater and folk songs to communicate election related messages, and this innovation proved highly effective and appropriate, given the low literacy rates in Bangladesh and the popularity of these forms of mass communication. The messages were further reinforced by the development and distribution of posters, leaflets, and flyers, short television and radio spots and longer electronic media programs. Through these means, partner NGOs were able to reach a large percentage of the population in their targeted areas of operation. Partner NGOs also developed and delivered training programs for women candidates, many of whom were successfully elected as Union Parishad members.



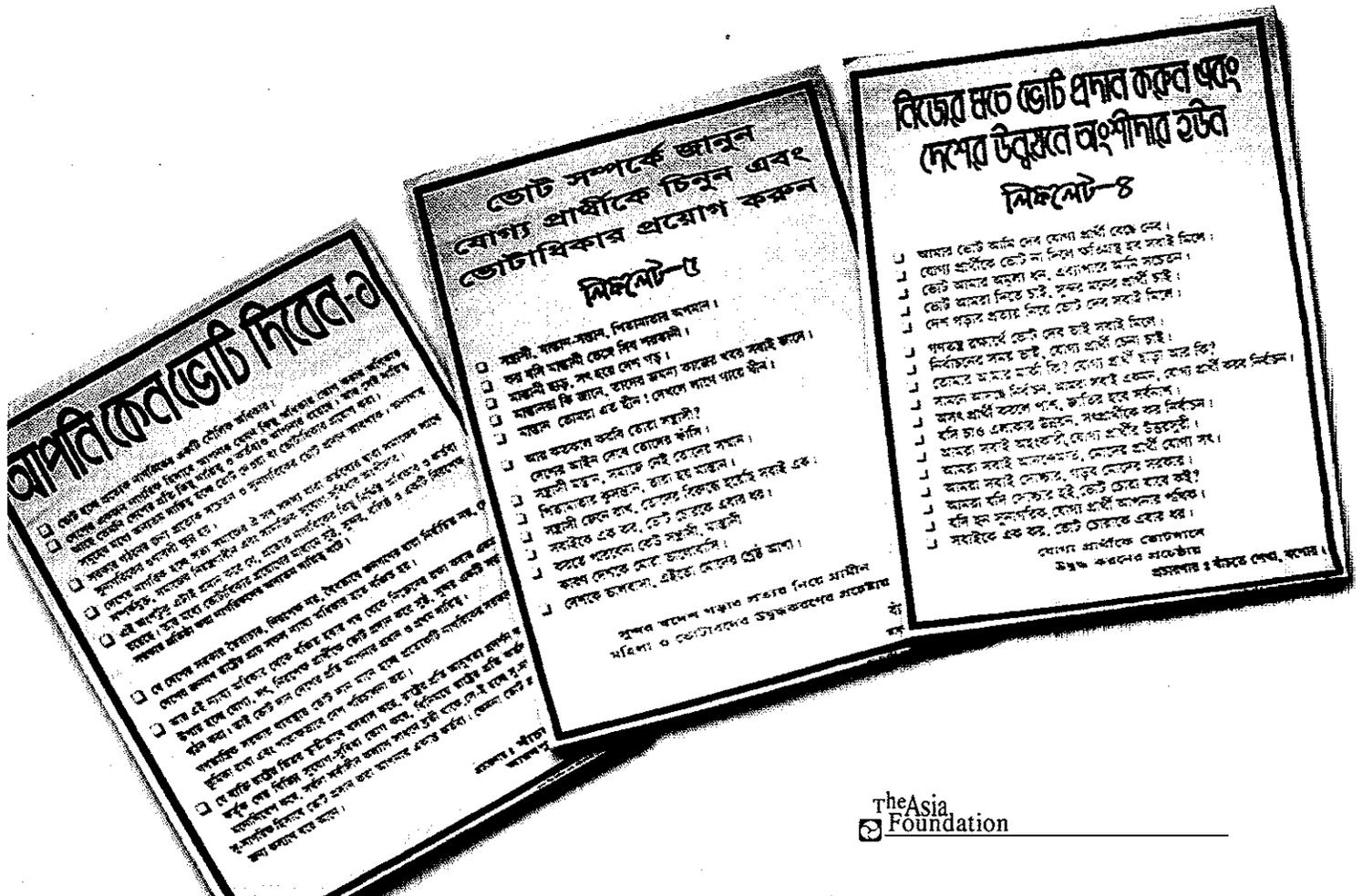
Bangladesh Map



Banchte Shekha

Banchte Shekha, which means "learning to survive," is an NGO based in Jessore District and operating in Khulna, Jessore, and Narail Districts in southwestern Bangladesh. In the months prior to the 1997 Union Parishad elections, Banchte Shekha implemented voter education programs for a diverse audience of voters, community leaders, elected officials, women's groups, teachers and others. Through drama, folk songs, printed materials and group discussions, Banchte Shekha trained 400 leaders of village-level credit and savings associations as voter educators. In turn, these leaders trained over 12,000 women in 400 villages. The voter education programs focused on encouraging women to vote according to their own assessment of candidates and party election platforms, rather than on the basis of the instruction and pressure of husbands, fathers and other community leaders. Other materials encouraged voters to select honest, competent and patriotic candidates. Based on community surveys, Banchte Shekha estimates that voter turnout in the three districts increased from 62 to 92 percent as a result of their voter education project.

To encourage women to contest for UP seats to be filled by direct election (with competition among women only), Banchte Shekha held a training program for 136 female candidates. The program covered the role and activities of the Union Parishad, the need for accountability of elected representatives, problems faced at the UP level, and ways to solve them. Of the candidates who participated in the program, 48 were members of the village-level credit and savings associations supported by Banchte Shekha, and of these 48 candidates, 26 were



elected to Union Parishad seats, a victory rate exceeding 50%. The significance of these victories can not be understated – these are poor, landless women, with no previous experience in local politics, elected to serve communities where traditionally only elite males and various persons of status, education, and wealth are seen as viable candidates. Women who had been



ধর্মীয় মহিলা ভোটার প্রশিক্ষণ কর্মসূচী : বাচ্চু পেয়া, পুর্বেশ্বরী

previously nominated tended to be either sponsored by or relatives of these elite males. Following the election, Banchte Shekha organized a workshop for 115 Union Parishad Chairmen to discuss the campaign promises made by the Chairmen and the means they would use to fulfill them.

আপনি যাকে ভোট প্রদান করে...

- আপনার ঘর নিরাপত্তা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, শিক্ষা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, পরিষ্কার পরিচ্ছন্নতা, পানীয় জল, বিদ্যুৎ, গ্যাস, ইত্যাদি নিশ্চিত করা হবে।
- আপনার জমি নিরাপত্তা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, পরিষ্কার পরিচ্ছন্নতা, পানীয় জল, বিদ্যুৎ, গ্যাস, ইত্যাদি নিশ্চিত করা হবে।
- আপনার শ্রমিকদের নিরাপত্তা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, পরিষ্কার পরিচ্ছন্নতা, পানীয় জল, বিদ্যুৎ, গ্যাস, ইত্যাদি নিশ্চিত করা হবে।
- আপনার পরিবারের নিরাপত্তা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, পরিষ্কার পরিচ্ছন্নতা, পানীয় জল, বিদ্যুৎ, গ্যাস, ইত্যাদি নিশ্চিত করা হবে।
- আপনার পরিবেশের নিরাপত্তা, স্বাস্থ্যসেবা, পরিষ্কার পরিচ্ছন্নতা, পানীয় জল, বিদ্যুৎ, গ্যাস, ইত্যাদি নিশ্চিত করা হবে।

আপনি কেবল গোলামোপকারীকে...

- ভোট হলে কোনো মারাত্মক একটি দাবীও পূরণ হবে।
- ভোট হলে কোনো মারাত্মক একটি দাবীও পূরণ হবে।
- ভোট হলে কোনো মারাত্মক একটি দাবীও পূরণ হবে।
- ভোট হলে কোনো মারাত্মক একটি দাবীও পূরণ হবে।
- ভোট হলে কোনো মারাত্মক একটি দাবীও পূরণ হবে।

আপনি কেবল পরিবেশে ভোট প্র...

- আপনি কেবল পরিবেশে ভোট প্র...

আপনি কেবল...

- আপনি কেবল...

ভোটাধিকার প্রয়োগ ক...

- স্বামী, মাতা-পিতা, পিতামহের অপমান।
- কোন ধর্মীয় মতাদর্শে ভেদে দ্বন্দ্বিতা।
- মাতামহা কি আসে, তাদের জন্য তাদের খবর সবাই জানে।
- মাতা-পিতা তাদের এত দীন! যেখানে যাবে গিয়ে যাবে।
- আমি কতকাল আমি তোমার সন্তানী?
- দেশের আইন লঙ্ঘন তোমার মতাদর্শে।
- স্বামী মতানুযায়ী, সমাজে নেই তোমার সমান।
- পিতামহের তুলনায়, তারা হয় মাতান।
- স্বামী কেমন রাখ, তাদের বিচারে সবাই এক।
- সবাইকে এক বলে, ভোট জোরপূর্বক যোগে দর।
- করতে পারলে ভোট স্বামী, মাতা-পিতা।
- কারণ দেশকে মোর ভাষাভাষী।
- দেশকে ভাষাভাষী, এইতো মোদের প্রেত আপা।

স্বপ্নের অংশে পড়ার প্রত্যয় নিয়ে আশীর্বাদ
মহিলা ও ভোটারদের উদ্দেশ্যে প্রচারিত

বাচ্চু পেয়া
পুর্বেশ্বরী

Centre for Development Services

The Centre for Development Services (CDS) is an intermediary, Dhaka-based NGO that works with grassroots organizations to support and guide their institutional development. Under the Democracy Partnership program, CDS used radio and television to disseminate voter education messages. CDS developed and produced television spots and a television talk show on women's participation in the electoral process, accountability of local elected bodies, selection criteria for candidates, and equal rights for women in the democratic process. Civil society leaders, local elected officials and other community members participated in the shows and discussed a variety of issues related to democracy and elections. These programs were broadcast free of charge to CDS by the Bangladesh national television network.

CDS also produced a radio discussion program to highlight the same issues through interviews, drama, debate, and songs. After intensive negotiations between CDS and the



government-run television and radio stations, the television spots and talk show, as well as the radio program, were broadcast on government stations at no cost to CDS. The radio program developed a loyal audience, and many listeners requested that CDS continue the program. According to CDS' figures, 38% of Bangladeshis nationally had access to TV and 45% had access to radio, and therefore had potential exposure to these messages during the project period.



Manabik Shahajya Sangstha/Fair Election Monitoring Alliance

Manabik Shahajya Sangstha (MSS) is one of the oldest NGOs in the country, starting in 1974 as a movement to feed and clothe people stricken by one of the world's worst famines in recent history. In 1977, MSS progressed from a loose-knit movement to a bona fide organization undertaking an integrated approach to development. MSS began a health and population program in 1982, and a savings and credit program for urban poor in 1984, which has since become sustainable. MSS was again in the vanguard among NGOs when building democratic societies and promoting good governance became the focus of development efforts, as it shifted to implementing programs at the grassroots level to enhance community participation in democratic governance, and to educating voters in civic responsibilities.

MSS serves as the fund management arm of its sister organization, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA). FEMA is a nation-wide coalition of local NGOs, professional groups, and concerned citizens whose mission is to encourage informed participation by voters



নির্বাচনে সকলে মিলে

ইউনিয়ন পরিষদ নির্বাচনে

ইউনিয়ন পরিষদে
আপনার অংশগ্রহণ বৃদ্ধি করুন।

ফেমা

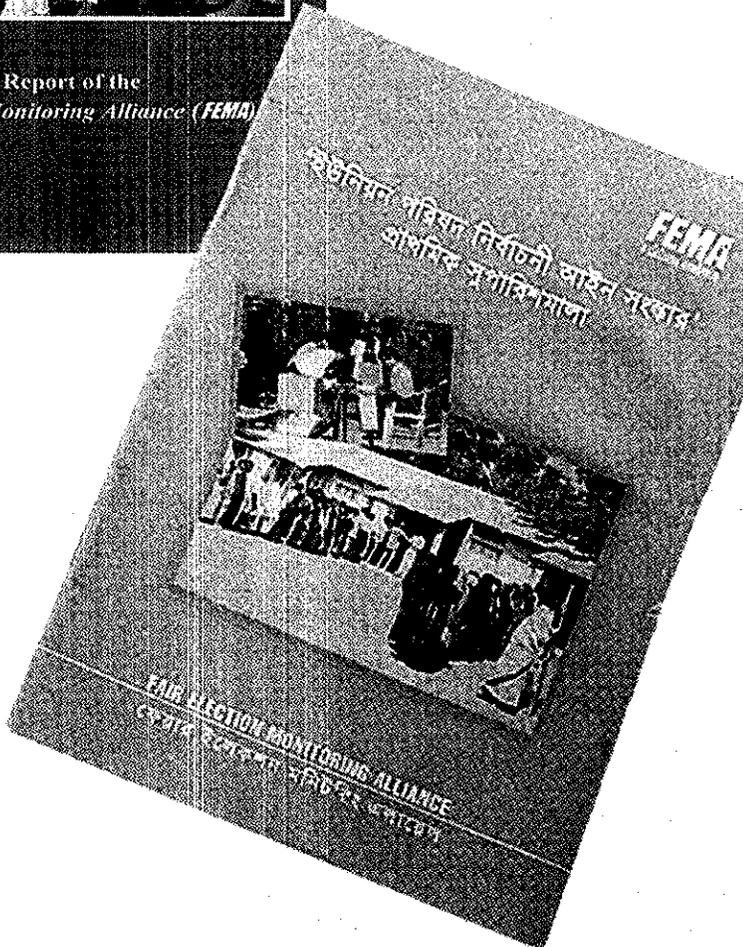
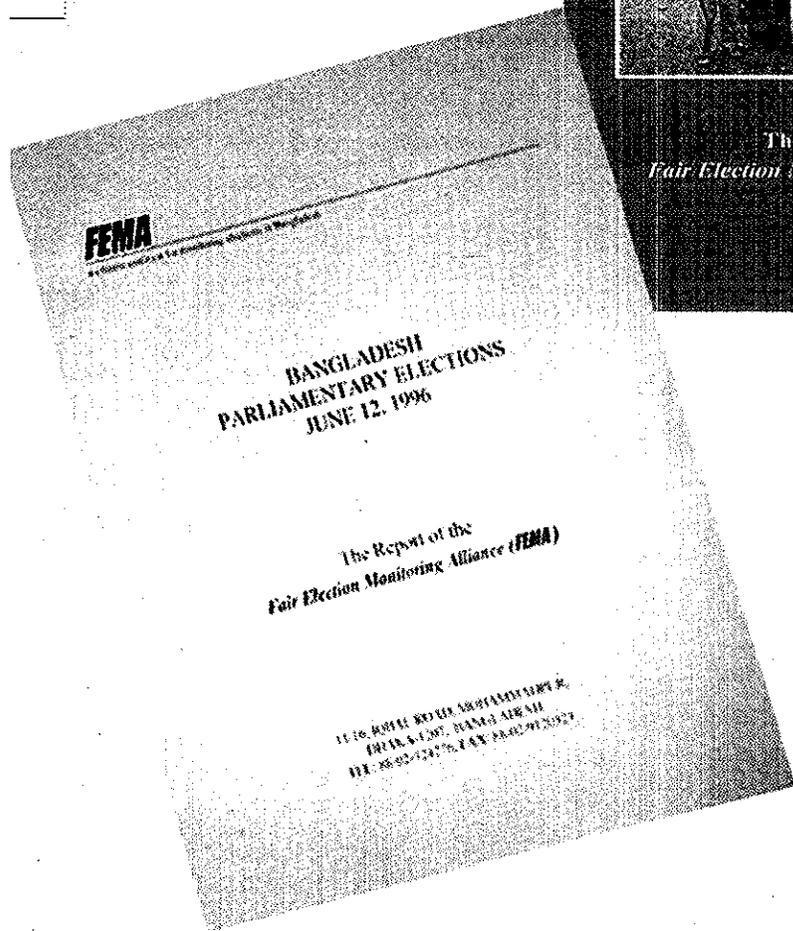


in the electoral process through election monitoring, advocacy, civic awareness and national- and local-level dialogue. FEMA's structure includes highly organized district offices, making it effective at the grassroots.

Under the Democracy Partnership, MSS/FEMA developed a voter education package called Democracy and Rights. The package focused on voter education for disadvantaged sections of the population in 34 of Bangladesh's 64 districts in preparation for the 1997 Union Parishad elections. The educational materials covered voter's rights and responsibilities, local



The Report of the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA)



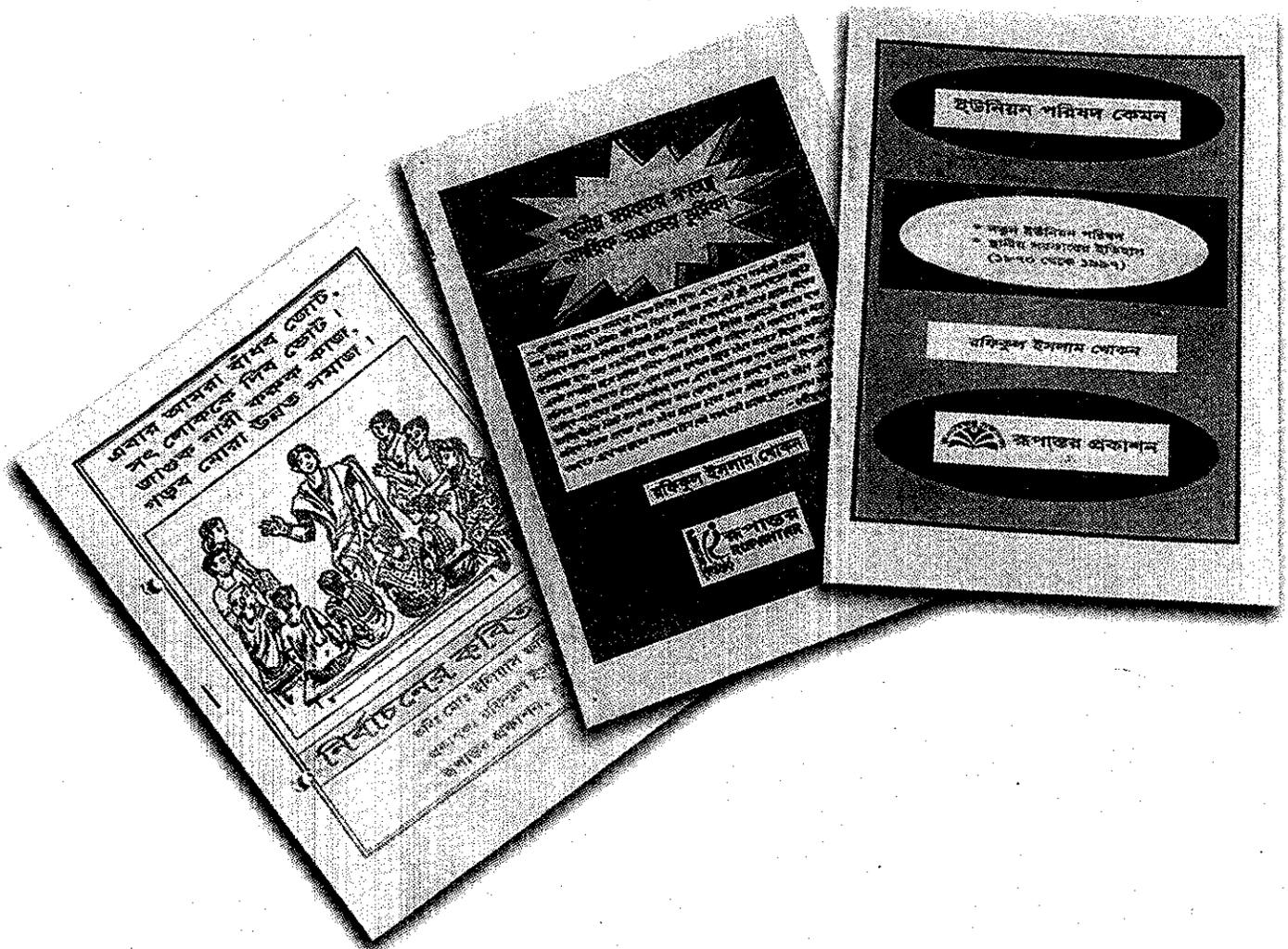
government institutions, the rationale for democracy, how to strengthen democracy, and how and why to vote. MSS/FEMA trained 375 educators and community trainers from MSS/FEMA partner organizations. These trainers subsequently trained over 100,000 of their group members using MSS/FEMA's flip charts and methodology. MSS/FEMA also developed and distributed two sets of posters: the first urging people to vote and to participate in the Union Parishad election as candidates and voters; the second to highlight qualities, such as reliability, trustworthiness, efficiency, capability, and honesty, that make a good candidate.

In 1998 and 1999, MSS/FEMA's election monitoring cascade training program reached an additional 300,000 individuals through its member organizations. In particular, MSS/FEMA's cascade training was able to reach a large number of disadvantaged people, including women and the extremely poor, who normally would not have access to civic and voter information.



Rupantar

Rupantar, which means "transformation," is an organization committed to empowering the poorest sectors of society to participate in decision-making, advocate for equal access to resources, and work in collaboration to preserve the environment and other valuable resources. Rupantar focuses much of its programming on encouraging women to be more active politically. Rupantar is active in the Khulna and Bagerhat districts in the southwest of the country. With support from the Democracy Partnership, Rupantar developed and implemented a variety of innovative voter awareness activities including street drama and other cultural events. In addition, Rupantar engaged in dialogue with community leaders, local elites, and other community members through workshops and meetings to raise awareness of the roles and functions of various actors in a participatory democracy.



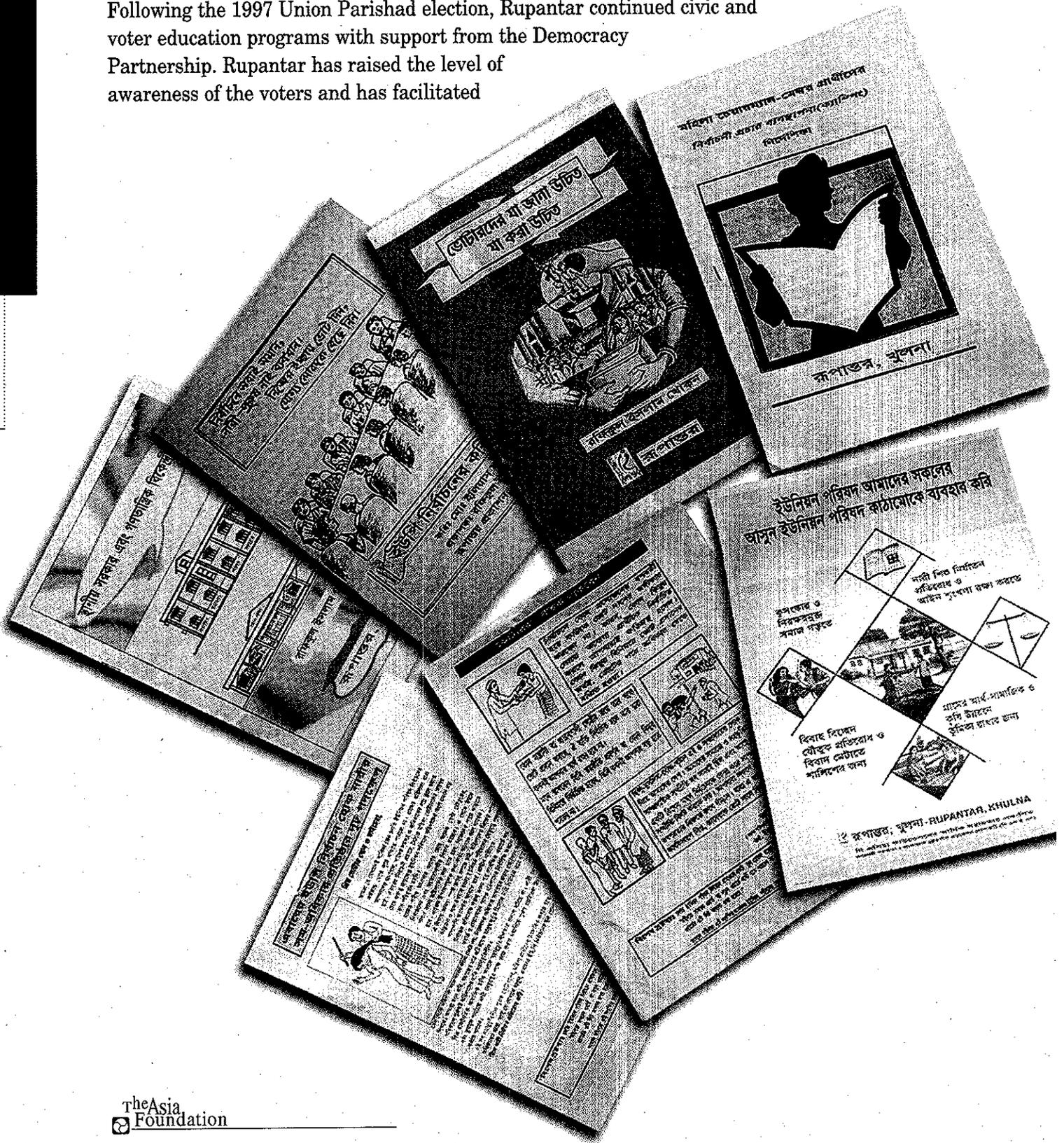
Using a method called alternative living theater, Rupantar adapted a traditional form of theatre to bring to life issues of democracy and governance such as the role of women in elected and non-elected leadership positions. This method involves the participation of the actors in developing the script, hence drawing on local experiences to demonstrate practical ways to overcome obstacles. Performances use local folk music and do not require the use of lights, props or expensive stage construction. Each performance can reach a large audience of up to one thousand people. Rupantar records indicate that in 1997 over 66,000 people attended these performances. Between 1998 and 1999, nearly half a million people attended Rupantar's 454 educational performances. The method is very popular in rural areas and Rupantar has taught this theater form to a number of other groups. Over 56 theater organizations in Bangladesh are now using Rupantar's living theater method.

In addition to its theater performances, Rupantar held a number of discussion meetings in preparation for the 1997 Union Parishad elections. These meetings involved Rupantar group members, local leaders, local government officials, women candidates and other prominent community members. In general meetings for group members, participants discussed the local government structure, its role and responsibility, the experience of women members in prior Union Parishad, the importance of women's participation as voters and candidates, and ways that Union Parishad address issues of concern to women. Working with its women group members, Rupantar developed and implemented a training program on campaign

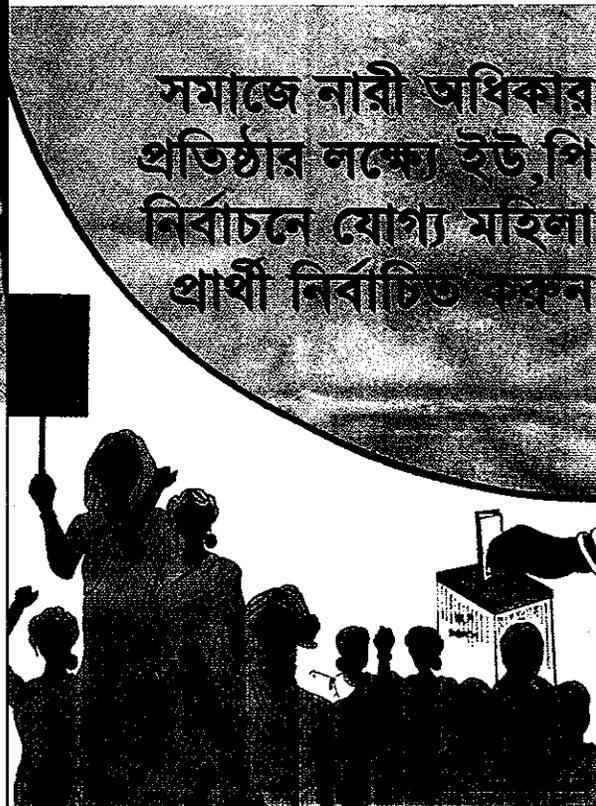
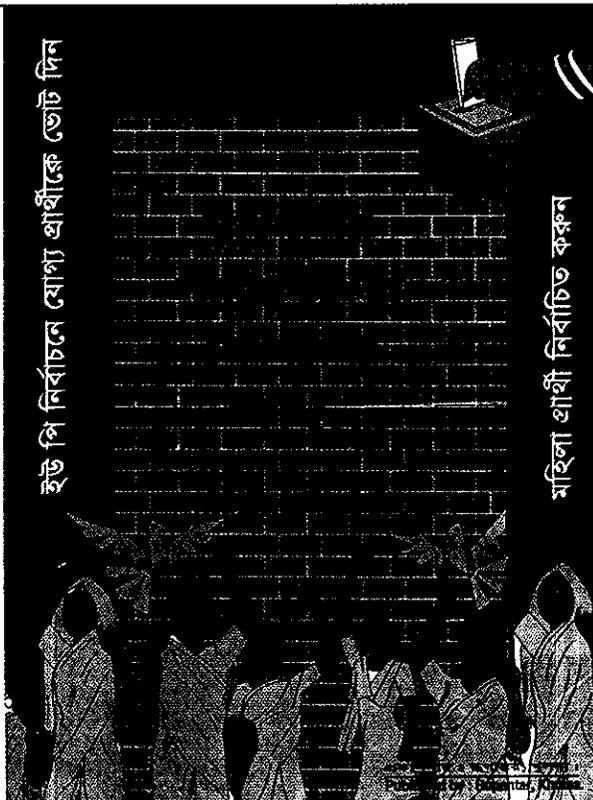


management for women candidates. The training program included strategies for communicating with voters, fundraising and budget management, and networking with other women candidates. Rupantar's creative program also included a number of comic-book style publications and posters on women's political participation and the new provision for reserved seats for women.

Following the 1997 Union Parishad election, Rupantar continued civic and voter education programs with support from the Democracy Partnership. Rupantar has raised the level of awareness of the voters and has facilitated



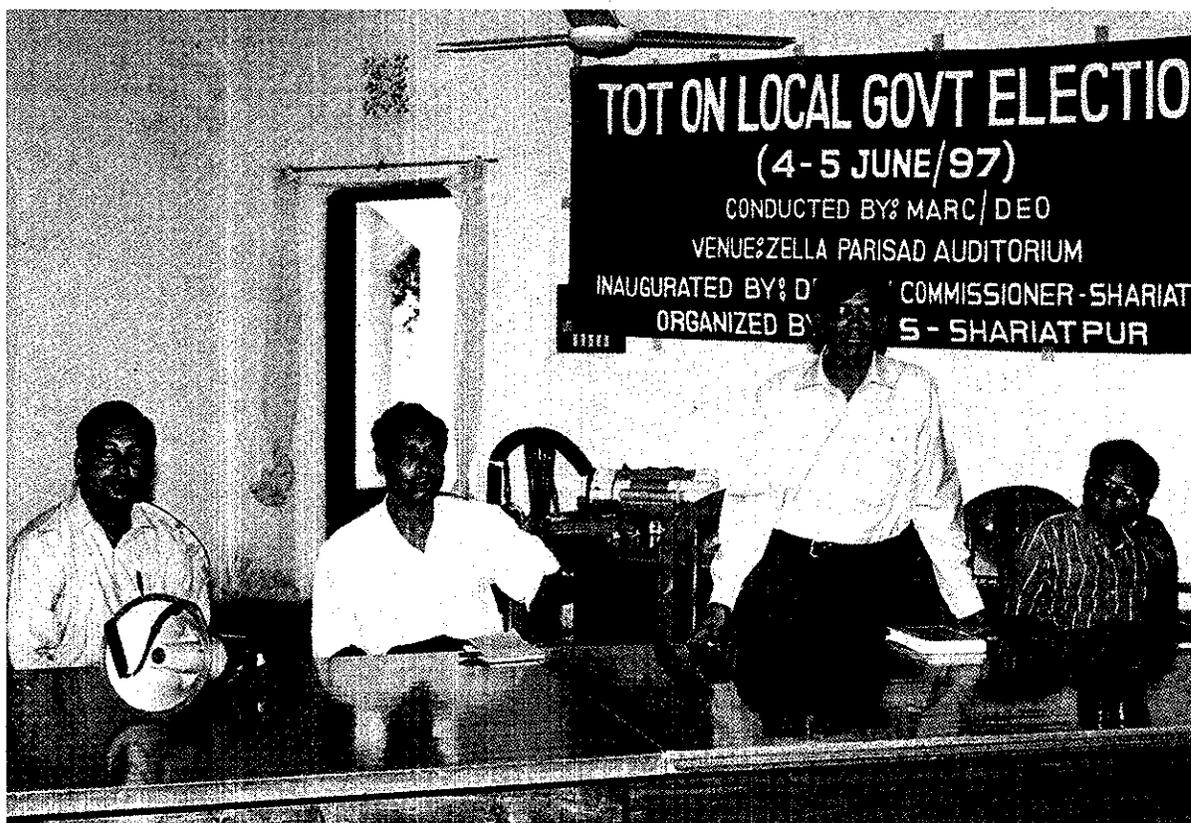
continued dialogue between local leaders and voters through its meetings and theater productions. Throughout the course of Rupantar's project, the organization reported increased participation of community members in local government activities and increased involvement of women in decision making processes affecting their communities.



Shariatpur Development Society

Shariatpur Development Society (SDS) operates in a seriously underdeveloped area in this southern district of Bangladesh. The population is 1.2 million, of whom 76 percent are illiterate and 68 percent are landless. Most live well below the poverty line. To determine the gaps in voter knowledge and awareness and to target its program as effectively as possible, SDS conducted a survey in Shariatpur district. It then developed posters, sample ballot papers, folk songs, and other materials based on the survey results and presented them through group discussions, door to door visits, and personal discussions around the district. SDS's program focused on the mechanics of voting, voter rights and responsibilities, and the roles of local and national government. SDS estimates that over 130,000 women voters participated in these voter education sessions.

In addition, SDS held a one-day orientation for 1,450 Union Parishad candidates on SDS's voter education program on campaign management; conducted a one-day sharing session with presiding officers, assistant presiding officers, and polling agents; and provided technical assistance to local election officials.



Uttaran

Uttaran uses village-based community groups to operate in fifteen unions of the Satkhira, Khulna, and Jessore districts, in the southwest region of the country. During the year 2000 Uttaran trained over 26,000 people including group members, locally elected officials, journalists, and other community leaders, through 420 community-level meetings. The sessions, conducted by Uttaran-trained field workers, focused on voting rights, the election process, the role of elected officials, the empowerment of women to participate politically and economically in the community, and the importance of participating in the democratic process.

Uttaran also trained local candidates, group leaders, and other members of the community on how to ascertain the demands and needs of voters and advocate on behalf of the community. This training included information on the structure and function of locally elected bodies and on issues typically of concern to rural communities in Bangladesh, including land distribution, access to justice, and communal conflict. A follow-up training for candidates looked at development issues and other regional concerns, including human trafficking, awareness of basic laws and legal procedures, and the rights of minorities.

Uttaran group members established citizens' committees at the village and union levels. Each of the village committees sent a member to participate in the union level committee. Members of the village committees used community meetings and door to door discussions to encourage poor citizens to become more active in making the election process free, fair, and peaceful and to become more involved with their Union Parishad. The village committee members emphasized how to use the formal local government system to participate in the decision-making process affecting their village's resources. The union committees served to coordinate and inform the activities of the village committees and maintain contact with elected officials and law enforcement agencies. Uttaran reports that these committees have created a sense of confidence among the rural poor, heightened their understanding of their democratic rights and duties, and increased their ability to improve their representation in local bodies. Frequent discussions at the village- and union-level committee meetings about Union Parishad activities and democratic rights has helped communities in which Uttaran works to hold elected officials more accountable for their actions. To reinforce the idea that local elected officials should feel accountable to voters, Uttaran group members organized meetings between UP candidates and civil society. Representatives from several major parties participated in the meetings and responded to questions and concerns about health facilities, education, water drainage, road construction, women's rights, social justice, and corruption.

Uttaran's activities were initially challenged by some UP candidates and other community members who felt threatened by its voter awareness programs. These individuals circulated negative rumors about Uttaran's plans and objectives. To counter these allegations, Uttaran involved increasingly large numbers of poor people in its programs, thus building public

momentum for its programs; at the same time, Uttaran met with candidates and local leaders to explain the methods and objectives of its voter awareness and candidate training programs.

Uttaran reported that in their area of operation, the 1997 Union Parishad elections were free from violence, vote rigging, and ballot box snatching. Candidates refrained from personal attacks on one another and a record number of women participated in the election both as voters and candidates. By involving their group members in the various training programs and committees, Uttaran was able to raise the level of awareness among voters in their area of responsibility.

Election Monitoring and Reporting

In young, emerging democracies, highly politically-polarized environments, or where democratic institutions are not independent or are subject to undue influence by political parties, election monitoring by civil society is critical to guarding the sanctity of the election process and every individual vote. To ensure maximum confidence in the monitoring and, in turn, the electoral process itself, broad ownership is essential. Furthermore, the monitoring process must be as open and transparent as possible. Effective election monitoring depends on 1) a network of nonpartisan observers; 2) standard training materials for observers; 3) clear and objective observation forms; 4) a flexible logistical structure to facilitate communication with a national coordinating body and to ensure an efficient deployment strategy for nationwide coverage; and 5) the analytical capacity to analyze and evaluate election-day results and to make timely, quality reports.

To this end, at the inception of the DP in 1995, the Foundation sought to identify nascent organizations working on election monitoring, made efforts to encourage communication and coordination among them, and provided financial and technical inputs to assist them in building their monitoring capacity. With the backing of a consortium of donors, two monitoring organizations were identified and supported by The Asia Foundation to carry out spot observations throughout the country.

Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh

The Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) was established in 1987 to coordinate organizations involved in the protection and advancement of human rights and democratic principles. The CCHRB network includes more than 250 member organizations and associated organizations throughout Bangladesh. The first official domestic monitoring in the country was conducted by the CCHRB during the 1990 Upazila elections. The violence and voter intimidation noted during this election confirmed CCHRB in the importance of continued observation efforts by impartial civic observers to deter further violence and to document where irregularities unduly affected election results.

In the subsequent parliamentary election in June 1996, CCHRB mobilized 4,000 observers to monitor 150 out of 300 constituencies. Prior to election day, CCHRB deployed 640 long-term observers to the selected constituencies. The observers reviewed the voter list for "ghost voters," surveyed the candidate nomination process, tracked campaign expenditures, and monitored the campaign process for incidents of violence, intimidation, and other provocative actions by candidates and their agents.

In 1997, CCHRB, in association with the Bangladesh Manobadhikar Samonnoy Parishad, assigned 7,500 observers to monitor the Union Parishad elections in 44 districts. The observers reported a turnout of 78%, with a higher percentage of females than males voting. Some significant problems with the voter list were noted, including listing the names of under-aged or deceased individuals, false identities, and over 50,000 people attempting to vote even though their names were not on the list. This election was marred by violence, with 47 murders and 1,955 injuries reported by both election observers and the media. As a result, CCHRB recommended that special security measures be taken not only during, but in the days preceding and following elections.

Manabik Shahajya Sangstha/Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (MSS/FEMA)

MSS was first formed as an organization in 1977 to provide an integrated development program to the poor. It has since shifted its focus to improving voter education and enhancing grassroots participation in governance. MSS acts as the fund management arm of the election monitoring organization FEMA, which was established in 1995. FEMA consists of members from more than 200 partners that on an ad hoc basis support election monitoring activities. The 1996 Parliamentary election was the first observation effort undertaken by MSS/FEMA. USAID and The Asia Foundation provided a grant to MSS/FEMA through the Democracy Partnership to carry out election activities in 1996.

Prior to the 1996 election, MSS/FEMA used a uniform questionnaire to observe election campaigns in a sample of ten unions. MSS/FEMA observers reported on violations of the candidate code of conduct and of rules governing the campaign process. In four out of the ten unions MSS/FEMA observers reported no violations. In one of the unions with a history of electoral malpractice, MSS/FEMA had conducted a massive public awareness campaign on the code of conduct and campaign regulations. Inspired by the MSS/FEMA campaign, elders in the community formed committees to supervise the law and order situation. This supervision led to compliance with the code of conduct and a cleaner election. In the remaining six unions, violations were limited to the improper use of microphones and multi-colored campaign materials; the mobilization of processions with motorcycles and trucks; the provision of food and drink to those taking part in the processions; and a few armed clashes between supporters of various parties.

MSS/FEMA mobilized 22,338 observers in 288 constituencies for the 1996 Parliamentary elections, for which a record 75% of voters turned out. Observers described the voting as peaceful and disciplined for the most part, although disruptions were reported at 200 polling stations. Polling officials were deemed to be serious and diligent in pursuing their tasks, but

were not adequately trained to carry out all their duties efficiently or without significant errors.

MSS/FEMA's post-election recommendations included improved arrangements for security and secrecy, provisions for the registration of political parties with the Election Commission, and a variety of increased powers to be delegated to the EC, including the power to disqualify corrupt or criminal candidates, to nullify election results in case of serious, documented illegal or corrupt practices, and to encourage domestic and foreign observation.

For election-day observation of the 1997 Union Parishad elections, MSS/FEMA recruited, trained and deployed over 1,600 union- and thana-level coordinators and over 15,000 stationary poll observers posted to 10,358 polling stations in 27 districts. Nearly 3,000 mobile observers from MSS/FEMA district and national committees also contributed to reporting on the election process. MSS/FEMA observers reported that turnout was high and that women voters came out in large numbers. The poll was generally conducted in an orderly manner and well-administered by election officials. On the other hand, MSS/FEMA observers noted that the physical arrangements for some polling stations were inadequate and lacking in lighting, safety, and space for secret balloting. MSS/FEMA observers also reported several instances of disenfranchisement due to mistakes in the voter list or voter impersonation. In several unions, women were prohibited from voting due to *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by the religious leaders in their communities. Out of ten thousand polling stations monitored by MSS/FEMA, incidents of violence occurred in 161, and ballot boxes were snatched from 41. In some areas, MSS/FEMA observers were denied accreditation and access to polling stations. Despite these irregularities and manipulations, MSS/FEMA's conclusion was that the elections were generally peaceful and that election outcomes in the various unions represented the will of the people. The involvement of such a large number of observers helped increase public confidence in the electoral process and created a safer environment for voters, particularly women voters.

Following the elections, MSS/FEMA issued a number of recommendations to improve the electoral process in future elections and consolidate democracy in Bangladesh. Among these, MSS/FEMA stressed the need for:

- Improved voter identification procedures, and a computerized voter list to prevent voter impersonation and disenfranchisement.
- Provisions for greater and more specific punishment for those candidates and their supporters engaged in bribery, poll manipulation, and voter intimidation, or found to be inciting violence.
- Incorporation of the election rules governing the Union Parishad into the main election law to avoid complication and confusion.

- Increasing the number of polling stations to ensure smoother voting.
- Better training for polling officials, polling agents, and candidate agents. (Candidate agents are selected by and represent individual party candidates; they are authorized to observe at polling booths.)
- Improved voter education on polling procedures.

MSS/FEMA conducted election monitoring activities during by-elections in Faridpur, Tangail, Sirajgonj, Rajshahi and Kishorgonj constituencies in October, November and December of 1999.



Society for Environment and Human Development

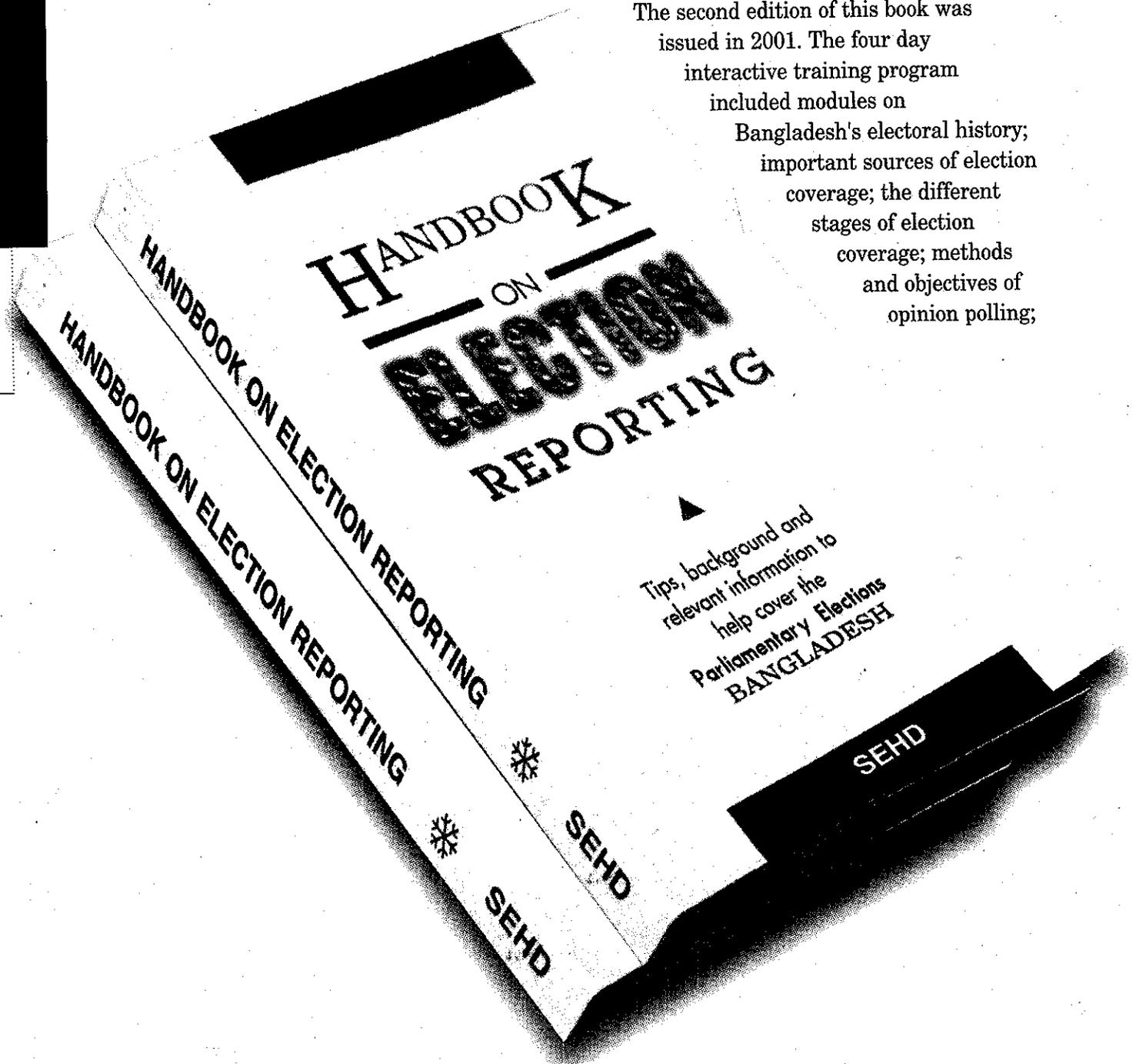
With a small grant from the Democracy Partnership, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) trained 55 journalists from 39 newspapers on election coverage prior to the June 1996 Parliamentary elections. The training program was based on a book titled The Reporter's Guide: Handbook on Election Reporting published in 1995 by SEHD under an

earlier grant from The Asia Foundation.

The second edition of this book was issued in 2001. The four day

interactive training program included modules on

Bangladesh's electoral history; important sources of election coverage; the different stages of election coverage; methods and objectives of opinion polling;



and election-day observation. The program also included a session with election officials, who discussed preparations for the election, as well as a session on local issues and voter concerns, which was intended to introduce greater attention to policy issues in the political dialogue.

The training program helped expand the actual discussion of issues, and involved journalists in the voter education process. Because journalists participating in the training program were required to talk to voters, candidates, politicians, and election officials and publish articles based on these interviews, the training also contributed to broader and more nuanced press coverage of the elections.

Advocacy

As seen from the above, voter and civic education can go a long way to ensuring increased electoral participation of individuals from underrepresented groups. However, significant barriers to participation and accountability are often lodged at structural and institutional levels, and require systemic as well as social reform. For example, laws related to election expenses, campaign procedures, and election disputes are currently inadequate. Some issues, including political party registration, are simply not addressed. Still others are ambiguous and require clarification. This all requires a longer-term process of advocacy for electoral reform. Since the inception of the DP, The Asia Foundation has sought to support organizations committed to researching and advocating reform agendas critical to a well-functioning electoral process.

Manabik Shahajya Sangstha/ Fair Election Monitoring Alliance

Supported by the Democracy Partnership, in 1997 MSS/FEMA embarked on an extensive advocacy campaign to encourage reform of the electoral system. Based on the experience from the 1996 national election, MSS/FEMA advocated for greater authority and autonomy for the Election Commission and for modernization of election laws to remove anomalies and inconsistencies and to promote greater procedural transparency. MSS/FEMA proposed regulatory changes to the code of conduct, and to provisions governing election expenses and election disputes. It also proposed significant reform measures regarding the delimitation of constituencies, the number of seats in Parliament, the compilation of the electoral roll, and the provision of reserved seats for women and the mode of their election. Specifically, MSS/FEMA recommended that the number of seats reserved for women should be increased from 30 to 64 and that those seats should be filled by direct election. MSS/FEMA also favored state funding of political parties and candidates, subject to certain conditions, including registration of political parties with the Election Commission. The belief is that their present reliance on the business community for funding may subject political parties to a certain amount of moral pressure to address the interests of those who helped them come to power, at the expense of the larger interests of the state and nation.

At the conclusion of the drafting process, MSS/FEMA initiated a series of meetings and workshops with election experts, academics, lawyers, journalists, members of professional associations, and other representatives of civil society to review and comment on the content and feasibility of the recommendations. The meetings and workshops were held at the national, divisional, and district levels. MSS/FEMA also conducted an international conference

on electoral reform, which included election experts from Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. A consultative process involved a range of interested stakeholders in further refining the recommendations, which were then presented to representatives of the political parties for their views and comments. The final iteration of the recommendations was published in March 2000 in a report called "Strengthening Electoral Process in Bangladesh." The report was formally presented to the Chief Election Commissioner and the President of Bangladesh, and copies were widely distributed.

Following the publication of the recommendations, MSS/FEMA began a nation-wide advocacy campaign to raise awareness for the recommended changes. The effort included media, letter writing, and signature campaigns, and district level rallies. The letter-writing campaign, which was targeted to then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia, generated a total of twenty thousand letters. Over 100,000 signatures in support of the reforms were also collected.

In addition to issuing recommendations on the electoral process, MSS/FEMA proposed a number of changes to the regulations governing election observers following the 1997 Union Parishad election. In particular, MSS/FEMA recommended that the voting age, set at 18 years, should also be the minimum age for election observers, rather than 25 years, which is the arbitrarily set minimum age now. Also, MSS/FEMA recommended amending a regulation in order to allow election observers to monitor polls in their own thanas. Such a provision would still bar observers from monitoring in their own union, but would reduce the time and cost of traveling to a different thana.

Conclusions

At the local level, in each of the targeted unions, the election-related programs of the Democracy Partnership increased participation of women as voters, elected officials, and community leaders; heightened the population's awareness of their rights as voters and of the duties and responsibilities of the Union Parishad; and stimulated public dialogue on electoral reform. Post-intervention surveys conducted by partner NGOs after the UP elections revealed that fewer women were voting according to the wish of the men in their families, and that women had achieved a much better understanding of democracy-related issues.

These results are especially significant in light of the obstacles faced by partner NGOs, many of which faced resistance from local elected officials and other community leaders who misunderstood the intended activities and feared the NGOs were forming new political parties, or distributing propaganda on behalf of one of the existing parties. Male candidates who did not receive training and support from partner NGOs also resented the Democracy Partnership programs and male family members and other community leaders often discouraged women

candidates from running for office. DP NGOs overcame these barriers over time and through continued dialogue with elected officials and community leaders, who slowly developed a better understanding of the program and its objectives.



The DP was also instrumental to strengthening a network of organizations with countrywide election monitoring capacity. In the 1996 elections, CCHR and MSS/FEMA fielded about 30,000 observers. For the 1997 UP elections, CCHR and MSS/FEMA increased this number to almost 34,000 and coordinated a strategy to field one election observer in every polling station. Many of the other Democracy Partnership NGOs also fielded small teams of election monitors.



Another example of longer-term impact of the Democracy Partnership

is the MSS/FEMA advocacy program. The issues raised by MSS/FEMA continue to be debated at democracy-related seminars and workshops and in the newspapers. More importantly, the Chief Election Commissioner has begun a dialogue with all political parties on a number of MSS/FEMA's recommendations and submitted a proposal to the government for four changes in the electoral laws and regulations. The proposed changes include requiring registration of political parties, limiting candidates to contest in no more than two constituencies, increasing the limit on campaign expenditures, and strengthening the electoral tribunals.

Finally, by working with indigenous NGOs, the DP also contributed to developing a network of intermediary organizations that now have a greater understanding of the broader context of democracy. Many of the DP NGOs were active in community development prior to the DP, in such areas as community health, education, and family planning. They now have a more sophisticated understanding of how local governance structures contribute to their other development objectives, and will continue to incorporate civic awareness programs into their more general community development activities. For example, Rupantar has continued its alternative living theater performances on issues of democracy and has created a new performance technique called *pot gaan* on women's rights, environmental issues, and the roles and responsibilities of local government. Also, CDS's democracy-related television spots continue to be shown free of charge on both the government-run television station, Bangladesh Television, and the new private television station, Ekushey Television.



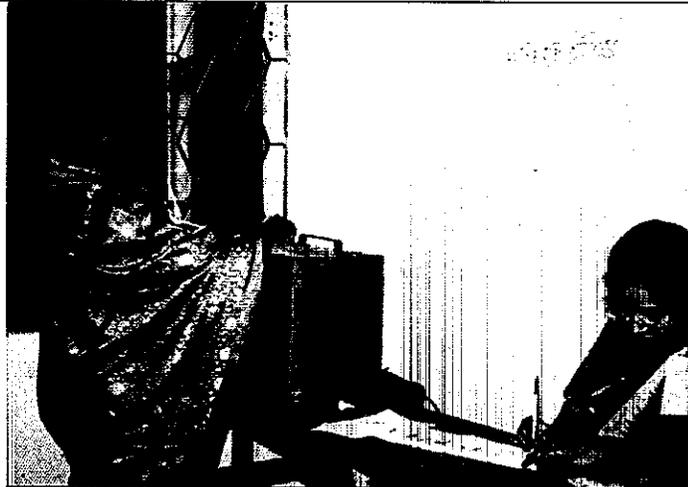


The many varied efforts of the Democracy Partnership throughout this period provided the Bangladesh electorate with a better understanding of its roles, rights, and responsibilities in the electoral process and set a firm foundation for the involvement of a more educated, aware, and informed population in future elections.

Lessons and Insights

- The public awareness that results from voter education activities, election monitoring and reporting, and advocacy activities can result in significant and lasting reduction in the incidence of election-related violence, misconduct, and mismanagement.
- People need to become more aware of the role that they could play, and the power that, as a cooperating, informed electorate, they could bring to bear to ensure free and fair elections.
- People need to become more educated about the candidates and the issues in order to hold their leaders accountable for their promises.

- Increased participation of women, particularly poor, marginalized, and previously disenfranchised women, in the electoral process is not only possible, but is also a powerful tool for increasing the informed, responsible participation of the entire electorate.
- Persistent, patient communication with and among all players can go far to overcome suspicion and obstruction on the part of established parties, to provide a sense of shared ownership, and to encourage the cooperation of all participants.
- Civil society has an important role to play in election monitoring and must be trained to be able to play that role effectively.
- Both long and short term election monitoring are needed to ensure free and fair elections.
- More diversity among observers is needed to make election monitoring more thorough and more credible.



- Training for election officials needs to be more focused and more intense.
- Greater transparency in the election process is required to ensure more credible election results.
- Civil society must continue to advocate for election law reform. Such advocacy could benefit from the efforts of a formal, institutionalized pressure group working to coordinate the efforts of the various stakeholders.

