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## Swaniti | In search of a winning formula

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In 2004, after the tsunami hit the subcontinent, Rwitwika Bhattacharya flew down from the US to join the relief effort on the southern coast. Educated in the US since the age of 12, Bhattacharya, now 26, had been visiting India each summer, following her politician father Ranjan Bhattacharya (currently with the Trinamool Congress, or TMC) in and around West Bengal.

Meeting ministers, visiting members of Parliament (MPs) and members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) in their offices and interacting with people proved to be a useful introduction to the world of politics. While in high school in the US, Bhattacharya worked with senator Katherine Harris, a Republican from Sarasota, Florida, in 2003-04. After finishing college, she joined the United Nations before proceeding to enrol for a master's degree in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. But her eureka moment came in 2009, in the wake of the general election in India.

“Around the time, some friends and I started having conversations about how to get young people involved with the governance process,” says Bhattacharya. “We thought a useful way of doing this would be by starting a non-partisan, non-profit organization that would help improve the work elected representatives are doing, from a development perspective.”

The idea was to pitch pilot projects, consulting-style, to MPs and MLAs to enable them to realize goals for their constituencies—and also make them aware of what the electorate expected of them. In 2009, the Swaniti Initiative, led by Bhattacharya, started out with a team of seven, typically people in their mid-to-late 20s with the experience of working in private or development sectors, some of them from business and engineering backgrounds.

The process of selecting Swaniti fellows is rigorous and dynamic. “We go to development agencies, post advertorials on job sites, and also depend on alumni and social networks for references,” says Bhattacharya. Of the 600-odd applications Swaniti has received so far, all except two (which were from the US) are from India. The shortlisted applicants have to clear three rounds of interviews.

“The intention is to emulate a high-pressure environment,” says Bhattacharya, adding: “We warn prospective consultants that when they go on to present a plan to an MP or MLA, they may, in all probability, be interrupted by a roomful of people. They have to make their case quickly, succinctly, and hold the attention of the bureaucrats present.”

So far, Swaniti has worked with 14 MPs and three MLAs, including the Biju Janata Dal’s Jay Panda (to introduce mobile health vans in Kendrapara, Odisha); Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP’s) Anurag Thakur (to improve the educational quality of schools); and the BJP’s Yashwant Sinha (to identify and clear pipeline funding for the MPLAD, or MP local area development, fund). “In the beginning, there was some scepticism about our

TMC MP Dinesh Trivedi in Barrackpore, West Bengal. Trivedi asked Swaniti in 2012 to help him improve the working condition of jute mill workers in the area. Dinesh Chand, 26, a computer scientist from Hyderabad with an MBA from XLRI, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, was one of the consultants chosen to work on this project.

“The Employees’ State Insurance Act, 1948, gives protective cover to workers in case of health hazard,” says Chand. “But there are no long-term preventive schemes.” With the support of the jute mill commissioner and the local rotary club, the Swaniti fellows ran five pilot health camps. It was found that 60-70% of the workforce in the dozen or so mills in the region was vulnerable to respiratory illnesses that are caused by prolonged inhalation of jute dust lingering in the air of these factories. “We found out that on an average, workers would become vulnerable to pulmonary diseases, such as tuberculosis, after holding a day job at a jute mill for five-six years,” says Chand. It was hard to persuade mill owners to invest in the upgradation of machinery and provide equipment to workers that would help arrest such an endemic threat to their health.

“Our challenge was to get all the stakeholders—workers, industrialists, bureaucrats—on board and make them work collectively,” says Chand. One of the obvious solutions was to enforce the use of masks, but even if funds could be raised to distribute these, it was difficult to convince workers to use them regularly. “We tried to get the wives and family members of the workers involved in the making of these masks,” says Chand. “It was a way of not only keeping the demand-supply chain working, but also to create small self-help groups within the community. Street theatre was used as part of a campaign to raise awareness about the need to wear masks, hold regular health camps, and replace the independence-era machinery in factories.

Although a work-in-progress, the project has ushered in a change of attitude. “We are now trying to place a sustainable system by involving hospital chains like Fortis (Healthcare) that could create better infrastructure to deal with these challenges,” says Chand. Swaniti has not only fulfilled its mandate of ushering in change, it has also set in motion a process that will hopefully endure and evolve over the years. “I have begun to

figures, which are in woeful short supply in India. Swaniti is working on Jigyasa, a knowledge base that not only puts out development-related data in the public domain but also maps and interprets it across several metrics. "Our primary goal in creating this platform is to help policymakers make decisions based on quantifiable outputs while also having the capacity to gauge their past and present performance. We want to provide them with knowledge support on successful development models in India," says Vishal Kumar, who is currently working as a director at Swaniti.

Kumar, who has an engineering degree from India and has worked as a fixed income trader in the US and European markets for five years, says, "We have taken development indicators like educational enrolment or agricultural output for over a couple of decades and overlapped them with who was in office at what time." For instance, an infographic on the gross enrolment rates of boys and girls in middle and primary schools between 1951 and 2011 not only compares one with the other, but also with how these figures varied with different governments at the Centre.

Bhattacharya believes that development and accountability will be key issues in the 2014 election, with a palpable shift in emphasis from identity- and ideology-based politics towards a more policy-centric administrative model—a model that affects public life directly.

Swaniti, for instance, aims to facilitate employment opportunities for young people. While many in India are keen to take chances, starting a business in this country can be a nightmare. "It takes 24 hours in Houston, US, to start a business," says Bhattacharya. "We want people in India to be able to do the same by a process that is simple, accessible and transparent."



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## If you volunteer, you will

- Swaniti is opening its first year-long fellowship programme (the deadline to apply is 15 November). If you are looking to work in policy and governance, this is an opportunity to help elected representatives, as part of the Swaniti team (this is a paid opportunity).
- Swaniti is increasingly integrating technology into its work, so those from suitable backgrounds may get involved.

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