

# JULEKHA BIBI'S JOURNEY AS A LEADER FOR CHANGE

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Working with SHG women on various issues faced by the community transforms the shy and soft-spoken Julekha Bibi into a vocal and active spokesperson, displaying hitherto untapped capabilities for tackling the day-to-day problems villagers face

**I** FIRST MET JULEKHA BIBI WHEN I WAS promoting the SHG '786 Jeevika' in Thari Noniyatari village in Chakai block, Bihar. She was very shy and appeared to be a typical rural woman, wearing a light red flower-printed saree, her head covered with one end of it, the *aanchal*. She had a good physique, medium height, a fair complexion and her wide eyes that were lined with *kajal*. When I asked her what her name was, she gave a shy smile and a dimple appeared on her cheek. She replied in a soft voice, "*Mera naam Julekha Bibi hai* (My name is Julekha Bibi)."

That day, about 15 SHG members discussed the concept of collectivization. Four of them, however, were silent; Julekha Bibi was one of them. At the end of the meeting, I asked the silent members why they had not participated in the discussion. Julekha replied with a light voice and a little smile, "*Didi ji, jo aap mahila ko sangathan me shaamil hone ka baat kar rahe ho hum use samjhane ka kosish kar rahe hain* (Sister, I am trying to understand what you are saying about recruiting women for the collective)."

I asked her what she had understood of the whole discussion. She was silent for some time and then

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spoke with a soft voice, “*Main abhi pura nahi samjhi, kyunki is tarah ka baat-cheet hamare puri zindagi mein pahli baar suni hun, aur jo samjhi hu use bol bhi nahi paungi* (I didn’t understand the whole discussion because I’m hearing such things for the first time in my life, and whatever I have understood, I will not be able to repeat it).”

Eight groups were formed in that village in 20 days. One month later, I went to the village for the selection of a representative to the Block Level Federation (BLF), Jeevan Marshal Mahila Sangh (JMMS), Chakai. In that meeting, members from seven SHGs were present. Since there was no Gram Panchayat Level Federation (GPLF), we discussed the role of the GPLF and the block-level Federation. I proposed that the villagers select a representative from their *panchayat*, who would represent them in the Federation. The group suggested Julekha Bibi’s name.

Somehow, I had formed a different opinion of Julekha because of my experience with her when I met her first. I was apprehensive that she would not be able to express herself in the Federation, or carry out her responsibilities as a Federation

member. And although I had shared all the criteria required of a BLF representative and the roles and responsibilities that she would be required to fulfil, the group had still suggested her name.

I reiterated the requirements of the work involved and prompted the group to take some time to rethink their decision because this was a big responsibility and the person would have to represent the entire *panchayat*. The group, however, was convinced that Julekha Bibi would be their representative. They told me that they had observed her and that whenever there was a problem in her in-laws’ family, she resolved it well. Ultimately, I agreed with the group’s decision. Yet, I was not sure that she was a suitable representative.

In October 2016, Julekha Bibi attended her first BLF meeting in Chakai. The meeting focussed on the origin and the journey of JMMS because there were new representatives from four *panchayats*. The older members spoke about JMMS and its vision to the new members. I noticed that Julekha Bibi was listening intently to the discussion. I asked the new members whether they

understood the discussions and whether they had any idea about how a Federation could play a role in bringing about change in society.

Julekha Bibi promptly replied, “*Haan didi thora sa samjhe hai, thora nahi samajh aa raha hai, dheere meeting me shamil hone se aur jyada samajh badhega. Samajh to badhana parega tabhi to hamare gaon mein badlav ho sakta hai* (Yes, didi, I understood some of the discussion, but not all. Gradually, by attending regular meetings, I’ll start understanding more. We must increase our understanding; only then can change take place in our village).” I was relieved with her response and although she was a shy speaker, the spark in her eyes showed how wrong I had been to judge her.

She soon took charge. After her first BLF meeting, she organized a village-level meeting, calling all SHG members, informing them about JMMS and sharing with everyone the discussion that had taken place in the BLF meeting. After a few days, the SHG members of the 786 Jeevika went for an exposure visit to an SHG in another *panchayat* to understand its functioning. There, she interacted with the older SHG members and understood

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how a group functions smoothly, what group norms are and how the group is stronger than the individual. She became more and more involved in group functioning, discussing with her fellow members what they could do as a group.

The next BLF saw a different Julekha Bibi. Now she was not merely listening to the others, she had begun to express herself and was actively engaged in the discussions and listened to the other representatives and the work that they were doing. It seemed that she had suddenly found a new meaning in her life.

Julekha was no longer confined to her SHG. She gradually began to step out of the house to promote the SHG and discuss the issues of the people. Meanwhile, she also started to identify various problems in her village. When she went to a group in another village, she motivated the members and talked to them about the power they have when they work together. She spoke of the various examples shared by other representatives of JMMS.

Once, in an SHG meeting, the members brought up the subject of the PDS dealer not giving them the full ration. Julekha Bibi said, “Dealer agar hami me se koi

*didhi ke kam ration deto tab hum sab koi ek ho ke aawaz uthaiwa* (If the dealer gives less grain to any one of us, we have to raise our voice collectively).” The women decided that they would not sit silent and if the dealer didn’t give the required ration; they would talk to him. As usual, the dealer distributed fewer grains than stipulated. This came to light and the women, led by Julekha Bibi, decided to take action against the dealer.

Julekha Bibi confronted the dealer, “*Bhaiya, ei ab nai chalto, ab hamni ke pura ration de, nai tha hum sab mahila ekatha ho ke tohar birodh kar debo* (This will not work anymore. You have to distribute the full quantity of ration, otherwise all of us will protest against you).” The dealer did not expect such resistance from the women. The collective power of the women made the dealer give full ration to all the people from that day onwards. Julekha Bibi and the women were very happy with the action. They had been able to put to the test the power that their collective could generate.

Often as the value and status of a human being rises, many attempt to pull them down. Something like that happened with Julekha Bibi also. Some people in the

village had spread rumours about Julekha Bibi. They told her husband that she had become shameless and that she roamed around the villages.

From here starts the story of her struggle against her husband. Her husband started obstructing her. He would not allow her to step outside the house or attend any meeting or training programme. Julekha Bibi, however, would not sit back in her home. One day, without telling her husband, she went to Chakai to participate in a BLF meeting. It was already dark by the time she returned home and she was quite tense. When she reached home, her husband slapped her hard. She was prepared for that. She told him, “*Chahe aap mujhe ghar se nikal do, lekin main group nahi chhodungi. Mein apne maiyke mein bhi jaa kar samuh chalaungi aur gao samaj me jo bhrashtachaar hai use samuh se kam karungi* (Even if you throw me out of the house, I will not leave the group. Even if I stay with my parents, I will run a group and work to get rid of the corruption in the society through the group).”

The group also tried to convince her husband, “*Use gaon samaj ka kaam karne se mat rok. Woh akeli nahi hai. Hum sab uske saath hai. Tum bhi uska saath do.* (Do not

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The Federation members talked to him and to the other villagers. They also invited him to attend some meetings as an observer so that he could see what happens in the meetings

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stop her from doing the work of the society. She is not alone. We all are supporting her. You also help her)." Although not fully convinced, he reluctantly let Julekha Bibi attend the meetings. Once, she had to attend a three-day residential training on vision-building, which was held out of Chakai. She took permission from her husband to attend the meeting and made arrangements at her home in her absence. When she came back from the training, her husband was furious and hit her head with a stone. She was badly injured. Her husband suspected her. He said that Julekha went to the training wearing a red *saree* but when she returned, she was wearing a yellow *saree*. He said "*Mujhe ispe shak hai, agar training din mein hoti hai to ye raat mein kya karti hai* (I suspect her. If the training takes place during the day, then what does she do at night)?"

Julekha was taken aback by her husband's statement. She did not know how to convince him. She decided to take help from BLF members. She called the Federation leaders to her village for a meeting to decide what could be done with her husband. Her husband couldn't believe that Julekha would have so many supporters from different parts of the block to back her up. He

became nervous seeing so many women from other *panchayats*. The Federation members talked to him and to the other villagers. They also invited him to attend some meetings as an observer so that he could see what happens in the meetings.

He agreed. "Whenever there is a meeting, I will take part for a few days and will come to understand the work that Julekha does." Things settled down in Julekha's life. Her husband accompanied her to a few meetings and tried to understand the work of the Federation and the SHG. The relationship between the two improved. Julekha, however, makes it a point to do her daily household chores before she attends the SHG meeting or the Federation meeting. She works with her husband and her two sons in the agriculture season. Her husband is a rickshaw puller and, in the lean period, he works as a labour in construction work. She has four children, the elder daughter is married, her two sons are 19 and 17 years old, and her younger daughter is 10 and is in school.

In December 2016, The Village Organization (VO) in Julekha's village held a promotional event. The VO is a village-level women's collective, comprising eight

to twenty SHGs. It deals with village-level issues on rights and entitlements. There is a space for discussion and taking action on issues such as gender, corruption, etc. Since the formation of the Kamalphool VO, the women hold meetings once a month. They identify village-level issues and prepare an action plan for Kamalphool VO.

The major issues that emerged were access to clean drinking water, lack of water harvesting structures for irrigation, irregular distribution and inaccurate amounts of ration being distributed, lack of quality education in school, irregularity in starting *anganwadis*, and open defecation. Julekha Bibi was selected as the Chairperson of the VO. She said, "*Yeh hamare liye pahla mauka hai jisme hamne gram aster ke samaysayayo ko pahchana aur uspar kaam kar rahe hain; isse pahle to humlog sirf gharelu samasyayo par hi baat karte the* (For the first time, we are discussing issues of the village. Earlier, we only used to talk about household issues)."

She further shared that their VO had identified many issues but she had suggested that they should deal with the issues one by one. The group agreed with her suggestion and decided to

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prioritize the issues. After the discussion, Julekha expressed, “*Hamni sab ke aisan kaam kare ke pahle koi anubhav nai hai, iyhe khatir hamar bichar yi hai ki hamni sab ke pahle wo muddha leke chahi, je mahila se sidha jural hai, o mudda anganwadi hai jai mahila se sidha jural hai* (We do not have prior experience of working on such issues, so I think we should do work that is directly related to women. I think that is *anganwadi*, which directly affects women’s lives).”

The members of the VO thought over Julekha’s suggestion and all agreed that *anganwadi* was the place where most of them were directly involved for nutrition and pre-schooling their children. They made an action plan on how to intervene in the *anganwadi*. The group selected Julekha as a leading person to deal with the problem. From the very next day, Julekha got started with the task.

First, she went to the *anganwadi* centre with some of the fellow didis to check if it was open or not. The *anganwadi* was open and she counted the number of children present. Only eight kids were present and she talked with the *Sevika* regarding the low attendance. The irritated *Sevika* replied, “*Bacche nahi aate hain to*

*hum kya kare, aur tum ye puchane wali kaun hoti ho. Apne kaam se kaam rakho* (What can I do if the children don’t come; and who are you to ask all this? Mind your own business).”

Julekha told her that she was the Chairperson of the VO and tried to explain to the *Sevika* about the VO and its role. The *Sevika*, however, was very impolite and said, “*Tum jo koi bhi ho, mujhe pharak nahi padta* (I don’t care who you are; it makes no difference to me).”

Julekha replied, “*Tum mano ya na mano lekin hum logo ne jo jimewari li hai use pura karenge* (You may accept it or not, but we will fulfil the responsibility that we have taken).” Saying this, she walked out of the *anganwadi* with the other members.

After two days, Julekha again went to the *anganwadi* with some women. That day, the *anganwadi* was not open. Julekha asked the *Sevika* the reason. The *Sevika* didn’t like the probing and told Julekha that she was not accountable to her and wouldn’t reply to her questions. Julekha told her, “*Agar hamare sawaal ka jawab nahi dogi to hum block mein shikayat karenge* (If you don’t answer our questions, we

will complain about you in the Block).”

The *Sevika* didn’t bother to answer. Instead she said, “*Jahan bhi jana hai jao, mujhe koi pharak nahi padta* (Go wherever you want to go, it doesn’t make any difference to me).”

Julekha then asked a member to bring a plain paper and to call the other VO members too. Within half an hour almost all the VO members had assembled at the *anganwadi*. Julekha updated them regarding the intervention and told them to write an application to the Block Development Officer (BDO) complaining about the *Sevika*. An application was written and all the members started to sign it. The *Sevika* became petrified, seeing all the members’ signatures on the application. She asked Julekha not to submit the application and that she would open the *anganwadi* every day.

In the VO meeting, the disparity in the distribution of *poshahaar* (nutrition supplements) for pregnant women and lactating women was referred to. The *Sevika* distributed only 1 kg of rice and 250 gm of pulses per person, and would do this once in four months whereas the

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allocation was for 2 kg of rice and half a kilogramme of pulses per person per month. The SHG women took steps to distribute the *poshahaar* on time just as they did to keep the *anganwadi* open regularly. It is all running very smoothly now.

Julekha also goes to other *panchayats* and attends their VO meetings with other Federation members. She went to the Ghutway *panchayat* and explained the usefulness and benefits of a group and a VO. Her group members support her developmental thought and take advice from her before taking any decision. She says that, “There are schools and *anganwadis* in Ghutway *panchayat* that are

not running properly. We, as a collective, are going to work to make these institutions run properly. This will be possible only when all of us fight together for this.”

Julekha Bibi has now become popular in her village and the women are very proud of her. When I asked Julekha Bibi, “How come you do such courageous work? When I first saw you, you could barely speak and were very shy. What has happened that you have changed so much in this time?”

Julekha smiled and looked into my eyes and said, “You are correct about me. I would not talk and was shy in nature. But

once I joined the group, and the members trusted me and elected me as the representative of the Block Federation, I thought that I should honour their trust in me. I attended meetings, interacted with many other women, overcame my fear and slowly started expressing myself in the meetings. More changes happened when I became a Federation member and met members from other places. The exposure through trainings also helped me. Being guided by experienced members of the Federation and your facilitation have also helped me to work for my village and my *panchayat*.”

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*Salbi Kumari is based in Chakai, Bihar*