

# Nasima Khatoon: A Leader is Born

NAMRATA SHARMA

*Setting out with a fierce determination to fight injustice and oppression, Bibi Nasima Khatoon, a milquetoast, is a shining example to poor village women that they need to raise their voice against all harassment and that, together, they become a mighty power, which will be acknowledged by the village and state administration*

The three-day-old decomposed bodies of a young pregnant woman and her six-year-old son were found hidden amidst heaps of paddy straw in Targachha village, in South Bihar. The police handed the bodies to the family and dismissed the case on grounds of lack of evidence or witnesses. The bodies were cremated immediately without any further investigation.

Soon after, a tiny woman was seen shouting in a shrill voice outside the police station. She was leading a 300-strong group of protesters, who had mustered the courage to walk 12 miles in the scorching October sun. They were demanding to meet the Inspector, who did not come out of his room. This was not the first time that this woman had led a group of people or had come to the police station. Media persons had, however, never ever seen the women of this area, in such large numbers, protesting so fiercely. The policemen mocked them and told them to go back, "*Yahan koi sunwai nahi hoti, janani sab ke mard kuch nahi lagam lagwalke...* (Nobody would bother to listen to you all; it seems none of your husbands seem to have kept you in control)."

This tiny woman was there to seek justice for a helpless mother. She met the mother, who was crying inconsolably, in a Cluster meeting. The mother told her that her daughter had been tortured, poisoned and murdered, and her body had been found two days ago. The husband and the in-laws, however, had got away easily. The distressed mother was a widow and had nothing to offer to anybody. Nobody was, therefore, willing to do anything to help her find the culprits behind her daughter's mysterious death.

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Having realized a few years ago that such problems were seldom addressed in Cluster meetings, and that there were many fellow women, who were similarly unjustly oppressed, Bibi Nasima Khatoon, a milquetoast, had decided to do whatever it takes to help these women. She vowed to raise her voice to help those seeking justice and to those who were being mistreated. After the marching, shouting and protesting for someone to whom she was not even remotely related, she usually came home to the abusive beating of her own husband. This repeated violence and abuse stirred her heart and mind so fiercely, it made her even more determined to help anyone in need.

The eldest in the family of four, Nasima Khatoon was born and raised in the Purnea district of Bihar. She is 46 years old now. Her maternal family consists of six members; her parents, two brothers, one sister and herself. All of her siblings are now married. Her parents were not well off. At the age of 16, she was married to Saffruddin Ansari. A

year later, having no income to sustain them, her husband and she had decided to migrate to Katoria, where he found work as an intern to a master tailor in the market.

They rented a house and, soon after, with all the savings of a year or so they brought a little piece of land and built a home there. Nasima, like any other woman, had not had many aspirations. It had always been the welfare of her husband and the rapidly growing family of eight that she was concerned about. She travelled to places like Delhi and Kolkata to earn for her family and raise her children.

Leaving her kids with her husband, she did menial jobs in factories. With the expenses so high in the cities and earning just enough to sustain her, however, there was little incentive to stay away from her family. She had decided to move back again.

The family continued to grow. The eldest daughter was married early and has four children, all of who stay with Nasima. If you ask her how she keeps her sanity with so many mischievous kids around, she laughingly says, "*Ziada hai tabhi toh hassi khushi hai; kaha say sunsan ghar mein itna buddhi ayega, didi?* (The more, the merrier; so where from will insanity peep in?)"

There was nothing unusual about Nasima except that she didn't know how to cook! She would rather go to the jungle very early, even before dawn, to gather firewood, go to work in others' fields or, at times, go to help her husband in his little tailoring shop and earn some money than sit at home and do the

chores. Nasima was sure that her children could take care of the household chores, so she was not bothered about her home not being looked after.

The whole family would gather in the evenings and eat together. Their meals usually comprised *dal* (lentils) and *marbhaat* (rice) with salt and chilly; at times, perhaps once a month, they would feast on chicken and mutton. Vegetables were a rarity and Nasima explains that the family could do without them because they are not only costly but also, if cooked, not everyone in the family would get their fair share because vegetables shrank after cooking!

As night sets in, the three younger children wrap themselves over her and fall deeply asleep and wake up to another day of survival.

The beating was not new to her but now it was about submission. Her husband beat her because the neighbours, other men-folk, elders of the community as well as everyone else on the road told him that his wife goes out for protests without any *pardah* or *haya* (shame). Her husband never used to get provoked by people's talk earlier, but now there were too many people talking. None of this mattered earlier when they were poor and going out of their houses for their livelihoods. Nobody thought of religion or customs earlier; now, however, they brought it up against her. In her words, "*Ghar main rehna aur pardah karna ameeron ke liye bana hua dharam hai didi, hum gareeb logo ka kya dharam. Pet bharne ko milega kaise, isi chinta mein rehte hai* (Staying in the house and in *pardah* is for the rich; we poor are always worried about how we are going to fill our tummy)."

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The large number of people that she gathers in support and her many acts of selflessness held no significance for any of these people, who taunted her and complained to her husband. All of a sudden, she had started feeling alienated from what she chose to do, which for so long had been everything to her.

It was beyond her comprehension why she was being beaten so badly instead of being praised. While picking up firewood, a few days later, she recalled the beatings and realized the significance of what she had learned during one of the SHG trainings in the game of introducing a stranger as your friend—*Sakhi-Sathi-Saheli*.

She realized that these men and the rich would never understand the problems and misery of any woman and the struggle she goes through. She realized that all these women had always been there to listen to her. She grew popular among them because of her wit and her speeches, she was liked too. She believes she has an even bigger family outside her home and that is of the *Mahila Mandal* (SHGs).

The SHG to which Nasima Khatoon belonged was formed by the wife of Munshi Saffruddin Ansari— the accountant, who used to meet PRADAN professionals regularly. Tasreen Begum, his wife, became involved in the SHG when her husband had insisted that she help him form groups in his own village so that they could become beneficiaries in the Goat Rearing project, funded by Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and piloted by PRADAN in Katoria in 2009–10.

Nasima's relationship with her fellow women grew stronger, based on a common feeling of victimhood, all suppressed by society and influential people, simply because they were poor and they were women. She spoke for them and for herself, and that was something that the women looked up to her for. She raised her voice for many of these voiceless victims. She enjoyed the popularity and openly acknowledged it. The others didn't mind either.

It was a hot summer day in mid-April in 2015 when Nasima learned of a meeting that was going to take place the next day. The *munshi* of the SHG and his wife had not told her about it. The meeting was about distributing the subsidy money to those, who would be rearing goats. She had overheard this from some women in the local market. The beneficiaries were to gather the next day in a village named Bahadiya, 7 km away.

Nasima prepared herself and reached the venue at 7 a.m., the next morning. There was nothing there, not a single being around, except for the huge Mahua tree. She sat under it and waited for the others. Soon, she fell asleep. She was woken up by the noise of babies crying, people talking and motorcycles revving. She realized that it was already eleven. People had started gathering. The accountant and his wife recognized her among the crowd and tried to chase her away with rude words, but she remained unaffected.

Nasima stayed on. A little later, she saw a young man arrive. He asked everyone to sit in a huge circle and started addressing the crowd. She liked the way this man spoke. He was unlike politicians or block officials. She was not used to being in such a meeting. She became excited and asked many questions about the objective of being in the SHGs, being beneficiaries, the criteria, etc. All her queries were answered very politely. Later on, in that same tone, she

complained about the misdeeds of the *munshi* and recounted his questionable practices of misleading SHG members. The gentleman was impressed and took her details and suggested that she come again for the next meeting, along with her group members. She learned that the gentleman was 'PRADAN *ke bhaiya*'. This was the beginning of her journey. It was her first encounter with PRADAN and the Federation. From that day onwards, she has never missed a single meeting or training, unless she was seriously ill.

In the next meeting, she helped the most vulnerable and the poorest of the SHG members get goat sheds. The *munshi* was better off and did not deserve the sheds, but he had already misled the authorities and got them sanctioned and constructed. This she revealed to the villagers much later. His threats to dissolve the groups, to defame her in the village and to ensure that she gets nothing ever all fizzled out, once she began to raise her voice. At present, he is never seen near any of the SHGs. She has the support of all the SHG members of her village, except the *munshi's* wife and her immediate relatives.

Each of the SHGs now have a woman accountant, who is a group member and who attends meeting regularly; this again is something that has been made possible by her. There are now nine groups in her village.

### **KIDNAPPED!**

One morning in January 2015, Nasima's phone rang when there were a hundred guests in her house. A relative's *mannat* (wishes) had been fulfilled and there was a feast at her home. The woman on the other side of the line was weeping and Nasima could hardly understand what she was saying. She spoke to her until the woman was calm enough to tell her story. The woman's daughter had been wrongly

charged by her husband and his family. The girl had returned to her maternal home and was refusing to go back. The husband's family didn't want her back either. The woman said that there were no quarrels or arguments among the two families, but her daughter's life was now at stake. The unknown woman requested Nasima to come to a particular venue with some other SHG members and intervene in the matter.

Nasima hesitated, looked at the guests in her house, but then agreed. She picked up her wallet, informed her eldest daughter that she was going out and went out discreetly. She was joined by other women, who would accompany her, and proceeded to Simultala, around 25 km west of Katoria. On the way, she asked the driver of their vehicle to stop at the police station, where she met the Officer In-charge. She told him the reason of their visit in the area and also took the phone numbers of the *mukhiya* and the *sarpanch* of that area.

When the women reached the venue, a school building, they found it deserted. Suddenly, a few men appeared and pushed them inside a room and locked them up from outside. All 12 women were trapped. They were in a panic but Nasima didn't showing any sign of fear, mainly because if she were to become afraid, the others would lose all hope and that would make things worse.

She waited till she could no longer hear anything from the outside. She, then, called the *mukhiya* and the *sarpanch* at the numbers she had taken from the police station.

The few men then re-appeared and asked them, "Who made the calls?"

One of them claimed that he was a high-up official in the Railways, while the others said they were dangerous people so the women should fear them.

Nasima got up daringly and said, "*Hum kiye call, kyu nahi karengay call?* (I made the call. Why wouldn't I!)"

One of them said, "*Pehechanti ho kaun hai hum?* (Do you know who we are?)"

She replied, "*Hum yahan jaan pehechan banane nahi aye! Jis kaam ke liye bulaya hai, hum logon ko udhar le ke jao. Mukhiya ji aur police dono ko bata diye hai ki hum school mein band hai!* (We have not come here to socialize with you. We were called for a certain purpose. Take us there. I have told the *mukhiya ji* and the police that we have been locked up in this school.)"

The men were taken aback. Never had they heard a woman (let alone such a tiny one) speaking to them in such a manner, disregarding who they were, as if it did not matter to her.

They took them to the venue, which wasn't far. There they saw a huge gathering of around 200-300 men. It seemed like a full-fledged *aam sabha*. The *panchs* were sitting under a big Mahua tree surrounded by the villagers. The *mukhiya* was furious at seeing them in that meeting. Nasima saw the woman who had called her; the woman had brought several men to support her. But they had the look of defeated soldiers...sad and tired.

Nasima realized that the *mukhiya* was in favour of the boy's party and had already threatened the girl's side to not take this matter any further. Nasima intervened and very calmly explained that this union between the boy and the girl had been a very costly affair for the girl's family and the case should not be dismissed without trying to resolve it. She also explained that, according to the boy, the girl was not ready for any intimacy with him and hadn't given him any reasons. He

gets frustrated and angry at her behaviour and he is not being able to settle down properly with her and hence there are no grounds to continue with the marriage. His case was strong.

Nasima said she wanted to ask the boy some questions. She talked to him so calmly and with such wit that it turned out to be a different case altogether.

The girl, being the only daughter at her home, had been so pampered that she wasn't willing to stay alone in the house without her husband. Her husband worked out of town and returned home once in several months. Hence, she refused him and his moves. Nasima then sat with both the girl and the boy separately for almost two hours, heard them thoroughly and finally convinced them to stay together. The *panch* and the others were not happy.

Nasima said that they were unhappy because they lost the money they would have got upon giving the case in favour of the boy's side, and because women from a different block had come to their help and to mediate, something which had never been heard of before.

She smilingly says, "*Hum dus aadmi ka ghar basa rahe hai, jo thana ya samaj nahi karta woh hum kar rahe hain, isiliye accha lagta hai yeh himmat jo humko mili hai.* (We are reconciling conflict in families, which neither the police nor the *panch* is able to do. We are happy to have found the courage and confidence to do so."

## LAND GRAB

Guddu Yadav is a thug that many fear in Katoria. He had been a *mukhiya* earlier and now was the right hand man of a well-known corrupt politician. He has always been associated with

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wrong- doings. Once, he helped a tribal man illegally claim the land of an SHG *didi*. The tribal man was just a façade, a front person, who claimed he had the papers of Sumitra *didi's* roadside plot, where she had built a little concrete house of two rooms. On the day when Nasima went to Simultala, to ensure the safe return of the girl whose case she had handled earlier, SHG

members of Sumitra *didi's* village had called for a road blockage. The women had asked the local police to be present but they refused, stating that their jeep had been taken by another officer on another case. Nasima *didi* was unable to return on time because she was 25 km from Katoria and the protest was 15 km from Katoria in the opposite direction.

She maintained contact with the women on the phone. The SHG members were being threatened again and again but she kept them motivated. She reached Katoria at noon but Guddu Yadav's goons were already there with bulldozers, unloading cement, bricks and sand on to Sumitra *didi's* plot. They planned to break her small house and keep their own material there. The goons were holding bricks in their hands and aiming them towards the SHG women, threatening to hit them.

Nasima *didi* was desperately trying to get a vehicle to reach the spot but without money, she couldn't hire one. While waiting for in a bus, she saw an army caravan carrying some *jawans* coming that way. She got down from the bus and stood in front of the vehicle. The army driver asked her why she was stopping the vehicle. She pleaded with them to help her, to go to the village 15 km away. She told them they would see a few women blocking the road. The women were trying to save their land from being taken over by goons. She said

that she would follow them in the bus. They agreed. The army caravan reached the spot and took charge of the situation in 5–10 minutes. The goons were taken aback and scared by the arrival of the army coming to the rescue of the women. Nasima *didi*, then, reached the spot and thanked the army men. As they were leaving, the jawans warned the goons not to trouble the woman again. Sumitra *didi* then brought her photocopied papers and threw them at the goons and told them that, legally or illegally, they could never get that plot of land.

It has been two years now; nothing has been heard of Guddu Yadav's tyranny in and around that village again. The men of the village and adjoining areas are still in awe as to how the army had arrived. Only Nasima *didi* knew how and she again smiles, followed by a laugh this time.

### A LEADER

Because of the many incidents and issues that she has dealt with, the other SHG members have begun to see her as an uncompromising leader. She was unanimously elected President of the Jagriti Mahila Sangh (the SHG Federation at the Katoria block). The trust and confidence placed in her by the women in this area is clearly visible. She is seen as someone, who is fierce and articulate although petite and not a very good orator. She learns things quickly, especially things that interest her. Without any written script, she can sing all the songs and narrate dialogues from any training that she has been to. She often boasts about it in private.

When asked about her motivation, she says "*Hum pati-patni ke larai, ghar thodne wale*

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*faisle, mahila logo ko bolne ka samman aur police ko ghoos dene say bachate hai logon ko, is se logon ko karj bhi nahi lena parta hai, na hi unko police se harassment hota hai... wohi cheez acha lagta hai didi.*

*Ek na ek din log yaad toh zaroor karta hai... Dada bhi, aas pass ke log bhi bolte hai ki log maar dega, bomb phak dega—public ke liye hi na marengay, naam hi na hoga didi...koi toh jaanega ki aisa bhi kaam ho sakta hai... (We solve marital issues, help families settle issues rather than break up families, let women have their say and teach people to respect their views, help people not to get into debt for bribing the police and save them from police harassment. My husband and our neighbours keep telling me that I will be killed. Someday, someone will throw a bomb at me. I say it will be a good thing. I will die serving the people, I will be known for it. At least people will know that such things are happening and are possible...)"*

The milquetoast, who had never even spoken outside her home until five years ago, now calls up the police station, "*Hello, hum Nasima Khatoon bolchi, Ghormara panchayat ke leader didi, ek case...*" (This is Nasima Khatoon speaking, leader *didi* of Ghormara panchayat, about a case...) Without any backing from her husband, she deals with both the struggles at home and outside. She relies on her own intelligence and gut, which she says she listens to and takes decisions. She and many others like her would have silently vanished into nothingness of their existence, had it not been for SHGs and various platforms, which have given them the space to speak up and to learn. She truly acknowledges this and derives her strength from the unity of her Federation members. The other SHG and Federation members look up to her as their spokesperson.

She is proud of her ability and uses it to influence people positively to speak up for their rights, irrespective of whether it is the right place and forum or not. She thinks that all members need to speak up and only then will things come to the surface and resolved. Many, however, feel the disapproval of society and keep quiet. She insists that once power gets into their heads, people tend to forget their duties. She cites the example of how all the SHGs of her village had elected a Ward Member from their group. After coming to power, the woman quit the SHG, and her husband started dominating the group and misusing her powers. He dictates to

the villagers now. She doesn't regret that they did not select the right person. But she says that everyone will get corrupt unless women speak up about what they feel and want. The women outnumber the men in any village at any given time; so they will always have a majority. The men usually go out of the village to earn money.

It will take many more years for her to reach her full potential; there is no doubt, however, that given a chance, there will be more Nasima Khatoons.