

Poll Boycott: Taking an Extreme Step

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Pushed to the wall and struggling for some basic necessities such as a road and electricity—the first steps to development—to their village, the people of Pokharia collectively decide to boycott elections in a bid to draw the attention of the administration and the government to their plight

The people of Bihar, working in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Assam and other parts of the country as skilled/unskilled labourers or in some office, came back to Bihar in October and November 2015. They had one common motive—to participate in the much-hyped and talked-about election, which would decide the fate of the third most-populated state of India. The results of the elections would be of great significance, especially for the party at the centre, which invested large sums of money for campaigning.

The contesting parties came up with different agendas to win voters' confidence. There were promises of supply of electricity, water/sanitation, building of roads, and more. The event remained the most sensational news in the national and the international media. It has been the most-watched election in recent times. The state witnessed a huge influx of Biharis, who came to exercise their democratic right.

On election dates, the booths were crowded, and there were long queues of eager voters. The voters believed that their voices would be heard and their eyes were alight with hope that their lives would improve. The nation's eyes were on Bihar; which political party would come to power in Bihar? The political parties had their own interests. The enthusiasm of the people of the state and of the observers nationwide helped the state register an overall polling figure of 56.80 per cent—the highest in an assembly election in the state's history.

Amidst this hype and hullabaloo, there was one polling booth in a remote, unknown part of Southern Bihar, where not a soul went to vote. Except for an occasional sound from the stray dogs roaming around, complete silence prevailed. There were more than 1,000 voters in Pokharia, who had collectively taken a decision to boycott the Assembly elections. Some journalists came to take photos of the deserted poll booth, which then appeared in some regional daily newspapers. The villagers of Pokharia were not influenced by the massive media hype, the large-scale campaigning or the big promises of the contestants.

Why were these people not exercising their franchise? Why was the polling booth deserted?

The people just wanted that their demand for basic amenities be fulfilled. It did not matter to them much whether the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) won or whether the Janata Dal United (JDU)–Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) alliance was victorious; what mattered was that their aspirations should be met and the development of their village should begin.

Pokharia, a name which even the District Magistrate (DM) had not heard, is in Banka block of Banka district, about 3 km into the interiors, off the Katoria-Banka state highway. The villagers are largely of the *kumhar* (those who make earthen pots) community, and their primary livelihood is agriculture. In the name of government interventions, the village has a middle school, a half-completed community house (which the Chairman of the *Panchayat Samiti* is using as his personal residence), one well (the water of which the owner of that land does not allow others to take), and three hand pumps in the school premises.

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The road to the village is *kuccha* and bumpy, making it inaccessible during the monsoon months. There are four hamlets in the village and all the roads are in a similar condition. If you were to enter the village during monsoon, you will see only a mud road. If you step on it, your

feet will sink up to the ankles and, at some places, even up to the knees. These deplorable conditions prevail for many days after a rainfall, making life miserable for the villagers.

Raghunandan Pandit, a 43-year old villager laments, "*Motorcycle, cycle to kya, paidal chalne me bhi dikkat hota hai.* (Let aside motorcycle or cycle, it becomes difficult even to walk)."

The most affected are school students and women, who have to venture out of their houses several times a day. Shakuntala Kumari, a 12th standard science student, who takes private tuitions outside the village, says, "*Barish me hum tuition nahi ja pate hain.* (When it rains, I cannot go out for tuition.)" Also severely affected are the patients, who need emergency medical treatment. Women who are ready to give birth and old people have to be carried 3 km on a *khatia* (bed made of wood and ropes) during the monsoon because the entire road is *kuccha* and muddy and no vehicle can ply in such conditions.

There is no electricity in the village. Again, the most affected are the school students, who have to study at night, and women, who have to cook. Shakuntala says, "*Azadi ke itne saal baad bhi hamein andhere me rahna parta he.* (Even after so many years of independence, we have to live in darkness)."

The *gram sabha*, the villagers know, is a platform where they can demand that a road be made. Some men got the road sanctioned in the *gram sabha*, many years back, during the tenure of *mukhiya* Jogender Das. The soil-filling work had started but due to some reason the work ceased. Jogender Das lost the subsequent election. Subsequently, he again won

the elections. The villagers persuaded him to resume the unfinished work. To their astonishment, they learned that the project sanctioned for them had been diverted to another village due to the intervention of a powerful and influential local person. The infuriated villagers approached the *mukhiya*, to enquire about the road. He asked them to have patience because the funds had not yet come.

He procrastinated like this through his five-year tenure and the villagers were not able to take any collective action to make the *mukhiya* accountable to the public. Most of the villagers were angry because their *panchayat* representatives could not provide them with basic amenities. The villagers said that these representatives, who came to their village frequently, asking for votes and making great promises before the elections, vanished after winning the elections. After that, they were not in the least bothered about serving the villagers, who had helped them win the elections nor were they willing to address the issues for which they had been elected. The villagers' role seemed to be to give their votes and sit back for the rest of the tenure, waiting for the government to do something for their upliftment.

The repeated crushing of their hopes tested their patience. In 2014, during the Lok Sabha

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elections, they heard that people from a nearby village, Sonhola, were planning to boycott the election if their demands for a road and electricity were not met. Some men of Pokharia also decided to express their strong protest by boycotting the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. They asked the villagers not to vote. They did not have much time to spread this message or

get a consensus on the decision to boycott. They, therefore, stationed themselves on as many approach lanes of the polling booth as possible on polling day, and asked the people not to vote. Some people turned back whereas some did not; some were afraid to boycott the elections and, therefore, cast their vote. Some people voted because they were unaware about the protest. Moreover, people from a nearby village also had their polling centre in Pokharia. The boycott failed because it was not well-planned. The people had not had enough time to involve everyone.

A few months later, some youth of the village, during a casual discussion about the poor condition of the roads and the lack of electricity, thought that merely talking about the issues of their village among themselves would not change the situation. It was time to bring their dissatisfaction and anger to the notice of the administration and the government. The much-awaited election, the Bihar Legislative Assembly election of 2015, was drawing closer. They thought that this was a good opportunity.

They talked about it with other young people of the village, who agreed with them. They discussed the loopholes and shortcomings of the previous effort that their fathers and uncles had made during the General Elections. Twenty-two-year-old Kundan Kumar, who was

a student and an electricity line worker, said, "*Is bar hum kisiko vote dene nahi denge.* (This time we will not allow anybody to vote)." They decided to make it a people's movement by including everyone. They held many meetings to win consensus.

During the month of August 2015, some 18–20 youth walked around the village, drawing people's attention by beating empty mustard oil tins. They called for a meeting, to talk about village issues. It took them 3–4 days to inform the whole village. On the appointed day, most of the men and some women met in the school premises. They discussed their problems and the *panchayat* representative's repeated negligence. They decided to bring this issue to the notice of the district administration, and if the administration did not take any action, the entire village would boycott the Assembly elections.

Raghunandan Singh, a 45-year old villager, firmly stated, "*Sadak, bijli nahi dega to is bar hum vote bahishkar karenge.* (We will boycott the elections, if they do not provide us roads and electricity)." Their clear objective was to tell the administration that they would not tolerate any more delay. They thought of boycotting the Assembly elections and not the *panchayat* elections scheduled to be held in 2016, because the former would have a greater impact. All the villagers present agreed.

The villagers met 3–4 times to convince everyone and discuss the strategy. The news spread to some SHG members, who discussed this emerging development in their SHG meeting. Coincidentally, in the Federation meeting of July 2015, the issue of anomalies in PDS in the different *panchayats* of Katoria and

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Banka blocks was discussed, and the members decided to give written complaints to the District Magistrate. This was then discussed in the *panchayat*-level Federation meeting, in which representatives from every SHG participated. Through this, SHG members of Pokharia became aware of the public grievance redressal system and decided to utilize it. With time, 100 women

from nine SHGs of the village joined the villagers, thus strengthening the movement. These SHGs were formed in the latter half of 2014 and some in the early part of 2015. This was how the tiny mass grew into a bigger collective. After that, there was no looking back.

To make this boycott a success, they required money. They started collecting a donation from each household. Banners on vote boycott were prepared and hung at different corners of the village so that they would be visible to anyone entering the village from any side. This was meant to communicate their message to the government and was also meant to remind everyone to stick to the vote boycott.

In the meeting, it was decided that a written complaint would be given to the DM. Accordingly, some 40 men, women and youth went to the DM at Banka and gave their written complaint. Neelam Devi, an SHG member said, "*Humlog ko teen baar DM office jana para apna shikayat dene ke liye.* (We had to go three times to the DM's office to register our complaint)."

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The local daily reported this news. The DM said, "*Humlog ka haath bandha hua he, thora ruk jaiye.* (Our hands are tied, please wait for some time)." The protestors were adamant because they had reached the end of their tether. The DM called them after a few days and assured them that, within five days, electricity poles would be grounded in the village. This proved to be a futile assurance. Sensing the delicacy of the situation, the *mukhiya*, fearing that he would be taken to task by the DM, filled some of the big potholes in the road with some soil, thereby making it a bit more comfortable for commuters. The mockery of their demands strengthened the villagers' determination. At that time, campaigning for the election was on in full swing. Campaigners were prevented from entering the village by the men and women. If some campaigners did enter the village and paste posters on the walls, the children tore these off.



Hearing about the boycott, the Block Development Officer, the Sub-Divisional Officer and personnel from the Bihar Military Police visited the village three times, to convince the villagers to lift the boycott. But the angry villagers remained adamant. People were happy that, because of their boycott, at least these high-profile officers had entered their village.

Some people in the village such as the Chairman of the *Panchayat Samiti* and some followers of the *mukhiya* were against this boycott. The villagers held several meetings, sometimes for four consecutive days at a time, to discuss the situation. And the strength of the collective showed its magic. The *panchayat* officials had to support the boycott because of the collective's pressure.

Some days before the election, the SHG representatives gathered at the Jamua Panchayat Bhawan for their monthly *panchayat* Federation meeting. A candidate, campaigning in Jamua, saw this gathering of women. The contestant, in a white *kurta pajama*, approached them to make an appeal. Seeing him, Neelam Devi said, "*Yahan humara Federation meeting ho raha he aur aapko yahan prachar karne ka jarurat nahi hai.* (We are having our Federation meeting here and you need not campaign here)." Perplexed, he wanted to know the reason. Bebi Devi, a member, said with pride in her voice, "*Humlog Pokharia se hain.* (We are from Pokharia)." The contestant replied, "*Humko vote dijiye, hum road banwa denge.* (Give us your vote and we will make the road)". Sensing that the women were not paying any heed to him, he left.

Finally, on 12 October, the day of the first phase of the much-awaited Bihar Assembly elections arrived. People lined up to vote since the early morning, carrying their *parchi* (coupon that they had to show to enter the booth). Those who had forgotten to bring the coupon had to return to their homes and bring it to be eligible to cast their vote. Many had to return disappointed because they had not collected their coupon from their *panchayat* representatives.

But there was a completely different scene at the Pokharia poll booth. The youth of the village roamed around near the booth to

ensure that no one came to vote. They had sticks with them, prepared to threaten anybody who arrived to vote. But nothing happened. The booth was deserted throughout the day. The only people there were the guards who were deputed at the booth. The people were delighted that after months of preparation, they had succeeded in making the boycott successful.

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Post election, some good and some bad news came the way of the people of Pokharia. The good news was that the deputy *mukhiya* said that he would resume construction of the road. It may have been a political gimmick because the Panchayati Raj elections were due in April 2016. Whatever the reason, a *pucca* road is more important for Pokharia than wondering about who gains what. People are waiting to see whether he keeps his word or not. Otherwise, they are planning to resume their fight. Another piece of good news was that two electricity transformers were sanctioned for the village and work was to start soon. It was an occasion to celebrate in Pokharia because they had succeeded in making the administration fulfill their demands.

Amidst all the celebrations, some bad news came their way. Someone from the village used the opportunity to square out a personal rivalry. To the DM, he named some of the villagers, accusing them of starting the boycott movement. A few days after the election, the DM sent a notice to the villagers against six men and two boys, alleging that they had

led the boycott and that there would be an enquiry into the matter. An atmosphere of gloom spread in the village.

According to the villagers the persons named were not in the lead role. It was a conspiracy. Some old men said, "*Kal uthae diya*. (By doing this boycott, you people have called danger)." The people then heard that the

government would stop distributing kerosene and ration to this village. They held a meeting to discuss the matter. Once again, they showed unity, and it was resolved that it was a collective movement and they would face whatever came their way collectively.

The people of Pokharia learned the importance of solidarity and the power of unity. The movement also tapped into the power of the youth and women. In a democracy, voting is a tool to show our duty to the nation. Maybe a vote boycott is not the correct way to voice disappointments, but what are the people to do if the public grievances are not addressed? Where should they go to make themselves heard? How should the public make the government and the administration accountable for the gaps in the system? These people just wanted to make their voice heard at what they called the 'upper level'. They held a peaceful protest. They just wanted to make their village worth living in. The action taken portrays the hard reality of the lives of the poor people and the struggle that they go through. There are innumerable such unheard and untold stories in many villages.