

Breaking the Chains of Patriarchy: Shanti Tekam's Quest for a Life of Dignity

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Reflecting remarkable tenacity and courage through many adversities, Shanti's life is a powerful and hope-inspiring journey from helplessness and dependence to belief in the collective, empowerment and leadership

THE BEGINNING

Shanti was born in Talabodi village, Chaparvahi *gram panchayat*, Paraswada block, Balaghat district. Her village is 55 km from the district headquarters and lies in the interiors of a dense forest. Despite there being no school facilities in the village, her father, who had studied till the IV Standard, wished to provide proper education to his children. Her brothers were already married and settled when Shanti started going to school, 12 km from her residence. Her father taught her the basics, and eight-year-old Shanti soon took admission in the 1st Standard. Shanti thoroughly enjoyed studying and had a close group of friends. When she was in the 7th Standard, Shanti lost her mother, and suddenly, her life changed and she had to live a life that she hadn't imagined for herself.

Shanti wanted to continue her studies but her family did not support the idea. Instead, they wanted her to get married when she was barely 15 years old. As is the case with most women who dream of an education and have an ambition, she was discouraged by people around her. Her sister-in-law called her education 'redundant', for women were just meant to serve their husbands' homes and had nothing to gain from being educated. Shanti was sure that if her mother had been alive at that point, she would have definitely supported Shanti's education. But now, without a mother, Shanti slowly lost support from her father as well. He also seemed to believe that Shanti would be more secure once she was married. He wanted to fulfill his paternal responsibilities before he died.

Her marriage was soon fixed to Shivcharan. Her prospective husband was from Amoli, a village in Balaghat district. He worked in the police force at Rupjhar Kotwali. Shanti knew him from the time she was studying in Baiher. Disturbed and upset at the decision, she left her house and went to a relative's place in a nearby village. This did not work out for her and finally, she had to get married and move to Amoli. Suddenly, there were restrictions on her movements within, and outside, of the village. Alone and house-bound, Shanti began to miss her school friends.

After a year, she shifted with her husband to Rupjhar and then to Balaghat. They lived together for 12 years and had four children, two sons and two daughters. Shivcharan spent most of his time outside of home and never found enough time for his family. Shanti heard from other policemen that Shivcharan was seen with other women before their marriage and the meetings may still be continuing. Initially, she did not believe her husband's colleagues; however, she soon realized that Shivcharan was not giving her enough time or money at home.

Additionally, he would regularly inquire about any visitors who came home and would cast doubts upon her character. Shanti found this hypocritical, and became angry because according to what she had heard, it was Shivcharan who was being unfaithful. Through subsequent fights and conversations, Shanti found out that her husband only married her under parental pressure. He had always wanted a wife with a fair complexion and found Shanti's dark complexion unpleasant. Shanti was also subject to physical violence and while she was angered by it, she chose to accept it for the time being.

Shivcharan soon stopped giving her money altogether and she could not send her

children to school. She asked for help from the other policemen but nobody helped. One day, Shivcharan brought his second wife home. Shanti could not tolerate the presence of another woman in her house, with her husband, and decided to leave him and come back to Amoli. Their two children were kept with each of the parents.

In 2000, Shanti started to live with her mother-in-law (in Amoli). She was a cooperative woman. Shanti did not have many livelihood generation options apart from doing manual labour. Shanti's mother-in-law owned two acres of empty, less fertile land, which she gave to Shanti so she could use it to generate some income. Shanti didn't know how to be a farmer and had little knowledge of agricultural practices; therefore, she started renting this land to other farmers. Meanwhile, she worked on other farmers' fields, did MGNREGA projects, and earned some money through wage labour.

The money wasn't sufficient for Shanti to send her children to a good private school. She had always been an advocate for education and was now worried about the education of her own children. With no support from her husband, and meagre income from her labour, Shanti tried to save as much money as she could for her children's education but still fell short of the stipulated fees. She eventually had to withdraw her children from their private school in Lamta. This was 2009, and Shanti was becoming disheartened by the day. It was at this time that Shanti was introduced to the Jai Narshigh Paat Self-Help Group.

Involvement with SHGs

The group was formed in March 2009 in Lohari *tola* (Shanti's *tola*) and was promoted by PRADAN. Initially, Shanti and the women around her were skeptical about SHGs and

feared that someone may run away with their money. After multiple trainings on the benefits and functions of SHGs, the PRADAN team was eventually able to build trust among the women. Because the money was to be in the safe-keeping of the women themselves, the fear diminished, somewhat. Shanti joined the group and started saving Rs 10 per week. The SHG was envisaged as a bank for the women.

The weekly meetings soon started and Shanti began attending them. The trainings helped her understand gender discrimination and made her aware of the secondary status that women had in society, both of which she had experienced first-hand. The importance of women's collectives, SHGs and village-level committee (VLC) resonated with her and she felt compelled to work harder for the cause. In her words, "For the first time in nine years, I sat with the women of the village and I listened to them, and I shared with them my story. It felt like I had friends again, that I was reliving my school days. It felt especially great after I became the accountant in the SHG, because now I had an important responsibility."

As she became more involved, Shanti shared her experiences and her life story in other SHGs, in the VLCs, both, in her own village and also in other villages. She actively participated in trainings organized by PRADAN on gender, rights and *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs).

These increased her knowledge and understanding immensely. Having suffered due to patriarchy, she resonated deeply with the gender training; she was also able to see that the women around her were

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suffering too. The game of Kamal-Kamli demonstrated how women lost out at every age due to widespread gender discrimination; Shanti could personally identify with the situation as she herself had had to give up her education and get married at a very early age and suffer violence at the hands of her husband.

Participating in the trainings and meetings, Shanti realized that majority of the women she met had undergone some

form of physical abuse in their homes but had accepted it as a part of their fate as women. Shanti was disturbed by this and decided to take it up as a critical issue. She organized the women to speak up against incidents of domestic violence and successfully resolved issues that came up, with the support of other women.

The story of a newly married woman, Laxmi, in Lohari tola, which was not a part of the SHG, is a telling example of the sufferings of women. For six months after her marriage, Laxmi was beaten and tortured by her husband and her in-laws; because she was new to the village, she did not know who to approach for help. Shanti learned about this while talking to other women. Laxmi too had heard about Shanti and the SHGs being active and supportive of women. One night, when the family was very violent with her and it seemed as though there was no other way out, she managed to escape from her home. The only person she could think of approaching for help and support was Shanti.

Laxmi stayed the night with Shanti and, in the morning, a meeting was organized by the SHG regarding this. The woman's family

blamed Shanti for instigating their daughter-in-law but Shanti stayed strong and took up the issue in the VLC, involving men and women from outside the SHGs. The family was told that if the violence continued, a police complaint would be filed. Until then, all decisions, in such matters had been made by men in the *samaj ki baithak* (caste *panchayats*). This was the first time that the norm had been broken and the women not only participated in the decision-making but also the final decision was made in favour of the woman.

In 2009, motivated to engage in a public forum, Shanti participated in the local elections and was elected as the Ward Panch of her village. In the capacity of the people's representative, she undertook various developmental works for her village—getting Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards made for vulnerable families; getting a temporary road made that led up to Amoli by approaching the MLA; she demanded work under MNREGA and ensured that the payments were made, etc. She also motivated the women to participate in the *gram sabha*.

She developed good connections with the agricultural department and MNREGA officials during her tenure as a Ward *Panch*. This set a great example for the women and men, who were caught up by the '*mai-baap* ideology' with regard to high-ranking officials and saw them as demi-gods. Bringing up crucial issues that act as an impediment to a life of dignity, she decided to take action to make women aware of their rights. From time to time, she organized and led women to fight for their rights and entitlements. The coming together of women gave them more agency and power

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and PRADAN. Over time, Shanti took up several responsibilities such as Federation Representative, Federation Secretary, *Ajeevika Saathi*, *Gender Saathi* and *Pashu Sakhi*, across different areas of intervention by PRADAN.

AJIVEEKA SAATHI

The farmers in the area had been practising traditional methods of planting paddy and vegetables; this, over time, caused low productivity and high costs. PRADAN was involved in grooming the local resources around agriculture and livelihoods. Shanti was a participant in many of the trainings centered on agriculture.

When the first training for agriculture took place, there was skepticism among the women. Farmers could not bring themselves to believe this new practice. Successful demonstrations and field trainings, however, helped build the confidence of the women farmers. As the training progressed, the women were shown films about the practices and the benefits of Srividhi (System of Rice Intensification, SRI) as compared to conventional agriculture practices.

Shanti tells us that the film, Ek Ropa Dhan, made by PRADAN, helped her understand SRI, and that was true for many other women as well. The screening of the film became the starting point of a belief in organic practices. Shanti learned the SRI paddy cultivation method in her 70 decimals of land after attending a training held by PRADAN in 2010. Her yield doubled to 14 quintals, as compared to the previous year's 7 quintals. This was the first demonstration in her village.

In the same year, a Cluster-level Adhiveshan was organized in Amoli village. PRADAN suggested that for promoting and scaling up agriculture-based livelihoods, a Resource Person from each SHG, something like an Ajeevika Saathi, be identified. Shanti's name was suggested for the post of Ajeevika Saathi by the SHG members and she willingly accepted the offer.

She also attended the second phase of the gender training, during which she became more aware of the biased social norms and the stronghold of patriarchy, especially within farming. She decided to claim women's identity and role in agriculture, and made confident claims about women being farmers. She faced numerous taunts from the men around but she continued to fulfill her duties. She learned farming practices and demonstrated them across villages and clusters. She was also involved in imparting training on SRI and organic farming of vegetables with the community. She travelled to other villages to create awareness about adapting new techniques in farming. She reached out to over 100 farmers, promoting SRI and organic practices.

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She also participated in an organic workshop at Chandigarh. This workshop was a national-level organic forum organized by ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture) Kisan Swaraj Manch. As a part of the organic farming training, Shanti was chosen to go to Jharkhand; when she returned, she had a new viewpoint. She met

women farmers, who made their lives better through organic farming, which improved the environment around them, leading to better health of the people.

She supported other families by helping them prepare a crop-based livelihoods plan. Shanti understood the power of participation and encouraged discussions among women. She took up the reviewing and monitoring of members in the group, and held regular discussions on integrated crop management.

GENDER SAATHI

A basic gender training was organized in Amoli by PRADAN, in which Shanti participated and found words to define and categorize her experiences of the patriarchy and discrimination against women. The Resource Person, her namesake, was the dynamic and eloquent Shanti Amma (gender trainer), and watching and learning from her was an amazing experience for Shanti. Shanti was also a participant of the advanced gender leadership workshop at Ukwa, a *gram panchayat* in Paraswada. Jagori (a non-government organization) was the resource for this training. Shanti attended a number of trainings such as a four-day block-level workshop by PRADAN on gender, a four-day leadership camp on gender and patriarchy by PRADAN and Jagori, and a three-day workshop on viewing things

from the gender perspective by PRADAN and Jagori.

After the gender trainings, the Federation started to work intensively on women's understanding of gender and patriarchy. Two Resource Persons were to be appointed in each VLC. Shanti had always been someone with strong views on gender and showed a lot of interest in the Cluster meetings. Because she was personally invested in these issues, she played an active role in the Cluster, and even attended SHG meetings of other villages voluntarily, so as to promote the Federation.

Shanti, thus, became the unanimous choice of the Cluster members for the role of Gender Saathi. She received basic and advanced gender training, and organized small training sessions at her village. As a trainer-facilitator, Shanti felt she could better relate with the world around her and she could often find connections between her life and the training she gave. After the training, she has been stimulating discussions around gender in her group and in the VLC. During the trainings, she usually plays the game of Kamal-Kamli and conducts discussions with the women, listens to their problems, and helps them find solutions. She undergoes thorough reflection and review sessions by PRADAN professionals after her engagement with the groups.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Shanti is glad that the gender training took place and she was able to participate in it and she was able to find the vocabulary for all her experiences. She says, "Everybody is so used to discrimination. It starts showing up right from childhood, so we stop fighting against

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She gives an example, "Women are considered impure and have no permission to enter the kitchen and some parts of the house when they are menstruating. Discussions around this were a part of the training and it was the first time

we spoke about this. Since the training, some women have started to break these norms. They enter the kitchen even during their periods. But change is not an easy process and will take some time."

She recounts her own experience, "I made the change with my own self and my family. I have always treated my children equally. Before this training, I was afraid of sending my daughter out for higher studies; now I am convinced that the investment in her education is worth it. I have suffered because of the discriminatory practices in our society, and I don't want our daughters to undergo the same. A man can re-marry without any social backlash; a woman does not have the privilege of a second marriage even if she suffers with her husband. If a woman becomes a widow, society imposes so many restrictions upon her—she cannot wear bangles, beautify her own self or even wear sindoor."

She encourages women to go against the norms, "I asked the single women in my training sessions to wear things of their own choice, such as bangles and saris, even in social functions. When the men questioned this, I replied that times have changed and if the men are free to dress how they want and remarry, women should be too."

Shanti has changed over the years and has been rewarded for her courage. "Today, I have reached a point where I have won *Panchayati Raj* elections uncontested when I stood for the Ward Seat. Women have been my cadre and have supported me from nomination, through the canvassing and continue to help me now in fulfilling my duties. I can talk confidently to the District Collector now, something that was unimaginable for us women; I can even fight to get our entitlements. I have found financial, emotional, social, and political support from being a part of the SHG and through PRADAN's involvement."

Being part of an SHG has helped her become financially independent; she is outspoken about her financial rights vis-à-vis her husband. "Being in the SHG has helped me send my children to school again. Initially, I took a loan of Rs 500 from the SHG for paying their school fees. Last year, I took Rs 20,0000 from the SHG for paying my son's tuition fee. With the income from organic farming, I am now paying off the debts and hoping to move towards a self-sustaining income. I have even found the courage to stand up and fight against my husband. I openly demanded money from my husband for our children's education and, also, for the expenses at home."

Apart from the financial rights, she is able to stand up for herself against him in other ways as well. "Shivcharan came to Amoli and threatened me while I was in my paddy field. Angered by my refusal to take back my demands, Shivcharan raised his hand to strike me; I stopped him and asked him if he had lost all his shame. I also warned him about his second marriage because I am aware of my legal and constitutional rights, ever since the gender training. I subsequently called a meeting in the village and it was decided that Shivcharan would have to provide money for our children's education. Since that

intervention, he has been giving child support regularly and my children are doing well in their studies. There are fewer financial hurdles now. My son, Rajeshwer is pursuing his BE and is preparing for the competitive exams simultaneously. My daughter Rajeshwari has completed her polytechnic and nursing, and has also found a job in nursing."

The Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh of Paraswada, the Federation of SHGs in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh, was registered as a Society under the Society Act in 2014. Shanti is a member and the current Secretary of the Federation. There are over 6,000 women voluntary members of the Federation and it covers over 142 villages in Balaghat district.

Shanti attends Federation meetings and is focussing on the regular and active participation of women in the *gram sabha*, having made this her chief objective. She is deeply involved in the participatory approach practices just started, aiming at different aspects of household-wise planning in 10 villages.

Furthermore, the government's agriculture and horticulture departments are supporting the women in scaling up their organic approach. The Forest Department and the *gram sabha* have also been involved as instruments to promote planning around sustainable use of forests and forest resources. The Federation's focus is on a sustainable approach for



livelihoods and 4,135 women are now involved in practices of organic farming and have even established linkages with the market. Recently, the work of the Sangathan was acknowledged by the 6th Jindal Steel Works Ltd. and Times of India Earth Care awards, 2015.

Shanti was chosen by the women to attend this award function on behalf of the Federation. She travelled to Delhi to receive the award at a glittering ceremony. In fact, she even gave a much applauded speech, where she dedicated the award to the women in her village and added that the success was possible only with the support of each member of the Federation and the SHGs.

Besides working as Ajeevika Saathi and Gender Saathi, Shanti excels in animal husbandry and is now Pashu Sakhi. Lamta Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh planned for allied activities in poultry farming for landless people. There was need to create a pool of doctors (Pashu Sakhis) for poultry from the Federation members. Shanti passed the exam, trained for being a Pashu Sakhi, thus breaking the idea that only men could become animal doctors. She led the vaccination activity conducted in her village and the nearby villages in June. Initially, she was scared to do the vaccination but she overcame her fears, believing that this could help the landless in her village earn some money and improve their lives.

With her immense experience and expertise in the area of sustainable and organic farming, Shanti, along with three other women, participated in the state-level organic and sustainable workshop for Master Trainers, conducted by the State Rural Livelihoods Mission. She shared and demonstrated her field

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experiences of various organic crop practices. Impressed with her confidence, knowledge, skill and her understanding of women as farmers and their rights, the judges selected Shanti for the role of state-level Master Trainer.

She was selected as a state-level Resource Trainer for Haryana and worked in the villages of Kethal district for 15 days. Later, she went to Jhabva district of

Madhya Pradesh for 10 days. She engaged with the communities of these two districts, demonstrating organic practices for 25 days. Her engagement did not just stop there. After coming back, she engaged with the women of her village and the Federation regarding the same.



In spite of all the good work she has done, seeing her house shut for almost a month, some people started spreading rumours about her. There was talk of how she had gone away without informing anyone and where she could have possibly gone. There were also rumours that she had run away.

All the motivation, confidence and happiness that she had gained from her experience was shaken when she heard that this is what people

are saying and insinuating; she was upset. She, however, did not lose hope, and called for a meeting immediately. She asked the villagers what the problem was if she represented her village and the Federation at the state and the national levels. She asked the people why she was liable to answer them.

Shanti is reaching new heights with her dedication and her hard work and is being recognized at the national level; yet for all the work she does, she still has to continue fighting for herself in her village.

Shanti's has undergone extreme challenges and hurdles in order to reclaim her rights. Beginning with her experiences in a small hamlet, she has fought her way through

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innumerable harsh experiences and has become one of the few people of her village to have ever visited Delhi, the capital city.

What sets her apart is her will-power and her enthusiasm to share her learning with as many people as she can. Her dedication, belief and generosity

are reflective of her undying courage to resist discriminatory practices in society.

Shanti beams as she recounts the sights of the big city and fancy hotels that she saw. Her story so far gives hope for all women like her—a hope that others will be able to nurture their dreams and fulfill them, unbridled by social taboos.