

PRI Elections in Jharkhand: Making Women Count

SHACHI SETH

Taking their place as representatives in PRIs, women in villages take the first step to strengthening rural populations by fighting for their rights and working towards development, self-sufficiency and equality

As the oldest system of local governance in the nation, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have held a traditional stronghold in the village life of India. Chiefly regarded as the space for conflict resolution and maintenance of order at the village level, these institutions were the receptacles of the Gandhian dream of Swaraj, or self-governance. As India embraced modernity in its institutions, PRIs were moulded to fit an agenda that went beyond mere arbitration and guidance.

PRIs have undergone changes in terms of the process of choosing members, their duties and roles. In the current socio-political context, the chief objective of democratic states is development. Institutions of local governance, therefore, become crucial for addressing issues of the rural population, especially as decentralization becomes a buzzword in search of good governance.

In Jharkhand, Panchayati Raj elections were held for the first time in 2011 although the state was formed in 2000. There was a surge in political participation by women and 56 per cent of the seats were won by women. The number of victorious women exceeded the 50 per cent that is reserved for them—a sign of encouragement for those working to better their lives.

The second elections, the results of which were declared recently (2015), became an impetus to empower women further. The PRADAN office in Ranchi conducted a series of workshops over two days (January 29–30) on 'Strengthening Local Governance: Reflections and Way Forward by SHG collectives'. This was a follow-up to PRADAN's recent interventions in strengthening the governance networks in rural areas. A series of such meetings and workshops were organized for those interested, chiefly, the women representatives of *mahila mandals* from Jharkhand. The workshops are aimed at increasing awareness and involvement in PRIs among rural women, especially those that are a part of collectives, Federations, and *mahila mandals*.

After the results of the elections for PRIs were declared, the workshop served to review and assess the progress that women had made, and to shed some light on the path ahead. The core objectives of the workshop were to record the women's experiences of the elections (post the training provided by PRADAN at the previous workshop) and to guide them for the upcoming challenges.

LEARNINGS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The theme of the workshop was *Jan Banaam Dhan* (People vs. Money). It focussed on breaking the legacy of money and muscle power as the decisive factors in *panchayati raj* elections. The workshops conducted by PRADAN acted as seminal spaces for the women to understand their political rights. The aim was to motivate women to participate in large numbers, both as candidates and as

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citizens, and to make choices that benefit the community in the long run. The choice of these candidates was to be made by the people and the money was to be crowd-funded rather than distributed, to buy votes.

The acute scarcity of women representatives was problematic and contributed to the unequal opportunities presented to women. The experiences recounted underscored a certain set of patterns, with some

distinct examples of bribery, defamation, and blackmail, clearly outlining the odds stacked against the rather powerless, individual women. This despite the fact that the laws in India offer reservation to women in representative roles and the Jharkhand Panchayat Act 2005 has a provision for women's reservation of 50 per cent.

Jharkhand saw a relatively high participation by women, which included many success stories. Despite such affirmative action being taken at the policy level, when it comes down to implementation, the power in the hands of women is negligible or limited, at very best. The common practice in seats reserved for women was that candidates are often wives or close aides of the powerful male politicians. The records may show a female statistic going up; however, often when it comes to decision-making, the power lies with the male politician backing the candidate. The accepted practice for a woman *mukhiya* or ward member is to continue handling domestic chores and 'duties' while the husband attends functions, meetings, and village affairs. On the flipside, the women associated with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), or women's organizations, show a significant revulsion to such proxy *mukhiyas*.

Besides gender, a crucial factor in determining who opts to become a candidate is her/his financial status. People with little or no money are usually not expected to win, or even stand for elections. If one is to aim at better transparency and representation and better governance, the role of money needs to be minimized in determining capacity. One of the candidates from Champadih village of Padma block, Neelam Devi, who lost by a mere 43 votes, recounts a *Shakti Pradarshan* (power rally) by her opponent that included over 50 SUVs and 100 motorcycles. Such displays of power, often, sway the vote of the public, who are convinced that the opponent has enough support to clearly win, and therefore, they do not wish to waste their votes on a candidate who would lose. This poses a rather complicated hurdle for a candidate of modest means, who must garner enough faith and support to neutralize the effect of such displays. After Neelam Devi saw these rallies, she too got nervous; she decided to focus on organizing the women. Even after she lost, in a spirit of true sportsmanship, Neelam Devi participated in the celebratory procession for the woman candidate who won.

Some of the *didis* such as Neelam Devi, who stood for elections, were entirely crowd-funded; a few were pressurized into spending a substantial sum of money in order to help level the playing field for themselves. The problem with this expenditure is the pressure it creates to earn back the money. Neelam Devi observes, "Those who spend money want to earn their money back once they win. It is but natural. Therefore, it is best to elect a candidate, who does not have this conflict of interest between private needs and the needs of the community." The idea captures the core issue in a simple understanding of human behaviour, yet does not necessarily manage

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to seep into the general psyche enough, to drastically change the status quo.

Additionally, social taboos and the fear of public shame sometimes manage to sway women into withdrawing support from such candidates. Whereas the success of the intervention is not to be measured by the number of seats won but by the change in ideology and mobilization that took place, one wonders whether a week-long training for a handful of members of society is sufficient to break the conditioning of ages.

The training provided by PRADAN hoped to break the norms in a two-pronged manner, in which one who is a candidate does not give money and a voter does not accept money in exchange for votes. If this spreads among the people and takes deep root in their political choices, one can expect to see changes in the system. Second, it hoped to bring to the fore the issues of women's development and rights. Often, the mere creation of institutions and practices is not sufficient to bring change. The process needs to be made more sustainable by increasing the stake of the women such that they themselves are motivated to participate and stand for their rights.

STORIES OF WOMEN

Draupadi Devi, Ward Member from Barhi block of Koderma district, narrates how she battled both these evils. She had a strong desire to stand for the post of the *mukhiya*; she faced tremendous pressure from men politicians, who asked her to stick to Ward Membership, which she had earlier won uncontested. When she tried to fight back, they publicly mocked her for being illiterate and questioned her abilities, given that she was uneducated. Draupadi Devi had been managing Self-Help

Groups (SHGs) for years but the fact that she was illiterate managed to sway a number of women. Whereas men were accepted in political positions, irrespective of their education, women found that they often needed to use being educated as a compensatory factor for their gender.

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The male politicians argued that even if a woman were chosen, it would be her husband who would do most of the work. Therefore, it would make more sense to choose a man in the first place. In a set-up where situations such as these are commonplace, it was not tough to convince the people that Draupadi Devi was not the correct choice. Draupadi Devi ended up spending above a lakh of rupees on elections and underwent verbal humiliation at the hands of the powerful men of the village. Her experience reflects the challenges that often come up when trying to change a system that has been working in a specific way since ancient times.

The formation of SHGs has gone a long way in empowering women in rural areas in India. However, as in most patriarchal societies, this sudden surge in awareness and empowerment of women is looked down upon and actively discouraged. Many women recounted incidents, which clearly revealed that one of the problems was the defamation they faced because women stepping out of the house to engage in public discussions ruffled the feathers of quite a few men. SHG women often found themselves at the receiving end of public taunts and were seriously reprimanded by family elders and their spouses. During elections, these multiplied because of the earlier unconditional acceptance of male domination in the political arena. In a space almost entirely occupied by a certain class of men, the

sudden prospect of poor women entering the political arena resulted in a lack of acceptance and understanding.

A second-time *mukhiya* from Porna Tham in Koderma block, Pushpa Devi, garnered 1,680 votes with a lead of over 1,000 votes from her nearest rival. She

was 22 when she stood for the *panchayat* elections for the first time in 2011, the first PRI elections that Jharkhand saw after a break of over three decades. The fact that she was educated was a big reason for her family and the villagers supporting her in this move, and fortunately the *mukhiya's* post in her constituency was declared as reserved for women. After winning the election the first time, she took the initiative of ensuring that the villagers were informed of various government schemes and that their problems were conveyed to the block office. Pushpa Devi was not a part of any Federation then.

Unlike the second election, where she had a strong support base of the local women, her first stint cost a large amount of money. Given that it is an anomaly to hope for a zero-cost election in a system where votes are commonly bought in exchange for favours, both in cash and kind, this is not surprising. Mobilizing crowds for canvassing often comes at a cost, coupled with the need for vehicles, posters, banners and loudspeakers.

The workshops on self-governance conducted periodically by PRADAN and the constant reminders to unite and participate in state institutions had a significant impact on the people in the area. The women of the village recognized Pushpa's willingness and ability to work and came together to support her in her journey. This was a turning point and Pushpa Devi managed to ride on the support freely

offered to her by the women, despite the political pressure. In fact, the women of the *mahila mandal* took a formal pledge to re-elect her as the *mukhiya*.

The ideological aim to create a dent in the system of money-determined politics bore fruit when Pushpa Devi managed to win her second nomination as *mukhiya* spending much less than the amount she had spent the first time. Her personal manifesto included better access to pension schemes and avenues for irrigation. The topography of the region does allow for water to be retained and the monsoons had been erratic for several years. Most of the agriculture in the area is rain-fed and migration of men to cities for work is a common practice. Women often migrate too but often have to return to the village after bearing a child because there is no one to look after them. Irrigation schemes, therefore, became essential in order to bring development to the area. Pushpa Devi's plans to make changes in these aspects, her involvement with the villagers, her reaching out to women, and her constant efforts in following innumerable bureaucratic procedures were noticed by the local women.

Nonetheless, in this fight against an established system, there are many hurdles. A woman from the Federation, who voted for Pushpa Devi, recounts that when the men heard the women discussing Pushpa Devi's nomination, they spoke of her failure to carry out her domestic duties. This was a common complaint about women—their involvement in public activities was often seen as their failure in their domestic roles. The men followed the women around at meetings, passing derogatory comments and taunts, in an attempt to coerce the women into reconsidering their choice. Involvement

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In rural areas, where the oral tradition has strong roots, informal conversations are often a major source of communication. Malicious gossip, a common political tool, creates the possibility of social ostracism and, therefore, acts as a strong deterrent to women stepping out, for fear of bringing discredit to their family's image and honour.

THE ROLE OF SHGs

That the women participating in the workshop were from the districts around Ranchi, where PRADAN has made multiple interventions and the SHGs have had a fair amount of success, is noteworthy. A visit to Koderma district of the North Chhota Nagpur region, reveals that these problems are still evident. The women of the area have created avenues of financial capacity for themselves and are more aware. Most villages have multiple SHGs, formed by various NGOs and institutions. Women now have a strong base to fight unwelcome social practices, with support from other women of their Federation. In the early 90s, when PRADAN started working in districts such as Koderma, women had little say in their own lives.

PRADAN initiated programmes chiefly to grant women this control and choice over their own lives. SHGs run on a spirit of unity. He notes that a mere increase in income is not sufficient to better the lives of these women. When

domestic violence continues to be a major form of abuse that women face, merely having more avenues for livelihoods has minimal impact. As the income of the household increased, alcohol consumption also increased. Rather than spending on nutrition, education, and creation of assets, the additional income is being used as the man of the house chooses to.

In Khunti district, one of the Development Practitioners, Smruti, wondered whether the empowerment that women seemed to have gained over the years was solely due to the increase in income or due to an ideological shift in the attitudes of society. Perhaps, the atrocities towards women have reduced partly because of the contribution of women to the income of the family and partly because of the fear that the men feel of being surrounded by the women of the *mahila mandal*. Is the change sufficient and sustainable?

This is a common challenge in the attempt to establish gender equality, wherein processes are put in place so as to financially strengthen women without creating an atmosphere of equality irrespective of financial status. As Avijit says, "We need to first help women make their presence felt and stand up for what is right, rather than merely use SHGs to implement financial activities. SHGs can and should be used to change patterns of thinking, and not be just a monetary tool of development practice." Most development programmes aim for tangible results that create avenues for market entry and consider this as the panacea for most problems, especially poverty.

Programmes such as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) use SHGs in a specifically programmed way and micro-manage the activities undertaken. These do not necessarily

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develop shared understanding, sense of community, or common good. The idea, often, is to merely bring about a statistical-economical change instead of altering the ideology and strengthening the rights of the population. The nature of

democratic politics seems to be that somehow most welfare schemes end with the creation of beneficiaries, instead of attempting to create capability and citizenship.

For example, SHGs are a seminal tool; if they are used to alter the approach of the local population to their own lives rather than to add it to a list of activities used for rural development, it would bring about cracks in patriarchal systems. In their very essence, SHGs are a platform for women to congregate, collect and create a collective identity of strength such that they can break out from the individual and social exploitations that they face. Often, so deeply are the women entrenched in the web of patriarchy that domestic abuse and demands for dowry are normalized. The women, often themselves, propagate these as acceptable ways to control their husbands and children.

CHALLENGES FOR THE PRI MEMBERS

In a society where practices of gender-based discrimination, corruption, bribery, malpractice are normalized, the challenges to bringing about change are manifold. The Panchayati Raj elections, therefore, are a mere tool in the larger picture, which aims at holistic development, community participation, and the creation of a more sustainable and egalitarian society.

In the workshop conducted by PRADAN on January 28–29, 2016, the success stories recounted of women were followed by a

reminder that it was not the end of the challenge. The elected women were briefed about their duties and responsibilities, and the procedures they needed to follow in order to fulfill most of them. The women were informed of their rights as voters and members of the *gram sabha*, as well as their duties as aware citizens. The *panchayats* were encouraged to step out of their web of solving land issues and family conflicts, and participate more in creating avenues for uplifting community.

When women voters were asked to list their expectations of those who win elections, issues such as awareness about policies, removal of social evils, providing facilities for irrigation, better health facilities, elimination of middle-men and *thekedaars*, transparency, integration of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Public Distribution System (PDS) into the *gram sabha*, employment opportunities, etc. came up. To a *mukhiya* or a Ward Member working alone, this is a formidable list to achieve. The women were inspired to organize themselves so as to support their representative in her efforts to achieve these goals. Following procedures such as attending the *gram sabha*, giving complaints in writing, keeping an eye out for corruption and subsequently bringing it up in the *gram sabha* were underlined as the duties for members of village units. The women were encouraged to work as a unit and support each other in order to eliminate the *bichaulia raj* (the rule of the intermediaries) and to claim their rights.

The work of a member of these institutions is huge in scope and limited in resources. The women in these positions need to stay

highly motivated and stand up to the system at intervals, in order to ensure timely delivery of policies. They not only need to deal with the *babus* and the officials that the rural population often fears, but also interact continually with the community. The ability to perceive and understand the community's needs and to bridge the gap between the state and its citizens is a continuous process.

CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj elections are a step towards better engagement with the state so that the rural people can fight for their rights and take their problems to the state through their representatives. What is necessary to make this process successful in its objective of strengthening rural populations is the involvement of all communities and strata of society. Essential it is to break out of a stagnant system of the rich and the powerful making choices for their own benefit in the name of development. Also essential it is that the poor, the women, and those that wish for the development of the community become active participants in the system.

The path to better governance is through setting up processes, enhancing awareness, and creating a system of checks and balances such that better transparency and participation is achieved. The community needs to come together and stand up against coercion, muscle power and bribery, and support their leader actively in making choices best suited to the sustainable development of a community and not just the vote bank. PRADAN's training programmes and workshops for the villagers are but small steps toward the achievement of a better and a just democracy.