

# SHG Women: Leading a Political Uprising

MEHMOOD HASAN, BANDANA DEVI AND MADHAVESH KUMAR

*Getting a foothold into the existing male-dominated Panchayati Raj Institutions seemed a Herculean task for the women of the SHGs—a challenge they took up with zest and determination, leading to their victory and the beginnings of change*

The active participation of the Self Help Group (SHG) women in the November 2015 *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) elections in Poraiyahat block of Jharkhand's Godda district was something remarkable. From the selection of the best persons to be the *mukhiya* or members of the *Panchayat Samiti* or Ward Members of their *panchayat* to going with them to file the nominations to campaigning for the candidates, these women extended their active participation.

Due to their efforts, one *jila parishad* member, five *panchayat mukhiyas*, seven *Panchayat Samiti* members and 72 Ward Members, who won the elections, were SHG members. They also helped many others, who were not from the SHG, but could play, according to the SHG members, a pivotal role as PRI representatives.

In some instances, the SHG women won the election unopposed. The reason for such enthusiasm among the women and their involvement is a long one, and the journey towards this change has not been an easy one. The Ekta Mahila Vikas Manch (EMVM) Poraiyahat is a block-level women's SHG Federation. It came into existence on 23 January 2005, with a total SHG membership of 2,685 spread over 196 SHGs. Poraiyahat is a very big block. There are 31 *panchayats*, comprising 197 villages. There are 37,594 families and the total population of the block is 1,87,989. At the time of the PRI elections in 2015, EMVM Poraiyahat had 13,745 rural women members from 1007 SHGs.

The SHG women, associated with EMVM Poraiyahat, had discussed their problems with PRI representatives. These discussions took place at different levels such as in SHG meetings, in Village Organization (VO) meetings and in Federation meetings. They were somewhat dissatisfied that PRI representatives neglected their issues.

Whenever they approached the *mukhiya* or the *Panchayat Samiti* member, their issues were not addressed. Sometimes, PRI representatives did not show any respect to the collectives, whether it was the SHG, the VO or the block-level SHG

Federation. When the women asked the PRI representatives to attend their meetings so that they could tell them of their problems, the PRI representatives rarely came. Sometimes, when the SHG women went to meet their PRI representatives, they were not heard out.

The PRI representatives were involved in many cases of corruption. The *mukhiya* of one *panchayat* openly accepted in a VO meeting that he charged Rs 3,000 for every Indira Awas Yojna Scheme. He justified it by saying that since the government didn't give any transport allowance for travelling from one area to another, he charged the amount from every beneficiary for meeting these expenses. In another case, a *mukhiya* asked for Rs 200 to make an identity card of a villager. The villager wanted to open a savings account in the bank, for which she needed two identity cards. The bankers in Godda district have allowed the *mukhiyas* to issue identity cards for opening savings bank accounts. Many PRI representatives, especially *mukhiyas*, shifted to Poraiyahat—the block headquarters, or Godda—the district headquarters. Because of these shifts, they became inaccessible to the common people.

Very few PRI representatives have earned respect because of their work. The *mukhiya* of Baksara *panchayat*, Hemant Kumar, is one such. He did extensive work in his *panchayat* and because of that he was elected again, and this time with more votes.

*The problems that the common people faced with PRI representatives became one of the reasons for the active participation of SHG women in the elections*

The problems that the common people faced with PRI representatives became one of the reasons for the active participation of SHG women in the elections.

The participation of SHG women also increased because of their collectives. After interacting with other SHGs and becoming more aware through discussions and training, members became more aware and developed greater understanding about the PRI and what could be done through it. The PRI was always on the agenda of discussions in their meetings. And the women took steps to strengthen the PRI by participating in *gram sabha* meetings. They also went to meet the PRI representatives. They asked the PRI representatives to attend the meetings of their collectives. Sometimes, they stood against their PRI representatives, and there were times they supported them. Since their bitter experiences with PRI representatives far outweighed their positive experiences, they were motivated to bring about a change in the local political set-up.

Getting elected to the PRI was the first step for entering the arena of politics for many SHG women. And the women's collectives were there to help them win. The SHG women wanted to bring change in their villages and in their *panchayats*. For that they wanted to contest the elections.

Here's the story of how this uprising happened.

## THE PRI WORKSHOP

PRADAN'S work at the grass roots brought great clarity that it was important to focus on the empowerment of the poor rural women so that they could contribute to increasing the household income, and also participate

in the governance system of the family, society and village. When talking of the governance system, the emphasis here is specifically on providing the space for women to be part of the decision-making in any forum, which directly or indirectly influences their life, for instance, family, *jati panchayats* and the local governance system.

*Most villagers are not aware of the power of the gram sabha and the people's role and responsibility in making it strong and functional*

With this broader objective, PRADAN organized a two-day workshop on 'Preparation for influencing PRI elections for better local self-governance' at Ranchi on the 27 and 28 September 2015. The main objective of the workshop was to motivate women's collectives to influence the *panchayati raj* elections of Jharkhand, to be held in November 2015, through imparting knowledge on the workings of the PRI.

SHG members from different parts of Jharkhand were invited. Four members—Anita Devi, Bitiya Hembram, Poonam Devi and Namita Kisku, from the EMVM Poraiyahat also participated in the workshop. Ajit Singh from State Institute of Rural Development, Jharkhand, and Gurjeet Singh, an independent consultant, were the resource persons.

The workshop began with an inspiring presentation by Ajit Singh on the *gram sabha*. In this session, the stress was on making women aware of the importance of the *gram sabha* for the people. The *gram sabha*, he said, was the most powerful body in the local self-governance system, as envisaged in our Constitution. But our experience is that this has not been recognized in our rural society fully. It has been seen that this powerful structure of local governance has always been by-passed and the Vidhaan Sabha and the Lok Sabha have always been what people have looked to for development. The *gram sabha* is

a permanent body, of which any person, 18 years or above, can be a member; it is her/his right to participate in each and every process of the *gram sabha*. Every decision, be it passing the Village Development Plan or implementation of government schemes, can only be passed with the consensus of the *gram sabha*.

But the real scenario is different from what has been envisaged in our law. Most villagers are not aware of the power of the *gram sabha* and the people's role and responsibility in making it strong and functional. The workshop discussed the probable reasons for this. One reason was that, perhaps, the villagers did not consider the *gram sabha* to be an important body or a place where they could exercise their rights. Instead, they handed over their power to the elected *panchayat* representatives as well as to *panchayat* officials. In most places, the process of organizing the *gram sabha* and informing people about it is neglected because of which these people remain outside in the decision-making process. Many of the schemes and plans, therefore, get sanctioned in the presence of a few so-called powerful and influential people of the village.

The innocent women and men of these villages are being made to sign or put their thumb impression on a blank register. This is only on paper. The set-up, therefore, is being dominated by a few, powerful persons along with a few PRI representatives, who have become the main decision-makers. Ajit Singh also shared that usually the villagers go to the *gram sabha* without any preparation of plans and hardly ever participate in the discussions; the plans passed then far exceed the allocated budget, which leads to chaos among the villagers, and a few people take advantage of the situation. The chaos also provides them

with a reason for not involving the villagers in the process.

The need of the hour, then, is to make the people aware how this democratic set up functions and the power of the *gram sabha*, without which it will not be possible to draft a developmental discourse of the area in favour of the people. Stressing on the importance of spreading awareness among the people regarding the *gram sabha*, Ajit Singh raised some questions, "In a democracy, whose responsibility is it to think of development? Is giving a vote and electing representatives our only responsibility? After being elected as the people's representative, should one think only about fulfilling one's own aspirations, forgetting all the promises made to the people when asking for votes?" Above all, he raised another question, "Which is the better option: only 543 MPs (Members of Parliament) deciding the welfare of more than 100 crore people or all the people participating in this process?"

The whole audience responded in favour of people's participation. And for this, there is no other way than to create awareness about the *gram sabha* and its power was his conclusion.

For creating awareness about the *gram sabha*, it is important to know its technicalities. Some of the key points discussed around it by the resource persons were: in a revenue village, any resident, who is more than 18 years old and has her/his name in the *panchayat* voter list, is a member of the *gram sabha*; the *gram sabha* should meet at least four times a year; a *gram sabha* should be announced within three months of the previous *gram sabha*; in a non-PESA (Panchayats Extension to Schedule Areas) area, for fulfilling the quorum, one-tenth of the members of *gram sabha* should be present, of which one-third should be women; in a PESA area, it is one-third of the

total members, of which one-third should be women.

Based on five years of experience, the resource persons shared that women have claimed a significant amount of space in local self-governance, covering 54 per cent of the seats at all levels such as the *panchayat*, the *Panchayat Samiti* and the *jila parishad*. *Panchayat* buildings are also being constructed in villages, thus, increasing infrastructural development, leading people to acknowledge that PRIs exist.

There is always some failure behind any success. PRI was developed but the power/provisions for it to function smoothly have not been given to the extent needed by this institution. For instance, *panchayat* offices are under-staffed and funding is less than required. The areas where corruption can occur have increased as has the impact of middlemen. Earlier, people had to approach the block or the district to avail of any rights or entitlements. Now, there is an additional layer, the *panchayat*. In the rural areas, it is observed that even though the gap between the common people and the government has decreased, they still have to pass through middlemen to access their entitlements. Women have created a space for themselves in the system but the key has remained in the hands of their husbands.

Gurjeet Singh, another resource person, compared the present-day *panchayat* with a bus. The bus symbolizes a *panchayat* and the *mukhiya* is its driver, who takes to the wheel without deciding where to go. The members of the *gram sabha* are the passengers, who are asleep. They are not even aware of the direction in which the bus is moving. Even if the driver is going in the wrong direction, the passengers are unaware of it. A bus needs four tyres to move; in the present system, there

are less than that, that is, the *panchayat* is under-staffed. So with less than four tyres, how can the 'bus', or the *panchayat* here, move. The bus is not being given adequate fuel by the government; thus, it cannot move properly: inadequate funding, inadequate development. This simple and clear analogy by Gurjeet Singh helped the participants relate it with the present situation of the PRI and realize where the gap lay.

The discussion then moved to the role of the women's collectives and how the forthcoming *panchayat* elections could be influenced to ensure that a proper representative is elected for the people. Some of the points for action that came up were: that the collectives should select one candidate unanimously at the Ward level. This would be without a contest so that there would be no bitter feelings among the villagers because no one would be in competition with each other. The fundamental basis of this selection will be that the 'candidate should be one whom the people want and not one who wants to contest by herself/himself'. The SHG women, along with other villagers, were to take a collective decision as to who they wanted to be their representative for the coming five years. They would also bear the election expenses collectively. This process will create pressure on the candidate to perform better because she/he would have been nominated collectively by the villagers. The collectives could also come up with an election manifesto, mentioning how the villagers envisaged their *panchayat* and *panchayat* representatives to be before the candidates started their campaigns. Also necessary was to parallelly by create awareness among the people about the *gram sabha*. The process of filing nominations, the criteria of the candidate to contest elections, the fee for different candidates and their expense limits were also

*After attending the two-day workshop, members of EMVM, Poraiyahat, came back energized and motivated to do something collectively in their area*

presented in the workshop by the resource persons.

## AFTER THE WORKSHOP

After attending the two-day workshop, members of EMVM, Poraiyahat, came back energized and motivated to do

something collectively in their area. First, they shared the entire experience of the workshop with the Federation members, comprising one representative from each *panchayat*. Together, they decided to hold meetings at different *panchayats*, the dates of which were finalized. The agenda for discussions in *panchayat*-level meetings was as follows:

- ♦ What is a *panchayat* and what is a *gram sabha*?
- ♦ What is our experience of the last five years—what has been our expectation from our representatives and what has been met and what has not been met?
- ♦ How do we want our next representatives to be? What should be done so that we can have a proper representative of the *panchayat* for the coming five years?
- ♦ Choosing the candidate for contesting the election collectively.

Besides this, the Federation also came up with an election manifesto, in which they envisaged their *panchayats* as an ideal place for the villagers—men and women. The main points were:

- ♦ Regular meetings of the *gram sabha* to be held in the *panchayat*.
- ♦ Information to be provided about the *gram sabha* to all the villagers.
- ♦ Doors of the *panchayat* to be open for women and the poor of the village.

- ♦ The *mukhiya* to behave properly with women and the poor.
- ♦ The *mukhiya* should be a person with a long-term vision for the *panchayat*.
- ♦ She/he should have an attitude to work for the people with evidence that she/he has done something in past for the village and its people.
- ♦ She/he should not be corrupt.

The Federation representatives then made six teams, with two Federation representatives in each team. They started to conduct *panchayat*-level meetings with SHG representatives, focusing on the *panchayat* election. They interacted with SHG representatives at least once and, when necessary, twice. Although they faced resistance from the influential people of the village, they did not lose their focus. They were finally able to influence collectives to identify a candidate they wanted as their representative rather than voting for a candidate, who was contesting on her/his own.

### PREPARATION FOR THE UPRISING

Once the collectives were able to select a candidate of their choice for elections to the PRI, they helped candidates at each and every stage, right from nomination to campaigning to the day of the election. They faced many challenges, which they handled successfully. For example, the opponents tried to suppress the candidates by muscle power, by offerings of money, and even by using socio-religious dogmas to restrict the candidates from contesting the election. At every point,

*The opponents tried to suppress the candidates by muscle power, by offerings of money, and even by using socio-religious dogmas to restrict the candidates from contesting the election. At every point, however, SHG women helped their selected candidate and made sure that they stood by her*

however, SHG women helped their selected candidate and made sure that they stood by her.

The SHG women went in large numbers with their selected candidates for filing the nomination, to show their strength. Similarly, they stayed with the candidate during door-to-door campaigns, when conducting the *chunaavi sabhas*, participating in rallies, etc. They

were also with their candidate on the day of the election, at the booths, to ensure a free-and-fair election. They were with their candidate on the day of counting. The collectives not only took on the responsibility of the selection of the candidate but also ensured that she wins the election.

### TARKHUTTA PANCHAYAT

On 18 September 2015, a meeting of the *panchayat* women was organized in Tarkhutta village of Tarkhutta *panchayat*. Every SHG member of all the SHGs of this *panchayat* participated in this meeting. The topic of discussion in this meeting was: who should we elect as our *panchayat* representative? Some names such as Jayanti Devi and Poonam Devi came up for the position of *mukhiya*, but there was no finalization of candidate.

The women met again later in the day to finalize the name of the *mukhiya* candidate from among SHG members. The same names Jayanti Devi and Poonam Devi came for the post of the *mukhiya*; however, some of the members did not agree to Jayanti Devi as the candidate. Jayanti Devi was around 55 years and was illiterate. On the other hand, Poonam was young, in her 20s, and had studied till class 12.



Keeping in mind all these aspects, Poonam Devi was selected as the *mukhiya* candidate from the Tarkhutta *panchayat's* women SHGs. Poonam was surprised by this decision. She was not able to understand what to do—whether to go for it or not. She did not give her acceptance in the same meeting. She discussed the selection with her family members later. They were not in favour of this decision. Their main reason for rejection was the money.

*It was decided that all the SHG women would go for the nomination. They decided to meet at the block where the nomination had to be filed. Almost 500 women reached the block. The people were surprised and the opposition was nervous seeing so many women*

and was collecting money for election expenses.

## NOMINATION DAY

Nomination day was 29 October 2015. The SHG women were tense about how to file the nomination for the election because they had never been through such a process earlier. Again, they sat together and discussed it. It was decided that all the SHG women would go

for the nomination. They decided to meet at the block where the nomination had to be filed. Almost 500 women reached the block. The people were surprised and the opposition was nervous seeing so many women. Poonam Devi filed the nomination paper for the position of *mukhiya*. After she filed the papers, the women raised slogans: Poonam Devi, Zindabad, Zindabad Zindabad! Mahila Mandal, Zindabad, Zindabad, Zindabad! *Hum sab ne thana hai, Poonam ko jitana hai!*

On 25 October, another meeting was organized in which the family members of Poonam Devi also participated. They shared the cause of their inability to contest the election. This time, Lata Devi, from EMVM and the representatives from the SHGs of Tarkhutta *panchayat* were also present at the meeting. The SHG representatives, initially, were of the view that they would not spend even a single rupee in the election. This election would be contested by Poonam free of cost. But later on, they realized that some money would be required, at least for printing the banners and the pamphlets.

All the SHG representatives decided that they would contribute Rs 200 per SHG for funding the election expenses. Poonam Devi's family then gave their consent. The SHG members, then, took an oath to help Poonam to contest in the election. She took an oath that if she were to win, she would work for the people honestly. A committee of eight members, comprising Nootan Devi, Jayanti Devi, Sangita Devi, Shanti Devi, Shanti Murmu, Paarvati Devi, Jhuma Devi and Tilotma Devi was formed to make all the SHG members aware that Poonam Devi was going to contest the *panchayat* election for the post of the *mukhiya*

## CAMPAIGNING

Poonam started campaigning with Jayanti Devi, Shanti Murmu, Sangita Devi and Paarvati Devi. During the day, they organized meetings in various hamlets of the villages and in the mornings and evenings, they went from door-to-door to meet people. They also organized rallies. One day, the SHG women organized a rally on cycles. Every day, they campaigned in one form or the other. People raised many questions such as, "Poonam is a woman; if we need her in the night for some emergency, will she come to help us when she is *mukhiya*? She is a new daughter-in-law of the village, what will she be able to do? Her husband is illiterate. Many became *mukhiya* earlier too, none of them did anything. What will she do for us?"

She heard these questions and apprehensions, and responded to each one animatedly. She said, "I am an SHG woman too. I am one among you. You should choose a woman like you, who can understand you and your issues. Trust me."

As the days passed, the opinion started to turn in the favour of Poonam. During Chhat Pooja, Poonam went to her parents' family in Kusumi village, Mahagama block. People from the opposition started spreading rumours that Poonam was not going to contest the election and that she had taken Rs 1.5 lakh for this. And that is why she had run away from the village.

When Poonam returned, she started campaigning again. At that time the people raised the question, "You are already sold. Why should we cast our vote for you?" Poonam and her campaigners explained to the people that these were just rumours that her opponent had spread.

"If it were true, why would I be here campaigning? My opponent is scared of me and he wants me to withdraw my nomination," she reassured the people.

To resolve this issue, another meeting of all the SHG women of Tarkhutta *panchayat* was organized. This time Shubhadra Devi, President of EMVM, herself came and promised all the SHG women that Poonam was going to contest the election and that she had not withdrawn her candidature. She told the women, "We should not get trapped in this."

The SHG women promised that they would not get diverted by such tactics of the opposition. They promised to cast their vote in favour of

*She heard these questions and apprehensions, and responded to each one animatedly. She said, "I am an SHG woman too. I am one among you. You should choose a woman like you, who can understand you and your issues. Trust me."*

Poonam. In the same meeting, the woman also discussed that the contribution of Rs 200 per SHG was insufficient and that the amount should be more. The members decided to contribute Rs 500 per SHG and a total of Rs 11,500 was contributed from 23 SHGs from Tarkhutta *panchayat* for the election.

## THE DAY OF THE ELECTION

The day of the election, 22nd November 2015, arrived. On the evening of 20 November 2015, all the SHG representatives of Tarkhutta *panchayat* met and divided their roles and responsibilities on election day. Four SHG women and two men would be placed at every booth, to ensure that voters get a fair environment to cast their vote freely. For Titiyatanr booth, 14 SHG women took the responsibility. Titiyatanr booth was the most sensitive booth of Tarkhutta *panchayat* because the opponent had deployed paid goons there and nobody wanted to take the responsibility of that booth. The SHG women decided to be there in sufficient numbers so that nobody would harm them.

As was expected, when the voting started, the SHG women found some cases of bogus voting. They reported it to the officials. In the afternoon, when the villagers were casting their votes, there was a sudden sound of a bomb blast. Somebody told Jayanti Devi that her son had died in this bomb blast. She rushed towards Titiyatanr booth. While she was on the way, the goons hired by the opponent hit her on the head with sticks.

Hearing this, the villagers went to save Jayanti. Eight persons were wounded in this violent clash. The *mukhiya* candidate, Poonam,



somehow was safe in all this. The SHG women called the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Superintendent of Police (SP), and the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and told them of the situation there. The DC assured them that the police would certainly reach the spot. Before the police reached, the goons poured water into the ballot box and hid it.

When the police reached, the goons went away. The police tried to find the ballot box but were not able to. The SHG women helped the police in the search and the box was found. Voting started again, but after this bomb blasts, most of the people didn't turn up to cast their vote. At the same time, it was very difficult to send all the wounded to the hospital. A *jila parishad* candidate helped and the wounded reached the Poraiyahat Community Health Centre.

This news was published in the daily newspapers. The environment of Tarkhutta *panchayat* was totally disturbed. The goons went every day to the houses of women, who campaigned for the election along with Poonam. Sometimes, they threw stones and, sometimes, they abused the women. Sangita Devi, the SHG Community Resource Person, who campaigned very actively for Poonam, was not even able to come out from her home because of these goons.

### COUNTING THE VOTES

Finally, judgment day came. It was time to count the votes and to declare the results. The counting of votes started. It was a tough contest for both the candidates. Mahadev Marhaiyya, the other contestant, was two votes ahead all the time. And then, only the counting of the last round remained. At the end of the counting, Poonam Devi was six votes ahead of Mahadev Marhaiyya. But

the opposition did not accept this result. He entered the main building where the counting was being done. But Poonam was not allowed to enter.

Poonam Devi, Lalmuni Devi and Lata Devi went to meet the SP. There too were denied entry. When the BDO of Poraiyahat also refused to meet them, Lata Devi told him, "*Chaliye Poraiyahat me aapka ilaj karenge*. (Let's go to Poraiyahat, we will treat you there)." The women entered the cabin forcibly and asked the BDO and the SP to announce the result. Mahadev protested. The BDO of Poraiyahat and the SP asked Mahadev what the problem was. He said he wanted a re-count of votes of two booths of Dhobai. The officials agreed to his demand. The votes of these two booths were again counted. And it was again found that Poonam was six votes ahead of Mahadev.

Finally, the result was announced. Both the candidates signed on the declaration and it was time for celebration. More than 50 SHG women felicitated Poonam, shouted slogans and played with the colours. It was something that the SHG women themselves had not expected a few months ago.

The SHG women had created history. Poonam was silent because she began to feel responsible to the people. After winning the election, she said, "*Chahe mujh par kitna bhi dabav kyu na aaye, mein paise se bikne vali nahi hu. Ye to manzil ka pehla kadam hai, aage raaste lambe hain* (No matter how much pressure is on me, I am not going to take money for my work. This is the first step of our journey and the destination is still far away)." She further added, "*Apni panchayat me keval main hi nahi, sab mukhiya hain* (In our panchayat, not only I...everyone is a *mukhiya*)."

## THE OUTCOME: PANCHAYAT ELECTION RESULT

The efforts of the Federation representatives brought outstanding results, in terms of the number of candidates elected. A total of 86 SHG women were elected for various positions in the PRI elections of November 2015.

*The efforts of the Federation representatives brought outstanding results, in terms of the number of the candidates elected. A total of 86 SHG women were elected for various positions in the PRI elections of November 2015*

have been sanctioned. She is fully engaged with her official work. As *mukhiya*, she deals with government officials and, since these are initial days, she is taking time to understand the system and the administrative functioning. Now, she says that she will get in touch with women collectives and work on the issues raised by them.

## SITUATION AT PRESENT

Poonam Devi is living a new phase of her life as *mukhiya*. Although there are many challenges along the way, she has done a remarkable job in these six months. If we go through her score card, we will see that she has helped sanction 48 old-age pension schemes, 25 widow pension schemes, 13 small and four large ponds under MGNREGA, repaired 40 hand pumps, and issued 10 new ration cards. Her *panchayat* also received Rs 6.5 lakhs for various development projects under the 14th Finance Commission, under which two sitting places (*chabootara*), one meeting hall (*sabha bhavan*), two PCC roads, and nine latrines

## CONCLUSION

Although 86 SHG women have entered the active politics of the local government, time will tell whether they will fulfill the expectations of those who have elected them. The expectation is that they will bring a positive change and will create some milestones in the days to come. We have planned to conduct a workshop with these women in July 2016 so that they understand the whole system in these six months. The system before them is very challenging. How will they respond to this challenge? Will they be able to change the system or will they become the part of the existing system? Only time will tell.