

Women Lead the Change in Murgabani Step by Step

KANAD GHOSH

Perseverance, determination, some guidance, and knowledge about rights and entitlements saw a few SHG members through a challenging situation, in which they crossed swords the powerful head of the village

March 2013. Mangali was very happy. She was returning home after attending the Mahadhivesan. She had no clue what lay ahead. When she reached home in the morning, her husband was drunk and was annoyed that she had stayed out at night. He was so angry that he beat her up brutally. Mangali fainted. Although she was a Federation Board Member (FBM), she could not stop her drunkard husband, who seemed to have totally lost his senses.

Beating women was a regular occurrence among the tribal population Murgabani village. Because domestic violence was so much a part of life, and quarrels between husbands and wives a natural phenomenon, other women did not become involved in the matter. And that morning, many SHG members were resting after their overnight *Mahadhivesan*; it was, therefore, some time before they noticed Mangali's plight.

Alaka Baskey (SHG member) first saw her lying unconscious on the ground and her husband sleeping on the cot. Alaka called the other members, who were shocked to at the sight of Mangali lying unconscious. They did not know what to do immediately. Coincidentally, Sadmani Saren another Federation leader, and some other women from Tilabani (a neighbouring village) came to Murgabani for some work. When she came to know of the incident, Sadmani immediately said, "*Taratari haspatal na legle u morei jabo; kotha bolte parchilo nai sudhu tuku tuku jol khacchilo* (If we do not take her to the hospital, she might die; she cannot talk, and she's only sipping a little bit of water)."

She asked the SHG members to call an ambulance and take Mangali to the Barabazar block hospital, saying, "*Amader jiban ta to ektai, amra na darale habek nai* (Our life is one, it will not work if we don't stand with each other)."

Parbati (SHG member), with the help of other SHG members, found the phone number and called the ambulance. The women asked Mangali's husband to go with her to the hospital but he refused and continued to sleep. Some of the SHG members insisted, "*Bou k mere r ghore ghumale habe. Okeo jete habe* (Having tortured your wife, you plan to stay sleeping in your home. Get up! You have to go)."

The SHG members forced him to get out of bed and go with Mangali to the hospital. Some of the SHG members accompanied them. The next day, Sadmani and some members went to the hospital; they talked to Mangali and after getting her consent, they decided to lodge a complaint against the husband.

Mangali's mother-in-law started crying but Mangali refused to back off or change her mind. She said, "*Era jadi na thakta tahole amake merei dita, or to kono hunsh e chilo nai* (If the neighbours had not saved me in time, I would have died and he would have been responsible for it. He was so drunk that he was out of his senses)."

The women lodged a complaint against her husband. The police threatened him and he had to make a promise that he would treat her well. The women kept a close watch on him and he did not dare to beat Mangali after that, for fear of the police and the SHG members.

This incident made the women more confident and they set larger goals for themselves.

TOWARDS LIQUOR-FREE MURGABANI

There are three SHGs in the area, which cover 39 families. When the women met after this incident, they discussed the problem of

When the women met after this incident, they discussed the problem of physical violence that most of them faced and realized that the root cause in every situation was alcohol

physical violence that most of them faced and realized that the root cause in every situation was alcohol. One of the women in the SHG meeting said, "*Dada ra ghore kono kaj korbe nai r chaal taka ja pabe seigula diye mod khabe r ghare ese sudhu jogra korb* (Our husbands do not do

any work and they take away any money, rice and whatever else they can find in the house and spend it on drinking and after they come home, they fight and beat us up)."

And truly, the situation is such. The women take on all the burden of the family whereas the men, in addition to not contributing to the earning for the family, also steal whatever the women earn.

The issue was taken up by their Federation: Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh (SSNSS). The SHG members of Murgabani spoke about the problems of alcoholism among their men-folk and its impact on their lives frankly and openly. They came to the conclusion that the evil stemmed from the local liquor shop. It was decided that FBM Sadmani from Tilabani village would work with FBM Mangali of Margabani village on the issue to find a solution to the problem. Both the FBMs drew up an action plan to mobilize the women of Murgabani village. FBM Mangali and Sadmani discussed the issue with the women and asked them whether they were ready to cooperate. The SHG members pledged that they would give full support to Mangali in curbing this problem.

Nilmani (an SHG member of Sisu Seba Swanirvar Mahila Samiti) said, "*Kichu kore holeo bandho korte habe nahole bartei thakbe* (It will have to stop immediately otherwise the problem will increase)."

They decided that they would take up the case with the Block Development Officer (BDO) and set a

date for the visit. They wrote out an application to the BDO complaining against the liquor shop owner and requesting that action be taken against him. Mangali, along with the FBM Sadmani and a PRADAN professional, went to meet the BDO and the *Sabhapati* and presented him the application. They provided the names and addresses of all the liquor shop owners of the area whose shops they wanted closed.

This was Mangali's first visit to the block office and her first interaction with the BDO and the *Sabhapati*. The women were not very confident that they could speak with the BDO. Mangali said, *"Prathame tuku voy korchilo tarpor jakhon sunchilo nai takhon dame rag hoyechilo r pura bole dili* (Initially, I felt frightened. But I told the BDO and the *Sabhapati* the problem. They did not seem to understand our problem and because of that I felt angry and expressed myself loudly)."

Some *panchayat* members were also present in the meeting and one of them tried to trivialize the issue. Mangali became very angry. She came back and shared the experience with the other women in the village. However, the BDO and the *Sabhapati* realized the seriousness of the situation and decided to take action that very day.

The block administration assured the SHG members that they would take action. They also told the women that they would need help at the time of the raid and arrest.

On the same evening, the police arrested four people, in the presence of the block officials, on charges of unauthorized production and sale of country-made liquor. The BDO made out a case against them. SHG members came out in full strength and helped the police

The SHG members realized that if all the members were to come together, they could do achieve everything they wanted.

destroy the liquor making pots. They helped the police identify and search for the men, who made liquor in their houses and sold it to the villagers.

The women achieved what they wanted. Mangali reflected, *"Voy pele habe ni, bolte habe* (Don't be afraid; you have to express yourself bravely)."

The SHG members realized that if all the members were to come together, they could achieve everything they wanted. A majority of the members wanted the making and sale of liquor to be stopped, and their success helped the SHG members become stronger and more united, raise their confidence and encourage them to work together on many other issues. At present, the supply of liquor from outside the village has stopped. But three families within the village have started to make and sell liquor behind closed doors.

RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS

At about this time, PRADAN started working on creating awareness of rights and entitlements and took up the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) for the purpose. In 2013, PRADAN started a mass awareness campaign on MGNREGA, through hamlet meetings, during which it discussed the rules, norms and process to get 100 days of work and other work-related information such as wage rates, payments schedules and processes, the facilities at the work site, how this work would help the households, etc.

After the awareness campaign, SHG members in Murgabani conducted a meeting, which was attended by PRADAN professionals. Many SHG members said that barring 8–10 days of earth work, they had not been getting 100 days' work. Even for the 8–10 days that

they worked, they got paid after 5–6 months. They did not know who to contact and where they could avail of the 100 days of work. PRADAN professionals explained to them that if a person had a job card and a bank account, they could get 100 days of work by applying at the *gram panchayat* or at the block.

The PRADAN team realized that, except for two or three women, none of the members had ever visited the gram panchayat office. The women expressed their uneasiness because visiting the gram panchayat was a new experience for them.

In another SHG meeting, members decided to ask for 100 days' work and set a date for filling the work-demand form. With the help of the Adult Functional Literacy (AFL) teacher and the SHG accountant, they filled the required form. PRADAN professionals then told SHG members where they could deposit the form and the process they needed to follow. Ten SHG members, who would deposit the forms at the *gram panchayat* (Bansbera), were selected in that meeting. They were reminded to insist on a receipt from the *panchayat* because otherwise the *panchayat* official could, at a later date, deny that he had received their forms.

The PRADAN team realized that, except for two or three women, none of the members had ever visited the *gram panchayat* office. The women expressed their uneasiness because visiting the *gram panchayat* was a new experience for them. Encouraged by the other members of the SHG, however, they went to the office. They could not deposit the work-demand forms because the concerned official (MGNREGA-related official) was not present that day. The women went again the next day and deposited the forms but were not given any receipt even after repeated requests. One of the members said, *"Amader katha ta niloy na. Kaaj ta na dile to amaderi khoti. Receipt ta nitei habek* (They don't hear our request. It would be our loss if we don't get work. We

have to take the receipt)."

The women went to the *gram panchayat* office again for the receipt. They had a heated conversation with the *panchayat* officials, who were not ready to give them the receipt. Finally, their efforts and insistence paid off and the women were successful. In accordance with MGNREGA rules, they got

their work within 15 days of depositing their work-demand application. In the financial year of 2013–14, they got a total of 35 days of work and they each got a payment of Rs 6,090, of which they deposited Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 in their own bank account. The SHG members realized the power of the collective, *"Sabai mile panchayat jeye bolte habe...ekla gele habei nai kichu* (Together we will have to go to the *panchayat* and speak...nothing will happen if only one of us goes)."

In 2014–15 and 2015–16, they demanded work and got it. However, in 2015–16, they faced the problem of late payment. The women knew whom to approach and they promptly communicated the issue to the block administration and received their payments.

FIGHT FOR DIGNITY

In Murgabani village, the Sarul festival is celebrated sometime from mid-February to mid-March. Each and every Santhal tribal village celebrates this festival. After spotting the moon in mid-February up to mid-March, the village head (Majhi Haram) and other villagers fix the date for the festival. At a holy place (Jahira) in the village, the God Marang Buru Jaher Ayo is worshipped by the Laya (worshipper of the village) so that all the villagers can live in peace and without any kind of disease. During the festival, all

the villagers enjoy being together for two to three days. Laya, along with a few other powerful villagers, are the main controllers of the festival. The Festival Committee arranges a drama competition in which 8–10 groups from other nearby villages come to compete. People from the neighbouring villages also come and enjoy the competition.

Some days before the start of the Sarul festival, the SHG members had undergone a residential training in Balarampur block, 21 km from Murgabani. They spent the night there. The drama group of Murgabani used this as the theme of their play—that women spend a night outside the home and are, therefore, characterless and are denounced for bringing disgrace to their family and the village.

Another theme that drama group highlighted was how SHG members talk openly with outsiders, especially PRADAN professionals. They showed how women are expected not to talk with outsiders

The drama group was trying to demean the SHG institution by showing them in a bad light. The SHG members came to know about the plan of the drama group and decided that they should do something about it and the drama group should change their theme. They decided to talk to Laya and Majhi Haram, to change the theme of the play.

Parbati Murmu, along with the FBM and the SHG members went to meet with Majhi Haram and very politely asked him to tell the drama group to change the theme because it showed the women and the SHG in bad light.

Majhi Haram called a Sholoyana meeting (planning meetings of men, usually conducted before the Sarul and Bandhna festivals, in which other issues are also discussed), in which he brought up the women's request, except that he falsely stated that the women

had demanded that he change the theme and had threatened him with dire consequences if he did not. This was received very negatively in the Sholoyana meeting; the members called the families of the SHG women and threatened them and said that in that case:

1. All the responsibilities of the festival would have to be taken up by the SHG members whereas traditionally women did not take on any responsibility in the Sarul Puja.
2. At the time of festival, if there was anything missing or stolen, the women would have to compensate the loss to the family concerned.
3. The families of the women, who do not obey the Sholoyana's decision, would be considered outcasts and would be physically reprimanded.

These conditions were relayed to the SHG members by their families, who pressurised them to not make an issue of the situation. Husbands of SHG members asked them not to attend SHG meetings and that there should be no further discussion on the issue.

This time the SHG members were frightened. The members agreed not to take the issue further. Many SHG members were silent succumbing to their family pressure; only some spoke about what could be done further. Quite a few SHG members did not turn up for the meeting.

Parbati's mother-in-law told Parbati's husband, *"Bou to tor kono kathai chale nai, nijer icchai ja khushi korche, group e jete nai habe* (Your wife does not listen to you. She does whatever she likes. She should not go to the SHG any more)."

Nilmani also faced pressure and comments from her family. *"Group kore khub berechis, baireo jabi na r group eo jete habe na* (You have learned enough from the SHGs. You

don't need to go out and go to the group anymore)."

Parbati said, "*Sabar valor jonne bolte geli r ekhon amakei katha sunte hacche. Dame kharap lagchilo* (I went to speak for the betterment of all, but now I am being considered the culprit. I am feeling very bad)."

Many SHG members clearly articulated that they would not go with Parbati and others for any further protests against the theme of the play. Parbati herself told me that she was afraid and, at the same time, very sad.

I discussed the situation with Parbati and explored what she wanted to do. She expressed her helplessness because the other SHG members and her mother-in-law were insisting that the issue be dropped and she was afraid of societal punishment. What would happen if she were to withdraw from the protest? And what is the learning for other villagers from the drama? Parbati replied, "*Chere dile ta dada eta ro barbek r pura bolte thakbe* (If I don't oppose the injustice against us, this injustice will continue to increase and the opposite party will take advantage of our weakness)."

I asked her what her hurdles were; she thought about it and realized that her husband had not really asked her to stop. I left her alone to think. Parbati Murmu and three other SHG members discussed the issue with some well-wishers— young boys (the SHG accountant, a young teacher and some others) of Murgabani. This group also wanted to change the theme of the drama because they understood the value of the SHG and they wanted to motivate the women. The boys assured the women verbally and they promised that if the women were to call a meeting with all the villagers they would be present to support them. But it was visible that all the women were not together.

"Amra jeta boli ni seta niye loke jakhon dosh dicche takhon to amader kei samadhan korte habe (We have to resolve this because we are being blamed for saying something that we have not)."

Four SHG members (Parbati, Mangali, Alaka and Nilmani) went to Majhi Haram just before the Sarul festival and told him that the women wanted a Sholoyana meeting where the women would be allowed to be present. In that meeting, they would discuss about their demand and ask the Sholoyana members what was wrong with their demand of asking for a change in the theme. The women were very firm this time, but Majhi Haram did not want to call for any village-level meeting.

The women insisted that either a meeting be held or their demand be fulfilled. The women decided that they would do their own Sholoyana meeting and began to inform the villagers of it. At this, Majhi Haram requested them to stop. He did not want any trouble in the village, especially at a time when outsiders were expected at the time of the festival. He listened to the women's concern again and said that he would ensure that the drama groups change their themes. He also agreed to see to it that no one talks ill of the SHG members or tease them in any way. Finally, the theme was changed by the drama groups. This satisfied the women.

Parbati, Alaka, Mangali and Nilmani told us, "People will say many things. We don't need to pay attention to everyone."

The women will continue with their struggle. During this movement, they became aware, however, of some gaps in their SHG. They plan to introspect on why SHG members did not support them throughout. They said it would be difficult to move forward without the SHG members' support.