

Women in the Political Arena

AZIZA HUMAYUN HALIM

Holding their ground firmly, despite political pressure to withdraw from the political arena, the women of Samnapur block, Dindori district, set an example by fielding, supporting and canvassing for their representative in the local elections because they know that having a position in the government will help them realize their dreams for a better tomorrow

With the *panchayat* elections of 2015 in view, villages are alive with speeches and promises of a 'better tomorrow' and 'a happily ever after' ending. From earlier experience, the villagers know that the sincerity of these promises vanishes just like the trail of dust that rises and settles after the candidates have sped past their narrow village lanes.

Dropti, a member of the Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh (RDTMS) says, "The gap between how policies are made and the manner in which information regarding these is disseminated to the common person is appalling."

Playing an important and active role in the Federation these past few years has given her the opportunity to engage with government officials on various occasions; in interactions with them, her experience has been varied. She realizes that there is so much information available in the block as well as the district that is meant for the ordinary villager but is not being passed on to them. New schemes are issued regularly by the government; however, they rarely reach the people they are meant for.

Dropti understands that these schemes do not reach the people because there are no proper channels for dissemination of this information and that there are no 'linkages' that allow access to these channels. This problem exists at all levels—from the district to the block, the block to the *panchayat*, the *panchayat* to the *gram sabha*, and from the *gram sabha* to the citizens.

The Federation is a group of informed and aware villagers, with a mission to change society; a group that has struggled long and hard and has finally been able to have access to the right places. Although the Federation has done much work in enabling women to access public information, it is ultimately only a parallel structure to the government. A vast majority of villagers, neither connected to the mainstream nor to any such Federation, are left out every time.

It is imperative, therefore, to have people who are trustworthy and dedicated, to be part of the system and in some position of authority, who will support and guide the villagers in availing of their entitlements. With widespread patriarchy and corruption prevalent in society, it is extremely essential that more women and gender-sensitive people occupy influential positions in the government

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in order to have just and fair policy-making, implementation, and information disclosure at all levels of the bureaucracy.

The women learned this lesson the hard way. They heard from the *zila panchayat* that a decentralized planning process was in progress in all the blocks.

It was to be carried out at the village level by the Technical Support Group (TSG), in the presence of the *gram sabha* members. Not seeing any action in this direction and keeping in view their priority of participating in the planning process, the women decided to intervene in the integrated village-level action plans. Their aims were simple: to increase transparency and demand individual assets in the name of women. The village leaders, the Federation staff and the promoting agency employees worked to create a movement towards this end in all the villages and completed it within a record time of one month.

RANI DURGAWATI TEJASWINI MAHILA SANGH

Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh (RDTMS) is a women's collective located in Samnapur block of Dindori district. About 25 km from the district headquarters, Samnapur is a block populated mainly by the Gond, Ahir, Panika and Kol tribes. There are also a few villages belonging to the Baigachak region—Baiga being a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG). The Federation spreads across 60 of Samnapur's 116 villages. It is with great enthusiasm that the leaders of all the villages got together to start a Federation to support them in realizing their dreams.

The Federation has a three-tier system, with the starting unit being an SHG member and the forum for connection being the SHG meeting. The next tier is formed by the thematic leaders, or *sakhis* whose forum for sharing and gathering information is the monthly village-level meeting of the Village Level Committee (VLC). These leaders represent their village for a particular theme, and meet every month in the block to share their progress, take inputs and contribute to decision-making by sharing their village's perspective. Another monthly forum, in which decisions related to the Federation's way forward and critical issues such as resources, finance and operations are discussed, is the Governing Board, to which one woman per Cluster of three or four villages is elected as a representative. From these, the Chairperson, the Secretary and the Treasurer of the Federation are elected.

As many as 1,270 plans were designed and consolidated in 48 villages, and prepared for presentation at all the levels of administration, including the *panchayat* office, the block office, the *zila panchayat* office, and the District Collector's office. When the Federation leaders took the plans to the respective officials, the response they received ranged from the warm and appreciative response of the District Collector, who lauded their initiative and hard work, to the rude and insensitive response of the Additional CEO of the *zila panchayat*, who devalued their efforts, saying that there was no need for it.

The contrast was sharp. This event opened their eyes to reality, and further strengthened Dropti's belief that in the district and other places, there exists huge discrimination, especially against women, and even more so for women who belong to the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Women had no voice and their opinions were never considered seriously, no matter how pertinent these might be.

The women were convinced they needed to enter the political sphere if the system were to be made pro-women. Discussions were held in the *Adhikar Sakhi* meetings after the Federation had submitted the micro-plans for each of their 48 villages to the district official. While analyzing their learning, they realized how hard it would be for them to break through to the system. And, yet, this was necessary. It was important to enter the arena of politics, however murky it may be, and to change the system from within by making it more responsive to the needs of the people because this system was responsible for planning and implementing most of

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the development policies and schemes in the country.

The discussions in the Federation meetings resulted in a decision that women from the Federation be placed at various levels in the government, including the village, the *panchayat* and the block, so that like-minded women, with a mission to transform their lives, would drive the forces of positive change within the system as well as outside.

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It was also decided to contest elections at the district level. A consensus was arrived at and everybody collectively decided to put up Dropti's name as a candidate for the district representative of 83 villages of Samnapur region. She now had a larger canvas on which to paint her dreams.

Dropti hails from a poor family and has no living parents or siblings. Her husband and three children are her only surviving family. She has lived through times of abject poverty and is grateful for what she has today. She and her husband Vishwanath have both worked very hard to have come to this stage of life, where now they can live a life of dignity. She can now live with her head held high and has no one to fear. She expressed, "When I saw my name published in the list outside the Collectorate and when the District Collector

herself announced my name in front of so many people as a contender for elections, I was speechless. I had never imagined I would ever do such a thing and feel so proud. I think, having come thus far, I have achieved enough for my lifetime." There are 11 men contesting the elections this year and Dropti is the sole woman.

With Dropti standing for elections, history is being created by RDTMS, Samnapur. This is the first time any woman candidate is contesting an election in the district. It is a place that seems far away and, hence, is also considered out of reach for ordinary women, especially from the tribal and rural communities. For them, this nomination heralds their bold entry into the political sphere of their society, and, if elected, will certainly enable their opinion to be genuinely represented in the larger governmental forums.

One of Dropti's signature remarks to people who ask her why they should vote for her when she does not give them anything (material) in return, is, "You voted for those who gave you money and travelled by cars, but did they ever return to your village? I don't have anything material to offer to you. But I can promise that when selected you will definitely be seeing me again."

The women are hopeful and confident that Dropti will be their true representative. As a regular Federation member, she has taken many initiatives to strengthen the institution such as extending herself to help those women who sought counselling from the Federation, visiting their villages, getting to the root of their problems while being sensitive to their position in the family and village.

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We asked a few SHG members why they would choose Dropti and what was in it for them if she were to win.

One of them replied, "We have always put forward the men in any work it may be. Now for the

first time, we have the opportunity, so let's put our women in front and see what happens?"

Another woman chipped in, "This is our way to prove that we are equal to men, that we can also contest elections."

In a Federation meeting in late November 2014, in which village leaders from around 30 villages participated, the agenda of the upcoming *panchayat* elections was raised. The villagers discussed what kind of a leader they would like to have and what they wanted to be included in their election manifesto.

A list of the following points came up:

- ◆ Access to regular and proper information regarding the *gram sabhas*
- ◆ Equal treatment of men and women in the *gram sabhas* (evident through actions such as seating arrangements, a space for women to articulate their opinions and needs)
- ◆ Information regarding the various schemes applicable to their *panchayat* and the people/positions responsible for expending those funds.

It was evident that the main concerns of the women were related to knowledge provisioning and accessing information meant for them at the right time and in the correct public forums. The lack of these, they concluded, was causing the others to bribe government functionaries

at all levels. They held that if the decisions regarding who would obtain which public benefit were made with consensus or, at least, if everyone knew that their needs were also part of the plan, they would not feel so insecure and the system would not have to be compromised.

With this in view, Dropti's election manifesto centres on the following points:

- ♦ Transparency in information dissemination at the *panchayat*
- ♦ Regularization of the *gram sabha*,
- ♦ Institution of a special *gram sabha* on agriculture
- ♦ Participation of women in regional development and women's rights
- ♦ Increase in the effectiveness of health services
- ♦ Provision of clean and safe drinking water and toilets

All the women of the Federation are on this journey together. One day, a contestant and a few of his supporters visited Chhindgaon village for canvassing votes. No sooner had they reached the village lane than a group of SHG members assembled near his car and told him, "*Prachaar ho gaya hai, vote fix hai Dropti bai ke liye.* (There is no need for any propaganda; our vote is fixed for Dropti bai)."

A similar incident took place in Kuraili village. The solidarity that the villagers have displayed during this time has been heart-warming. Leaders from Ghata village invited Dropti to come and share her views with the people, to

A local shop owner, in response to the campaign strategy, remarked, "Since the awareness levels of the villagers have increased, and owing to the efforts made by organizations such as PRADAN, the masses have started questioning candidates about why they should vote for them. This trend was not prevalent earlier and people would cast their votes for whoever was in power or for other reasons."

mobilize public opinion and align with the people's expectations. Elections have become a costly affair and sensing the situation, the leaders have gone out of their way to support Dropti financially. In one of the Federation meetings, the issue of election propaganda came up. Dropti shared that she had no money for the propaganda and sat down quietly.

At first, everyone was puzzled because there would definitely be some small expenses such as hiring vehicles on some occasions and other publicity costs. Considering all this, and wanting their initiative to

succeed, they all decided to contribute Rs 5 per person. Almost Rs 5,000–6,000 was raised. In that instant, the election belonged to more than 1,000 women, not just one. And Dropti's style paved the path for women to claim their spaces consciously and willingly. In a way, by doing this, Dropti became a co-traveller and gave everyone an equal opportunity for taking responsibility. This one act demonstrated a singular unity in their village, which has had a huge impact on the social perceptions that people carry about the Federation and its leaders.

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Contesting the elections has cleared many of the misconceptions the village women had regarding elections. For instance, the slogan, "Aadhey mein haqdaari, poorey mein ummeedvaari," has started to be quoted frequently by anyone who is told that this seat is reserved for men and the women cannot contest in this area. If women's participation in *panchayati* elections is the agenda, the means to it are to pose questions and provide information in order to create the right environment for members to make an informed decision and make their choice.

Many women, including those who have not stood for elections this year, are now aware of the electoral procedures, rules, etc.

In the course of filing applications and mobilizing public opinion in favour of not only Dropti but also all the other Federation members who stood for elections, many internal dynamics have become known. The village, being a closer-knit unit than a district, also experiences much more political disturbance. It is harder to unite people for a single cause in a village already divided by caste, class, gender, relations, money and many other reasons.

The Federation members standing for positions such as ward member and *sarpanch* have a somewhat harder time in drawing support because there are multiple contenders for the same posts. Traditionally, in the context of Dindori, discrimination against women in terms of mobility, decision-making and voicing their opinions is extensive, and women's political participation in the 2015 elections

It hasn't been easy to face such threats. "But I will not quit," Dropti says adamantly. "It is the unwavering faith of my fellow sisters that has got me so far. I have seen them make the effort when they have invited me to their village to meet the Federation members, and after all the trust they have placed in me, I cannot withdraw my name. No matter what happens, even if death comes my way I will face it."

has raised many eyebrows. At the beginning of the process of filing applications, there were 18 candidates, including Dropti. However, by January 2015, the number stands at 11.

The unique feature that distinguishes Dropti from all other candidates standing in this election is that she has entered the elections only because she has been nominated as a representative by the public. She was chosen from amongst almost 2,000 women of the Federation, of which she is a member. They have proposed her name and, hence, she believes that they will support her too.

There is one particular instance Dropti narrated that really proves that her participation has made people question themselves and their stand in this election. One day a big car came and stopped by her house and some popular influential figures emerged. They had come to find out who Dropti was. She was offered a handsome amount of money in return for stepping down and withdrawing her nomination. They said that it is a '*purush* seat' and she should, therefore, withdraw.

Well aware that it was not a reserved seat, she confidently replied, "I will not withdraw because it is an open seat and I am as entitled to contest the election for the seat as you are."

All possible means of negotiation were attempted. They even tried to play on Vishwanath's ego by taunting him, "We would never place our guns on our wife's shoulders. We would never allow our women to do such things."

To which Dropti promptly retorted, "This decision is mine and my husband is supporting me."

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Despite the brave front she puts up for the world, a certain anxiety always prevails. Dropti says, "*Mujhe to neend nahi aa paati aaj kal. Raat bhar jagi rehti hu ki kya hoga nateeja.* (I am unable to sleep through the night thinking about the results)."

Ansuiya Bai of Mohti Village consoles her saying, "*Nateeja chaahe jo bhi ho par chunaav me itne bade pad ke liye ladna hi apne aap mein ek badi baat hai, didi.* (Whatever be the result, just fighting in the election for such a post is in itself commendable)."

However, Dropti's aspirations for herself and for the Federation are higher. She dreams of a larger victory, a more equal system of governance, a bigger impact. The election this time was postponed by at least a fortnight. The date announced earlier was 7th and then was postponed to 22nd February 2015. Owing to this decision, the tension among the Federation members, as well as the candidates, increased and so also has the risk of the majority opinion shifting.

The women believe that the earlier the elections get over, the better it would be because with

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every passing day and week, public opinion is wavering. Women are employing smart strategies to campaign for Dropti—wherever they go they say, "*Is baar to Dropti ke taraf hi ja raha hai vote. Dropti hi jeetne wali hai. Usi ko vote dena.* (This time the votes are going in favour of Dropti. She will definitely win. Give her your vote)."

By tapping people's tendencies of 'going with the crowd' and 'casting their vote in favour of who wins', it seems like the crowd is quite convinced that Dropti is the 'rising sun'—just like her election symbol—for them. In many places, the people who are leading Dropti's publicity campaign are also faced with many challenges. For example, when the leaders, who are extending themselves voluntarily for this cause, go to village-level meetings, they will be faced with much ridicule.

This event has brought out the spirit of oneness and leadership among many of the leaders of the RDTMS such as Laxmi Bai of Chhindgaon, Geeta Bai of Ramhepur, Kasturi Bai of Madhopur, Godavari, Devki and Siya Bai of Barga, Maina Bai of Kikarjhar, Shyama, Sukko and Sarla Bai of Devalpur, Ansuiya Bai of Chapwar, Janki Bai of Mohgaon, Mamta, Sunita, Laxmi Bai of Samnapur, Kuwariya and Shyama Bai of Ghata, Shyama and Deepa Bai of Harsinghari, Ansuiya and Chaiti Bai of Mohti, Sukarti and Gomti Bai of Bamhani, Ketki and Ramkali Bai of Tikariya, Anita Bai of Kuraili.

The confidence and energy of these women has emerged as a beacon of undying support during the elections. Phula Bai of Sunderpur, a particularly vocal leader of the Federation, faced a reaction from her own village-folk who said, "*Tum log ko to paisa milta hoga yeh sab kehne ke liye; par humko kya doge?* (You

all must be getting money for this.)" And, "Ab tak kahan thi jo aaj yeh sab prachar me lagi ho? (Where were you until now?)"

She was particularly hurt by these comments and retorted, "Aaj tak tum log ne mujhe mauka kahan diya hai, agar bolte to tumhara bhi saath de sakti thi. (You haven't given the space till now, if you would have said earlier, I could have supported you)." Keeping up the Federation's 'no-frills-for-vote' principle has been a tough challenge in an environment where everything has a price.

Threats from other financially powerful and socially influential people to take back her form have started to come her way but she has put up a strong front. The response from the village is mixed. Also, where the Federation has its stronghold in terms of leaders or SHG members, there is greater acceptance among the villagers and campaigning is supported heavily due to their efforts at mobilizing the masses. But in the villages where people don't yet know of her, the leaders wonder how effective their door-to-door, low-cost methods will be.

Dropti has a support system in the tireless volunteers who are committed to the cause of seeing their candidate win the election in the face of corruption and bureaucracy. In a time when money can buy most things, especially public opinion, this victory would mark the ascent of an honest, replicable and value-driven process; one which can be followed by any ordinary person.

With the support of the Federation staff, the leaders have decided to hold exclusive *mahila gram sabhas* to campaign for Dropti. She has a support system in the tireless volunteers who are committed to the cause of seeing their candidate wins the election in the face of corruption and bureaucracy. In a time when money can buy most things, especially public opinion, this victory would mark the ascent of an honest, replicable and value-driven process; one which can be followed by any ordinary person.

Finally, the participation of women in the elections has opened another door to freedom. Women's entry into the political sphere is sure to create an inroad into the dense, inescapable jungle of bureaucracy, which envelops us. With a hope of greater awareness, articulation and access to the very system that governs their existence in many ways, this step hopes to bring about a positive difference in the governance structure of Dindori today.