

FEMININE FORCE: Rural Champions of Change

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Experiencing the power of togetherness and community, close to 5,600 women from 129 villages in the Lamta and Paraswada blocks of Balaghat district, displayed their confidence, organizing ability and enthusiasm at the annual meet of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh by taking decisions and making choices about their livelihoods and their families

They flowed like a river down the road. Women holding banners marched in line as far as the eye could see. The morning air reverberated with a slogan that had first been heard in Mumbai's streets in the 1980s: "*Hum Bharat ke nari hain. Phool nahi, chingari hain!*" (We are women of India. Not flowers, but flames)."

They poured into a tented venue, pitched on fallow rice fields just outside the village of Lamta in Madhya Pradesh's Balaghat district, which lies on the border that the state shares with Maharashtra. The bags they carried and the babies sleeping on some of their shoulders indicated that they had come a long way. "*Awaaz do, hum ek hai* (Raise your voices, we are one)," shouted somebody. "We are one, we are one," the marchers responded. They entered the tents to the sounds of drum beats while women standing on a decorated stage sang songs and smiled their welcome. Tired they may have been, but the energizing effect of being part of a crowd of over 5,000 women like themselves was unmistakable.

The Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh, to which they all belong, is creating quite a stir in the forested hills of Balaghat.

The celebratory event was organized largely by the women themselves. Numbering 5,600, they are members of 437 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) from 129 villages in the Lamta and Paraswada blocks of Balaghat district. The event was like a general body meeting of the federation that they had formed and had named 'Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh' (Women's confederation of women power). Its annual audit was made public during the event. Although most members were extremely poor, together they had successfully opened 314 bank accounts in various villages in 2011-12, extended credit of around Rs 2.32 crores, redeemed loans worth Rs 1.84 crores and made savings of Rs 67.17 lakhs.

Balance sheets, however, are just a small part of this story. Certainly, when the SHGs were first formed, the emphasis was on buttressing personal income and exploring livelihood options. The journey since has, however, been a continuous process of

learning. Recalls Sahana Mishra of PRADAN, a civil society organization, that began working to form SHGs from January 2008, under the government's Tejeswani project, "It was a struggle to form SHGs because these villages are located in semi-isolated areas and the populations are mixed, comprising tribals—the Gonds make up a large chunk; others, like the Baigas, are classified as 'primitive'—as well as people belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBCs)."

During PRADAN's early interactions, personal experiences were shared. "Domestic violence emerged as a huge problem. Women were beaten if the food was not cooked right, if they left home without permission, if they were 'disrespectful'," remarks Mishra. Abandonment was common; she adds, "Dowry, never a tribal practice, has become normal, usual, and routine."

Dr Vasu Chhatrari, Block Medical Officer, Lamta, agrees with this assessment, "Alcoholism is rampant here. Attitudes to daughters are distressing—the idea is to marry off the girl as soon as possible so that parental responsibilities end."

In order to address these issues, PRADAN began an intervention in early 2011, in partnership with the Delhi-based women's resource centre—Jagori, with support from the UN Women. It aimed at getting women to speak out against violence; understand and assert their rights; and access political and economic opportunities meant for them under

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various government policies and programmes. "As a result of the training programmes, we got women to speak up. Whereas there are instances of men preventing them from attending such meetings, what's interesting is that sometimes the

men realized that the women needed to come out more," reveals Mishra.

The process of expansion has been an organic one. As women in SHGs, they realized they had to go beyond personal needs if only to secure their entitlements. So in 2010, they set up village development committees (VDCs). Later, five or six of these committees came together as a cluster. At present, there are 21 such clusters—these form the base of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh and the women members work separately in Lamta and Paraswada blocks.

Thus, the otherwise faceless, powerless women, who call themselves *didis*, or sisters, built up their collective strength, which they then leveraged. Last November, for instance, 220 *didis* from various clusters met to discuss the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) threadbare, after which many *gram samitis* were able to pressurize the authorities into giving 10 to 25 days of work to women in their villages. Similarly, since alcohol-fuelled domestic violence was ubiquitous, women in villages such as Bhamodi, Aamoli and Kochovada were able to successfully stop the brewing and sale of liquor in their neighbourhoods. Their slogan: "*Sharab nahi, pani chahiye/theekha nahi, kuan chahiye* (We need not liquor but water/not pubs but wells)."

Agriculture continues to be the biggest source of employment and because many men have migrated, farming responsibilities increasingly

fall on women. They now actively seek information on better cultivation methods, including the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a technique for paddy cultivation, and organic ways to grow vegetables that can be sold in the market. The *didis* seem to have realized that innovation is the key to change and have even set up a theatre group to write skits based on personal experiences. These efforts were showcased during the annual day event and reflected a sophisticated understanding of issues. Plays were developed by women who had, just a short while ago, silently borne reversals and discriminations.

There is something significant happening here and local politicians, always sensitive to new forces, are already trying to get these strong *didis* on their side. At the annual day, representatives from both, the Bhartiya Janata Party, the ruling party in Madhya Pradesh, and the Congress, which rules at the Centre, turned up and spoke the language of 'women's empowerment'.

It has been just four years since the first SHGs were set up; today there are stirrings in the forested hills of Balaghat. Will they touch lives beyond the SHGs and villages? Difficult to say, but one thing is certain: life will never be the same again for these women.

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