

On the Path towards a Just Society: Challenging *Jati Panchayats* and the Dowry System

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Defying the jati panchayat's decision was momentous for the women of DMMS, who, through their SHGs, are realizing the power of collective action in shattering age-old domination structures and in moving from passive acceptance to quiet assertion of their rights

The story begins with the General Body (GB) meeting that was held in May 2013 in which the members of the Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh (DMMS) Federation passed the following resolutions.

- All members of DMMS, Koderma, will stop practising the dowry system because it leads to high cash transactions during marriages and puts a heavy burden on the bride's family.
- DMMS members will not participate in marriages wherein cash transactions have taken place, especially if the women of the family are members of the Sangh.
- DMMS members will promote marriages in which no exchange of dowry takes place.

Two days before the momentous day of June 8, members of DMMS heard about a *jati panchayat* meeting taking place regarding a marriage proposal between Sunil Kumar Rajak and Priyanka Kumari, both from Jainagar. Sunil's family told the women members that the 24-year-old had been earning his living by taking tuitions in Koderma for the last three years whereas Priyanka, 21, was a B.Sc. II year student. They had met two years ago in the college campus and had fallen in love. Nearly a year earlier, Priyanka had told her family that she wanted to marry Sunil. When her parents met him, they liked Sunil. They decided to place the matter before the members of the *jati panchayat*. And if the *panchayat* agreed, the proposal would be carried forward.

The *jati panchayat* members interacted with both the families and others from the *jati* and after some deliberations came to the conclusion that both Sunil and Priyanka belong to the same *gotra* and are, in effect, brother and sister! Thus, a marriage between them could not take place. The news spread throughout the *jati* and made things difficult for the young couple.

Priyanka's marriage was twice arranged elsewhere; both times she called it off saying that she would not marry anyone other than Sunil. These incidents made her parents angry and her family began to torture her by not giving her food, locking her in a room and not allowing her to communicate with anyone outside the family. Six months passed and her marriage was once again arranged with the help of the *jati panchayat*. The date for the marriage was fixed. It was to take place on the 13 June 2013. The *mukhiya* (head) of the village took Rs 5,000 as commission from Priyanka's family for finding the prospective groom.

The *jati panchayat* held several meetings on the issue. Each time a meeting was called, both the parties had to give Rs 500 rupees to the *panch* as '*panch kharcha*' (expenses of the *panch*). In every meeting, both the families were warned about the dangers that they would have to face if they dared to go against the decisions of the *jati panchayat*. Priyanka and Sunil were also called to the meetings and were pressurized to say/write that they would marry whoever was chosen by the *panchayat*. But Priyanka stuck to her decision of marrying Sunil and Sunil's decision was that if Priyanka and his parents agreed, the marriage would take place.

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In spite of the pressure from the *jati panchayat*, Priyanka's parents approached Sunil's parents to let the marriage take place because they were fed up with their daughter's stubbornness. The problem became aggravated when Sunil's family demanded Rs five

lakhs in cash and a gold chain as *tilak* (dowry). The excuse given by Sunil's family was that because the *jati panchayat* was against the marriage, the *tilak* would be needed to bribe people. Hearing this, Priyanka's family backed out of the offer.

On 7 June 2013, some DMMS members heard that a final meeting had been called for that day by the *jati panchayat*. The Sangh called a meeting before the *panchayat* met, to discuss what they could do to resolve the issue. Some of them went to meet Sunil and his family.

When interacting with them, Sunil said that although he loved Priyanka, he knew that the *jati panchayat* would never agree to their marriage. They asked him that if he would be ready for the marriage if he were assisted by the women of the Sangh. He hesitantly said yes. They asked his mother if she would be ready to get her son married to Priyanka without the *tilak*. She too said yes, adding that she would accept whatever *tilak* they gave and would not demand Rs five lakhs.

The next step of the DMMS members was to meet Priyanka and her parents. Initially, they were not allowed into the house; however, one of the members was a relative of the family and, therefore, they were invited in. Priyanka said that if she were not allowed to marry Sunil, she would commit suicide. She said that she had made this clear to her parents as well

as to Sunil. Priyanka's mother said that she just wanted her daughter to be happy. She cried that she could no longer bear the plight of her daughter. Priyanka's grandmother and aunt said that Priyanka would have to listen to the *jati panchayat*, "She is a woman and should learn to obey." They said that they would not allow Priyanka to get married to Sunil, no matter what. Both Priyanka's and Sunil's families were then invited to the Federation office for a meeting, to try to reach a consensus.

When the *jati panchayat* members heard about DMMS's intervention, they were angry. In the *jati panchayat* meeting held that night, they warned that both the families would be given stringent punishment if they listened to the women. The *jati panchayat* leaders remained in the police station throughout the night trying to influence the police officers.

The next morning, the families did not appear for the Sangh meeting. Two members went to Sunil's home and two to Priyanka's to call them for the meeting. Although Sunil came, his parents did not and Priyanka's relatives did not allow her or her parents to come to the meeting, saying that they did not need the help of DMMS. Priyanka, however, waved from the window of the room where she was locked and said that she needed help. The DMMS members went to the police station for support but the police were busy with an external visit. They promised to be there in the evening.

Taking stock of the situation, DMMS members realized they could not wait for the police and decided to take action there and then. Within an hour, nearly 250 members from different villages got together and sat in *dharna* in front of Priyanka's home, demanding her release

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and seeking support for her from the family. Most of the members were on an empty stomach because they were celebrating the festival of '*bar puja*' and had come forward for the cause, leaving behind the *puja* being conducted in their homes.

There were heated discussions from both sides. After a lot of effort and struggle, DMMS members were able to convince Priyanka's parents to break the barrier and come out. In a hurry, clothing was bought for the would-be- bride and groom. Two pundits were organized for the event. The venue for the marriage was to be the temple inside the Jainagar Police station premises. The decision to organize the social marriage instead of a court marriage was taken to let society know. Consent letters were taken from both the families before the marriage was conducted.

DMMS members sang songs, danced, helped in the rituals of the marriage and distributed sweets to all. The parents of the bride were initially not allowed by the *jati panchayat* members to go into the temple for the marriage rituals but on the insistence of the DMMS, they came in and participated.

Against all odds, 40 young girls (aged 15–20) also participated in the marriage through PRADAN's efforts. The news spread like wildfire throughout the district. After the marriage, some Community Service Providers (CSP) met the couple and counselled them. After a day, they were taken to the court to have their marriage registered.

This victory over the *jati panchayat* has, on the one hand, strengthened the hands of the DMMS and the people, who want a society free from the unjust decisions taken by the former as well as the evils of the dowry system.

On the other hand, DMMS members are being threatened with violence by some of the *dhobi jati samaj* members. Some goons went to the houses of some DMMS members to threaten their families. However, as is said, "God helps them those who help themselves," has been proved. The road was full of hurdles; yet, once the DMMS decided to walk on it, nothing could stop it from attaining its goal.

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regularity of meetings, attendance and book-keeping, establishing linkages with banks, creating livelihood options, and building financial services such as maintaining books of account, thereby strengthening the functioning of SHGs.

In 2006, PRADAN's Koderma team separated from the Hazaribag team. Considerable expansion and nurturing of the SHGs was carried out in Chandwara block and a small part of Jainagar block. The first federation was formed in 2005 in Telaiya whereas the second was formed in Jainagar in August 2011, under the umbrella of DMMS.

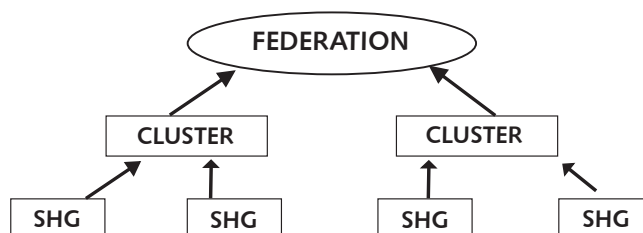
DAMODAR MAHILA MANDAL SANGH

The journey of the DMMS began in 1991–92 from Titirchanch and Jamukhandi villages, where PRADAN helped start self-help groups (SHGs) of women. The path was not easy, especially in a male-dominated society, in which women were viewed as home-makers only.

The condition of the families in those days, especially that of the women in these areas, was pathetic because the construction of the Telaiya dam led to their displacement from their homes to resettlement in the area. As time passed, SHGs expanded to other parts of the undivided Hazaribag district. The focus of SHGs during the early days was on maintaining

Looking back at the condition of the people in areas where SHGs, clusters and federations now flourish, it is immediately evident that the poor economic condition of the people was due to lack of livelihood opportunities, high migration of young men, debts owed to moneylenders, poor health status, lack of general awareness, confinement of women to household chores, nearby wells and jungles for collection of firewood, poor quality of education and low literacy rates, alcoholism, domination of men over women, gender discrimination in all spheres of life, lack of

Figure 1: The Three-tier Structure of Operations of DMMS



- SHGs are functional at the hamlet and the village levels. Clusters are formed at the *panchayat* level and federations work at the block level.

accessibility to government schemes by the community, high level of corruption in government offices, etc. The upper caste people dominated over the women and the weaker sections.

The SHGs gave its members the forum and the opportunity to discuss their personal issues as they sat together in the group meetings. There have been instances when SHG members have helped each other through collective measures. These have paved the way for widespread 'gender-action' by the women.

The last two years have been quite busy for DMMS because it has decided to walk on the roughest terrain—challenging patriarchy and, thereby, the norms of society that was being followed blindly by all. People are being sensitized regularly at the SHG, village and block levels, the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, the health department, the local police officials, the education department, the legal department, District Rural Development Authority and other stakeholders.

Significant changes have been made at the self and family levels by DMMS members after they receive training, attend meetings, etc. They are challenging the patriarchal society and gender-based inequality, understanding and resisting violence against women, creating awareness on health and hygiene, and building relations and working with the different government agencies. Various methods such as institutional mapping, theatre of the oppressed, modules for training of the SHGs through songs, games and exercises have been used to spread the

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message and make people aware. The issues of violence against women are discussed regularly in SHGs, clusters and villages. Cases are heard in the three *Nari Adalats* in the district,

set up with the objective of providing justice through gender perspective. *Anganwadis*, the public distribution system, village health and sanitation committees, village water committees, school committees and primary health centres are all being monitored by SHGs and their review is conducted by the clusters. The two-day cluster *adhivesans* and the two-day *mahaadhivesans* have also played a great role in conveying the messages of equality and solidarity in the community and among various stakeholders through games, plays, etc. Influenced by DMMS, the District Collector, the Superintendent of Police, the Judge and the Deputy Chairman of the District Board have attended federation meetings several times, appreciated the work done by DMMS and encouraged members to keep moving forward with the same zeal and courage.

Of note is the fact that women from this area are ready to risk challenging their iniquitous situation. Their energy is being tapped positively for collective action, and instances of DMMS members uniting and acting to break the patriarchal norms of society is steadily on the increase. Recently, DMMS members have organized rallies and campaigns against liquor consumption with regular follow-ups. They have participated enthusiastically in the 'One Billion Rising' campaign, counselling victims of domestic violence. And most recently, on 8 June 2013, DMMS members arranged a social marriage, defying the *jati panchayat's* decree.