

SAYANI BHATTACHARYA AND BIPIN KUMAR

GEETA MARKAM: An Epitome of Courage

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Embracing her disability and accepting it as a part of her life, Geeta *didi* has shown exemplary courage and determination in tackling issues that women face, and has been especially active in seeing that justice is meted out to women of her community

“SAARI LADKIYAN KHO-KHO KHELTI THI, *par mein chup chap baithi rehti thi* (All the girls used to play kho-kho and all I could do was to sit and stare),” reminisces Geeta Markam, saddened by her childhood memories. She could not contribute to the household income through agriculture or labour. “*Sab paise kamane ke liye matti feinkne jatey they aur mein bas ghar ka kaam hi kar pati thi* (Everyone used to go for daily labour work and all I would do was the household work).” She became used to the daily taunts of her relatives. “*Mein to sab ke liye bojh thi* (I was a liability for everyone).”

Life was never smooth for Geeta Markam of Mohgaon village, Balaghat district, Madhya Pradesh. She was struck by polio when she was three. Although she underwent treatment at the local hospital, she became differently-abled. Her right leg was affected. Her family sold two acres of land for her treatment. Geeta stays with her mother, father, brother and sister-in-law.

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She was good in studies and was enrolled in the local school. She was trained to walk with a bamboo stick as support, at the age of five. In spite of scoring first division marks in all her subjects, she had stop studies after the 9th standard. Higher education required both monetary and physical investment, and she lacked both of them. Several superstitions of her family and relatives, regarding her physical condition, also prevented her from studying further.

Geeta's first stint with the SHG (Self Help Group) came when she was staying at her maternal uncle's home. At that time, an SHG had been formed in the village, under the SGSY programme. Because she was relatively more educated than the other women of that village, the SHG members asked her to join the group as the *khaata lekhak* (accountant) of the group. During this period, she fell ill with malaria, typhoid and jaundice, back-to-back, and the doctors also suspected that she may have tuberculosis. She had trouble with her eyes and had to wear spectacles. She stayed away from home for three months due to her health and had to quit the SHG.

The SHG had been functioning for 11 months, and it dissolved

when she left. After recovering, she came back from her maternal uncle's home. This time, she was approached by the women around her home as well as the Community Support Person (CSP), to join their SHG. The women wanted her to be a part of the SHG because she was good at writing accounts and in communicating with others. Initially, she was nervous because of her last experience of illness during her stint with the SHG. With the persuasion and encouragement of the women of her hamlet and the CSPs, however, she agreed to join. Soon she was encouraging other women to form more SHGs. She remembers forming two SHGs in her village and getting Rs 240 per month for writing their accounts.

She recalls the initial questions posed to her by the CSP, which gave her an incentive to organize the women into collectives. "*Panchayat mein gaye ho? 100 din ka kaam hua hai?* (Have you been to a panchayat? Do you get to work for 100 days)?"

She had no idea and said, "*Nahin, bhaiya, hamaare gaon me aisa to nahi hota* (No, brother, that doesn't happen in our village)."

He suggested forming a Village Level Committee (VLC) for

women to discuss issues such as these because the number of SHGs increased from one to three. They formed a village-level group. They started to have discussions in their meetings on the issues of the village. "*VLC mein charcha karke, hummein himmat aa gai thi* (We became more confident after these discussions in the VLC). In one meeting, the issue of semi-constructed Upswasthya Kendra (Sub-Health Centre – SHC) was raised and the group decided to call the sarpanch to the next meeting to talk about this issue.

The *sarpanch* came to the next VLC but the members were hesitant about asking him anything. Geeta *didid*, too, was trembling. Finally, she said, "*Baddo jee* (respected Sir) *upswasthya kendra kyon nahi ban raha hai* (Why is the SHC not getting constructed)?" *Baddo jee* is how an elderly uncle is addressed. The *sarpanch* was her distant relative.

The *sarpanch* was furious that the women were interrogating him, and said that he had already tried but could not do anything. He told the women angrily to remain within their limits and asked them what they could do, being women.

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Geeta *didi* did not like the response; however, because the *sarpanch* was her relative, she did not feel confident about confronting him. The women discussed among themselves what they could do to take the issue forward. Once again, the women approached the *sarpanch* and asked for the name of the contractor who was to build the Upswasthya Kendra. The *sarpanch* refused to give them the name.

This time, Geeta didi found her lost courage and looked angrily at the *sarpanch* and told him, “*Hamko dhamki diye to kyon diye, ki auratein kya kar sakti hain* (Why did you threaten us and ask us what women could do)?” The women contributed Rs 20 each, hired a tractor and went to the block headquarters. Geeta *didi* said, “The officials got irritated and asked us to go back to our village. But he also told us that the construction would restart in 3–4 days. A few days later, the ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) and one man from the hospital came to Sunita Bai’s house and started abusing her, asking her why the women had gone to complain against them.”

The women were undeterred; they decided to discuss the issue in the Cluster meeting (women’s collectives of four to five villages).

In the Cluster meeting, three villages came together to place before the Collector and the district officials the issue of the Upswasthya Kendra, which affected all of them. They also took the *sarpanch* with them. The *sarpanch* tried to hide from the district officials. Initially, Geeta *didi* was hesitant and fearful about putting forward the matter of her village, but the other women were confident about her, and insisted that she speak up. She described the problem to the Chief Medical Health Officer (CMHO).

The CMHO asked the *sarpanch* about the problem and the details of the contractor. He made a phone call to the contractor and ordered him to start the work immediately. The work began in few days and the Upswasthya Kendra was complete. Geeta *didi* tasted success for the first time... going to the district office with a village issue, engaging with the official and getting the job done!

Being a member of an SHG and undergoing various trainings is what she considers the major turning point of her life. She was very hesitant but had the support of the women and of PRADAN. Other women from the group used to say to Geeta *didi*, “*Hum nahi bol paate hain par tum bolo,*

ham tumhare saath hain (We don’t know what to speak, but at least you can speak, and all of us are with you).”

Geeta *didi* says, “*Baki didi ka bharosha tha* (I had the trust of the other women with me).” She also mentioned that the person from PRADAN kept encouraging and motivating her, which helped her move forward, “*Tum log kab tak darke rahoge* (How long will you stay in fear)?”

Geeta *didi* went through several exposure visits and trainings besides the participating in the regular meetings and discussion forums in and around the villages. She was chosen as the representative of the village-level committee and went to Paraswada to the Federation meeting each month. The members said that she was good at communicating and had lesser work-load so she should be the village representative.

As the village representative, she attended a five-day leadership camp in Kesla (Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh), where she met leaders from the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS). She heard many stories of collective efforts, wherein women worked in a united manner to solve issues of their family,

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village and the *panchayat*. She went through a training module that focussed on rights and entitlements, mobility mapping and games, all of which helped her develop an understanding of how women's collectives could function.

She visited the NMS Federation office in Kesla. It inspired her when she saw that the women were running the office. She understood the structure of collectives from them. It was a new world for her where women were talking about their issues and working to resolve them. She participated in a three-day long Gender training by Shanti Amma (Gender trainer) and many questions started hovering in her mind. The training was based on the experience of the participants and the discrimination they faced in the family and in society. It was here that she began questioning the inequality and discrimination that the women were subjected to in society.

In one incident, an SHG member, Kaushal *didi*, who was regularly beaten by her husband and even had a scar on her neck from one such beating, couldn't take it anymore and she hit her husband back and ran away to another village for fear of repercussions.

No one knew where she had gone. One of the women informed Geeta *didi* that Kaushal *didi* had slapped her husband and she was missing for the last 15 days.

The next day Geeta *didi* went to the Federation meeting and talked to the women of Bhamodi village (Kaushal *didi*'s maternal home) about the incident and found that Kaushal had not gone back there. Her father came to the village that same night. He, along with the police constable, went to meet his son-in-law but he abused them. The father filed a complaint in the police station later about his missing daughter and the husband was put behind bars.

There had been no search for her, so far. After the police complaint, everyone began searching for her. Kaushal *didi* was found in Pratappur at one of her relative's homes. After this, her in-laws called for a *jati panchayat* meeting in the village to penalise Kaushal *didi* because she had slapped her husband. Geeta *didi* suggested to Kaushal *didi*'s father that he should attend the meeting with people from his village and fight for Kaushal *didi*. Geeta *didi* mobilized the women from Mohgaon to attend the meeting and speak up for Kaushal. At the *jati panchayat*, Kaushal *didi* was charged with *bakra roti* because

she had hit her husband (*bakra roti* is a penalty, in which the accused has to feed mutton to the whole village).

In the meeting, Geeta *didi* argued, "*Bhaiya to didi ko hamesha marta hai, tab kuch nahi kartey koi; ek bar didi ne bhaiya ko mar diya to bakra roti loge. Ye kahan ka niyam hai, kaun se bhagwan ne likha hai* (When her husband hits her every day, then nobody does anything. Didi hit her husband once and you are penalising her with bakra roti. What is this law, which God has written this?)"

There was silence in the entire village. Then, the other women supported Geeta *didi* saying, "*Kaahe ka roti? Jab bhaiya marta hai to roti deta hai? Kitaa sahegi? Bhagwan to bana ke nahi laya hai ye niyam ki iska roti lena hai* (What bakra roti? When the husband beats his wife, does he get penalised? God has not made the law that only a woman needs to be penalised)."

Some of the men also started supporting the women. But the in-laws of Kaushal *didi* were saying that they will not take her back in their house. The women's collective then pressurised them for compensation of half an acre of land and Rs 1,000 per month for Kaushal *didi* if she were to live

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on her own. The father-in-law came out in support of Kaushal *didi* and said that she is a good person and that she would live with them. An agreement letter was drafted for her living with her husband in safety and with a provision of half an acre of land and Rs 1,000 per month, in case she lives alone. One copy of that letter is still kept with the VLC.

Owing to her passion to fight for the cause of women, Geeta was selected and given several responsibilities as Sangathansathi, Swastyasathi and Adhikaarsathi. She went through the training on rights of citizens—the Right to Equality, Free Speech, National Food Security Act (NFSA), Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Right to Information (RTI)—as ensured by the Constitution. She also underwent a National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) workshop, in which she learned about the structure and provisions of health-care services and she became engaged in preparing a citizens' report.

She did a survey, based on a questionnaire, prepared when the team was involved in writing the citizens' report about the health system. She took interviews, raised questions about the

irregularity in health services and the respective institutions. The interview and survey raised the awareness of the participants, which led to an improvement in the services of the ANM, *Anganwadi Karyakarta* and the *Aasha Karyakarta*. Geeta *didi* now creates awareness among women about their rights and entitlements, and the various government schemes and provisions.

As a Swasthyasathi, she influenced the functioning of the Gram Arogya Kendra (Village Health Centre) and the Tadarth Samiti (a village-level monitoring body around health services) in her village. She enquired about the Tadarth Samiti and its functions at the *gram sabha*. She came to know that there were many women who were members of SHGs and the Tadarth Samiti, including the *adhyaksh* of the Tadarth Samiti, who were ignorant about the functions of the Samiti and the amount invested by the government for the health and sanitation services.

Geeta *didi* created awareness among the members of the Tadarth Samiti, who then began to look into the functioning of the Gram Arogya Kendra. Along with a few other women, Geeta *didi*

went to the Anganwadi Kendra and enquired about the medical services and the opening and closing times. Although it existed, the people had no knowledge of it, and the *Aasha Karyakarta* was not conducting the Gram Arogya Kendra in the best way. After the discussion, the *Aasha Karyakarta* agreed to stay two hours per day at the Arogya Kendra.

Geeta *didi* is also an active member of the ADV (Anti Domestic Violence) theatre group. This group was formed to engage the community in a discussion around domestic violence and the Anti Domestic Violence Act, 2005. She participated in a seven-day workshop before being associated with the ADV theatre group. She talked about how the participants formed the human stairway and touched the roof during the workshop. It was a collective exercise and she was at the base with her stick.

At the time of the formation of the group, there were sessions where members shared their life experiences of violence and cried. She says, "*Hum logon ne ro ro ke group banaya hai* (We have formed the group by weeping our heart out)." The group performs plays in villages and during the performance it engages the audience in discussions on the

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situation of women and the violence against them. Geeta *didi* engages in dialogue with the audience, questions the norms of society and beautifully exposes it to the people.

It was not easy for her to talk about this issue in public. She trembled during the early performances, especially during the dialogue. But with practice, she is able to master the art of performing in front of a full audience. So far, she has performed more than 100 plays, including two in the State capital, Bhopal, and one in Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh. She was actively involved in the fair election campaign during the *panchayat* elections. She, along with the whole theatre group, was involved in creating awareness, through their plays, about the fair mechanism of an election, the role and importance of women leaders, and having space for women in the *gram sabha*.

Once, the issue of *nashabandi* (banning alcohol) was raised in the village and the women from the SHG participated in this. One *panch* from the village, who was involved in preparing the *mahua* alcohol, abused Kashan *didi* and tried to beat her. Geeta *didi* and Kashan *didi* went to the police station and reported the incident

that same evening. By the next morning, the *panch* knew about the police involvement. He also complained against Kashan *didi*. The police did not take any action against the *panch*. Geeta *didi* called up the police station and asked what they were doing against the complaint they had made. She warned the person on the phone, “*Tum paisa se ladoge to ham ijjat se ladenge, tumne paisa leke daba diya case ko, to ham aage badhte hai, agar aapki beti hoti to aap kya karte* (You will fight with money and we will fight for our respect. You have taken money and settled the case. We will take it further. Had she been your daughter, then what would have you done)?”

Within an hour, the police came. They suggested arriving at a compromise. The women demanded that the *panch* be put behind bars. Geeta *didi* said angrily, “*Hum report lagaye hai tamasha nahi kiye hai* (we have filed a complaint not created a drama).”

One policeman commented that Geeta *didi* walks with a stick and she is stubborn. Geeta *didi* replied back, “*Mein lathh le ke chalti hu par pahar par chadh jati hun* (I walk with the stick but can climb the mountain).” Looking at the stance of the women, the *panch* asked

for forgiveness and the women let him go on the condition that he would stop making liquor and would not abuse women.

There are many other instances when Geeta *didi* has shown courage and has brought positive change. Each time she faced her anxiety and fear, she has grown stronger. Now, she is an epitome of living the values of equality and freedom. She went through loads of challenging situations and has worked hard to overcome them. She proudly says, “*Ek samay tha jab sarpanch aata tha to main dar jati thi, baat nahi karti thi, aur ek din sachiv mera pair pakad kar maafi maang raha tha ki mai MGNREGA payment ki shikayat collector ko na karu, wo payment karva dega* (There was a time when I used to be so afraid of the PRI members that I wouldn’t be able to speak; and today the *panchayat sachiv* begs pardon by falling at my feet pleading that I mustn’t complain to the Collector and that he will get the payments cleared).”

She is overawed when she realizes the change that time has brought in her.

Geeta *didi* says that her village women supported her at every step and stood beside her. Once, she became the target of

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a conspiracy when she raised several issues in front of the District Collector during one of his visits to Mohgaon. She made complaints related to corruption in the PDS, the postmaster who delayed pension payments, and some of the PRI members. She was considered a disturbing element in the village and one who incited other women as well.

Some powerful person in her *panchayat* decided to send several men around to her house to threaten her during the local festival, *mandai mela*, when she was all alone. All her family members and most of the neighbours had gone to the *mela*. They abused her verbally and wanted to harm her physically. All she could do at that time was to lock herself up in her room. They kept banging on the door and shouted for an hour and, finally, left. There was no one in the village to come to her rescue. When the women in the village got to know about the incident, a VLC meeting was convened. The persons involved in the incident were dragged out of their houses and they begged pardon in front of the women and Geeta *didi*.

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citizen and as a woman. She has gathered enough confidence to fight in her family for equal rights in property among the two sisters and one brother, which has led to some bitter relations with her brother. “*Bohot kuch sikhne ko mila* (I have learned a lot).” But this has not been an easy journey for her. Several persons opposed her, “*Mard jaisa bolti hai aur gaon ke muddo ko lekar auraton ko bhadkaati hai* (She talks as if she is a man and incites the women on village issues).” She is used to such comments and taunts. But she has not given up. She has always stood up for justice and fought back as a strong and courageous woman.

Geeta *didi* embraced her body as it is, accepted it as a part of her life and did not let it dissuade her. She has not only been an active member of the SHG but has also been instrumental in taking forward improved agricultural practices by learning new techniques. She cultivated paddy through the SRI method and did vermi-compost and vegetable farming. Seeing her success, many other women have also adopted the improved practices.

She got married a year ago, and is happy that she is able to

cultivate the concept of equality in her small family. “*Main mahine mein chaar bar meeting jaati hun aur shaadi ke baad bhi jaaungi* (I attend a meeting four times a month and will continue to do so after my marriage),” was the first thing she said when she met her husband for the first time. After her marriage, she moved to Basi village, which also comes under the purview of the Federation. She formed a new SHG in her village, introduced organic agricultural skills such as organic pest management, and explained the importance of raised bed nursery to her neighbours. She is appreciated a lot for her skills when the villagers saw that the plant disease vanished by just spraying cow urine. She and her husband run a small general store and plan to invest more money in it. She wishes to develop the same collective strength in her new village as she had done in her own village. She started organizing the women, reaching out to the Aasha for family health issues; she says, “*Is gaon mein bahut kuchh karna hoga* (There is much that needs to be done in this village).”

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Sayani Bhattacharya and Bipin Kumar are based in Paraswada, Madhya Pradesh