

Coming Out of the Shadows

Ms. Swapna Majumdar (India)

It takes more than just courage for a woman from a marginalized tribal community to take on the muscle and might of money of the powerful upper caste in India. The journey of Jayanti from a daily wage labourer to the head of a local government in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, symbolizes the growing political empowerment and coming of age of many marginalized women.

This increasing agency has come from the collective strength of their self-help groups. Coming together has given them confidence to step out of their houses and stand up for their rights. "Had I not been a part of the self-help group (SHG), I would never had the courage to contest for the panchayat (local government) elections," said 30-year-old Jayanti.

In fact, it took almost seven years for these women to take that leap of faith. The first SHGs were formed in 2008 in three of the seven districts in southern Uttar Pradesh known as Bundelkhand by the Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), a programme of Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust, a non-profit institution working to empower women and alleviate poverty in the state. In the beginning, women were shy, as many of them had never ventured out of their homes. Even though the prime objectives of SHGs were thrift (small savings) and microcredit for many members, information on their rights and entitlements disseminated in their weekly SHG meetings helped women learn about the importance of their votes, their gram panchayats (village councils) and how these local political institutions could facilitate development. In 2015, this learning helped 11,435 self-help groups in Bundelkhand, each comprising 10-15 members, play a pivotal role in ensuring that the members not only exercised their franchise but also dared to jump into the fray.

In October 2015, when it was announced that state panchayat elections would be held in two months, about 100,000 women belonging to these Bundelkhand SHGs formed by RGMVP met under the aegis of their federated village organizations to take one of their biggest decisions. Had the time come to test political waters? The unanimous answer was in the affirmative. The women decided they had to be the change they wanted.

Being the change

Just how right their decision was to be proven when almost 50 per cent (23) of the 52 women fielded by the SHGs would emerge victorious, with the districts of Lalitpur and Jhansi (two of the four districts of Bundelkhand) leading the way. Of the 16 candidates fielded in Lalitpur, nine made the cut. While in Jhansi, 13 of the 21 nominees won.

In district Lalitpur's Rajawan gram panchayat, 10 SHGs decided it was time to challenge the male bastion. "Having been governed by a male pradhan (leader of a gram panchayat) all these years and seen the lack of development, we knew Jayanti would do a better job", said Lalita Dubey, the SHG coordinator.

The women launched their campaign knowing Jayanti was the only woman among 10 male candidates. Pamphlets were printed, all with personal contributions made by the women members, and distributed by them. Night meetings were held to review and rethink their strategies. Door-to-door visits were also initiated.

The first hurdle they had to cross was in their homes. "When I told my family to vote for Jayanti, my father-in-law refused. He said the family had always voted for the men. There

was a lot of resistance. It took some days to convince him that it was time to give women a chance,” recalled Lakmi, a SHG member.

The women were frugal, and banked on their collective strength to run the campaign. Each member was given the task of spreading the word in their hamlets. The momentum created by the women jolted the male candidates and their supporters, many of whom were from powerful communities. Jayanti was not surprised when she received threatening feelers to withdraw.

Fighting spirit

However, an attempt to overwhelm her was made by telling her that she had lost. “The officials told me to sign the paper accepting the results. I came out and discussed with the SHG members and decided to demand a recount,” said Jayanti.

Apprehensive that the local officials would not grant their request, they headed to the district magistrate’s office. “Being a part of SHGs had given me the confidence and courage to articulate my rights. I requested the DM for a recount and he agreed. My victory was a collective effort,” said a smiling Jayanti.

Collectivization has given the marginalized Bundelkhand women the power to become agents of change.



From a daily wage labourer to the head of the village council, Jayanti is an inspiration