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How women panchayati officials in Bihar are challenging the practice of proxy candidates

ZUMBISH

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After Bihar introduced panchayati reservations for women, a new practice emerged with women contesting elections as practice proxy candidates. But in several villages, women were challenging the status quo. Manorama Kumari stands out in her village—at 26, she is still unmarried, and chooses instead to work on creating better opportunities for her Dalit community. ZUMBISH

On a cold December morning last year, in Bihar’s Saguni village, nine women presided over the *gram katchahry*, or village court, hearing complaints concerning alcohol consumption, marital disputes and other issues affecting the local residents. Saguni is located in the Parsa block of the state’s Rohtas district, and its panchayat exercises jurisdiction over 13 contiguous villages. The women addressing the court were elected representatives from these areas. In 2006, the Nitish

Kumar government had introduced 50-percent reservation for women in Bihar's Panchayati Raj institutions, or PRIs. Yet, the calm confidence of women involving themselves directly in local administration was a rare sight in rural Bihar.

Though the reservation for women has been hailed by many for bringing about a "silent revolution (<http://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/how-silent-revolution-rural-bihar-empowering-women-be-agents-change>)" in Bihar, the policy has not translated into real empowerment on the ground. In December 2018 and February this year, during visits to eight villages across three districts in Bihar, I observed that a new practice had emerged after the reservation policy was introduced: women would contest as proxy officials on behalf of their husbands, who came to be called *mukhiyapatis* and *sarpanchpatis*—husbands of the mukhiya and sarpanch. Though women contesting elections as proxy candidates appeared to be the status quo across Bihar, in several villages, such as Saguni, I met women who had embraced the powers and responsibilities of their positions, and asserted their independence over their public office. These women had inspired others in their village to play a more active role in local governance, but my reporting indicated that such instances were exceptions, not the rule.

The PRI in Bihar follows a three-tier structure. At the lowest level of the PRI structure are gram panchayats for every village, or cluster of villages, followed by panchayat samitis at the block level, and lastly, zilla parishads at the district level. An elected mukhiya presides over each gram panchayat, and within each panchayat's area, a gram katchahry exercises the judicial functions concerning the village. The gram katchahry, too, comprises elected officials, known as *panchs*, and is headed by a sarpanch.

Bindu Devi, the sarpanch of Saguni's gram katchahry, has played a large role in inspiring the other women officials to assume control over their judicial responsibilities. "It was not easy to convince

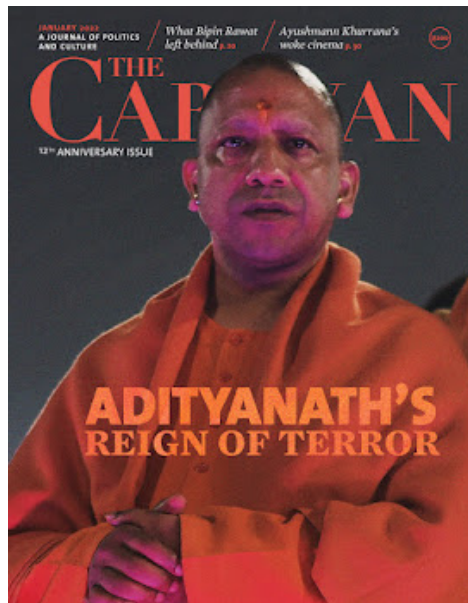
the panchs to participate in the katchahry instead of letting their husbands represent them,” Bindu said. She has a master’s degree in economics from Patna University and lives in the state’s capital with her husband, Manilal. Every Sunday, Bindu travels over fifty kilometres by bus to Saguni to conduct her administrative duties and persuades the other women officials to join her as well. “They still hesitate to come to the katchahry once every week but I make the village women convince them to attend. Now that the women panchs have started attending the katchahry, I see it as an achievement.”

Bindu added, “The key reason which holds back the women position holders here from discharging their duties confidently is lack of education.” In every village I visited, several women echoed this view; the lack of education prevented women from taking charge as elected officials, many told me. “All the panchs in my katchahry are either school dropouts or illiterates,” Bindu continued. “A few who know how to sign also prefer putting thumb impression. Education of women is a must if we really want to see women’s empowerment across the state.”

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Her husband Manilal is the state convenor of the Janmukti Sangharsh Vahini—an independent organisation that carries out social work in seven states in India—and frequently travels across rural Bihar for his work. According to the Bihar Economic Survey of 2018–19, prepared by the state’s finance department, there are 8,386 gram panchayats in the state. Manilal claimed that less than 350 of these panchayats conducted their gram katchahry regularly.

In the Jaigir panchayat of the Barachatti block, in south Bihar, the situation reflected a more accurate picture of women’s representation in the state’s Panchayati Raj institutions. Though the mukhiya of the panchayat was one Mava Devi, nobody recognised her by face—instead, they all identified her husband Kailu Mandal as their leader.

The story of Mava’s election to the mukhiya post is a classic example of Bihar’s panchayat politics—a man who fulfilled his ambition to become a leader by propping up his wife to contest elections from a reserved seat. Mandal was defeated in the three previous panchayat elections, in 2001, 2006 and 2011. Following the successive defeats, he convinced Mava to file her nomination as a candidate in for the elections held in April 2016, and then even spearheaded her election campaign.

On two occasions, I called Mava to speak to her—last December and again in February—but both times, she declined to speak to me, and handed over the phone to her husband. Mandal insisted on answering all of my questions, justifying that he was competent to do so in his capacity as the mukhiyapati—villagers across Bihar have come to treat it as an official post in the state’s PRI. When I visited their village, in late February, both of them were travelling out of town, and none of the residents I met recognised the name Mava Devi—they all identified Mandal as their mukhiya.



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Mandal appeared to feel that he had not committed any wrongdoing by taking control over her electoral office. “My wife has studied only till Class 4,” Mandal told me. “I have at least passed Class 10 board exams and I am able to understand official proceedings of a mukhiya well.” Mandal said that his wife would learn from him. “She is learning but lacks confidence as of now. I discharge several duties of the mukhiya and the block-development officer and other officials know me well. I understand the issues of our people and they trust me.”

Mandal said he asked his wife to contest the elections because he believed that “a woman had a better chance of winning.” He added, “When the question of proposing a candidate for mukhiya elections confronted us in 2016, I was doubtful about suggesting an outsider’s name as they could not have done justice to the issues of us Mahadalits. It was a question of the village’s downtrodden caste groups’ liberation through achieving power status.”

Manilal and two other activists I met in north Bihar—Akhtari Begum, who founded Izad, a Patna-based non-governmental organisation working to empower women in the state’s panchayats, and

Aarti Verma, an independent women's-rights activist—all spoke of the prevalence of proxy candidates across the state. They told me they visited at least 55 gram panchayats in the state's Saran and West Champaran districts, seeking to interact with the mukhiyas, but were only able to meet their husbands. During my visit to Chhapra, a town in the state's Saran district, a passer-by made a poignant observation about such mukhiyapatis: "*Chunav bhi wahi lad lenge, shaashan bhi wahi kar lenge. Mukhiya ghar mein baith ke chai bana rahi hai*"—They will contest the election and they will govern. The mukhiya is sitting at home preparing tea.

In fact, the practice of proxy nominations had become so prevalent that in July 2018, Amrit Lal Meena, the principle secretary in Bihar's Panchayati Raj department, issued a notice to district officials directing them to ensure that women officials were not represented by anyone else. The notice stated, "Seeing the practise of women representatives in panchayat being represented by others in meetings concerning gram katchahry and panchayat proceedings, it has been decided that nobody apart from the appointed people's representatives themselves will be allowed in these meets." On earlier occasions as well, the Bihar government and its officials made similar efforts to prevent husbands from representing women elected officials. In November, Bhim Singh, the state's Panchayati Raj minister at the time, directed women panchayat members to ask their husbands to remain at home while the officials attending meetings, and ordered district officials (<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/glass-house/story/2011121-bihar-panchayat-raj-minister-bhim-singh-mukhiya-patis-749689-2011-11-12>) to book mukhiyapatis and panchpatis for criminal trespass if they continued to attend official meetings in place of their wives.

Arvind Chaudhary, the rural-development secretary of Bihar said, "Women's attendance at panchayat and katchahry proceedings has improved in the last years and their active participation could improve with capacity building programmes." According to Chaudhary, one of the reasons for the poor participation by women in the proceedings was a lack of financial autonomy, for

which the state government was providing “technical training and taxation rulebook to navigate through financial proceedings to panchayat officials.” He added, “We look forward to better participation of women by making them more equipped and self reliant. The financial autonomy of panchayats is only increasing with each term.”



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I contacted Amrit Lal Meena and Kapildev Kamat, the minister in the state’s Panchayati Raj department, for a comment. Neither had responded to calls or messages at the time this story was published.

Bihar’s political history reflects that the practice of proxy leadership goes all the way to the top tiers of the state’s governance. Throughout the chief ministerial tenure of Rabri Devi, between 1997 and 2005, her husband Lalu Prasad Yadav, formerly the state’s chief minister himself, continued to serve as the de facto head of the government. Similarly, in 2011, the Janata Dal (United) leader Ajay Singh was unable to contest by-elections from the Daraunda assembly constituency because of his criminal record. The chief minister Nitish Kumar then advised him to

get married quickly and get a ticket in his wife's name. Soon afterwards, Singh married Kavita Kumari (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/bihar/mia-son-ties-knot-to-gift-bride-a-ticket/cid/343753>) in a rushed ceremony, who proceeded to win the Daraunda by-election that year.

Yet, there remain few active leaders who have challenged and upturned the status quo. In the Singhwani panchayat, in Bihar's Sitamarhi district, Ritu Jaiswal left an urban life in a posh Delhi neighbourhood, to contest the mukhya elections from the village of Narkatia. Though she fought the elections from her husband's ancestral village, she did not rely on his name during her campaign, and won by a huge margin of 1,853 votes.

"Before Singhwani, I hadn't even visited a village," Jaiswal told me. "The situation of women safety here was such that women would not step outside their homes beyond 6 pm. On my visits, I was also advised the same. There were frequent cases of intruders barging into homes and sexually abusing women whose husbands had migrated outside Bihar. Alcoholism and domestic violence had been accepted in households to such an extent that there had been about 85 women in the village who committed suicide seeing no escape."

When I asked her about the status of women in her panchayat, Jaiswal responded, "A society that lacks an understanding on women's right to property has to begin from the basics, development will come next." She added, "This society dwelling in Sitamarhi district has been living in dark ages for decades. I have started with endless interactions with womenfolk and asking them to report to me even against their husbands. A change will come gradually."

Jaiswal insists on full attendance of women representatives in the panchayat meetings. She believes that there is a tolerance for the entry of mukhiyapatis and panchpatis in Bihar's

panchayats because the elected women officials have not challenged the notion that their identities are restricted to their households. “I question the entry of the position holders’ husbands in panchayat meetings,” she said. “The government should enforce a strict rule against it and ensure that women lead and do not just remain figureheads in panchayats. Isn’t it also high time that women contest elections with an ambition? They will have to raise their voice and challenge the patriarchal face of our society with an iron hand.”

Geeta Sagar, a 39-year-old, too, is challenging the status quo in the Ishuapur block, in north Bihar, as an elected and proactive zilla parishad member. Geeta’s stint in the zilla parishad has been extraordinary. In 2016, she was elected to the post as a Dalit candidate contesting from a general seat, with a campaign that gained popularity even among the men, for her courage and outspoken questioning of traditional norms surrounding marriage and women’s rights in her village.

I met her and her husband, Ganga Sagar, at their residence. Ganga was seated in a corner. “Our’s must be the first marriage in the village which took place without any dowry and didn’t involve rituals,” he said. In her bid to encourage inter-caste marriages, “Geeta has been instrumental in 53 marriages being performed,” Ganga added. “Women empowerment at the grassroots is beyond reservation, a lot comes from enabling them to exercise their rights. The freedom to choose their partner is one of them.”

Geeta discussed the obstacles women officials faced. “It is indeed disappointing that women accept their position as figureheads and do not question men’s rule by proxy,” she said. “But it is also a reality that even after our increased representation in PRIs, if a woman wants to rub shoulders with men and perform all her official duties independently, elements from within the system tend to put across barriers. In the most backward village societies, she has to be strong

enough to face insults, threats and not sit back even if it means landing into jail. I always hear taunts from male panchayat officials about spoiling their womenfolk.”



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According to Geeta, women officials need a lot of encouragement to participate because they have traditionally “never had a say in anything.” My conversations with the other officials of the zilla parishad revealed that Geeta had become an inspiring role model for the women of the area. “I first got the strength to participate in local governance after seeing Geeta in power,” Prabhavati Devi, a zilla-parishad member from Masrakh Block, in Saran district, told me. She added that “I began to learn my role from Geeta instead of relying on my husband.”

In Garkha block, around 36 kilometres from Ishuapur block, another zilla parishad member, Manorama Kumari, is defying the traditional norms of her society. Kumari stands out in her village—at 26, she is still unmarried, choosing instead to work on creating better opportunities for her Dalit community; she travels around the village riding her motorcycle, and she dresses

unconventionally for her area, wearing a white kurta pyjama that was stitched in the style of men's clothing.

“Education does empower you but I do not see lack of education as a key reason for women to refrain from active participation at panchayat level,” Kumari said. “I don't even see harm in a woman taking guidance from a man in her family to understand her role in panchayat. She wouldn't learn everything right after becoming a people's representative when it is the first time she is stepping outside her house and being introduced to her rights. The problem is only if they allow themselves as proxy to their families and do not realise their powers.”

Jaiswal had other complaints about the PRI in Bihar. “I have a problem with the fact that when the government forms a welfare policy, it is said that its benefits should trickle down to the *antim aadmi*”—the final persons—“which are people at the grassroots.” She asked, “Why are villagers in a state with maximum rural population defined as *antim aadmi* and not *pratham aadmi*?”—first person. Jaiswal also believed that local governance at the panchayat level was not truly independent, as it depended on the state government. “As a mukhiya, I do not feel a part of a self-reliant government. I feel I am a rural official working with excessive dependency on and interference of state government in financial matters. Self governance needs to be strengthened.”

With respect to the participation of women, Kumari believed that the situation improved steadily since the 2016 panchayat elections. “I see women in more numbers gradually taking interest in official matters,” she said. “They do fear the society—they have to pay a price for their independence in their households. They also have to look after their kids and are inexperienced in politics. I see it as an ongoing process, the journey towards women empowerment in rural Bihar.”

This is the second piece in a two-part series on the impact of women-empowerment laws in Bihar. Read part one, on the impact of Bihar's prohibition law, [here \(https://caravanmagazine.in/gender/bihar-women-prohibition-benefits-wane-alcoholism-persists\)](https://caravanmagazine.in/gender/bihar-women-prohibition-benefits-wane-alcoholism-persists).

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