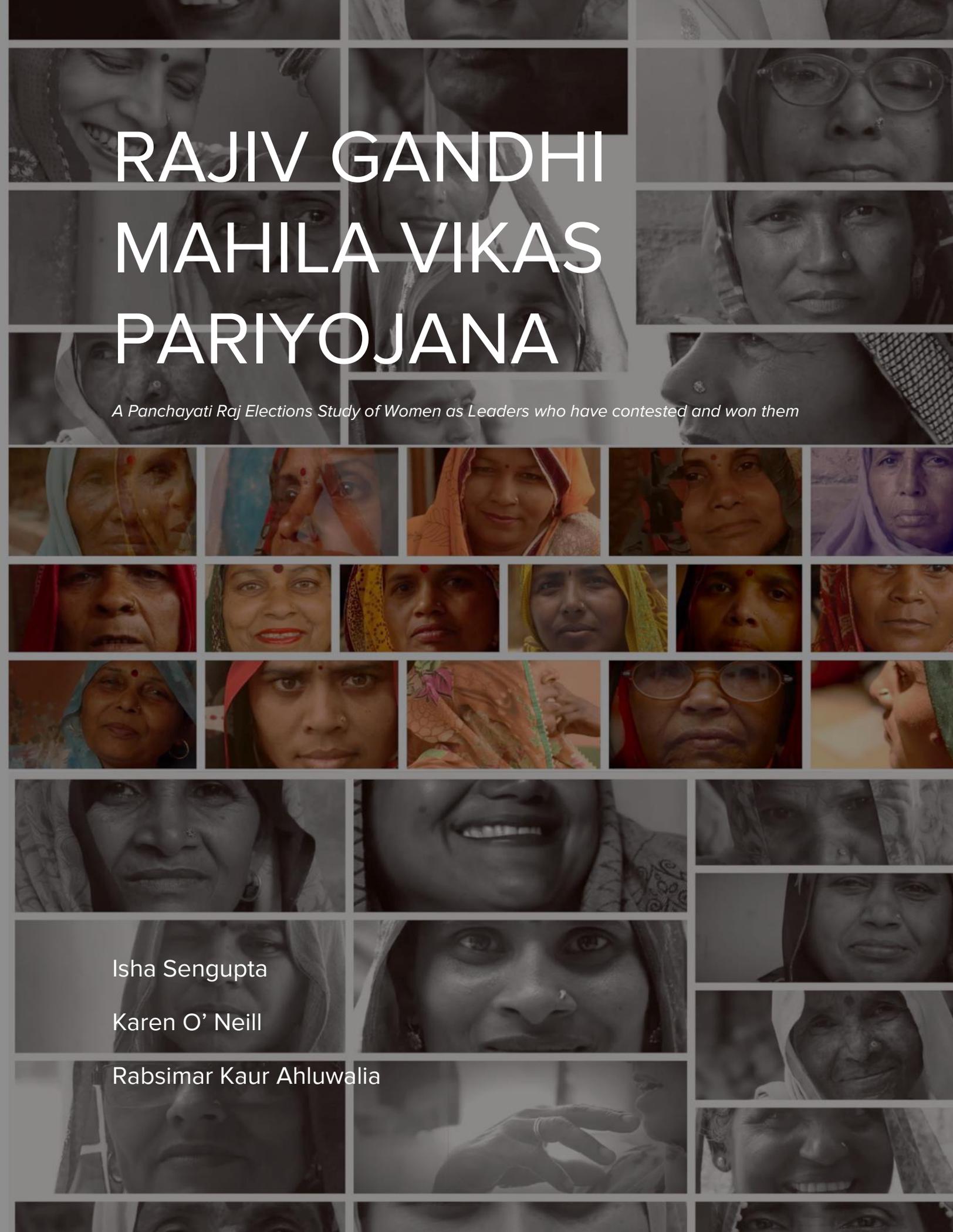




Voices of  
Liberty





# RAJIV GANDHI MAHILA VIKAS PARIYOJANA

*A Panchayati Raj Elections Study of Women as Leaders who have contested and won them*

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP) for presenting us with this opportunity to work with the organization to realize this project. We are particularly indebted to Swati Saxena for her wonderful guidance throughout this journey and insightful comments on the drafts of our reports. Our eternal thanks to Ravi-ji, the resident magician of RGMVP, who seamlessly organizes our arrangements for every field research trip. Our gratitude also goes to the entire RGMVP support staff, from the drivers, to the field officers to the caretakers.

We would also like to thank Ashoka University and the Ashoka programme team, with special thanks to Palki and Shveta for facilitating the ELM process.

Through this project, we have endeavored to give life to the voices of the many women that were gracious and patient enough to take time out of their busy schedules to share their stories with us about their lives, about Self Help Groups (SHGS) and about their participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Without them, this project would never be possible. We are forever grateful to them.

## Executive Summary

The aim of our project is to understand and analyse RGMVP interventions with respect to Self Help Groups (SHGs) and women leadership in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the lens of women empowerment. To realize this, we conducted field research in and around the Raebareli and Amethi region of Uttar Pradesh of women SHG members through methodologies such as surveys, focus groups, homestays and long interviews. Using our findings and observations we have made recommendations to improve RGMVP's current training model and approach to women's leadership in PRIs. This has culminated in the form of a report and a short documentary.



## Chapter 1

### 1.1 Developmental Indicators of Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh (UP) is one of the most populous states in the country, accounting for 16.7% of the total Indian population and the population count of the seventh largest country in the world (Census, 2011). It comprises of 75 districts making up 240,928km in total. It is home to 200 million people, 60 million of which are poor (World Bank, 2016). There has been uneven progress particularly amongst social categories in the State, with poverty among Scheduled Castes among the highest in the country, with great disparities in access to clean water, education and employment (World Bank, 2016).

The vast majority of the population live in rural areas, whilst just 22.7% of people live in urban areas (Census 2011). Almost 80% of the population are Hindu with the remaining 20% consisting of mostly Muslims and other religions (Census 2011).

The gender gap in Uttar Pradesh is concerning and is reflected in the development indicators. The overall literacy rate is 67.68% percent. However, female literacy rate remains at 57.18%, meaning that just a little over half of its female population are considered literate (Census 2011). This literacy rate falls even further when measured in rural areas. The share of women participating in the labor force is one of the lowest in the country (World Bank, 2016). Further, the sex ratio in UP is low and declining falling from 916 in the 2001 census to 902 in the 2011 census. These figures reflect Sen's comments on the many "missing women" in South Asia and India especially, where a pervasive culture of undervaluing girl children can lead to people seeking out sex-selective abortions, or to disinvest in the care and nutrition of a girl child (Sen, 1990).

UP consistently underperforms in health indicators compared to the national average. The infant mortality rate remains alarmingly high, despite falling from 80 deaths per 1000 infants in 2002 to 42 deaths per 1000 infants in 2017 (NITI Aayog). Diane Coffey and Dean Spears have written about the link between this death rate and the high levels of open defecation that persists in the State. In their Sanitation Quality Use Access and

Trends in rural north India, of which UP was one of five of the selected States they found that 40% of households in the sample who had a working latrine had at least one member who continues to defecate in the open (Coffey and Spears, 2017).

## **1.2 Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP)**

RGMVP, initiated in 2002, is a flagship poverty reduction and women's empowerment programme operating in 49 districts of UP. Initially started as small micro financing units, RGMVP organizes rural women in to Self Help Groups (SHGs), Village Organisations (VOs) and Block Organisations (BOs). The SHG groups are owned and managed by the women themselves and facilitated by field officers from the organisation. RGMVP helps connect the SHG groups with banks and set up means for access to credit at reasonable interest rates. The SHGs then encourage women to save regular small sums of money and then uses this collective sum to secure loans from the banks. This enables women to alleviate poverty by saving money and permitting small loans which they can then invest in their own business and familial projects. The SHGs also aim to empower them through livelihood enhancement, promotion of better health behaviours and sensitization to deep rooted social prejudices and hierarchies. For some women, it is the first occasion to be a part of something external from their duties in the home and the safe space that the SHGs create provides the women with an opportunity to discuss a range of issues affecting them. RGMVP also trains a number of Community Resource Persons (CRPs) who are trained women from the villages so as to increase the outreach of the information and skills that are disseminated in the SHG groups. As of March 2017, RGMVP has mobilized 1,36,160 SHG groups, totaling 7,904 VOs and 221 BOs (RGMVP Annual Report 2016-2017). The VOs and BOs, which represent the strength of a number of combined SHGs, have become important platforms for the furtherance of issues and lobbying at a political level.

RGMVP has eight Regional Offices that function as Community Resource Development Centres (CDDCs) located at Raebareli, Amethi, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Lucknow, Shahjahanpur, Jhansi and Banda.

RGMVP is the largest programme of its kind which is directed specifically towards women's empowerment and poverty reduction. It understands that poverty and powerlessness are closely intertwined with issues such as lack of access to resources such as credit, lack of information about rights and entitlements, lack of freedoms in a strongly patriarchal society, and social barriers such as caste.

### **1.3 Link between SHGs and PRIs**

RGMVP has taken note of the link between SHG members and the women that have come forward to run for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). We will discuss these institutions further in the chapter in Chapter 3. As RGMVP focuses on the holistic empowerment of women, they understand the significance of SHG members running for these elections and accessing positions of leadership and political authority. Thus, they want to encourage more women to contest for these roles. They developed a number of initiatives to support women SHG members in running for the 2015 PRI elections, which will be discussed below.

### **1.4 Leadership Initiatives by RGMVP**

RGMVP has started several initiatives to support women SHG members in running for PRI. In November 2014, they pioneered a Women's Leadership Development Programme, whereby they gave training to 50 PRI mentors about the PRI, its roles and functions, the importance of collective action and the need for women to contest for these positions. They also gave further training on how women can campaign and mobilize voters to participate in governance and other strategies such as wall-painting etc. Over 2000 women ran for these positions of leadership with around 800 succeeding in winning seats.

Further, they have developed a voting manual, which instructs women on how to register to vote and how to ensure that their vote is properly balloted during elections.

Since this initiative, there has been no further follow-up training programme designed specifically for the development of female leadership, although a large number of RGMVP's other trainings touch upon this theme.

### **1.5 Research Question**

The aim of our project has been to understand and analyse RGMVP interventions with respect to SHGs and women leadership in PRIs through the lens of women empowerment. To realize this, we conducted field research in and around the Raebareli and Amethi region of UP of women SHG members through methodologies such as surveys, focus groups, homestays and long interviews. In this report, using our findings and observations we have made a number of recommendations to improve RGMVP's current training model and approach to women's leadership in PRI. We will explore the methodologies, field research and limitations of our study in the coming chapter.



## Chapter 2: Field Research Methodologies and Limitations

In this chapter, we will discuss the methods and tools that we used when conducting our field research. We will also discuss the limitations of our study and outline the scope for further research in this area.

### 2.1 Selection of Villages and Respondents

We conducted five field research trips to gather data. We chose a random selection of villages in the Amethi and Raebareli regions. We interviewed any women who were present during SHG meetings. RGMVP also assisted us in organizing long interviews with the PRI leaders.

### 2.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Approach

To gauge the profiles of the SHG members and the *pradhans* we adopted both a quantitative and qualitative approach. We felt that a mixed-method approach would help us uncover important information that would not ordinarily make itself available through the use of any individual method. Quantitative research means observing phenomenon through statistical, mathematical or computational techniques, which means gathering data that can be objectively measured. Qualitative research is a deeper inquiry into the specific experiences of the person which develop themes that cannot be quantified in the same way.

#### ❖ Surveys

In total, we surveyed about 100 SHG members and 10 *pradhans* and charted out their socio-economic status, caste, religion, income, family members and other such factors. This information was important so that we could compare this data with the data from the female leaders whom we interviewed. (Questions contained in Appendix 1) We found surveys to be very beneficial as by asking initial questions, it allowed the respondents to become comfortable with us and ask us questions too. Building on this mutual trust, we were able then to initiate dialogue that went beyond the questions we had prepared.

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### ❖ Long Interview Questions

We conducted long interviews with the *pradhans* in which one team-member asked them a series of questions about the motivation for running for the PRI seat, the knowledge that they had about their duties, their opinions on women as leaders etc. whilst the other team-member recorded the interview. All interviews were later transcribed. Direct quotations form part of our observations and analysis as we tried to remain as true to the women's words as possible. These interviews were instrumental in moving beyond our surface-level understanding of how these women were functioning in their seats and assessing the realities of their leadership. (Questions contained in Appendix 3)

### ❖ Focus Groups

Focus groups are an excellent way to gauge people's reactions in a group setting. We decided upon a theme that we wished to explore (such as caste) and then drafted questions to prompt the discussion. The focus groups contained no more than 10 people sitting in a circle. One team-member led the discussion as a moderator and the other observed and took note of the participants' answers and also reactions. Both team members endeavored to keep a neutral stance throughout so as not to influence the authenticity of the conversation.

### ❖ Home Stays

A homestay was facilitated by RGMVP with one of the *pradhans*. Homestays enabled us to somewhat live the daily reality of the person whom we were researching and provided a great deal more context to the type of questions we had been asking.

### ❖ Direct Observation

We also directly observed the women in the SHG groups. We noted how they interacted with each other and how they responded to our questions. This was used to support our research.

#### ❖ **Videography**

We also took photos and videos and created a short film with a Hindi poem in which we endeavored to show the empowerment of the women who participated in our research.

#### ❖ **Confidentiality and Ethics**

Abiding by the ethics of research and ensuring that the consent of the women was obtained was of paramount importance to us. We would always ensure when conducting surveys, or taking videos that the women were comfortable with us filming and had given their informed consent. We ensured at the start of each field research session that we would speak extensively about who we were, the nature of the project and the research we were conducting and the type of questions we would be asking. We ensured them that they could decline to participate at any time, for any reason.

### **2.3 Limitations**

#### ❖ **Time**

As we were conducting the research alongside our studies and within an 8-month time frame, we were constrained in our ability to conduct more field research and for longer stretches of time. We felt like a project of this nature was a huge undertaking for a team of three members, despite receiving much help from the supporting staff in RGMVP and our research supervisor. Ideally, a team of five members would have been more appropriate and with longer stretches of time dedicated to conducting field research.

## **Insider/outsider dilemma**

As a team of all women, with one non-Indian team-member, we did encounter some difficulties both on and off the field. Whilst travelling to the field, safety was a concern of ours especially when taking overnight regional trains. We managed to overcome this by opting for a slightly more expensive train but which was guaranteed to arrive on time and during daylight hours. This helped to mitigate the risk.

### **❖ Language**

One of our team members did not speak Hindi at all, which was a limitation when working on the field and reviewing some of the training materials. However, we managed to overcome this by distributing and organizing our work in such a manner that the dominant Hindi speakers would step in more during field research and interview transcription whereas the non-Hindi speaker would work more on the drafting of interview questions and the collating of data. The other team members would debrief the non-Hindi speaking member after each session to ensure that she understood what had occurred.

### **❖ Reflexivity**

We attempted to assess and mitigate the effects of the power differentials at play as best we could. Considering that we were perceived as urban, upper-class Indians, including one non-Indian, we attempted to mitigate this by dressing in Indian attire. When arriving to the field, we disembarked from the car away from the village so that we could go on foot and walk into the village. We tried to minimize us being treated as guests, so when we were offered chairs at the meetings, we would ensure to sit on the mats with the other SHG members. We endeavoured to discuss with everyone face-to-face, eye-to-eye.

## **2.4 Limitations of Methods**

When conducting surveys, we often found that there could be a pattern of ‘group-think’, where, if one member answered a certain way, the rest of the members will copy that person. We found that this may have influenced our findings. When conducting long-interview questions with women leaders, we often found that it was extremely difficult to be allowed to speak to the woman alone. Often, her husband would be present and would answer on her behalf. We also found that this impacted the quality of our research. When discussing in groups, members of the village – mostly male – would come and stand around the group and make comments. This could be intimidating, cajoling and often had the effect of silencing women members.

## **2.5 Scope for Further Research**

There is much scope for further targeted research to be conducted on the training methods and interventions which RGMVP are conducting to improve both the quantity of women entering leadership positions as well as the quality of their leadership.



## Chapter 3: Background

In this chapter, we shall discuss the political backdrop of Uttar Pradesh, the make-up of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and the intersection of reservation and caste in political positions. We will then explore women's leadership through the lens of empowerment and expand upon the *pradhan pati* phenomenon. As we shall see in the coming sections, women's political participation is heavily interwoven with such themes as gendered reservation, patriarchal influences and pressures as well as caste, gender and socio-economic status. Our aim is to lay the theoretical framework of such issues to support our observations and analysis.

### 3.1 Political landscape of UP

The once dominant Congress party has fallen in popularity and support in the last number of years. The post-colonial period has witnessed caste-based horizontal mobilization in Uttar Pradesh (UP), resulting in the creation of political parties representing Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits strong enough to challenge the dominance of the Congress party (Pai, 2002). During the 1990s, UP held three assembly and four *Lok Sabha* elections, which were framed against the backdrop of rising consciousness of the lower castes of their socio and economic disadvantages and assertion against upper-caste domination. However, Pai (2001) has commented that although the middle-to-lower classes have mobilized for political action, traditional internal differences have not been completely eroded, creating rivalry and class conflicts. Capitalist development and state-funded welfare programmes have also heightened competition and conflict between Dalit groups for control over economic resources and political status. UP now exhibits political parties which are closely identified with specific ethnic groups - the BJP with the upper castes, the SP with the backwards and the BSP with the lower castes. She notes from her study that the panchayat institutions in UP

reflect the segmented society in which they are embedded and are an arena of contestation rather than cooperation among various castes over resources and benefits.

### **3.2 Panchayati Raj Institutions**

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are a form of decentralized government, elected by the people as institutions of local democracy. This represented a shift in thinking of the State from government to governance. It was believed that the delegation of authority to local decision-makers heading these institutions would lead to effective administration of programmes for the local people (Mathur, 2013). These institutions were empowered to develop socio-economic plans of development and implement them. The PRIs were revived and enshrined into law by the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution which mandated the holding of elections every 5 years, 33% reservation for women for all elected bodies as well as the office of chairperson, reservations for Scheduled Classes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the establishment of a uniform three tier structure with the *gram sabha* being the deliberate body of decentralized government. The *gram sabha* is the critical unit of the PRI system where villagers deliberate on matters face-to-face and then give further orders to the panchayat (the executive body) for execution. It consists of 10-15 members who approve all plans and programmes of social and economic development, audit the accounts and select the beneficiaries (Mathur, 2013).

### **3.3 Reservation**

The 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution, which granted 33% reservation to women in the PRIs, was heralded as a watershed moment in the history of the state initiative on political empowerment of rural women (Pradhan and Dutta, 2008). The rationale for these reservations was to give women a platform to directly participate in decision-making in local self-government from which they historically have been denied and to make women central actors in development processes. For the first time, rural women began to take

up positions in politics. It is estimated that over 1 million women have entered the panchayats since the enactment of the amendment (Tiwari, 2013). Bihar has raised reservation to 50%, with Sikkim and Karnataka raising this number to 40%. Around 80% of all women elected are of reserved seats (Tiwari 2013). However, it has been noted that participation of women in these institutions does not exist in the abstract but is heavily interwoven with ideological and cultural factors where social inequality and oppression are reflected and maintained (Pai, 1998).

### **3.4 Representation versus Participation**

Tiwari (2016) has noted that there are more elected women in India than the rest of the world put together. However, despite the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment creating legislative conditions to ensure representation of women in PRIs, this representation did not automatically lead to adequate participation of women in their roles. A number of studies have revealed, that while the number of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) have increased, there are a number of factors that serve as a hindrance to their equal participation in the local governance systems. These factors will be explored in the gendered developmental challenges of the *pradhan pati* phenomenon, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

### **3.5 PRI and SHGs**

The symbiotic relationship of SHGs strengthening PRIs and vice versa was understood by the drafters of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. In the 11th plan, they recognized the important role that Civil Society Organisations, such as SHGs, have to play in the strengthening of the PRIs due to their proven track record of implementing programmes at the grassroots level. However, in practice SHGs and PRIs appear to have very different functions and spheres of influence. In a study conducted in West Bengal, the government has taken steps to encourage collaboration of SHGs and PRIs, namely by incentivizing the *gram*

*panchayats* to extend capacity building support to the SHGs. However, despite the predominant role that SHGs have in changing the socio and economic positions of poor families in the villages as a whole, the study found that this had not translated in to influence of decisions at a political level (Roy & Datta, 2008).

### **3.6 Caste as a Historic system of Hierarchy, Division and Oppression**

Dumont (1966) has written that the caste system is unique to India which created a hierarchy of status based on the notions of purity and impurity. According to him, the opposition of pure and impure played out in several ways including; the division of labour and the association with certain castes to certain professions, the creation of a hierarchy, and the separation of castes founded on their levels of purity and impurity. It is a system which traces its origins to ancient India and which is founded upon Hindu scripture. Caste is passed through birth and cannot be changed unless through hypergamy i.e., marriage to someone who is outside of one's caste. Rigid adherence to caste prescribes certain rituals that one must perform, foods to eat, professions to practice and would encourage only inter-caste socializing and marriage. Untouchables, the caste assigned to those at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, were considered the most impure, were shunned by society and forced to perform demeaning labour. Bhagat (2001) has noted that caste became crystallized through the census conducted by the British in India. Through the mechanism of census categorization, "fuzzy" communities became enumerated communities and social ignorance was transformed into a heightened social awareness. It made it possible for people to seek self-definition in their similarities and differences, leading to communal and caste divides becoming politicized.

### 3.7 Difference between urban and rural caste structures

Much has been written about the difference between caste structures in urban and rural settings and the breakdown and subsequent realignment of caste structures and identities. Caste solidarity disappears particularly when a caste is spatially dispersed (Desai, 1967) and where interactions become more transactional and uniplex, rather than face to face and multiplex (Shah, 2010). In villages, the caste system is believed to be rigid and more enduring. Beteille (1980) in his exploration of caste in Indian villages, both past and present, said that custom law and religion combined to sustain a moral environment, whereby hierarchy was considered to be part of the normal scheme of things. Gupta (2005) has noted that caste in villages was the outcome of an uneven distribution of wealth and power and that by no means did members of lower caste participate willingly in their own subjugation. The notion that was propagated for years, that caste was a harmonious and self-understood hierarchy, was misunderstood. In fact, interlinking systems of power, oppression and violence forced people to begrudgingly accept their position in their hierarchy, whilst secretly harboring their own origin myths of belonging to a higher, purer caste.

Shah (2010) has commented that the intersection of caste and politics sparks a lot of discussion, but he is wary of the emphasis that we place on how it influences voting habits. He says that this is due to our misinformed belief that castes are homogenous when in fact, they are highly differentiated, such that its members often do not always vote *en bloc*. Caste, he highlights, is in fact only one factor influencing voting behaviours that is often utilized by politicians and candidates in the locality but there are numerous other factors that will also play a role. We will discuss this and other factors in our observations and analysis chapter. However, he agrees that the most crucial arena in which caste plays a role in politics is in reservations for SC, ST and OBC categories.

### **3.8 Reservations and Caste Politics**

For legal purposes, it is important to note that there are four enumerated castes, General Caste, Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. The system of reservation post-independence has led to an assertion in caste identities, as benefits and other provisions have been allocated to certain castes in recognition and reparation for historical oppression. Shah (2007) seems particularly critical of reservations as a “progressive” means of rectifying past imbalances of power but simultaneously reinforcing caste as a system, rather than gradually phasing it out in favour of more democratic ideals of equality. For nearly two decades, UP has mobilized Dalits and other backward castes in politics. However, despite this, Mehrotra (2006) has commented that they continue to have the worst social indicators of wellbeing, not only compared to upper castes but the rest of India.

### **3.9 Caste in SHGs**

Caste plays out in several ways in SHGs. SHGs are not only vehicles of empowerment of women, but for the empowerment of the poor. A study has shown that people classified as ST and SC are less likely to have access to formal credit and therefore, are more vulnerable to moneylenders (Adhikary and Bagli, 2010). SHG membership offers a more systematized and reliable form of credit access. Fernandez (2007) has commented on the strong link of affinity between members of the SHG based on “certain social features (such as a degree of homogeneity among members, of voluntarism and self-reliance and willingness to support one another in need), on certain structural features such as a common origin (blood or ancestral village) or the same livelihood base (all daily wage earners, landless or marginal farmers, even though from different castes, religions or communities), or on gender bonds (all women or all men, with about 5 percent of the groups being mixed).” Although caste and creed played a role, in several groups affinity relationships and economic homogeneity were stronger and members of the group seemed to transcend these traditional forms of distinction and division in favour of a new

bond of sisterhood. In this way, SHGs are also playing their part in breaking down caste divides.

Besides breaking down caste divides, it has been documented that participation by women in the SHGs has led to empowerment on multiple fronts, including the taking up of leadership positions in the *gram panchayats* (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2004). Aiyar (2016) has commented that the SHGs are a vital supplement to the political empowerment of women as individual and in groups. These empowerment indicators will be discussed in the following chapter.



## Chapter 4: Literature Review

In this chapter we attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the prevailing literature and research that exists with regard to women empowerment, SHGs, PRIs and the *Pradhan pati* Phenomenon.

### 4.1 Development (Empowerment)

According to McWhiter (1998):

empowerment is the process by which people, organizations, or groups who are powerless or marginalized: (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) which they exercise without infringing upon the rights of others, and (d) which coincides with supporting the empowerment of others in their community.

In alignment with this definition, we shall describe the various nuances of the empowerment of women through SHGs gained through our observations.

#### **(a) Become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context**

Reddy and Manak (2005) observed that the status of women has generally improved as they have become sensitive to the power dynamics at play in their lives, which has changed gender dynamics and their role in the household.

#### **(b) Develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives**

The Karnataka Human Development Report (2005) also described how SHGs have not only been platforms for micro-financing but also a range of other inputs, such as

liveliness interventions, awareness about health, literacy and political participation, vocational trainings, upskilling and communication skills.

**(c) Which they exercise without infringing upon the rights of others**

The SHG movement in India is premised on collective empowerment through female collective action based on cooperation, reciprocity and solidarity (Joshi & Desai, 2012). According to Bernardiner & Mangala, (2017), SHGs have mobilized collective action for change at the local level including economic and village development activities, addressing social issues, mobilization of government schemes as well as serving as forums for political empowerment. (Joshi & Desai, 2012; Bernardiner & Mangala, 2017).

While a study on female microfinance groups in rural Tamil Nadu demonstrated the complexity of relational power dynamics among the women, it also emphasized the instrumentality of solidarity and cooperation among its members for effective financial management (Guerin, Kumar & Agier, 2010). In corroboration, a number of studies have revealed that SHGs contribute to a building of networks and a collective identity among the women as well as the development of relations based on trust, reciprocity and associational capital (in the form of strengthening local institutions) (Gaiha & Nandi, 2007; Husain, Mukhejee & Dutta, 2010). Lastly, this collective empowerment creates a safe space, which often extends beyond the SHG, for women to assert their rights and engage in greater freedom and mobility (Navas, 2015).

**(d) Which coincides with supporting the empowerment of others in their community.**

McWhiter (1998) posits that the empowerment of an individual or group often facilitates the empowerment of other marginalized individual, groups and the community in

general. This can be promoted through interpersonal behaviors e.g. encouraging community consciousness, building of capacity and skills to support the empowerment of others as well as the forging of robust connections with the community.

The women's SHG movement in India has moved beyond the economic sphere of microfinance to encompass the social transformation and empowerment of marginalized rural communities (Microfinance Task Force Report of State of Maharashtra, 2009). According to Tesoriero (2006), that women in SHGs often experienced shifts in individual identities through a collective engagement in community and social action programs for influencing change at the village and panchayat levels. Moreover, studies have shown that loans from these female microfinance groups are more likely to be used by the members for health and education of their children as well as production related expenses incurred by disadvantaged members (Gaiha & Nandi, 2007). SHGs as spaces of collective empowerment and community upliftment are also characterized by their caste constitution, with a 2006 survey of SHGs across India revealing that 45% of all groups were 'mixed' in composition, including SC/ST, OBCs, general and other minorities (e.g. Muslims) (Ramchandra and Pelto, 2009). This mixed caste constitution allows women to uplift and assist their caste disadvantaged counterpart both economically and socially, under the sentiment of sisterhood and solidarity.

Thus, we can conclude that SHGs seek to empower and promote women's rights and wellbeing on numerous factors.

## **4.2 Developmental Challenges**

### ***Pradhan pati* Phenomenon**

Although reservations are definitely a step forward in to mandating that women take up their rightful role in political processes, they are liable to manipulation due to the extremely male-dominated attitude to the exercise of any decision-making function. Dak & Purohit (2008: 35) have noted that most elected women are:

“Illiterate, housewives, first time entrants in politics, and lack confidence and ability to participate effectively in panchayat raj institutions. They tend to contest elections not at their own volition but do so at the dictates of their male family members; they are escorted by their males; and they speak and do what is told to them. This gives rise to the extra-constitutional authority of *sarpanchpati*.”

We will refer to the phenomenon as *pradhan pati*. It is important to note at this juncture that this is not an exhaustive or categorical list and that a female *pradhan* may not fulfill all these elements to qualify as a *pradhan pati*. This rubric has been helpful to us in our research in understanding the level of engagement and effectiveness of the female *pradhans*.

The *pradhan pati* phenomenon has been widely documented. It was noted as early as 1995 that that most women in reserved constituencies were surrogates for male family members and exercised no powers and function (Pradhan and Dutta, 2008). Dak & Purohit have noted that the proxy representation in panchayat had become quite common. This has led to the perception that female *pradhans* are mere puppets of their husbands and that women’s political participation has not really been achieved.

Studies have concluded that due to the pressure of household work and children, women seldom attend PRI meetings. It has also shown that the mobility of a woman is highly restricted as she is either prohibited or hesitant to commute alone. It has been noted that most of the women are accompanied by either their husbands or other male members of the families, if they have to attend any meetings, which itself is seen to be a rarity.

In a study on women in PRIs it was concluded that only 20% of women representatives were aware of their rights and duties (Sharma, 2002). Only half of them attended all the meetings and almost an equal number were present only in some of the meetings. The number of those who never attended was small. But their presence did not indicate their

role in decision making on their own. They almost always acted on the basis of the directions of male members.

In another study it was revealed that many of the female *pradhans* were illiterate and were only able to put their signatures on official papers (Pai, 1998). A study of PRI in Haryana on some hundred elected women in four districts revealed that the majority of the elected women including younger women were illiterate when elected to office (Indian Institute of Social Science 2000). UNDP has stated that the low literacy levels, absence of education and limited or no exposure have led to a lack of confidence and many women are unable to comprehend the true spirit of decentralization and recognize the opportunities that it provides. (UNDP, N.D)

Studies demonstrate a lack of general political awareness among women in rural areas, with husbands of EWRs often carrying out the official duties, while the EWR are often used to sign off on pre-made decisions (Pai, 1998; Tiwari, 2013; Agnihotri & Singh, 2014). For instance, a study revealed that EWR did not attend meetings and never made decisions with regard to allocation of funds (Pai, 1998). Second, EWR often have limited access to information regarding the function of PRI, the election process in general as well as the reservation of women within the PRIs (Tiwari, 2013). For instance, following the PRI elections, the Rajasthan government found that female panchayat members were largely unaware of the rights and functions as presiding members of the PRIs, while some studies reveal that women panchayat leaders when interviewed about their position and roles, often professed ignorance and asked researchers to interview their husbands instead (Pai, 1998; *Pradhan & Dutta*, 2008). Lastly, the general dominance of male members in panchayat meetings, also served as a significant obstacle to optimum participation of their female counterparts (Agnihotri & Singh, 2014).

A study conducted by Singh (2007), revealed that out of a random sampling of 160 EWRs, a majority of them had entered PRIs for the first time. Moreover, in many states it was discovered that women who were first time entrants into panchayat bodies through reserved constituencies, were being governed and represented by their husbands in

meetings, decision making, functions etc., though the same women began to display greater assertion and will power when elected for the second time. However, there also exists a low retention rate, that gradually declines with an increase in the number of times a woman is elected into office. For instance, the percentage of first time EWRs was higher than average, though the retention rate for second timers was very low, while that for third timers was hardly present (Tiwari, 2013).

As a criterion for the *pradhan pati* phenomenon, 'first time entrant into politics' will be operationalized to include women who have entered or held office in a PRI for the first time. Even women who have contested multiple elections prior to winning and holding office for the first time, will be considered first-time entrants. This is because, while these women may have greater knowledge about elections and campaigning, they would still lack first-hand experience of the roles, responsibilities and duties of political leadership as well as the functioning of the panchayat institutions.

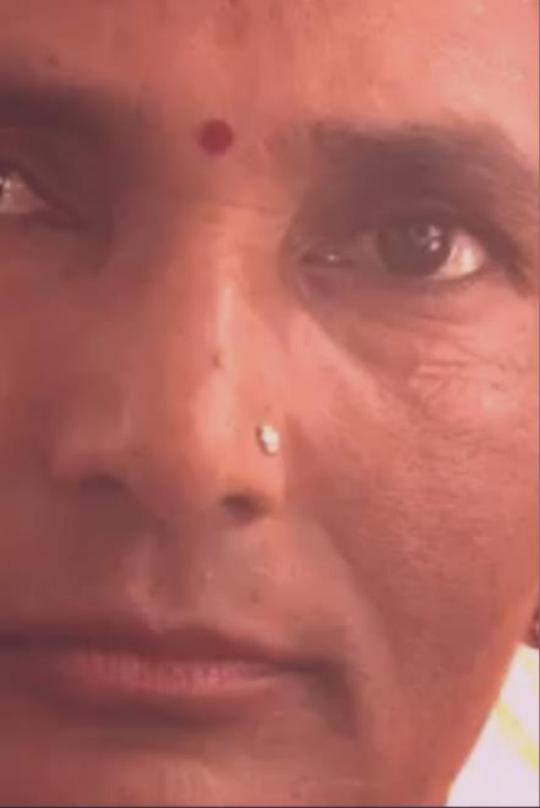
A recent study conducted by Dubey, Gupta and Sharma (2017) has reported that women who joined PRI were mostly housewives before joining PRI. Mohanty (2005) has noted that the entry of these women in to PRI has impacted on the power dynamics between husband and wife as, in the case of *pradhan pati*, the husband gets a chance to enter the political public sphere through his wife's position. She maintains that rather than souring the relationship between them, it has altered the power dynamics for the better, with the husband supporting his wife in her roles and duties. She further posits that familial relations have assisted in providing childcare and taking care of the household duties whilst the female *pradhan* attends to her *pradhan* responsibilities. A study conducted by Tiwari (2015) has found that the woman gains more respect in her family when she is elected a *pradhan* and in the community at large.

It is often argued that women *pradhans* do not contest the elections in their own name and are there because of their husbands and not because of their merit (Lima, 1983). A report by the Society of Tribal Women for Development has acknowledged that it is true

that many women are nominated by their husbands, fathers and father-in law to take advantage of the quota.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

From the above, it is evident that the conditions for proper representation of EWRs has, in many respects, not translated into proper participation. The undercurrents of patriarchy, as well as the lack of experience of women entering these roles, have intervened in such a manner as to hamper the autonomous leadership of women. However, notwithstanding the impediments that the *pradhan pati* phenomenon creates, dimensions of empowerment can be seen in the women across SHGs and in the women who are contesting and winning PRI seats. In the coming observations and analysis chapter, we will present our findings from our field research and provide our insights as to the current state of female participation in PRI and SHGs in the Raebareli and Amethi regions.



## Chapter 5. Observations and Analysis

In this section, we shall analyse our findings and observations of the female participants in Self Help Groups (SHG) and *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRI) in the rural spaces surrounding *Raebareli* and *Amethi* districts of Uttar Pradesh, through the lens of well-being and development. As per our thematic framework of well-being and development, our findings and observations have been divided into four dimensions (1) women and empowerment (2) women and political governance (3) women and collective action, and (4) women, self-agency and self-expression.

### 5.1 Women and Empowerment

“I have always wanted to do something good for the society and help the poor as I dream about no sadness, no poverty and only happiness. I am glad that I have to get up at 3 am in the morning to fulfil this dream. My *Pradhani* (leader of the village *Panchayat*) is based on the nature of serving and spreading happiness. Thus, I really am obliged to my SHG sisters for it was because of their support, motivation, and trust that I have been able to come this far. It is only because of this that I have realised the importance of confidence and exposure to information as now especially through personal experience I can say that it is integral for the individual as well as the country’s progress for women to come out and voice their thoughts and opinions. This is my learning, my advice and one of my dreams”, says Shanti yadav, a female *Pradhan* and a SHG member.”

Empowerment of women through SHGs has been one of the foremost and prominent observations of our study. Women have proudly spoken about the changes brought about in their personality and lifestyle through SHGs. All of these changes were backed up by their common belief of SHGs being the sole reason of their monetary upliftment and social and political awareness.

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In this section we shall be delineating our observations in accordance with McWhiter's (1998) definition of empowerment, as discussed in our literature review. Subsequently, our findings will be organized around the following four parameters of her operationalization.

**(a) Women have become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context,**

According to a female *Pradhan*, Rekha, “SHGs pave way for helping women to earn confidence and stand up for themselves and stand in leadership positions. And it is important for women to stand in leadership positions because this is an opportunity for equal respect in the society.”

RGMVP has developed a number of initiatives that seek to sensitize the SHG members to systems of oppression that impact their daily lives, such as gender. One such initiative is the *Bandhan Role Play*.

*Bandhan Role Play* involves two women where one ties ribbon around the second woman's body in front of the rest of the members. Starting with her eyes, the ribbon represents how the veil she is obliged to wear blinds her. A ribbon is then wrapped around her mouth, which represents how she is not free to speak how she wants around certain people, such as her husband and her in-laws. The ribbon is then bound around her wrists to represent how she is bound to perform certain work, such as domestic or agricultural work. The ribbon is further bound around her stomach which shows that she does not have complete control over her reproductive rights and finally her legs to show the curtailment of her mobility. Finally, these ribbons are undone as a symbolic representation of the woman establishing her right to these freedoms and control of her body.

“*Bandhan Role Play* teaches us our importance for we have been forced by the society to act in certain manner and that restricts us, our freedom and our existence. If we wear a veil that covers the entire face, how will we see the world around us? If we are told not to speak up, where will our voice go? We need to see, we need to speak because our voice is important, we are important”, said one of the SHG members.

Women have described how SHGs have exposed them to a world outside of the home and have sensitized them to forms of gender oppression that they had otherwise unquestioningly accepted, such as wearing of the veil. One woman said that she had stopped wearing the veil completely. Often, women who would come to the SHG meetings who had their faces almost completely covered by the veil were encouraged by the other SHG members to pull it back so that the other group members could see the woman’s face. Women also acknowledged the importance of educating girl children since joining the SHG and reported sending their girl children to school. The *Pradhan* of *Pure Abhiman Singh*, in her interview, said that she speaks out against domestic violence and child marriage and that these were concepts that she had learned through the SHGs.

“I have always found certain practices such as domestic violence against the woman, child labour, perpetual silence of a woman and everything to do with the veil, very problematic. Now with the exposure and confident that I have acquired I sometimes go and talk to people about these vices, condemning them. I really just want this to end. I try my level best to make people understand, sometimes I can, most times I cannot but I am going to try. I also talk to people about the significance of education”, says the *Pradhan*.

Thus, the awareness generated by the SHG of such power imbalances have enabled the women to break from tradition and empower themselves and their families.

**(b) Women have developed the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives**

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Many women reported the benefits of the micro-financing structure to us. Across villages many women expressed that by virtue of their SHG membership they were able to come out of poverty, strengthen their voices, garner respect in their villages and establish their personal and collective identity.

One woman from *Kodra Bhagat Khera* described how they had taken small loans from the SHGs and had used these loans to invest in livestock, then in agricultural equipment and had succeeded in lifting herself and her family out of poverty.

Another woman expresses, “We belonged to a really poor family and since my husband is a labourer, it was turning out to be very difficult for the family to make two ends meet. But then SHGs came along my way and I was able to help the family uplift considerably. This, not only helped the family money wise but it changed the family dynamic also, as my husband now remains more happy and tension free. I felt really happy also as I was the one who was able to help. This, in my family’s eyes increased the credibility of SHGs as they earlier used to speculate what is the woman of the house doing going out. I now really believe in the power of women.”

Another woman helped her husband get out of a 3.5 lakh debt, 1.5 of which was paid with the help of SHG. With that, she was not only able to revive the happiness of her home but also stop her husband’s drinking problem.

For some women it had provided an opportunity for upskilling and new employment. A number of women had been selected to be trained as health sakhis and bank sakhis by RGMVP. These women were given specific training to assist others in the villages with accessing credit or with spreading information regarding healthcare. This not only raised these women’s confidence but provided them with a small income and it was clear that other women in the village respected these women for their knowledge and desire to give back to the community.

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RGMVP conducts several health initiatives with particular focus on best healthcare of pregnant women, care of children following birth and health and nutrition of adolescent girls. This information works as a trickle-down effect, moving from the organisation, to the health *sakhis*, to the SHG members themselves and then spreading to others in the village who are outside of the SHG network. This training and education is dispersed throughout the villages and enables the SHG women and their counterparts, armed with this knowledge to implement it in their daily lives.

### **(c) Exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others**

As per our observations, all the SHGs visited by us across the *Raebareli* and *Amethi* districts, were premised on the principles of collective action and collective empowerment. At the individual level this collective empowerment was manifested through a collective/group identity many women had adopted based upon their belonging in a particular SHG.

At the group level, sentiment of the 'collective' was represented via ideals of sisterhood and solidarity among members, with each woman referring to the others as her '*Behen*' (sister).

At the institutional level, a number of women shared powerful instances of the collective assertion of rights on behalf of the more disadvantaged members as well as collective action for community development. For instance, one woman shared an instance of collective action, when a female *Pradhan* went against the wishes of her husband and stopped a pipeline from being built through a poor neighborhood, asserting that "Although he is my husband, at this moment my duties lie with the community and I have to make a decision that is good for my community"

During the SHG meetings, we observed that while some women were undeterred in voicing their opinions, they allowed space for others to do the same, often encouraging

their more silent sisters to speak up. A significant number of women also expressed gratitude for the strength they were able to draw from their collective, by building networks and giving them numbers to “not only beg for their rights, but also to fight for what they believed they were entitled to”, said a woman in Kodra Bhagat Khera. Lastly, some women revealed that they were enjoying greater freedom and mobility following their membership in the SHG, because their ‘sisters’ provided them with support and security in the face of opposition.

“I used to not get out of the house, i felt very weird getting out of the home, getting out of the village for the first time but now I attend almost all my ward member meetings and it is all because of the push that I got from my SHG sisters. It feels nice to get out and work, earlier there was a lot of hesitation but having received immense amount of courage and will from all my sisters, I now speak where ever it is deemed necessary and I feel extremely nice. This has not only made me speak up confidently but has also helped me aim and desire as I wish for running for the *Pradhan* in the coming elections”, said a Ward Member

#### **(d) Support the empowerment of others in their community**

During our fieldwork, a number of female members from various SHG’s emphasized their bond of sisterhood as the foundation of their effective functioning, with many claiming that they derived strength, power and courage from their SHGs and through the collective identity established with it. It was also a common occurrence for members to express a desire for helping the community, particularly the marginalized and poor within their village, a sentiment that often permeated the SHG’s decision making and policies.

“It is only due to my SHGs support that I have been able to win as they helped me tremendously with the campaigning and spreading the word. Their motivation motivated me and their trust pushed me”, said Mamta Devi, a female *Pradhan*.

There also seemed to exist a consensus among most SHG members, that their SHG represented a breakdown in the caste structure, since it involved the intermingling of women across castes. According to a number of these women, while their prior knowledge of caste had been informed by caste discrimination, SHG’s had transformed their views to believe that their shared sisterhood preceded the caste politics of the village.

Within the framework of PRI's, the main aspiration for women was attain power for the sake of their 'sisters' and the needy of their village. Subsequently, their idea of 'leading' was enabling others, particular the poor and disadvantaged. A group art activity was conducted by us, wherein women were divided into group of 5-6 and asked For instance, in the group art activity conducted by us with the women of three different SHG groups, across groups there was an overwhelming emphasis on community development, with the artwork representing similar community motifs such as cattle, water, hospitals, schools etc.

Thus, we believe that the implementation of the SHG model in the rural spaces constituted by this study, has been an effective and viable solution to the intersectional oppression faced the women in these regions, in the domains of poverty alleviation, women empowerment, political visibility, community development as well as combating other social structures of oppression.

“Getting out of the house was not considered to be a very good thing for me and it was also almost prohibited but because of SHGs, I have started going out and doing things that can help our family to sustain as our kids are growing up and so are their needs.

However, my in-laws were really not in the favour of this getting out bit. They were of the belief that it is okay for us to not have enough food or clothes as long as our daughter in law stays inside the walls of the house. She once said that even if you are wearing worn out, torn out clothes, how does it matter, you have to stay inside only now that you are married, nobody will anyway see you, so it is completely fine. My life had become nothing but days of me just crying and crying as I had nothing left to do. My husband also used to always whine because of the money problems and it was all extremely bad. But then, I believe with money came brains and due to our poverty alleviation, he has become good now.

It all happened when I got exposed to SHGs and as I started getting more and more involved which was a little easy for me because I was educated, I started becoming happy and finding solutions for the poverty of our family. It was obviously not at all easy initially as villagers used to say insulting things and speculate about where am I going and what am I doing. But then due to the work that we do and information received by the SHGs, I got the courage to not listen to the world and think of the society as an obstacle that is pulling me back. Thus, with the help of training, conversations, education and most importantly because of values such as passion and hope, I have been empowered and it is through that empowerment that I don't anymore shake while speaking and even provide training. I also started handling the savings with the bank and other monetary work. I was able to collect a lot of money through my SHG with which I made my husband buy a second hand alto car. This helped in a lot of earning and he started doing a lot of things. With those earnings I was able to repay some of the SHG loan, we were able to buy jewellery, other good things for the family and even arrange for private education for our children. And slowly slowly, home became a happy place. We now have good food and we even share. We also are now able to financially help my birth home", says Savita, on being asked about the transformation of her life.

## 5.2 Recommendations:

- **Personal and Individual Development** - RGMVP should focus on developing and incorporating more activities involving introspection and individual identity development in SHG meetings. This would enable women to develop their own unique sense of selves as well as the capacity to express their individuality to other members of the group.
- **Self-Reflection Tools** - RGMVP can incorporate methods of self-reflection, such as meditation, into the SHG models. During our visits, one of our team members conducted a short meditation session with the SHG members. Many of the women were already familiar with the concept of meditation and many reported feeling peace and stillness in the aftermath. One woman said that she felt like she had “emerged from a cave”. Meditation could be a valuable tool of self-reflection for women as well as a welcome respite from their busy schedules. It can also contribute to a sense of well-being and interconnectedness.
- **'You cannot be, what you cannot see'** - We observed that there are more male block officers than female block officers who facilitate the SHG meetings. This again, reinforces the belief that women require the leadership from men. Women cannot aspire to be what they cannot see in their daily lives. More female block officers who lead SHG meetings could be positive role models for inspiring more women leaders to come to the fore.
- **Gender Sensitization Training for Block Officers** - As Block Officers are largely responsible for facilitating the flow of SHG meetings, as well as disseminating information in the SHG meetings, it is imperative that they are aware of patriarchal influences and gender dynamics, so that they do not propagate problematic beliefs and customs concerning women. Some of the male block officers affiliated to RGMVP could come across as patronizing to the SHG members. Further

training is required for all Block Officers to generate this awareness and safeguard against the undermining of women's empowerment.

- **Strengthening of Young Women SHGs** - We had limited interaction with YWSHG members, however, we noted that the involvement of these young women in SHGs had a positive impact on their confidence and their ability to express themselves. The later women become involved in SHGs, the more time it takes for the women to develop the confidence to speak up in meetings and become comfortable in a women-only space, that is sometimes their first opportunity to be apart of a community outside of their family home. Early SHG intervention is essential to developing bonds and confidence of young women and girls.
- **Making space for Illiterate and Elderly Women** - It is important to pay specific attention to women who are marginalised within the SHGs, namely illiterate women and elderly women, through a specialised training and empowerment model. This is to ensure that each SHG member has the equal opportunity to reap the fruits of empowerment.

The social and economic empowerment achieved by women in SHGs, has a significant spillover effect into the political empowerment experienced by them, which shall be discussed in the next section.

### **5.3 Women and Political Governance**

The self-help movement has had far reaching consequences for the female leadership in PRIs, SHG's serving as platforms for the nomination and selection of political candidates into the *Panchayat*, thus making them an integral part of grassroots democracy in rural India. As per our observations, SHGs were important for PRIs in ways of providing information transfer, voting banks, financial assistance as well as social support and morale boosting. We shall be discussing each of these in the chapter.

“SHGs are the first step if one desires to stand for the elections. Without the help of the collective, the sisters, success is not possible”, explained one of the women.

Within the scope of this study, this section attempts to investigate the link between SHGs and PRI's, determining in the process the role played by the SHGs in furthering female leadership within the context of local governance.

#### ❖ **Information Diffusion and Transfer**

Almost all the women said the following, on being asked about how they received information about PRI, “it is only through my SHG that I got to know about this as my sisters only guided me. We discuss matters like these in our SHGs.”

Our research revealed that SHGs were often spaces of information diffusion and transfer surrounding the *Panchayat* institutions, elections and reservations. Most of the women we interacted with expressed that their SHG served as a major source of information for keeping them informed about the changing roles, responsibilities, processes and criteria entailed in running for *Panchayat* elections. In fact, in the village of *Hariyaanva*, SHG women who had no information about the *Panchayati Raj*, also did not have any desire or motivation to run for positions of leadership, which is testament to the important role adequate information plays in allowing and motivating women to aspire for leadership within PRIs. Lastly, this information diffusion also meant that women were more well-informed and aware of the system, which allowed them to be more critical of their own political leaders and demand greater accountability from them. Many women also shared the awareness and cautiousness they had developed of the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon. They developed this awareness through the collective information shared among them.

#### ❖ **Financial Support**

“If my sisters would not have helped me, our campaign would not have gone the way it went”, said one of the leaders.

While adequate information transfer laid the groundwork for women aspiring towards political leadership, the financial assistance provided by SHGs for its members, also gave

these women the ability to concretize their aspirations. Most of the women we interacted with, SHG and otherwise, were of the opinion that effective campaigning entailed a heavy financial burden, a crucial aspect of the election process that deterred a number of women from not only running but also aspiring for a seat in the PRI. While not a robust occurrence, we found that SHGs were often the solution to this monetary obstacle, since its collective funds could be used to finance campaigning, particularly for women who had been elected by their SHG to run for office. For instance, Shanti Yadav, the *Pradhan* of *Pure Abhiman Singh*, despite her limited salary of a school teacher, has been able to consistently hold office for 15 years, by virtue of the financial assistance her SHG sisters have accorded her.

#### ❖ **Voting banks**

Both information transfer and financial support allowed women to aspire and run for office, however their chances of winning the elections was predominately contingent on the support of their SHG and its surrounding network. Our observations revealed, that once a woman was selected by her SHG to run for office, she automatically garnered the support of her SHG sisters as well as the network of SHGs within her village and neighbouring vicinity.

Moreover, this SHG network then went on to form a voting bank for these nominated women, ensuring their re-election time and again, as long as they continued to represent and act upon the collective interest of the SHG and its members within the PRI. The SHG networks that constituted a voting bank were also substantially larger, which meant oftentimes a candidate's victory was pre-empted and assured. Since SHGs provided a loyal voting bank and at times a guaranteed win, it also meant that the need for financial investment in campaigning was significantly relaxed. For instance, almost all the female *Pradhan's* we interviewed, expressed that they had not invested a lot on money in campaigning, rather they had been assured a seat due to the loyal vote banks, their SHG sisters and surrounding networks constituted.



### ❖ **Empowerment and Social Support**

The first step towards political leadership, is social and economic empowerment, which has been the most valuable contribution of SHG membership in the lives of their female members. First, SHGs across the villages visited, have helped in alleviating a number of their members from poverty and financial crises, allowing the women to experience a semblance of financial stability for the first time in their life. Second, through a diffusion of information and various forms of gender education, SHGs have served as a critical force in driving the social empowerment of women, which ranges from empowering women to break away from the purdah as well as increasing their mobility outside the home. For instance, Lastly, the SHGs have helped its female members in developing a collective identity of sisterhood from which they derive strength, support and security. Moreover, this has had a colossal impact on the personal development and confidence of the individuals within the collective, who have finally found their voices, identity and dreams. Most women when asked about their political aspirations, repeatedly reiterated that they would not run without the support of the SHG and their sisters. In fact, a significant proportion of women believed that they would only run for office, if they were given the opportunity to run by their SHG sisters. Almost all the women who were holding office in the PRI, were unable to shake off the loyalty and responsibility they felt towards their SHG sisters. They also cited that their primary source of motivation, confidence and strength to run for a leadership within the PRIs was their SHG, which allows us to believe that these groups serve as spaces of social support and morale boosting for potential and current leaders.

Within the framework of SHGs, political leadership ceases to become an individual endeavor, instead it becomes a highly interdependent phenomenon that is representative of the needs and wants of the collective. Consequently, this will have implications for the leadership training model of RGMVP, since leaders do not just

emerge, rather they are actively chosen based on certain criteria, which we shall discuss in our next section.

#### **5.4 Women and Collective Action**

All her SHG members expressed the following to Shanti Yadav, a *pradhan* since 2005 to the present day, “We want you to stand because we trust you and we think we need you. We will vote for you, we will negotiate with our families and they will vote for you.”

One of most integral aspects of the SHG model has been the development of a highly sustainable sisterhood component amongst the women of each SHG. We observed the nature of this collective identity when the women in the PRI leadership positions shared with us their fascinating political and personal journey. The women regarded their womanhood as well as their existence outside of the home, as a shared form of life built through all their sisters and the SHG’s collective idea of empowerment and development. For them, their self is formed of dreams, aspirations and expectations which have been created and met by their SHGs.

“Everybody was very helpful and supportive. We did not use any money during the three months of campaigning because of the support of my SHG and their families. My family and my sisters worked very hard as it was a shoulder to shoulder fight. We went house to house and folded hands to seek votes. We won with 175 vote margin and it was a victory for my entire SHG”, says Mamta Devi, a *pradhan*.

We looked at this power of collective action through the lens of the criteria on which women of a particular SHG recommend and support a particular woman for the Gram Sabha elections. In this section, therefore, we will outline our observations with respect to the same, through analysing the support of the respective SHG members for the ten leaders that we looked at through parameters of caste, socio-economic class, gender,

and other fundamental factors. Taking these parameters as the baseline of our observations, we will also try uncovering other reasons behind these recommendations and personal nature of this motivation of supporting a particular leader over any other woman of the SHG.

#### ❖ **Caste**

A woman very amusingly remarked, “You don't even know your caste! That is very strange”, when one of the researchers admitted that they were not aware of their caste. Social structures like caste, we observed, played a very significant role in the politics of SHG that lead to shaping the role of women in PRI.

To initiate a discussion on the same, we conducted two focus group sessions with around 12 women in each. Almost all the women, barring a couple, agreed that caste did not matter in the functioning of their SHGs. “We all sit together, on the floor, and work for the progress of our families and our village. It does not matter if it is an upper caste or a lower caste. We have long been seeing the vices of this structure in the politics of male *pradhans* and we, with our work and our belief do not want to walk on that path”, explained a member. However, this understanding seemed to us very situational and initial. One of the older women was not at all in agreement with this belief. She was in favour of the caste system and she stuck to this position throughout the discussion. The women that we spoke to somewhat believed in the no-discrimination policy with respect to caste but not at a very individual level. For example, when we asked them about inter-caste marriages, more than half of the women were not in favour of the idea. Some, although, did agree that they would bow down to their children’s wishes and happiness. The intersection of gender politics with respect to this will be dealt further in the next section.

We, therefore, concluded that while collectively women articulated their belief in inclusion and equality, often in personal life and major life decisions like marriage they

held caste to be a determining factor. When, on one hand a women said, “it is just about the perception of cleanliness, if one is neat and clean, it does not matter what caste they belong to, we will sit together on one ground, eat together and drink together. That is the spirit of the SHG”, on another, one of them said, “caste is important. We will prefer voting for a woman who is from our caste because she will take care of us, then.” Since, a lot of women commented on the cleanliness factor, we noted that caste is integrally linked to the idea of purity and pollution.

Even when most of the women believed that they would vote based on the capabilities of a woman, a lot of them preferred voting for someone from their own caste as they believed they would be able to understand their problems better. For example, one woman said that she would not want to vote for a higher caste person because she will not understand the needs of a lower caste. Similarly, a lot of them did not agree to intercaste marriages. However, on a theoretical level, almost all of them believed that discrimination on the basis of caste is not good. “Before our involvement with the SHGs, this was very prevalent in our minds, but now our thought process has changed a bit and we don't see this structure as a tool for discrimination”, said one of the women.

Thus, even with the above understanding, we noted caste to be one of the major factors behind the members’ choice of nominating a woman for a PRI position not only because that would ensure their needs and interests but also because there is always an inclination towards someone from one’s own caste.

#### ❖ **Socio-economic Status /Class**

Another important factor under the ambit of selection criteria is the socio-economic position of a woman including her financial condition. We noted this connection by evaluating the amount of money the ten leaders that we interviewed and asked this question to, had spent on their campaigning (one of them had spent 1-2 lakh and the

average range was about 40,000 to 60,000). We also noted that a lot of aspirational women who have the desire to run are not able to contest due to the financial constraints. A lot of women cited money to be a factor for the selection criteria of a woman from the SHG for the PRI. “I would prefer recommending a woman who is economically stable and has a good earning husband so that they can spend on the welfare of the village community”, said one of the SHG women.

Once again, on a theoretical level, almost all the members of various SHGs believed in values such as equality and inclusivity when it came to class. They believed that these values are the primary lessons that their membership to an SHG has taught them. However, in practice and in relation to the PRI, class mattered significantly. For example, one of the women said, “these upper class *pradhans* cannot and will not understand the life of poverty. We need somebody who is determined for the cause of poverty alleviation.” Here, we saw a contrasting link between financial status of a woman that is being recommended and her social status. However, the uniform factor that has played out in the selection criteria based on all these structures, is the assurance of interests and needs by one’s own.

Furthermore, we also observed that almost all SHGs had a prominent social structure in place, within them, with respect to class and caste, and this prominence had a major role to play in the influence explained above.

### ❖ Gender

One prominent theme that stood out across our interviews with the women, SHGs and PRI members alike, was the significance of the husband's inclination towards development and politics as a criterion for the woman's eligibility to run for *panchayat* elections. A significant proportion of women, when questioned on the selection criteria of their female leaders, spoke about the capabilities, education level and developmental

drive of their husbands. For instance, most of the SHG women nominated Sangeeta as their female *pradhan*, based on her husband's desire to run for the seat and his promises of bettering the community and the village. As one woman narrates, "He is highly educated and is aware of the developmental problems of the village. He ran in the general category, but could not win. Ever since he ran in Sangeeta's name in the general seat, we have rallied behind him, providing him with our voting support".

Sangeeta's husband was able to garner the SHG support by virtue of his inclination to develop the village and community. At the same time, however, we are unable to ignore the gendered implications of such an occurrence, which can be marked as an internalization of the *pradhan pati* phenomenon as mentioned in the earlier section.

We also witnessed the robust intersection between gender and caste, during our focus group discussions on caste. There was a consensus among the women that their reaction to an inter-caste marriage, would differ based on gender, with many expressing that they would be able to support their son in his wishes to pursue an intercaste marriage, but not their daughter. As expressed by one SHG member, "If my son wants to marry a girl from a different caste, I would listen to him and try to understand him, but I would be against it if it was my daughter. If my daughter had an intercaste marriage, I would not resort to violence, but I would cut her out of my life". We observed the above paradox through the lens of honour as ideas of honour have been deeply engrained within the community in focus. The foundation,, itself, of these ideas is highly gendered as a girl's caste and life is assumed to be attached to her husband's.

#### ❖ Other factors

Some of other factors that further helped in shaping the criteria, are education of the woman, education of the husband, their nature and will to serve and help and their connect to the community. "We made her the *pradhan* because of her kind and trustworthy nature and her education", said one of the women in relation to Shanti Devi.

Another woman said the following on being enquired about the nomination of Sangeeta, “Her husband is very educated and really wishes to help and serve all of us.

We observed that, while caste and class, are the major factors that influenced the choices of SHG members with respect to the nomination of a woman, there do exist certain small factors that tie up the influences and sometimes act as a disguise to hide the visibility of the dominant influence.

## 5.5 Recommendations

- **Emphasis on the individual and personal attributes and leadership qualities of the woman when choosing a leader** - As previously discussed, many women who were nominated for *Pradhans* were nominated because their husbands were development-oriented and were supportive of her running. Despite this, one SHG group said that when choosing a woman candidate from the SHG group, they focused on the personal attributes and characteristics of the woman herself as to whether she would make a good leader. This awareness should be encouraged amongst other SHG groups.
- **Introduce a Self-Nomination Process** - As we observed, many natural leaders who emerged during the activities were not being nominated for positions of leadership. To address this, we suggest implementing a self-nomination process, whereby every woman has the opportunity to stand and make her case as to why she should be chosen as a leader, even if she is not selected to represent the SHG.
- **Select and Approach Potential Leaders for Training** - Many women who show strong leadership capabilities may not have the confidence to present themselves as potential leaders. RGMVP should be sensitive and alert to leadership abilities in the SHG members. Should they think it appropriate, they could approach and

select an SHG member who showed strong leadership potential and discuss with her the possibilities of further leadership training.

- **Paralleling caste oppression with gender oppression to increase identification e.g. Bandhan role play.** - While sensitization of gender oppression has been achieved through experiential activities, such as Bandhan role play, it would be imperative to also design activities that aim at sensitization of caste oppression and politics. For instance, through paralleling caste oppression with gender oppression in the Bandhan role play, the intersection of caste and gender can be highlighted.

## **5.6 Women, Self-Expression and Self-Agency**

As we noted the excellent implementation and effect of the SHG model, we could not help but observe the gap in the spillover of these empowerment and development indicators to the PRI institutions. The SHGs have worked greatly in bringing to life the power of collective women action but it has somewhat lacked in helping women develop self-expression and self-agency within the PRI institutions, which have proved to be significant development indicators. We aim to explore this lack through our observations of the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon, as discussed below.

While we encountered one woman who said, “We need the support of our husbands due to our lack of education and biological gender differences”, we also came across a woman who expressed deep concern against the existence of this phenomenon. “I am well aware of the prevalence of *Pradhan Pati* and I find it to be extremely detrimental for true development. If I ever get the opportunity to become a leader, I would try to the best of my capabilities to combat this problem.”

### **(a) Meeting Attendance and Mobility**

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In our study, we noted that majority of women leaders are unable to attend all or most of the meetings due to their household work, children, in-laws and Mobility problems. Thus, it would usually be their husbands or other male members of the family that would attend meetings and take care of the official work. However, there were some women who understood their duties more than the others and thus tried to attend as many meetings as possible. “I am not able to attend all the meetings because of my small kid. I attend the meetings that are near, and my husband attends all those that are far. He, only, takes me to the meetings and other required places”, says Rekha, a Ward Member in the *Panchayati Raj*.

We also observed that women did not regard attending the meetings as an integral part of their duties as they themselves had internalized the prevalent nature of the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon. Thus, they were of the belief that this outside work is under the domain of the male members even if they were in the position. They regarded this to be a joint work deal. “I will try to retain this seat even after 5 years if I get people's cooperation but I don't have much hopes as the villagers have constantly been asking me to leave this politics business and stay at home. This is mainly because I can't go around alone, and someone has to take care of my mobility as my husband does not get any time from his service and I also have to take care of my child”, says the Ward Member in the village, *Pure Abhiman Singh*.

We also observed that women did not really desired to take on the task of attending more meetings than the ones absolutely required as then they would have to manage their household work accordingly which could also mean them getting up at 4 or 5 in the morning.

One woman, however, was opposed to the idea of not attending meetings and believed in perseverance when it came to managing it with the household work. Her name is Shanti Yadav and she is a teacher and a terrific *Pradhan*. “I attend all meetings and even

go to far-away meetings myself. Since people know me and my work, they help me drop and sometimes my but even when I am not able to arrange a vehicle, I walk my way to the meetings. I get up at 3 or 2 in the morning and sleep at 12 or 12:30. I do a lot of hard work and believe it is highly important for I believe it is essential for women to come out and voice out as it is essential for their confidence and for the country's overall progress", she says.

### **(b) Illiteracy and Level of education**

In our study, we observed that the majority of women leaders were either illiterate or had received very little education, mostly upto high school or the intermediate level.

*"Hum kahaan padhe hain didi (what would we have studied)"*, has been one of the most common responses of the women when asked about their level of education. However, one out of the ten women leaders that we interviewed had studied upto the graduation level, having received a Bachelor's degree. She has been noted as one of the most influential and empowered *Pradhans* in our study. We also observed that all in all, education did not really play a very important role in the whole operative mechanism of women in *Panchayati Raj*. This, however, is on contrast with the logic provided to us for the prevalence of the phenomena of *Pradhan Pati* in PRI.

Furthermore, we observed a direct link in women's confidence, the phenomenon of *Pradhan Pati* and the level of education. *"Since the women are not literate enough, it becomes necessary for their husbands to help in their duties"*, is what one of the older men of one of the villages said on being enquired about the existence of this phenomena.

Many women also regarded their low level of education as a barrier to their desire of standing for any post in the *Panchayati Raj*. Almost all the women stressed on the need

for education in a politically charged setup like the PRI. However, it was also noted that most of the husbands that play the role of a proxy husband were also not very educated as compared to their wives. In some cases, they had received even less amount of education. This raises a considerable amount of doubt in the link that we are trying to establish and leaves us to speculate further the patriarchal nature of this phenomena.

### **(c) Knowledge of and Participation in roles and responsibilities.**

The criterion of 'knowledge and fulfillment of roles and responsibilities' was measured based only three parameters. First knowledge of reservation and participation in campaigning and election process. Second, knowledge of and participation in the duties and functions of office. Third, knowledge regarding needs of the village and community as well as participation in fulfilling the same.

According to our research sample, of the ten women who held PRI offices, only three represented significant knowledge of high level of participation along the three defined parameters. All of these women were able to list out developmental goals of their village and the steps taken to meet them. For instance, while one woman spoke of increasing rations of the poor and pensions of poor widows in her village, another woman spoke of the efforts made by her to solve her village's card pension and water problems.

Four female *Panchayat* members represented a low to medium level of knowledge and level of participation along the said parameters. While one woman revealed limited knowledge about *Panchayat* functions and roles. "My husband usually takes care of the work", she said.

Another said that the "campaign was mostly run by gents as only they knew about the finances".

The remaining three elected women representatives had no knowledge or evidence of participation in the same, with two of these women asking us to interview their husbands instead of them.

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#### **(d) First Time Entrants into Politics**

According to our research data, out of the ten female *Panchayat* members we interviewed, seven of these women were first time entrants. Of the remaining three female *Panchayat* leaders, two of the members had retained their seat thrice, while one had retained her seat twice. Moreover, given that only three of the female *Panchayat* members had retained their seat, it stands as corroboration of the low retention rates of this position, particularly during the second and third time.

#### **(e) Housewives and Family Dynamics**

Out of the 10 interviews that we conducted with *Pradhans* and BDC members, 9 were housewives and one was working as a teacher. It was clear that the burden of domestic household chores and childcare was assumed by these women and many reported that they must complete their household duties before attending to their duties as *Pradhan*.

One woman said that “household work is primary. If I have to go anywhere, I get up at 5 in the morning, manage my work and then go.” One *Pradhan*, Mamta Devi, said that it was sometimes difficult to manage the work of both housewife and a *Pradhan* because there is “a lot of household work” and admitted that sometimes her husband attends the meetings on her behalf since she has to stay home and mind her child. This was a common revelation by many of the *Pradhans*.

However, two *Pradhans* succeeded in managing their household duties and *Pradhan* responsibilities. Shanti Yadav, who also worked as a teacher, proudly told us that “*the household work, animals, going to meetings, other work, food, kids, etc. Everything I manage myself.*” She only slept 3 or 4 hours a night to finish all her work which she was insistent that she finished “*on time.*” This could indicate that women who have stepped

out of the home and are already working in the public sphere are used to juggling their household duties and their other working commitments simultaneously.

Another *Pradhan*, Nafeeza, who successfully managed her *Pradhan* duties cited living in a joint family and the support from her husband as factors in doing so. She said that if she has to go for a meeting, her family will make food for everyone so that she can attend the meeting. She told us that she had never missed a meeting because of domestic work.

Many women reported that their husbands and their families were “very happy” when they won their seat and said that they had gained respect in their families because of their position. Thus, it is evident that whilst taking on their responsibilities as a *Pradhan*, women’s work has doubled as they are the primary caregivers to their children and take care of the majority of the domestic work. This can impact on the time that they can dedicate to attending to their duties as a *Pradhan*. Although we have seen shifts in the division of this domestic labour, it is usually the joint families of the women - particularly the mothers and daughters - who step in to alleviate the burden of domestic work so that the *Pradhan* may go to the meetings. Domestic work is still very much considered a woman’s job and it does not appear that their husbands are shouldering their fair share of this work.

#### **(f) Contesting Elections on Own Volition**

Some of the *Pradhans* that we interviewed told us that it had not been their decision to run for elections but that they were instructed to do so by their husbands. One woman said that “the desire (to run) was of my husband only, but then the Mahila seat came, he didn’t give up but became the *Pradhan* through me. He thought when I have a wife then why not make her stand.”

Further, during one interview the female *Pradhan* remained silent whilst her husband spoke about winning the *Pradhan* seat. When asked whether he had also run for a seat he replied that he had run through his wife's name. However, despite this, two women said that it had been their decision to run for the elections. Both had expressed desire to give back to the community and help the poor. One woman when asked if her husband had run for *Pradhan* said that he had but when the woman's seat was there she wanted to run herself.

## 5.8 Recommendations

- **Training after becoming *Pradhan*** - training programmes should be developed and held for women once they have been elected as *Pradhans*. The programme should contain information of the structure of PRI and her roles and responsibilities. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that the real journey begins only once she has entered into the position of power. It should be stressed that she has made a commitment to those who have voted for her and her sisters that have supported her. It should be highlighted to her the importance of attending the PRI meetings as much as possible and to have her voice heard.
- **Awareness of the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon** - Patriarchy is highly institutionalized and reinforced in rural villages and especially in PRI. Women must become more aware of its influences if they are to begin to critically challenge its role and correct the imbalances of power.
- **Mobility** - Many women reported that they could not attend PRI meetings because the meetings were held late at night and far from the women's homes. One suggestion to ensure that women can attend meetings in a safe and guaranteed manner is to establish a collective car/transport-pooling system, whereby other women who have access to transport can volunteer the use of their transportation to bring the woman to the meeting. This would again, compound the element of sisterhood that exists within the SHGS. This can be conducted on a rotating basis so that the burden does not fall exclusively to any one person.



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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

#### Survey to be filled in BLOCK CAPITALS

**Date:**

**Name of Village:**

**Name of SHG:**

**Number of years that the SHG has been functioning:**

**Full name of woman:**

Age:

Religion (if other than Hindu):

Social Category:

Number of children:

Total number of people living in the home:

Education status:

Education status of husband:

Source of household income:

Year became an SHG member:

Family member who has run for panchayat:

Have you received information about panchayat:

Would you run for panchayat:

If yes, why?

If no, why?

If finances were not an issue, would you run for panchayat:

What other factors would stop you from running for panchayat:

When are the next elections for panchayat:

Could you run for panchayat without the support of your husband:

Could you run for panchayat without the support of your sisters:

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## Focus Group Questions

**Focus Group 1:** Caste and panchayat – trying to delve further in to the caste dynamics of SHG groups.

- What caste does everyone belong to?
- When did you become aware that there was such a thing as caste?
- Have you ever seen incidences of caste discrimination in the village?
- Have you ever seen incidences of caste discrimination in the SHG?
- What was your perception of caste before you became a member of a SHG?
- Have your perceptions changed?
- Do you see caste in politics/panchayat?
- Do you think that people of the same caste only look after people from their own caste?
- Do you think some castes are more powerful and keep the power to themselves?
- Do you think that leaders, despite of their caste, can look after the interests of the community?
- Would you be more influenced to vote for someone for panchayat because of their caste?
- What elements of a leader unite everyone of different castes?

**Focus Group 2:** Delve in to the selection process of women for leadership positions.

- How is a leader supposed to be?
- How are women leaders in the home? (give examples)
- Do we see each other (in SHG) as leaders?
- For leadership positions, how do we select the woman from the SHG to run for

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this position?

- What characteristics must she have?
- Do we ask her if she wants to run for the role?
- How do we support her?
- When she wins, is her victory our victory?
- What input do we have in to her she uses her power?
- Have we seen any examples of changes in the village after she has won?
- Can she use this power however she wants?

## **Longer questions and prompts for individual interviews with women leaders:**

1. Tell us about your journey from hearing about the panchayat raj to contesting elections to becoming a leader?
  - Where and from whom did you hear about these elections?
  - How did you decide to contest these elections?
  - Elaborate on your campaign strategy?
  - Did you receive any help (from family members, RGMVP or otherwise) in this journey?
  
2. Tell us about your family.
  - Are they supportive of you?
  - Is there any change in dynamic before and after becoming a leader?
  - How is your relationship with your husband? Has it changed before and after?
  - How do you balance your commitments to your family and your work with the panchayat raj?
  - Do you plan on having any more children?
  - What do you envisage for the future of your children?
  
3. Tell us about your role as a leader?
  - What are your priorities?
  - What is the most rewarding part of being a leader?
  - What is the toughest part of being a leader?
  - How has it changed the way in which people treat and look at you?

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- How has it changed the way that you look at yourself?
  - How often do you attend panchayat meetings?
  - What are the barriers, if any, that make it difficult to attend these meetings?
  - Do you think your life has improved as a result of becoming a leader or do you regret it?
  - What advice would you have to give another women who is considering to contest the elections?

4. Do you think it is important for women to be in these roles?

- Why do you think there is reservation for women in panchayat raj?
- Do you think it is important for reservation to be there?
- What different perspective/benefits do women bring to these roles?
- Due to reservation, do you think women still retain equal status as members in panchayat raj?

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