

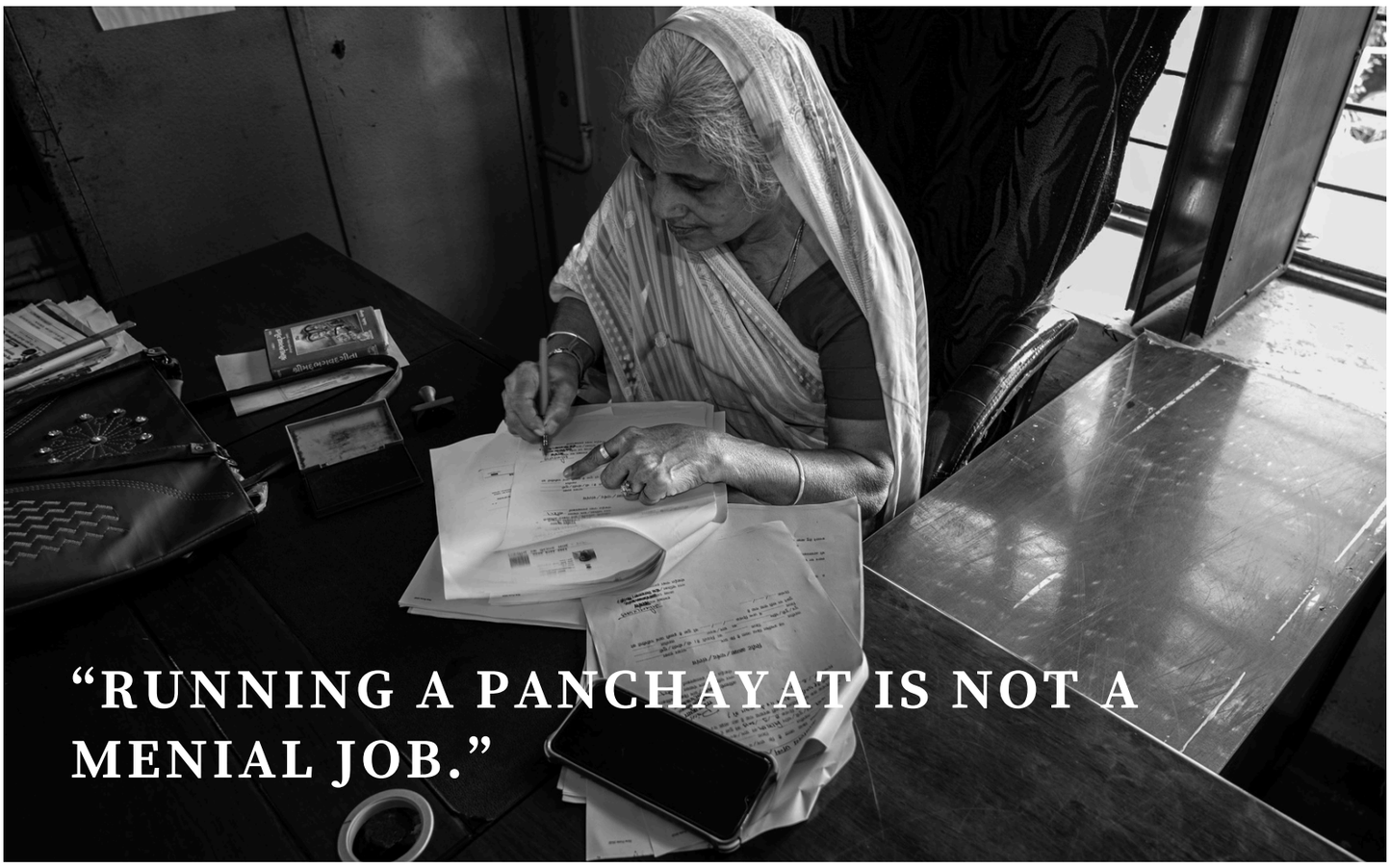
‘YOU HAVE TO RAISE MULTIPLE FISTS!’
Women-Led Governance In Rajasthan

THE HUNGER PROJECT INDIA

"We’re confident… We have earned our right to be here… We have work to show for it… They can't just bully us," are some prominent phrases one hears repeatedly as we traverse the empowerment journey of elected women representatives across gram panchayats in Pindwara Block, Rajasthan. What started with becoming self-aware of their leadership capacities in 2020 (after gram panchayat elections) soon translated into a potent, passionate, persistent voice for advancing local democracy where all can participate and be heard. Their presence in public office has and continues to democratise public spaces as more women step out to attend meetings and push for inclusive change. It is doubly critical as they genuinely level the playing field despite the many obstacles stacked against them.

In light of this, the photo essay draws upon individual leadership acts of courage and perseverance, along with collective efforts in the form of federations and other citizen formations, and how each action and experience is a determined attempt to deepen democracy in local governance. We witness a critical process of consciousness-raising and gaining knowledge about systems and structures, enabling elected women to realise the “power within”, emerge as individual leaders in their own right, as role models for each other, building solidarities and negotiating a better future for all, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Time and again, these powerful narratives of empowered leadership demonstrate that women matter on their own. They refuse to cede this hard-won ground. They are keeping a watch on the bullies, the rabble-rousers, and the sluggish fellow male panchayat administrators. They are holding themselves and others accountable as they negotiate their way through and challenge the bastions of patriarchy. They are willing to stir the pot as and when needed.



“RUNNING A PANCHAYAT IS NOT A MENIAL JOB.”

A former ward member (2005-2010), Savita Rawal (65, sarpanch) of Vatera GP is highly motivated and determined to correct the many wrongs that plagued her panchayat. Not having completed her schooling, Savita feels strongly about the need to to educate girls. “I upgraded the high school to senior secondary school to ensure no girls dropped out after class 8th.”

Her idea of leisure comes from serving the people of her panchayat. Her five-year engagement has enough fight and moments of triumph to keep her going, she graciously said.

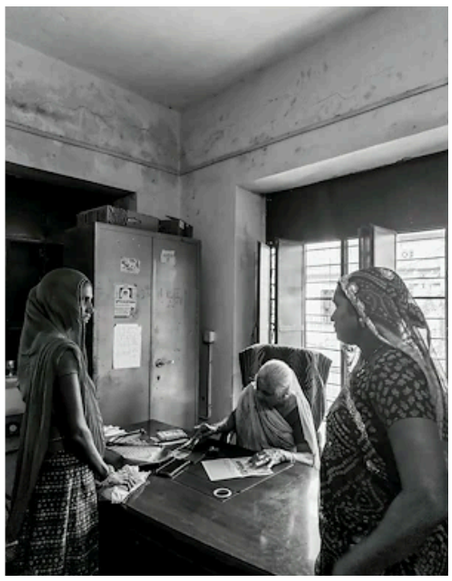
Running a panchayat is not a menial job, Savita candidly maintained. “It requires so much more of me as a sarpanch to ensure every service is functioning smoothly. Hiccups will come and go. What is crucial is the intention!” Bursting with earnest joy, she considers her legacy to be one of transformative change in which accessing public services and participating in panchayat life is a reality for all and not a few. Her age is not a hindrance, she argued. “If anything, it grounds me in many ways. I will not hesitate or use my age as an excuse to run away from my responsibilities.”

Access to safe and clean drinking water was one such issue that caused her many sleepless nights. Every time she got a spot sanctioned for digging bore wells, she would hit a bottleneck (for instance, some members of the nearby Adivasi village raised the concern about exhausting their access to water, or in another spot, the water hardness levels were high, which made it unsuitable for consumption. After much struggle and persuasion, she finally installed six borewells with the help of Jalday Vibhag (water department), which now produces sweet water. “This became urgent because the tap water that almost all houses receive remains hard. The situation is much improved. Otherwise, people had to call tankers to get sweet (fresh) water.”

Another proud moment was ensuring stress-free, affordable access to roads across the panchayat. Reducing travel distance from 11 km to 4 km has massively impacted how people move in and out of the panchayat. This required the coming together of the federation (a collective of elected women representatives) and multiple meetings within the group and with the district collector. She commends the federation's role in facilitating this action. “Together, we fight!” Five years later, people from 12 villages across three panchayats “tell us that the improved road connection has significantly changed their lives for the better.” Connecting to local markets has been most helpful for farmers as they have an enhanced chance at greater trade. Easy mobility has greatly improved access to livelihood opportunities (and the hope for higher incomes). “Even for us elected representatives, reaching the district office is no longer a tedious task.” She added that the 600 Adivasi people in Kharadoli village benefited the most due to this road. “It is truly a lifeline for them as they can easily access sub-health centre, anganwadi, school, market, etc.”

As she nears the end of her tenure, she hopes to prepare and contest in the forthcoming gram panchayat elections. “If I return, next on my agenda is to focus on health services - upgrade the sub-centre to a primary health centre (PHC). And also build a veterinary hospital (in light of the lumpy skin infection among cattle in 2022, which adversely affects milk production).”





Left: Girls' volleyball team (in the making) at the school upgraded to class XII; Right: Savita in a panchayat office meeting women and men coming in to get various documents (scholarship forms, pensions-related issues, linkages to PDS shop, etc.) signed.

“WE ARE FIGHTING FOR OUR LUNGS”

Modest but determined, Mewa Devi (42, ward member, Vatera GP) moves with great gumption and dexterity to ensure all panchayat facilities are functional in her ward. Her demure personality tends not to reveal the full impact her leadership has had. But on further prodding, we learned that people from three other wards, because of proximity, often reach out to her to get their grievances addressed.

From making sure pregnant women can access Take Home Rations, to regularising vaccinations and helping them complete their documents so they can take benefit of social security schemes such as the Matru Vandana (a government-run cash incentive program for pregnant and lactating women) to raising awareness about mothers' health and the impact of undernutrition, to monitoring school infrastructure, to installing hand pumps in her ward, she is a tireless worker.



For Mewa, the most gratifying yet the most arduous task of her tenure was to convince many men in her (Garasiya, an indigenous tribe) community to give up marble- cutting and opt for alternative jobs.

The stone-carving industry, which is built on the labour of predominantly Adivasi and Dalit men, is causing many to fall prey to the health hazard of silicosis, a long-term lung illness.“It is a deadly disease choking men to death who have to work for hours without any protective gear, and leaving many bereaved families grappling with loss of income and life. Somebody has to save them.” One of the reasons men, primarily daily wagers, would opt for this job is that it paid a relatively decent amount, which afforded their families a small financial support. “They get paid between INR 700-1000 (USD 8-12) per day. More than a MGNREGA job!”

However, she was committed to intervening and finding some way out of this recurring tragedy caused by inhaling silica dust. She and other ward members went door to door, raising awareness about alternative livelihood opportunities (agricultural farming, construction work, house painting, tailoring, poultry farming).

“Women from 15 families affected by this disease were also encouraged to join self-help groups to get credit access and start small businesses.” For those who were already reeling from the devastating effects of working in these marble-cutting workshops for years, Mewa helped with putting their documents together so that they could apply for compensation. About 50 families managed to receive INR 300,000 (USD 3585; one-time government assistance to the affected person after certification) each as a result of her and the sarpanch’s efforts.

In addition, the federation members put forth their concerns to the MLA’s office in 2023 with a request to provide mandatory protective gear or close the factories. “That struggle is still on,” Mewa said unperturbed.

This is her legacy, she smiled, “People recognise me. See me! Trust me! What can I do for them?”



While Mewa ghts on, Kaniya Devi (28, sarpanch, Telpur GP), a young, feisty yet poised Dalit elected representative, has gone a step ahead and got one main stone-cutting workshop in the vicinity closed after 60 silica-exposed workers listened to her, understood the extremely expensive medical costs they could incur, and recognised the hazardous nature of the occupation and its long-lasting impact on them and their families.

“Because they left the factory, it shut down.” 100 people now receive INR 1500 (USD 18) per

month pension as per the silicosis policy and one-time government assistance. “We would like to advocate for an increased monthly pension as this is too meagre an amount, but clubbing it with other social welfare schemes (like Palanhar scheme to support children of silicosis-affected families) provides some relief for these people.”

In her five years in office, she arranged work permits, helped access 75 pensions (widow and old age), applied for subsidies from the local government for 100 houses and a bridge under the Public Works Department (which is now ready to use), appointed ANM (auxiliary nurse midwife), police patrolling to address domestic violence, had two additional classrooms built at the high school, and stopped a considerable number of child marriages amongst Adivasi families. “12 girls were re-enrolled in 2023 after many negotiations with family,” she proudly shared.

Many people still find the idea of Dalit women in leadership positions unpalatable. But Kaniya is showing the way, and she attributes her conviction and sense of confidence to both the trainings attended and her parents.

Despite the challenges of a caste society, her mother (a government-felicitated ASHA worker) and father (a chemist) ensured that Kaniya and her two sisters received proper education. She also acknowledged the massive role of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in empowering her family as one’s eye roved across photos of Babasaheb throughout the house. Her father added, “Education is what makes a person fearless. Babasaheb taught us this.”

When asked what other works remain, she mentioned installing street lights and tree planting. “All of these don’t even require me to come back as a sarpanch. I now know what process each one entails and where the sarpanch sits,” she added in jest.

Both tenures show that Mewa and Kaniya are in no way simply passive beneficiaries of reservations. They are unfazed, steadfast and fully grasp the significance of the vital support network created by the federation, which encourages them and rallies behind them from time to time. Towards the end, Kaniya quickly reiterated (speaking of district interface meetings, which addressed many of their issues), “When all of us go together, they have no choice but to listen to us.”





Left: Kaniya acknowledged the massive role of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in empowering her and many in her community;
Right: With her two younger sisters, who see her as a role model.



“ DONT BULLY ME. YOU CAN'T SCARE ME WITH THESE DISTRACTIONS!”

Kailash built a 3 km road that gave 150 households in Nat Basti (Scheduled Caste in Rajasthan who have often been discriminated against because of their caste position) easy access to panchayat services, and got housing approved for them under PM Awas scheme.

Kailash Kunwar (55, ward member, Nandiya GP) sat in the panchayat bhawan, sharing excerpts of small and big victories, challenges, and reflections from her tenure. A ward member for the second time in a row, she minced no words and kicked off with a striking statement that paints the reality of the majority of elected women representatives, “Powerful men (referring to the members of her upper caste community) will find ways to distract us (women in public office), keep us from performing our duties, find faults in our ways of doing things, remind us of traditions, want us to behave as proxies. But I know my worth and capabilities.” She instantly acknowledged the support she received via trainings and meetings that enabled her to take such firm positions in a hostile environment. “They taught me how to do politics intelligently.”

With almost a decade under her belt, Kailash pridefully counted the range of development works she undertook – removing encroachment by upper caste people and making land available for a much-needed anganwadi, building a 3 km road that gave 150 households in Nat Basti (Scheduled Caste in Rajasthan who have been often discriminated against because of their caste position) easy access to panchayat services, housing for them under PM Aawas scheme, enrolling girls from other backwards castes into schools, appointing two female doctors and building a new delivery room in the PHC.

Her leadership is one of grit and tenacity. The most prominent example was her fight in 2021 against powerful men from her community, who tried to encroach again on a part of the street in front of the PHC. “The contractor brought labour to build illegal shops that would have hampered the ambulance or other traffic from reaching the health centre. They tried to create a conflict by pushing the labourers to the front as I, other women and men from the village, ward members and sarpanch (her husband) protested against the infringement.” She immediately called the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) and the District Collector. The police also arrived. They confiscated all the building materials and warned the contractor. “Instead of a shop, I have not installed a hand pump which can be used by all.”

Because of her dogged pursuits, which constantly threatened patriarchy and caste hierarchy, she and her husband have been isolated by her community. “But I have no fear, as the village people stand with us.” Even to her husband, she would tersely remark, “You are my husband at home. But when it comes to panchayat governance, I will stand against you too if needed.”

In another instance, Kailash confronted the SDM at a Jan Sunwai (public hearing) meeting called to address the issue of food grain delivery. She had mobilised all the people facing trouble accessing their food grains at the PDS shop, but soon realised that the SDM was not in the mood to listen. “He misbehaved with the women who approached him with their complaints, asking that they be removed from the meeting.” She stepped forward and "scolded" the SDM, “This is our panchayat; these are our people. We are the government! How dare you dismiss them without hearing their issues?" She forced him to take the applications and do the needful. She later complained about the SDM to the collector, and the former was transferred for his erratic and condescending behaviour.

She maintains, “All of us panchayat functionaries are meant to serve the people, not put obstacles in each other’s work. Men, especially, need to learn to share this responsibility instead of playing a power game.”





“HOW WILL WE CHANGE OUR CIRCUMSTANCES IF WE DON’T RAISE OUR FISTS”

Menaka Devi (30, sarpanch, Nitoda GP) was a member of an SHG even before entering public office. “Being part of a collective gave me an acute sense of its power, and I thought as a president, along with other elected representatives, perhaps I could make a difference.” More importantly, she decided to contest the election because “the former representative was not performing his role properly. Any conversation in the panchayat governance-related matter did not reach us women as it should have.” She saw citizens’ access to information as crucial before they could make their rightful demands with clarity and confidence.

Seen as an articulate and pertinacious voice by other women, Menaka took on the daunting yet rewarding task of governing. “The leadership workshops I attended helped make me more assertive and assured of my role and right to be here as an Adivasi woman.”

She acted on multiple fronts—she grappled with the authorities for two years to build three bridges, ensuring easy mobility, especially for women needing urgent medical care; mobilised the Jagruk Manch (women citizens and elected women's collective) to complain against the encroachment of common grazing land; linked the eligible families to PDS; and sensitised and encouraged women in Adivasi households to send girls to school. She urged them, "How will we change our circumstances if we don't push for our right to education?" Her efforts enabled ten girls to re-enrol after they had dropped out in the 5th grade.

Her most significant achievement was mobilising the Jagruk Manch women to shut down an illicit liquor shop nearby. "Women bear the brunt of problems caused by the sale of liquor. Alcohol-induced domestic violence and harassment on the streets were restricting women and girls' mobility." The Manch exerted pressure in an open panchayat meeting, urging the shop owner to relocate far away. "We sat in front of the shop for days, broke many bottles, disrupted their sales." They also leveraged the media to shame the contractor. The furious demonstration bore fruit, and the shop was shut down.

When asked if she would contest in the next election, she gently said, "I want to fight. I will still try to run because I want to return and do so much more. Anyway, COVID-19 cut short most of our tenure."



Left: Women waiting at a PDS shop for ration; Right: Panchayat bhawan, Nitoda gram panchayat.

AMBULANCES DELIVER MUCH-NEEDED HEALTHCARE

From the first day, Sharda Devi (50, Ward Member, Rodeya GP) took responsibility for changing the face of her ward. Welfare schemes (sanitary pads for girls in anganwadis, pensions and the Palanhar scheme for widows), monitoring mid-day meals, putting 600 feet of water pipeline, and a cremation ground - she did it all.

She shared that one of the driving forces was the unparalleled support from THP India. “They prepared us so we could raise our voice against an entrenched patriarchal and unforgiving society that is always scrutinising our every move, especially women who chose to become visible and raise a voice.”



As a School Management Committee (SMC) member, Sharda raised many issues related to girls’ access to sanitary pads, separate toilets, electricity in classrooms,

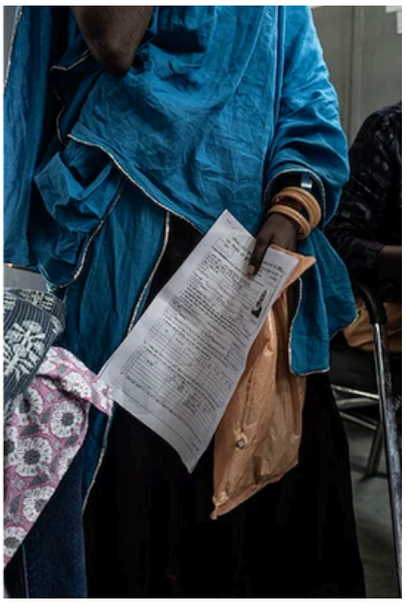
“Many village people joined during the SMC meeting as a show of support, demanding students’ safety. A case was led against him despite the principal’s efforts to protect him. He was finally suspended.” She added, “The govt. has put all these platforms (and institutional mechanisms) in place. It’s up to us how we use them. Our participation is what makes them effective. We can hold the school accountable and vice versa.”

Despite barriers, she feels proud not only of whatever small legacy she hopes she has built but also of her membership in the federation. “Sangathan made many things possible.” She sees the federation as an opportunity and a possibility.

She narrated the process of starting three ambulance services to ensure people could access the primary health centre in emergencies. It was especially critical for pregnant women and elderly people. “The federation members went to the panchayat meeting, raised it at the district level, and submitted a letter to the MLA. And within one year, the service started, and people of five-gram panchayats are taking advantage of it.” She proudly added, “Of these, four are Adivasi-dominated areas.”

Millions in rural India still struggle to access healthcare because basic medical facilities remain unavailable. Sharda made it a point to reduce the distance between the most vulnerable and healthcare. “The reality is, poor people get poor care. And it angers me that we are unable to change this situation for the better,” she said gently but strictly. She immediately added that the pace might be slow, but the change was happening. "Step by step, we are getting the job done."





With a few months left before the term ends, Sharda contemplates whether to recontest again. She knows change is hard. She has built a momentum. However, for now, her main concern is finishing pending tasks. One thing that remains is the appointment of additional female doctors in the PHC. “Hopefully, I can put in an application before my term ends this year.”

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