

A Case Study on Women leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) at the Gram Panchayat level



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Location of Gram Panchayat: Soukani Da Kot Panchayat in District Kangra of Himachal Pradesh

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I. Executive Summary:

This case study focuses on the life and accomplishments of Smt. Mamta Devi, a young woman from the marginalised Schedule Caste (SC) community of Soukni-da-Kot Panchayat. Smt. Mamta Devi is currently serving her 2nd term as the President of her Panchayat. This Panchayat is located in the Dharamshala block of District Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. This case study explores how elected women leaders in the PRI succeed in their role despite the highly patriarchal and traditional social norms prevalent in the region.

Interview schedules, Observations and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to elicit the required information including the demographic profile of the respondents, factors affecting EWR in performing their roles and in obtaining their expectation and suggestions for better leaderships.

Smt. Mamta Devi's story is an excellent story of women-empowerment, leadership in PRI and community development. Mamta Devi has significantly contributed in the development of her Panchayat. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors led to the success of Mamta. These factors include developing herself first through awareness and trainings from odd jobs for her livelihood, good intension to do something for herself and others through network with agencies like CORD (NGO) and government before the leadership role of becoming an effective and capable Pradhan. She did commendable job by engaging people in PRI not by just knowing and understanding the PRI process, issues and challenges but doing concrete action for results. Some work examples in her 1st and 2nd term exhibited this very well i.e. mining employment issue, infrastructure development, women mobilisation, livelihood improvements, issues of law college etc. As

Pradhan, she further built positive relationships with all stakeholders within and without the Panchayat including local MLAs, ministers, corporate etc. and made sure that her activities and policies didn't alienate those who opposed her. By displaying maturity and active engagement in her interactions and using a direct and focused approach in problem solving, Smt. Mamta, from a poor and marginalised family has been able to bring people together and demonstrate positive changes in the community and local-self-governance.

Smt. Mamta Devi believes that intent and spirit of the 73rd Constitutional amendments can only be achieved with a strong political will towards empowering Panchayat and not just treating them as mere agents for implementing various programs and schemes in a top-down manner. Autonomy and community needs need to be prioritised and top-down planning, delayed decisions on fund disbursement and red-tapeism need to be changed. She acknowledges that there are some efforts for decentralising by way of shifting of funds and responsibility to the Panchayat. Mamta's struggles, issues and challenges as an outcome of this case study could be further leveraged by concerned trainers, stakeholders and policy makers in this domain to strengthen leadership and build efficiency in the institutions of Panchayati Raj in India.

II. Introduction and Methodology:

Women are changing the nature of governance in India. Women's increased political participation has yielded positive results—development issues such as education, health, nutrition, increase in family income take centre in interventions by PRI. Women representatives have demonstrated that they have critical information about community resources, learn quickly about how to lead effective community-centred development, are inclined to be more inclusive and are adept at managing funds.

Despite such positive results, women remain largely excluded from the PRI and local governance structures. Proxy politics, power brokering and gender-based discrimination continue and many women sarpanch have had to face extreme violence for challenging existing power centres in their communities. Often, male family members deliberately position women in their families to stand for elections so that when they win (under representative quota for women) the men can influence and control the PRI through the woman from their family.

In his field notes on 'Pradhanis in New Panchayats' in Merut district, Pai (1998) revealed that reservations provided by the government had forced women to contest elections and that provision of reservation has not led them to participate in local bodies. Mostly, Presidents were illiterate, belong to better off families, they do not work outside their homes and contested elections due to family pressure and their decisions were driven by family/community and not by themselves.

Nambiar (2001) in her study of 'Making the Gramsabha work' noted that majority of the women reported that they were not informed or invited to meetings of the Gram Sabha and were hesitant to attend meetings either due to the presence of village elders or because attending meetings would cause them to lose their day's wages or neglect household duties.

Despite the 50% reservation for women in all three tiers of PRIs in Himachal Pradesh, empowering women to play their roles in PRIs actively, productively, independently, collectively and in a sustainable manner, is a big challenge due to prevalent gender inequality and gender-based discrimination in outreach and service delivery mechanism.

Objectives of the case study

The case study has the following objectives:

1. To understand the factors that enabled women representatives to participate and lead in the PRI at the Gram Panchayat level despite the challenges and constraints they face.
2. To understand how women's participation and leadership in the PRIs is changing the dynamics in local self-governance, leading to changes in different aspects of their life.

The following aspects have been explored:

- Self-confidence and self-initiative
- Reason for contesting elections
- Freedom of speech and expression
- Nature of meetings of the Gramsabha
- Dealing with administration
- Decision making and empowerment at home
- Leadership in PRI as team leader at Gram Panchayat level
- Cooperation with multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries including co-partners
- Factors motivating EWRs to participate in Panchayat

Sample selection

District Kangra in Himachal Pradesh, is the largest and most populated district with 15 development blocks. 10 Elected Women Representatives as sample—Gram Panchayat Pradhan (Women) selected from seven development blocks on the basis of the following criteria: distance from the district headquarters, caste affiliation of EWRs, occupation of EWRs, interventions in the area by local NGOs, and linkages of EWR with Community Based Organisation (CBOs).

Smt. Mamta Devi, President of Soukani-Da-Kot Panchayat, development block Dharamshala, was selected out of 10 Pradhans because despite being from a marginalised community she has emerged as an example of successful leadership by an EWR. Mamta has been EWR (President) for her Panchayat for 7 years at the time of this case study, As this case study will confirm, Mamta has demonstrated the ability of a woman who, despite her poor family background, and without any political backing or affiliation, overcame challenges posed by discriminatory social norms.

Key research questions

Following research questions were formulated for this case study:

Research Q. 1: Does participation of a woman in PRI as elected representative influence her individual growth and development?

Research Q.2: Does participation of a woman in PRI increase her level of awareness and knowledge?

Research Q.3: Does participation of a woman in PRI as elected representative influence her participation in economic decision-making and her influence over the economic resources?

Research Q.4: Has participation of a woman as elected representative in PRI increase her mobility, network and sphere of interaction with Panchayat members at different levels, community and higher level?

Research Q:5: Is there influence of woman as EWR at household level?

Research Q.6: Does participation of EWR in PRI increase her influence and participation in social, community and political activities?

Research Q.7: Is there any change in the attitude of husband, community and male PRI members regarding women's empowerment?

Research tools

Interview schedules, Observations and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to obtain the required information. The interview schedule looked into demographic profile of the respondents, factors affecting EWR in performing their roles (as per research questions) and expectation and suggestions for better leadership.

Observations and FGDs were conducted by the Principal Investigator (PI) with the support of his two assistant field investigators who have been associated with Smt. Mamta Devi from the time of her joining the PRI and who have closely observed her as she emerged as a role model leader and President of her Panchayat in her 1st and 2nd term.

The data was collected in the months of November and December 2017.

III. Case Presentation:

Situation that triggered Smt. Mamta Devi to become EWR:

Prior to the election of Smt. Mamta Devi as Pradhan in 2011 for 1st time, the Panchayat was underdeveloped despite its proximity to the district headquarters in Dharmshala – one of the “Smart City” in India. The Panchayat was a picture of poor sanitation, unemployment and alcoholism. It was through the vision, leadership, teamwork and initiative of the current Pradhan, Smt. Mamta Devi that many of these issues have been addressed successfully through up-gram



Mamta Devi taking oath of President (1st from right)

sabhas and gram sabhas of the Panchayat and concerned stakeholders of various government departments and agencies in the last couple of years. Mamta Devi has driven her Panchayat towards becoming a model developed Panchayat.

Mamta was born on 12th August 1982 to Smt. Chimpi Devi and Shri. Laddu Ram in Sutkar Panchayat, Bharmour block in the tribal backward district of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. She was educated until 3rd grade initially in district Chamba and till 8th standard in the government school in Slate Godam, near Dharmshala, when her family shifted from district Chamba to district Kangra in search of daily wage labour. After standard 8th, Mamta had to drop out of school due to poor financial condition of family and the need for her to work at home to support

her family. At the age of 19 years, she was married to Shri. Sansar Chand of Soukni-da-Kot Panchayat. Her husband, who has also dropped out of school after completing 8th standard, encouraged her to complete her school education and so at the age of 19 she went back to school and completed her education.

Smt. Mamta Devi is 36 years old and has two children—an older son studying in 11th standard in a government school and younger daughter, studying in 9th standard in a private school as she believes that her daughter is brighter than her son and needs better quality education. Her husband works as a daily wage labourer in agriculture and rears cattle to make a living for their family.

Mamta Devi joined a Women's Group known locally as "Mahila Mandal" in 2001 facilitated by CORD, an NGO working actively in the area. Mamta considers this as the turning point in the journey of her empowerment. CORD enabled members of the Mahila Mandal with information on women's issues and how to solve them with the strength of collectives. Mahila Mandals were provided with training on leadership, developing their collective to take on tasks of community development. Financial literacy, saving and credits through Self Help Group (SHG) were facilitated within the Mahila Mandal and this further helped Mamta and other women members of the Mahila Mandal to become more economically self-reliance. All these inputs and support from the NGO helped Mamta in emerging as a strong and independent woman. Eventually, with members of her group Mamta started raising awareness and action in the community of the issues of sanitation, hygiene, alcohol abuse, and cannabis (bhang) addiction among the youth.

As a member of the group, Mamta's mobility increased—she visited banks, insurance companies, other farms and communities with her campaigns and messages for community development. She came to be recognised as a passionate, well-spoken, helpful and a very caring woman, who could make a difference in their community. As a result, she was encouraged by her community members and family to contest in the Panchayat elections for the position of Pradhan in the year 2011, on a seat reserved for women from the Scheduled Castes (SC) and she emerged victorious in the election.

Challenges in the Panchayat

In her first term as a Panchayat Pradhan, Mamta had many challenges to resolve. The problems in her Panchayat could be broken down into four main categories: infrastructure, political, social and health:

Infrastructure related problems

- The main walkways in the mountains were in poor condition and many of them were dimly lit after dark, making it unsafe to use.
- The villages that were more remote were worse off; they didn't have proper roads leading to them and didn't have access to clean water.
- The irrigation canals in the panchayat were either damaged and/or not functional
- The main road in the Panchayat was of poor quality leading to inconvenience for the residents of the Panchayat.
- There was no proper waiting area for commuters waiting for buses, especially during the heavy rainfall that affects the region in monsoons.
- A physical structure had been built for a law college, but it was not functional due to lack of approval.

Political problems

- Mining of slates was a major industry in the Panchayat but because some residents had been mining without permits, the government had banned mining and imposed large fines. This ban had pushed many residents into unemployment.
- While people were attending gram sabha meetings, at the ward level, very poor or nil up-gram sabha meetings by the residents.
- As a woman she was more visible with local Minister while pursuing the implementation of her Panchayat development work consequently, she has to go with a tag of belonging to a particular political party as a result the supporters of the opposite party perceive as an opponent.

Health and sanitation related problems:

- The health and veterinary department in the panchayat didn't have staffs and a proper building to conduct their activities.
- Prevalent open defecation and poor waste management challenges.

Social issues/problems:

- Gender discrimination and poor situation of women
- Disagreements and conflict among members of the community
- Family members of the previous Panchayat representatives were getting involved in the matters of running the Panchayat.
- High prevalence of female feticide (which is a problem all over Kangra as well)
- Lack of community hall, which could be used by members of the community for social events including marriages.

IV. Outcomes:

Having developed herself with various trainings provided by CORD and the government, Smt. Mamta Devi has emerged as an empowered woman, an effective Panchayat leader, and a community development facilitator who is engaged with the issues and challenges of her Panchayat. However, she believes that she is not resolving issues alone but with the support and engagement of Community Based Organisation (CBOs) of women where she herself is an active member and Treasurer. She utilises the network and collective strengths of these women CBOs

in each ward of the panchayat that have been facilitated by CORD. She keeps a good network with the CORD team which is working on integrated rural development in these wards through the Mahila



Exposure visit to "Smart Panchayat" in Gujarat

Mandals. Regular feedback

from her ward representatives and CBOs enables her to understand the various needs of households and the interventions required through various programs and schemes of government/departments. Mamta's work is a good example of collaboration and synergy with existing CBOs, NGOs and government agencies to leverage development efforts for her Panchayat, besides engaging the local community in their own development. In recognition of her work, Mamta has also been elected as Vice President of the Panchayat President's Association of Dharamshala, platform to exchange views and learn from each other.

At the government level, her increased mobility and interactions have enabled her to earn and use her good rapport with various MLAs, ministers and government officials. These relationships and negotiation skills that she learnt through various trainings have helped her solve multiple problems. First, with her efforts of lobbying with government the fines on slate miners were removed, leading to employment to hundreds of labourers again in her Panchayat. She also successfully negotiated for a law college to be opened in her Panchayat, resulted in access to student for law education locally.

Mamta's positive approach and relationship with various political leaders and representatives enabled her to get funding for various infrastructure projects in Panchayat. These include construction of proper walkways, new pakka road, rain shelter at bus stop, installation of solar lamps for safe and ease mobility for commuters specially of women and people with old age at night-time and reduce the risk of fall/injuries.

Funding from government was also accessed and utilised under her leadership for inaccessible areas in her Panchayat. The work includes building roads, repairing irrigation water canals, water storage tanks and pipelines to access clean water.

In addition, a proper *pakka* structure has been built for the health and veterinary department in the Panchayat. A large community centre has been built to accommodate 300-500 people to host events like marriages and hold other social events besides it being a source of revenue for the Panchayat through rent.

One of the biggest change under Mamta's leadership has been the construction and utilization of household toilets and community toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), that has resulted in improved cleanliness, health and sanitation in Panchayat.

Through active involvement in the lives of the residents of the Panchayat and CBOs, Mamta has mobilised people to participate more actively in Gram Sabhas and Up-Gram Sabhas. Furthermore, she has been able to eliminate interference and proxy running of Panchayat by male family members of EWRs, including her own. Besides these appreciative interventions she has been effective in resolving conflicts between individuals in the community.

As a result of her excellent performance as Pradhan in her first term from 2011 to 2016, Mamta was re-elected as Pradhan in 2016 despite facing stiff competition from all other women who contested this open (caste) seat. In her second term, Mamta has been continuing her work of developing her Panchayat through initiatives since first term, including on cleanliness and the new ones as following:



Government Officers visit to Mamta's Panchayat for monitoring development work

- Developing an underground garbage disposal system like “smart city” Dharmshala
- Address the issue of eviction notice from government to residents have homes in forest land.

- Construct rope-way to promote eco-tourism
- High School and a Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC)
- Infrastructure development i.e. shops and guesthouses for generating revenue and employment

V. Discussion:

Smt. Mamta Devi, like many other women Presidents of Panchayats, start their journey as elected representatives in PRI with the motivation they receive from their community members, especially their families and women from their CBOs such as the Mahila Mandal. Reservation for women and marginalised communities such as SC/ST in PRI has definitely helped Mamta in



Mamta Devi participating in community development event

initiating her journey as a leader in Panchayat. She has consolidated her position and earned a second term on the basis of the results she has delivered in her Panchayat. She acknowledges that she has been supported in delivering

these results by the various training and exposures she has received and because of the support of NGOs and the vast network of CBOs of women supported by NGO. She believes that her win over three other candidates in the election for the second term can be attributed to the development work that she successfully demonstrated in the previous term and good communication and trust she has with members of her Panchayat.

This case study looks at various dimensions of the empowerment framework – *material, cognitive, perceptual and relational*. Mamta Devi’s association with Mahila Mandal as a leader actively facilitated by an NGO, access to credit/finance through Self Help Groups/banks and various program and schemes of government and related agencies, MGNREGA has expanded her material base and enabling her to become socially and economically self-reliant. It has also created a resource base for sustainable livelihood for villagers through expanded



“Beti Bachao Beti Padoo” event being conducted at the community centre built

network. She also experienced *‘power within’*: feelings of freedom, strength, self-identity and increase in her levels of confidence and self-esteem. However, still in the society, prevalence of gender discrimination is most deeply entrenched in the family, evident in attitudes towards daughters in law, daughters, the gender-based division of work, roles and responsibilities as well as the mind-set towards domestic violence and issues of ownership and inheritance of land. Mamta emerged as a role model by challenging these norms within her own family when gave preference to good quality education for her daughter rather than son, which is the norm in her community and thereby also endorsing the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padoo* campaign.

At the social level, an encouraging trend is that women have been able to challenge the norm of *purdah* (Veil) in front of their elders and senior villagers especially men. Women’s emergence as leaders in the local Community Based Organisations (CBOs), i.e., SHGs and Mahila Mandals, has immensely helped in preparing them for greater involvement in public life—beginning with

the platform of local self-governance these women are now poised as prospective leaders in the local political field. There is still a long way to go to completely change discriminatory practices against women within and beyond Mamta's Panchayat that restrict their potential for empowerment—son preference, lower priority for girls' education, proxy controls by husbands over EWR (*Pati-Pradhan*), lack of opportunities for skill development, and so on. It may be comparatively easier to ensure material change (for instance in terms of increasing incomes) than to cause a change in power structures, ideologies and attitudes that are prevalent at all levels in the PRI, from the Gram Panchayat to multiple levels.

The following are lessons learned from Mamta's example about how women can be empowered to be effective elected representatives in the PRI:

1. Mamta Devi strongly believes that **reservation for women has provided her an opportunity for initial entry** into the system of PRIs. Being an elected representative has increased her circle of influence and action to become more visible and recognised as a leader and *change-maker* in development issues and action than as a member of a women's group. Her election for the second time has demonstrated that the general perception of women as mere *home-makers* who are



Exposure visit to "Smart Panchayat" in Gujarat

responsible for children and family has changed. Mamta describes her journey from a *Gharelu Aurat* (A woman confined to the household and its chores) to an empowered women leader of her community, an elected representative in the PRI as follows:

- *“Was earlier hesitant to share about my illness even with my husband. Had no idea about any law for helping women earlier. Did not know there is a women police station to help women”.*
- *“Had no awareness about what help I can get from outside. Had no idea that poor people can earn from different (sources of) income. It has increased my self-confidence and feel more capable now” says Mamta.*

2. Her **outdoor mobility** gained from exposure visits including to Gujarat to see “Smart Panchayat” model and to Kerala, meeting with other CBOs, various training programmes that she attended, and Panchayat meetings, enabled her to unfold her potential through increased exposure, information, knowledge and awareness which she directly used in her work and growth within and without. Mamta has earned support in all her endeavours from BDOs, DC, Minister through her capability and confidence.

3. Her **participation in PRI as EWR** has not only influenced her participation in economic decisions but enhanced control over economic resources at home. This



Mamta Devi with other Panchayat Presidents

aspect is quite evident from Mamta's decision to send her son to a government school and daughter to a private school, while the community members did quite the opposite; and her ability to access and utilise available subsidies, loans, seeds and irrigation schemes for her own as benefit as well as for the benefit of others in her Panchayat.

4. Mamta's participation in local self-governance has provided her a large **platform for interactions** with local communities, stakeholders, administration, politicians, enabled through enhanced mobility, networking at different levels with institutes such as Himachal Pradesh Institute of Public Administration (HIPA) and PR Training Institute Mashobara. She acknowledges that these opportunities for learning have played a significant role in strengthening her knowledge and skills and also in changing her attitudes and approaches to problem solving. It has enabled her to establish effective relationships as a leader with the poorest of the poor, as well as, with officials of different stature.
5. At **household level** too, not only does Mamta receive the support of her husband and children but her neighbours too have recognised her leadership and boost her self-confidence with continuous endorsement and support.
6. Mamta's participation **as EWR in Panchayat has increased her influence and participation in social, community and political activities**. For example, Mamta has also earned respect and recognition of the Up-Pradhan (Vice President) of the Panchayat, who is male and whose political affiliation is different from Mamta's. Not only does he recognise her capability but endorses her in all decisions as a supporter and co-partner. Mamta is now highly motivated and aspiring to contest the Zila Parishad/MLA election to benefit many more people with her leadership. Mamta Devi's story is an excellent

example of women's empowerment and leadership in PRI and community development. Mamta has significantly contributed to the development of her



Mamta Devi – confident and empowered Panchayat leader

Panchayat. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors led to the success experienced by Mamta. These factors include her own drive for educating and training herself, experimenting with different types of sources of livelihood and an inherent desire to do something for herself and others through network with agencies like CORD and government. As Pradhan, she built upon the knowledge, skills and networks she established as member and leader of the women's group to build positive relationships with all stakeholders within and outside the Panchayat including with local MLAs, ministers, corporate agencies and so on. She made sure that her activities and policies didn't alienate those who opposed her. By displaying maturity in her interactions and using a direct and focused approach in problem solving, Mamta, a woman from a poor family and marginalised community has been able to bring people together and demonstrate positive changes in the community and local-self-governance.

Smt. Mamta Devi highlights some challenges in the system of governance by stating that a strong political will is essential for enabling PRI to become effective institutions of local self-

governance, in true intent and spirit of 73rd Constitutional amendments. She sometimes feels that Pradhans of Panchayats are becoming mere agents of implementation of government schemes and programs. Autonomy of the PRI and community needs are compromised due to overpowering and top-down planning instructions of government, delay in release of funds, attitude enforcing common activities to all PRIs not as per need of specific Panchayat. A bottom-up approach in PRI remains challenging. She states that in a democratic ecosystem, political party ideology/affiliation/tagging sometimes affects development of Panchayat and should be avoided to give priority to development of Panchayat. She acknowledges that there are some positive efforts for decentralising in terms of greater space being given to Panchayats for deciding use of funds. However, due to poor infrastructure and lower capacities of some members of the Panchayat, leaders and functionaries of the Panchayat are not able to leverage it. She shares that Pradhan as an elected representative has a number of social, physical, moral and development responsibilities towards the Panchayat but do not receive appropriate remuneration and recognition. Pradhan are expected to do wonders and benefit the most needy persons in their Panchayat but the systems of governance remain unchanged, rigid and operationally sluggish since the time of Independence. The Pradhan's role is very demanding but their compensation does not match even the wage rates of the State and is nowhere close to the compensations, privileges, salary, and honorariums provided to elected representatives at higher levels such as the Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs). Pradhans are expected to work around the clock as volunteers (*lok-seva*). Mamta urges that policy makers need to consider the issue of appropriate remuneration for Pradhans and also address the issues of corruption and inefficiency in the institutions of PRI.

It is hoped that this case study will help policy makers and implementers to support PRIs in the true intent and spirit of the Constitution of India.

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