

# Panchayat Convention



9<sup>th</sup> April 2007-Patna  
Bihar

Communicators for Development  
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## Background



One of the panchayat level information centers established during Bihar Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan 2006

One of the prime objectives of PACS-Bihar is to strengthen the Local Self-Governance -- and “Bihar Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan” launched in the year 2006 was an extremely affective step taken in this direction. Around 1.7 lakh villagers got direct information related to panchayat through our “Information Kiosks” set up in every PACS panchayat area. Added to that over 5000 marginalized candidates were helped in filing nomination forms and the rejection rate was

just 2% compared to the state’s rejection rate of 14%. The nominated candidates were mostly from PACS SHGs and over 2250 of them won at various posts in this election.

Almost a year has passed since the election and these PRI representatives have been working on ground facing various challenges over the past one year. Now they wanted to make the state level policy makers and expert know the kinds of challenges they are facing in developing their region. In order to collectively voice their demands, PACS facilitated a massive gathering of PRI women members on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2007 at Sri SK Memorial Hall in Patna, the capital city of Bihar. Reportedly it was the largest gathering ever organized on PRI in Bihar’s history. Over 1200 women PRI members participated and shared their views collectively, which forced the Bihar MLC and a veteran politician Mr. PK Mani to say that for the first time he is addressing such a large gathering of PRI representatives.

The speaker of Vidhan Sabha Shree Uday Narayan Chowdhury, Member Legislative Council Shree PK Mani, State Election Commission Secretary Shree Raghuvansh Kumar Sinha, PACS PSC chairman Dr. A K Basu & PACS director Mrs Kiran Sharma along with over 1200 PRI representatives and over 100 PACS partner CSOs and ROs participated in this gathering. The Deputy Chief Minister Shree Sushil Kumar Modi, who initially promised to attend this gathering, could not do so due to technical snag in his vehicle. Though he wanted to join in the later half of the day, the women PRI members who had come with their

children had to leave by that time. Nevertheless the deputy chief minister who is also the finance minister, promised to take up their issue with the chief minister and also other issues related to PACS SHGs and micro finance.

This convention can be said to be another major step for advocacy at the state level for strengthening the local self-governance in Bihar. It also helped in further opening up PACS network especially to the people's representatives of the state. Media gave extensive coverage to this event, which helped this initiative reach the common mass across Bihar. For the press reports please log on to [www.empowerpoor.org](http://www.empowerpoor.org).

### Inauguration and Welcome

The PRI convention was inaugurated by the PRI members in the presence of Dr. AK Basu, Mrs Kiran Sharma and other important dignitaries.

Thereafter Mr. Rakesh Jha, State Manager PACS-Bihar welcomed all the participants and expressed his gratitude for sparing time and attending this convention.

He especially thanked the women PRI representatives who had come from far off remote areas of Bihar to share their experiences and put up their demands to the state government. He briefed upon PACS and its intervention in Bihar focusing on the Bihar Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan launched in the year 2006 at the eve of panchayat elections. During that campaign PACS was able to help over 5000 marginalized candidates file nominations and out of them over 2250 have won at various posts. "Out of these winners, majority are women belonging to the marginalized communities and they would share their experiences in this convention" he said.



Inauguration of the PRI convention



R Jha, State Manager PACS-Bihar during the PRI convention

### PRI experience sharing—1<sup>st</sup> session

Rakesh Jha invited Sangita Thakur who is Zilla Parisad member from Madhubani district to share her experiences. She quoted this occasion as unforgettable where Panchayat representatives from various parts of Bihar got opportunities to exchange their views and opinions with the state representatives & the experts. “I am obliged to the PACS CSOs and my SHG members who gave me financial assistance and added societal value to my personality. Fifty percent reservation in Panchayat



One of the PRI members sharing her experiences

election inspired me to stand for it and I won with the support of the SHG members,” she said. However, just by providing 50% reservation to women is not enough for developing the villages of Bihar” she added. She said that she would dedicate her life for the betterment of the marginalized communities. She also narrated the local level problems being faced by women Mukhiyas and the poor coordination of them with the block/district level authorities. She highlighted that most of the PRI members are illiterate and do not understand the nuances of government policies, schemes, rights duties of the poor and the modus operandi of government machinery. They should be trained and also provided proper channel through which they can get simplified information on a sustained basis.

Radha Devi who is a Mukhiya of Vihat Dakshini Panchayat, Lakhnaur Block, Madhubani district said that she managed to secure 400 job cards for the poor from her village with the hope that they would get work through NREGS, but to her surprise the government servants did not give her money to begin any kind of work. According to her they asked for bribes. Till now no work has started in her panchayat and after three months the entire area would be flooded. She appealed to all the senior politicians & government officials present in the convention to collectively work towards removing corruption from all levels.

She thanked PACS initiatives in strengthening PRI and said that this programme has enabled her win the post of Mukhiya. She also thanked the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for giving opportunities to women for standing in election. According to her the decision of providing 50% reservation to women was a historic one, as this gave chance to the women not only to



PRI members during the convention

stand in the election but also helped in making women supporters come out of their house to canvass for their candidates. In the end she said that the government and the non-government developing agencies should provide training and capacity building exercise to the PRI members.

Putul Devi, member, Zilla Parisad from Gaya reiterated the grass root difficulties being faced by elected representatives and said that most of the PRI members are unaware of the provisions provided under the Panchyati Raj institution. They are unaware of their roles and responsibilities vis a vis the village development issues. She thanked PACS, which has created a forum of elected representatives and inspired them to stand for the development of their villages. She emphasized the role of Gram Sabha and advised women representatives to actively participate in it. “Panchayat representatives now have to set up a role model and work for the common and needy without being prejudiced” she said. She expressed her desire that while attending the meetings people should not use derogatory words to women and must respect the spirit of reservation to women. She stated how her forty-eight hours fast had changed the mindset of district level government machinery. She also said that the PRI representatives should think with integrated and inclusive approach keeping behind their personal interest.

During her speech she lauded the state government’s initiative for providing 50% reservation in the PRI election but according to her they should not stop there. “The government should also look into easing travel allowances to the PRI members on their field visits and in later course should provide salaries to them” she added. She concluded her speech saying that the government and experts should provide (a) training to women representatives (b) government should ensure payment of minimum wages in NREGS scheme (b) leave package for three months for women worker during pregnancy (c) collective efforts are needed to boost the morale of farmers because they are actual catalyst of change.

### The State representatives



Shree UN Chowdhary, Speaker, Bihar Vidhan Sabha during the convention

After patiently listening to the women PRI members Shree U.N.Chaudhary, speaker of Bihar Vidhan Sabha shared the government’s viewpoint on local self-governance. He said that the government is keen to uplift the economic as well as political status of women. The state government made a landmark decision by providing 50% reservation to women. In local dialect he said that power is a thing, which cannot be purchased or hired but it comes from knowledge or education. He sarcastically gave the example of the prevalent abbreviations “SP” and “MP” that connote the Women Surpunch & Mukhiya who are puppets in the hands of their husbands. “SP” is Surpanch Pati (Husband) and “MP” is Mukhiya Pati (husband).

He said that a man and women are equal before law but this spirit has not been properly imbibed by the society. This very mindset also opposes the women reservation bill. He reiterated the principles of Ram Manohar Lohia & Mahatma Gandhi and said that these are the only ways to bring equality, peace and fraternity among mankind.

Lauding the state government’s pro-women stance he said how these initiatives have led to the winning of around one lakh and thirty one thousand women PRI members and how they have been streamlined in the process of decision-making in local self-governance. “It is a good sign that women representatives have started taking decisions on their own and their tendencies to be dependent on their husband has been decreasing,” he said. He blamed the orthodox & conventional approaches that thwart the growth of women development.

“In efforts towards further strengthening women empowerment, government has given opportunities of teaching job to one lakh eighteen thousand women and has now decided to distribute bicycles to high school going girls” he further added. According to him all these steps are now going to change the scenario of the state. He stressed that there is no shortcut



Shree PK Mani, MLC, Bihar, expressing his views during the convention

to access the rights and the only way is to get educated and be informed about what is happening. The whole marginalized community will have to prepare to fight for their rights.

After the speech of Shree UN Chowdhury, Shree P.K. Mani, MLC Bihar, shared his experiences with the PRI representatives. He started with the note that for first time he has addressed such a large number of elected women representatives. He lauded the

government's initiative to give proportionate representation to women during this PRI election. He also appreciated the efforts of Bihar Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan. "Bihar is now role model for our country in this regard. The women representatives should act as a catalyst for putting Bihar on the correct track of development", he said. He narrated the story of women strugglers Savitri Bai Phoole and Rama Bai who were thrown out from their native village only because they dared to learn Sanskrit, which is lingo of God, but in spite of all odds they made a dent in the society.

He added that now new leadership has emerged from among the women, which is healthy sign for the new era and an indication of vanishing feudal mindset from Bihar. According to him women representatives are performing far better than their counterparts. If they are managing their house successfully then apparently they have the ability to lead the society in the same manner. However they should understand their roles and responsibilities. He said that today dowry, illiteracy, mental tortures on the women are main barriers for development of society and only women can forcibly challenge it.

Shree Raghuvansh Kumar Sinha, Secretary, State Election Commission lauded the system of Panchayat Raj in its true sense. He spoke about the role of election commission and its responsibilities during the elections. He also explained



Shree Raghuvansh Kumar Sinha, Secretary, State Election Commission expressing his views

about the entire reservation policy that was enforced in the last elections. “The roles and responsibilities of PRI members is more crucial compared to the state level representatives because they are directly linked with people who have elected them,” he said. He also explained his preparation and provisions of women reservation in the elections for Urban Local Bodies. He advised the PRI representatives to look into the vital issues concerning the villages viz. health & sanitation, education, employment, etc. He also portrayed RTI as an extremely effective tool and advised the elected representatives to use it for the benefit of the poor. He requested the civil society organizations to provide guidance to these elected PRI representatives.

### [IPTA Play](#)

During the second session the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) -- Patna performed a play on Panchayat Raj. The play depicted how a woman Mukhiya who won with the support of her husband is being treated as a puppet by him --- and how the male members of the village deject her in the meetings --- and how gradually the whole village including her husband starts



Play by Indian People’s Theatre Association

accepting her as the leader. All the PRI representatives applauded the play as they saw themselves and their grievances in the play.

### [PRI experience sharing –2<sup>nd</sup> session](#)

Thereafter several PRI representatives were given a chance to briefly share their experiences. Manju Kumari who is a Panchyat Samiti member proudly shared her experiences and achievements in her constituency. She said that she has initiated sanitation campaign at village level, helped several the Dalits get enrolled in the BPL list and ensured the payment of old age pension to the old and poor. A ward member from Muzaffarpur, Meera Sinha speaking about her achievements said that she was able to help the poor of her village avail Indira Awas and got 12 hand pumps installed in the village.

Tanuja Devi, ward member from Banka district told how she fought with the PDS dealer and forced him to distribute Kerosene oil to the poor.

Gayatri Devi, a panchayat samiti member from Panchanpur village, Sirdala Block of Nawada district who belongs to Mushahar community alleged that the bank officials in her block humiliated her when she approached them for loan. She also said that not a



A PRI member sharing her experiences

single person from Mushahar community received the BPL card from Panchanpur village to which she belongs. Many other women while speaking to the press reporters and the writer revealed similar stories. Similarly, several other PRI representatives narrated the achievements and challenges they face in their areas in this convention.

**Conclusion**



Mrs Kiran Sharma, PACS programme director expressing her views

Mrs Kiran Sharma appreciated the courage and conviction of the women PRI members for coming to this convention and showing their unity & strength. Mr. Basu, PACS-PSC chairman pointing towards the ardent crowd of women PRI members said, “Bihar symbolizes the past of India and women of Bihar symbolize its future.”

Soon after the convention when the press reporters asked the PRI representatives what they feel about this convention, one of the PRI representatives Radha Devi from Madhubani district shot back “we ourselves could not believe that we are such a large entity. We thought our problems are unique to our areas but found that most of them are common problems and can be solved by the initiatives of the state policy makers”. Another PRI representative Manju Devi from Saran added “We are sure by looking at our strength, unity & conviction the chief minister would definitely think of providing us the right environment to develop Bihar. Providing 50% reservation to us is not enough to develop the villages of Bihar”.

