

Woman Panchayat Candidates in UP

Subverting Personal and Political

KHABAR LAHARIYA

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Khabar Lahariya (khabar.lahariya.delhi@gmail.com) is a weekly newspaper in Bundeli and Hindi brought out by a collective of women based in rural Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Khabar Lahariya reporters spent a day each in a ward of Mahoba, Banda and Chitrakoot districts with women candidates for panchayat elections. The candidates display both political mobilisation and understanding, however not quite in the way their supporters may have expected.

Anshu Shivhare points to the bottom corner of the windshield of her special utility vehicle (SUV), where a small stone has shattered the glass. “This happened this morning when we left for the day’s campaigning. What can you do? You can’t say anything to these overloaded trucks from the quarries. You just have to carry on with what you’re doing.”

Panchayat elections descended this month like slow-building dust storms across a monsoon-parched Uttar Pradesh. Over two decades after the adoption of the 73rd amendment to the constitution, which increased the representation of marginalised groups in elected positions and the powers of the panchayat, women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are present in politics in significant numbers. However they have no substantive voice in the system. Their presence remains limited by their low status in the patriarchal and casteist community structures.

Given this reality, and the well-documented stories of women as figureheads of power in the panchayat system—a flimsy front to a new position of the “pradhanpati”—Khabar Lahariya (KL) reporters set out to deepen the portraiture of women candidates in the panchayat system.

Were the women, who were being “propped up” by husbands, sons and fathers-in-law, actually as far from the knowledge of power and political reality as they were assumed to be? Or was there a new language of politics and strategy that was being developed, behind the *ghunghat* (veil) in the shadow of the glib and powerful male family member?

To explore this possibility, KL reporters spent a day each in a ward of Mahoba, Banda and Chitrakoot districts, with an important woman candidate contesting the elections to the district development councils (DDC, the third tier of the panchayati raj system), the heads of

which are “first citizens”, with red beacon-ed cars and [crores of funding](#). The posts of chairpersons in each of these districts are reserved for women this year, and thus scores of women candidates are being fielded even where seats are not reserved for women.

As reporters whose professional trajectories paralleled the candidates’ own journeys into the public sphere, battling gender and caste norms, and a lack of political education or exposure, our conversations with the candidates were significantly different from any other local journalists’ interviews. We chatted with candidates’ sisters-in-law, their female chaperones and security guards, followed them into homes where they freshened up and had their saris adjusted. We were able to adjust their ghunghats and witness their first independent conversations with voters; closely observe who they canvassed, and who they avoided, and what may have determined these choices.

Of Rhetoric and More

Regardless of whether they had clocked years in politics, or their political lineage, these women had an understanding and articulation of political strategy, which seemed specific to their experience as women entering the public sphere in rural Uttar Pradesh—a state which has seen intensive political mobilisations around caste and community in the last two decades. Depending on their individual histories and location, the way in which class, caste and gender intersected in their performances as political beings was interesting to observe.

Javitri Devi of Kasahai village in Karwi block of Chitrakoot District had never been interviewed before. On the morning we were to interview her, she answered her phone on the first ring and excitedly asked us to join them at home before they left to campaign. We chatted with her and her family, moving with the sun inside and outside her mud house, men, women and children of all ages appearing every few minutes to check in with her about various things; we would not have known she was not born a politician.



Javitri Devi, remarkably confident, urges voters in Pachokar, Chitrakoot, to vote for the umbrella!

“I wanted to join politics because I want to serve society and reduce the oppression and violence that women suffer, especially poor women like myself.” Hours later, inhibition and her husband’s lines forgotten, finding a thus far unknown space for expressing herself, she admitted, “We were all sitting at home and eating when the news came that the seat in our ward was reserved for a woman. I joked to my husband that he should put me up for election. And my wish came true! I always wanted to contest an election.”

Javitri is a Chamar from Ramnagar in Chitrakoot. Her husband’s family is a political one—her husband Rajjan Kumar (“he’s been doing this *netagiri* [acting like a leader] from the time I’ve known him”) said that his maternal uncle “prepared the ground for the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Chitrakoot,” but never really tasted political power himself, due to the increasing corruption in the party. “There’s no seat in the BSP for less than 50 lakhs or 1 crore. There’s no space for people like us. And until the key to development isn’t in the hands of the poor and oppressed, there will be no change in our situation.”

Rajjan is a “Right to Information (RTI) reporter” and a social activist, and is well known in the region for having connected poor families to the entitlements the state government has been distributing—cycles, for instance. Currently, Javitri’s nomination and campaign is

supported by the Dalit leader Bishambar Nath Kabir, the secretary of the Bahujan Mukti Morcha.

“The car, driver and some fuel is being contributed by Kabirji. Patelji (a neighbour) is providing the tent and chairs outside. We’ve collected about 25,000 rupees for other expenditure, like the pamphlets and food. We don’t want powerful politicians to pay us to do dirty politics—our mud hut will remain the same, and we want to set off a new, clean generation of politics.” Progressive politics or women’s reservation notwithstanding, Rajjan Kumar makes it clear that he wears the politics in the family.

Just over a 100 km away, we are amused to hear a similar vocabulary being bandied about by a candidate who definitely has been interviewed before. Word on the street in Bila Uttar village in Ward no 1 of Kabrai block, Mahoba District, is that the incumbent DDC secretary (Kshetra Panchayat Sadyasa in Hindi) Anshu Shivhare is going to win the ward member seat, for the second time.



Anshu Shivhare delivers an impromptu speech, Kharka village, Mahoba

“She’s got our work done. And she’s on our side.” Whether or not that is true, what is patently clear is that she holds the reins of this campaign. We chase Anshu for hours across Mahoba’s landscape of granite-dusted babool trees and this year’s stunted sesame crop,

burnt as we are by the harsh late summer sun. When we manage to get her on the phone her campaign manager, she talks so fast we're dizzy, "We've got 32 villages to cover, and 2 days to cover them. *So hum speed se pahunchte hain, aur nikal jaate hain* (We reach there in a jiffy and leave quickly as well)"

No sooner have we said hello, we are absorbed into her smooth campaign engine—she instructs us, along with her band of gregarious men-in-black, to photograph the walls on which her election posters have been covered by those of other candidates; she has the election officer in Mahoba on the line within minutes to get our testimony. "How is my politics different from theirs? I don't play dirty politics. I get work done, that's within my power to do. I listen to people—actually listen. I don't make promises I can't keep."

In Banda, the incumbent municipal chairperson's wife, a woman who looks and sounds considerably younger than her age draws on the same thread of rhetoric, "If you stand me up in front of an audience to give a speech, I'm not likely to be able to do it—I'm not very good at expressing myself," she says, coy yet endearing, perched cross-legged on the table in front of us, chai in hand, after a hard few hours' campaigning. "But I'm not nervous in the least about the election. I think of the present, and not the future. I haven't promised anyone anything. I haven't paid a rupee to people who are supporting my candidature. I just want to work for the class or community that needs it the most—Dalits or the poor. I've heard people say these politicians do no work, only appear for votes—I want to show people that all politicians are not the same."

Playing the Field

Rhetoric aside, watching Anshu Shivhare and Javitri Devi in action could not have been more different.

One is a well-off Gupta, brought up in Kanpur and married into Mahoba. She is rich, well-educated and contested elections on a Samajwadi Party ticket. The other woman is a Chamar who had barely ever stepped outside her home after she was married—even her exam papers travelled to her marital home.

Despite the vast differences, both these women showed similar steeliness vis-à-vis their political careers. Class and caste notwithstanding, both these candidates were in control of their campaigns, especially, we noted with some bitterness, the making and distribution of food to each member of their disparate campaign teams: Anshu's strapping "bouncers", and Javitri's young band of wall painters. We were witness to long interventions about the food to be packed for the day's campaigning—"Roz khaana banta hai aur barbad hota hai!" (Food gets made every day but also gets wasted) in one case by a team of workers at home, in the other by Javitri herself. You would be hard-pressed to find a male candidate with such anxiety about wasted food.

"I want to contest the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections, and I thought that if I give these DDC

elections a miss, then it will be bad for my career,” Anshu told us, when we asked her what made her decide to campaign this time, with her husband away. “If you don’t stay in the public eye, then people forget you in politics.”

There is no hint of sentimentality as she talks about her husband, a prominent young engineer and Samajwadi Party (SP) worker in Mahoba, being embroiled in the Vyapam scam, which recently exposed politicians, officials and middlemen in recruitment and admissions to professional colleges in Madhya Pradesh.

“My opponents thought that this would work to subjugate me, or prevent me from standing this time but I couldn’t let them.” As we scroll through pictures on Facebook of her last holiday with her husband, in verdant Munnar, she described the division of roles between herself and her husband in her last term, and growing into the role herself, “You need four-five people to look after your area, as a DDC secretary. When I won the elections last year, I didn’t even know how to run meetings—I would go with my husband and learn. Slowly, I would oversee the zilla panchayat, he would look after the politics. There are so many people to meet all the time, weddings to attend every day. If you don’t appear for these occasions, or miss a few, it has serious implications. So he would manage this. *Main sirf netaon ko namaste karti thi* (I would only greet the leaders). Since the last year, when he has been away, I’ve handled this part of the job as well. You do what you have to.”

With an infectious laugh, and an accompanying sharp observation on the social acumen that politics necessitates, Anshu made it clear that she had the rules down, so much so that she had made them her own. “It’s not that you need to be visible in your area all the time,” was her response to our question about whether women politicians could be as mobile as their male peers, and therefore as effective or influential. “Getting your work done is what should make you visible. That’s when people know you and see you. Otherwise roaming the countryside just brings down your stature.”

In Javitri’s case, as she is at a different point on the political ladder, we saw her preparedness to enter an entirely unfamiliar domain, and lightning quick understanding of what it may require of her. We sat with her and her sisters-in-law in the *aangan* (courtyard), and talked about their yearly migration to the brick kilns of Rajasthan and Punjab, the drought and loss of crop across these regions, and the back-breaking inflation it has caused.

Javitri has never gone with her sisters-in-law (“Rajjan wouldn’t be able to handle it,” her sisters-in-law sneer), but she quickly adds, “If I had to, I would go; I would learn the work even now. You can learn anything you put your mind to doing.” Much of her learning seems to be from hearing her husband’s *bakbak* (banter) every day: she is well aware of developmental problems in the area and government schemes, down to the thriving enterprise that is the last mile delivery of entitlements—cycles, for example.

But her husband’s glib wisdom does not seem to explain Javitri’s feisty and sharp commentary on her patron, Kabirji’s engagement in the campaign, which for us shed light

on her understanding of how less privileged candidates can (or can't) manoeuvre their campaigns. Most of our interview takes place while we wait for Kabirji to finish his bank work, buy umbrellas for the day's canvassing or get himself and his Bolero to Kasahai to begin the day's work.

"It's harvesting time now, you don't find anyone in the village if you go at noon. I hadn't stepped out of home for campaigning till yesterday, but yesterday I told my husband that if I am contesting the elections, then I want to be part of the campaigning. Only when I go out, and see things and meet people, I'll learn. I told Sahabji we should have a loudspeaker too, and a sound system, but he said what's the need? *Sahabji karte zaroor hain, par dheele dhaale hain* (Sahabji does everything but he should be more proactive).

When we are finished in a village, you can always depend on Sahabji endlessly talking to someone and making us wait. Now if we had our own car and everything, we could come and go at our own time. There are hardly any days left before the campaigning comes to an end...."

Javitri's feelings are clearly illustrated as she matter-of-factly leads her band of umbrella-wielding women to canvass in the Dalit *basti* (slum) of Pachokhad village, neither batting an eyelid when wrinkled women raise voice at the opportunism of politicians, nor when her first-time campaigners get their slogans a little jumbled. "The umbrella seems to be in the lead, as far as I can tell," she flashes an unexpected and totally dazzling smile.

Priyanka Patel, the wife of Brijesh Patel, charismatic chairman of Tindwari region, seems to be part of a campaign that rides entirely on him. She is in intense competition with wealthy and influential family members of the local sand mafia and member of the legislative assembly (MLA) for the DDC seat, and the basis of her campaign is that she and her husband stand for a different kind of politics (family politics notwithstanding) from the corrupt and extractive "*balu* mafia" (sand mafia) led one.



Priyanka Patel endears herself to voters in Khauda village, Banda.

Priyanka scuttles from one female household to another, a fast depleting bunch of pamphlets in hand. Once they are done, she becomes a walking, talking, pink-and-black-sari-clad pamphlet herself, which definitely works the crowds, except one crusty Panditayin, who pulled her close, “We don’t take our husbands’ names in these parts... and you shouldn’t be doing it so freely.”

Priyanka’s vivaciousness is barely fazed, “You’re right, I shouldn’t. What can I do, people know only his name!” And as if perfectly orchestrated, “There isn’t a person in Tindwari who doesn’t know who I am,” says Brijesh, to a group of Brahmin men, “I’ve made Tindwari shine in the past three years. There are other politicians who have emerged from the mines of this area, and their power is limited to these mines. My power reaches Lucknow. The MLA has no time for his constituency, how will his relative have any for this post? Remember, you’re choosing a leader for the next five years, you’re making a choice for your future.”

The chairman’s sloganeering rings in our head when we interview Priyanka later, about how much independence she would have from him to practise her own politics, given his knowledge and experience, and her lack thereof. “I’ve never been one to sit at home. I’ve done all kinds of courses—computers, beautician, *silai-kadai* (sewing), I worked with a non-

governmental organisation. Before I thought of contesting, I would cook, spend time in either one of our houses in Tindwari, practise for my beautician course. But if I win, my husband will manage (Tindwari town area), and I'll manage my area (the zilla panchayat/her ward). People are looking at me, voting for me, putting their faith in me. So I will do my own work, and I'm not going to take permission from my husband, even if I need to struggle and fight a little at home! If my husband has brought me into the ring, he should be ready to let me play too. And only if he does it in public, will he listen at home too."

Something of the "new political thought" that is part of Priyanka and the chairman's campaign rings true in the confidence that Priyanka has—to express vulnerability and power; to communicate her understanding, however incomplete, of the politics of the area and how she plans to negotiate it.

"There was a meeting of candidates in Banda yesterday, and I was the only candidate who attended it—no one else cares. If we wanted an easy political path, we wouldn't have done half the work we have: we've been threatened, intimidated by people, had to ask for political protection. People say the opposition has a lot of money. But we're trying to campaign honestly, as per the rule book."

Portrait of a Woman in Politics

It is dusk—the end of a long day with Anshu Shivhare, as we reach Kharka village in Mahoba. We are almost as white as the powdery babool along the roadside, but neither non-stop canvassing nor shattered windscreens seem to have fazed Anshu. Her voice is just barely strained. We do not realise how fast the sky darkens, nor how remote and rocky the terrain is—we are noting the quick construction of a temple where we have paused to strategise. Anshu points to the dry pond opposite it, and the acute water shortage in the area.

Before we know it, we are part of a caravan that is snaking through the village and its rocky paths, lit by mobile phone torches, and led by a loud band of child sloganeers. Our hearts beat faster, as the pace of the procession increases, the slogans get more hysterical, the village descends into pitch un-electrified darkness. But Anshu does not miss a step, she knocks on each door, greets each *mami*, *chachi*, *dadi* and *dada*. Voices rise in anger: huge numbers of votes from this village were the reason for Anshu's landslide win last time. Five years later, the village had no water and no electricity. We came to a clearing where a hundred people had gathered to wait for Anshu's speech. Without missing a beat, unfazed by her 15-hour day, and the palpable resentment of her audience, Anshu explained the challenges of her term in grave detail and with an honesty that placed herself and her vote bank in an intimate relationship, rarely seen in a political campaign.

She spoke about the political conspiracy that entangled and drove her husband away, the theft of electrical cables bought for the village. "For water in the village, I have to admit defeat. The village has been cursed with a water level that does not allow us to bore any

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deeper—there is no water. I can say I will organise tankers as often as possible—but re-boring I cannot do. Still, I'm asking you to support me like you did the last time, as a single woman who is campaigning on her own, who has worked for you and will continue to, despite any political pressure.”

Driving back later that night, through fogs of smoke and granite dust, we thought about how Anshu Shivhare had gained our confidence and our vote; in doing so, she had demonstrated that a new identity and language of politics was taking shape in these badlands, and that was worth keeping an eye on.