



1000 PeaceWomen

Across the Globe



Tiliya Devi

Samajik Shaikshnik Vikas Kendra (SSVK)

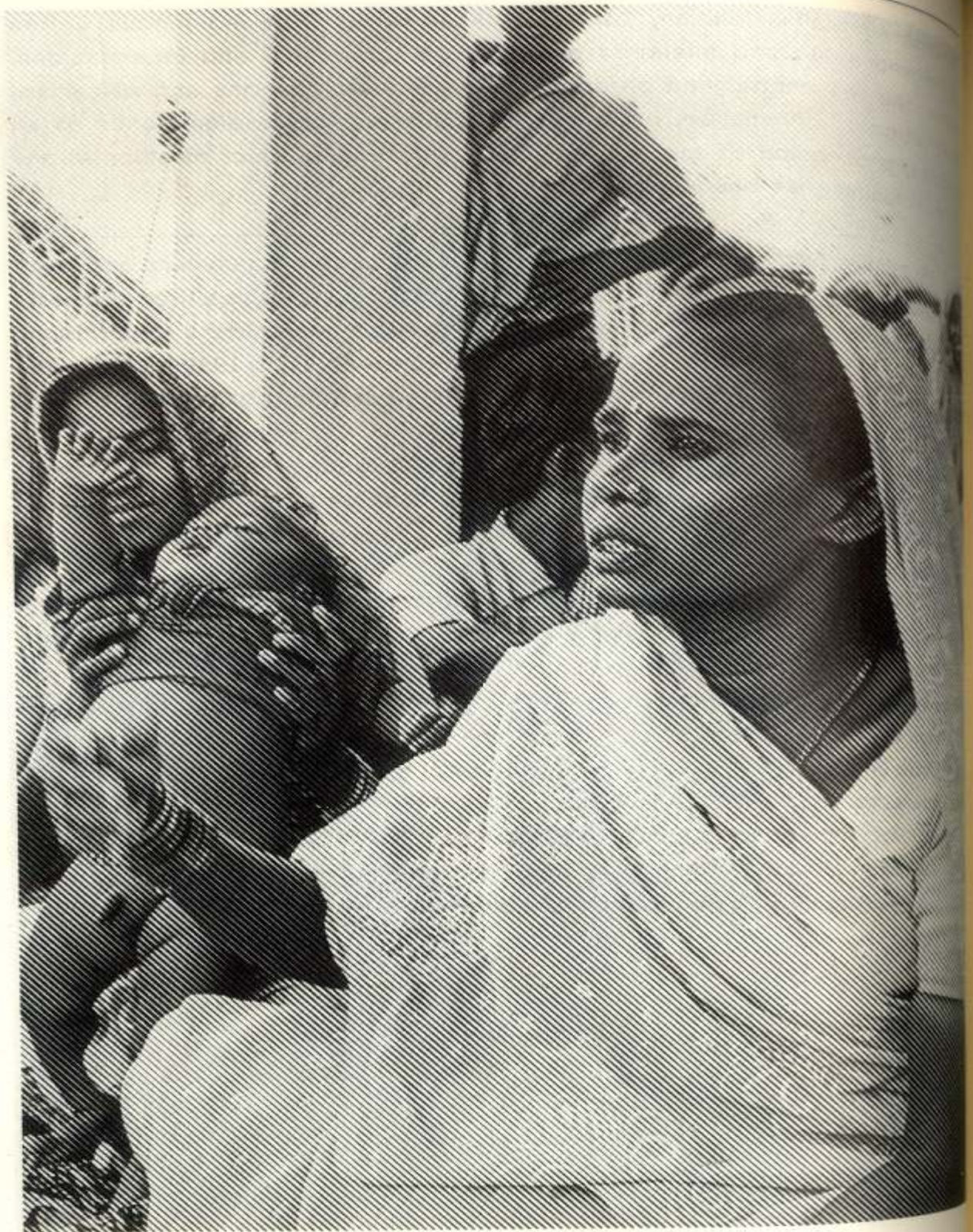
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A Mushar (Dalit community) woman, Tiliya Devi fought opposition from all quarters – including within her home – to bring about a better life for her downtrodden community. Along the way, she succeeded in rallying together hordes of women in search of a better life, and took on the might of the upper-caste Yadavs who had encroached upon agricultural land belonging to the Mushars. After contesting the Panchayat (village council) elections, Tiliya has, since 2001, also been working as a Panchayat Samity (village council group) member.

Tiliya Devi (born 1963), from the Mushar community in the Dalit heartland in Bihar, grew up as most Mushar girls do: slaving as a bonded laborer. She was married off at 14, and continued being a bonded laborer – at her husband's house. The lives of the Mushar women took a turn for the better when the Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS) came to their villages, promising them training in developmental work, and improved living conditions. Tiliya joined the campaign despite opposition from her husband. The Mushars were all farmers, but because of the lack of land in their settlements, they were forced to be "bonded" with big landlords. Tiliya discovered a 156 – acre plot of land in her village belonging to the Dalits which upper-caste Yadav landlords had encroached on. Initiating a series of protest rallies, Tiliya spread the word for the imperative to reclaim the land that was rightfully theirs. The men refused outright, although the women stood beside Tiliya. There was such outrage that Tiliya's husband evicted her from the house. The reason: fear of a backlash from the upper-castes. And the upper-castes, obviously, vented their fury, attacking the Mushar men, women, even children. They looted the Mushars' cattle, and torched their houses.

But Tiliya was not about to give up, and neither were the rest of the Mushars. Supported by the LSS, Tiliya led a protest and charted out their demands. The agitation finally bore fruit in 2004, when the land was legally handed over to the Mushars. In 2001, Tiliya contested the Panchayat elections and was appointed member to the Panchayat Samity. Her victory came almost undisputed. No justice could have been sweeter.

Bihar's Mushars are among the most neglected of Dalit communities: the upper-castes rob them of their meager possessions, and mire them in inheritable debt, forcing the Mushars to spend their lives as bonded laborers.



America Devi

Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS)

America Devi, from the Mushar community in Dalit Bihar's heartland, started her journey in activism as part of the Lok Shakti Sangathan. Becoming part of their campaign was only the first step, as America later took on the Bihar government – first, a state minister who had taken over a village pond belonging to the Dalits, and then the government, which had denied the Dalits employment. She won both fights, and even forced a re-examination of government policy.

America Devi spent the best part of her childhood and youth as a bonded agricultural laborer, first at her parents' house and then at her husband's. She came into her own only around the time the Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS), a people's organization working among Bihar's downtrodden, came to her village calling out to women to join their campaign for a better life. America had her first brush with education after joining the LSS; she learnt to read and write, and her work involved introducing women from her own village and neighboring villages to the LSS process. America also contributed by creating a Gramkosh (fund for village development).

Her first involvement with activism came when she fought for the rights of her villagers in connection with a village pond belonging to the Dalits, which had been illegally taken over by a state minister. She led the protests against the minister and his cronies along with the rest of the women in the community, even as the men held back for fear of a backlash. Some years later, the Dalits were allowed to reclaim possession of the pond.

The Mushars are employed through a government policy when there is any big government project that needs laborers. In 2002, the Bihar government began repair work on a particular river embankment: even as the Mushars waited to be informed about work, things started going wrong. The government replaced the men with machines, and the Mushars were left in suspended anticipation. But the series of protests America initiated forced the government to re-examine its policy, and 150,000 Mushars finally got the employment they needed.

The Mushars in Bihar are among the most neglected of Dalit communities, with their condition further worsened by the nonimplementation of policies aimed at their betterment. Entire generations waste away as bonded laborers working for rich landowners to repay ancient, unending debts.