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AMRIKA DEVI

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Bihar

Works with Lok Shakti Sangathan, towards awareness about land and water rights and justice for lower and backward castes

"Haan, haan, I know America, as in China, Japan, America," Amrika Devi chortles at the much ado over her name. "In my village, we name our children after goddesses' names, like Parvati and Lakshmi, but my grandfather named me Amrika, because someone in the *mukhiya*'s family had named their daughter Amrika. They were very angry and asked him to change it, but he retorted, 'If you eat rice, does it mean that we cannot eat rice? If you wear clothes, does it mean that we cannot wear clothes? If you walk in the shade, does it mean that we cannot walk in the shade?'"

A lot of her grandfather's spirit got transferred along with her name, and Amrika grew up to take issue with upper caste prerogatives and "*puji-path aadmi ka thag-thag*" that denied rights to the *harijans*, *kumars*, *telis* and *malas* in her village in Madhubani district (Bihar). Trying to place it on a recognisable map co-ordinate for us, "An hour's bus travel from Jhanjharpur," she offers. This is one of the Lok Shakti Sangathan centres, the NGO that she crossed the boundary of her village for, in 1993. And when the villagers objected at the *ghunghat waali mahila* stepping across and abandoning her duties, she took her three children along for the 20-day training. She then went on a 10-day *padyatra* to create

awareness about injustice, land rights and "*apne haq ke nye, court-kacheri jaana*" - telling others what Hari Bhai and Digambar Bhai from LSS had told her.

"Everyone alleged that I was instigating people," she recalls, and puts forward her line of argument, "*Lekin ek baar jab jaankari mil gaya, tab aadmi ungli kaybo pakade? Akela chalega* (Once you have knowledge, why should you depend on what others say? You start thinking for yourself)." She gives examples of the questions that struck her, "Why should the *puji-paath ka aadmi* (upper class), who already have acres and acres and acres, own even the *nirbhumi* (uncultivated and unclaimed land)? Why should we plead with the government, when the *sarkar* is our *naukar*? Why should we send our children to work for the moneylenders to pay off our *karz*, instead of sending them to school? Not go to school...(you can hear the indignant 'hmp') *Arre, agar anpadh hoga, tabhi to thagega hamein* (It's in their interests to keep us illiterate). It is necessary to be *jagrut* (aware)."

Amrika talks about rights, transformation and empowerment. When the mind is without fear, when it is aware. And the struggle therein. "After the 1993 *baadh*, we dug up seven acres of *nirbhumi*. We planted *gehun* on it and filled another part with water, then put *rohu* and *naini* fish into this *Hansar pokhra* (lake). When the time came for the catch, Singhji's *badmaash* - Lok Narayan Jha and his people - staked their claim to two out of four fish in each catch, and said, 'Show us papers that give you ownership'." Amrika is indignant, "Just imagine! I told them, 'Why should I go to court? Fight me on this land'. The men threatened me, 'We'll take over the land what can you women do? *Chaliye, jaan bacha kar jaiye*'. They tried filling my husband's ears against me and told the villagers that because of me, they'd all land up in jail. They

What have the men done that women should live according to their dictates? And now that I've already stepped out, what's there to fear?

said I was wrong because I had overstepped boundaries." But Amrika had her own logic to counter them with, "I just told them that I too am a human being. I also know how to think. I collected the village women and children and *hamara jhanda gadh diya*, telling them, 'If I die, there will be 100 others to take my place'."

As Amrika enjoys narrating the ensuing drama, we sample her ammo of fiery rhetoric that matches the spirit animating her being, that fuels the *andolan* and that has grown men quailing, "*Sir kat jayega, magar hum zameen nahi chhodega*," I told them. It took us two-three years of hard work to get the grain and fish harvest, and these *puji-paath* guys wanted the benefits! I took them and the rest of the village to the *sangathan* and finally persuaded everyone of our way of thinking." She waits for the enormity of the victory to sink in, before revealing the tactics of her friendly

persuasion, "I told everyone that I would take women from all the four *zilas* and land up at court!" ("*Baap re!*" was the response). Amrika chuckles over her quiet, emphatic victory.

Droll tone shares a basic wisdom, "Women aren't weak, are they?" Besides, Amrika questions, "*Kaun kaam kiya marad ne ki hum uske palle mein jiyenge? Aur jab ek baar ghar se nikal gaye, to ab dar kyon hoga* (What have the men done that women should live according to their dictates? And now that I've already stepped out, what's there to fear?)."



TILLYA DEVI

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Bihar

Works with the Lok Shakti Sangathan towards awareness about land rights, health issues, women's development, education

She was the only one who didn't run away when the men came in their motor *gaadi*, and she listened to their "samaj seva scheme" in her *angan*. She stood her ground again, in her face-off with Lotpal Singh's men during the "zameen ki ladaï". And she made sure that Joginder Yadav, Sukhi and their accomplices served their jail term for raping Dulari Devi and that the *bada babu* at the nearest local clinic in Jhanjiharpur (two-three hours away) attended to her. "Toh didiji," intones the sing-song voice of Tillya Devi, dismissing admiration for her sheer grit and spirit, "what option did I have? It's our matter, *apne nahi karega, to kaun karega?* Whose *khushamat* do we do? That's why I took on all the difficulties. There cannot be *vikas* without struggle."

The Tillya-Devi-something-of-a-force-to-reckon-with - in Khudi village, Thana Nakrur, Panchayat Baliya, and the great beyond - was born when she decided there was something else she gotta be. 'Sukri, *yeh andh-vishwas ka jiwni nahi chahiye tha humko, yeh kheti, mazdoori aur bachcha ka palan poshan* (I didn't want this life of prejudice and ignorance, of just farm labour and raising children). I joined the *sangathan* so I could change our conditions," she says. So, Tillya took the brunt of beatings and left when her husband and her village community disowned her for having gone to Patna for a 12-day training, wherein she learnt "what to say, what to do, about health issues, about ownership of land, how to sign my name, issues around my *maila-behen*, about child marriage and delivery problems". The homecoming came much later, when her family reconciled themselves to her "vikas schemes".

Her first "vikas scheme" was micro-credit finance, "I collected Rs. 5 from the village women (later increased to 10) and started a *gramkosh* from where women could take money if they were ill, had delivery problems, *et cetera*. In one year, we collected Rs. 5,000!" Their women's bank also

What option did I have? It's our matter... That's why I took on all the difficulties. There cannot be vikas without struggle

came handy when they had to bribe the *thanedaar* so that he registered a case against Joginder Yadav, Sukhi and their accomplices. An epic battle that she has christened '*hamari zameen ki ladai*', and narrates with full gusto. "Before we joined the *sangathan*, we weren't aware of our rights. There were nine *bighas* of village land that Lotpal Singh had taken over. We requested him, '*Sarkar, give us this dabaya hua land*'. '*Nahi debo,*' he categorically refused. So, I collected the women in the village and just sat on the land, refusing to budge even when they threatened us. *Kiski khushamat karte jab apni ladai hai?* We sat there for two months, until it was decided in our favour. Then, when our men folk went to Punjab-Haryana to work, Lotpal Singh's men came with *badka, badka lathis*, beat the women and raped Dulari Devi. I was at the Jhanjiharpur centre at that time, so they came to me there. We carried the injured women on a *khat* to the doctor, '*Jaldi karo, bada babu,*' we urged. Deepakji (LSS, Patna) then phoned the SP, the police came and recorded our statement, and all of us 25 women stayed at the Jhanjiharpur centre that night. Within 34 days, these guys were put in jail. We also took our money back from the *thana*. *Ab apna haq mein zameen hai,*" she chuckles.

Tillya talks about the changes since then, "Houses on five *bighas*, *dhan* on four (and with great amusement, enlists the variety of *dhan*, absolutely sure that '*Didiji, Maithli nahi, bujhben*') - *gehun, mausri* and *khechri*." They also plan to build a *pokhra* (lake for fish harvest) on the land; the last one was destroyed in the 1987-88 floods, and never repaired. "You must be knowing how bad things are here, *gai-ghotala sab?*" Tillya checks the knowledge base across the phone line. What about elections, we offer, and Tillya is exasperated, "Vote *karne de tab na! Garib ko dhamki-dumki de ke dabaav mein lane ki koshish karte hain.*"

But no matter what, take it all on, Tillya advises, acknowledging, "There is a lot of hassle in this line of work, but how else will women go forward? How else will things change?"