



# Standing Proud

The Stories of Ten Women Candidates for  
the 1997 Local Elections of Nepal



PROMOTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (PWPP)  
राजनीतिमा महिला सहायिताको अभिवृद्धि

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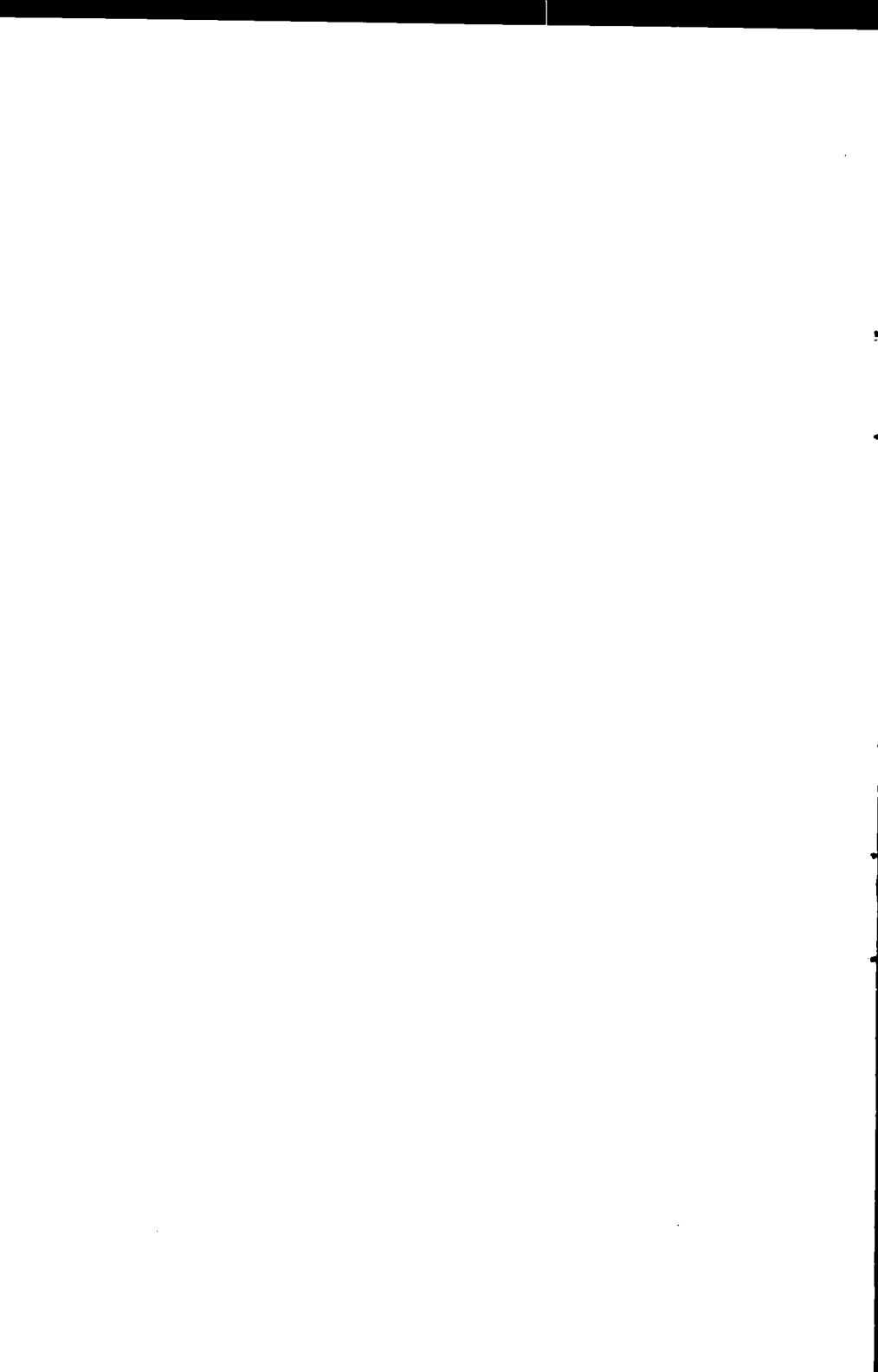
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## Introduction

Included in this book are the stories of ten women, each of whom ran for office during the 1997 local elections in Nepal. As individuals, their stories are all unique; each one has a different starting place. The stories of these women and The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) intersected when NDI launched a program to train women candidates and their staff in Nepal. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), NDI created a program called Promoting Women's Political Participation (PWPP). The PWPP was conducted in eight districts of the Tarai region of Nepal starting in December of 1996.

NDI Field Representatives Michael Tajchman and Elizabeth Zervos, along with numerous Nepali staff members and supporters, organized a program that swelled into a large campaign by the time the local elections were held in May of 1997. However, as one woman included in this book explained, "For a woman to enter politics, is to enter the World of the Male." But actually for many women, the situation is far more grave than this. In many cases, for a woman to simply leave the house is to enter the World of the Male, a place that is off limits and culturally forbidden. Hence, all of NDI's PWPP was completed in a very socially conservative environment.

NDI employed an unusual strategy to train women candidates. By March 1997, with assistance from Veena Nayyar, the president of Women's Political Watch-India, and numerous other women and men who served as trainers, NDI trained nearly 90 women to conduct training programs for women candidates on topics such as campaign strategy, public speaking and voter contact. NDI had



invited and trained two women from each political party in each of the eight NDI target districts. These women, in turn, trained women candidates from their own parties in their home districts. In total, nearly 4,000 women were trained by NDI in the eight districts through cooperation with the district level political parties in the region. Additionally, NDI produced and distributed more than 39,000 campaign manuals for women candidates and more than 30,000 posters designed to increase public awareness of women's involvement in the elections.

Just after the NDI program started training women candidates, the government changed, and a royal ordinance was passed that stipulated that approximately 20% of the elected seats in local government be reserved for women. Similar legislation reserving seats for women (33% in all local bodies) had already been in effect in neighboring India for several years.

In Nepal, at the most fundamental and local level of government, the Village Development Committee (VDC), there are nine wards. There are five elected officials, including one ward president and four ward members, who represent each ward<sup>2</sup>. Following the ordinance, one of the ward member seats was reserved for women, meaning that only women could run for that particular seat. The reservation is a minimum only; many women attained tickets and ran for other "open" seats as well, such as ward president, ward member (not reserved) and VDC president and vice president.

In the previous local elections in 1992, less than 1% of all elected seats in Nepal were held by women. However, boosted greatly by

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<sup>2</sup>A VDC ward typically has a population of several hundred people, whereas several thousand people typically live in a municipality ward.

the ordinance, during the 1997 elections, an estimated 36,000 women were elected to local office.

When NDI set out to conduct this program, eight districts in the Tarai were chosen because the cultural barriers against women's involvement in politics are particularly strong in this region. In other words, NDI (and USAID) believed that the need was especially great in this part of the country. Although Nepal is most famous for the high Himalaya, Sherpas and Gorkhas, equally important is the Tarai, the flat stretch of land along the southern border of India and home to about half of Nepal's nearly 20 million people. At only a few hundred meters above sea level, the Tarai is geographically part of the Indian Gangetic plains and is rarely visited by tourists.

In the Tarai it is common for women to remain at home and covered from head to toe in their brightly colored *saris*. When women do venture out, they move along the footpaths like whispers, quietly with vague form, anonymous silhouettes. But as stated before, each of these women has a unique story and life. Similarly, the ten women included in this book give voice to these whispers, define the human figures, and name the anonymous women who live throughout the Tarai.

The women in this book were handpicked from thousands. Each of them was "followed" during the election period by an NDI local staff member who recorded their campaign activities and impressions. Women who ran and lost, as well as women who ran and won, are included in this book. These women in many ways are both ordinary and extraordinary. While some of these women were politically very experienced, others were complete novices to politics and actually represented the majority of the women who ran for office in the local elections of 1997.

However, it should be stressed that the women interviewed in this book are not representative of all women who participated as candidates in the 1997 local elections. Although attempts were made to include women who represented the various castes, ethnic groups, political parties, and regions of the Tarai, it should be acknowledged that the women in this book are more experienced, educated, and articulate than the "typical" woman who ran for office in the 1997 local elections. Additionally, all ten of these women participated in the NDI organized women candidate training program.

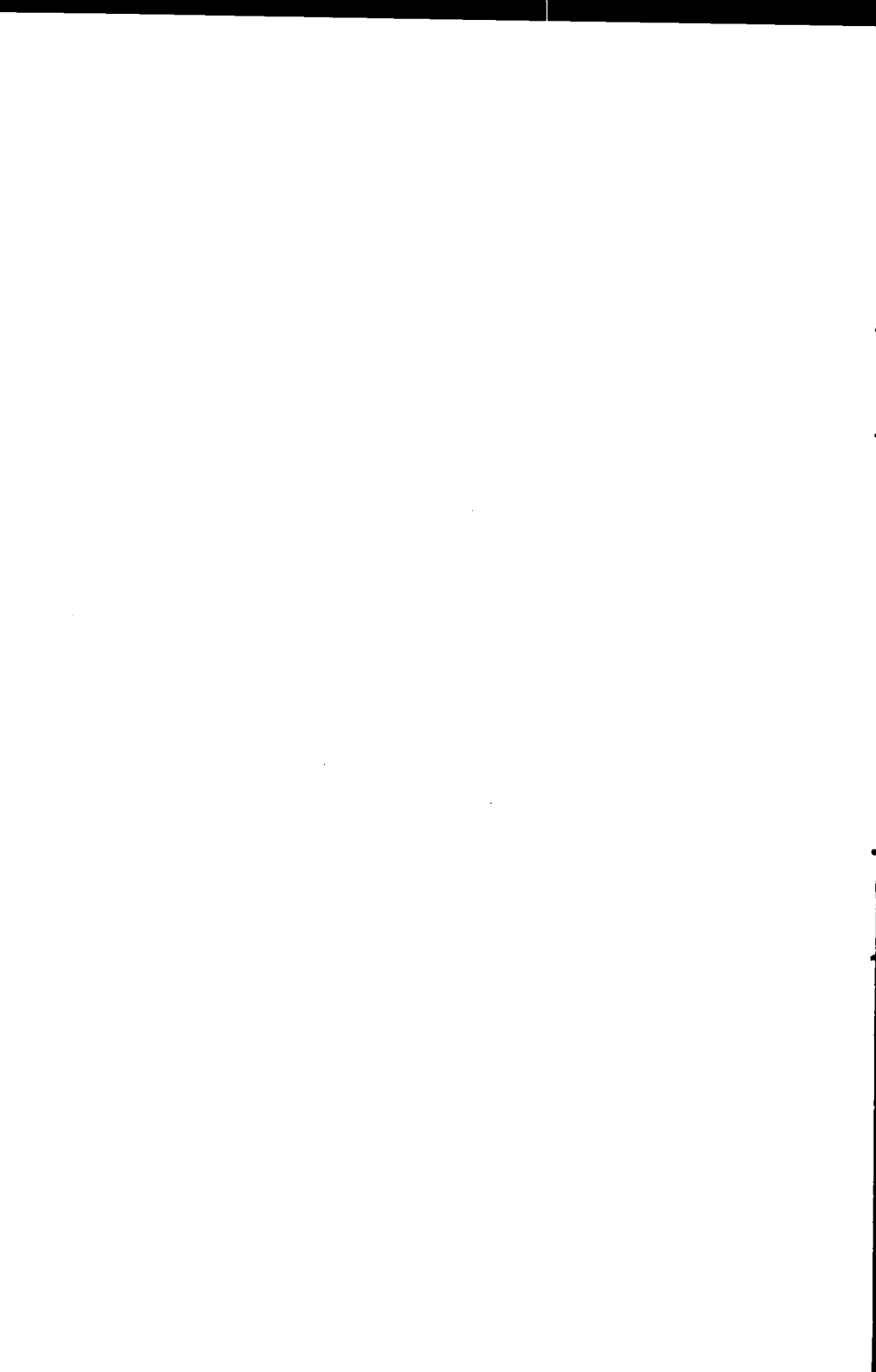
Over a period of two months during the monsoon, starting in late June, Tajchman travelled with a small team of NDI staff members throughout the Institute's target districts in the Tarai in a rented Gypsy Maruti jeep. Together, they waded through floods, slid through mud "roads," and ultimately prevailed over several vehicle breakdowns and road strikes. The places they went and the women whom they met were very familiar to this roving team since all NDI staff members had been travelling and working in these areas since December of the previous year. The NDI team met many of these ten women during the women candidate training program and during the campaign period. For the most part, these women were interviewed in their homes or party offices, but sometimes at hotels and restaurants, or in the Gypsy Maruti during downpours.

To gather more information about the context in which the elections took place in each district, the NDI team conducted interviews with voters, shopkeepers, farmers, fruit sellers, and so on. Likewise, they met the candidates' husbands, sons, daughters, and other family members. NDI also met with party leaders and community activists. They met with employers, neighbors, volunteers, opponents, and just about anyone else they could think of who could provide their opinions about the candidates and their campaign.

This book is meant to provide a snap shot of ten women who participated in the elections. It is a shared hope that their experiences will give insight into the problems faced by women entering political life and that their stories will also provide the encouragement and inspiration for women in Nepal, and elsewhere, to serve and lead their communities by holding public office.

Another slightly different version of this book based on the same interviews with these ten women has been written in Nepali. This book was compiled and written by local staff member Deepak Khanal. The focus of the Nepali book is somewhat different, as it includes more practical information targeted at helping Nepali women run better and more efficient campaigns in the future, based on the lessons and advice of the ten women in this book.

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## Political Party Background

The ten women included in this book represent the political landscape of the Tarai. Two women from each of the four national parties have been included as well as one woman from a small minority party and another who ran as an independent. The four major national parties are listed below. Each of the national parties is represented with a *chhap*, or party symbol. Because of the high rates of illiteracy in Nepal, the names of the candidates are actually not written on the ballot. Instead, the party or individual candidate's *chhap* is on the ballot marked with an inverted *swastika* symbol in order to cast a vote.

### **Communist Party Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML)** **symbol: the sun**

Following the 1994 national elections, the CPN-UML emerged as the largest single party in the Parliament. The party also won approximately 60% of the seats during the 1997 local elections. This party also played a significant role in ushering in multiparty democracy during the 1990 struggle or *Andolan*. The CPN-UML led the government twice since 1990, once in a coalition with the RPP.

### **Nepali Congress (NC)** **symbol: the tree**

The NC is Nepal's oldest political party. The NC played a critical role in the struggle for Nepal's multiparty democracy. It became the first party to govern Nepal with the advent of a multiparty system in 1990. It also won a majority of seats during the 1992 local elections. The party received the second largest number of seats during the 1994 national elections and also ran a distant in the 1997 local elections.

### **Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP)**

**symbol: the plow**

This royalist party is mainly made up of politicians from the previous era of "partyless" democracy called the "*panchayat*," when political parties were banned in Nepal. Although the RPP is the third largest party represented in the Parliament, for a time it turned out to be a powerful player since neither the NC nor the CPN-UML could form a government without its cooperation and participation. The RPP only achieved marginal gains in the 1997 local elections.

### **Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP)**

**symbol: the hand**

This regional party has its traditional strength in the Tarai and purports to support greater representation of the *madheshi* people living in the Tarai, who have been traditionally under-represented in various sectors of Nepali society, such as the army and civil service. The NSP's representation in the Parliament is the smallest among the national parties. During the 1997 local elections, the NSP suffered setbacks further reducing its importance in local government.

### **Rastriya Janamurkti Party (RJP)**

**symbol: none**

This non-national minority party is made up primarily of ethnic Hill groups related to Tibetans, many of whom have migrated to the Tarai in recent years. Similar to the NSP, the RJP purports to support the greater representation of these ethnic groups, which have also been left out of the mainstream Nepali society. Previously, this party's symbol was the house, but a rule change at the national level prevented non-national parties from using a single symbol. Instead, candidates from this party received symbols the same way as independent candidates, individually. Support for this party during the 1997 local elections was found only in sporadic

enclaves in the Tarai where migration by the Tibetan-Nepali ethnic groups has been heavy and where the RJP made alliances with larger parties such as the NC.





## **RUKMANI GYAWALI**

**LOCATION:** Butwal Municipality,  
Ward No. 10  
**DISTRICT:** Rupendehi  
**SEAT:** Ward President  
**PARTY:** Communist Party of Nepal  
(United Marxist Leninist)



### *No Time To Worry*

Rukmani Gyawali sits at her desk discussing some business with several men in her office. She excuses herself from the discussion and offers a welcoming smile.

"When you were first here, this (the Ward no. 10 office that is a part of her home) was not here. I won the election! It all worked out. It's been a few weeks now since I started my new responsibilities as ward president."

She continues,

"At first, I was nervous about running for ward president. Everyone had put so much faith in me: the party women's organization, my friends and family. Occasionally in private, I doubted myself and my abilities. But in the end, it was not that hard. Everything went smoothly in my campaign and all the hard work and planning paid off. I even won by a good margin."

## ***Standing Proud***

For Rukmani, everything seemed to fall into place during her campaign and she turned out to be a winner. With this said, it is important to point out that Rukmani was the only woman to receive a party ticket for the position of ward president in the entire municipality of Butwal. Other women in the municipality also won, but for ward member seats only, and primarily for the reserved seats for women.

Rukmani's interest in politics started when she was a girl living in the village outside of Butwal. She, like most Nepali girls, took on more than her share of responsibilities of the housework and farming. Her mother died when she was eight years old, and she took on the main responsibility of raising her younger brother and sister. Before her mother died, Rukmani's father lived in two homes, one with her mother and the other with another wife. Although illegal, this arrangement is not uncommon in the Nepali family structure. Men sometimes marry two or three times. Wives, with no alternative means of economic security for themselves and their children, are sometimes expected to live together in the same house. Rukmani's mother was the second wife. After she died, Rukmani and her brother and sister went to live with their stepmother and her children who were older.

Despite her father's marital arrangement, Rukmani remembers him as an advocate for her to attend school. She recalls,

“He told us that the boys and girls in the family should have the same privileges. This was especially true for education. The fact that my father cared about my education was a big influence on me growing up. Many of my girlfriends in the village never saw the inside of a classroom except for looking through the windows from the outside. I was lucky.”

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Continuing, she says,

“My family was supportive of my campaign. It was my decision to run. I have two sons, ages 17 and 19. They’re both studying at the campus here in Butwal. They’re teenagers. But even still, in their own way they helped me with my March 18, 1998 campaign.”

Rukmani explains how she first became involved in party politics,

“When I was in the eighth grade, I started to become interested in the left-leaning parties of Nepal. My father was a supporter, although not an activist, and through him I first became acquainted with the communist party. This was also my first introduction to feminism. I learned about women’s rights and civil rights. I read the communist party manifesto and liked it immediately because it had specific provisions for women’s rights, as well as basic civil rights for everyone.”

When she was still in the eighth grade, Rukmani became involved in educational activities in the community. Encouraged by her father and school teachers, Rukmani organized and taught literacy classes for women in her village. She was inspired to start this project when she attended a program organized on International Women’s Day. Eventually, Rukmani finished high school and passed the SLC (School Leaving Certificate) exam. Because she married and started a family of her own at a young age, after high school she was unable to attend college, despite her interest in higher education.

Rukmani became involved with the CPN-UML in the early 1980s when political parties in Nepal were banned and underground. Only after the restoration of democracy did she become more openly

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involved in the party as an official member. But Rukmani and her husband have been party activists for many years. During the period when all parties were banned, she risked her life for her party and helped move party leaders through an underground network of party activists. She explains,

“At that time, it was dangerous to be involved in party politics. Politics did not just start when multiparty democracy was restored in 1990. Before that time, many people were jailed for showing any kind of affiliation to a political party. My husband or I could have been killed for what we did. It was not uncommon for government representatives to take activists to the jungle. There, the police would tell them to run and then shoot them in the back. Others were taken to the jungles in the east and hung. Back then you never really knew who to trust; the government had a network of spies that would report things to them, true and false. You had to be very careful.”

Although her husband has also been an active member of the same party, his attention has also been focused on the family business, and he has therefore been less involved than his wife in the political area.

“My husband and I have always preferred the policies and programs of the CPN-UML. I like my party’s stand on women’s rights. No party is perfect but that’s the structure that we have to work with. I believe that my party is sincere in its efforts to involve more women in the party and to really see that women advance in every sector of society.”

## ***Standing Proud***

Rukmani welcomed the 1997 local government ordinance that reserved ward seats for women. She believes the quota is necessary to guarantee women's participation in local government. Parties, unless compelled, are reluctant to provide tickets to women. As a result of the reserved seat provision, thousands of women in Nepal were given tickets who probably would have never received them otherwise. However, Rukmani explains that the ordinance is limited because it does not address the disparity between men and women in other seats in local government, such as ward president, VDC vice-president and president.

"In order for me to receive a party ticket, my party's internal women's organization, *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh*, had to organize and demand it from the party leadership. But I got the ticket because I deserved it. I had been active in the community, committed to the party, and I had a good chance of winning. Our *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh* tried to pressure the party to give even more tickets to women for other higher posts. We did not succeed in this regard. I think in the next election, when more women have proven themselves, tickets for higher posts will also be given to women."

Rukmani has been active with the *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh* for over ten years. This organization played a very active role in the restoration of democracy movement in Rupendehi district. During the *Andolan*, or "people's struggle" in 1990, while protesters were fired upon by the police in Kathmandu, it was the activists from the women's organization of the communist party who first unfurled the banned communist party flag and took to the streets in Rupendehi. This, of course, was an extremely daring move at the time. Immediately after multiparty democracy began, Rukmani was

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appointed as a full member to the party's first district level committee. Rukmani explains that now the role of the party's women's organization is to advocate for women in the party structure, particularly in pressing the party to give more tickets to women. She remembers,

“Back then, after the restoration of democracy, when I first (openly) started in the *Sangh*, I didn't imagine that I would ever run myself. My efforts were more general. But gradually, as I took on more work in the organization and the party, I began to realize that I could apply my leadership skills in a different way and run for office. That's what happened this year. I made the decision to run, and after that everything fell into place.”

Rukmani explains that the NDI training program for women candidates contributed to her success in receiving a ticket for ward president. She says the training program helped to convince the party that she was prepared and that she had the necessary support to run and win. At the training session the women in the party started developing their strategy to maximize the number of tickets that the party would give to women. The ordinance guaranteed a minimum number of seats. The *Sangh* pushed the party to give even more. The NDI-trained party trainer for the CPN-UML, Sushila Pradhananga, is also district president of the *Sangh* and led the women from the training to the party leadership to make their demands clearly heard. She would later become Rukmani's chief supporter in her campaign for ward president. Sushila recalls,

“We had to press the party for tickets for women. We were not going to be satisfied with only the ward member seats for women. We did our research and gave our list of women candidates to the party.”

## ***Standing Proud***

Rukmani's name was on the list. She's an old friend of mine; we're 'comrades' you could say. We see issues very similarly, and I know how committed she is to the party and women. She's proven herself to be a leader, and she's sacrificed a lot for the party. We had challenged our party leadership on the issue of tickets for women. At one point, when the party started to go back on their word, we had to show our power; we threatened to boycott the election unless they gave at least one ticket for ward president to a woman. In the end, they reluctantly offered the ticket to Rukmani."

Sushila explains that because of the stance taken by the women's organization, Rukmani's election became larger than just a fight between Rukmani and her opponents. The women in the party had to prove that *women can win*. Sushila explains,

"When you've been with the party as long as I have, you start to figure some things out about these people. You have to know when and where to pick your fights. I am in this struggle for the long haul, not just the short term. Threatening the party was not an impulsive, hot-headed reaction. We put our word and beliefs on the line. The party thought that Rukmani couldn't win, especially there in Ward no.10 since it was a Congress area. Some of our party leaders had their own agenda in giving her the ticket, in my own opinion."

Because of the initial reluctance of the party to provide her a ticket, Rukmani says that she felt that she had something to prove to the party and to everyone else. She says that she wanted to be a



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positive role model for other women and prove that women can compete with men in every sector of society. She feels that because of her hard work within the party, she had earned the right to prove this point.

“When I finally learned that I had gotten the ticket, I was happy and relieved. The party had promised me the ticket but I wasn’t sure until it was made final. Despite all the pressure that we women have had to apply to our party, I definitely believe in the party’s support for women.”

After winning the ticket, Rukmani and her supporters started making plans for winning the election. Following NDI’s advice for developing a campaign plan, Rukmani made a schedule of all the activities that she would organize during the period leading up to election day.

Some of the activities she included in her campaign plan were organized by the party municipality committee and some by the party ward committee. Rukmani was involved in all the activities planned to raise the candidates’ profile with the voters. These activities included a city wide rally in which the candidates for mayor, vice mayor and ward presidents led a procession to each of the 15 wards of the city. Rukmani also organized a smaller rally at the ward level where she led the party’s slate of candidates on a march of nearly 200 people through her ward, stopping at each intersection to address the crowds that gathered spontaneously. Rukmani gave numerous speeches in her ward during the campaign.

While making her campaign plan, Rukmani also considered how many of the roughly 2,600 voters in her ward she would need to win over in order to achieve her victory. She tried to honestly examine

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her strengths and weaknesses and to assess those of her opponents. She met with Sushila and, together, they went over the voters list and developed a strategy for winning.

Rukmani attributes her victory to many factors, the most significant being the support she received from the women's organization in her party. As the only woman running for the post of ward president in the municipality, there was extra attention focused on her campaign. The women party activists organized heavily in Ward no. 10 to ensure Rukmani's victory.

Face-to-face contact with voters during the campaign period is probably the most important activity for candidates running for office. Candidates believe that when voters cast their votes, they ask themselves, "Did the candidate show his or her face at my house? Did they make an effort?"

Most candidates in Nepal go with a group of five or six supporters door-to-door to meet with voters. When Rukmani organized her neighborhood tour to meet voters, she had with her a group of 20 to 30 men and women supporters. The size of this group on their front door steps impressed voters.

"I was surprised when there were so many of us going door-to-door. Having a small crowd with me as I asked for votes generated a lot of enthusiasm for my campaign. At any given time, I had at least 20 supporters with me. Others wanted to join as well. This turned out to be a good strategy."

Having so many supporters with her also allowed for more contact with the voters, explains Rukmani. For instance, although she was fairly well known in her ward for her social activism and

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involvement in various community projects, her supporters, while going door-to-door with her, asked voters about their needs and were able to give more individualized attention to each voter. While Rukmani kept the group moving from house-to-house, some supporters trailed behind to talk to voters.

Rukmani and Sushila made a conscious effort to target voters who were either leaning towards her major opponent, a candidate from the NC, or those seen as “swing” votes. Sushila remembers hearing about this strategy at the NDI Training of Trainers (TOT) session, when Veena Nayyar of Women’s Political Watch India advised the candidates to be deliberate in their efforts to target voters and to create voter profiles. Consequently, Sushila advised Rukmani to follow her main opponent and visit with voters at the same homes. They sent certain supporters to the homes of targeted voters where they had already established friendships so those voters could be more easily convinced to vote for Rukmani.

Like many other women who ran for seats other than the ward member seat reserved for women, Rukmani in her campaign highlighted the fact that she was the only woman running against all male competition. Rukmani and her supporters asked women to vote for their own party, but wherever they had a choice, to vote for themselves by voting for a woman. During the last local elections in her ward, the Nepali Congress Party had won. The incumbent did not run again, and the NC gave the ticket to a man, Radhesyam Rajbhandari. He was Rukmani’s main competition. Rukmani and her campaign staff did not write anyone off as a possible supporter and even tried to convince Rajbhandari’s wife to cross party (and marital) lines to vote for Rukmani.

According to Sushila, when Rajbhandari found out who was running for the seat on the UML ticket, he asked, “What’s this?”

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Why should I take my opponent seriously if the person is someone who wears a *sari*?"

Sushila and Rukmani took this comment as a challenge they readily accepted. After the election Rajbhandari admits,

"I lost for a lot of reasons. First and foremost I was out-campaigned by my opponent, Rukmani. She and her party were stronger, more active, and much more disciplined. They were up early and out late every night of the campaign asking the voters for support. In contrast, my party was weak and undisciplined. I blame my party for my loss in the elections, and I have started losing my friends by speaking out against the NC. I have never before felt so frustrated with politics, and I sometimes feel that the NC leaders are only looking out for themselves."

Despite these comments, Rajbhandari is not a sore loser and wishes Rukmani the best. Rajbhandari was also a supporter of the NDI women's program and helped in the training as a resource person for women interested in running as independent candidates.

Rukmani also assesses the reasons why she won. She says,

"Since I ran on a party ticket, the party provided me with a great deal of support. I received posters and pamphlets. The party also sent me party workers who served as key volunteers for my campaign. The posters that I received from NDI were also useful and were well-liked by everyone. Since I was running against all men, the NDI posters were helpful since they showed women involved in politics in such a positive light."

## **Standing Proud**

In addition to providing campaign volunteers, posters and pamphlets, Rukmani's party also hired a *rickshaw* which traveled throughout the ward with an amplifier system that broadcast messages, encouraging everyone to vote for Rukmani and the CPN-UML symbol, the sun *chhap* or election symbol.

In addition to being an old and close friend of Rukmani, Sushila is also an accomplished writer whose articles have appeared in local newspapers. During the election, in order to reach more voters through the power of her pen, Sushila wrote an article that was published in the *Lumbini Daily*, a local newspaper with district-wide distribution. The article encouraged voters to vote for women candidates and specifically highlighted the accomplishments of Rukmani.

Just before the District Development Committee (DDC) elections, Sushila also published another similar article about women running for the DDC elections that would be held several weeks after the general election. In the article she specifically mentioned the NDI program to increase women's political participation. This article again encouraged the women voters in the DDC election (through an electoral college) to cast their votes for women.

"I want to push the debate forward. We are happy with the women's ordinance because it is an important first step, but we want equality. That is the real goal. I hope my writing provokes discussion and makes everyone, men and women alike, wonder, 'What if men and women were equal? How would it be? How might we feel as humans?'"

Rukmani, Sushila, and other supporters were overjoyed when they learned that Rukmani had won the election. But Sushila says that after the election she learned some disturbing details about the vote

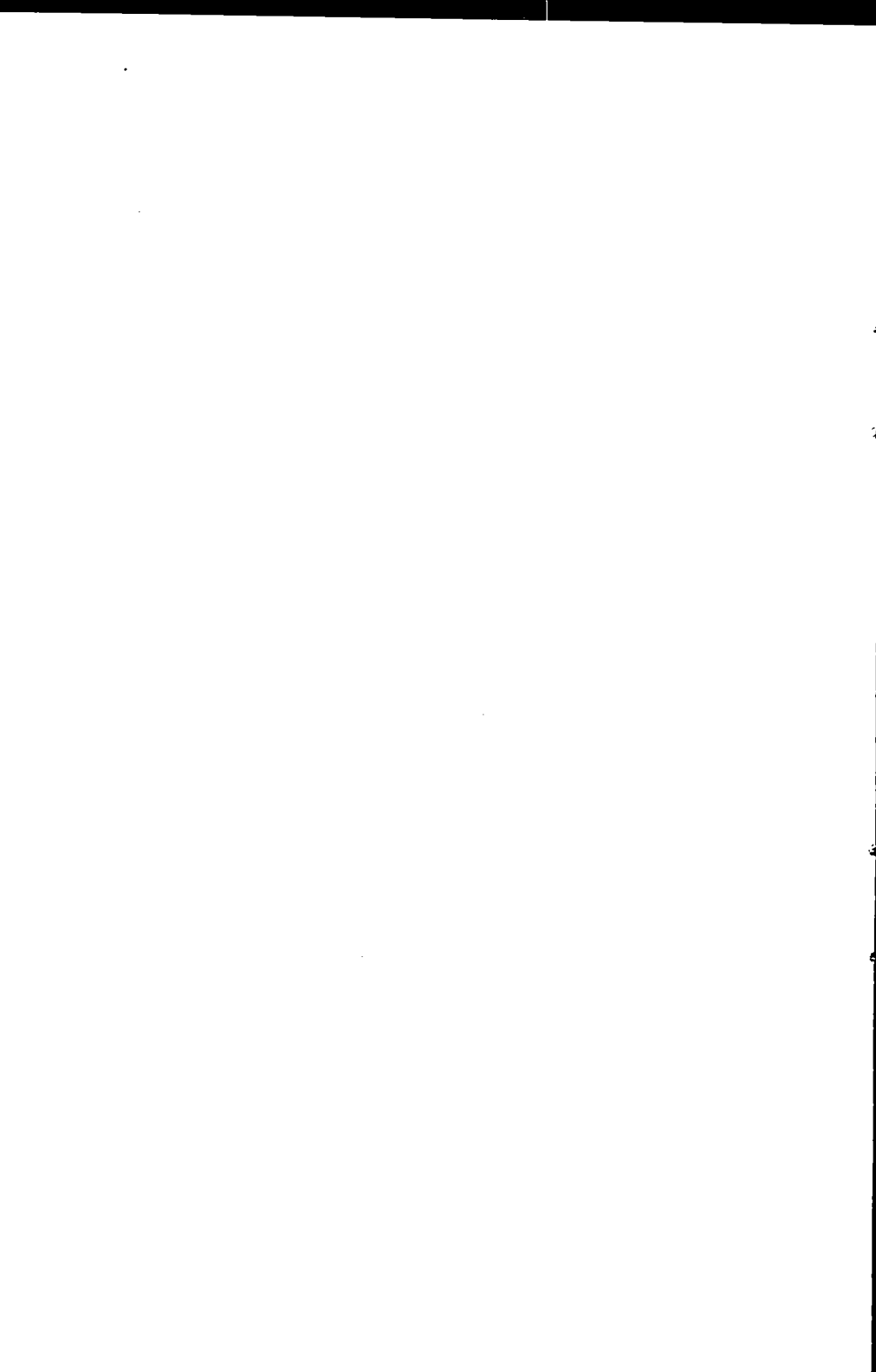
## *Standing Proud*

count that indicate that the support for Rukmani was not wholeheartedly felt throughout the party; there was a significant number of ballots that were marked all for the communist party candidates, with the exception of the ward president seat where voters voted for the NC candidate. Sushila surmises from this that these voters may be men in her own party who were out to prove that women can not win.

Rukmani is putting this possibility in the past because she wants to focus her attention on the future. She explains,

"I am busy, and I don't have time to be concerned about who in my party does not support me. It's only a minority of party activists. I know I have a great deal of support, from both men and women, which was demonstrated during the election. Tomorrow morning starting at 6:30 am, I have meetings with other community leaders, and we are going to meet with constituents door-to-door throughout the morning. I have to finish writing a proposal by the weekend. And then I have to prepare for municipal meetings next week. See? I don't have time to worry. I have a lot to do."

Rukmani has places to go, people to see, and a lot to do.





Rukmani Gyawali explains, "When you were first here, this [the Ward no. 10 office that is a part of her home] was not here. I won the election!... "



Rukmani Gyawali says, "Back then, after the restoration of democracy, when I first openly started in the *Sangh*, I didn't imagine that I would ever run myself. My efforts were more general. But gradually, as I took on more work in the organization and the party, I began to realize that I could apply my leadership skills in a different way and run for office. That's what happened this year. I made the decision to run, and after that everything fell into place."





## **PUSHPA PAUDEL**

**LOCATION:** Jahada VDC  
Ward No. 9  
**DISTRICT:** Nawalparasi  
**SEAT:** Ward Member (Open Seat)  
**PARTY:** Nepali Congress Party



### *The Second Time*

After the election, when Pushpa Paudel made the rounds in her neighborhood with the other candidates who ran on her party's ticket, it was a familiar experience. Each of her neighbors whom she met, carefully placed red powder, or a *tika*, on her forehead to bless her in the Hindu way and to wish her good luck. She had won the election, and this too was familiar because in the 1997 local elections, Pushpa ran and won for the second time.

She won the election for the first time five years ago when she was elected to the seat of ward president of the Jahada Village Development Committee (VDC). For the past five years she has been the only woman on the eleven-member VDC and has worked hard to use her power as an elected leader to make improvements in her village.

In 1997, Pushpa deliberately ran for a seat with lesser responsibilities, which she won (an open ward member seat not reserved for women). She ran for this seat because she wanted to run for a position on the District Development Committee (DDC).

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In order to run for a DDC post, the candidate must be an elected official, either a ward member or the ward president. In 1997, the conventional wisdom was that the ward president should not run for the DDC election because the VDC ward president's responsibilities require the official to stay close to home. The DDC posts are of greater responsibility and require travel throughout the district. Therefore, many candidates with DDC ambitions first run for seats as ward members. This was also Pushpa's plan.

Pushpa wanted to apply the skills and experience that she had gained as ward president to a position on the DDC. But unfortunately party dealings before the DDC election kept her from running for DDC office. Her party made an alliance with another smaller party that nominated and ran their own candidate for the DDC from Pushpa's geographic area. Nonetheless, Pushpa is one of the very few women in Nepal who has the distinguished record of running and winning a seat in the local election *twice*. She is a remarkable politician.

Pushpa's VDC is located in the lower plains of Nawalparasi district. It is near Tribenwen, on the Nepali-Indian border. According to the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, Tribenwen holds special significance because it is the same place where the goddess *Sita* was sent into exile by her husband, *Ram*, while she was pregnant. According to the *Ramayana*, for fourteen years she lived in the jungle with her twin sons and a hermit. One day *Ram* stumbled upon his family by accident when he was hunting. When he realized the grave mistake he had made by sending *Sita* into exile, he asked her to rejoin him. But to his disappointment, in her pain and sorrow *Sita* dissolved into the earth from which she was created.

Many Hindu women believe that this story holds a special lesson for men: if a husband does not show faith in his wife, he might end up

## ***Standing Proud***

losing her forever. Nevertheless, in the Hindu faith *Ram* and *Sita* are the most celebrated couple. They are the ideal husband and wife because of their love, sacrifice, and devotion to one another.

Tribenwen (and across the river in India) is considered a holy place, and pilgrims come from far away to pray to *Sita*. Now the jungle where *Sita* lived has since been cut down, and the soil that she became is some of the richest land in Nepal, fully planted with iridescent green rice during the monsoon season. During this season, the winding ox cart roads that lead to Pushpa's village become impassable due to flooding and mud.

Pushpa's home is modest: it is made of wood and covered with *lipnu*, a mixture of cow manure and mud. Rising from the plains, the green Middle Hills of Nepal provide a beautiful backdrop for her village. Her home is decorated with old black and white photos: her wedding picture, photos of her children, relatives who died long ago. In the next room, there is one framed photo of the Nepali Congress leader and former Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, surrounded by the Nepali Congress flag. Next to this is a large print of *Ram* and *Sita*. But her family photos are the most prominent decorations.

Pushpa appreciates the support that her family provided her while she held the post of ward president. Her husband, Ganesh Kumar Paudel, has been particularly supportive. He is a farmer and also holds an administrative post in the VDC. He speaks like a philosopher, weaving metaphors into everything he says. Pushpa and her husband have two teenagers, an 18 year old boy and a 15 year old girl.

Ganesh Kumar has been a supportive husband to Pushpa throughout their 19 years of their marriage. He says that he and Pushpa have a

## ***Standing Proud***

family in partnership. Because of this, they must support and help one another. This also includes sacrificing for one another. Ganesh Kumar explains,

“We have a beautiful partnership, and I am happy with her accomplishments in politics and in her social work activities. Because we are like one person, when she succeeds, so do I; when I succeed, so does she. Look at this picture of *Ram* and *Sita*. They too, sacrificed for one another. In our Hindu culture, it is the female deities whom we pray to for strength and prosperity. We pray to *Durga* and to *Laxmi*. When we look at our culture and look to the teachings of our ancestors, it is obvious that both women and men are both supposed to be involved in life, not just men. Somehow our original culture has been distorted and perverted by a system of male dominance.”

He continues,

“Some men feel threatened. They worry that if women get involved in politics, that the household will fall apart. But this has not happened in our case.”

The Paudel household has not fallen apart because Pushpa's husband is a full partner in the household and shares the housework activities, including cooking for the family. He laughs when he says that he can do anything at home that a woman can, except have a baby.

Pushpa's husband's family came to Nepal as immigrants from Burma when the Tarai jungles were being cut down and turned into

## ***Standing Proud***

farmland in the 1960s. Many ethnic Nepali people living in Burma and the states of Northeast India, such as Assam, also followed this same immigration pattern. Pushpa studied in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where she was raised until the eighth grade when she got married to Ganesh Kumar at the age of 15. She later finished high school but did not pass the leaving exam.

With the support of her husband, Pushpa completed the ninth and tenth grades. She returned to school after she had already been married for 10 years. When her children were in the fourth and fifth grade, Pushpa was in the 10th grade at the same school. They wore the same uniforms of navy blue and white. This was a very unusual situation since most girls who marry while they are in their early teens are usually forced to quit school. Pushpa said that although this was unorthodox, several other mothers in her community followed her example and also finished high school later in life. Ganesh Kumar was particularly helpful in encouraging her to complete her education.

Pushpa is particularly lucky that her *sasu*, or husband's mother, is also supportive of her political and social activities. In Nepali culture the mother-in-law has evolved into an unpopular family figure. Some believe that the main job of the mother-in-law is to make the life of the daughter-in-law as unbearable and painful as possible to ensure that she is subservient to her son. In modern Nepali culture the duty of a wife is to worship her husband. There have been a number of documented cases of mother-in-laws beating and even killing their daughter-in-laws for stepping too far out of their traditional roles. Pushpa says,

“My family is very understanding, and everyone pitches in to help one another. They know that my life is busy, and I have many responsibilities here at

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home and outside. The family is used to my many activities.”

Pushpa's calendar is full. Besides holding office in the VDC, there are about a half dozen other organizations with which she is involved, either as an active member or as a board member. She is the elected Secretary of the district-wide Congress Trade Union Association. She is president of the NC women's organization for her area. She is an active member of a women's NGO, Women's Empowerment Committee. And she has started a community organization called the Women Farmer's Association, which works as a savings group and clearinghouse for information on improving farming methods.

Pushpa believes her role in these organizations helps to build the capacity of other women leaders. She says,

“I have to be realistic. I can't do everything all the time. So when I start to pull back on some of my activities because of the demands of other activities, my friends in the concerned organization get nervous. But I don't leave abruptly. I stay on to see that someone else can fill my role. I think leadership positions should not simply be retained by the present leaders; leadership positions should be shared so that everyone gets a chance to improve their skills.”

It has also been helpful to Pushpa that she and her family have been interested in the same party. She said that she first became interested in the NC when she was a student in India, and many underground leaders from Nepal would convene to fight against Nepal's partyless system of government, or *panchayat* regime. She

## ***Standing Proud***

saw the NC as the party of democracy. She and her husband both became active in the NC after the 1990 people's movement.

“It was my husband who first inspired me to become involved in politics. He said to me, ‘Go ahead. You should have a life outside of the home that is meaningful to you.’”

After Pushpa and Ganesh Kumar had their two children, Pushpa first became involved as a community social activist by becoming an officer in the Family Planning Association, of which she is still a member. This experience led to other social work activities, which in turn led her to politics.

“One of the reasons that I first ran for office, is because I wanted to be an example for other women. I had gained so much through my experiences as an activist in the community, and I wanted other women to follow my example. I wanted to inspire them to accomplish things for themselves and for the community. But the other reason that I ran was because I felt that I had a great deal to offer to the VDC. I took my work seriously, and I worked very hard. I knew that I, Pushpa, had something to contribute.”

Pushpa did accomplish a great deal and made significant contributions to her community during her tenure as ward president. She plans to continue working on the projects that she started in her second term, even though she was elected to a ward member seat this time. Some of the local government structures have changed with the new local government ordinance.



## ***Standing Proud***

Under the old structure of just eleven ward presidents, Pushpa often found herself in the role of mediator. She was the only woman and the only Nepali Congress representative on the committee. On almost all the issues there was an even split between the other parties which often left her with the ultimate decision-making power.

“I chose not to become the ‘king maker’ in those situations, but rather I acted in the belief that the work of the VDC should not be partisan. I am a firm believer in this principle. I made the parties work out their differences so that everyone could benefit. I learned that making decisions is very tough. Every decision should also be guided by the principle of balance.”

Pushpa relays a story of how once a VDC decision caused her to stay up all night. In this situation she reviewed her options and then asked for advice from others. She said that she ultimately followed the advice of a local leader in her party and made what turned out to be the wrong decision. She then agonized over this decision because she felt others would see her as partisan. In the end, however, her reputation and ongoing diligence overshadowed her poor decision.

In addition to her leadership style and ability to make others work together, Pushpa also became an expert on attaining resources for her village by accessing programs from both the NGO and government sectors. Most of the programs that she brought into the VDC, such as literacy programs for women, pipes for drinking water, and irrigation equipment, turned out to be popular cost-sharing measures for the VDC.

## ***Standing Proud***

Pushpa can talk about development issues with impressive authority. She describes the technical problems she encountered when boring tube wells for irrigation and laying pipes for the drinking water supply. She says she learned a great deal about all aspects of development through her participation in local government. She explains further,

“I learned one very important lesson: you can’t please everyone! And unfortunately, the voters have an expectation that you can. It is very hard to prioritize needs when every need is real and pressing to those affected by it. And when you are working with limited resources you have to prioritize. But what criteria should be used? A bridge may be an important project for people in my ward, but building one might take the VDC’s whole budget. What about the people in the other wards? Distribution of goods and services and the prioritization of needs are two large problems that I faced as ward president.”

Therefore, when Pushpa accepted the ticket to run again in 1997, she did so fully knowing what kinds of challenges were ahead. Running a campaign was much easier the second time around. She talks about the difference,

“One thing I noticed this time was that the women in my ward seemed to be much more aware than they were before. They are more conscious of their problems and struggles. They are also much more involved in politics now. Most of my women friends worked on the elections of other women. Before, they provided me with a lot of support. For my second election bid it was not so necessary I

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personally felt more confident the second time around.”

Because of her record, Pushpa felt certain that she would win a position on the VDC again, but she campaigned hard nonetheless, partly to reassure herself. The other reason that she campaigned hard was that she did not want to be perceived as arrogant by the voters. She explains,

“I went to every house several times. My ward is small. I had to go back and forth several times to each house because I made it a point to meet with every single voter, not just any household member.”

Her pitch to the voters was unique and appropriate for an experienced campaigner. Going door-to-door, she said,

“Hello. Do you recognize this familiar face? I am here to ask for your support again. I am sure that you are aware of the development projects that I have brought to our village. I want to continue to work and serve you, so I am asking you for your vote again.”

One man did indeed recognize her familiar face and was angry with Pushpa. He held a grudge against her, claiming that she did not give him pipes that she had acquired through the district office responsible for drinking water. He remembered this incident when she came to ask for his vote. She said that she had to explain to him, again, that he had to sign up for the program and that she had set pipes aside for him. She said that she gave him several reminders. When he didn't come for the pipes, she gave his away to someone

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in another ward. Pushpa thinks that she may have convinced him to give her another chance.

At the ward level, Pushpa's main campaign activity was meeting the voters door-to-door. She also campaigned more broadly for her party by participating in a bicycle rally held throughout the VDC, in which about 450 NC supporters rode through the area chanting party slogans and ringing their cycle bells with tiny party flags attached to the handle bars. Most women, however, do not ride bicycles, especially along the border areas where the restrictions for women going outside the home are greater. But for Pushpa this was not a problem. She explains,

“Of course I was there. I have a bike! How do you think would I keep up my busy schedule if I didn't have my own means of transportation?”

At the bicycle rally Pushpa also gave a public speech -- the only woman from her party to do so. As part of her speech, Pushpa told a story in which she ended up publicly criticizing leaders of her party. Several weeks before the election, she was in the courtyard of the home of a male party leader. She and the party leaders were planning the rally and speech program for the election. Pushpa had gone into the house and was appalled to find the leader's wife and other female relatives with their heads and faces completely covered with their *saris*, like a *parda* or curtain. Angered by this, Pushpa went directly outside and said to the leader,

“Why are those women all covered in *parda*? It's fine to treat me as an equal and work with me, but why don't you give the same respect to your own family?”

Pushpa made this issue the topic of her speech at the bicycle rally, and she encouraged the leaders who preach about equality from the

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stage during the election period to practice equality at home all the time.

When Pushpa went to the homes of voters to ask for their support and votes she went with all five of the NC candidates, including one other woman running for the ward member seat reserved for women. (Since most of her women friends were active with the campaigns of other women, most of Pushpa's volunteers were men.)

One of her male volunteers, Deeprakash Lahoni, also worked as a volunteer for another woman's campaign. He strongly believes that men and women should have the same rights. He states,

“Looking at Pushpa, I am convinced that women can lead. That's why I wanted to help with her campaign. She has had a positive impact on my wife and daughters. We live in this ward.”

Lahoni went on to say that he feels that when the ordinance brought thousands of women into the election process and politics for the first time, Nepal started its second great struggle for democracy. According to Lahoni, the first struggle happened in 1990 with the start of multiparty democracy. The second struggle started in 1997 when women became more engaged in democracy through the new law reserving seats for women.

Interestingly, Pushpa says that she prefers to run against men rather than women in the election. She summarizes her feeling by saying,

“I think for me, it's easier to run against men. I have spent a great deal of time working with men on the VDC. I think I have got them somewhat figured out. For this reason I think my chances of winning are greater if my opponents are men. I stand out more

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and have a stronger appeal to the voters this way. I am glad that I didn't run for the ward member seat reserved for women. It's not my nature to be campaigning against other women."

Pushpa looks back on her campaign and explains why she thinks that the voters supported her for the second time,

"I think I won because people see me as hard working and impartial."

Pushpa was perceived as an effective local government leader. She had valued compromise when working with the other ward presidents who were elected from three different parties. Pushpa's idea of politics is to include everyone, rather than making one side a winner and the other a loser. Pragmatically, Pushpa believes that the time to be partisan is during the election when candidates need the support of political parties. But after the election, Pushpa believes that partisan politics impedes effectiveness in government. Asked to further expand upon this point, Pushpa explains,

"Even though I support one party over others, it doesn't mean that the other parties are bad, or that they have to be the enemy. The voters win when the leaders from all the parties can work together."

There were only two places in Pushpa's VDC where the Nepali Congress won seats, in Wards no. 9 and 6. All five of the NC candidates won in Pushpa's home Ward no. 9, even though support for her party has weakened significantly almost everywhere else. It seemed as though her popularity not only propelled her to victory, but also helped the other NC candidates in Ward no. 9. The other winning NC candidate won in Ward no. 6 for the ward member seat

## ***Standing Proud***

reserved for women. She was the NDI-trained NC party trainer, Laxmi Kanta K. C.

Pushpa's story makes a compelling argument that money and fancy campaign tactics are not necessary to win in the local elections. Her campaign strategy was simple: to maximize her personal contact with voters and to highlight her past accomplishments. She spent no money on posters or pamphlets. In total she spent between 400-500 rupees (equivalent to about \$8-10) -- a very low budget approach.

At the district level, NC Party Secretary, Bhisnu Lamichhame has known Pushpa for many years and has been an ally within the district level party structure. He, as well as NC District President Krishna Nepali, went to Jahada VDC during the campaign to meet with Pushpa and help with the campaign. Both men were also large supporters of the NDI program in the district and helped to organize training for women candidates. During one of the training sessions, Lamichhame himself gave a memorable presentation and shared tips on public speaking with the NC party women candidates. Lamichhame shares his impressions of Pushpa,

“Pushpa is the kind of leader who will go far because she understands that successful politics is really about the art of compromise. She is a hard worker. Our party is lucky that she is so involved. It is easy to trust someone like Pushpa.”

Pushpa has great political ambitions. Five years ago, as a political novice, she ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the DDC. Pushpa's defeat did not stop her from wanting to achieve bigger posts. She is presently trying to position herself to run for Parliament so she can

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represent her constituency at the national level. Her ultimate goal is to become a Minister.

Pushpa is capable and confident after her first five years of experience in public office. It is a reassuring thought that the other thousands of women who won seats in local government for the first time in 1997, with backgrounds and experiences similar to Pushpa's, might be just as confident and capable to govern five years after taking their posts.

At that time Pushpa might find herself running for a local government post for a third time, unless she runs for Parliament first.







Pushpa Paudel and her husband, Ganesh Kumar Paudel. She says, "It was my husband who first inspired me to become involved in politics. He said to me, 'Go ahead. You should have a life outside of the home that is meaningful to you.'"



Pushpa Paudel with her daughter outside their home in Jahada VDC. Speaking about her first five years in elected office, Pushpa Paudel says, "I learned one very important lesson: you can't please everyone! And unfortunately, the voters have an expectation that you can. It is very hard to prioritize needs when every need is real and pressing to those affected by it. And when you are working with limited resources you have to prioritize... ."



## **SHARDA DEVI GUPTA**

**LOCATION:** Birgunj Municipality,  
Ward No. 9  
**DISTRICT:** Parsa  
**SEAT:** Ward President  
**PARTY:** Nepal Sadbhawana Party



### *United by Politics, Divided by Party*

When Sharda Devi Shah married Rajendra Prasad Gupta in 1967 at the age of 14, she had no idea how interesting her life would become. Her parents were owners of a small pastry shop. She was the oldest of seven sisters with no brothers. At the time of her marriage, she had little notion that her life, especially her family life, typical as it had been up to this point, would at times become so confusing and difficult. When she got married, she would have never guessed that her life would become so driven and disrupted by politics, a word that she barely understood the meaning of back then.

Things change, however. Sometimes the change occurs so dramatically that the color, shape and content are unidentifiable from the original. Sharda Devi Gupta went through such a metamorphosis. Many from her previous life would hardly recognize her now.

After her marriage, Sharda Devi would go on to have four children and work long hours in the Megha-Wool factory in Birgunj. Now

## ***Standing Proud***

her children are grown but all of her three sons live at home. Her oldest child, a daughter, is married, and Sharda Devi has three grandchildren. But as Karmic law (the most supreme law in this Hindu Kingdom) would have it, a series of circumstances occurred which would groom Sharda Devi to become a skilled and honest leader.

Like thousands of women in the region, Sharda Devi took a job in one of the hundreds of factories which cram the main roadside from Pathayia to Raxaul. This corridor, centered around Birgunj, is Nepal's main industrial area and provides employment for thousands of people in the region. Most of the work is semi-skilled, and the factories mass produce consumer goods like biscuits, laundry soap, zippers, jute, and yarn, among other things. Birgunj is also famous for dirty drains, dirty factories and dirty politics. The tourist guide book, *The Lonely Planet*, calls Birgunj the "Armpit of Nepal," and discourages tourists traveling into Nepal at this entry point from staying there due to its industrial churning.

Sharda Devi started working in the Megha-Wool factory, which produces yarn, in 1988 when her youngest child was only one year old. While she was at work, her mother-in-law and daughter, instead of attending school, watched the baby boy and his two older brothers.

Work outside the home brought Sharda Devi into contact with many kinds of people. Her supervisor at the factory, Hari Ballav Mishra, was active with the Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP), and through him she started learning more about this party. She became a party activist when Mishra ran unsuccessfully for ward president during the 1992 elections. Because she had a great deal of respect for him, Sharda Devi campaigned for Mishra door-to-door during the

## **Standing Proud**

campaign period meeting in particular with women voters and asking them to vote for Mishra.

This experience was positive Sharda Devi recalls,

“It wasn’t until I went to a rally one day and heard Mr. Gajendra Narayan Singh (the national NSP president) speak that I became excited about the NSP. He impressed me. I liked his opinions and approach. He told the crowds that we *madeshi* people have rights and should be represented equally. Singh inspired me. He was gentle and sincere. He really cares for people. From this point, I remember the day, I became a dedicated NSP party worker.”

Since that time Sharda Devi has taken on many responsibilities in the party. She is presently the district treasurer of the *Mahila Munch*, the NSP’s women’s organization. In the 1997 local elections, she stood for the ward president seat in Birgunj Ward no. 9 against four opponents, all men.

When the party first asked Sharda Devi to run for this seat, she asked them to reconsider and give her a ticket for a seat with fewer responsibilities, such as the reserved seat for women. The ward president seemed like a big step for someone who had never run for office before. Sharda Devi explains that her party had planned to give the ticket for this seat to a man who was more well known than her in Ward no. 9, but due to his daughter’s wedding he could not accept it. Sharda Devi told the party that she already had a lot going on; she was facing increasing responsibilities at the factory and in the NSP *Mahila Munch*, besides the usual workload at home. But the party persisted.

## **Standing Proud**

She explains,

“They begged me to take the ticket. I was the party’s best chance to win in the ward, since my home is there. But Ward no. 9 was tough for me and for our party. There is not a great deal of support there for *madeshi* people. I had originally planned to run in Ward no.16 where my chances of winning were much greater. The factory is there, and many of the workers live there. There are also a lot of *madeshi* people who live in Ward no. 16, our party’s natural base. I have also been more involved in social activism in Ward no. 16 than in my home Ward no. 9. But in the end, my name was not on the voter list there. The party was persistent about Ward no. 9; Gagendra Narayan Singh himself, a Minister in the government coalition, called me up personally to ask me to take the ticket. Ultimately, I accepted, and I ran for the seat. I gave it my best shot. I lost, but I am very happy that I ran. It felt good. The experience was invaluable.”

Ward no. 9 did in fact turn out to be a difficult ward for the NSP. Whereas this party won a number of seats in Birgunj, including ward president seats in other wards, the votes in Ward no. 9 were divided: out of the five seats, three went to the RPP, including the ward president seat. One went to the UML, and the reserved woman’s seat went to the NC. Previously the ward was an NC stronghold.

Despite her loss, Sharda Devi’s story is one of success and inspiration for many women in the region who have expressed an interest in politics. However, while Sharda Devi became more

## ***Standing Proud***

active in the NSP, her husband and oldest son became active in the Nepali Congress and RPP, respectively. Her husband has been an NC activist for many more years than Sharda Devi has been involved in her party. At the district level, her husband holds a leadership position in the party and is a party worker for the NC. He has not had paid employment for the last six years.

Sharda Devi's oldest son, Pramod Kumar Gupta, is an activist in the RPP and begged his mother not to run for office and to put an end to her political activism. He and his mother did not speak to one another during the two-week campaign period. Sharda Devi and her husband also rarely discuss politics. He told her that he would not oppose her, but it was obvious to her that he did not support her. Before they stopped talking, her son demanded that she not put her photo on her campaign posters and pamphlets as most candidates do. She recalls,

“What was I to do? He was so insistent and angry. He said that if his friends and the neighbors saw my photo on the poster he would be embarrassed. I believed I was doing a good thing by running. But my son didn't see it that way at all. It was hard on me. I felt very conflicted. Out of respect for him and to ensure some peace in the home, I didn't use my photo. But where was his respect for me?”

Things turned increasingly ugly during the campaign. Her brother-in-law, an RPP activist, and his friends showed up at Sharda Devi's home one night and threatened to kill her and her youngest son if she didn't withdraw from the race. When she refused, he left, but before doing so he damaged her mud and bamboo home.

On election day, the same brother-in-law and other RPP activists tried to prevent Sharda Devi from having a representative in the



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polling booth, her right under the election law. She witnessed a great deal of voter fraud and ballot box stuffing by the election officials themselves. However, Ward no. 9 was not re-pollled, as the election was deemed fair enough.

The family's political saga is balanced by Sharda Devi's daughter who lives in neighboring Bara district, east of Sharda Devi's home district of Parsa. This year, her daughter also ran in the local elections (on a CPN-UML ticket) and won the ward member women's reserved seat in her VDC. Sharda Devi says that she is very proud of her daughter,

"I am glad that my daughter is involved in politics. Even though she is married and belongs to another family now, she too, should have her own opinions about politics, like I do."

Despite feeling proud about her daughter's political activism, Sharda Devi is puzzled by the diverse political views in her immediate family; there are political party activists representing each of the four national parties in Nepal: NSP, NC, RPP and CPN-UML.

Her youngest son just received news that he passed the SLC (School Leaving Certificate) exam, an accomplishment that many young people, especially in this region, have a difficult time doing. Failure rates are very high among *madeshi* people since the test is given in Nepali, the second or third language of most people in the area. This issue is one of the major concerns of the NSP. Sharda Devi's excitement about her youngest son's accomplishment is tempered by worries about how to raise money for him to attend college. Sharda Devi explains her special relationship with this son,

"My youngest son, Ashok Kumar, is my friend. Youngest sons and mothers are often close. We are. I asked his advice when I was deciding whether or

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not to run for ward president. He encouraged me to run and be involved despite the negative feelings of his older brother, father, and others.”

The situation in the Gupta family is uncommon. Voting data demonstrates that families in Nepal usually vote the same way, typically following the family patriarch's lead. If women are active in a party at all, it is often because their husbands are active in the same party. Sharda Devi's running on a party ticket other than that of her husband is quite unusual. She recalls,

“I ran for office because I support my party. But I also ran because I wanted to do the work. Governing is tough, especially in this town where there is so much corruption. I told the voters that I wouldn't stand for all this corruption. It's choking us. I ran to serve the public on this issue. I thought, if I can win, I can bring people together behind the issue. One of my main messages to the voters was to end corruption.”

Corruption and scandals are endemic in Birgunj. Although it is the second richest municipality in Nepal, it is evident to most political observers that the money from the public coffers is not being spent on development projects.

Sharda Devi also sees her political involvement as necessary to uplift the Tarai people and as an extension of her social activism. She is very well liked both at the factory where she works and within the NSP. Despite the lack of support from her family, she found support for her candidacy at the factory, in the party, and from the woman who became her campaign manager, Phul Devi Raut.

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The Megha-Wool factory is located along the main road in Birgunj Ward no. 16 next to a tire repair shop. Sharda Devi sometimes works overtime when the work demands are high. In addition to her work at the factory, she works hard at home as well. She sees this as normal and not a special sacrifice. Rising early, she prepares the morning meal and cleans before heading to the factory at 8:00. She returns home usually at 5:00, unless her work load at the factory is heavy. She cleans, does laundry, and feeds her family often not stopping until 11:00. Her bedroom walls are covered with more than 30 framed prints of Hindu deities. Over her bed is a large print of *Durga*, the goddess of protection. By the door is *Bishwa Karma*, the god of machines, which she passes on her way out the door every morning on the way to the factory.

At the factory there are many machines. It is noisy and hot, and the work is repetitious. The factory employs nearly 235 employees. Sharda Devi is one of fourteen women who work there. According to her supervisor, Hari Ballav Mishra, she is one of the best and most reliable employee he has ever had. He states,

“Her job performance is excellent. That’s why she’s earned promotions. Outside of work she also conducts herself very well. She’s active in her community. When she ran for office, it was only natural that we would try to help out. Sharda Devi earns people’s trust. She is really well liked here and is known for her hard work. At the factory, she’s an elected member of the trade union.”

Mishra continues,

“Women should be involved in politics. There is a need. We need balance. The population is made up

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of men and women. Women also need representation. Men and women need to work together for the development of the country.”

In addition to arranging a ten-day vacation from the factory for Sharda Devi so she could devote more time to her campaign, Hari Ballav Mishra also provided a generous campaign contribution. Her co-workers also collected money for her. Money raised from the factory provided the bulk of what Sharda Devi used for the campaign. The remainder was made up of what she contributed herself and what the party gave her.

Both local and national party leaders have recognized Sharda Devi's commitment, reliability and hard work toward the party's goals for several years now. As the smallest national party, the NSP is striving to build support. Supporting party activists, such as Sharda Devi is a long term investment for the party.

Sharda Devi has taken on a great deal of responsibility in the NSP. She was key in the selection of other NSP candidates in her home Ward no. 9. She was the founder of the NSP's *Mahila Munch* three years ago; prior to this there was no organized women's organization within the district level NSP structure, as there was in all of the major parties. During the elections, Sharda Devi also campaigned hard for her party, not only in her own ward, but throughout the municipality. She spoke at rallies, encouraging women, in particular, to become involved in the party.

Sharda Devi says that her party supported her fully in her run for ward president, even though she was known as a long shot candidate. She remembers,

“The party helped with everything. They provided volunteers whom I trained and supervised. Everything, I tell you: money for the volunteer's

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snacks, pamphlets, posters, microphoning. There was a *rickshaw* that went throughout my ward with a large loud speaker and microphone urging voters to vote for me and the hand symbol (*chhap*) of the NSP."

Because of the party's full support, Sharda Devi ended up spending very little of her own money for the campaign. Of her own money that she spent during the campaign, most went for transportation costs and for refreshments for the volunteers. As mentioned before, she was also helped out considerably by a large donation collected from her supporters, including the owner, at the factory. She says that she felt overwhelmed by this show of support from all of her co-workers.

Sharda Devi's party also sent her to the NDI-sponsored women candidate training-of-trainers (TOT) seminar. Drawing on this experience, she organized a training program for other women candidates in her own party.

"The TOT was nice because I met so many women similar to me from other parties. We all had a strong interest in politics. I still keep in touch with the women from the other parties. Some of them also ran. I learned a lot at the training session. One bit of campaign advice that I remember was to supervise your volunteers well. The trainers told me that sometimes there are people in your campaign who pretend to work for you but are actually working for another party. This advice was very useful because this is precisely what happened to me during the campaign; I realized that a few of my volunteers, when they were going door-to-door, were showing

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voters how to use the ballot paper by pointing out the symbol of my opponent from another party. I replaced these "volunteers" with people who genuinely supported me, and then everything was fine."

Many of her volunteers were campus students involved in the NSP Student Union, the *Biddhyarathi Munch*. She says that having so many young and enthusiastic volunteers, both men and women, really energized her campaign.

Sharda Devi also feels that she gained a lot of experience by organizing and giving training to the women in her party. She explains,

"Since I had never run for office before, I couldn't speak from my own experience when I was training other women candidates. Although I have mobilized and inspired women to become involved in my party, I had never actually given training. NDI helped me in this regard. I was nervous at first but now I have the confidence that I can do this kind of thing, too."

With the help of her party, Sharda Devi trained 25 potential NSP women candidates before the election dates were announced. The NDI staff members on hand to supervise the training session commented on how well she had applied what she had learned. They also observed how much more confident she appeared since the TOT.

A few weeks after the NSP women's training session was held, the campaign period started. Sharda Devi set out on the campaign trail

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early in the morning, almost waking up voters as she went to ask for their support. She went with her trusted friend and campaign manager, Phul Devi Raut, who is an active newcomer to the party. Phul Devi had also hoped to be an NSP candidate for the elections but her name was not on the voter list, and she was therefore ineligible to run. Many other voters found that their names were also not on the voter list when it came time to vote and complained about this.

Sharda Devi and Phul Devi attended the NDI women candidate training program together and met daily during the campaign. Phul Devi said that since she could not run herself, she ran vicariously on Sharda Devi's ticket. The two strategized together. They travelled the neighborhood and told the voters about Sharda Devi's good qualities, including her honesty, dedication, and sincerity. At one point, when they learned that her opponents were slandering her, the two had to strategize in earnest.

“I was insulted by the things my opponents were saying about me because none of it was true. They said I was not competent and tried to belittle my campaign. They said that because my party couldn't find a man to do the job, the party had to give the ticket to a woman. So Phul Devi and I did some research on my opponents. We only told the truth, but we had to fight back. We pointed out to the voters that the candidates for the other parties have not accomplished anything except to line their own pockets. We asked the voters to give a small party like the NSP a chance so we could prove to them how hard and honestly we could work.”

Sharda Devi and Phul Devi also believed that a woman running against a slate of all male candidates might have a good chance.

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Although they asked men and women both for support, they especially tried to convince women that only a woman representative could really understand their problems and take their concerns seriously. They asked women to cross party lines to vote and show solidarity as women.

On election day, Sharda Devi went to the polling station alone and cast her votes, including one for herself. She says solemnly,

“It was a vote for my party. I can’t say for whom my husband voted. That’s his own business. I didn’t ask him. He might not want to tell me the truth.”

Sharda Devi reports that she saw considerable cheating in the voting booth. However, she acknowledges that she lost the race. Nonetheless, when she learned of the election results, she still says she felt she had succeeded. She remembers thinking,

“Even though I lost, I ran honestly.”

When asked about her future plans, Sharda Devi says without hesitating that she is planning to run again. She would like to run another time for the ward president seat, perhaps in Ward no. 16 where she feels her chances of winning are better. She plans to take the time before the next election to prepare herself. She will need to re-register to vote in Ward no. 16, which is allowed since her employer is located there. She is optimistic and hopeful that her family will be more supportive of her the next time around.

She offers the following advice to other women considering running for office,

“I would tell them first of all to get out of the house and leave their *laaj* [embarrassment, shyness and submissiveness] at home. I used to be like the other



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women, all covered up, at home all the time, unable to speak with others. Somehow, slowly, women have to find their freedom. Also, I would tell them to be independent and to think for themselves. I know about this. It feels good to have your own opinions about things.”

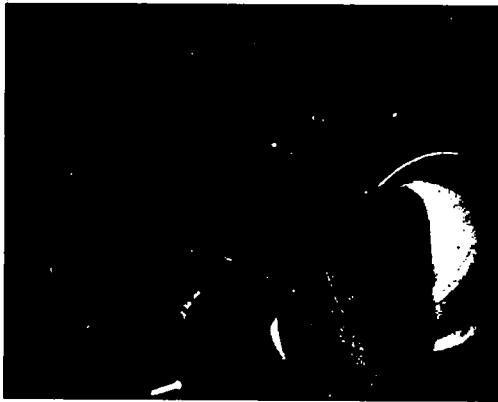
And she has the following words of wisdom directly for women who won seats in the last election,

“If you’ve won, it is now time to take the responsibility that the people have given you and govern fairly and honestly. You must work hard and be a good example for the other women who will follow in your footsteps. You should also govern with mercy and understanding.”

This last bit of advice about mercy and understanding seems fitting advice for the Gupta family as well. Perhaps next time...



Sharada Devi Gupta with her supervisor, Hari Ballav Mishra, at the Mega Wool Factory. He says, "When she ran for office, it was only natural that we would try to help out. Sharda Devi earns people's trust. She is really well liked here and is known for her hard work. At the factory, she's an elected member of the trade union."



Sharada Devi Gupta working at the Mega Wool Factory.



## **MEENA DEVI MISHRA**

**LOCATION:** Birgunj Municipality  
Ward No. 3

**DISTRICT:** Parsa

**SEAT:** Ward Member  
(Reserved Seat for Women)

**PARTY:** Independent



### *Positively Independent*

Meena Devi Mishra needed to keep a positive attitude. She was facing one of the biggest challenges of her life: running for office to represent Ward no. 3 in the municipality of Birgunj. Meanwhile, Birgunj itself, renowned for horse drawn taxis and a faulty drainage system, was also facing huge challenges. The local elections of 1997 were splitting the city apart along the familiar dividing lines of caste, religion, party and for the first time this year, even gender. In Birgunj, the 1997 local elections did not come and go peacefully as they did in most areas of Nepal. With the exception of its sister "Gunj" in the west, Nepalgunj, one might argue that no place in Nepal was riddled with as many problems during the 1997 local elections than Birgunj. There were widespread incidents of booth capturing, voter fraud, clashes between rival parties and with the police, and violence and intimidation throughout the city's 19 wards. In the nine wards that had the worst violations, the results of the elections were deemed null and void. Repolling took place relatively peacefully two weeks after the original elections when more security forces could be mobilized for Birgunj. Nonetheless, many questioned the repolled election results. In the end, the 1997

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local elections changed the political face of Birgunj, just as they did in most of Nepal. Amid all of these challenges, Meena Devi Mishra ran for the ward member seat reserved for women, as an independent, without support from any party.

Despite her many challenges, Meena Devi Mishra felt she had to remain positive and believe in herself. In the end, when the votes were tallied, she lost, but remained proud of her belief in herself and her bid to win. She describes her attitude,

“During the campaign, I thought, sure I can win. I have a chance. A student taking an exam doesn’t think that he or she will fail while actually taking the test. If the student thought this way, failure would surely take place. I had to be positive. If you live your whole life without trying to succeed and follow your dreams, your life would never be fulfilled. One day we will all die and then what is left? You see, I had to try.”

Like many of the thousands women who ran for office in Nepal in 1997, Meena Devi was a relative newcomer to politics. She had a strong desire to build upon her work as a community social worker. She felt one of the best ways to do this was to get involved in local politics. She wanted to be “the voice of her community, especially the women.” For years, Meena Devi’s neighbors had recognized her as a caring person and had counted on her. When community members fall on hard times or face some sort of personal tragedy, Meena Devi is there for them with her practical, no-nonsense advice and a helping hand. Being a helpful neighbor may mean taking care of a neighbor’s sick child, negotiating the local hospital’s bureaucracy, or cooking meals and delivering them to hospitalized neighbors (since food service is not available at the local hospital).

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Meena Devi has been this kind of caring neighbor for the 22 years that she has lived in Birgunj. As a mother of four children herself, she understands the difficulties faced by mothers and families in her neighborhood.

The people in her community have come to recognize Meena Devi as a natural leader. It was therefore not surprising that when the new ordinance was announced reserving seats for women on local government wards, that members of the community gathered to ask Meena Devi to run for office to represent them. About this, Meena Devi says,

“At first I was surprised by their request. But I have been really interested in politics for the past five or six years and have lobbied the local government representatives to do more for unemployed people in our ward, especially for women. During this time, I have come to realize how ineffective our leaders have been at representing the people. In the past, I wanted to run for office myself but never thought that I would have a chance. The ordinance, reserving seats for women, really opened things up for me and for many women. It made running for office a legitimate thing for a woman to do, even in Birgunj, a very conservative area. You have to understand that men and politics have been synonymous for years here. For a woman to enter politics, is to enter the World of the Male. And then I heard about and attended the NDI training for women candidates, which really helped boost my confidence.”

The area in and around Birgunj is very conservative, particularly for women. More than many cities in the Tarai, Birgunj is dominated

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by men. Even to see women on the street in Birgunj is unusual. The streets are crowded and bustling with ringing rickshaws, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, and buses, all filled way past capacity. And men are everywhere both in and out of the vehicles: men chewing and spitting *paan*; men squatting, standing, and leaning up against the walls reading the daily news; and men holding hands and discussing the day's events.

From the window from the Dialo Hotel, a huge billboard overlooking the old bus park says it all in big, bold lettering: **MACRO MAN- Everyman, Macroman.** It's an advertisement for men's briefs. Beneath the sign is a remaining symbol of how modernity refuses to become a permanent part of Birgunj -- a burned up and gutted-out old bus rests on its punctured tires among the mud huts built by squatters. The centerpiece of the scene, the bus itself, has become a shelter for the somewhat domesticated jungle pigs that have reclaimed the bus park as their rightful home. In Birgunj, it's clearly a man's world.

In stark contrast, the world of women is completely different and exists almost solely within the confines of the home. Strict moral codes dictate that women should remain inside the house with their heads covered. In Birgunj, the ideal woman, the virtuous woman, demonstrates *laaj*: her personal shame and embarrassment. (For many women in the Tarai region, there is a "*parda* system," which requires women to be covered, including the face, with a *sari* or other garment to demonstrate *laaj*.) The social code requires that women not walk around with their backs straight and heads uncovered, looking proud. Ward no. 3, where Meena Devi's home is located, is particularly conservative, as the population primarily Muslim and strict Hindu.

Reportedly, some of the conflict on election day in Ward no. 3 started when a Muslim woman came to the booth with her head and

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face totally covered and invisible under her *sari* (*parda*) with a male relative. The poll worker asked her to show her face since he suspected fraud. She refused. Insults, threats, and punches were soon being hurled every which way. The polling booth had to be shut down temporarily. The incident wreaked havoc until ten o'clock that night, when all concerned became too exhausted to continue. The incident which provoked the whole mess was never resolved and, even a month after the election there were still two versions of the story: one Hindu and the other Muslim.

Meena Devi's husband, Vishnu Mishra, explains,

“Communal feelings have been here for a long time. In Birgunj, the population is roughly 25% Muslim and the rest Hindu. In our ward, we Hindus form a slight majority of the population but we are not united. For the ward president seat, for instance, the Hindu vote was split between three parties. The Muslims were well organized and voted as a block for the Nepal Sadbhawana Party. They won the seats. Muslims and Hindus are very different. Their Muslim society is very conservative. They have their own schools which teach in Urdu but they don't educate their daughters. Theirs is a complete *parda* system. Ours is more open. Nonetheless it is true that there are conservative Hindus (that have a *parda* system, too), especially here in the *madhesh*. But I don't believe in it. In our family we are open.”

Vishnu Mishra goes on to say that ignorance is the main cause of the open hostility between Hindus and Muslims but that a cautious friendship between the two communities could develop,



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“I have Muslim friends. We can sit together, drink tea together, and so on, but I don’t dare criticize or comment on their culture and community.”

In addition to caste and religious differences in her ward, Meena Devi explains that there are harsh economic realities. Since the ward is near the Indian border, there is a great deal of merchandise smuggled from India to Nepal to avoid taxation on the goods. Smuggling is dangerous and illegal, and is mostly done by the poor, who are most desperate.

The Mishra home is a modest two story house made of cement. The house is located on a common pothole ridden lane in urban Birgunj. It is a *pakka ghar*, a real house, in contrast to many of the other homes in the region that are made of mud, bamboo, and thatch. Both cement and mud houses are visible from the top of Meena Devi’s flat roof, where her dog barks and scowls at passers by. It is on her roof that Meena Devi shows the parameters of her ward by pointing out landmarks in the distance. Unconventionally, she does not cover her head with her purple flowered *sari*.

There are approximately 1,500 voters in Meena Devi’s ward. In July, monsoon rains blow in from the Bay of Bengal and shower the subcontinent (including Birgunj) with heavy rains. Extended, shallow lakes have formed in the few empty lots near Meena Devi’s home, creating a recreation spot for ducks and pigs who mill about in the sewage. The city is actually built on a seasonal swamp. Ironically, Meena Devi’s *chhap*, or election symbol, was the umbrella. Her *chhap* can provide protection from the rain in the monsoon season and from the intense summer sun that causes temperatures to rise well past 105 F in the late spring months, the time in which the 1997 local elections took place. Meena Devi’s

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umbrella *chhap* was fitting and illustrated her practical side and her utility as a servant of the people.

Just outside the door of her house are remnants of the election pasted to her neighbor's house. Even though the election took place weeks before, two NDI posters, tattered and beaten by the rain and then dried by the sun, are still recognizable on the wall. One shows a group of Tarai women, some with their heads covered, in colorful *saris* and hand embroidered clothes representing the multitude of ethnic castes in the Tarai region. Meena Devi smiles as she explains that the NDI posters reinforced the idea that it is OK for women to be involved in the elections. She explains,

“These women in this poster are asking, as a group, which candidate will really represent their interests as women.”

As she points to an even more torn and tattered poster with her name written boldly across the middle of the page she says,

“Here, this one is mine. See, this is my *chhap*, too. I told the voters to vote for me and to remember my symbol, the umbrella, because like me, it is useful and provides protection from the elements. I told them I would work for them in the same way.”

Again, pointing to the poster, she explains,

“I wrote this myself. I wanted the voters to know what I would do for them: improve the drinking water, expand electricity and help poor and unemployed women. After I wrote the text for the poster, my husband and daughters all helped me to

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edit it and then get it produced. You can see that the slogan at the bottom here even rhymes.”

Across the lane from Meena Devi's house are the weathered posters of other candidates who ran for office in Ward no. 3. Those posters that were placed high on the cement walls of houses bordering the narrow street are still legible. The posters placed low on the wall succumbed to the children who picked at them until they were no longer visible. Many of the posters during the campaign period, including the NDI posters, fell victim to the child poster pickers.

One of the posters that is still faintly visible is of Meena Devi's opponent who ran on the RPP ticket and ultimately won the seat for which Meena Devi stood. The winner, according to Meena Devi, is a shy woman, but very kind. Meena Devi has plans to work with her and to provide her encouragement, since she expects that the new representative will face many difficulties. Recently at a community meeting of local women called by an NGO, Meena Devi says that she had to really push and encourage the newly elected woman from her ward to step forward and speak as a leader.

In 1997 in Birgunj, the voters did not give a mandate to any particular party but forced the parties to divide the spoils of the election. In Meena Devi's ward, for instance, the NSP won the ward president seat. The NC and RPP won the ward member seats. Voters in Ward no. 3 appeared to vote more along caste and religious lines, rather than along party lines. However, the party of the different candidates remained an important factor, especially in those races where parties put up candidates from the same general castes.

Even though representatives from the NC, one of the major parties in the area, came to her home and asked Meena Devi to run on their

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party ticket, she thoughtfully and politely declined. At that time Meena Devi had already made up her mind that she wanted to run as an independent candidate, despite the extra difficulties involved. Candidates running on a party ticket have built in support for their campaigns. Parties provide money, volunteers, name recognition, and a platform on which to stand. Independent candidates must provide these things themselves and work extra hard to persuade voters to break away and not vote for party candidates. Meena Devi explains her reasons for running as an independent,

“First of all, the parties are always fighting with one another about this and that. I didn’t want to be a part of that. Second, I ran as an independent because I wanted to be my own person. I have my own opinions, and I wanted to be free to express myself. When you take a party ticket, you owe the party, and you can guarantee that the party will ask for a favor later on. If I won, I wanted to be truly independent. I knew it would be tough, however.”

Meena Devi tried to capitalize on the fact that she was an independent candidate by trying to convince voters that she was an outsider and therefore not involved in all the inner-and intra-party feuding that characterizes local elections. She told voters that as an independent she would only have the interests of the people in mind, not those of any particular party. In the end, unfortunately, this message was not enough to convince voters to turn out for her en masse. The votes in her ward were fairly evenly split between herself, four women who received tickets from the four national parties, and another independent.

Meena Devi said that she spent some of her time during the campaign going door-to-door with other independent candidates

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asking for votes together. There were many candidates, both men and women, who ran as independents in this year's local election. However, most independent candidates were actually disgruntled politicians who felt that their party had made a major mistake by not providing them with party tickets. Meena Devi was the exception to this rule; she ran as a truly *independent* independent, deliberately running without a party ticket. But independents, in general, face uphill battles and find it difficult to find the necessary support in their bids for office. Fortunately for Meena Devi, her family members were her biggest fans.

Meena Devi's home is decorated with house plants, miniature ceramic statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, and black and white photos of her family. In her sitting room on a table in the corner there is a framed class photo taken when her daughters were very young and two recent passport sized photos of her daughters. These two young women, whom Meena Devi described as a constant source of encouragement during her campaign, are both studying at the local campus in Birgunj, one at the intermediate level and the other at the bachelor's level in Commerce and Business. Meena Devi studied only to class ten, which is much more than most Nepali women ever achieve. Despite low literacy rates in Nepal and especially in Birgunj, her daughters excel in their course work at college. Her second oldest daughter, Babita, is quite articulate and well spoken. About her mother running for office, Babita says,

"I told her, 'It doesn't matter if you lose. You have to try. You can be a great example for other women.'"

Meena Devi took her daughter's advice and ran a respectable campaign with the support of her family. Her closest friends and neighbors, many of whom she had helped in some personal way

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over the years, took part in her campaign as volunteers. When she went to the municipal building to register as a candidate, Meena Devi had with her nine women friends for support. But it was her family on whom she counted on the most, especially her husband and two eldest daughters.

“My husband helped me in every way -- from helping to put up my posters throughout the ward, to going door-to-door to ask for support and votes. At first he was reluctant. But I think my daughters’ excitement and enthusiasm for my campaign helped to bring him around. He recognized that this was my chance to become more involved in the community and saw my running for office as a natural extension of my social work activities.”

For his part, Meena Devi’s husband Vishnu says,

“Politics is a tough field. Meena Devi ran and lost. What more is there to say? I am happy that she ran. I mean, it suits me fine. She ran so that she could serve the people. There’s nothing wrong with that. She didn’t make it this time but I don’t think she will stop trying to win the trust of the people.”

Smiling widely, Vishnu adds,

“I helped with her message, which says, ‘because everyone’s blood is red, we are one as humans despite other differences; we need Meena Devi to unify us.’ I think that what is really needed in this ward, unity.”

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Vishnu has worked for 24 years at the CDO (Chief District Office) in Birgunj where he is presently a driver. He laughs saying that if a person can drive in the bustling Birgunj traffic, they can make it anywhere in Nepal. As a government employee he is forbidden from being directly involved in politics. But his support for his wife's campaign allowed him to express some of his own political beliefs. He is very proud of the fact that his children, especially his daughters, are taking advantage of educational opportunities that were not there for him and his wife when they were younger.

Meena Devi interjects,

“We are not that educated; we can't speak English. But we speak many different languages: Nepali, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Maithali. I like to stay up late and watch old Hindi films on television. I like the American films, too. Last year I went to a big movie theater and saw the one about the dinosaur-*wala* (*Jurassic Park*, dubbed in Hindi). That was good. There were two scenes in that film that really scared me.”

But Meena Devi did not have any real fears of running for office she says. With a wink and a smile, she explains,

“Well, maybe I was a bit scared, but not really. Mostly I was nervous. During the campaign I had to give a speech. It wasn't a big crowd, around 150 people. But I had never done this before. I did well though. I remember the session on public speaking during the NDI training program that was also outlined in the NDI campaign manual. I must have read through that a hundred times. I learned a lot

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from NDI, especially from the NDI trainers (two professors at the women's college who served as district coordinators), but I don't have to say that. You all already know. They advised me to ask the voters what they want, rather than just promising to do this and that for them. I learned a lot but didn't quite make it this time."

She pauses for a moment and then says,

"But there's always next time, right?"







Meena Devi Mishra with her daughter, Babita. Babita says, "I told her, 'It doesn't matter if you lose. You have to try. You can be a great example for other women.'"



Meena Devi Mishra and her children who helped with her campaign.



## **MEENA RANA MAGAR**

**LOCATION:** Butwal Municipality,  
Ward No. 12  
**DISTRICT:** Rupendehi  
**SEAT:** Ward Member (Open Seat)  
**PARTY:** Rastriya Janamukti Party  
(RJP)



### *Uncle! Uncle!*

While Meena Rana Magar was organizing a training for women candidates in her party in Rupendehi district, her party was engaged in major protests and demonstrations in Kathmandu about the new election rules and symbols that had been issued for the 1997 local elections. For the 1997 elections, Meena's party, the Rastriya Janamukti Party (RJP), had joined forces with other small parties that were not defined as national parties since none of these parties had attained the necessary 3% of the total vote in the last national election. Together these small parties shut down the capital, calling a strike in the Kathmandu Valley that stopped commerce and transport for a day. The strike and protests proved to be ineffective, however, as the government (made up only of national parties), refused to change the controversial election symbol rules.

Before the 1997 elections, the definition of a national party was different, and smaller parties were allowed to have their own election symbol just like the national parties. The ballot paper in Nepal only displays symbols; there are no actual names of

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candidates written on the ballot. Citizens vote for candidates based on the party symbol, or *chhap*. This makes it easier for voters who can not read and write (more than 50% of the population) to remember the candidate and party of their choice. In previous elections, the RJP had the house *chhap*, which made voting for this party simple and easy to remember. However, the new election law forbids the use of set party symbols except for national parties, forcing the small parties to use the symbols reserved for independent candidates. This would make it very difficult for voters who wanted to support a small party to vote for the party's entire slate of candidates; to do so they would have to remember seven different symbols. Before this change, many voters already felt somewhat confused about how to cast their votes using a ballot that had more than 45 symbols on it. To vote for all the candidates from one small party, voters had to remember symbols such as a filing cabinet for mayor, a sewing machine for vice mayor, matches for ward president, a honeybee, bananas and a clock for ward members, and an umbrella for the women's seat. In Nepal, there is already a fairly high rate of spoiled ballots, ballots that are declared invalid because the voter made a mistake during the voting process.

Although the small parties continued to protest the new election laws, the laws remained intact, and the candidates from small parties had to do their best to educate the voters about their new election symbols.

Meena's symbol was the drum. She ran for a ward member seat in Ward no. 12 of the Butwal Municipality. Originally she had planned to represent her party by running for the ward member seat reserved for women, but during the time of registration a family emergency called her away from Butwal to the hills of Palpa district. She asked a friend to take care of the registration process for her. When she returned, she learned that her friend had

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mistakenly registered her for one of the ward member "gents' seats," as Meena refers them. Meena was somewhat reluctant to run for it seat since this was the first time she had ever contested elections. As it was too late to change, Meena thought about dropping out of the race. Eventually she ran and lost by a fair amount. She states softly,

"No, I didn't really think I would win. It was my first try. I *hoped* that I would win, but it didn't work out. In my ward the communists had won five years ago, and this year they won by an even bigger margin. All five of the seats in my ward went to the CPN-UML."

The competitive dynamic inherent in elections turns some candidates into winners, but even more into losers. No one likes to lose. No one likes to be reminded that they lost months after it is all finished. Most people would just like to forget about it and move on with their lives. Meena is not an exception. She had a difficult time during the elections, and the experience of running and losing has noticeably shaken her confidence. She does not even have a rough idea about the number of votes she secured. She has forgotten many details of the voter profile, such as the total number of votes, the total number needed to win, and how many votes her opponents received. This is data that she should know for the future if she is to run again. But at this point, she feels discouraged and is uncertain of her future in politics. For all the thousands of women (and men) who ran and won their seats in the local elections, the reality is that there were thousands more, like Meena, who were not successful this time. Nevertheless, Meena's experience of running for office is interesting, and many other women who plan to run for office in the future could learn from her experience.

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Meena's party, the RJP, is primarily made up of people belonging to caste groups from the ethnic Hill tribes of Nepal. Culturally and physically, these ethnic groups are more similar to Tibetans than Indians. Geographically, Nepal sits at the crossroads of these two very distinctive ethnic groups, Mongols from what is now China, and Aryans from northern India and Central Asia.

People from Meena's ethnic group have caste names like Sherpa, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Dewan, and Tamang. For centuries, these groups have lived in the middle Hills and the high Himal of Nepal with their own unique cultures and languages. But population pressures and the opening up of the Tarai region for widespread habitation in the 1960s has caused large shifts in migration from the middle Hills to the Tarai. This pattern has taken place so heavily that in some areas of the Tarai there are higher concentrations of certain Hill caste groups than there are remaining in the hills. This is true, for instance, with the Rai caste in the Tarai city of Dharan, which boasts the largest concentration of Rai people in the world.

Hill people have changed the face of the Tarai, and in some places with higher concentrations of Hill people, such as Butwal, the impact on the general culture is evident. Meena uses a lot of Hindi words when she speaks Nepali, and she has become a regular at the Hindi movie theater, to which she says she goes just to hear the current hit songs.

The cultural exchange goes even further yet. Tibetan Buddhists pay homage to a site in the Tarai located not far from Meena's home in Butwal. King Guatam Siddhartha, later known more commonly as the Lord Buddha, is said to have been born in what is now Lumbini in Meena's Rupendehi district, over 2,500 years ago. Across the highway from Meena's home is a beautifully painted *gumba*, one of

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many Buddhist temples honoring Rupendehi district's most popular native son.

There Meena lives with her son, who is just fourteen years old. Her husband is presently living two districts west of Rupendehi in Dang, where he works for a private transportation company. Her husband has been a supporter of the NC party for many years, but during the 1997 elections, Meena convinced at least one voter to cross party lines and give her support. Her husband returned home to cast his vote for Meena and then traveled all the next day to get back to work. No one else in Meena's family, either on her side or on her husband's side, has ever been involved in politics. She says,

“At least I had support from my family to run. My husband said, ‘Look, it sounds hard to run a campaign but I am sure you can do it. Do your best.’ I am glad to know he supported me. His mother at one point asked me not to run. She is old fashioned. I explained my reasons for wanting to run, and she came to understand, only after I convinced her, that I wasn't running for the seat of prime minister.”

Meena said that her decision to run for office was a hard one to make. But once she set her goals and remembered why she wanted to run in the first place, she recalls that the decision felt right. She talks about how she first became interested in politics,

“I got involved in politics because I relate to people. I like to be with other people and talk with them. You hear about other people's problems. Other people say that I am a good listener. I try to help people who are in need. Many times, people just need someone to listen to them.”



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She continues to explain,

“The community where my husband and I have lived for the last fifteen years is composed of people from ethnic Hill tribes, like Gurungs and Magars. I was Gurung before I got married and now I am Rana (Magar). As a group we are not very educated -- we do things the old-fashioned way. Others often consider us ‘backwards.’ Some of my neighbors have been involved in the RJP since the party started. This party represents our interests as people from these ethnic Hill tribes. I became acquainted with my party through my neighbors about four or five years ago.”

Many people from these ethnic groups argue that there is a history of oppression by the Aryan caste groups, particularly the *Chhetri* and *Bahun* castes, who have traditionally dominated Nepal's political landscape. The RJP appeals to those people who feel that this domination is taking place and wish to address this as an issue, politically. Others see this party as a way of preserving traditional Hill cultures. For other people the RJP represents cultural identification rather than a specific political agenda. Regardless of the specific reason, where there are higher concentrations of these ethnic groups, in the villages of the Hills and in some Tarai locations, the party has had some success in electing local leaders.

With respect to gender, the cultures of these Hill tribes are generally different from the *Chhetri-Bahun* groups and significantly different from the *madeshi* people concentrated along the Nepali-Indian border of the Tarai. To generalize, women from the Hill tribes enjoy a much higher degree of freedom in everyday life than women from the Aryan groups. To illustrate this point, one senior RJP party leader points out that it is customary in *Bahun* households that

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wives must wash the feet of their husbands and then drink the dirty water to show their subservience. In the Tarai, women's lives are more restricted in *madeshi* households, since talking directly with men, leaving the house, and becoming involved in a group are all activities that are essentially forbidden. However, the Hill tribes generally have no such restrictions.

Despite the lack of severely oppressive traditions amongst the Magar caste, women in these societies live within the conservative customs prevalent in Nepal and throughout South Asia. For example, Meena's own mother was abandoned by her father when she did not produce a son. Instead, she had one daughter, Meena. Her father married another woman and had a large family with this new wife, including the sons he so cherished. Meena's mother struggled on her own but eventually was able to build a house. When she died 12 years ago, Meena inherited all of her property, including the small house, since she had no brothers. This is the house that Meena presently lives in with her own son.

When reflecting on her first impressions of politics and running as a new comer in this year's elections, Meena recalls,

“Honestly, I have never really seen myself as a leader or politician. I am familiar with the ways of most politicians. When I was growing up in the village, the politicians would come around and make promises. But that was it: empty promises. Those kinds of politicians do not pay attention to what people really need. They don't listen.”

Meena laughs,

“They say that politics is dirty. When I think about this, I wonder how I became so involved!”

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But Meena prides herself on the fact that she ran a clean campaign. She canvassed her ward and tried to convince voters that if elected, she would listen to them and take their concerns seriously. She spent a fraction of the money that she was allowed to spend, running a very modest campaign. She explains,

“I wanted to run a campaign within my means. We do not have a lot of extra money. I intentionally spent very little on my campaign. I thought that the best way to earn votes was to meet with voters directly and try to convince them of my capabilities. That doesn’t take any money. My party provided me with some posters and pamphlets too, but overall it was a very cheap campaign.”

The aspect of campaigning that Meena liked the most was the contact that she had with the voters. Being on the campaign trail gave her an opportunity to talk with neighbors whom she had never known before. She liked meeting all these new people. She easily recalls interesting and funny stories about different voters’ reactions to her campaign, especially when she explained that she was running for a “man’s” seat. Some voters were openly discouraging, while others gave her their best wishes, if not their votes.

“I told the voters, ‘Give me a chance. Let me show you what a woman can do.’ I remember one man who was irritated said, ‘All you women these days want to be just like Indira Gandhi.’ I responded by telling him, ‘Look, right now I am not Indira Gandhi, but if you give me a chance, I will try my best to be just like her!’”

When Meena went to voters’ homes, she almost always went with the slate of candidates from the RJP. They spent the majority of

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their time with the voters explaining the election symbols for each of the five ward seats and the two RJP candidates for mayor and vice mayor. There was little time to discuss the RJP's agenda or plan for development during the two-week campaign period. Meena had one friend in particular who helped her during the campaign and went with her door-to-door every day, Dhan Maya. Dhan Maya comments,

“I have known Meena-sister for many years. I am really fond of her. I am the one who encouraged her and made her run. Sometimes she wanted to give up, but I told her she could not do that. Meena is very educated compared to the other women from our area. [Meena completed high school, 10th grade.] She's a good listener and is not afraid to talk to anyone. I supported her because I thought she could represent women here.”

Dhan Maya explains that she felt very sad when she learned that Meena had not won. She goes on to say that she had been much more hopeful than Meena had been about her chances of winning. Dhan Maya plans to encourage Meena to run again in the next election in 2002. She says energetically,

“She can do it! Look at what we have done so far! We both learned so much about the elections through this experience. And now, after going door-to-door throughout our ward, the voters have all at least met Meena. The way I see it, we have some years to prepare for the next elections.”

Meena agrees, laughing and slapping Dhan Maya on the back before burying her face in her arm. The thought of running again makes her laugh and roll her eyes as she hugs her friend.

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Meena was able to clearly articulate her shortcomings in the campaign and to state what she would do differently next time. For instance, she says that she should have built her base of support before running by engaging in social work activities and doing more in her community. She also says that she should have campaigned more by herself rather than in the large group of candidates from her party. She feels she should have individualized her campaign, speaking more directly to voters about herself, rather than relying so heavily on her party. One other point she mentions is that she should have approached the campaign more strategically and targeted voters who might have supported her. And finally on this point, she says that she should have tried to assist older people to get to the polls on election day, since she noticed that many of the older people who planned to vote for her were not able to cast their votes, due to their age and factors such as distance and heat.

Meena also receives praise and advice from one of the founders of the RJP in Rupendehi and the current district president Kabiraj Pun. The spry 74-year old Pun says,

“I would encourage Meena to run again. She can't give up after just one try. She needs to continue to develop her leadership skills, but she has already come a long way. She offers a lot to our party, and we can help her. With people like her we can build our party. Right now, to tell you honestly, our party is small, poor, and weak. We need people like Meena.”

Pun also supported other women in the RJP by helping Meena to organize training for the party's women candidates in partnership with NDI. Pun believes that women should be involved in politics and in every other sector of society. He also says that men, too,

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should behave more like real partners to women and take more responsibilities at home. Pun praised NDI's efforts and says that the program did a lot to strengthen women in all of the parties. He is happy that even though the RJP is a small (non-national) party, it was made welcome to participate in the NDI program.

In the corn field outside of Meena's bamboo and mud home, she pulls out her NDI campaign manual, which is tattered and well-used. Some of the pages are folded over, and she has taken notes in it as well. She thumbs through the pages and says,

"Here it is. I remember the story of this woman that you included in your campaign manual. She's not from my party, but nonetheless I learned a lot by reading her story. Her story is particularly meaningful to me now because she also lost her election five years ago when she ran for the mayor of Bhairahawa [another municipality in Rupendehi district]. Despite her loss she continued to be involved and walk with her head high. I like her story."

Meena also agrees with Pun about the effectiveness of the NDI program,

"I owe a lot to NDI, and I am grateful. I know that if I had not gone to the training-of-trainers workshop, I would not have had the skills to train other women in my party. I also know that I would not have run myself. The most important things that I gained through my involvement with NDI was encouragement and confidence. NDI taught me that women have a place in politics."

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She looks at her friend seated next to her and blurts out, "Uncle! Uncle! OK, OK, I won't give up!"

With this, Meena laughs loudly and slaps Dhan Maya again on the back. Both of the women burst into laughter and begin to remind one another of stories from the campaign.

Dhan Maya asks, "Did you tell them about the time when...." They interrupt themselves again with their own laughter.



Dhan Maya Gurung says of Meena Rana Magar, "I have known Meena-sister for many years. I am really fond of her. I am the one who encouraged her and made her run. Sometimes she wanted to give up, but I told her she could not do that..."



Meena Rana Magar joking with her friend, Dhan Maya Gurung.





## **INU ADHIKARI**

**LOCATION:** Mahendranagar-Chakragatti  
VDC, Ward No. 1

**DISTRICT:** Sunsari

**SEAT:** Ward Member  
(Reserved Seat for Women)

**PARTY:** Rastriya Prajatantra Party  
(RPP)



### *Her Father's Daughter*

By 6:00 a.m. on April 21, 1997, a large crowd of perhaps 500 people, many clutching bundles of hand-picked flowers, had already gathered in Inruwa, Sunsari at the public school. Many of those present were ardent RPP supporters who had been instructed to be ready at this early hour to greet the Prime Minister of Nepal. "He is on his way," the crowds were told by the organizers. By 8:30 a.m. the crowds had swelled to well over 3,000 people. Soon, in a whirl of dust, a small caravan of off-road vehicles came to a halt on the road, and the Prime Minister emerged surrounded by a group of men that helped to navigate him through the thick crowds to a stage that had been set up for him. The crowds cheered and showered him with flowers. He smiled and slowly waved, seeming to lap up the adoration of the crowd.

Prime Minister Lokenhdra Bahadur Chand was in Inruwa to stump for his party in an attempt to boost the RPP's standing in the local 1997 elections. More specifically, his task this day was to inaugurate a training seminar for women candidates from his party

## ***Standing Proud***

assisted by the NDI. The fifty-five women participants in the training program were seated near the stage. For the next 25 minutes, Prime Minister Chand and the other speakers at the program worked to convince the crowd that the RPP is the party that supports women. During the period before the 1997 local elections all the major parties were making this claim. Each party tried to claim responsibility for the creation of the reservation seat for women.

When Prime Minister Chand reached the stage, he was greeted by district level party leaders, including Inu Adhikari. He greeted her with a nod. Inu was no novice to politics. After the introductions of the Prime Minister and the special guests, Inu took to the stage and seized the opportunity to challenge her party, and the Prime Minister specifically, to take women seriously during and after the local elections. She spoke eloquently and with great force about the need for immediate improvements in the lives of women in Nepal. Her speech was concise and convincing. The crowd cheered. Next, the Prime Minister spoke with less conviction about the same points that Inu had so clearly articulated just minutes before. His speech seemed a bit tired, however, and he failed to respond directly to Inu's challenge. After Inu's address, the Prime Minister's speech was a let down. Immediately afterwards, he was whisked away to the next stop. The event was over before the dust had a chance to settle, but Inu had upstaged the Prime Minister. She walked through the crowd back to the meeting hall to finish helping with the training program. Individuals in the crowd, most of them conservative Hindu or Muslim men local to the area, probably were not aware that a woman could speak with that much power and conviction.

Inu is an exceptional individual and was born to be a leader. She says politics is in her blood and pumps through her heart. Her family is very political and has a long history of involvement in the

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government. Under the *panchayat* regime, Inu's great-grandmother was a political baroness. She was president of the district women's organization, *Mahila Sangathan*, for Sunsari district (the same post which Inu holds today). And she was known as "*Chaudha-Aama*," or mother of 14, because she ruled over 14 VDCs in the district for many years. After her husband died, Inu's great grandmother cut her hair short, stopped wearing *saris*, and started wearing men's clothes and shoes. In a culture that even today enforces a great deal of gender conformity, she was taken very seriously and was an accomplished politician. She passed on her political dynasty to her grandsons: Inu's father and uncle. Her uncle later became a Member of Parliament and then the Minister of Education. Her father was the VDC president for many years in Mahendranagar-Chakragatti VDC, also under the *panchayat* system.

Inu says that her father was a remarkable man. When he died when she was still in high school, Inu was crushed and was unable to complete school as a result. She explains,

"I can't even begin to tell you how close my father and I were. We were more like friends or brothers, than father and daughter. I am the oldest of nine children. He always loved me like a son. He was the force behind my involvement in politics. He introduced me to everyone, and he treated me like an equal. Because of this, I think people had an almost automatic respect for me, both because I was his daughter and because it was clear that he respected me. I still miss him today. In terms of raising children, he was a visionary. He raised me to be a leader."

Inu explains further that while she was growing up, her father was busy in politics and running the VDC. For many generations and

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even today, the Adhikari home is always full of political leaders meeting, discussing, and strategizing. From a very early age, Inu's father involved her in everything that he did. He gave her books to read, including *Nehru's Letters*, one of the books that is said to have inspired Indira Gandhi. He also gave his daughter biographies about Indira Gandhi herself. He encouraged her to be involved in sports, and she became a champion runner. By the time she was 16, he had taught her how to drive a motorcycle. He also encouraged Inu to develop her talent in public speaking, and she became an articulate and persuasive orator. At the age of 16, she was travelling and campaigning throughout the district with her father and uncle, speaking to large groups of people along the way. Her youth and speaking ability charmed crowds. She says,

“My father taught me to speak like a leader. But you know, I never prepare speeches ahead of time. I just go to the podium or stage and speak from my heart. I learned a lot from my father. He put more pressure on me than my brothers to be involved in all kinds of activities.”

It is important to note that Inu's life was, and still is, extremely unconventional, especially in the context of Nepal. Girls rarely receive this kind of encouragement from their parents, particularly a father. It was 19 years ago that Inu was running track, riding a motorcycle, and involving herself in politics. In Nepal even today, very few girls and women participate in sports or even ride bicycles, and it was just recently that a substantial number of women became involved in politics. Also unconventionally, Inu's hair is cut very short, she prefers to wear pants, and she is unmarried at the age of 35. Many women in Nepal have grandchildren at Inu's age. Some have suggested that she is the reincarnation of her great-grandmother. The similarities between the two are obvious. Inu explains her family situation,

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“To have a husband, you have to have free time. Well, I don’t have any free time. I am too busy, and I also have to watch over the house. My father has passed away, and my mother and grandmother are both old. I have to care for them. I also have a brother and a few sisters living with me, too. I know that there is a need for marriage. There are both men and women in this world, but for now I am content with my life. Marriage is really not in my plan. Where would I fit in a husband and children?”

When Inu was 19 years old, she ran for her first post in the women’s organization of what would later become the RPP. On her behalf, the organization amended the rules allowing her to run for the post even though she was young. She was elected as the district secretary of the organization. When she was 23, Inu ran for public office for the first time, unsuccessfully. She had run for VDC president, the post that her father had occupied for many years. At this time under the *panchayat* regime there were elections, but political parties were banned.

Nepali politics from the perspective of Inu’s party, the RPP, is very different from that of the other political parties. While party activists from the CPN-UML, the NSP and the NC highlight the atrocities that occurred during the *panchayat* era, RPP supporters tend to think of the period as “the good old days.” RPP activists argue that under the *panchayat*, there was democracy but just not political parties. There were elections every five years; anyone who was interested was free to run for office. Today’s RPP activists were the politicians and leaders under the *panchayat*’s system of “partyless” democracy. As a result, many of these old time leaders are very experienced campaigners. Although few women were involved in politics during the *panchayat* time, those who were have

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a wealth of political experience. Inu and many of her women friends in the RPP are therefore not novices to politics and elections. Many RPP activists today argue that multi-party democracy has created many social problems and general unrest in society.

For a brief period in Nepal's political history when multiparty democracy was introduced in the late 1950s, Inu's father was involved in the communist party. But after this period, when the King re-installed the partyless *panchayat*, Inu's father became convinced that Nepal was not prepared to handle the responsibilities that a full democracy required. Inu still believes that this is true today. She argues,

“One really has to ask, ‘Is multiparty democracy working in Nepal?’ Since it's arrival look how unstable the government has become. How many governments have we had now? Look at all the unrest, especially during the elections. The Maoist terrorists in the west are gathering support and becoming increasingly violent. For a democracy to work, the people have to be aware, but that's not the case in Nepal or South Asia where masses of the population are impoverished and uneducated. What do people here really know about democracy? Maybe it's not the best model for us to follow. Look at how the parties just try to appease the poor and trade votes for empty promises. Not all, but many things were better when the King ruled Nepal. Look at the examples of multi-party democracy all around Nepal. India has been doing it for 50 years now and what a mess. Look at Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and

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Bangladesh. Civil Wars. Violence. Is this really what we want?"

Before the advent of multiparty democracy, Inu's party, the RPP, was not a party; it was the government. With the advent of the democratic system, many leaders from the former *panchayat* joined other parties, but some leaders formed the RPP with the hope of restoring the previous regime.

During the 1997 local elections, Inu ran for the ward member seat reserved for women in her home Ward no. 1 of Mahendranagar-Chakragatti VDC. She won by a fair margin, beating her closest opponent from the CPN-UML by around 90 votes. Inu's VDC is a stronghold for the CPN-UML, and even for an experienced politician like herself, she had a hard time winning this seat.

Out of the 47 elected seats in her VDC, 46 of the seats were won by the CPN-UML. The one remaining seat was won by Inu on the ticket from the RPP. After winning the seat, Inu's plan was to run for the District Development Committee (DDC). But to her great disappointment, she did not receive the ticket as she expected. She recalls,

"I have to tell it to you straight. After all that I have done in my life for women, for politics, and for my party, this was the first time that I felt that I was discriminated against as a woman. This was the first time that I felt betrayed by my party."

She continues,

"I had a good chance of winning the DDC election. I am well known throughout the district and I know



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that I could have convinced the other elected officials to cross party lines and vote for me. I heard my name everywhere I went. In the end, I did not get the party ticket. The man who received the party ticket wound up losing when all was said and done.”

Tulisar Sharma thinks that Inu was deliberately overlooked for the DDC ticket. Tulisar is a district committee member for the RPP and is also the regional coordinator for an NGO based in the area, the Women’s Development Association. The two women have been working together for years. Tulisar was the women’s organization’s district president when Inu was elected to the post of district secretary, at the age of 19. She explains their relationship,

“I knew Inu’s father well. When he was in office I was also in office as the only woman ward president in the Dharan Municipality. Inu learned a great deal from him, and she is a smart politician. She has been totally dedicated to the party. Her name was circulated as a possibility for the RPP ticket to run for the DDC, but I can not say what happened. In my personal opinion, the party made a mistake by not giving her the ticket for the DDC.”

Inu further explains,

“I was running for the DDC because I wanted to represent my VDC. I was really hoping to put it on the map. In terms of population, it is the biggest VDC in the district, and like the district itself, it is very culturally diverse. There is a large Muslim population, and there are *madheshis* [indigenous ethnic groups from the Tarai] and people from the

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Hills. Many people here earn their livelihood by fishing and collecting driftwood from the large Sapta Koshi river."

The VDC in which Inu lives is primarily agricultural with a focus on rice cultivation. Along the northern side of the VDC there is a jungle. There is also a very large irrigation canal that runs through the VDC and supplies water to a sizeable portion of the district. When Inu's father was the VDC president, the jungle was much thicker, and there was a railway line connecting Dharan to the Sapta Koshi dam used for transporting stone from the base of nearby mountains.

This is the place where Inu's legacy began. She says that when she rides her motorcycle through the jungle or walks through the bazaar, she is aware of all the political history she shares with her family.

Inu is ready to run for any post for which she can get the party ticket. She likes the excitement and enthusiasm that builds as election day draws near. In addition to her father, Inu says that she includes former U.S. vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro as one of her biggest political heroes.

For her campaign, Inu was very prepared, and she fought hard both for herself and her party. She participated in many of her party's campaign activities. At the VDC level, the RPP organized a bicycle rally and several processional marches through the VDC.

Inu's political instincts told her that her party would only have enough support to win in certain areas during the 1997 local elections. She was not optimistic about her party winning many seats in her VDC. Before the 1997 elections, the CPN-UML and the NC held all of the elected seats. However, she asked voters at least to support her even if they could not support the whole slate of

## ***Standing Proud***

RPP candidates. She also organized her volunteers into specific groups that would appeal to target audiences when they went door-to-door to ask voters for support. For instance, the younger women from Inu's sister's NGO talked with young women voters. Young male volunteers talked with other young men and so on. She explains her campaign strategy,

“Besides encouraging all the young people who supported me to convince their parents to vote for me, I also told the voters about my plan to run for the DDC if I won. I convinced them that I could advocate for our VDC at the district level better than anyone else and that for this reason they should support me.”

Before Inu decided to run, she met with voters in her ward to ask their opinions. From this exchange, Inu determined that, despite the strong support for other parties in her ward, she could win by convincing voters to cross party lines to support her. She recalls,

“During the elections, I learned that volunteers from other parties were even campaigning for me. They told voters to support their own party for all the seats except for the seat for which I was running. For that one they said, ‘Vote for the plow symbol or *halo chhap*; that’s for our sister, Inu.’”

During her campaign, Inu enjoyed the full support of her family and party. To support her campaign, the RPP ward committee raised money to cover the expenses she incurred, including costs for pamphlets, banners, a party flag, and snacks for volunteers. Inu feels awkward about the role of money in campaigns. She explains,

## ***Standing Proud***

“I actually did not spend any of my own personal money for my campaign. I felt like I should contribute, especially for the volunteers’ snacks, but I felt strange about it. I didn’t want people to think that I was trying to buy their support. So I didn’t spend my own money.”

Inu faced very few problems during the campaign. When she started to hear election results and learned about the CPN-UML’s huge lead, she got nervous. She worried that maybe she had been overconfident and that it had ruined her chances of winning. But in the end this was not the case.

Inu did say, however, that she faced some hostility from voters because she ran on a RPP ticket. She mentions,

“Some voters, the ones who were strong party supporters, were angry when I asked them for their vote. They said, ‘Oh! you are trying to resurrect the ghosts of the *panchayat!*’ But I handled it well. I smiled and asked them to evaluate my party based on what’s happened since multiparty democracy started. I told them to forget about the past and look to the future.”

One of Inu’s strongest supporters does seem like a ghost from the past, District Party Secretary Tejnath Dahal who lives in the same VDC as Inu. Dahal is an old time politician who represents the older generation of Nepal’s current political landscape. While he argues that the RPP should only be evaluated on its history as a party and not as the *panchayat* itself, he also argues that the criticism against the *panchayat* is unfounded. He says defensively,

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“If I am so corrupt and ran off with all the public’s money, where is it today? I am not a rich man. I am tired of the critics saying that the *panchayat* era was a bad time in Nepal’s political history. We governed honestly back then, and we were good leaders for the people.”

But few have complained when it comes to Inu. Khagindra Niroula was one of Inu’s major supporters during the 1997 elections. He is the principal of a local campus branch and represents a younger generation of RPP activists. He said that Inu’s experience is what makes her such an interesting and lively politician. He explains,

“You see, Inu comes to politics up the trunk of the tree. Others start out naïvely as social workers or do-gooders, and then they find the branch of the tree, which is politics. That’s the difference between her and others. She is driven and clever. She has what it takes to become the Prime Minister. You watch.”

He continues,

“There are many people involved in politics now. It has become fashionable. But there are very few leaders. I mean leaders who can inspire the people and convince them that they must work hard to achieve success. Inu has this ability. She is a leader because she has charisma.”

Inu is much more modest about her leadership abilities. She says that she does not see herself as an exception and believes that other

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women can also become excellent leaders in their own communities. She explains,

“It’s not just me. There are thousands of women behind me, ready to take a chance, too. We need more programs like NDI’s to help these women.”

When Inu first heard about the NDI training program for women candidates she says that she was very excited and convinced her party to support the idea. She recalls,

“The NDI program was exactly what was needed. It was so right. And the topic -- women and politics -- well, you see, that’s my life. I put pressure on my party to help organize the program. The party supported it well and even provided money for the participants’ food, lodging, and transport.”

At the training program, Inu led several of the sessions herself. One talk that was memorable was called “Why Women? Why Politics?” In this session, she wanted to encourage women leaders to focus on women as a political issue. She explains,

“I know that women leaders should focus on all issues. Men will try to marginalize us by saying that we only focus on health or education issues. But look at it this way. If we don’t focus on these issues, who will? Women’s lives are in a desperate state; we have to do something. The lives of women have to improve immediately.”

This is not hollow political rhetoric. Inu is sincere. And, like her grandmother and father before her, she seems to have what it takes.





Inu Adhikari with other RPP supporters at her home. She says, "I know that women leaders should focus on all issues. Men will try to marginalize us by saying that we only focus on health or education issues. But look at it this way. If we don't focus on these issues, who will? Women's lives are in a desperate state; we have to do something."



Inu Adhikari with her grandmother and mother.





## **GEETA GHIMIRE**

**LOCATION:** Phattepur VDC  
Ward No. 3  
**DISTRICT:** Saptari  
**SEAT:** Ward President  
**PARTY:** Communist Party of Nepal  
(United Marxist Leninist)



### *The Tea Stall Politician*

At 5:00 a.m. every morning Geeta Ghimre arrives at her tea stall in the main Phattepur bazaar to start the day. Her tea stall is one of many stalls set up in the muddy center of town where other small shopkeepers, many of whom sell vegetables or dry goods, have also set up shop. Geeta has been pulling back the large wooden shutters of her stall every morning for the last nine years. The stall is nothing more than a small box on wooden stilts made of discarded wood and is not really large enough to sleep in, although many shopkeepers do. This is the place where Geeta serves the thirsty and weary customers of her village countless cups of ready-made hot tea: milk, tea, sugar, and spice, all boiled together and served in a short glass. This is also the place where Geeta launched her political career in local government.

In the local elections of 1997, Geeta ran for office for the first time. But she not only ran, she won in grand style. She was elected to the prestigious seat of ward president in Ward no. 3 of Phattepur VDC, where she, her husband, and their four children have lived for the last 13 years. Geeta's ward has an extremely large portion of the

## ***Standing Proud***

VDC population, roughly 2/5 of the people in the VDC. (Usually the population in the nine VDC wards is fairly evenly distributed.) Geeta won by 700 votes, the widest margin of any candidate in her entire VDC.

Geeta owes much of her popularity to the public role she plays at her tea stall. In front of her shop under a woven grass mat canopy, there is a picnic-like table with two benches. These benches are host to the customers she greets and serves each day. Socially, Geeta's tea stall is similar to a diner in Tiny Town, America. The customers come to drink tea and discuss the day's news. It is through these discussions that Geeta began to know her voters personally. She explains,

“It's true. I got to know the people here in the village through my tea shop. Everyone comes to the bazaar to buy vegetables or whatever. In between, they like to stop in for a glass of tea. Everyone likes tea, and rich or poor, it is something that almost everyone can afford. [One glass costs about four cents.] Anyway, I am a social person. I like to visit with people and get to know who they are. People know me. I offer advice and, just through listening to people talk, I've learned a lot about the resources here in the VDC where I can direct people to go for help.”

Over the years, Geeta has become a trusted and wise friend to her customers and to the other shop keepers. In the bazaar, when someone needs advice or help in solving some kind of problem, often the first and best advice they receive is “Go ask Geeta.”

Sita Khadka is also a shopkeeper in Ward no. 3. Although she has never gone to Geeta for advice, Sita voted for her because Geeta is

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well known in the community as someone who can help. She explains,

“If for example, there is a fight in a family or if a woman is being beaten by her husband, Geeta will go and talk to the family members. She brings people from the community together to explain to the concerned family that what is happening is wrong. I know of one woman who was kicked out of her house by her husband and not given any food. Geeta was called in to help, and she managed to resolve the situation.”

Geeta has thus earned a reputation in her community as an advocate for women.

In addition to providing her family with the main source of income, Geeta's tea stall provides her with a great deal of contact with the public. This exposure, combined with her interest in politics, led Geeta to become active locally. She recalls her first memories of party politics.

“After my husband, Narayan Prasad, and I got married, I remember what a big impression Narayan Prasad's sister, Sita, made on me. Here was a woman who was so courageous. At that time the parties were outlawed, and it was dangerous to be involved in party politics. The police broke up one underground communist party activity I attended, chased us, and one of them tripped me and beat my legs with a stick. It was awful. Sita was heavily involved in party activities. Everyone was always

## ***Standing Proud***

coming to our house for meetings. I was really on the periphery of it all. Mostly, I just listened.”

During this period, when Geeta was living in Morang district, she helped out her sister-in-law in small ways by delivering letters and helping to distribute an underground party newspaper. It was through this connection that Geeta became involved in the communist party. She remembers,

“After I read the communist party materials and met many of the activists who came to the house, I became more and more interested in the party. I read the party manifesto and really liked it. The party seemed to have a serious commitment to poor people. There was also a statement in the manifesto that clearly stated that women and men should have equal rights. That impressed me.”

Geeta’s sister-in-law now lives with her family in India where she is active in party politics. In Geeta’s immediate family, two of her brothers are also involved in the communist party. Her husband is also a party member, but Geeta is the more active of the two in the party. Most of Geeta’s extended family is not involved in politics.

Geeta’s family home is in Jhapa district. While growing up, she stayed in school until the fifth grade when she had to quit to help her family with babysitting, housework, and farm chores. All four of Geeta’s children are teenagers and are still in school. The oldest is in college, studying in Kathmandu. While her daughters have decorated most of their home with posters of Hindi film stars, Geeta’s bedroom features four NDI posters promoting women in politics. She says that the posters were useful during the 1997 elections and that they make nice household decorations.

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When Geeta and her family moved to Saptari district 13 years ago, she slowly began to become involved in more covert party politics. She and her husband gave refuge to underground party workers and informed the party of police activity against party members in the area. Through this involvement, Geeta became known within her party, especially to party activist Utam Kumar Gautam. In 1997, Gautam was elected to the vice president of the VDC and has been an ally of Geeta for many years.

Years ago, Geeta's husband became ill and required expensive medical treatment. When they had moved to the district they had purchased some land. But in order to pay for an operation for her husband, Geeta sold the land and a general store she owned. Shortly after this, Geeta started selling tea and opened her stall. Her husband is still not well enough to work full-time. He has to spend a good part of the day resting and suffers particularly in the heat. He is sometimes involved on party committees, but mostly he takes care of the home and the farm animals that live on the ground floor stable of their second story house built on stilts. He sells the milk from their two cows to the dairy, providing the family some income. Despite the sacrifices Geeta has made for her husband and her entire family, her husband says straight forwardly that he has stronger loyalties to the party than to his wife. While serving on the party village committee, he concurred with the decision of the committee to nominate Geeta for the seat and submitted this to the district level committee for approval. But he cautions against any misunderstanding, saying,

“I supported her as a party worker, not as her husband. And when I helped in the election, that was also as a party worker. I am very strict about these principles. Just because we are married, I would never show preference toward Geeta.”

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Since the time when Geeta first became involved in the party in her new district, Saptari, she has taken on increasingly larger responsibilities, both in the party in general and in the party's internal women's organization, the *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh*. Geeta has held almost every executive post in this women's organization; she is currently the district secretary and has also been the organization's president and vice-president.

Geeta first became involved in the 1997 local elections when she was selected by her party to attend the NDI-organized training program for women candidates in Chitwan. Her plan at that time was to learn more about elections and the campaign process so that she could train other women candidates in her party. She did not plan on becoming a candidate herself.

Before the election, she and her counterpart, NDI party trainer Saraswoti Chaudhary, were very active in the district, training more than 352 women candidates and campaign staff in preparation for the elections. They organized mass meetings for women to promote the CPN-UML and solidify a bloc of active women in the party. For International Women's Day in March, the party's *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh*, under the leadership of Saraswoti and Geeta, made the national newspapers by organizing events for women on an unprecedented scale in Nepal. They organized a mass rally of more than 5,000 women, volleyball matches and other games, and a speech contest -- all for women in the district. All these activities are especially remarkable, given that Saptari district is highly conservative socially and the *parda* or veil system is strictly enforced. In this district it is unusual to see women without at least the tops of their heads covered with their *saris*.

Despite Geeta's prominent role in the *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh* and her skills as an organizer, before the elections she still felt that

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her role was to help other women to run for office. However, in hindsight, several key experiences had prepared her to run for local government office herself.

Geeta educated herself about the functions and processes in local government by becoming an active member of a user group committee in her VDC. For most community projects in the VDC, there is a voluntary user group committee made up of civic leaders and people who may benefit directly from the success of the project. Geeta was asked to participate on this committee to help oversee and implement a tree plantation program in the Phattepur VDC. Through her participation, she learned firsthand about how to raise money and manage the budget for a community project, organize the work of volunteers and laborers, and solve problems by constantly monitoring the project. Geeta says that this experience was very useful to her and demystified the process of local government. She says further,

“Before I became involved on the user committee, I was not sure how projects were actually implemented. I had only a vague idea. I had never worked with the type of budget used for VDC projects before. But my work with numbers at the tea stall had prepared me well, and I didn't let the process scare me. Now that I have the experience on the user committee, I know I can do more.”

Through her activities on the user group committee and her party, and her work at her tea shop, Geeta became a recognized leader in the community. Even the previous ward president, Laxman Karki, of Ward no. 3, came to her for advice, especially when there were problems in the ward related to women.



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By the time of the 1997 local elections, Laxman Karki had been ward president for more than ten years, the first five years under the *panchayat* system and the second five years as a Nepali Congress (NC) convert. The NC held a number of posts in the VDC, and Laxman Karki, as an incumbent in a traditionally NC area, was seen as someone who would be difficult to unseat. The CPN-UML needed a strong and popular candidate to compete with Laxman Karki. For many of the local party women, this choice was obvious: Geeta.

Without Geeta's knowledge, these women started a campaign in the party to nominate her for the ward president ticket. Then they came to her and asked her to join them in their campaign. The party did not take much convincing that Geeta should be given the ticket. District Central Committee member Khilnath Lekhi was already a supporter of Geeta. He says,

“On the committees that nominate and approve the list of candidates, there was a great deal of support for Geeta. She was viewed as a real contender, as someone we hoped that we could count on to win.”

But Geeta was not fully convinced that she was the best candidate. She consulted with her husband and family. Two days before the date for filing nominations, Geeta gave into the pressure from her party, her women friends, and her family. She decided to become a candidate. She remembers her decision,

“I wasn't sure that I could do it. I had never run for office before and it seemed like such a big step to run for ward president. But everyone was encouraging me. In the end, I decided to believe in everyone who

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seemed to believe so strongly in me. I took the ticket.”

This decision ushered in a whirlwind of activities for Geeta right up until the election day. Throughout the process, she thought hard about the problems of the ward and the responsibilities of the ward president and began to craft her campaign accordingly. She recalls,

“I thought about issues that were important to me and important to the people that I know here in my ward. Drinking is a big problem here with the men. Men sometimes come home drunk and hit their wives and children. They drink up all the money too. I also thought about other issues related to our village development, such as water, electricity, and roads. In these areas there are problems in my ward. I thought to myself, ‘I could help with these kinds of problems if I got elected. I could really make a difference here.’”

To help her with her campaign strategy, Geeta took an extensive walk through her ward in an attempt to see it all with a new, fresh eye: one from the perspective of the voters. Ward no. 3 covers a large section of the VDC, including a large irrigation canal, the oldest in the country. Phattepur VDC is located in the northern section of Saptari district on the western part of the Sapta Koshi River. Water from this canal irrigates huge portions of the district, making it some of the most productive land for rice in the country. The village is connected to the main highway by a one lane partially paved road, riddled with potholes. Local buses and supply trucks connect Phattepur with the outside world. The village itself seems small and cluttered. In the main bazaar, old wooden structures house the small stores that sell basic goods: rice, soap, liquor, and

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cigarettes. En route to their villages north of Phattepur, villagers stock up on staples in the central bazaar. A few of the trees planted many years ago to retain the canal dyke are missing, and some erosion is already evident. Phattepur is not unlike many places in the Tarai. In the dry, hot season it is dusty. In the wet, hot season it is muddy. The centerpiece of the town is a relatively new temple for the goddess *Bhagwati, or Durga*, located just west of the canal, for which members of the community raised money. The King and Queen of Nepal put Phattepur on the map by paying a visit to the VDC for the grand opening of the temple several years ago. They avoided the bad roads and arrived by Royal helicopter.

Phattepur VDC may also become famous for women in politics. Not only did Geeta win the seat for ward president in 1997, but there were two other women who were also elected, in addition to those women elected to the nine ward member seats reserved for women. One of these other women also won the seat for ward president, which means that along with Geeta there is another woman on the VDC board that is made up of the nine ward presidents and the president and vice president of the VDC. The situation in Phattepur is unusual since in most VDCs, parties fulfilled only the minimum requirement by nominating women only for the ward member seats reserved for women. Geeta explains that these women candidates supported one another during the elections,

“All of the women candidates from my party met as a group to discuss our special needs. We all had copies of the NDI campaign manual, and we read and discussed it together. It was very helpful. It helped prepare us for the election because with this manual, we developed our campaign plans, which we coordinated with other party activities.”

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Although popular in her ward, not everyone was happy with the selection of Geeta to run for ward president. Geeta explains that some men felt resentful,

“ I know there was some resentment from some men in the party . These men are just behind the times in their thinking and think that women can not make contributions to society. Therefore, when the party offered me the ticket for the ward president, I think they were jealous. They probably thought that a man should get that ticket and that I should be given a ticket for the ward member seat reserved for women. But it was the party committee that selected me. I didn't ask for the ticket. They were looking for the person from our party who had the best chance of winning the seat. But I really can't worry too much about what some men think.”

Once Geeta had decided to take the ticket, she became determined to win. She met with other party activists to discuss a campaign strategy. She reviewed the voter list and determined how many of the ward's 2,025 voters she needed to win. She and other party activists scrutinized the voters list and divided the list into supporters, non-supporters, and swing voters. Her next step was to join her party in a political blitz which would convince the voters to vote for the sun, the CPN-UML *chhap*.

Geeta's campaign strategy focused on riding the huge wave of support her party (the CPN-UML) was enjoying throughout Nepal. She campaigned not as an individual, but rather as a member of her party. All of the CPN-UML candidates in Phattepur adopted this strategy, and it was effective. For nine days during the campaign period, Geeta and the other candidates from the CPN-UML led a

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procession of 200 to 300 people to every house in the VDC, demonstrating to the voters their strength and organizational capabilities. They went to many houses twice.

While going from house to house, the CPN-UML in Phattepur tried campaign tactics unheard of in Nepal. They asked for votes and notes (money). In this way, they collected thousands of rupees. This is very unusual in Nepal where many candidates hand out money, wine, rice, and meat to voters in an effort to influence the way they vote. The CPN-UML activists, in contrast, encouraged the voters to give money to the party, which would be spent during the campaign. This strategy was successful. And it meant that candidates like Geeta, who did not have much extra money for campaigning, could compete with those who did have money.

For Geeta's campaign, the party paid for the majority of her costs: posters, banners, flags, and snacks for the volunteers. Geeta only spent approximately \$32 of her own money to provide snacks for some of her volunteers after they had spent the day campaigning for her and the party.

While proceeding door-to-door in the VDC, the procession of CPN-UML candidates often paused to hold rallies at the main intersections and to give speeches to drum up excitement and enthusiasm for the candidates. Geeta gave a number of speeches at the rallies. Regarding public speaking Geeta says,

"Now I don't have a problem speaking in front of a group. In my party's women's organization, we often practice public speaking. I always try to speak directly to the people and tell the truth. During the campaign, I urged people to be unified and work

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together. That was the main message of my speeches.”

In addition to campaigning broadly in the VDC, Geeta carried her message to the people of her own ward. Just before the election, she led about 120 supporters and volunteers to each house in her ward. With a smaller group, Geeta also went door-to-door to the homes of people whom she thought might be swing voters. She made a special effort to reach out to these voters, but always encouraged them to vote for all the candidates from her party and not just her. She says,

“I could read the faces of the voters to see if they were really planning to vote for me when I met them. Even if I felt they wouldn’t support me, I tried anyway.”

During the campaign period, Geeta began to feel more confident that she would win because of the enthusiasm generated on the streets. But it was not until Geeta’s main opponent, Laxman Karki, approached her that she felt sure she would win. She gave it her best shot. She recalls,

“Laxman came to me one morning and said, ‘You are so well organized and popular. I don’t think that I stand a chance against you.’ At that point, I told him not to give up and offered kind words, but secretly I felt really good inside.”

Geeta was very organized. Every night she met with her volunteers to evaluate and review the day’s work. Before the elections, the local party office organized a two-day training for all party workers and volunteers so that everyone would know how to meet voters

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and appear to be a unified force during the campaign. Geeta's hard work and organization paid off, as she and her party marched to a landslide victory in her VDC.

One voter that Geeta persuaded to vote for her was Sunil Khadka who lives in Ward no. 3. He is a farmer and an activist of the Nepali Congress. He explains Geeta's popularity,

"I can tell you why she is popular. First, she is committed to her party principles and people appreciate that. Second, she is impartial. She has a good reputation for being fair and making rational decisions. And third, Geeta is a capable and strong politician with a good background to be a community leader. These are the reasons she got my vote."

Many voters like Sunil Khadka supported Geeta, but not necessarily her party, the CPN-UML. Geeta modestly maintains that she won because of her party. But her assessment does not explain why she won by such a large margin. Even within her ward, the other candidates from her party did not win by such a large margin.

Winning so many people's votes has not gone to Geeta's head. She says that her life has not changed significantly since winning the election. Geeta is still operating her tea stall but now has to close early because of her responsibilities as ward president. Much of the time, people know where to find her: at the tea stall where they first met her.

Geeta says that she continues to urge more women to participate in politics, despite all the obstacles,

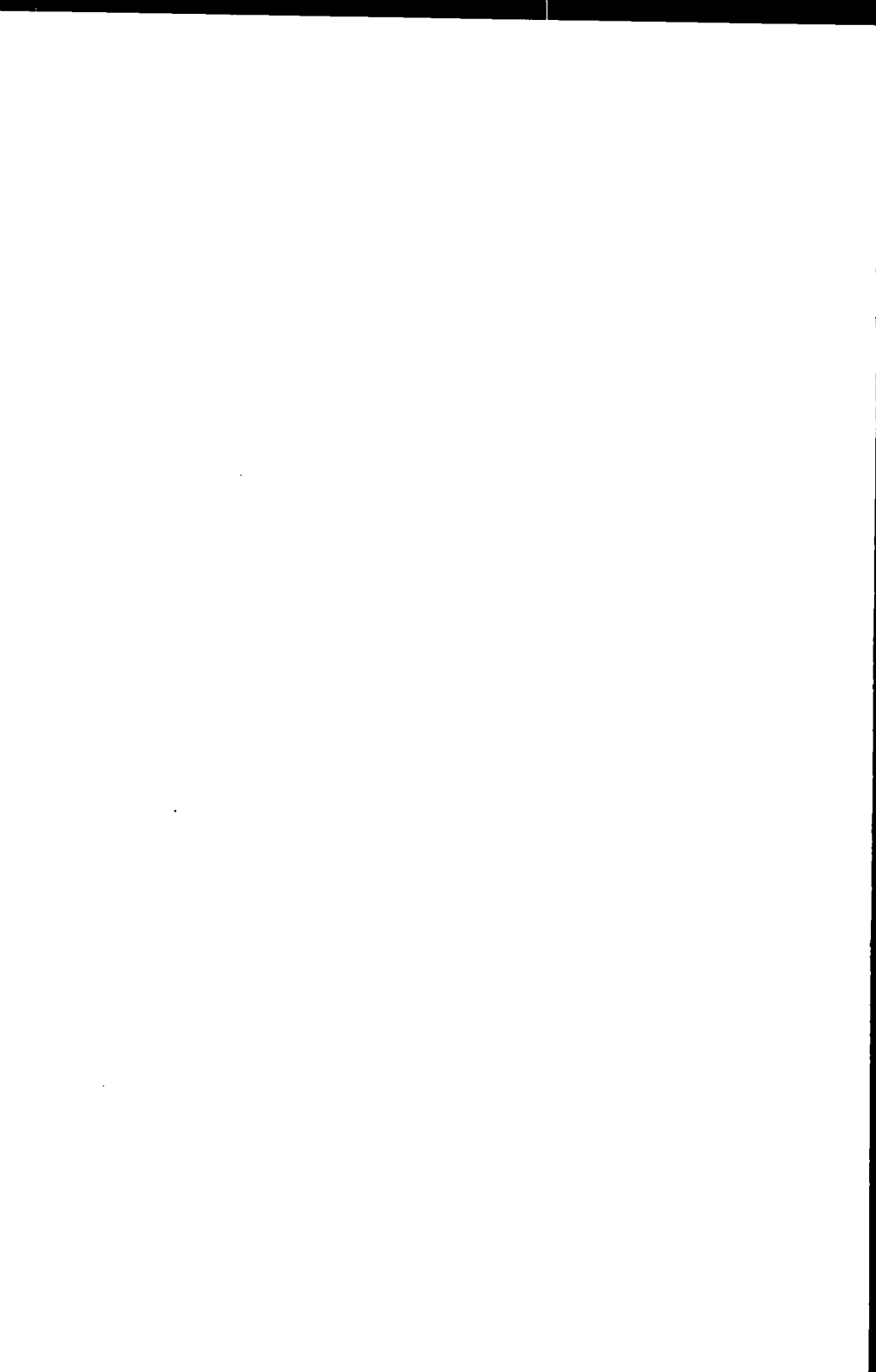
"I would like to see all women involved in politics. Maybe some day it will be like that. But it is hard

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for most women, and we can't forget that. For many reasons, the majority of women don't have the chance to become politically involved: family, work responsibilities, and so on take so much time. As some of us are moving ahead, we can't forget about these women being left behind."

Listening to Geeta, it is easy to become convinced that she will leave as few women behind as possible. And those women in her village who follow in her footsteps will thank her.







Geeta Ghimire explains, " I know there was some resentment from some men in the party . These men are just behind the times in their thinking and think that women can not make contributions to society..."



Geeta Ghimire at home with her family.



## **RANU ADHIKARI**

**LOCATION:** Biratnagar Municipality,  
Ward No. 9  
**DISTRICT:** Morang  
**SEAT:** Ward Member  
(Reserved Seat for Women)  
**PARTY:** Nepali Congress Party



### *Ranu's Song of Freedom*

In 1949 Ranu Adhikari wed at the age of 16. At this time, Nepal was still closed off to the rest of the world, and only a handful of westerners had ever visited the Himalayan kingdom. Kathmandu could only be reached by foot. In southeastern Nepal along the Indian border, the bustling metropolis of Biratnagar was not much more than a jute mill surrounded by mud huts.

Out of this jute mill the very first radio program in Nepal was broadcasted. This program was part of an undercover operation by pro-democracy activists who had taken refuge in neighboring India. The radio program would later evolve into Radio Nepal, the state-owned radio station popular today. These underground activists included Ranu's husband and many other people who would later introduce democracy to Nepal. Ranu's extended family has produced three of the country's prime ministers and several members of Parliament in Nepal's brief history of multiparty democracy.

Ranu Adhikari made history when she was just 16 years old, when she was the first woman to sing on the radio. She sang a

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revolutionary song about freedom and democracy that would later be banned by the King since it became so identified with the pro-democracy movement. In defiance, Ranu continued to sing this song in protest against the country's monarchy.

Today, Ranu is often interviewed by radio and newspaper journalists, and she is known as the "historical singer." Looking back now at the age of 65, Ranu says that music and politics have been her life. She has recorded three records and many of her songs can still be heard on Radio Nepal.

Ranu sang the revolutionary song that made her famous and many others at the NDI women candidate training-of-trainers seminar. She participated in the program as a representative of the Nepali Congress party in Morang district. Ranu sang with such conviction that many of the participants in the training seminar had tears in their eyes, and she was asked to sing again and again.

This year Ranu retired from her teaching position at a public high school in Biratnagar where she has taught history, geography, and social studies to eighth, ninth and tenth grade students for 28 years. But her actual retirement has been postponed because Ranu was elected as a ward member in her Biratnagar ward. Laughing and smiling widely she says,

"I was wondering how I was going to spend my retirement. Now I have a job again. I will be busy for the next five years trying to work out problems here in the neighborhood and seeing that my ward is developing. I am already busy trying to work out a budget so that we can get street lights put up. It's a small ward. The drains need to be cleaned. Some of the people don't have drinking water. Oh, there's so much to do."

## ***Standing Proud***

Ranu is not new to community activism. She has been involved in her community for many years and has conducted a variety of development projects with the Red Cross, the Lioness Club, and other NGOs. She is also a member of the South Asia Classical Music Association and when asked about music, she says,

“Music is an important part of life. It improves the quality of life for everyone that it touches. Music used to be taught in the public schools, but not these days. Some of the private schools still teach it. I would like to see more music in this community. It is meaningful.”

Ranu studied music at the intermediate level in college and is highly educated by Nepali standards, particularly for a woman of her age. She explains that between raising a family and teaching at the local school, she managed to find time to further her studies. She received her BA in Nepal and her MA in history in India. She shares her fondness for history,

“I love history because it tells us who we are today, and it connects us with the people from our past. The stories of history are our bridges to our ancestors. It is so important to know these stories. I also like the history of other peoples of the world. I enjoy learning about the ancients and their societies. So much has gotten lost along the way, and we need to be reminded from time to time. Many of the ancients were very wise people. History was also my favorite subject to teach. Nepali history is so very rich. So many important events took place right here in Biratnagar.”

## *Standing Proud*

Ranu may also have such a keen interest in history because she and her family have made so much of it themselves, particularly when it comes to the political history of Nepal. The NC president and former Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, is Ranu's relative by blood and marriage twice. Her husband is also related directly to the Koirala family. Many of her four sisters have also married into this political family.

Numerous NC leaders related to Ranu, at both the national and local levels, are women. The local MP whose constituency includes part of Biratnagar is Shailaja Acharya, a niece of Girija Prasad Koirala. One of Ranu's sisters, Nona Koirala, is one the very few women on the NC national level committee.

Ranu describes Nona as "a capable leader in her own right." Although Ranu acknowledges the political power of Nona's family, she believes Nona's accomplishments stem from her sister's own hard work.

Most of Ranu's family is involved in the Nepali Congress Party. However, one of her brothers, who is now deceased, was a national leader in the Communist Party Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML). The CPN-UML party president and former Prime Minister, Mon Mohan Adhikari, is also related to Ranu. Her family, which at one time ducked in and out of Biratnagar to fight against the Rana King, has evolved into a formidable political dynasty.

Biratnagar is the hub of this dynasty, and today is Nepal's second largest city. The people of Biratnagar and the district in which it lies, Morang, have a reputation for being very politically aware and active. Biratnagar is an old city cut out of the jungle; and it is home to many industrialists. Today, the city is surrounded by fields of rice and factories. The factories produce soap, biscuits, jute, and

## ***Standing Proud***

zippers. Many of the industrialists have large mansions with walled compounds and are Indian nationals of the *Marwadi* class. The majority of Biratnagar's residents, however, are poor. Some are Nepalis who have immigrated from the Hills looking for work in the factories. Others are immigrants from India's poorest state which lies along Nepal's border: Bihar. This border near Biratnagar is very fluid and there is little distinction between either side.

Ranu was born in Birgunj but her family home is in Varennes, India. Ranu's home city of Varennes is believed to be so holy in the Hindu religion that those who die there are not reincarnated into the next life, but rather go straight to *sworga*, or heaven. Millions of Hindus make pilgrimages to the city yearly and pray along the banks of the sacred Ganges river. In hopes of a short cut to *nirvana*, many people go to Varennes when they are deathly ill and spend the rest of their days there before they die.

The Koirala family also made their family home in Varennes, and the city, therefore, played an important role in bringing multi-party democracy to Nepal. After India gained independence from Britain in 1947, pro-democracy activists in India, especially those from the Indian Congress Party, assisted the Koirala family in their efforts to bring democracy to Nepal. While the family is now politically very successful in Nepal, it has also suffered and made huge sacrifices over the years to establish a multiparty democracy in Nepal. Members of the family have been jailed, exiled, and killed. Ranu herself was jailed for ten days in 1978 when she and other activists were arrested by the police. She recalls,

“At the time I was involved in a teacher's struggle, which was related to the broader democratic movement in Nepal. At the time, people in all sectors were protesting against the King. We were



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organizing for better conditions and more freedom in our profession when the police came and arrested us. It was an unpleasant experience but we kept each other's spirits high."

Many other Nepalis, of course, have made these kinds of sacrifices. Perhaps thousands of people were killed over the years in their efforts to bring multiparty democracy to Nepal in 1990. They are today honored as martyrs.

Ranu has been an active party member for many years. This year before the local elections, the municipal NC party office sent Ranu a letter asking her to organize a party ward committee to select the NC candidate to run for the ward member seat for women. There are many party leaders in Ranu's ward, including G. P. Koirala's immediate family, whose family compound is just four houses down from Ranu's own house. At the party meeting, Ranu was embarrassed and flattered when the party leaders decided to nominate her for the seat. The ward includes part of the main business district of Biratnagar, and many community business leaders also urged Ranu to take the ticket. She says,

"I wasn't sure what to do. All my life I have been encouraging others to run for office and to advance their political careers. But I never really thought of myself as a candidate. When I heard the suggestion, I thought, 'I am old now and my husband is very sick. Maybe this doesn't make sense.' I continued to think about it for several days. I didn't ask anyone else their opinion; I wanted to make the decision myself. I didn't even consult with my husband. I finally talked myself into it and said, 'OK, I'll take it.'"

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Ranu had assessed her abilities and had concluded that she felt capable and energetic enough to fulfill the responsibilities of ward member. She also says that she wanted to have a useful role after retirement, in addition to taking care of her husband and her home.

There were a number of factors that made Ranu feel confident that she would win the election. The Nepali Congress had previously held the president's seat in this ward and was generally strong in Biratnagar. Ranu was also well known in the ward. She was a longtime resident and had taught school there for many years. Many of her former students and their parents turned out to support Ranu during the campaign. When going door-to-door to meet the voters, Ranu made sure to ask the voters about their needs and problems. She asked the voters for their suggestions and told them that if she won, she would come back again to ask for their help in addressing community concerns.

Ranu also campaigned on a unified party ticket; the five candidates from her ward campaigned together. They asked the voters to support them and the NC candidates for mayor and vice mayor. Ranu explains,

“We asked the voters to support the ticket or party rather than us as individuals. It would have seemed strange for me to highlight my own symbol and not those of others in the party.”

Things were going smoothly when Ranu heard that her main opponent from the CPN-UML, Meena Shrestha, was planning an upset victory. Meena was a capable candidate with good experience in the community. She was also younger than Ranu, and Ranu feared that voters might see her own advanced age as a weakness.

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At one point too, she worried that her party was not faring well in the elections. She says,

“The CPN-UML leaders were telling everyone that the NC would become extinct during these elections and that we were finished. When I heard this kind of talk, my fighting spirit really kicked in. I became more determined and campaigned all the harder. I had to believe in myself and my party.”

Ranu’s main opponent, Meena Shrestha, proved to be strong in the ward but came short of beating her. Ranu explains her opponent’s base of support,

“Meena represented the younger generation. Younger people today are looking for something different and many of them are attracted to the CPN-UML.”

Even though Ward no. 9 was considered a stronghold for the NC (it is the home ward of the NC Party President Girija Koirala, after all), the NC failed to retain the ward president seat. The CPN-UML won the ward presidency, and the NC won the seats for the four ward members. District NC Secretary Gopal Raj Rajbhandari gave his analysis of the loss of this seat in the ward. He surmises,

“I can’t really say what happened in Ward no. 9. Our data showed that we had the voters there in the ward but it is really impossible to understand why someone loses an election. It was up to the ward level committee to nominate the person who had the best chance of winning. At the district level, we usually approve the recommended nominations,

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believing that the local ward knows best. Let's face it though, the NC campaigns were not successful in the district. We went from having 20 of the 22 ward president seats to having only six. We also lost the race for mayor."

Ranu's party provided support for her campaign by furnishing her posters and pamphlets and by organizing processions through the ward and municipality. Ranu spent only \$40 of her own money, primarily for snacks for her volunteers. Although she prepared food for the volunteers at home, she bought them sodas and chewing gum from outside shops.

Ranu campaigned hard in her ward. Because her ward is so small, she was able to go to each house three or four times. She had the luxury of really meeting with the voters. Ranu believes that it was her personal contact with the voters that assured her victory.

After the elections, Ranu had to wait for the results because of re-polling in five of Biratnagar's 22 wards. When the results were announced, Ranu was in Kathmandu visiting her husband (who was there receiving medical treatment). She describes how she felt when she heard the news,

"I was so happy I could hardly talk. I got the call telling me that I had won and by a decent margin. It felt so good. It was my first try at running for office, and all my hard work had paid off. It felt wonderful to know that the voters knew me."

Madhavi Katwal said that she was not surprised that Ranu won the seat. Madhavi was the other trainer from the NC who accompanied Ranu to the NDI training program. Together they trained 322

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women candidates and campaign staff before the election with the help of the NDI program. Madhavi also helped Ranu go door-to-door during the campaign. She highlights some of the reasons why voters like Ranu,

“It's an honor to work with someone like Ranu. She is an active leader and a genuinely concerned person. The party owes her a lot for all her hard work on its behalf. The community is also indebted to her for her efforts as a social worker and as a teacher. She has made a tremendous impact on her students. Ranu has given so much, and she is not finished yet.”

Madhavi is also a school teacher. She teaches science. She wants to encourage Ranu and all the women who were elected to participate fully and represent both men and women at the local level. She is hopeful that with solid experience in local government, many of these elected women will advance to become leaders at the national level.

Ranu also echoes this wish. But she believes that for women to be effective in politics, especially at the local level, it is imperative to convince husbands and other family members that women's involvement in politics is not a threat to the home. Ranu hopes that eventually roles will change enough so that all the responsibility for taking care of the home does not reside just with women. But for now, women can not neglect their homes.

Ranu and Madhavi both agree that the NDI training program that they participated in, and the subsequent training sessions that they conducted for NC women candidates in the villages of Morang district, were very helpful in increasing women's awareness, knowledge, and skills related to campaigning. Both feel that the

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training program made women more strategic in their campaigns. They say that there was a great deal of excitement created since they brought this training program to even the remote areas of the district. Ranu says that her main message to women during the training was to continue the struggle and not give up. She explains,

“At the training sessions and even now, my advice to women is to keep up the struggle. We brought democracy to Nepal but many women have still not seen the benefits. We have to make our voices heard. We are not where we want to be yet, so that means keeping up the fight.”

Ranu is obviously continuing to sing a song of freedom for Nepal's women.





Ranu Adhikari and women candidate trainer and party activist, Madhavi Katuwal. Madhavi says, "It's an honor to work with someone like Ranu. She is an active leader and a genuinely concerned person. The party owes her a lot for all her hard work on its behalf. The community is also indebted to her for her efforts as a social worker and as a teacher. She has made a tremendous impact on her students. Ranu has given so much, and she is not finished yet."



Ranu Adhikari sharing her experiences during the campaign, "At the training sessions and even now, my advice to women is to keep up the struggle. We brought democracy to Nepal but many women have still not seen the benefits. We have to make our voices heard. We are not where we want to be yet, so that means keeping up the fight."





## MEENA DEVI BHATTARAI

**LOCATION:** Mukundapur VDC  
**DISTRICT:** Nawalparasi  
**SEAT:** VDC President  
**PARTY:** Rastriya Prajatantra Party



### *A Woman's Place*

Mukundapur Village Development Committee (VDC) is much like any VDC along the King Mahendra Highway cutting through Nawalparasi district. It is the kind of place with small town atmosphere, where people seem to care about what is happening. The local government leaders raised thousands of rupees from the community and recently built a new VDC office that will house the VDC meetings in the future. But mostly, Mukundapur seems like an ordinary place. There is a *haat bazaar* that takes place on Fridays when villagers bring their produce for sale. Like other VDCs in the area, Mukundapur VDC is primarily agricultural, with farmers turning rotations of wheat, then corn, and finally rice every year. The soil is rich, and the pastoral scene is pure green in the monsoon season as the rice plants mature in the terraced rice fields. Mukundapur also boasts some industry since it is located conveniently near to the city of Narayangarh. There is a small pharmaceutical plant that produces simple medicines and a Tuborg beer factory that employs about 200 people.

This VDC may not seem unusual but during the 1997 local elections, Mukundapur made history as one of the very few places

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in Nepal where women ran for upper-level seats in the VDC. All of the major political parties in this VDC (CPN-UML, NC, and RPP) put up candidates other than those for the compulsory seats reserved for women at the ward level. Two women ran for vice-president of the VDC, one of whom won and is currently serving in that position.

And one woman, Meena Devi Bhattarai, ran for the VDC's highest post: VDC president. Even though she lost the election, the mere fact that she ran, in addition to the other two women running for vice president, was a tremendous step in Nepali politics.

Thirty years ago, Meena Devi and her husband moved to this VDC from a small village in the Palpa district Hills where some of her husband's family still farms. Meena Devi, however, was born and raised in neighboring Chitwan district, across the Narayani River. She and her husband raised six children: four boys and two girls. Most of her children are married and are studying at the campus. She boasts that her youngest son is teaching science at a college campus, and one of her daughters is a staff nurse. Most of her children live in the area, close to their mother.

Her husband's photo has a *mala*, or string of dried flowers around it, symbolizing that he is now deceased. On the black and white photo on the table, he appears gentle, as Meena Devi describes him. He died three years ago. He was a school teacher, and like many government teachers shortly after the entry of multi-party democracy in Nepal, supported the newly-formed RPP (the party that evolved from the leaders of the former partyless system). He became an activist but never held a formal position within the party. Meena Devi says that it is out of respect for her husband that she is now active in the RPP. She continues,

"It's not that I have a special affection for any one political party. I see myself as a social worker first,

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not a politician. I guess I like the RPP because I am most familiar with it and that's where I am most known. In some ways, it is a kind of connection to my husband. I know he would be happy if I continued his work."

Meena Devi takes pride in the job she has done as mother but does not feel that women should be limited to a homemaker role. To her, it seems completely logical that women move from the realm of the home to the community. Then she believes that women can move from the community to higher level positions at the VDC, district, or even national levels. This is the route that Meena Devi has chosen for herself. She says,

"As a mother I watched over and cared for my family. I raised my children. I fed them and took care of them when they were sick and helpless. I also taught them to take care of themselves. This caretaker role is also necessary at the local government level."

When Meena Devi met the voters of Mukundapur, she did not make any promises about what she would do. Instead, she told them,

"I have been a daughter. I have been a wife. I am a mother and a grandmother. Now I am your sister. I am exercising my political rights and running for VDC president in our VDC. You should exercise your political rights also and vote for me in the election."

One of Meena Devi's greatest frustrations during the campaign was meeting with women who were not conscious of their own political

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rights. She believes that many women simply vote the way they are instructed by men in their families. Meena Devi says that one of her main motivations for running for office was to raise women's level of political awareness. She explains,

“I wanted to be an example for other women in my community. I wanted to show both men and women that yes, a woman can run for even the biggest seat in our village. Everyone needs to realize that there really is nothing that a woman can't do.”

Meena Devi entered politics through her organization, *Aama Samuha*, or Mother's Group. In thousands of communities throughout Nepal, these *Aama Samuha* groups have formed to work on a variety of community issues. In Nawalparasi district, the *Aama Samuha* organizations have joined together in one federation of which Meena Devi is the district president. Through her organizing efforts at the local level, Meena Devi and other women in her community have gained a great deal of experience as social workers and have improved the lives of people in their community. For instance, under Meena Devi's leadership, her local organization has conducted literacy classes for women, installed pumps in places where women previously walked long distances to fetch water, and organized credit and savings groups, and income generating activities for women.

One of her group's most successful undertakings has been a partial ban on alcohol sales and consumption in Mukundapur VDC, despite the presence of the beer factory. This partial ban, now instituted, allows alcohol sales and consumption to take place only in the evening between 6:00 and 8:00. She believes that this limitation has been very useful in curbing some of the problems related to heavy alcohol consumption, especially among men. She explains,

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“The limits on alcohol sales and consumption have been successful without a full ban on drinking. Many men come home drunk and beat their wives and children. Plus, drinking wastes money and doesn't contribute to the family income, does it? When there is a violation, the seller and the drinker must pay a 300 Rs. (\$5) fine, of which our organization gets a share for our programs.”

Meena Devi also made violence against women a major issue in her community. The murders of two women in neighboring VDCs mobilized women activists in the community to raise their voices in protest. Meena Devi led a procession of women to the local police station to protest a murder which took place in a local jungle. Allegedly, a young man had tried to elope with a woman outside the confines of a traditional arranged marriage. When the boy's father learned of his son's lover, he reportedly took the young woman to the jungle and murdered her by chopping her to pieces with an axe. In another nearby VDC, a newly married woman was murdered when her husband and in-laws were not satisfied with her dowry. The family killed the woman and then tried to make her death seem like a suicide by hanging her dead body from a rope. A police investigation uncovered what had actually taken place. In response to these murders, Meena Devi organized a demonstration to draw attention to the dangers that women face as a result of domestic violence.

Meena Devi is also a devout Hindu. She views her work in the community and in politics as part of her spiritual calling. She is active in her neighborhood temple and has raised money for festivals worshipping praise of Hindu deities. Meena Devi is also a member of a temple construction committee that is developing the gardens surrounding several temples in her VDC. She is well

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known at the temples near her home and says that she finds her strength through prayer and meditation.

Because of her leadership in the community, Meena Devi was appointed to the VDC Advisory Committee that meets to discuss special issues related to the VDC, such as improvements in the VDC health clinic. On this committee from 1992 to 1997, Meena Devi focused on issues that she felt were of importance to women's lives and acted as the liaison between the VDC board and women in the community. Through this experience, Meena Devi learned a great deal about the inner workings of the VDC, particularly about the VDC budget. She also became intimately familiar with the work and issues in which the VDC is engaged. VDC president Yamunath Acharya, Meena Devi's main opponent in the 1997 election, appointed Meena Devi to the post of VDC Advisory Committee. Acharya would go on to win a second term as VDC president and remains very popular, as does his party, the CPN-UML.

Meena Devi's party, the RPP, was initially hesitant to support her, unsure of how she would do as a candidate for VDC president. The party is comparatively weak in the area and actually won no seats in the past two elections. The party committee that decides upon RPP tickets in this VDC was divided initially. Chandra Singh Gurung is an active member of the party and was Meena Devi's strongest supporter. He was the first person to mention her name during the committee nominating process. Gurung explains that he thought Meena Devi was the best candidate for several reasons,

"I first looked around at whom we had on our team, and I concluded that Meena Devi was the best choice because she is capable and has the right experience to do the work of VDC president. She is a good

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community person and has also gained experience from the VDC Advisory Committee on which she served. I also knew her husband, as we had worked on many projects together for our VDC.”

The 87-year old Gurung, who rides his bicycle through the heat of the day protected only by his baseball cap continues,

“Our party also needed something to liven it up a bit. I argued that someone like Meena Devi, who has many connections with women in the community as a result of her work with the *Aama Samuha*, could draw the votes of women from other parties. I thought this should be our main strategy and was our best chance of winning. I have always been an advocate of women in politics.”

After a great deal of discussion, the party finally decided to support Meena Devi and hoped to capitalize on women’s votes by giving the biggest ticket in the VDC to a woman activist from their own party.

Just a few days after receiving her party’s nomination, Meena Devi shifted into high gear. She agreed with Gurung’s strategy, believing that if she could mobilize enough women to cross party lines and support her, she would have a good chance of winning, despite her party’s lack of support in the area. Meena Devi formed the VDC election committee for her party and began fundraising for herself and the other RPP candidates running for seats in the VDC. This committee developed an election plan for winning as many seats as possible in the VDC.



## ***Standing Proud***

Meena Devi called upon her friends at the *Aama Samuha* and the countless women whom she had helped in the past to come out and support her during the campaign. She often went door-to-door with a group of twenty volunteers. Because she was running for a seat that covered nine wards, Meena Devi had to be everywhere all of the time. Meena Devi's oldest son, Saukur, became his mother's chauffeur. He drove his motorcycle with his mother on the back seat throughout the VDC during the campaign. He even had hand-sewn party flags attached to his motorcycle handle bars. Meena Devi also produced a pamphlet with a short catchy message about village development through increasing political rights. Her pamphlet also highlighted the fact that she was the only woman candidate running for the VDC president position. One of Meena Devi's daughters who lives in Kathmandu also came home for a month to lend a helping hand for the campaign. All of her daughters helped prepare food for the campaign volunteers and went door-to-door with groups of their friends as part of their mother's first try for local elected office. Meena Devi said she was delighted that all of her children helped so much during her campaign.

Meena Devi's close friend and fellow party worker, Purna Sapkota, was a dedicated volunteer. Purna had a wonderful time campaigning for Meena Devi and says that it was one of the most rewarding experiences that she has ever had. She recalls,

"It was really fun. We went this direction and that direction and well, everywhere! There was a group of us women from the *Aama Samuha*. We paid particular attention to the women voters when we went door-to-door. When our feet hurt we just rested a bit and told jokes. Because Meena Devi is such a sincere person, I feel good about having worked on her campaign, even though she didn't

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win. There is always next time, right? And it could be an even bigger post.”

The 1997 local elections overlapped with the spring wedding season, adding further commotion to the brass bands of the marriage processions. Meena Devi saw a campaign opportunity in the VDC's weddings. She targeted wedding parties on her campaign route, since these community gatherings bring hundreds of people together. She worked the crowds and asked for support as she wished the bride and groom good luck in their future lives together. Meena Devi says that she was well received and never heard any negative feedback from voters when she was on the campaign trail.

Meena Devi kept the costs of running her campaign to a minimum. She believes that money did not have a bearing on election outcomes. She explains,

“Because of the Election Commission spending limits for the campaigns, everyone spent about the same. It was pretty moderate. I only spent about 7,000 Rs. (about \$120). I didn't lose because of lack of money. Our party is not well organized and not very popular in the VDC. The party that won here has been doing a good job of governing and the people are satisfied.”

Because of her strategic campaigning, two days before the election, Meena Devi felt that she and her party had a good chance of winning. She was meeting with voters and felt that they were hearing her message clearly. Although she spent relatively little money, her campaign was energized with enthusiastic volunteers and she believed that she had very little to worry about. Everything seemed under control. Unfortunately, she was not able to convince

### ***Standing Proud***

the voters to opt for a change. But despite the election results, Meena Devi is happy that she ran and satisfied with her efforts as a first-timer. She reflects,

“I gained so much experience from running. I also had a good time and so did the others involved in my campaign. Everyone pitched in and did what they could. It’s hard to believe that I waited so long to have this much fun.”

The 47-year old Meena Devi is ready to run again in the future if given the opportunity. She feels that her experience running for office has really boosted her confidence and speaking ability. She plans to employ her newfound enthusiasm to involve more women in politics in the future. Meena Devi believes that the biggest barrier for some women is their husbands. She plans to address this problem the following way:

“I am good at convincing husbands to allow their wives to participate in outside [the home] activities. I tell them, ‘Look, get with the times. In this day and age, women can’t be treated like this. How would you like it if your wife turned the tables and made you stay at home all the time? Just imagine how you would feel. Everybody, male or female, needs freedom.’ Often, this approach works.”

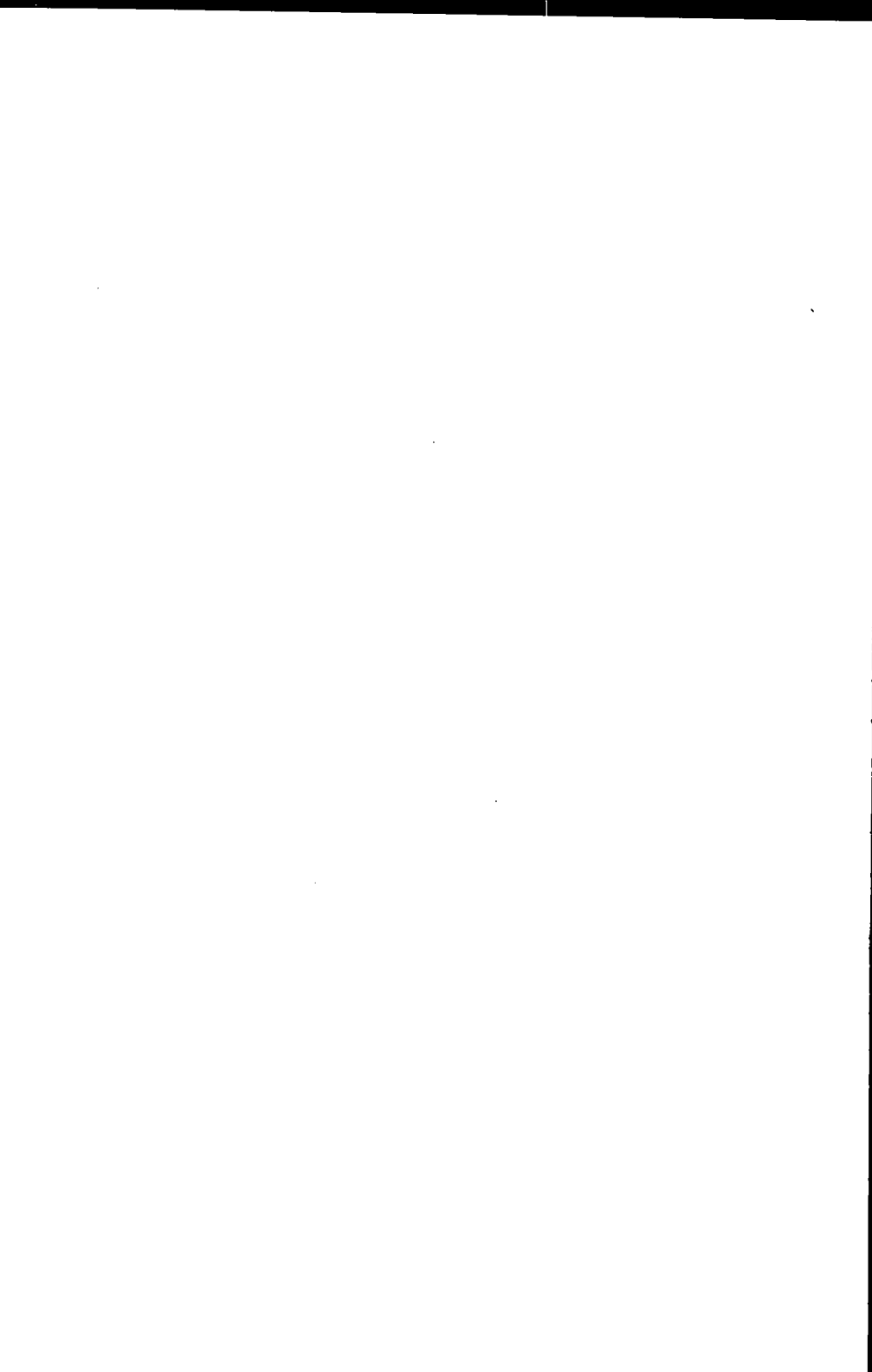
In the future, Meena Devi will undoubtedly continue her work in the women’s movement in Nepal and redefine and expand the boundaries of what it means to say “a woman’s place.”



Meena Devi Bhattarai with her friend Purna Sapkota. Purna says, "...Because Meena Devi is such a sincere person, I feel good about having worked on her campaign, even though she didn't win. There is always next time, right? And it could be an even bigger post."



Bridging the gender gap, Meena and her one of the principal supporters, Chandra Singh Gurung.



## **BENAMI<sup>1</sup> DEVI CHAUDHARY**

**LOCATION:** Phalano<sup>2</sup> VDC,  
Ward No. 3  
**DISTRICT:** Nawalparasi  
**SEAT:** Ward Member  
(Reserved Seat for Women)  
**PARTY:** Nepal Sadbhawana Party

### *Everywoman*

Benami Devi sits waiting in an old wooden chair that her neighbors have put in their cattle stable. The stable is one of the coolest places in the village. Flies swarm around Benami Devi's head and cup of tea. With a shrug of embarrassment, she says,

"The first time you came to my village, I wasn't able to talk at all. I was in tears, wasn't I? That was so awful. Just the night before, my baby girl tried to kill herself. Please don't think badly of us. The whole situation is alright now. Really it is."

The situation of which Benami Devi speaks may be alright now, but it is undoubtedly an unresolved problem. Several weeks before, on

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<sup>1</sup> This woman's name has been changed to protect the anonymity of both her and her daughter. In Nepali, *benami* actually means "anonymous."

<sup>2</sup> The name of the VDC in which this woman lives has also been changed. *Phalano* means "random."

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a scorching hot afternoon during the rice planting season nearby, Benami Devi's daughter had been given work orders by her husband. When her daughter failed to make the stipulated 300 *roti* (an unleavened flat bread made from wheat flour) over an open fire and return to the field to resume her rice planting work within the time frame that her husband felt was reasonable, he became irate. He subsequently tied her up and beat her mercilessly. That night, thinking that her only escape from her husband was to end her own life at the age of 23, Benami Devi's daughter tried to hang herself. She was found before she died and received medical treatment. Very shortly thereafter, she resumed her work, and her mother says that everything is alright now. Her son-in-law agrees. Quoting one of the famous lines from the Wife Beater's Handbook (Universal Edition), Benami Devi's son-in-law promised to never hit his wife again. But, deep down, everybody -- Benami Devi, her daughter, the neighbors, the other women in the village -- knows that the chances are that it will happen again; this was not the first time that the son-in-law had made such a promise.

Benami Devi is a caring and loving mother and grandmother. She is still very concerned about her daughter but social convention prevents her from taking an active role in preventing this terrible situation from happening again. She strongly resists the suggestion of help from a women's NGO several villages away. There are many social factors at work which help keep the situation the same.

First, Benami Devi's daughter is not considered a member of Benami Devi's family anymore. Since she is a married woman, she is now considered the property of her husband and his family. Therefore, it would not be Benami Devi's place to help her daughter. Also, there is shame in this issue for the whole family. Even if available, bringing in "help" from the outside world would only highlight a problem that the family (including Benami Devi's

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daughter) finds highly embarrassing and shameful. And finally, Benami Devi believes that drawing any extra attention to the problem would probably anger her son-in-law and further jeopardize her daughter's safety. As is usually the case in these situations, the dynamics involved are very complicated.

Talking with Benami Devi, it becomes increasingly clear how absolutely powerless she feels to resolve a situation, which so many women face on a regular basis. But, according to the VDC President, Benami Devi is undisputedly the most active women in her ward. Yet, Benami Devi feels frustrated by her own inability to help solve these kinds of problems. Change seems impossible. She has a hard time articulating what she would like to see happen in the village in terms of improvement for women, even if she had the power to change it.

Feminist Writer Marilyn Frye used the metaphor of a wire birdcage to describe women's oppression. She explained that whereas one single wire presents no problem in obstructing movement, it is the totality of all the wires that forms the oppressive cage. It seems that Benami Devi and many other women in her VDC live in these cages. Even dreaming of a breakout scheme seems unthinkable. In Phalano VDC, so far, freedom has eluded most, especially the poorest and most oppressed women.

But in Benami Devi's story, perhaps, there is also a tale of hope for freedom taking root. This year, in her home Ward no. 7, Benami Devi was elected to a ward member seat reserved for women.

In many ways, Benami Devi is not unlike many other women in her village. She is 51 years old but she is not sure. Time has a different quality in the village. And besides, Benami Devi asks, "what is all the counting for?" Her hands are large and rough from years of



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work in the fields. Her forearms are decorated with geometrical designs tattooed on with ink and needle, common of many women in the region. She has raised two daughters, both of whom are married. Benami Devi now lives with her husband and sister-in-law in their home made of mud, manure, and bamboo. The roof is made of clay tiles and keeps the heat from the oppressive sun to a minimum. No one in her village has electricity, and the village road is made of dirt, making it useless during a large part of the year due to monsoon rains. There are no irrigation facilities so farmers are dependent upon an early and heavy monsoon rain for the rice crop. In 1997 they were worried; the rainfall had been below normal. The fields surrounding the village are planted in rice and sugar cane. There are also mango groves and small forests of bamboo to the east. The centerpiece of the village is a *Shiva* temple near a murky fish pond which has a thick layer of algae living on the surface. The pond serves other purposes besides providing a habitat for ducks, dragon flies and the villagers' fish stock. Villagers also use the water to wash clothes and dishes. Overall, the sanitation of the village is very poor. Benami Devi has lived here her entire life. She says,

“When I was small, it was very different. There were many more trees, and we lived more off the jungle. But this is where I was raised. I know everyone here. By some distant relation, we are almost all related somehow.”

The houses of the village have grown larger with each generation, and the paths between the homes and stables form a maze. Almost everyone in Benami Devi's village has the same last name: Chaudhary. In this part of Nepal, this name denotes that this group of people are a part of the Thauru caste. Many people who live in the plains region known as the Tarai migrated either from the Hills

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of Nepal or from India, when most of the Tarai jungles were cut to make way for rice cultivation after the arrival of the pesticide DDT over 30 years ago. But the people of the Thauru caste are the native inhabitants of these plains and are said to be genetically resistant to most forms of malaria (which is why they survived in this area before the advent of DDT).

When meeting someone for the first time in the Tarai, it is common to ask the location of the family home. Many ethnic Nepalis (both Indo and Tibetan ethnic groups alike) answer by giving the name of their district in the *Pahaad*, or Hills. But for the Thauru, the Tarai has been their family home for many, many generations. Like the hundreds of other castes and ethnic groups within Nepal's borders, the Thauru have a rich and complex culture and social structure. But many of the relatively newly arrived people from both the Hills of Nepal and from India have not been kind to these original flatland Nepalis.

A large number of the Thauru have been cheated out of their land by inadvertently "selling" it while incurring small debts. Many of the people in the Tarai, including the Thauru, are actually landless now. They work as bonded laborers for relatively rich landlords. The system appears quite medieval, and the landless class are the serfs. The landless people become dependent upon the landowner during the dry season for rice, which they purchase at high rates due to the scarcity. When they sell rice that they earn from sharecropping the rates are low because of the abundance of rice, and they are unable to pay off the debts. The landowners own the means of transport and basically control the market. The next year, the laborers again buy back their rice (that they sold cheaply the year before), at the higher rate. Due to the incurred debt, children of the laborers become bonded to the landowners and the cycle repeats. Other children are separated from their families and sold off to work as *de*

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*facto* slaves in the homes of the middle and upper classes in the urban areas of Nepal. Thauru servants are especially valued for their perceived docility.

Unfortunately, much of the foreign aid pumped into Nepal yearly has had little impact on the lives of landless farmers, especially the women. There are numerous villages in the Tarai like Benami Devi's that never see the results of all the social programs designed to uplift them. In this area, the women who do participate in programs are most often "creamed," meaning that only those women with the biggest chance of success (i.e. advantaged) are included in the social programs, which usually means high caste, Nepali-speaking immigrants from the Hills. Often those programs do not include low caste or Thauru women.

Benami Devi's experience is fortunately atypical. She and a handful of women in her village have benefitted from social programs designed to help them. When the VDC president of Phalano VDC said that Benami Devi was the most active woman in her ward, it was due in part to her involvement with the district government office of the *Mahila Bikas Shakha*, or Women's Development Office (WDO).

The WDO produces results by running a variety of social programs in Phalano VDC and several other VDCs nearby. The WDO is usually full, busy with volunteers and field workers coming from the villages. Despite the good work that the WDOs are engaged in throughout the country, the scope is very limited. Usually in any district, the WDO operates in only a handful of VDCs. Benami Devi's VDC is one of the lucky few where the WDO works.

It was the WDO that helped Benami Devi and other women start their own women's group, *Mahila Jagaran Drishya Kendra*, or

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Women's Vision and Empowerment Center. Benami has been a member of this group for two years. And five years ago it was another WDO-related program that trained Benami Devi as a community health volunteer. She has since gone door-to-door encouraging women to practice family planning methods and giving health advice to avoid diarrhea. She explains that her work in this area has paid off,

“When I started, I was even embarrassed to talk about family planning, and no one seemed to want to hear about it. The women would just stay inside when I came around, all shy. It was hard, and I sometimes thought that I should just give up. Slowly, I got the women to start using family planning methods. So after having a son and a daughter, they now come looking for me. Now they see the advantages of family planning.”

Benami Devi believes that her participation in the WDO programs has done a great deal to involve her in her community activities. She says the most important thing that the WDO women workers gave her is something that is difficult to measure: confidence. She explains,

“At the WDO, they really encouraged us and gave us hope. They told us, ‘You can make a change.’ They showed women that they could do something for themselves. I’ll give you an example. They helped to start a ‘women’s only’ fish farm, which generates income for women.”

Benami Devi jokingly clarifies that while the fish farm is run by local women in the village, it is stocked with both male

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and female fish. She also describes some other programs that women in her village are engaged in, such as fruit and vegetable farming, as a result of the WDO. Benami Devi's face lights up in a smile when she describes the ban on alcohol sales and consumption that her women's group initiated in her VDC. She says that the ban was effective before the 1997 elections but it is becoming more lax now. In her ward, however, the ban is still in full force. For many women in her VDC, alcohol consumption is synonymous with lost money, fights, and beatings from husbands.

Benami Devi expresses the need for women to be financially independent in order to be free. She says that the WDO programs are a start in this direction. She explains the problem,

“In one hand of a man is money. In his other hand is rice. He controls women this way. We women need to have our own say, and we can't do that if we have to beg for rice from our husbands. We need our own money to be free.”

It was through her public role as a health worker that Benami Devi became known in the community. She talks about how this helped her during the election,

“The people knew me already as an honest and hard worker. I was not getting paid for my health services with the WDO. I was purely a volunteer. People realized that I was sincere in this way. I think that helped me to win.”

Benami Devi says that just as she is grateful to the WDO for involving her in social work activities, she is also grateful to

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NDI for introducing her to politics. It was a young woman in the village who was working as a district coordinator for NDI's Promoting Women's Political Participation Program who first motivated women from her village to run for office. The young woman, Samjhana Chaudhary, encouraged two women, Benami Devi and Jagadamba Chaudhary, to participate in candidate training program for women planning to run as independents. For women who could not speak Nepali, Samjhana gave the training in the local language. Benami Devi recalls,

“I don't know what young people are doing these days; they are different than we were. That Samjhana is smart, and she is the one that got me thinking that I should run in the local elections. She herself has a child, but she is studying at the campus in Parasi. I really liked the training that she organized for us. I had never attended a program like that.”

Benami Devi feels she gained practical advice and encouragement from the training program. When she returned from the program, she discussed the idea of running for office with her husband. According to her, he was initially a bit reluctant but she was able to persuade him by reminding him that her health volunteer activities had yet to interfere with her housework. She convinced him that her political involvement would be similarly integrated into her life. Benami Devi also discussed the idea with her neighbors and members of her local women's group, *Mahila Jagaran Drishya Kendra*.

Benami Devi was prepared to run for office as an independent candidate. But when the ordinance was passed that guaranteed

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that 20% of the ward seats be reserved for women, the political parties searched for women to run on behalf of their parties. The most popular party in her area, the Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP), approached Benami Devi. The most senior party representative and VDC President, convinced her to accept the party ticket for the NSP. He told her that it would be easier to run with the support of the party. Benami Devi had never before taken an interest in politics but was sympathetic to the agenda of the NSP. She liked that the party's goal was to bring about fair representation for the poor people and the *madheshi*, or low caste people in the Tarai region.

In the 1997 local elections, thousands of women became candidates who, without the reserved seat for women on the ward committee, would never have run. This was also the case in Benami Devi's village. In her ward, only one other party, the RPP, put up a candidate to run for the ward seat reserved for women. In some VDC wards in the area, women ran in races uncontested. Benami Devi ended up winning the seat by a significant margin. Of Benami, the VDC President says,

“Benami Devi would have won either way, with our party or without it. She had support in the community and was well known for her good work. We now have the responsibility to educate Benami Devi and other newcomers to the party about the work of local officials and our party. Women like Benami Devi will prove to be big assets for the party in the years to come.”

The NSP helped Benami Devi and all of their other candidates only minimally. The party itself is small and lacks resources. Fortunately, election expenses are kept to a minimum in a poor area. The party provided her with some pamphlets that she gave to voters and

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pasted up in her ward. Benami Devi organized her own team of friends to accompany her as she went door-to-door with the other NSP candidates for the ward. The NSP also sponsored a bicycle rally in the VDC, which Benami Devi attended. She spoke very briefly at the small rally and encouraged voters to support her and the NSP in the elections. Benami Devi said that she found the experience of running for office stressful at times, but now she is happy that she ran. She recalls,

“When I first started, I was really nervous. I had never done this kind of thing before, and I was worried that I would make a mistake and lose. I felt like everyone was watching me, and I did not know what I was doing, to be honest with you. I was scared. But closer to the elections, I started feeling more at ease. I noticed that there were many other women running for office in my VDC. I felt happy that I was one of the women running.”

Despite Benami Devi's limited exposure to running for office, she ran a winning campaign. She felt that her group of 15 volunteers was too large and cumbersome to go to each voter's home. Therefore, she divided the group and split her time between both. She also spent no money during the campaign, as she incurred no expenses. She asks,

“What do you need money for? I had always heard that you needed money, but I didn't spend any. I just talked to the voters and asked them to support me. That didn't cost anything.”

Although Benami Devi has won the election, her situation still remains difficult. One of her biggest supporters during the campaign explains,



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“Look, you have to understand that meeting you all like this is not normal. Women don’t meet like this and conduct meetings with outside people. We always have to sit on the outskirts of the meeting. We sit and just listen. We don’t even understand what’s happening fully, just a little bit. If the men see us sitting and listening, they shout at us, ‘Hey, what are you doing, listening to our talk? Go and do your work!’ You see, we are just now, little by little, starting to be included. It is really tough.”

Benami Devi echoes this same concern,

“I want to bring women forward. But, I don’t know how to do it exactly. I will try to meet with the women in my ward and listen to their problems. But I am not sure what I can do for them.”

Despite her good showing in the elections, Benami Devi lacks confidence and a plan. When asked about her future goals as an elected ward member, she says that she is unsure about what to do. She explains,

“When I became a health volunteer, I didn’t know anything about health but I received training. The training showed me the way. Now I know how to be a health volunteer. But for this? How can I learn about the ward member’s job? I can only promise to try my best.”

Hopefully, Benami Devi will find a way.

## Conclusion

In her recently published article, Writer Jane S. Jaquette states that "the growing participation and representation of women in politics is one of the most remarkable developments of the late twentieth century." Indeed, perhaps women's greater participation in politics will prove to be one of the most significant impacts on democracy as we know it. But despite the positive trend towards the greater participation of women in politics worldwide, the situation for women in most places, and in Nepal in particular, remains very difficult.

Numerous studies have documented the barriers to women's political participation in Nepal. The reasons are many. Culturally and historically, politics has simply been off limits to women, as the "World of the Male" mentality still prevails in almost every political party in the Kingdom. Women, more so than men, are more likely to lack experience in, and exposure to, politics. Segregation on the basis of sex ensures that the worlds of men and women, socially at least, rarely intersect. The division of labor in the home and in the fields, which places a disproportionate burden on women, also prevents many women from participating in politics simply because there are not enough hours in the day. Nearly 90% of the population is rural-based and subsistence farming is the major occupation of the country's citizens. In Nepal, which is consistently counted as one of the ten poorest nations in the world, poverty more adversely affects women. Without some degree of economic power and independence, women can not afford to compete with men in politics. Women also disproportionately face other impediments, such as illiteracy. However as Veena Nayyar from Women's Political Watch in India has pointed out, numerous male leaders are "illiterate" in crucial skills, such as solving community problems or even governing fairly.

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The list of barriers to women's political participation is long, and each barrier must be hurdled by women who have political ambitions. The local elections of 1997 were a tremendous first step in this area for thousands of women who ran for office, whether they won or lost. Each woman who ran deserves to be congratulated for demonstrating courage, in the face of Nepal's conservative environment.

## **Additional Campaign Advice to Women Candidates and Their Volunteers**

NDI staff members travelled throughout the Tarai during the 1997 campaign period before the local elections to observe women's political participation and to informally follow the campaigns of women candidates who had participated in NDI's women candidate training program. This observation period proved to be a very valuable experience, and NDI would like to share some insights with those women who may be considering running for office in the future.

The following are some suggestions for women candidates, above and beyond the campaign tips provided in NDI's campaign manual and during NDI's training program:

- *Women candidates should be more deliberate in targeting of women voters.* Women voters are the natural constituencies of women candidates anywhere, but especially in Nepal where gender roles are well-defined and women identify so strongly with other women. While NDI observed women candidates reaching out to women voters, more of an effort could be made to address women's issues in their campaigns and, in particular, in door-to-door canvassing. This is especially true if you are running for something other than the reserved women's seat; if you are the only woman running for ward president against nine men, make sure the voters know it.
- *However, don't forget to talk to men!* You have every right and responsibility to approach and to talk to men

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voters during the campaign period. While this might be a bit awkward, it is absolutely essential to win their votes, especially when you are running for the ward member seat reserved for women. You need *everyone's* vote. NDI observed many women running for the reserved seat talking only to women voters.

- *If you want your party's ticket, it helps to be active in the party's women's organization.* Many potential candidates overlook the power that lies in the leadership of the women's organization when the time comes to distribute the party's nominations. If you have built solid relationships with your party's leadership, don't forget that often they look to the leadership of their women's organization to assist in the nomination of women candidates.
- *Independent/small party women candidates MUST display their election symbol prominently and frequently.* Without the recognition of a well-known national party symbol, independent candidates or candidates of smaller parties must make more of an effort to display their symbols in order to inform voters. Put your symbol on flags to give to your supporters, wear it as a sash, whatever you have to do to make sure that you, as a candidate, are associated with that symbol.
- *If there's any chance that you may run as an independent, plan in advance.* Many candidates run as independents, if they do not get their party's nomination. However, running as an independent is a special challenge. You do not have the easy recognition of the

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party's symbol, and you can not easily draw upon party members to be your volunteers. You will need more money to print up your own flags, bags, posters, etc. If there's any chance that you may not get the party's nomination and you are still determined to run, you should prepare in advance and anticipate these added challenges.

- *'Namaste' isn't enough: door-to-door canvassing should be a meaningful exchange between candidates/their volunteers and voters.* NDI observed many candidates going door-to-door, both men and women, simply telling voters that they were candidates and indicating which symbol to stamp on the ballot. Here's your chance to convince the voters that if elected, you are interested in representing their interests. Sit down. Take the time to get to know them and understand their concerns. If there are many voters in your ward, then you need more volunteers to cover the households and get your message across.
- *Campaign volunteers are a valuable resource and they need training to be effective.* NDI observed the role of volunteers in many situations during the campaign. They can be a great source of support to a women candidate, accompanying her as she canvasses her ward. But they should be doing something other than taking up space in the voter's yard! They should be talking to other voters in the household, passing out pamphlets, being active. Volunteers can linger behind once you, the candidate, have left to continue to gauge voter attitudes and share your story. They should show enthusiasm and build on

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their personal relationships with voters in order to persuade them.

- *Contrast your accomplishments with the weaknesses of your opponents.* Don't be embarrassed to highlight your achievements or point out the weaknesses of your opponents. Chances are, your opponents may be saying the same things about you, and you should think defensively.
- *Develop a strategy that reflects your ward's politics.* If your party is strong in your ward, go door-to-door with the whole slate of party candidates running for every position on the ballot to show your party's unity. However, if your party is not generally popular in your ward, disassociate yourself from the party and ask voters to vote across party lines to support you as an individual candidate.
- *Prepare your sample ballots before you go door-to-door.* Everyone teaches voters how to vote for their symbol when they go door-to-door. But not everyone takes the time to put their name on the ballots they leave behind. Invest in a simple stamp that has your name, the position for which you are running, your party/symbol, and any message you may have developed. Make sure to stamp your sample ballots before you distribute them to voters.
- *Make pamphlets or simple posters.* For ward level races, this has generally not been done in the past. However, if there are a lot of voters in your ward, and if you have volunteers helping you go door-to-door, invest in some

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simple pamphlets (approximately 300 rupees for 1,000) that have your picture, your bio-data, your party, the position for which you are running, and your message or some interesting quotes from you on different issues. Not many people do this so its a novelty and voters may actually read it after you've left!

- *There are inexpensive ways to raise your profile as a candidate.* Ask some women friends or volunteers to paint your party's symbol on their *nanglo* (basket used to clean rice) and hold a rally. Everyone has a *nanglo*, and they can be re-used after the campaigns. Women ride bicycles too, so stage a bicycle rally with women wearing your symbol on a sash or displaying it on a flag. Ask a friend to write an article about your candidacy and submit it to the local newspaper. During the campaign period, newspapers like to run stories that are current. If you make your story interesting the newspapers may print it.
- *Develop your own message in addition to the party message.* Too many candidates only go to events sponsored by the party and use the message that the party has developed for the campaign period. You can still be loyal to your party and benefit from your party's support, and yet establish yourself as a unique, forward-thinking and responsive politician. Although creating your own message is not the norm for men or women, doing so will help you to stand out from the crowd. Make it simple. Make it rhyme, maybe with your name.
- *Be on time.* NDI observed that 'Nepali time' is suspended during the period of the campaigns. Bicycle



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rallies scheduled to depart at 7:00 a.m. did so, whether all party members were present or not. Don't miss any opportunity to be visible and let people know you are a candidate!

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## Glossary of Nepali Terms

<i>aama</i>	mother.
<i>aama samuha</i>	mother's group; a network of women's organizations in Nepal with self help and social activism as a focus. In some locations, these organizations have conducted successful health programs and anti-alcohol campaigns.
<i>Andolan</i>	movement; the 1990 popular people's revolution that ushered in the era of Nepal's multiparty democracy.
<i>Bahun</i>	Brahmin; highest caste in the Hindu cultural hierarchy. In Nepal, this caste dominates the social structure, particularly in the education sector and the government.
<i>Bhagawati</i>	another name for the Hindu goddess, <i>Durga</i> .
<i>biddhyarathi</i>	student.
<i>Bishwa Karma</i>	Hindu god of machines and mechanics.
<i>chaudha</i>	fourteen.
<i>chhap</i>	election symbol or picture on the ballot. Since no actual names appear on the ballot, candidates must educate the voters about their particular symbol before the election. The four national parties have national symbols which

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are used in each election, whereas smaller parties and candidates who run as independents have assigned symbols.

- chhetra*** area; voting constituency in Nepal that elects one Member of Parliament.
- Chhetri*** originally the warrior caste, with the second highest position in the Hindu cultural hierarchy; ethnically related to Bahun with a similar high social status in Nepal.
- Durga*** Hindu goddess of protection and strength.
- ghar*** house; previously the national symbol of the Rastriya Janamurkti Party (RJP).
- gumba*** Buddhist temple.
- halo*** plow; national election symbol for the RPP.
- haat bazaar*** open market, usually large and held on a weekly basis.
- laaj*** concept of embarrassment and shyness; culturally this concept applies more to women in the Tarai region, where social codes dictate that women who display shame and embarrassment are virtuous and "pure."
- Laxmi*** Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune.
- lipnu*** ruddy mixture of manure and mud used as a sealant for the floors and walls of mud homes.

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- roti** flat, unleavened bread made from wheat flour and water; often preferred in the Tarai region over rice as the staple diet.
- sangathan** organization; the "sister organization" within the RPP is called the *Nepal Prajantantrik Mahila Sangathan*.
- sangh** organization; the "sister organization" within the CPN-UML is called the *Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh*; the "sister organization" within the NC is called the *Nepal Mahila Sangh*.
- sari** asymmetrical dress typically worn by married women in Nepal. Especially among *madheshi* women in the Tarai, this brightly colored dress covers women entirely from head to toe.
- sasu** mother-in-law.
- Shiva** Hindu god of destruction and creation.
- Sita** Hindu goddess of purity and truth.
- surya** sun; national election symbol for the CPN-UML.
- sworga** heaven.
- tika** blessing placed on the forehead between the eyes, sometimes made from rice and colored powder.

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***VDC***

Village Development Committee; the geographic area which is made up of nine wards in Nepal's local government structure.

***wala***

related to.

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- madhesh*** Nepal's Tarai region, characterized by flat farmland and jungle.
- madheshi*** people associated with ethnic groups based in Nepal's Tarai who originally immigrated from India, especially the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
- Marwadi*** wealthy business class people; in Nepal they have usually immigrated from India.
- mahila*** women; related to women.
- Mahila Bikas Shakha*** Women's Development Office; a district level government office that organizes a variety of social and economic programs to improve the status of women.
- mala*** flower garland worn around the neck and given as a token of respect; the photo of a person who has died may also be decorated with this.
- munch*** forum; the "sister organization" of the NSP is called the *Mahila Munch*, or Women's Forum.
- nagarpalika*** municipality; urban area.
- nirvana*** emancipation of the soul from the cycles of rebirth and death; the final destination of the soul.
- paan*** an after dinner sweet made from the leaf of the bettlenut tree.

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<b><i>panchayat</i></b>	the 30-year era of "partyless" democracy when political parties were banned.
<b><i>pahaad</i></b>	Nepal's middle Hill region.
<b><i>pahaadi</i></b>	people associated with ethnic groups based in Nepal's Hill and mountain regions.
<b><i>pakka</i></b>	real or substantial.
<b><i>parda</i></b>	covering; for many women in the Tarai region, there is a " <i>parda</i> system," which requires women to be covered (including the face) with a <i>sari</i> or other garment to demonstrate <i>laaj</i> , or shame.
<b><i>phalano</i></b>	wherever, whatever; unspecified or random.
<b><i>Ram</i></b>	Hindu god married to the goddess <i>Sita</i> , and hero of the <i>Ramayana</i> .
<b><i>Ramayana</i></b>	the epic story of Ram, considered one of the holy scriptures of the Hindu faith.
<b><i>Rana</i></b>	caste name of the former Royal family in Nepal that ruled for 104 years before the brief period of multiparty democracy in the 1950s.
<b><i>rickshaw</i></b>	three-wheeled cycle with passenger seat; during the elections, these vehicles are used to carry large amplifiers and microphones to spread the candidates' messages.

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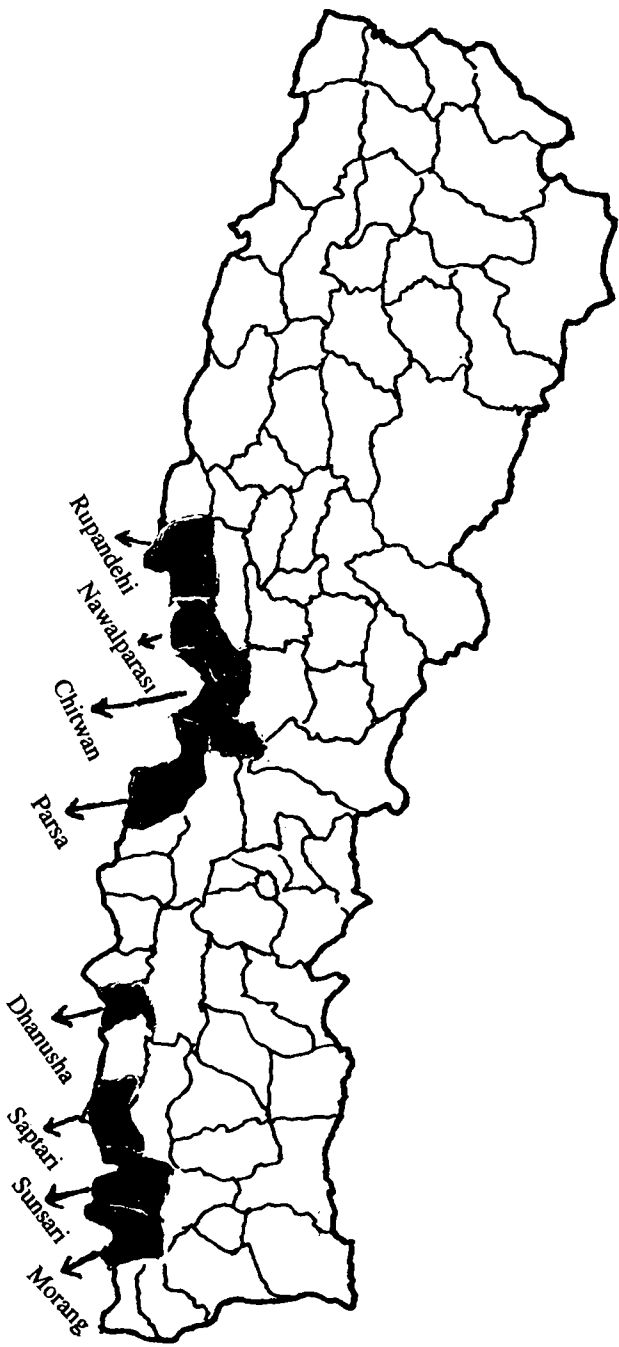


***Standing Proud***

***VDC*** Village Development Committee; the geographic area which is made up of nine wards in Nepal's local government structure.

***wala*** related to.

MAP OF NEPAL  
EIGHT NDI TARGET DISTRICTS



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