

# The Newtons of Gadchiroli: tribals rise to power in local body polls

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(L to R) Pramila Juru Kudiyami, Sainu Gota, Lalsu Soma

Bagoti, and Sukhram Mandavi are united in their struggle against big mining corporations. Photo Credit: K Murali Kumar

**It's not often that the tribals of Maharashtra's Maoist-affected district get to control the political narrative, so this has been an unusual victory**

Lalsu Soma Nagoti, Sainu Gota, Sukhram Mandavi and Pramila Juru Kudiyami — four ordinary *people* who share one common thread. In the strife-torn, neglected and poverty-ridden tribal district of Gadchiroli, they were all candidates in the civic body elections held earlier this year.

This year, when Bollywood gave us *Newton*, the dark comedy about India's democratic system, the tribals of Gadchiroli decided to give themselves a crack at democracy when several Gram Sabhas decided to contest the Zila Parishad elections by fielding their own candidates. They were doing this, they said, because they had traditionally been neglected by mainstream political parties. More important, they were doing this to fight what they call the destructive mining agenda of large corporations.

Standing for elections in Gadchiroli is no easy task. In the villages that dot the length and breadth of this insurgency-hit district, uncomfortably close to Chhattisgarh's Maoist-affected Bastar region, poll candidates, elected sarpanches, and all people with electoral aspirations face three risks: being classified as Maoist sympathisers, being hounded as police informants, or being gunned down. Stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place, the story of the 22 candidates fielded by the Gram Sabhas is one of grit and faith in the democratic system.

Significantly, six of them won, two winning Zila Parishad seats and four, Panchayat Samiti seats. Now, in the Panchayat Samiti of Gadchiroli's Bhamragad town, the Gram Sabhas have a three-fourth majority, an important victory for the *tribals*. We spoke to four of the winners.

Lalsu Nagoti

When Bhamragad resident Nagoti was asked to contest elections to the Gadchiroli Zila Parishad by the local Gram Sabhas, it was difficult for the 39-year-old to not think of his father-in-law, Malukupa Bhogami. The Congress leader and Panchayat Samiti chairperson was killed by Maoists during an election campaign in 2002. Nagoti, one of the few lawyers in the area, is not sure why or how Bhogami incurred the wrath of the insurgents. By all accounts, he was popular. "Maybe his efforts to bring government schemes to the people went against him."

Nagoti couldn't have forgotten either the fate of Bahadur Shah Alam, a Congress block president and Bhamragad Panchayat Samiti president, who was gunned down by Maoists in 2012 in the town square with three policemen looking on, barely 500 metres from the police camp.

To understand the trepidation Nagoti went through and the courage he showed in agreeing to contest elections, one needs to understand Bhamragad.

Abutting the dense Dandakaranya forest on the Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh border, the town is on the banks of three rivers, the Indravati, the Pearl Kota, and the Pamul Gautami. Faced with Maoist opposition to any form of government, only four of its 19 Gram Panchayats have elected bodies. The number of sarpanches and village police patils (appointed by the district administration to record crime in the village) who have fallen to Maoist bullets is hard to ignore.

On the other side are the police. For local body representatives such as Nagoti, the police are as big a headache, if somewhat less bloodthirsty. Nagoti's village, Juvi, is located deep inside the forest. "The police want to know why an educated person like me hasn't relocated to the city. They suspect me of being a Maoist supporter because the insurgents don't target me. My house has been searched many times. Once, I was detained in a police camp," he says.

When he campaigned, for instance, the police were suspicious that his cavalcade of 60-odd motorcycles could move through the area without threats from Maoists. Nagoti says the Maoists could not do much since the people were directly involved, and had to be satisfied issuing statements opposing the elections.

"If educated people like me turn a blind eye to the electoral process, candidates not bothered with tribal issues will get elected. What if someone with a feudal mindset wins? We contested as Gram Sabha representatives, and not for a political party because that could have set us ideological limits." The Congress did offer him a ticket, he says, which he turned down.

When he campaigned, Nagoti made few public speeches, choosing instead to accompany Gram Sabha members to villages in Maoist-dominated areas as they campaigned for him and powered him to a win by 500 votes.

Nagoti attended the well-known school run by Prakash Amte in Hemalkasa village, before moving to Pune for his graduation from Fergusson College and a law degree from ILS Law College. Educated tribals like him belong here, he says, and have a duty to work for their less fortunate brethren. "A right-wing activist, who runs a so-called anti-Maoist group in Nagpur, openly calls me a 'white-collar Maoist'," he says, with an amused look.

Also working in their favour is the battle these candidates are waging against indiscriminate mining. Being elected representatives, they can fight for tribal rights and continue the anti-mining struggle in Surajgad, 40 km from Bhamragad, in the neighbouring tehsil of Etapalli.

"We can't expect anything better from the rebels, I know, but the attitude of the police forces us to question whether they are here for the people or for big companies. In Surajgad, police stations have been established to protect mining projects," he says. "I recently issued a statement against the Chief Minister when he came here to inaugurate a mining company's operations. The government can't always be right; many of its schemes have affected our people adversely, like distribution of rice under the PDS, which has made dependants of many of us."

### **Sainu Gota**

Another man who has raised his voice against mining is Sainu Gota. The second representative fielded by the Gram Sabhas after Nagoti, Gota says his agenda will be 'Jal, Jangal, Zameen (water, forests, land)'.

"We tribals are dependent on nature and forest produce. If forests are destroyed, it means displacement and destruction of our culture. Our gods are displaced," says Gota.

When the former Congress district president, former Zila Parishad member, and four-time sarpanch of Gatta village, was selected as a candidate for the Zila Parishad elections, his wife Sheela and he were in Nagpur jail. In January this year, Gota had accused security forces of having sexually assaulted two tribal girls from Chhattisgarh in the forests on the Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh border.

When the police denied it, the Gota couple took the survivors to a lawyer in Nagpur. The police, says Gota, raided the lawyer's office and booked the couple for "forcibly taking the girl to Nagpur to testify against the police in a fake case". "It was my decision to contest," says Gota. "I wanted to see if the people were with me when I was arrested. I got my answer when I won by 700 votes. Sheela, too, was elected to the Panchayat Samiti. I was released on bail a day before campaigning ended."

Gota's problems are far from over. His son Shivaji was recently arrested for a murder allegedly committed by Maoists. "My son is still in jail, implicated in a false case," says Gota. "We cannot move around freely since the police suspect us of being Maoist sympathisers. But we are not scared because we have done nothing wrong; this has happened because of our opposition to the Surajgad mining project. (The government) did not take the consent of the Gram Sabhas, and the police are being used to provide protection for the project."

### **Sukhram Mandavi**

In Gadchiroli, a Maoist attack on security forces is usually followed by atrocities on villagers in the vicinity of the attack — when they are rounded up and interrogated and many arrested. This year, in the first week of May, Maoists targeted an anti-landmine vehicle, killing one policeman and injuring 19. Interestingly, the first arrest did not happen until a good one-and-a-half months after the attack.

This change in the attitude of the security forces, say locals, is solely due to the newly-elected local body representative, Sukhram Mandavi.

Mandavi, 39, a resident of Kiyar village in Bhamragad block, was a poultry farmer until January when he was selected as a candidate from the Maoist stronghold of Nelgonda. The father of two children who have completed high school, Mandavi began Gram Sabha work in 2015, helping out with meetings and translating documents to Madia language for the villagers.

Neither the Gram Sabhas nor Mandavi faced much trouble from the Maoists, but the police more than made up for it. "The police said our meetings had Maoist support and were reluctant to permit rallies and meetings," says Mandavi. "We cobbled together a 26-member team to campaign on 13 motorcycles." His campaign too was based on the Jal, Jangal, Zameen line and he promised to implement the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) and the Forests Rights Act (FRA).

"However," he says, "political parties projected PESA as pro-Maoist. They were supported by a section of the district administration and the police. But these parties have never even stepped into the interior villages."

Mandavi crowd-sourced his campaign funds. "Every house donated ₹20 and a cup of rice. We collected ₹40,000, and covered 90 of the 120 villages in Bhamragad block." Mandavi is now the chairman of the Bhamragad Panchayat Samiti.

Despite being elected as chairman of a powerful local body, he says the Gram Sabhas have to fight with the government for their rights. "The government has given us rights, but they are only on paper. We want actual rights, even to the minerals in our land. The government is granting mining leases to outsider companies. Why can't we have a say on the mineral ores in our area, if we can have rights over tendu and bamboo? The people here get nothing from the mining," he says.

Mandavi's life has changed now, especially with regard to the police, who treat him better, but he continues to face threats. During the campaign, some Maoist pamphlets were found threatening people against voting. "I didn't get scared, as all the Gram Sabhas were united. Everyone has to die one day. I will also die, but I want to do something for my people and my area before dying, and this election has given me an opportunity to do that," says Mandavi. Already, since the election, there have been no incidents of security forces manhandling villagers in his area.

After the May bomb blast, the bus service on the Hemalkasa-Kothi road was stopped. The police asked villagers to give in writing that there would be no damage to the bus if the service was restarted. Mandavi retorted by demanding to know what the police was doing when the Maoists planted explosives hardly a few kilometres from the police camp.

"The policemen were talking as if the Maoists inform us before triggering an explosion. We refused to give anything in writing and asked them to resume the bus service," he says. The service was started in a week.

### **Pramila Juru Kudiyami**

Of all the winning candidates in Gadchiroli, 23-year-old Pramila Juru Kudiyami had the highest victory margin.

Educated up to Class XII, Pramila is now the deputy chairman of Bhamragad Panchayat Samiti. "I never thought I would get elected. But the villagers insisted I contest," she says.

Pramila's campaign team was small, but she managed to reach out to every village in her constituency and won by 715 votes. Her father was once the sarpanch of Dhondraj village and is a well-known activist in the area. Pramila followed in her father's footsteps to become the sarpanch of Dhondraj.

In this area, most young boys or girls think of joining the police or the forest department, but Pramila wanted to enter politics from the start. She wanted the people in her area to become aware of PESA and FRA. She became a bridge between the tribals and the activists, translating the Acts and the documents in the local dialect, and explaining their importance.

When the Gram Sabhas decided to contest the elections, they wanted a local candidate and one with some experience. They picked Pramila because her administrative experience as a sarpanch is expected to come in handy.

Pramila's election has kindled hopes for women's empowerment in the area. As local activist Mahesh Raut says, "Hardly any woman from this marginalised community gets a chance to become a public representative." Being young and educated and without the baggage of any political affiliation, Pramila now figures in the larger plans of the Gram Sabhas, who are eyeing some major roles for her in the future.

### **Footnote**

In the film

Newton

, the eponymous protagonist, an election officer, insists on conducting fair elections in a remote tribal village despite the apathy of security forces and the fear of Maoist attacks. He succeeds, after a fashion.

In real life, the Humans of Gondwana have a Facebook page where they are celebrating their Gadchiroli victory, possibly the first sign of the changing times.

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