

# Thus spoke the press

Vol 5



Select Articles on  
Elected Women Leaders  
in Village Panchayats

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Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

Volume 5

THE  
HUNGER  
PROJECT

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*This book is dedicated*

*...to the spirit of struggle*

*...to the quest for justice*

*... to the new face of India*



## FOREWORD

As the nation debated the women's reservation bill in the Parliament this year, the revolution heralding women's participation in rural local self governance sparked off by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment gained further strength. The move by the centre to increase reservation for women in Panchayats from 33.3% to 50% is yet another pointer to the change being brought about by elected women representatives in Panchayats to their villages. Across states, and regions what is emerging is that women, as elected leaders are fast changing the face of development by addressing issues of health, water, sanitation, education, gender justice and social equity, and by doing so, bringing about development in the real sense.

Partnering the women leaders in this incredible journey – documenting their many achievements, voicing their challenges and raising their concerns to the common woman and man and policy makers alike has been the media. In an age where media has often come under scrutiny for lack of commitment to serious journalism, the stories of elected women leaders brought out by the media and the change they bring to the country has only been increasing with each passing year. By doing so, media helps counter much of the cynicism surrounding the issue of women's participation in politics.

The Hunger Project is thus honored to have the media as an ally in this journey of strengthening women's political participation. Shortlisted from among the 2,122 entries received for the Sarojini Naidu Prize awarded annually for best reporting on women and Panchayati Raj by The Hunger Project, Thus Spoke the Press is a compilation of 44 select articles. These articles showcase the body of work done by the women leaders. As we bring out the fifth edition, we would like to acknowledge and thank all those journalists who recognized and gave space to the work of elected women in their newspapers.

New Delhi  
October 2010

The Hunger Project

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## INTRODUCTION

“It’s my special appeal to the women that they should not let go of this opportunity granted by the government to go in for public life. They should become self-dependent and have their own identity, especially women who are from the marginalized communities and until now have been isolated from mainstream society,” says Seema Devi, President of the District Council of Saran, Bihar in an interview with Kashmira Singh. She too took advantage of the 33.3% - 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. She feels that this reservation is a revolutionary step and its effects will be felt in the years to come.

Fortunately for Seema, the changes are already visible. Ever since the one million women who are elected to Panchayats every five years have donned the mantle of leadership, radical changes have swept the Indian grassroots’ politics. Women representatives, tired of being at the receiving end of a corrupt government structure, patriarchal power structures and an equally patriarchal and subjugating society, are forging ahead and changing the face of rural India. Good governance and an alternative development model is their political agenda. In his article, Bimal Krushna Thamb says that Sarpanch Pratima Behera of Anugul District has taken many steps to connect women from BPL<sup>1</sup> families to mainstream society. When she took charge as Sarpanch, only 36 beneficiaries had been given

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<sup>1</sup> Below Poverty Line

pensions. Now the list has gone up to 221. Seventy people have been allotted Indira Awas houses. Ninety one people have benefited from the Antyodaya Yojana. Under the NREGA program, Pratima has been able to provide two square meals a day to many people.

In far away Bihar, elected women representatives have formed federations and are now drawing up monthly plans to work on issues of dowry, child marriage, domestic violence and sex selective abortion. Likewise, Sesamma<sup>2</sup> from Dakshin Kannada has been focusing on gender justice and campaigning against sex selective abortion and female infanticide. The statistics substantiate this. The gender ratio for children less than six years of age in her area is 1,000 boys versus 1,043 girls. There has been a distinct increase in the number of girls in Bannur Gram Panchayat.

India still struggles with deep inequality of caste, class, religion and gender. But reservation for women in grassroots has been able to do what no other policy or Constitutional Amendment has achieved till date. It has helped in breaking down barriers of caste, class and gender, allowing women to participate freely in politics as well as everyday life. It has provided an enormous opportunity for women from marginalized communities to bargain for their rights and those of their fellow women. Sanjo Kol's story is of a bonded labourer who, for almost three decades, lived in awful deprivation only to turn a crusader, giving voice to the tribal people of Gidurha village of Chitrakoot. Biswajit Banerjee says that she grabbed the first opportunity that came her way to pull them out of the mess. The opportunity was the 2005 Panchayat elections. In the following five years she

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<sup>2</sup> Sesamma – The Role Model, Pushparaj B.N., Vartha Bharathi, 11 July, 2010

worked tirelessly to get land pattas for 80 tribals, making them land owners. Sanjo changed the face of the village by building roads, 261 toilets and providing houses to 56 families.

Has increased participation of women transformed the rural political agenda? If one were to read these articles, the answer is certainly yes. And do female representatives promote women's agency? Shuomojit Banerjee's research reveals that despite class and caste tensions, Rehana Khatoun has put a halt to incidents of domestic violence in her block in Madhubani district. No longer is development solely based on economic progress; social and gender justice are being woven into the development agenda. Will the critics, who have continuously trashed the 73rd Amendment, be finally silenced? And will the states reluctant to increase the 33.3% reservation to 50% be finally convinced of the contributions of the elected women representatives.

In her article, Niti Dewan points out that today these elected women representatives need not just reservation but respect, cooperation, a status of equality and a safe atmosphere. For the million odd elected women representatives from across the country, the trajectory to becoming a political leader has been plagued with challenges. In fact their's is a harrowing tale of humiliation and disrespect at home and at the work place. In the 2010 Gram Panchayat elections, many were 'requested' to step down and 'give' others a chance. Strong female candidates despite a string of achievements behind them are seen as a threat – constituencies prefers soft, docile and ready to oblige representatives. Many though have won without spending a single paisa on 'gur' or alcohol; their election manifestos clearly emphasizing proper use and accountability of Panchayat funds.

But winning the elections is just the beginning. Then comes the battle with their loved ones – those who want to control and rule on their behalf. And if the women are successful in negotiating this space it is their character which is assaulted – they become the village shrew, the witch, the whore. Of those who have broken out of tradition and walked the path, several have paid with their lives.

But change is in the air. New age female representatives have won the 2010 Gram Panchayat elections in the three large states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka. There was a distinct urgency to participate in the elections. Tulsa Bai of Lakhakheda panchayat, 31 km away from the Katni district office, says, “Whether the Lakhakheda Panchayat seat would get reserved for women or not, I would definitely contest the election.” So what has changed suddenly? If we look at the women who have won the elections, we see that they are not only aware and informed, but they are far more politically savvy. They have a better understanding of the labyrinth that is politics; they talk with confidence and do not get intimidated by others. They are honest. The average female representative is younger and more literate than her predecessors. Non-literate marginalized women from remote Panchayats like Sanjo Kol too are making their voices heard and presence felt. One is hopeful that they have made this choice of career consciously and have not been pushed into it.

Women like Pratima, Rehana and Sanjo are all aware that once elected, all eyes will be on them for the next 5 years. Everyone has inordinately high expectations of them. Chavvi Rajavat from Soda, Rajasthan says that all questions in her constituency will centre around water and wonders if she

will be able to get it. Female representatives have to walk that extra mile to prove their worth. They need to bring tangible development to their villages by building roads, getting piped water and making government schemes work. However, women like Rehana insist that their work should not be confused with “social activism” or “social reform”. “It should be viewed as a larger struggle to gain political power and emancipation from the constricting patriarchy in our region,” she remarks.

But will this larger struggle for emancipation be successful if the work of an elected representative goes financially unrewarded? Most affected are the women representatives who have no control over the family purse strings. Dipa Cheleng of Gohain Pukhuri Gaon Panchayat, Assam walks three miles to her office. She is proud of her new role as a political representative. However she says, “It is only when I have to ask my husband for money for the bus fares to go to the Block Development Office, that I feel unhappy”. The agenda for the next battle is clear. If they are to be the torch bearers of progress and transformation, elected representatives – be it men or women – need to be paid a salary for their hard work. As Rehana says, it is not social work.

The forty four articles which follow in this fifth volume of Thus Spoke the Press published by The Hunger Project paint a picture of hope and possibilities, evoking admiration and a sense of connection with rural India. While the politicians debate ad nauseam the advantages and disadvantages of women’s reservation in the Parliament, the elected women representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions quietly go about changing the face of rural India, revolutionizing politics and transforming society.



# CONQUERING THE RURAL FRONTIER

Shruba Mukherjee

Deccan Herald, 29 April, 2010

**M**eet Sudha Patel, the first blind woman sarpanch in the country, who successfully changed the face of Changal Village in Anand district of Gujarat with well-laid out roads, streetlights, schools and a primary health centre.

The Thakurs in her village reportedly threatened her and her family and demanded that her election as sarpanch be countermanded. When that failed, some of her detractors blew up the fuse of motor pump, disturbing water supply in the entire village. Sudha was mobbed and asked to resign. “I asked the villagers for how long they had been facing a water crisis, and they replied, ‘Sixteen years’. Then, I told them: ‘You gave 16 years to three male sarpanchs who did not solve your problem and you are not giving me 16 days to work out a solution’ The mob quietly melted away,” Sudha recounts.

Rajamani Vijay Kumar, member of Mundagudure Panchayat in Mandya district, is no stranger to threats. “Since I am vocal against bribing local officials for disability certificates, even to genuine candidates, people with vested interests are always threatening me,” she says. The threats haven’t stopped her

from ensuring that senior citizens and the disabled get the benefits that are rightfully theirs.

Her colleague Kenchamma, president of the Nerelekere Gram Panchayat in Chikmaglur district in Karnataka, has ensured that every child in her jurisdiction goes to school. When she took over as panchayat chief, this dalit woman was illiterate. She learnt to read and write Kannada from her daughter. Thanks to her untiring efforts, seven children have been freed from bonded labour and brought back to the classroom. What makes the women leaders popular is their passion for work and their commitment to the people they represent. Some of them cycle 24 kilometers to the district headquarters to follow up on applications.

“We don’t consider ourselves special”, says Meenakshi Natrajan, Congress MP from Madhya Pradesh who defeated a BJP veteran in Mandsaur constituency.

How did she manage the feat? “My opponent tried hard to divide the electorate on caste and communal lines, but I talked about development—roads, drinking water and schools. The villagers knew that I was aware of their daily problems”.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## **GOOGLE AWARD FOR SANUR GP**

Ramakrishna Sidrapal

Deccan Herald, 13 April, 2010

**D**evelopment: This gram panchayat in Udupi district has served as an excellent role model for other local bodies to follow.

The Sanur gram panchayat has made news for being crowned the model gram panchayat, located in Karkala taluk of Udupi district, and has won Rs. five lakh. The gram panchayat serves as an excellent role model for other local bodies to emulate.

The public perception has often been that there is a lot of mud-slinging among members of gram panchayats, and that it involves a lot of politics. And in most cases, there is some truth to this thought. Most gram panchayats don't concentrate on development. And then, there are gram panchayats which have not been able to focus on progress. But Sanur gram panchayat stands out. It has turned out to be a model panchayat, especially on the health, cleanliness, drinking water and basic amenities front.

The panchayat has 16 members and all of them are in uniforms. Computers have been put to good use in the panchayat's offices. There are 15 committees including the Swaccha Grama Samiti,

Western Ghats and Forest Committee that look into various aspects of development of all their projects. Thanks to support of the community, resources are put together at the local level for the successful implementation of their various plans.

Sanur has a population of 6,382. The panchayat earns revenue of Rs. four lakh annually by way of building tax. From the last five years, every house in the village has water supply by way of taps. The panchayat earns revenue of nearly Rs. six to seven lakh by way of water supply.

A huge tank within this gram panchayat's borders was rejuvenated way back in 2005 by the then panchayat president Narsimha Nayak. The village gets its water from this tank. The tank is well-maintained, and cleaned once in six months. The water is tested for purity at least once in three months. On other fronts too, Sanur is a great role model. All the cattle and stray dogs in the village are vaccinated to check spread of disease.

Why did the gram panchayat win the attention of Google?

According to Narsimha Kamat, the president of the gram panchayat, it was because the local body exceeded the government's brief, and all members, cutting across party lines, participate in development projects.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## SHE WANTS TO LIBERATE BEDNIS FROM FLESH TRADE

Ranjan Kumar Shrivastava  
Hindustan Times, 15 July, 2010

*Bedia Community: Woman makes it to Sarpanch office defying all odds; says govt should promote Rai dance*

**B**HOPAL: If you have the will, you can achieve what seems impossible. And for an example one can look at Krishna Bai (50). What she has achieved is no mean feat. A member of the *Bedia* community famous for its Rai dance and bednis who are into flesh trade, Krishna Bai has made it to the office of sarpanch of Uncher panchayat in Sanchi block of Raisen. Five villages come under the panchayat.

Not only that, she was elected from an unreserved seat. She defeated five male candidates who were from upper castes or backward class. Krishna Bai, who belongs to the scheduled caste, was the only woman candidate in the fray in the polls held in January this year.

Krishna Bai tried her luck during previous panchayat elections as well but lost it with a narrow margin.

But this time she revised her strategy to win over the members of *Bedia* community of her village Sukha Karar. She told them

that prostitution brought a bad name to the community. And their folk dance, Rai which was once a respected dance form, was also viewed in a bad light. The government should preserve and promote the dance form, she says.

She promised the villagers that once she was elected to the post, she would work for the preservation and promotion of their dance and the strategy worked.

Besides, she won the sympathy of her community when the upper caste candidates started a campaign against her and ridiculed her during her interaction with the voters. They asked the voters whether they would like to approach a woman and that too a bedni to get their problems solved.

Krishna Bai's camp countered their campaign and her followers described the opponents' offensive remarks as an insult to the womenfolk.

Krishna Bai said several males from the opponents' side also extended their overt support to her. She could not believe when she was elected.

She says she has got several development works done as sarpanch- a drinking water scheme, two concrete roads and an anganwadi centre. But the mission of her life was to help bednis abandon prostitution. The task was not easy given the protest from within the community but she would be able to help them out with the society's support just as she was supported by many to leave the profession and live a dignified life 25 years ago.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## ELECTED WOMEN LEAD THE FIGHT AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Shoumojit Banerjee  
The Hindu, 14 July, 2010

*Lack of sensitization among block and Panchayat level officials hampers process - It should be viewed as a larger struggle to Political power and emancipation*

**P**atna: For a State with the highest incidence of domestic violence in the country (59 per cent, according to the third round of the National Family Health Survey), the Nitish Kumar – led NDA government’s move to initiate 50 per cent reservation for the women at Panchayat levels in Bihar in 2005 was a welcome step.

While the State government has been in a self-congratulatory mode since then, lack of sensitisation among block and panchayat –level officials has hampered the process of rural women’s empowerment in Bihar.

More often than not, these elected women representatives (EWRs) are converted into party mascots to serve the purposes of political propaganda or are used as weapons by their husbands in order to further their political ambitions.

Despite such odds, poignant stories resonate across the Bihar’s

rural heartland as these women – a majority of them barely literate – challenge Bihar’s formidable patriarchal status quo.

Overcoming class and caste antagonisms, Rehanna Khatoun has put a halt to incidents pertaining to spousal violence in her block in Madhubani district. Women like Rehana insist that their work should not be confused with merely “social activism” or “social reform”.

“It should be viewed as a larger struggle to gain political power and emancipation from the constricting patriarchy in our region,” she remarks.

“Most of us are acutely aware that it is tough tackling the deep-rooted corruption and violence in a male-dominated hierarchy. So, we are making political inroads in our panchayats by actively taking up social issues like domestic violence,” observes Punita Devi perceptively.

Punita, a EWR from Madhubani (a district notorious for its domestic violence), endures verbal abuse from her own husband even as she actively organizes women to combat spousal violence in Jagatpur, her panchayat.

A common problem facing these women is that they find their efforts wantonly thwarted by conniving relatives and block authorities, in a bid to exclude them from decision making processes within the panchayats.

To combat this, Shanti Devi, the *mukhiya* of Inderpuri panchayat in Rohtas district decide to visit every single house in her panchayat on foot with two of her subordinate lady EWRs to listen and counsel victims of domestic violence.

“The male members here are reluctant to let go of power. So, when they are away attending their meetings, we go round travelling to each village, listening to women problems,” she states.

Such independent initiatives also help achieve for them the significant political function of constituency building, which will aid them in the upcoming panchayati elections.

“Villagers now come to me and speak more openly of their problems. My self-confidence has increased by leaps and bounds,” says 35-years-old Amita Devi, a school-teacher and the *mukhiya* of Muzzafarpur’s Dadar-Kolluha Panchayat.

While attempting to quell the violent dispositions of their spouses, Shanti Devi, with her subordinate Prabha Devi, actively focused on picketing before liquor shops.

Apart from verbal abuse, the EWRs are firmly voicing their protest against morally incorrect social practices like child marriage and sex selection.

Gaytri Devi, the *mukhiya* of Dhema panchayat in Muzzafarpur, had to fight against her own son to stop him from taking her daughter-in-law for a sex selection test.

“My son wants a baby boy as he already is the father of two daughters. But my daughter –in-law does not want a child. I have firmly told my son if he continues to harass her, I will take up the matter with the police,’ reveals Gayatri.

“It will not be easy to shake off the dominant patriarchal mentality overnight. This (women’s empowerment within the

Panchayati Raj) is a new movement in Bihar which is bound to take time,” feels Dr. Deepak Prasad, Secretary, Panchayat Raj Department, while admitting the need to speed up efforts.

But, he is upbeat about the future.

“These women, being first timers, are bound to grapple with a myriad of problems. Yet, it is heartening to see the confidence some of them inspire.”



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## CAN THIS WOMAN BRING WATER TO THE VILLAGE?

Priyamvada Kowshik

Marie Claire Magazine, April, 2010

*Chhavi Rajawat who once pursued a corporate dream is now the sarpanch of her ancestral village. Here, she talks about the collective effort to transform this parched corner of Rajasthan.*

As our jeep veers towards the harvested mustard fields, Ranglal's eyes crinkle and a toothy smile spreads across his face as he sports the newly elected Sarpanch of his village. "Baisa" he exclaims, rushing towards the pretty 30 year old who once rode on his shoulders as a little girl.

As Chhavi Rajawat steps out of the vehicle, the old man's hands involuntarily reach for her feet. It is a gesture stepped in the feudal ways of society Ranglal has lived in. Still, perhaps Baisa does signal hope.

In the two-odd months since Chhavi respectfully addressed as *Baisa* or daughter, became the *sarpanch* the villagers have watched numerous television crews, filmmakers and news reporters troop into Soda. Not that they watched the programmes, as electricity supply is irregular and television rare. But the villagers definitely seem to realize that a woman

at the helm of affairs signals a change. They are only hoping this change will bring water to their parched land.

So what brought Chhavi, an alumnus of the prestigious Rishi Valley School, who studied English Literature at Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi and pursued an MBA, back to her ancestral village in rural Rajasthan?

It all began in January this year when some villagers landed at her home in Jaipur, where she runs a horse-riding school and helps her mother manage a family-owned hotel. “They were fed up with the earlier sarpanch and requested me to contest. They told me that if I refused, two hundred villagers would land outside my house the next morning,” she says, posing patiently with all the women who want a picture with her. Her jeans and *kurti* strike an arresting contrast to their brightly-coloured *odhnis* pulled firmly over their faces. “Nobody questions my clothes because I am the daughter of the village. Had I been the daughter-in-law, they would have expected me to dress differently,” she explains.

Chhavi belongs to a Rajput family which owns several hundred acres of land in Soda and its adjoining villages. Her grandfather was the village sarpanch 20 years ago, and according to her, it’s the memory of the development he brought that led the villagers to her. A text book case for those opposing the Women’s Reservation Bill, the former *sarpanch* had promptly nominated his wife for the post when the seat was reserved for women. “But I had the support of the entire village, who didn’t pay attention to the opposition’s attempts to divide them along caste lines,” she says of her landslide victory. Chhavi got 1,300 votes, and won by the highest margin in the panchayat elections in Rajasthan.

But winning is only the beginning. She knows that over the next five years, all eyes will be on her. There will be questions asked, and most of them will centre around water. No surprise then that bringing drinking water to the village is her foremost concern.

Soda lies in Tonk district, one of the most backward regions of Rajasthan. The village economy rests on the cultivation of mustard, wheat and cumin and the depleting rain fall has meant thinning harvests. No rain has fallen at all in the last two years and almost all the lakes and ponds in the area are dry. The water table has receded further and wells are on the verge of drying up. The questions have already begun surfacing. “Baisa, when will we get water?” asks Jamna Sheni, part of a team digging a canal to collect and divert rain water in Ramjipura hamlet. Resting her shovel, Jamna says, “Have you seen the huge pipeline on the outskirts of the village? It takes the water that should have come to us to Jaipur. We don’t get a drop!” Jamna is referring to the water from the Bisalpur dam in Tonk, which is being supplied to Jaipur, bypassing most of the water-starved hinterland. As she listens, the young *sarpanch* knows that if she brings water to the village, the war is won.

But right now Chhavi is focusing on fighting smaller battles, one of them being tackling corruption at NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) sites. Work undertaken under the NREGA is meant to provide employment to poor villagers who are rendered jobless after the farming season is over. “I realized that the people were only being paid Rs. 20 to Rs 50 instead of the Rs 100 they are entitled to for a day’s labour. The funds were being siphoned off by various levels of officials. The fight, according to her, is not only against a corrupt system, but also the “shortcut mentality” among

villagers. “I noticed many of them would be absent from work sites. They’d ask to be marked present on the roster and keep Rs 25 while the officials would pocket the rest. Now I tell them that if we have to store the water, we need to repair and rebuild our existing infrastructure. In the past, communities worked together to protect their natural resources.” Then, turning to the people, Chhavi asks, “Tell me, would you sit idle and waste your time if you were working in your fields?” The question sends everyone scurrying for their gothis and phavdas (pick-axes and shovels).

Bright, billowy *odhnis* dot the landscape and we realize that most of the people working on site are women. They love the media attention Chhavi has brought and leave no opportunity to be heard. “We elected *Baisa* so she would bring us water,” says Jannat, a feisty middle-aged woman. “My daughter-in-law here has completed her matriculation, but today she’s digging ditches. If we have water, we can hope for a life beyond this,” interjects Shanti, pulling her veil over her head as the sun glares down mercilessly. Light-eyed Dwarka, who’s wrapped up in a shocking yellow *odhni*, opens her palms to reveal blisters. “Look around and you’ll see only women working, at the site, at home, fetching water twice a day and cooking meals. The men have either migrated to cities, or they are wasting away here,” she says, her gaze following Chhavi’s path.

Back in the jeep, the young sarpanch consults her father who is doing the rounds with her. They talk about plans to de-silt lakes, regenerate a 500-acre forest stripped of green, install a drip irrigation system and harvest every drop of water that will hopefully fall from the skies in a few months. “But first, I want to concentrate on encouraging the people to work,” Chhavi says, explaining how, in the past, communities volunteered

## Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

to work on preserving resources that belonged to the village. “Now there is a blind dependence on the government to provide solutions,” she says perhaps alluding to a somewhat similar expectation of her. It’s an uphill task, and her climb has just begun.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## THE ILLITERATE TEACHER OF LIFE

Biswajeet Banerjee

Sunday Pioneer, 30 May, 2010

**S**he had a dream – of seeing all the village children going to school and pre-empting a life of ignorance and illiteracy like hers. A mother of five and a widow, 56-year-old Draupadi Devi got a rare opportunity to realize her dream when villagers made her the Gram Pradhan. Now Raamshala, a sleepy village in UP, has two schools, all pucca houses, concrete roads, a modern sewer system and proper lavatories---a result of the grit and determination of this one woman. Biswajeet Banerjee meets up with this lady who is out to make a difference in the most difficult situations.

An illiterate widow had a dream that all children of her village Raamshala should go to school. The problem was that the village had only one school that too up to primary level and its compound was encroached by a powerful villager. He used to grow wheat and bamboo in a field which should have been the school play-ground.

For the widow in her 50s this was unacceptable. She wanted the village children to have a wholesome school life, studying, playing and learning life. An opportunity came her way in 2005 when the Gram Sabha of Raamshala in Chandauli district

of UP was reserved for backward caste women. She contested the election and won by a huge margin. As the village pradhan, the illiterate Draupadi Devi got an opportunity to fulfill her dream. She knew what she had to do first. She went to the encroacher Chhotu Yadav, a moneyed and influential villager, asking him to vacate the school land.

“The primary school was surrounded by illegally-grown wheat and bamboos. There was just a small passage which children could use for commuting. Wheat was grown in the playground area. I went to Yadav almost every day for a month and begged him with folded hands to vacate the land. I went to the police and the *lekhpal* too, urging them to enumerate the exact area of the school so that the panchayat could construct a boundary wall.”

“Initially, the *lekhpal* asked me for *kharcha-panni* (bribe). We did not have money. I motivated a few village women and held demonstration outside his office. This struggle continued for six months and ultimately in 2006, he measured the school area,” she said.

“Once we knew the exact area, the villagers marched to the school campus. It was the summer of 2006 and wheat was ready to be cut. Villagers stopped outside the campus as Yadav’s terror ran deep. Realising the predicament of villagers, I went ahead and started pulling out the crop with my bare hands.”

“Suddenly, hoards of villagers ran towards the school and joined us in our effort. Together, we pulled out the entire crop and emptied the field within no time,” Draupadi recalled, as villagers nodded their heads in approval.

Being illiterate, she said she knew the importance of education. "I hope the light of knowledge will dispel the darkness of ignorance from the impressionable minds of our children," 56 years-old Draupadi said. A mother of five, she has ensured that all her children are literate. The youngest one is in class VII in the village school.

Thus, a beginning was made in 2005. In next five years, this neglected village turned into one with a primary school and a junior school as well. The school building now has seven rooms. All the children of the village study there. The number of students has swelled from 75 to over 300. Four *Shiksha Mitras* (ad hoc teachers) have been appointed at the school to impart quality education to children. The Anganwadi Centre came up and 'Asha Bahu' started making regular visits to the village. Lactating and pregnant women started getting nutritious food as well as regular doses of folic acid tablets. She ensured BPL cards for the poor and ration cards for all.

Gram Sabha Ramshala, around 350km south-east of Lucknow, comprises three villages-Basadih, Khojapur and Raamshala. This impoverished region in Chandauli district, having a population of over 5,000, is Naxal-infested sharing borders with Bihar. The region is just an extension of dry and barren Naugarh area where starvation deaths are common.

Gram Sabha does not have hospitals, no transport depot and not even a secondary school. Five years ago, the only Government building was a primary school. As rains are irregular and irrigation facilities rare, the people of this area work in illegal stone crushing mines for subsistence. Here, stones of Bilawar Hills are cut manually.

The work is tedious but villagers earn up to Rs. 2,000 per month in these mines for putting in almost 10 hours of labour, 30 days a month. A majority of the men folks have lung infection due to the stone dust that they inhale during work.

Draupadi's husband died almost a decade ago of lung disease. He also worked in these illegal mines. His death came as a shocker for Draupadi who had five children-three daughters and two sons to tend to. She was then a labourer in the fields of upper caste people and in lieu of a day's work got some food grains and a meagre amount of money.

Can a widow turn the tide in her favour? Draupadi has shown that grit was essential to pave way through difficult terrain. "She was working in the fields when some villagers dragged her from there and force her to file nomination. She was picked up because she was vocal and knew what was good for villagers," Kamla Rani, a villager said.

Before Draupadi became the Gram Pradan, the Gram Sabha was headed by monied and powerful people for almost 30 years. "The roads were full of potholes, during rains the situation turned worse. The village used to become cesspool of water and disease. Movement was difficult. Even the teacher had to park his bicycle almost 200 meters from the school and walk in knee-deep water," another villager Ram Dular said. It was then that an idea struck Draupadi - why not have Concrete Cement (CC) roads? "The Pradhan has good ties in the neighbouring village in Bihar and she has seen how CC roads have transformed the lives of villagers there. So, the panchayat decided to have CC roads here too," said Ashok Srivastava, a member of the panchayat.

But the panchayat did not have enough funds to construct these roads. Even the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme did not allow construction of CC roads there. Again, Draupadi started making rounds of Government offices. The District Panchayat Raj Officer (DPRO) was asked to build CC roads under Ambedkar Samgrah Vikas Yojana. Draupadi continued visiting the DPRO's office till he agreed to sanction funds for CC roads.

"Persuasion powers of Draupadi are amazing. She pesters officers and sometimes even shouts at them seeking funds needed for the development of her village. She is exceptional," M.K. Sukla a block level officer said.

The village which did not have brick laid roads, a few years back, now has an almost 4 km-long CC road which meanders through village lanes. The sewers system is complete and covered. During the last five years, 175 houses were constructed under the Indira Awas Yojana. Earlier, villagers used to defecate in the open. Now the village boasts of 163 lavatories (145 for BPL and rest for APL), constructed in the last four years.

"The village does not have a single *Kuchcha* house now. All the poor have been allotted under the Indira Awas Yojana," Ashok said.

Ironically, the only *Kuchcha* house in the village is that of Draupadi. "I do not need a *pucca* house. I fear what people will say if I start living in a *pucca* house and install hand pump outside my home," she said, adjusting her *pallu* over her head. Despite being a Pradan, she does her daily chores of washing utensils and cooking food for her children. She even makes cow dung cakes for fuel. "I finish my morning chores by 9 am

so that I can spare time for the people. I visit the block office and even go to the tehsil on every Tehsil Diwas. This keeps me in touch with officers and helps me convey village problems to them,” Draupadi said.

Draupadi has some unfinished job at hand. She wants a Primary Health Centre and irrigation facility in the village. “I have seen people dying without getting any medical help. The nearest Government dispensary is 14 km from Raamshala Gram Sabha. If we can get some irrigation facilities we would be able to grow enough food grains and this would keep our men folk away from the deathly stone mines,” she said.

As it goes, success is always followed by enmity. Draupadi is no exception. One Jibrayel, who had unsuccessfully contested the panchayat election last time, had lodged a money laundering case against her. The Pradhan was given a clean chit after a police investigation.

The village level Government officials are impressed with Draupadi’s yeoman service. An officer recounts how she has changed the face of the village in last five years.

“The village roads are permanent, school are working efficiently and children are getting their daily mid-day meal. The children are getting their regular vaccination doses as well. People do not die of malaria or other common diseases now. Draupadi ensures that all villagers get Government facilities at their door steps,” Block development Officers SC Tripathi said.

“She is very efficient. It is her selfless service which has made her a darling of the villagers. She lives in a dilapidated house

so that others get *pucca* ones. It is an open secret that Pradan pati or the male members of the family run the panchayat by proxy. But here the situation is different. She does not have any adult male in the family who can support her,” he said, adding: “I wish all the Gram Sabha have Pradhans like Draupadi.”

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## FROM BONDAGE TO GOVERNANCE

Biswajeet Banerjee

The Pioneer, 5 June, 2010

This is the story of a bonded labourer who, for almost three decades, lived in awful deprivation only to turn a crusader, giving voice to the tribal people of Gidurha village of Chitrakoot district in Uttar Pradesh.

Chitrakoot, nestled in the rugged Bundelkhand region, is the home to Kol tribals, who, for decades, worked as bonded labourers in the fields of upper caste landlords. Sanjo too was born into one of these tribal families and grew up only to join her father who worked in the fields of a landlord. “My father used to work as a bonded labourer in the fields of a Brahmin landlord of the area. My grandfather had taken some loan from him and we had to repay it,” she recalls.

Sanjo knew the pain and sufferings of the people of this region so she grabbed the first opportunity that came her way to pull them out of the mess. In 2005, the villagers persuaded Sanjo to contest the Panchayat election and ensured her victory by a very huge margin. The next five years saw her working tirelessly to get *pattas* (land lease) for 80 tribals, making them land owners. The *pattas* for 3-5 bigha land gave a sense of pride to these landless tribals who had till then worked in fields as

bonded labourers or in the stone quarries of Shankargarh in Allahabad district.

Some of them grew sarson (mustard) but the crop withered this year in the absence of good rain. But this has not deterred them. “We will try again. Perhaps the next year will be better (for rains) and will have a bumper crop,” says Bisheshar Kol. He used to work in the stones quarry of Shankargarh before getting patta of a 4 bigha land last year. This year he had invested over Rs. 2,000 that he earned in Shankargarh on fertilizers and seeds. “For us this loss is big. But it is a matter of pride for us as we are now land owners in real sense,” he says smiling ear to ear.

The same has been the fate of Lalmani, father of seven, but he too has not lost hope. “I grew enough mustard for my own use. I am satisfied. At least I got something from my land,” he says.

It did not take long for Sanjo to realize that land without irrigation facility was meaningless as it was unfit for agriculture sans water. And water is scare in the entire Bundelkhand region that receives little rain. Here drinking water is as precious as gold and women often travel 2-3 km for it. The importance of water for Chitrakoot’s women can be best summarized by a couplet that says: “For women a pitcher is more important than her husband; she prays that the pitcher should not break even if her husband dies”.

To overcome this shortcoming, Sanjo held a meeting with villagers and mooted the idea of constructing check dams under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS). The villagers agreed. Four check dams

were proposed. One of these was constructed in Gigunwan village. Its site was selected after consultation with the village's elders who had a fair idea of water's natural flow. This check dam was completed last year. The water it retained helped in irrigating 50 bighas of arid land, which produced 150 quintal food grain, including wheat and mustard. This year the check dam is being strengthened and its catchment area is being increased. "Not a single drop of rain water will go waste. We will conserve it. We irrigated 50 bighas of land from this check dam last year and this time we intend to increase the capacity four times. This will bring more prosperity to our farmers," says Sanjo with confidence.

Besides check dams, four wells are being dug under the MNREGS in different villages that come under Gidurah gram Panchayat.

Indeed, Sanjo's life is a tale of grit and determination. After spending her adolescence as bonded labourer, she worked for some time in a nursery of the Forest Department and then for almost a year in the stone quarries of Gwalior. She also sold vegetables and other eatables, carrying them on her head and travelling almost 15 km a day from one village to another. She even tried to establish herself as a grocer but the experiment did not click. In 1990s, she came in touch with a women's social organization and was exposed to three R's. Six months later she passed a certificate course and then cleared the class VIII examination of Uttar Pradesh Board. Sanjo's married life was stormy and short. After she gave birth to a girl child at her mother's house, her husband deserted her – he did not come to see her for almost one year. It was a traumatic experience. When he came to take her home, Sanjo revolted and refused to go with him. "I lost faith in the man who ditched me when I

was in pain. I told him point blank to go away from my life and since then I have not seen him,” she says.

Dressed in pajama and kurta with a boyish haircut, Sanjo looks more like a man than a woman. And her doggedness has earned her the sobriquet *jhakhad* or wild thorny bush. Even the village level officers call her *sankhi* (eccentric) soldier because of her steadfastness. But it is this tenacity that helped her defeat the feudal conspiracy when her name was deleted from the electoral rolls. She refused to be cowed into submission and knocked the doors of various officials for justice. She refused to give in even when an official in the District Election Office threw her representation on the ground, shouting expletives. She moved the Election Commission and the Women’s Commission and got her name back on the rolls just a day before the date of filing nominations.

This was the beginning of Sanjo’s new struggle. When it became clear that she would contest the gram Panchayat election, threats came from unexpected quarter- the Dadua dacoit. The area around Manikpur and Chitrakoot was infested with dacoits and the most dreaded among them was Dadua, whose gang was armed with modern weapons. Dadua was later gunned down in police encounter in 2007.

The villagers recount how threatening messages has started coming from dacoits that Sanjo should not contest election and instead support a particular candidate considered to be Dadua’s man. “But we all decided that Sanjo would not withdraw her papers. At one time we even decided to meet Dadua to tell him how Sanjo could change the face of the village,” recalls a villager, Awadh Naresh. And she did change the face of the village on being elected. She built roads, 261 toilets and

provided houses to 56 families – 22 under Indira Awas and the rest under Mahamaya Awas schemes. She also played a pivotal role in getting pensions for 160 elderly persons. Almost every household has got work under MNREGS. “There is so much work under MNREGS that sometimes we do not get labourers. Roads are being laid, wells are being dug and work is underway on check dams. Everyone is getting work,” says gram panchayat member Kunto Kol.

All of this has been done despite Sanjo spending night in Manikpur, 23 km away from Gidurah village, because of security reasons in the dacoit-infested area. The villagers are used to seeing their pradhan riding motorcycle with a male companion on the pillion.

Her selfless devotion to the cause of her village has earned kudos for Sanjo – she has given houses to others but does not have one for herself. An accomplished folk singer, she has also won the Outstanding Women Panchayat Leader’s Award of 2010.

“She is better than others. At least she thinks about the welfare of the villagers and does whatever is possible by her meagre means,” says Sitaram, a villager.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## CHAIR OR NOT, THEY STRENGTHEN THEIR GPs

Preethi Nagaraj  
Deccan Herald, 9 July, 2010

**M**ysore: It is quite a common scene for top politicians to say “I will continue to do good work whether I occupy the chair or not” during elections and more so, when they have lost the hope of winning.

But, here are some women in Mysore district, who after having occupied most powerful seats – in Grama Panchayat – of the biggest democracy in the world, are now sharing knowledge with current members to make their GPs better. Each one of them is a powerhouse of information and comes with the wherewithals learnt mostly through self-help mode, and is selfless when it comes to empowering other GP members, especially first timers.

Meet Shivamma, Chinnamma and Vijaya – three women who have and have been strengthening the Panchayat Raj system, with their grit, determination and with a sense of professionalism.

S Vijaya, hailing from scheduled caste and a mother of three, has had a strong base of ‘social justice’ in her work as Vice President and President (respectively) of Hodaghatta GP

(Mandya district, during her term which lasted between 2005 – 10, serving a population of nearly 1500.

She had to learn her work hard and fast, since her secretaries kept changing every few months, owing to different circumstances. “With the knowledge I carried from various training sessions, I got a good start. And from then on, the path was difficult, but not impossible,” she says. She was among the six women in the GP, which had a membership of 14 persons. Men on her team were anything but forthcoming when she took decisions and sought their consensus. “I learnt it pays to be strong and loud. Though deep within I am a soft spoken person, for the welfare of my village, I had to increase the pitch of my voice,” she says with a smile on her face. Her reading of the situation and self-found remedy, paid off. She was able to execute works not only limited to her GP allocation, but also draw funds from various resources such as MNREGS, MLA and MP funds up to Rs 80 lakh. “Most recruitment I have made, be it Anganwadi, ASHA worker or an office boy, I have ensured the posts went to someone who was struggling for support, such as an orphan or a widow,” says Vijaya with a sense of satisfaction. This apart, she worked towards giving facelift to the temple of village deity and the only graveyard, construction of UGD, mettling, and striving to bring village children back to school. Accounts needed extra help and she would sit with her confidantes to consult and cross check. “I am happy doing my bit and have no political aspirations,” she says. But, same is not the case with Chinnamma, a former member of Dornahalli GP in K R Nagar taluk.

She feels women should scale the heights of power to bring about positive changes in the system. When she started with Mahila Sangha activities decades ago, men of her village said

they would end up drinking gruel since women attended meetings and did not attend to cooking duties at home. “My family dwindled at first. But, later, they came along and when I won elections, my husband ensured he attended to housework and cared for kids when I was away,” she says.

Deeming it her strength, Chinnamma had to also earn the ire of relatives who sought favours from her in the form of houses or some benefit government had extended to economically weaker sections. “Today, I have lesser relatives talking to me; but, I see it as a proof of my impartial work,” she adds. During her term, Chinnamma not only used the funds allocated to her GP for works, but also ensured beneficiaries of various pensions and schemes were from lowest strata of the society. During her term, she ensured every home built a toilet of its own.

Don’t be fooled by the frail looking Shivamma, who served as a member of Haradada Halli GP between 2005-10. An assertive woman and a quick learner, Shivamma faced hardships and went ahead undeterred, spoke her heart out at the meetings and learned how to take people into confidence. “The meetings would go haywire often with no women participating in it.

Initially I was very hesitant. But constant support from various organizations which trained us with information and behavioural knowledge came a long way,” she says.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010*

## FROM HOMELESS TRIBAL TO GP CHIEF

Preethi Nagaraj

Deccan Herald, 13 July, 2010

**S**he is the second time president of Abbalati Gram Panchayat in Periyapatna taluk. Janakamma, who hails from a tribal community called *Kaadu Kuruba*, can barely write her name. Reading involves an effort, but she manages with some help. Yet, the never – say die spirit of this 54-years old has taken her on a stupendous journey. From being a homeless, landless and rightless tribal, Janakamma has gone on to fight for the rights of her people and has managed to get a residential school upto class seven for the children of Abbalati. She plans to get a hospital and a high school sanctioned for her village.

“As many as 125 children from 26 *haadis* study here. A high school will be of great help to ensure that these children get an education. I have been told job prospects are brighter for those who have completed their SSLC,” she says. She has never used the “ST” or “woman reservation” tag to win the seat, either during her tenure as a Sangha member or as a GP member. She contested from the general category on both occasions. That has been a bigger victory for her because she fought against male candidates hailing from communities that have enjoyed greater social acceptance.

### *A life of penury*

Janakamma represents 26 *haadis* and villages, covering 530 families. Hailing from a community that was displaced from the forests surrounding Periyapatna, Janakamma worked as a labourer earning as little as 25 paise. When Stree Shakti Sangha activities began in her village 20 years ago, Janakamma was among those who initially opposed the “outsiders” and their attempts of trying to get women together. “We were living a life of penury. For days on end, when there was no work, boiled leaves were our staple diet. We didn’t even have money to buy salt,” says the mother of three. Her daughters and son, along with her husband, never understood what Janakamma was up to, when she started attending Sangha meetings and sometimes travelled to ‘big cities’ like Mysore and Bangalore. “I had not even seen Periyapatna, seven kilometers away from Abbalati, let alone other cities,” she says.

Janakamma learnt the ropes pretty fast, with support from Mahila Samakhya, and was GP President-elect from her Gram Panchayat when elections took place in 2000. Needless to say, she swept the polls. “I had to depend on officers to tell me everything. Some helped me, while others misguided me. But, both gave me important lessons,” she says, as her eyes moisten. It was one of those days when the residential school sanctioned to their village was ‘snatched’ by a nearby village. Till then, an anganwadi was being run under the tree in the village.

### *First struggle*

“We then went to Vidhana Soudha and returned with records to say that the school and hostel belonged to us. They had no option but to help us build it,” she says. Eventually, the school started functioning, four teachers and three cooks were

recruited and aashraya houses were built too. She preserves a photo with the then prime minister A B Vajpayee and the meeting she attended in Parliament, where a discussion pertaining to the significance of the Panchayat Raj system was held. “It gave me a great sense of conviction. I felt whatever I was doing was indeed important,” she says.

During the subsequent elections, Janakamma didn’t contest. Though the candidate she supported won the polls, there was not much change in the village. “This time around, when the elections were announced, people from our *haadi* called me and said they wanted me to contest because there was a lot of work left to be done,” she adds.

After winning the polls, Janakamma, along with 50 people surveyed a reserve forest in the area. They have now launched a campaign to get small shares of land for people for her community to lead a life with dignity. “We tasted success when we campaigned for ration cards. We waylaid the MLA, MP, Ministers and even met the CM to get things done for our village. This time too, we are asking for an acre or two each for families which are dependent on labour for a livelihood,” she says. During her tenure, Janakamma got a lot of work done including laying of roads, installation of street lights and construction of houses worth over Rs. 1.20 crore. Her Sangha members have driven out the arrack vendor who has a roaring business from the village. There are hardly any cases that reach the police station because people respect the Panchayat and its verdict.



*This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 in English category*

## WOMEN'S IMPRINTS ON THE DEVELOPMENTAL WORK

Bijendra Lunthi  
Rashtriya Sahara, 12 July, 2010

**P**itthoragarh: The reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat has made them strong and they have the courage to be at par with men. The women who were confined within the four walls of their houses till a few years back, have started participating equally with men in the developmental work for the progress of their village and in this context they have gone much ahead of all the previous male Sarpanches. For the progress of their village, women representatives have taken bold steps which the male Sarpanches were hesitant to take.

In Siankuri village, which lies near the border of tehsil Dharchula, the village Sarpanch Gangotri Karki does not need any introduction in her region. In the past Gangotri, though a post-graduate, did not step much out of her house like every other woman in the village. Today, she not only has started stepping out of her house every day, she also encourages other women to be confident and follow her footsteps.

In the past, even a few years back, the village of Siankuri had been the den of drunkards and gamblers. It is Gangotri Karki who was instrumental in transforming the whole village in

terms of attitude and behaviour. The men in the village have started helping their wives even in household chores.

Gangotri has done a lot of work at a remarkable speed. Within 16 months of her becoming the Sarpanch, she has got work worth more than 25 lakhs done. The developmental work includes repairing of roads, connecting them to the concrete roads, planting of trees, providing for drinking water facility in the higher secondary schools, building up of play grounds for school students, building a long road (1 km) and enriching the soil.

Gangotri says that the main purpose of her becoming the Sarpanch was to bring in progress to her village and towards that direction she has achieved only 25% success. She firmly says that in the remaining tenure, she would be successful in all other spheres of development.

Gangotri says that at present, her main objective is to bring in electricity connection to each and every house of the village, to ensure all the education centres have sufficient number of teachers to teach all the subjects , to open ANM centres ( auxiliary nurse midwives service), to build toilets, to connect each house to the concrete road etc.

Gangotri Karki considers her husband as the source of her inspiration. She says that she had got married after completing class 8 only. It was her husband who had encouraged her to pursue her studies. And it was her husband who had bolstered her confidence for contesting the elections for the post of Sarpanch.

During her studies, she was associated with adult education, non formal education, and that had created interest in her for getting involved in the sphere of social work.

Gangotri Karki has become a role model for not only the people of her village but also for the Sarpanches of other villages. Gangotri is making use of each and every opportunity which is granted to the women in the Panchayati Raj system.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

## THE NEW AGE LEADERS FROM VILLAGES

Manoj Kumar

Reporter Madhya Pradesh, 25 April, 2010

The village women, so far confined within the four walls of their houses and covered heads, are now matching the rhythm of the new age. With a newfound confidence, they have demonstrated in different parts of Madhya Pradesh that they are better leaders; each of them has proved that she is a leader who not only looks after the house but also has the potential to change the existing reality of the village. For the State of Madhya Pradesh, it is a new kind of experience to witness its Sarpanch rebelling against the corrupt Secretary of the Panchayat or coming out in the open to protest against the worthless Secretary. This is the same Madhya Pradesh where the Sarpanch, unable to fight corruption, used to run away from the office. However, things are different today. The women have carved out their niches as successful leaders.

It is perhaps more than 15 years that Panchayati Raj system was established in Madhya Pradesh. It was a dream of Mahatma Gandhi that the villages should actively participate in the power structure and that is the reason why Mahatma Gandhi always gave emphasis to establishing Panchayati Raj system in the villages. Moreover, it was his wish to see the women having equal say, equal footing in the system of Panchayati Raj.

In the initial phase of the Panchayati Raj system in Madhya Pradesh, women's participation was almost zero. Even when they were there in the political system, it was their husband or other male members of the family who would be the controlling agents. There were several incidents in which women had to resign from their post at the whim of some influential persons. They were also implicated in cases of corruption.

Gradually a change was perceived in the Panchayati Raj system. The women began to be more active in the political sphere. The husband and other male member of the family were sidelined and the elected women Sarpanch or Panch began to take decisions on their own. Though the percent of such women was minimal but even one step towards the desired objective is important. Recently a unique change was visible in the Panchayat elections. Several Gram Panchayats in the state had all women Panchayats and power lay in their hands. In several places, the election process was made easier by adopting the process of unanimous election and all women Panchayats were made. If we see the recent statistics, more than a dozen Panchayats had unopposed elections where the power was in the hands of the women Panchs and Sarpanch.

After the election, the women Sarpanch had to confront many challenges. They had to formulate work plans of development and for that they needed to seek the help of the Panchayat Secretary but many of them would refuse to cooperate since they were afraid that the black money would stop coming to them. Moreover, they were also afraid that the women would get to know about their past records of corruption. Some of them even tried to fight with the women, not realizing that times have changed. They did not realize that women Sarpanch would not pay any attention to their tactics and in fact would

show them the door. An incident of this kind took place in the Adivasi dominated village Panchayat Chirai Dongri in district Mandla where Sarpanch Sushma Uike protested against the Secretary in a pure Gandhian way. She says that it was her dream to take her village ahead but the Panchayat Secretary Sujit Singh kept on putting obstacles on her way. Not only this, he was consistently asking her to sign the cheque and when he was asked for what, he refused to give any answer. Sushma Uike says, "When I refused to pen my signature, he started threatening me that I would be removed from my post." Sarpanch Sushma Uike also bears grievances against the CEO who not only refused to take action against the Secretary but also asked her to resign from the post of Sarpanch. Unable to exercise her rights, she began her protest in Gandhian way and started working as a daily wage earner. She is of the view that a day would definitely come when she would be heard and would get back all her rights.

Like Sushma Uike of Chirai Dongli, Sarpanch Urmilla Choudhary of village Barkheda, district Dewas, also adopted Gandhian way of protest and showed to her people what a leader of substance is made of. She got the unauthorized structures bulldozed. The people in her village are never tired of praising her for her immense courage. Urmilla had studied up to class 10 and she is only 22 years old. The people in her village call her 'Sarpanch Bitiya'. Urmilla says that she would now start the process of getting roads constructed in her village. Because of the unauthorized structures, the roads could not be constructed until now.

The women Sarpanchs are not only fighting for their rights, which they are fully aware and alert about, which have been granted by the Constitution. The 50 year old Adivasi Sarpanch

Dhapu Bai of Village Panchayat Panatlai, district Harda, has started learning the alphabets. If one questions her why she feels the need to study at her age, Dhapu Bai says that to undertake the responsibility of her village, literacy is needed. Dhapu Bai has joined a Government School and like a disciplined student, she reaches school exactly at 11 am and leaves at 5 pm. She had always wanted to go to school when she was a child but due to several reasons could not. Today she is the representative of her people and she thinks that literacy is of utmost importance for everyone in every village.

The significant aspect of all these changes is that, none of the official work of these three women is being interfered with, by their husband or other male members in the family. The person who has been elected as the Sarpanch has to fight her own battle, fulfill all the responsibilities. By granting reservation of 50 percent seats for women, the government has not only shown its respect for women but it has also strengthened their self-confidence. There is no doubt that the new leaders of the new age would be writing new stories of progress and development.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PANCHAYATI RAJ

Kashmira Singh  
Chetanshi, Oct 2009 – June 2010

A few days back, a no confidence motion was passed against Seema Devi, the president of the district parishad in the district of Saran. The no confidence motion was a mere pretext and it was actually the struggle of power between political parties. Our Chapra correspondent Kashmira Singh tried to find out how effectively the women in this region have been able to use the opportunities granted to them by the constitutional reservation policies and what are the practical problems faced by women in the Panchayati Raj System. For this, Kashmira Singh had interviewed Seema Devi and Anita Devi.

### *Seema Devi, President of the District Council*

Question - What was your experience as the president of the district Parishad?

Answer - As the President of the district parishad, I have had positive as well as negative experiences and have met good and not so good people.

Question - Why was the no confidence motion passed against you?

Answer - The meaning of opposition is to oppose. Howsoever good our performance is their task is to oppose the party in power. Within a family, a lot many things happen and this is true of our big family in the district of Saran. It's nothing unusual. But the way political vendetta is used is also not good. The people who were instrumental in getting the no confidence motion passed had among them Lalu Prasad from Sansad Chhapra, Uma Shankar Singh from Mahrajganj Sansad, Yaduvanshi Rai, erstwhile President and Udit Rai, erstwhile Minister of State. These were the prominent ones. But since people are attached with my party, I could get their support. The quality of my work and my capacity to take decisions are the reasons why I won the election again and got back my "Chair". But of course there are persons without whose support winning the election was impossible. The prominent among them are Prabhu Nath Singh, Ram Pravesh Rai, and Chote Lal Rai. Moreover, the councilors of all the parties also have a great role in getting me re-elected. You take it from me that the no confidence motion was just a pretext and the real reason was the struggle of power between the two parties.

Question - What do you have to say about the reservation of seats for women?

Answer - This was a revolutionary step. The effect of this would be felt five years later. When women's reservation bill is passed in the Parliament, the women's reservation would get a boost and then its effect in the society would be clearly visible.

Question - People say that women representatives are representatives only in name and their work are actually being done by the male member of the family?

Answer - It's a wrong notion. Nothing of this sort happens. Look, my husband is right here. There are some members of the council also. You can ask them. My husband does not have any say in my official work. I make all the decisions about the work and policies of the district council.

Question - During your tenure, what steps have you taken to enhance the condition of women in your area?

Answer - Of all the projects of the government that have been undertaken to empower women, the SHG is the most prominent one. Due to SHG (Self Help Group), women are becoming self-dependent. The women from the economically deprived section are now making pickles, wax, and rope and thereby helping the dwindling cottage industry to be revived. Today, the women are no longer dependant on their husband; rather they are running their families on their own. We have been doing a lot of work for the enhancement of the condition of the marginalized women.

Question - You have won on the basis of reservation within the reservation category. What do you feel about it?

Answer - I do not much like this. But the situation was such that women were far behind. Due to the 50% reservation of seats for women granted by the Government, women from marginalized communities got the opportunity to join the main stream. The reservation of seats for women has made them capable and confident. The women who were elected on the basis of reservation within the reservation are doing excellent work. The government has done a great job. Now, there is no longer any need for reservation of seats for women. We are now into finding our own path and doing our bit of work. There is no need for that kind of support any longer.

Question - What have you accomplished in your region?

Answer - For me, the whole district is my region and there is no specific area that is mine. I have worked for the whole district, for each and every person in the district.

Question - Did you have to face any kind of obstacles while working with the male members?

Answer - Not at all. In fact, I feel a lot of pride. In the initial stages, I did have some kind of hesitation and inhibition because before the election, I was a teacher in the Purushottam School in Maker Region. I had no idea I would be joining politics and would be elected as the President of the district council. My life was confined within my house, my life revolved around my family and my work sphere was confined to the education centers. During the election of district council, the seat in Maker was turned into a reserved category and then I resigned from the school and contested the election and I won. This was definitely due to the blessings of the elders and my parents in law. For a few months after I won the election, I did find it quite difficult but six months later, I adjusted to my new life, my political life. In the past three years during my tenure as the president of the district councilor, I had had no problem. Towards the end, I had stopped taking any kind of help from my family member.

Question - What message would you like to give to the women?

Answer - It's my special appeal to the women that they should not let go of this opportunity granted by the government to go in for public life. They should become self-dependent and

have their own identity, especially women who are from the marginalized communities and until now had been isolated from mainstream society. All women from the city to the village should become capable and empowered. All the women should make progress and should make society progress.

Anita Devi, Councilor

Question - You are a councilor and you won the election after the reservation of seats for women was granted. What do you have to say on this?

Answer - The 50% reservation of seats for women is an apt step to take the women out of their closed existence. This way the woman is able to participate in the political process of the country. But for this, education is as important as reservation. The male member of the family overpowers the women, who are not literate, and the people in authority already know this reality. Therefore, along with 50% reservation of seats for women, laws related to education should also be strengthened. The government has not paid any attention to this aspect and that is why the reservation has remained one dimensional.

Questioned - What are your rights as a councilor? What are your works spheres?

Answer - Under the Zila Parishad, there are 21 departments and the councilors have the right to monitor the activities of all the 21 departments. The councilor has the right to attach the NREGA from one region to the other. The BRGF is the project of the Central Government. All kinds of work can be accomplished in this but unfortunately, it does not happen that way. We are members of the District Planning Committee.

92% of funds of every scheme goes to the Panchayat. The work related to soil, for example carrying of soil during construction, is to be undertaken by NREGA but it is done under BRGF. Why does the Panchayat undertake such work? Why don't they do other work so that women, children and old people get the benefits? This time I have complained to the D.D.C. The Gram Sabha brings the construction work to us and being a member of district planning committee and knowing that under the Panchayati Raj, it should not get acceptance, we still end up giving approval to it. It's really strange that Gram Sabha is never held but these resolutions are passed.

Question - Who would make complaints in the Gram Sabha?

Answer - The Chief Minister has made a statement that in every Panchayat, Gram Sabha would be held on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of every month but this statement is not available in writing in the Block Office or in Panchayat Office. The B.D.O. or the Panchayat Officials have the knowledge about this but they are subordinate officials. In my jurisdiction, there are seven Panchayats. I myself work in one of them. Till date, I have not seen any Gram Sabha meeting. Just by 50% reservation, Panchayati Raj system cannot be established.

Question - On what basis do you pass the no confidence motion? Can't notices be served to them?

Answer - Inter personnal rivalries and unsatisfactory performances are the reasons for passing no confidence motion. There is no provision for sending any kind of notice. When the council sits for the first time, the members don't know each other. Big leaders bulldoze and appoint one member as the President. Later this becomes a reason for passing the no confidence motion.

Question - As the Zilla Councilor how do you accomplish your work?

Answer - In the Panchayati Raj system, the region of the district councilor is very vast but the councilor has no fund to call his or her own. The projects, which are being passed by the committees, reach us for our approval. At the block level, the councilors are not invited and our rights are violated. Seven Committees should be formed in the Panchayat but till now they have not been formed since the Sarpanch always tries to have his way. There are many shortcomings in the present Panchayati Raj and only when the system is refined further can it work. This is my perspective.

Question - Politics also says this. Problems will be solved the way the representatives perceive it. What do you have to say to this? Even if you are accomplished can you solve everything on your own?

Answer - Listen. In the absence of education you cannot practice politics. To understand societies problems you have to be educated. We are talking of 33% reservation in the Parliament, but still not talking of education. Elected representatives should understand societies problems, only then they can solve the problems. I want to emphasise education is crucial, especially for elected representatives as they are the problem solvers.

Question - What are the aspects that are required to make the Panchayat System better?

Answer - For a better Panchayat, the social and political aspects need to be strong. It all depends on the person who is in power. The society follows the representative. Look at

the survey done on BPL (Below Poverty Line) families. It was all wrong. The survey should have been conducted in the open but it did not happen like that. The head of the village included the names of his people in the BPL List and the poor people had no idea what BPL was. This survey should have been done by an NGO. A protest letter should have been sent to the Block office but the people in the village did not know this since 70% of them are daily wage earners. Self less people should have conducted this survey.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

## A NEW IDENTITY FOR MEENAKSHI IN POLITICS

Prashant Dikshit

Aaj, 7 July, 2010

Nainital: If we look at the records of the past many years, we find that women's participation in political sphere was a dream. Today the dream of the yester years is at last materializing. In fact in today's world, women have gone far ahead than men and establishing themselves in the political sphere, has ensured her participation in deciding about the future of not only India but also of the whole world. In the patriarchal system, this is a rather big challenge which the women have accepted and taken into their stride before entering the panchayat. The women representatives are victorious after struggling a lot and till date, they are facing a lot many challenges in putting down roots in the Panchayat. Imagine for a while the condition of women in our country. Surrounded by a patriarchal society, her own family, her countless responsibilities and her own sense of insecurity, she is undertaking her new responsibilities placing herself in the political sphere. She is a shining example of women's empowerment.

One of such empowered woman is Meenakshi Tamta, the Sarpanch of the village panchayat Bhumiyadhar that is 15 km from the district of Nainital. Meenakshi, a strong, experienced and an aware woman, has fulfilled her responsibility in

the political sphere as well as in her family. Her steadfast dedication towards the work related to the Panchayat has made the people of her village select her for the second time to contest the election to the Panchayat. Facing tough challenges, Meenakshi ultimately won the unreserved seat with a clear majority. During the election campaigning, Meenakshi had to undergo many pressures. While some of the people in the village were questioning her credentials asking what can an ordinary woman like Meenakshi do for the village, the Brahmins and ksatriyas, making caste an issue, were making all efforts to stop her from contesting the election and were opposing her tooth and nail. Despite such caste politics and opposition from several quarters, Meenakshi Tamta won the election and taught a lesson to the opposition. Breaking down the age-old monopoly of men, Meenakshi gave men a message that she has the capacity and capability of an able administrator and can overcome all impediments.

Meenakshi, being a very social person, is always ready to be of help to the needy and stands by them as a solid rock, sharing their happy and sad moments. It may be scorching hot in summer or extreme cold in winter or there may be heavy rains, or it may be at the dead of night, Meenakshi Tamta is always there for them. Opposing violence against women and children, she is very prompt in her efforts to get them justice.

Meenakshi Tamta is the person who was instrumental in getting the social and economic issues entrenched in the Panchayat work plans for the overall development of the village. It was her initiative that got pension to the widows, to the persons who are physically challenged, and to the senior citizens. Along with the pension, she had tried to get them the other benefits that are meant for them. After getting the drinking water facilities, she

got an aanganwadi and a public centre constructed. To make the women in the village strong and self dependant, she has set up training centers for stitching, embroidery and painting for girls and has tried to involve a great many women in such centers. The middle schools were turned into full-fledged ones so that girls could get the opportunity to complete their schooling. To provide better health facilities to the people, she made the health department actively involved with the health chart of the village. During the campaigning for cleanliness, she got toilets constructed in each and every house of the village. For granting a sense of security to her people, she has appointed village guards and this has really brought in fearlessness among her people.

It was with Meenakshi Tamta's effort that roads were laid out in the village, which was then joined with the high ways. Under the employment guarantee scheme, 240 job cards were made and all the villagers were part of the employment scheme. Meenakshi did a lot of work in the field of de-addiction. A provision was made against the drunkards, which made them pay a fine of 500 rupees to the Panchayat. Along with this, much work was done in the field of violence against women making these issues the issues of the Panchayat. Moreover steps were taken to nott only give property rights to women who were abandoned by their husbands but efforts were also made to make people sensitive towards them.

Meenakshi Tamta believes that howsoever difficult a task may be, it can be accomplished with the cooperation of one and all. Hence, she makes it a point to consult each and every member of the Panchayat and undertakes every job after the ward members take a collective decision. This allows equal participation of each and every member in the Gram Sabha.

Today if we look at her personal development it is evident that she is much more aware and empowered. She has established her own identity not only in her village but also in the block and the district. In fact, she has been selected by the block office as the trainer for the training programme of the Panchayat representatives. Meenakshi always cooperates with the other woman representatives at the block level. It is her dream to go up the ladder in the field of politics and work for the people of the country; this she wants to do on the basis of her own capabilities.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

# GROWING POWER OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ

Pushpendra Pal Singh  
Dainik Nai Duniya, 14 July, 2010

The political analysts of the Panchayati Raj system in Madhya Pradesh are continuously and constantly discussing the positive and negative aspects of the system. A significant aspect of this ongoing discussion is the analysis of role of women in Panchayati Raj system. One of the objectives is to research about not only those women who have won the elections but also those, who haven't won the elections but have become politically active after participating in the election process. The question to which the answer is sought is, 'what is the role of these women in taking a decision regarding the activities related to development.'

Another objective is to find out how empowered the women have become after participating in the whole process of election and who were the inspiring forces in their lives who propelled them to move ahead.

When we look at these three questions in the context of Panchayati Raj system and the issue of women's empowerment, the answers that we derive is truly inspiring and encouraging.

*Inspiration Derived from Sakhi Manch and Women's Conference*

Sunita Uike, the Gond woman of village Morgadi was the member of Sakhi Manch, a woman's group. Morgadi is situated 22 km away from the Panchayat office in the Khirkia block of district Harda. Sunita had studied up to class 2 but after remaining active in the Sakhi Manch, she had developed a deep understanding of various issues. Therefore, she had become deeply involved in the social life of her village; she would go on her own to each and every woman in the village and would talk to them and inspire them to participate in the proceedings of Gram Sabha. She would raise the issue of frequent absence of Aanganwadi workers from their work place and would have a role in selection of the new Aanganwadi workers. She would raise several issues like the issue of non-availability of ANMs (auxiliary nurse midwives), the issue of bad roads, scarcity of water and she would participate wholeheartedly in the process of including the names of poor people in the BPL (below poverty line) category. Due to her intense active role in the village life, the Sakhi Manch and people from other walks of life made her contest the election for the post of Sarpanch during the Panchayat elections. The members of Sakhi Manch took up the issue of development during election campaigning and gave assurance to the populace that they would see to it that education, drinking water and employment guarantee scheme reach out to all and that the benefits of other developmental planning accrue to each person in the village. As a consequence of the convincing campaigning, Sunita Uike got 228 votes and won the election by 66 votes.

Similarly, Tulsia Bai of Lakhakheda village was highly inspired by the women's conference which was organized by The Hunger project and Jivan Vikas Samiti in December 2009 to ensure women's participation in greater number during the

elections to the Panchayat bodies. Tulsa Bai of Lakhakheda panchayat, which is 31 km away from the Katni district office, had attended the woman's conference where women from 15 Panchayats had come to participate. Tulsa Bai was so highly inspired by the proceedings in the conference that in great excitement, she had declared while giving her speech, "whether the Lakhakheda Panchayat seat would get reserved for women or not, I would definitely contest the election and I am saying this in front of all of you that I will win the election".

Later the Lakhakheda Panchayat seat was declared reserved for Adivasi women. Tulsa Bai contested the election and got 397 votes. She won the election by 97 votes. Tulsa Bai always says that the energy and courage which she got from the women's conference had made it possible for her to win the election.

#### *Victorious though She Lost the Election*

Bhagrathi Bai belongs to the village of Dabya of Jamunya Panchayat, 36 km from tehsil Khirkiya in the forest region of district Harda. She has studied up to class 4 and she and her husband worked as daily wage earners.

As a member of the self help group, Bhagrathi Bai always encourages other women in their activities, makes them put forward different developmental issues in the Gram Sabha and if the issues were not sorted out in the Gram Sabha, takes them to the Janapada Panchayat. There were different issues like sending children to school, availability of items in the ration shop , opening of aanganwadis at a fixed time, distribution of mid day meals, repairing of hand pumps .

During the recent Panchayat elections, Bhagrathi Bai contested the elections against 12 men for the seat, reserved

for scheduled caste candidates. The issues that she took up during the election campaign were regarding developmental work, construction of toilets, inclusion of names in the BPL list and opening up of health centers. She would visit each and every house in the village during her campaigning. She got the appeal printed and distributed among the people and unlike other candidates; she never attempted to entice the voters. The supporters of other candidates began to spread rumors about her and they even questioned her right to contest the election, saying, "This seat is meant for men alone, how she can contest the election?" The other contestants were so insecure that they even made supporters of Bhagrathi Bai consume a lot of alcohol so that they would not be able to go to the pooling booth to cast their votes. This is exactly what had happened on the Election Day. Bhagrathi Bai lost the election. She could get only 13 votes.

Bhagrathi Bai never got deterred by these happenings and because of her positive attitude, became an ideal for many. She is whole-heartedly involved in her initiatives to bring in progress to her people.

One more woman who has similar zest for life and a sense of commitment is Shyamvati, the Baiga Adivasi woman from Chandrani village which is situated in the Samnapur block of Dindori district. Shyamvati who is from that kind of a village which finds its place in the police record for constant fights and dirty politics among the thakurs (the feudals), was so excited by the women's conference held on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2009 in the village of Jatadongri that she had declared there and then that she would contest the elections of the Panchayat. She had also declared that she would not only contest the election, but she would also fight the atrocities that are committed against

women. Shyamvati had to take money on loan and had to sell off her ornaments but at the end, she lost to alcohol, chicken and money that were being freely distributed by the other contestants. But Shyamvati also never got discouraged by her defeat. She is continuing with the same level of excitement and zest.

Isn't she a winner?

*Search for The Path to Progress*

Shrimati Khargi Saur, an Adivasi woman from village Debran of Badamalhara, who is a member of Ekta Tejaswini group, wanted to contest the election after she attended the pre-election training programme. With the support of Ekta Tejaswini group and because of her own strong will power, she won the election, breaking all past records. After becoming the representative of her people, she started dreaming about her village attaining great heights, reaching the top notch in the developmental scale. While searching for the steps to be taken towards progress, a meeting with the cluster head, Shrimati Rekha Sharma, had proved quite providential. Rekha Sharma would take her to meetings and then, together, they would chalk out the future work plans. They would have very intense discussions about the problems of the village at the block level conferences and then forming committees of the women representatives, would ensure that the ration shops, schools, Aanganwadi and the matter of the village cleanliness are being taken care of properly.

Shrimati Khargi Saur along with Shrimati Radha Ahirwar, Shrimati Ramlali Ahirwar and Shrimati Premkali Ahirwar has formed a committee and with the support of Rekha Sharma, are accomplishing all the developmental work.

The stories of these brave women tell us that women in Panchayati Raj are moving towards an empowered society. We can make out from these real stories that these women are very aware, highly matured in thinking, have deep understanding of the developmental issues, are capable of taking decisions, have leadership qualities and a strong will power to take the society ahead, grant us inspiration to learn from life itself and challenges the school education system, have participated actively in taking decisions about monetary issues and providing ideals to bring in change to the system. This is what women's empowerment is, isn't it?

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## **BEWARE, HERE LIVES AMASO BAI.....**

Rumni Ghosh

Dainik Bhaskar, 8 March, 2010

**B**eware this is the territory of Amaso Bai! If anybody, even by mistake, consumes alcohol a fine of Rs 1000/- is imposed. If anybody tries to drink, hiding somewhere in the village, they would definitely get caught since Amaso Bai's informers are spread throughout the Panchayat. The informers get paid Rs 500/- by Amaso Bai.

This is Madam Sarpanch Amaso Bai. She is a familiar name in Tinsai and its surrounding villages. The village of Tinsai is about 60 km away from Chindwara district in Madhya Pradesh. Women Panchs like Dhyanvati, Bakhtiya and Mulia Bai gave her the name. She won the elections by defeating the wife of the former Sarpanch by merely 5 votes. At the time of filling of the nomination form, Amaso Bai was non literate. Being a non literate Sarpanch was not acceptable to Amaso and hence three days prior to the election, she put all her efforts and learnt to sign her name. She signed the nomination form and won the election.

Amaso Bai says, "Before I became the Sarpanch, I rarely went out of my house. I did not even go to the Gram Sabha. Now, I have been entrusted with many responsibilities and I have to do a lot of work."

After becoming the Sarpanch, Amaso Bai needed to go to the Panchayat office every day to get the work done. After all, how long could she be dependent on her husband? One day, Amaso Bai picked up a bicycle and started to ride. Then started her campaign against alcoholism in the panchayat! In the scorching summer afternoons, she would go to each and every household in the village and mobilize the women against alcoholism. Amaso Bai says, “In the beginning, every one resisted the idea. But gradually the women began to realize that half the household income was being spent on alcohol.”

This took almost two to three years but ultimately the day came when a Panchayat meeting was called to collectively make rules regarding alcohol consumption in public. Though a rule was formulated to stop alcoholism, Amaso Bai was convinced that a mere rule would not be sufficient. She decided that she would reward Rs. 500/- to those giving information about anyone drinking in public. Amaso says that this has really helped in controlling the habit of drinking in the village of Tinsai. A lot of the information comes from the women themselves. A visitor to Tinsai says that a few days back two men created a scene at a village wedding after consuming alcohol. The women's front immediately imposed a fine of Rs. 1,000/- on both. Both the men accepted the punishment and gave their word that they would pay the fine once they returned to the village after earning the money. Both men are at present working as daily wage labourers in some other village. Though Amaso Bai is still unable to read or write her political acumen and her management and planning skills are at par with any CEO. The money collected from fines imposed is deposited in the bank account of the panchayat.

Supporting her in this entire campaign, Sajid a social worker informs that so far nearly five thousand rupees have been collected. Some of this money has been utilized as reward money for informers; the rest has been used for development work in the panchayat.

In order to get her work done quickly, Amaso Bai has learnt to use a mobile phone. This helps her to keep in touch with the District CEO at all times. She says she would like to work on Forest Rights but has not been able to do much work on the issue yet.

Amaso Bai did not contest this Panchayat election. Instead her husband Jaipal contested and won the election. He says, “The real Sarpanch is still Amaso. I will take her work forward.”

*“Where there is a will there is a way!” The thousands of women sarpanches of this country could learn from the experience of Amaso Bai that change is possible without resources. All you need is determination to do something.”*



*This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

## THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Sanjeev Kumar

Patrika, 6 July, 2010

*On the Path of Progress: Women sarpanches are breaking myths, and fulfilling an important role in removing obstacles to development.*

At a time when politicians have sacrificed the issue of 33 percent reservation in the `highest Panchayat', that is, in Parliament, at the altar of their egos, it has become all the more essential to gauge and evaluate the work women have performed in Panchayats. A large number of women who have become the centre of governance, within the Panchayati Raj system, have challenged and broken the notion that they do not fit into this work-area, that is considered to be male-dominated. The 33 percent reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions, granted to women by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, has given extraordinary support to women, and they, on their part, have proved through their work that they are a match for men. The women of Gujarat too are making full use of this right granted to them by the Constitution, and they have succeeded in bringing the winds of change to blow into their various constituencies. *Patrika* has managed to locate two women Sarpanches, who have created stories of success, in their respective areas. Surat district has a number of such Panchayats, which have provided opportunities to women,

through the system of electoral reservations. One among these is the Kapletha Gram Panchayat. Fifty-seven year old Ameena Chinchwadiya of Kapletha is engaged in serving the people, in her role as an elected representative. Under the roster system, Kapletha was declared a women's seat in the year 2006. At that time, Ameena fought and won the elections as a non-party candidate, thus being elected to the post of Sarpanch. Situated approximately 20 kilometres from Surat city, Kapletha is a village with a dominant Muslim population. The population of this village is just 3,000. Apart from Muslims, people belonging to Halpati, Harijan, Dhimar and Mistri castes also reside in this village. The majority of them are agricultural labourers.

*Educated Only Up To Class 7*

Although educated only up to Class 7, Ameena has handled the work of a Sarpanch with great finesse. In the beginning, she had to face a number of difficulties, in the process of trying to understand the work. Her husband Abdul Hai, however, helped, which was quite a big support for her. There are seven members in Kapletha Gram Panchayat, including the Sarpanch. Two of these are women members. It was with their help that she took her developmental agenda forward. Ameena made efforts to inspire girls to study, and met with parents to explain to them the benefits of educating girls. This is the reason that today every child of this village is attending school and learning lessons for the future. The Panchayat elections are to be held here next year. Ameena still has many items on her agenda, which she wants to complete before that.

*Selected for the 'Nirmal Gaon' Award*

Kapletha has also been the recipient of the 'Nirmal Gaon' award, presented to it by the state government. This is presented for villages with maximum attainment of hygiene

and sanitation. The major credit for this award goes to Ameena. After becoming Sarpanch, Ameena made efforts to build a proper drainage system in the village. By now she has arranged for underground drainage in the entire village. It is due to this that Chief Minister Narendra Modi presented an award of Rs 1 lakh to Ameena.

*Problem of Broken Roads*

The major problem in Kapletha village was the need for repairing broken roads. It used to become impossible to enter into the village during the rainy season. Children would long to attend school, but were prevented because of this problem. As soon as she became Sarpanch, Ameena undertook the task of getting the broken roads repaired. She managed to get the district administration to pass the proposal and allocate a special fund for the improvement of broken roads and lanes. It is only due to this that the condition of these roads has improved.

*Recalling Gandhiji's Historic March*

Gandhiji had passed through this village during his historical Salt Satyagraha. Kapletha is on the route to the historical Dandi village. Although the road between Kapletha and towards Dandi village is still waiting for the day it will be repaired, yet Ameena has not given up. She has not accepted defeat on this front. Abdul Hai explains that pressure has been built up on the administration, for the repair of this road.

*Lack of Clean Drinking Water*

Clean drinking water too is a problem in Kapletha village. Because the water in River Mindhola is polluted, this has affected the ground-water in and around the village, which is also polluted. Because of this the villagers are not able to access clean drinking water. There is only one tank for drinking

water in the entire village, which is proving to be woefully insufficient.

*Deep Commitment to Developing Her Village*

“After becoming the Sarpanch, my effort has been to take everybody along with me, and bring the benefits of development to one and all. With the active help of other Panchayat members, I have been able to bring several projects to completion, which had been stalled since many years. The condition of roads has improved, and we have constructed a proper drainage system. I am also making all efforts to see to it that women come forward, and work for the improvement of our society,” says Ameena Chinchwadia, Sarpanch, Kapletha village.

*In Chikhli Gram Panchayat of Navsari district, there is yet another woman Sarpanch, similar to Ameena. After Deepti Shah became Sarpanch of Chikhli, she took to hand many such schemes and projects that the people of the village had been waiting to see completed since the last three decades! She took steps to get illegal encroachments removed, which had taken over some roads since the past thirty years – and succeeded. This one action won immense popularity for her, among the common people. Deepti Shah is the Head of a Panchayat that has an annual budget of 10 crores. The 15-member Panchayat includes five women members too.*

*Several Schemes Passed and Implemented*

The population of Chikhli village is approximately five thousand. However, for this large population, there is provision for only one water tank. Shah on her own strength has one more water tank accepted, and the budget for it passed. This tank will provide water to the entire village, under the Swajal Dhara Yojana (scheme). This area is dependent for its water supply upon the Kaveri River. Apart from this, preparations

are also afoot for building a fire station in this village. Until now, fire fighters had to be called in from Billimora, whenever there was a need.

*A Solid Support for Women*

This Panchayat used to be male dominated. The election of a woman Sarpanch in such a Panchayat has provided solid support to the women of this constituency. Since the past ten years, Shah has also been running a Sakhi Mandal, for the benefit of women of the villages. This Sakhi Kendra is working consistently for improvement of the conditions of women, under the framework of the Akhil Hind Mahila Mandal.

Through this Sakhi Mandal, women are being provided training in various kinds of cottage industries, so that they are able to stand on their own feet. Apart from Chikhli, about 200 women from Samroli, Majhigram and Khudgaon villages have also joined the Sakhi Mandal. The Sakhi Mandal also runs a balwadi (crèche and play centre) for small children.

*Several Difficulties on the Way*

Deepti Shah says that after becoming Sarpanch, she faced many difficulties initially, even in understanding all the administrative affairs she was supposed to deal with. Deputy Sarpanch Deepak Kapadia helped her in the process of developing an understanding of the work. Now she conducts meetings on her own, quite independently. She explains that she has received help and cooperation from the concerned officers, and from the members of her Panchayat, during the process of carrying out Panchayat work. Due to this, her task has become easier.

*Work In Hand*

During her tenure as Sarpanch, Shah has been able to get many such schemes passed, which had been delayed over a

## Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

long period. She has got a budget of Rs. 50 lakh accepted for the construction of village roads, Rs. 10 lakh budget for the development of Kaveri river, Rs. 15 lakh for the fire fighter, and Rs. 10 lakh for building a new library. There is a plan afoot to furnish the library with all modern facilities.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

# WOMEN PANCHAYAT MEMBERS REQUIRE AN ATMOSPHERE FREE FROM FEAR

Niti Dewan

Nav Bharat, 22 January, 2010

During the past few years, several state governments have increased the reservation quota for women in local governance institutions, from 33 percent up to 50 percent, and the Central Government has announced 50 percent reservation for women. At the time when the 33 percent reservation for women was first announced, some fifteen years ago, it was envisaged that after women's participation in structures of power increases through the route of reservations, then women occupying leadership positions will carry out their roles in decision-making, and be able to work actively and freely to prevent violence against women. It was thought that they will also be able to bring to an end certain problems that are deeply entrenched in society, for instance sex-selective abortion (female foeticide), child marriage, the dowry system, and brutal atrocities including sexual violence, thus leading to a total collapse of the structures of gender inequalities. However, even after the passage of one and a half decades, apart from a few exceptions, the general status of women continues to be that of second-rate citizens.

For these elected people's representatives, breaking the centuries-long traditions is proving to be extremely difficult

and onerous. For these women who are forging their own independent identities within the structures of family, society and state power, the meaning of power is itself quite different from the traditional sense. Rejecting the values and beliefs of tradition bound society, they are trying to etch out completely new definitions of leadership. In spite of adverse social circumstances, many women elected representatives have succeeded in breaking out of traditions, and have chosen the path of struggle. Some of these highly respected women leaders have even lost their lives in the battle – be it Sukhia Bai or Dhula Bai, or else Urmila Bai or Mori Bai.

Several such incidents have come to light during the past fifteen years, in which elected women representatives have had to face the brunt of violent attacks. However, they did not withdraw or move back, despite so much of struggle and hardship. While on the one hand these elected women representatives today need not just reservation but also respect, cooperation, a status of equality and a safe atmosphere, on the other hand they also constantly need to be exposed to ways to awaken their self-confidence, and ways and means to enhance their information base and sources of information, so that they may be enabled to recognize their own importance and work in an atmosphere free of fear.

Due to the announcement of reservation of one-third seats for women under the Panchayati Raj Act, initially villagers and family members made women candidates contest the elections perforce, without really wanting to: such women who had so far been the traditional centre around which rural households revolved. In this way, several women didn't even come to know what is happening, yet they won elections, and came to occupy various different posts. It was only much later, after a few years

of gaining experience, that Usha Patel, the ex-Sarpanch of Raisalpur village in Hoshangabad district, said that she has now got to know in which direction the village school lies, where is the Anganwadi situated, and which place does her own home occupy in the map of the whole village.

Making good use of their important positions in the Panchayati Raj system, these women have tried to establish their own identities in the fields of power, but for this leadership that they have tried to assert, they have often had to pay a price, by being made the victim of brutal assaults. Those women elected representatives who belong to Dalit and Adivasi communities have had to face the most severe problems. Not only were they women, on top of this the caste-ridden society considered them to be inferior, and yet they were carrying out leadership roles within their villages, wielding power even over those powerful landowners and other sections of society who had been the rulers through the ages – these people did not like women's interventions in the political sphere. This was the very basic reason that women had to suffer many atrocities. Whether it is at the level of society, at the level of family, and also at the level of the government and administration – they are facing violence and carving out their identities and existence within this kind of context.

As the participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions is increasing, so also the incidents of violence against them are rising in number. During the last elections Prabhavati Devi, the dalit woman candidate from Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, committed one and only one offence – that is, she refused to leave the electoral fray, even after the powerful sections had tried hard to convince her to withdraw. For this offence of hers, she was punished by having to give up her life – during the

elections, she was burnt alive. In Madhya Pradesh's Gubrail Gram Panchayat, Betul district, the Adivasi Sarpanch Sukhia Bai was a hard-working, committed and honest leader, who really wanted to bring about true development in her village, but for this a sum of Rs five thousand was being demanded from her as a bribe, and fighting against this kind of corruption, she too lost her life. When no agreement was reached despite a great deal of struggle as well as efforts on her part to bring about compromise, she eventually committed suicide by burning herself.

Since the reservation, women who occupied various posts during the first term, as a result of winning in the elections, had to face the maximum number of cases of no-confidence motions filed against them. Then during the second term, the right to call back elected candidates was used to the hilt against elected women representatives, especially those members who belonged to adivasi or dalit backgrounds. The women Presidents of Nagar Panchayats (urban municipalities) of Anuppur and Sanchi towns were among those most affected by this, and each of them had to pay a heavy price in one way or the other. As a continuation of the same process, and in very much the same spirit, Article 40 has also been used against women elected representatives, on a very wide scale.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

## WINNING AN ELECTION HONESTLY IS A TOUGH TASK, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

Shankar Singh

Diamond India Monthly, March-April, 2010

**M**s Rukmini fought the election for Sarpanch of Vijaypur Panchayat of Deogarh in district Rajsamand, Rajasthan. The five years administrative expenditure of this Panchayat is between Rs 8 to 10 crores.

Rukmini canvassed intensively for the election along with the enthusiastic team of energetic women, travelled a lot on foot and contacted every voter. She convinced them that if she wins, the entire amount sanctioned for the Panchayat during the period of five years would be incurred on development work. There would be no fake or duplicate bills. No machinery or tractor of her family would be pressed in service of development work, no contract would be awarded. All work would be carried out by manual labour on prescribed minimum wage rates. The Panchayat would meet daily. There would be full transparency in the functioning. There would be foolproof arrangement for filing the application for job fortnightly and timely payment will be made to wage-earners. In her election manifesto she committed “not to take single paisa for personal use from Panchayat Fund and not to allow anybody else to consume the Panchayat money. Every single paisa would be spent for the public”. This manifesto was distributed among all voters/

villages. She did not spend a single paisa on canvassing. Starting on foot in the morning after taking meals at home, all her team members marched throughout the day and took their meal on return in the evening. She guaranteed free and fair deal in Panchayat functioning.

There were nine other candidates against her, who spent a lot of money on transportation and publicity material. They begged for votes on caste, mohalla (community) and relationship basis. They made negative canvassing against Rukmini that in case of winning the election she would depute untouchable women on drinking water distribution and take hazardous work from other caste. But it was all in vain. Rukmini won the election with the margin of 115 votes. A number of other candidates in order to gain undue favour from voters distributed gur (jaggery), liquor; wheat in large quantity besides bribing many voters with cash currency notes @ Rs 500 to Rs 1000 per vote. There were a number of brokers or intermediaries. Such candidates during local body elections practice these illegal activities and spent huge amount of money in a hope that if elected they would recover the same double or triple times from the expenditure of funds meant for the Panchayat. Such a candidate after winning the election resort to many dishonest means of corruption, full wages are not paid in NREGS, construction of village roads are not up to the mark. He takes bribe for every service done to an individual. But bravo, the illiterate but simple Rukmini has become the Sarpanch and the public now hope that the old order of corruption will change and everything would be set right. The money power and muscle power would end, that democracy would prevail. The new Sarpanch Rukmini has informed the public about their Right to Information and has asked them to use this right fully and properly. In this way, the

public can resort to social accounting on the money spent in NREGS or in any other scheme. There would be transparency in Panchayat dealings. Rukmini would be an ideal example for other Panchayats and future Panchayats not only in Bhilwara region but also throughout the country.

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## **REMOVE THE VEIL PLAY A LEAD ROLE**

Premchand Gandhi

Rajasthan Patrika, 3 February, 2010

*A recent exhibit of successful village administration by women has made it clear that in the ensuing period, the trembling voice from behind the veil is a thing of the past; now onwards only the confident voices of women would be heard everywhere.*

The country is in the process of change. It is true that the Panchayats were hitherto being run by the men folk in the name of the village women. However, the woman, who after initial hesitation came out with eager enthusiasm did better work in comparison to her male counterparts. With the 33% - 50% reservation for women, they were determined that they would play their part better than men in the village development. Now many women Panch and Sarpanch have been giving new direction to the nation and they are proving a better people's representatives in comparisons to their male colleagues.

By becoming the Panch and Sarpanch in Panchayati Raj Institution the women have shown that they can now undertake the journey from their houses to the public meeting place in the village. They may not be well aware of the 'A, B, C' of politics but are fully fulfilling their responsibilities. They are concerned

with development of their villages and in this they do not require the assistance of their husbands. The advancing steps of women in Panchayati Raj may create stream of development in their villages and settlements. Take for example the tenure of Shanti Devi as ward Panch of Dudhwali village of Bahrur in Alwar district who has constructed classrooms in the village school, made arrangement of drinking water and other basic amenities, which were hitherto less important for their male counterparts. The women representatives are coming up with the basic facilities that are more beneficial to the public of the area. Being a woman, they understand the problems faced by human beings better. Another example is that of Kanta Devi Nayee, who during her tenure of Ward Panch of Loonkaransar village of Bikaner district struggled with the atrocities of drunken husbands who snatched their wives earnings. She compelled the Sarpanch to pay the wages of women directly to them so that they could economically independent.

*"Presently there are about 2.5 lakh village Panchayats (village assemblies) consisting of about 28.1 lakh representatives, out of which 36.37% are women members. The number of women members is likely to increase with 50% reservation."*

#### *There Would Be No Corruption*

Many village development works hitherto remained incomplete for years due to paucity of funds and entrenched corruption. The male Sarpanch did not pay heed to female Ward Panchs. However, the educated Ward Panch of Chanar Village of Sirohi district Ms Nimisha Barot persuaded the Sarpanch to complete the Community Hall within a year without any corruption. Besides, there are educated women like Nimisha Barot, who are guiding the Panchayat politics. Taking a lesson from her, the illiterate women members have also started getting educated,

doing their duty honestly for the cause of the Panchayat's success. Laxmi Berna of Mordhal village of Sirohi district is one such woman who during her tenure as Ward Panch solved the problem of large scale drinking by the male villagers by getting liquor shop in the village closed permanently. According to her, she did it with legal assistance and by forming a group of fifty women volunteers for the purpose.

*Self-Confidence Always Pays*

It is said that the powerful are bringing the women in their families forward through reservation. However, it is also learnt that the women now no more want to remain puppets in the hand of their partners. They have stood up against the issue of child marriage. Uma of Boarh Milakpur village of Bansur block in Alwar district is an example in this regard, who opposed her marriage at the age of 12 years and married only at the age of 19 years. She also changed the drinking habit of her husband, became Ward Panch and got the liquor shop in the village closed.

*The Males Have To Support the Women Members*

The men now play a supporting role. In politics there is a new image of elected woman – one who is confident and takes her decisions independently. Tara during her tenure as Ward Panch of village Sindesar Kalan of Rajsamand district raised her voice against gender discrimination in the Panchayat and campaigned for equal treatment of women members. Since then they sit on chairs along with male members.

*Circumstances are Changing*

In Panchayat politics throughout the country many voluntary organisations are playing an important role in changing the

scenario. Organisations like The Hunger Project are devoted in their role of the representation of women in the Panchayat, thereby strengthening them. Last year in a seminar of women Panch and Sarpanch organised by The Hunger Project in Jaipur, a large number of women representatives met with the authorities who then started to take their problems seriously and today their problems are being solved very efficiently. If changes have been visible with 33% reservation after the last Panchayat elections, with women winning in large numbers from 50% reserved seats as well as non-reserved seats the much awaited golden era in rural areas is not very far to reach.

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## WOMEN ASSUMES THE CHARGE OF PANCHAYAT

Premchand Gandhi

Jat Express, Bi-monthly, 10 July, 2010

First with 33% reservation and now with 50% reservation for women in local bodies, the women in many states including Rajasthan have the opportunity of openly participating in politics. This would have a far reaching effect and the sensitivity of the women would provide local bodies with a new image, because of which not only the politics of the villages, towns and cities, but the priorities of development work would also change. An example in this regard is that of Ward Panch, Shanti Devi of Dudhwali village in Behror block who constructed classrooms in the village school and made the provision of drinking water. The other women representatives are also following in her footsteps and have strived to open *anganwadis*, girls schools, *pucca* roads, health centres etc. in their villages; fundamental issues which were hitherto unimportant in the eyes of male representatives. Being women themselves, they are aware of the numerous obstacles and problems that they have to face on a regular basis.

Reservation in Panchayats has given women enthusiasm and self confidence, because of which they are now able to talk about their rights directly to the higher authorities and overcome the challenges thrown by society. The ward Panch of Mordhala

village of Abu Road, Ms Laxmi Berwa organized a group of 50 women against the village drunks and with the help of the law stopped liquor consumption in the surrounding villages. Similarly the ward Panch of Lunkarsar, Kanta Devi Nayee says that a woman in her village was regularly beaten up by her husband. Kanta saved her from the atrocities meted out by her husband by persuading the Sarpanch to give the wages directly to the woman. Laxmi Berwa has won the seat of Ward Panch unopposed for the third time.

Uma Gurjar of Barh Milakpur in Bansoor Tehsil opposed her marriage at the age of 12 years and married only on attaining the age of 19 years. After her marriage she stopped her husband from drinking. On becoming a Ward Panch she closed the liquor shop in her area. Such is the daring spirit of women representatives, who are taking increasing part in the politics.

Development works in the rural areas have been lying incomplete for several years. This has been partly due to the non-availability of funds and partly because of corruption. Male Sarpanchs did not respect the women ward membersrepresentatives. But if you have confidence, everything is possible. The educated Ward Panch, Ms Nimisha Barot of Chanar village, Abu Road struggled against the male Sarpanch and completed the construction of the community hall within a period of one year at a reasonable cost, not allowing any corruption. In local government politics, where highly educated women like Nimisha are coming as representatives, non literate representatives are trying to educate themselves and undertake development works themselves. From reading resolutions in Panchayat meetings to getting them passed, the women representatives are very active in the Panchayats. In the recent Panchayat elections, a large number of educated women have won the elections.

It is a common perception that shrewd and established local politicians promote their women family members through reserve seats. This is true till a certain extent. What is also true is that women are no longer puppets in the hands of their male partners. Men have started to play a supportive role instead. A new image of the elected women is emerging in politics, an image which gives her self confidence and enthuses her to take her own decisions. Ward Panch of Sindesar Kalan, Ms Tara Begum Mirza of tehsil Railmagra, district Rajasmand opposed caste and gender discrimination at a Panchayat meeting. Together with other women, she fought with the Sarpanch ultimately succeeded in getting equal status for both men and women. This was despite the fact that the Sarpanch was Tara's father in law.

A number of voluntary organisations throughout the country have contributed in politics in the Panchayats. The Hunger Project is one such NGO, which have been playing its role in strengthening the women representatives not only in Rajasthan but also in the rest of the country. It organised a women Sarpanch seminar in Jaipur last year in which 350 Panchs- Sarpanchs representing the 8 districts of the state participated. These women representatives since then have started forming their block and district level federations and relevant authorities are taking them seriously.

In the Rajasthan Panchayat elections of 2010, out of a total of 1,20,000 Panchayat representatives, 60,000 are women representatives. An encouraging sign this time has been the large number of educated women representatives. Several of them have won the elections the fourth time and many have left their jobs with a dream of not only changing the village politics but also its direction.

Sarmi Bai of Abu Road was a ward panch in the previous tenure. But because of her work in the village she was elected the Sarpanch in the recent elections. Experience has taught much to the non literate Sarmi Bai. However, she was eager to learn and has now passed class 5. At present she is preparing for her class 8 exams. She is a tribal woman and she has become an ideal for other tribal women. Several women like the poor tribal Sarmi Bai are rewriting the history of Panchayati Raj in India. The Sarpanch of Oda gram Panchayat, Vardhini Purohit left her job as a lecturer, contested and won the Panchayat election. On taking charge she levied a tax on all tractors carrying sand from her village thereby increasing the revenue collection of her Panchayat. Both the government and NGOs regularly organize training programmes for women representatives at district and block levels to increase their self confidence and at the same time make them aware of their roles and responsibilities. In the coming years, such programmes will contribute towards strengthening Panchayati Raj. A slogan of the Self Help Groups is a sign of the future – ‘Women running households should now run villages and the nation’.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

# SARPANCHES WHO CREATED HISTORY BY GETTING ELECTED WITHOUT SPENDING ANY MONEY

Aruna Roy and Shankar Singh

Vividha features, 12-28 February, 2010

Two women candidates here created history by becoming Sarpanches of the Gram Panchayats respectively of Harmarha and Tilonia in Kishangarh, Ajmer District. Naroti of Harmarha won by 729 votes and Kamla of Tilonia won by a 1000 votes. No candidate from the Dalit communities had ever become a sarpanch in past two rounds of panchayat elections. No Dalit or candidates from OBC communities even participated in the electoral battle for the past fifty years. They contest, lose or win amongst themselves. Tilonia Panchayat has been dominated by just one family since independence. It may have been an open or reserved seat but the Sarpanch had always come from the same family. So how did things change suddenly? Norati and Kamla could not have won the election had there been no reservation. Both of them are from Dalit community. Both of them are aware and informed. They have a good understanding of things, talk with confidence and do not get intimidated by others. They have the skills to explain their stand. They are honest, they are literate.

In most places elections are contested by candidates who lose or win. The voters don't have a third alternative hence they have to vote for one of them and their choice is determined by

caste, gotra, kinship and proximity of the villages and bribes such as alcohol, cash, vehicles, community lunches or dinners. The voter is lured by such considerations and at the end the real winners are not the candidates but things like alcohol or the caste majority. In the case of the same caste, the winner is the gotra. When all equations begin to fail, money wins for power is displayed on the basis of money. But this time round it was not like that. It was a different story altogether.

Norati became a Sarpanch by a large majority of votes. But what was the ground on which she was able to win? The first among them was Norati has a social worker personality which won the voter's support. Norati is a social worker in a barefoot college. She has been actively involved in social work and the research centre in Tilonia and has been working in the village for thirty years. She fought for the implementation of minimum wages schemes in her own village and carried the struggle upto the level of Supreme Court where the people won the case. She joined the movement for the guarantee of employment and the right to information. She travelled far and wide in that connection. She is not formally educated but today she teaches computers. Norati has an excellent understanding and she address thousands of people over the microphone with no trepidation. Driven by her commitment and hardwork and encouraged by the organization and people's co-operation, Norati has come along way.

Norati comes from an ordinary poor family who live in a modest home in the village. The whole village is aware that she fights for the rights of the poor, the downtrodden and the other weaker sections of the society. In a sense she is the perfect candidate, fully qualified for the post of a Sarpanch. She would carry out her responsibilities on her own steam. In most of the other

places where a woman has become Sarpanch, it is her husband who calls the shots in the Panchayat. Taking note of Norati's work and persona, a few prominent people from Harmaha came to Bunker Roy, the Director of the organization and said that they wished to field Norati as a candidate in the election for sarpanch. They knew that once she is elected she would be a Sarpanch and not a puppet on a string in someone else's hands. Her supporters said that Norati was the one who would run the panchayat with the co-operation of the organization. Norati stepped in the election arena with that confidence and started her door to door campaign by talking about development. No 'gur', no 'alcohol' money or other incentives were offered. She solicited votes on the promise of development as she visited house after house. Women and elders of the village gave her full assurance of support. They told her she need not come to their homes over and over again as they were sure of casting their votes in her favour. According to them, she was a candidate after their heart. The villagers even advised her not to spend money but Norati had already resolved not to spend on the election. She would be out and about all day and be completely exhausted by evening. She had even had fever at times but no house in the entire panchayat was left uninvited by her. If she found a house locked she would remember to revisit it when the residents were present. That is how she made contact with her voters. She reached out personally to people without spending money and held out a promise of development. These promises were printed in the manifestos which were distributed amongst people. What more could the voters wish for? They gave their mandate and Norati won. This is not Norati's victory alone. It is the victory of the people who are the real masters of the panchayat. According to her this panchayat will be run by the people, not by Norati. There will be individual committees who will keep an eye on all development work in each village.

They will not let wrong things happen. The panchayat would operate on this assurance. The number of votes with which Norati won far exceeds the number of rupees which were spent on the election. Her victory is being celebrated in every village with drum beats and joyous singing and dancing by women. Villagers are using their own resources to join in the victory celebrations. Norati is being honoured with a *choonar* (ceremonial stole) in each village. One wishes this would be the case everywhere. No need to seek votes by offering incentives such as 'gur' or alcohol. No money distributed and the true winners are the people, not the candidate.

Like Norati, Kamla too has scored a win with a large majority vote. Kamla says she went from door to door asking for votes. She had a car. The only election expense she incurred was the price of petrol. She had not spent more than 3,500/- rupees on the election. Kamla is a brave woman, full of self-confidence. She is recognized by the name Dhokal in the village. That is her pet name. How did she acquire it? She says when she came to Tilonia after marriage, her father-in-law looked at her and said, "She is like dhokla". Since then, everybody has been calling her Dhokal. During the election campaign, she asked some women who were popular in their area and they answered that they were going to vote for Dhokal. So it is Kamla's personality that has been voted to power here and it is the victory of the common people. Everybody knows that she can talk to any officer in authority with confidence. She can run the panchayat, though except for her signature, she knows no reading and writing. She is an aware woman who does not get intimidated by anybody. Hence, she has transcended all stereotypical parameters of elections based on alcohol, money, vehicles, greed, caste and gotra. Kamla looks more anxious after winning and her anxiety is understandable because winning an

election is definitely a struggle but running the Panchayat with integrity is a bigger challenge. The real struggle is now when she will run the panchayat with transparency and honesty. Kamla exhorts the villagers to co-operate in the proper functionings of the panchayat. "I want to work in the area of children's education. I want to move forward. Having become a sarpanch today, I would like to become the pradhan in future." She is quite a politically ambitious woman. Kamla had contested the election of Panchayat Samiti as an independent candidate which she also won.

These gutsy women have become sarpanches in Harmorha and Tilonia panchayats but it is not an easy job to run Gram Panchayats effectively according to them. They want that each paisa of the Rozgar Guarantee should reach the people with complete honesty. The panchayat shoule be open and available to people all the time. All the ten rights of the rozgar guarantee should be observed. All information should be available to everybody. All decisions should be taken with people's participation through the medium of ward sabha and gram sabha. There should be no forgery. Nothing should be done in contravention of rules. Everybody should come to the panchayat without fear. This is an excellent opportunity to run a panchayat with complete transparency because Kamla and Norati have the capability of being able and honest Sarpanchs. It is the people who have to co-operate. If they co-operate sincerely, the panchayat would move forward with honesty. These two panchayats can become the models for the whole country.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Hindi*

## **REAL SARPANCH, NOT A RUBBER STAMP**

Krishna Chauhan

Sandhya Border Times, 13 July, 2010

Under the three layered organization of the state Panchayati Raj system a number of women have contested and won the elections against all odds. Women representatives of the people have given proof of their existence demolishing existing prejudices and myths to traverse the rough terrain between the purdah and panchayat. It is nothing less than a dream come true for women in rural areas who have been living a life of hard work at home as well as labouring relentlessly in fields and granaries and surviving in a male dominated, patriarchal system like second class citizens. Rising above illiteracy and exploitative social traditions these women have become Panch, Sarpanch or Zila-Pramukh in many places. Women in rural areas are not indifferent to the idea of participating in activities related to social responsibilities. Women representatives of people have demolished another myth, and that is they'll have no real power even if they are elected. Would they be able to perform their roles well? Right from the start they had been subjected to barbs, taunts, rude behavior, threats and neglect at every step. But the scenario has changed with the recent elections of Panchayati Raj. The pleasant surprise is that a large number of women have been re-elected as Mukhiyas of the

panchayat and they are participating in the governance of the villages.

Sri Ganganagar, village Guwad: Women who had been living behind veils enclosed within the four walls of their homes are now functioning efficiently in the administration and the presence of educated and aware women in politics has led to a slow but steady progress in the development of rural areas which is reflected in the changing political scenario of the villages. However in some cases after winning elections in the name of women, the male members of their families actually call the shots. But several educated and enlightened women have broken this wrong impression by becoming Sarpanch and Upsarpanch. The graduate Sarpanch of Choonavad, Sudarshan Batra says that Women's Reservation Bill had benefitted women. Women should participate in politics on their own strength. It is not prohibited to seek the help of their families but they should take political decisions themselves.

Desire to do something special: If you think women cannot do anything, you are sadly mistaken. Possessed of a zeal to work, high ambition and ample self confidence women are not languishing within the four walls of the house anymore. Women of the area have been dreaming of and aspiring for better things. As a women Sarpanch Manjit Kaur of village Koni, situated on the border of India and Pakistan has returned for a second term. The intelligent electorate here does not have blind faith in anyone. They understand the importance of votes and cast them with care. According to Priyavrat Jaat, the Panchayat Sachiv, the Sarpanch is a simple, honest and dynamic person. She has fulfilled the expectations of the villagers. She has constructed pucca water courses and ponds in the area and store to solve the problems of electricity and water. Besides she

is always prepared to create awareness about issues like girls' educations and female foeticide. For these reasons the villagers have re-elected her giving her another opportunity to govern the village and she is performing her duties efficiently.

A burning desire for village development: Leela Devi Bauri, Woman Sarpanch of Odhki village situated near the border has proved wrong the belief that men rule in the name of village women. Leela Devi presides over the panchayat and attends all meetings of the Panchayat Samiti. She spearheaded the struggle for the demand for an overbridge was forwarded. She is the only Sarpanch lending her support to the male Sarpanches in their struggle. Determined to find solutions to the problems of the villagers she is resolutely moving in that direction. According to the Pragati Prasa officer of the Panchayati Samiti, Gurdarshan Singh Ramanna, this woman Sarpanch is extremely dedicated to the welfare of the villagers. Immediately after taking charge of office, she expedited the process of solving the problems of the villagers and carrying out other development work. She stated that it was her ardent desire to encourage education amongst women, to make women join the centres for tailoring to establish new aanganwadi centres to provide women new employment opportunities and to make them aware of the importance of economic independence. She has arranged to get maximum employment opportunities to the women in Narega and been to it that workers get paid on time.

Women's representation in Panchayats: There are about 2,50,000 panchayats in the country. They have 28,10,000 women representatives. After increasing the reservation to 50 % the number of women representatives has gone up considerably. Half the governance is now in the hands of women and the winds of change have slowly been bringing

about a transformation. At present there are 8 Pradhans and Up-Pradhans, 160 Panchayat Samiti and 31 Zila Parishad Directors. After the implementation of women's reservation bill there are 60 women sarpanches, 80 Panchayat Samiti and 15 Zila Parishad women directors. There are 3424 Ward Panches. Elected women panches are part of this group. The Village governance has the participation of approximately two thousand women representatives of the people.

Women's representation in Panchayats: Women's participation in the development of villages is truly admirable. Women now attend panchayat meetings. At the same time, increasing participation of women in the training programmes proves that they have now started keeping pace with men. Women are gradually becoming more and more aware.



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## WHAT IF WE ARE UNEDUCATED? WE TOO CAN RUN THE PANCHAYAT

Lakshmilal (Lakhan)

Pakshik Yuvak Current, 10 July, 2010

Dalit and *adivasi* women in Panchayati Raj, Rajasthan have become Panch and Sarpanch and they are working with confidence. Not only have they been bringing about development but they are also playing an important role in Panchayati Raj. Women whose lives were confined to a domestic sphere are now the representatives of the people of their villages. Rising above the tyranny of the past, they have started fighting for their rights. Panchayati Raj has given them a new direction towards empowerment. Rajput women were traditionally kept in purdah. Their existence was like birds in gilded cages. But that tradition has now been demolished. They have benefitted the most through Panchayati Raj. It has boosted their morale so much that their age old silence has been replaced by the most eloquent voice. In the wake of reservation for women half of the Gram Panchayats in the country have assured seats for women.

Today women Sarpanches and Ward Panches are working towards the development of their villages. Although they are still subjected to discrimination, taunts and jeers at several places, they are resisting them as they strive to forge ahead.

“Education is a big advantage but it is not true that the illiterate people cannot run a panchayat,” says a zealous Norati Devi of Gram Panchayat Harmadha, District Ajmer. She has never attended a school but she can operate a computer. Is the need for higher education if a Gramsabha accepts proposals/projects, exercises complete transparency and utilises funds allocated for development work? A Gram Panchayat in the right hands ensures the development of women; she has fought for minimum wages, has been involved with social work and the research centre for a long time. Right to information, minimum wages in accordance with law and the struggle for NREGA are some of the areas in which she is actively involved. After being elected, the first thing she did was to look into old accounts and then assumed charge of Sarpanch according to the format of guidelines as laid down by the State Government. When the Secretary did not hand over the charge according to the format, she complained to the Secretary, Administration. The Secretary eventually handed over the charge according to the format. According to this format the Secretary had to submit, before handing over charge to the newly elected Sarpanch, complete details about existing amount of money in the bank account, how many certificates of completion have been received for the work and the number of projects in progress at the moment.

Firm resolve and confidence are true instruments of achievement. Take for instance Sarmi Bai Girasia, Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat, Nichlagarh Abu Road. A Ward Panch for five years, she used to cook, clean, take care of children and even worked in the fields. 15 years back a movement towards an increase in the minimum wages for *tendu* leaves pluckers was initiated against the contractors. Sarmi Bai too had joined that movement. That was the first time she had left the house to go and join other people. The success of the

movement left a positive impression on Sarmi Bai. Her self confidence grew and she became involved in peoples' issues. The illiterate Sarmi Bai firmly resolved to get some education. She began to learn reading and writing with the inspiration of her colleagues of Jan Chetan Sanstha and passed class 5. Aware of the importance of education Sarmi bai is now preparing to appear for her class 8 exams. Sarmi had achieved quite a few things for people's welfare during her term as ward panch in the Nichlagarh Panchayat. She specially focuses on right to information, midday meals, Public Distribution System and pension scheme.

Lakshmi Bai of Sirohi has actively and continuously been exercising her authority for the development of her village. Lakshmi Bai is the ward panch of Gram Panchayat, Morthala. She says that knowledge of rights leads automatically to self confidence. She has been a ward panch three times in a row. Being an active and aware woman she had been elected unanimously every time. Her nomination was filed for the ward panch in time. After the deadline was over, someone from the village tried to file the nomination of another woman. Lakshmi Bai objected. The Returning Officer accepted the other woman's nomination. Lakshmi Bai took him to task saying, "I know the rules. The deadline is over. No one can file a nomination now." Only then the Returning Officer obliged by returning the nomination.

Hanja Devi is the Sarpanch of Bant Panchayat. She hasn't studied and can only sign her name. She is childless. There was a reserved seat for an adivasi woman on which she contested and won the election. After that she started going to the Gram Panchayat. Upsarpanch and the secretary gave no importance to Hanja Devi. She was made to sit where people remove their

shoes. After participating in the training programme for women Panches and Sarpanches organised by Sharad Sanstha, she became aware of her rights. She resolved to fight for women's development and her own rights. When she returned to the Panchayat after attending the training programme she went and occupied her chair. That annoyed the Panches and even her husband. Efforts were made to dislodge her from the chair but they proved futile. She refused to get off the chair and asked the Gram Panchayat to pass the proposal of removing the liquor shop situated opposite the Gram Panchayat. The ward panches were stunned by her audacity. Uncouth bullies of the village proclaimed that she had violated the norms of propriety by sitting on a chair. But that did not affect her for she is determined and fearless. She has also raised her voice against the attitude of the Secretary. People try to unnerve and humiliate her by calling 'banjh' (a barren woman) which upsets her a little but she says that the Panchayat is like her child. She doesn't want money for herself. She wants to work for the development of the people.

They have got reservation but at several places women Ward Panches and Sarpanches have to put up a fight against the unbridled fury of these tyrants. But women too are determined to put up the toughest resistance and to tame the fury of their antagonists.

Vidya Bai is from Sahariya, a caste called Adim Janjati. She is the Sarpanch of village Rajpur. Her parents gave her no education. She never dreamt she would be a Sarpanch one day. This miracle was brought about by the fact that the post of Sarpanch was reserved for a scheduled caste woman. A number of people in the village encouraged Vidya Bai to contest the election which she did, and won. She acquired information and

knowledge about functioning of aanganwadis, village health committee, public distribution system, rights and responsibilities of being a Sarpanch through various workshops and training programmes arranged by different organisations.

Vidya Bai tells us that now she goes to inspect aanganwadis and checks whether the children are getting nutritious food or not, whether the expectant mothers and children are getting vaccinations or not. If the aanganwadis are not kept clean, she takes the concerned workers to task. After a recent inspection Vidya Bai discovered the irregularities committed by Amit Gupta during the construction of the gravel road under Mahanagar Scheme. He had been marking proxy attendance for five people for fifteen days. She demanded that he should be dismissed by the Development Officer.

Many men cannot tolerate women becoming Sarpanchs. They say that women are unfit for politics. Vidya Bai reacts strongly to such allegations and says, “What do we have to do with politics? My job is to see that the government funds are spent for the development of the village and to find solutions for the problems of the villages.”

Upsarpanch Vipin Kirad wants to dominate Vidya Bai. After becoming Upsarpanch he went to the extent of telling the villagers that he would do all the work of the panchayat himself. After the elections, during a meeting the Sarpanch was sitting with the ward panches on white sheets spread on the ground. The Upsarpanch who had initially been sitting with the others on the floor, got up and occupied the chair of the Sarpanch, Vidya did not like it. She said, “Get off my chair. I may be a Sahrin but I am the Sarpanch. You are the Upsarpanch. Please keep within your limits.” The Upsarpanch

bristled at a Sahrin women talking to him like that and retorted angrily, “do you think you are the lady collector, you Saharati?” There was a majority of Kirad caste in the quorum and nobody opposed the Sarpanch. Vidya Bai complained to the District collector about the matter. She also participates in the NREGA discussions held in Jaipur. During the NREGA discussions she complained about the Upsarpanch to the Panchayati Raj Minister and Secretary, Administration. The Upsarpanch does not abuse her anymore but he keeps making false allegations against her. Vidya Bai says she is non-literate but she does not put her signature on a paper unless she fully understands its contents. She has recently started learning to read and write.

Sunita Rajavat, ward panch, of the Gram Panchayat of Vanasthali says, “So what if I am a woman? I’m not going to let men have their way.” She has contested and won the election from ward 2. Sunita Rajavat attends quorum meetings without a “ghoonghat” (veil) to discuss the problems of the ward and to chalk out proposals. After raising the problem of drinking water several times she submitted a proposal for the installation of a handpump which was accepted. When the boring machine for the hand pump was bought, some influential residents of the village tried to get the hand pump installed near their cattle sheds. On hearing their intentions, Sunita Rajavat, accompanied by women from the ward reached there to prevent digging for installation of the handpump. She asserted that it is women who have to fetch and carry water. Why should they be made to walk that distance? The hand pump should be put up in the middle of the mohalla so that they can fill the water conveniently. However, the influential people did not agree. By then Sunita’s husband Pradip Rajavat had also arrived. The troublemakers began to throw stones at him. But Sunita remained undeterred. Soon the Sarpanch and more women

from the mohalla arrived and a stiff resistance was offered to the influential people of the village. Eventually the handpump was installed where Sunita and other women from the ward wanted it to be. Earlier, the women had to carry water from long distances. A handpump in the mohalla has solved their problem. Not only that, when Sunita heard that a male ward panch had been appointed in the Clean Village and Health Committee in place of a women, she opposed it and placed it before the quorum. She argued the case firmly on the basis of rules. Ultimately the male ward panch who was appointed was replaced by an elected woman ward panch.

Women are taking unprecedented strides on the path of progress and development. Mother Teresa in social work, Kiran Bedi in the Police and Kalpana Chawla in space are big names now. Currently, Manju Rajpal, the District Collector, Bhilwara, and Tina Soni, SDO Dungarpur have been doing commendable work and setting examples of women's power and practical wisdom. Women from different fields are setting new standards of participation in administration and development in the present times.

*Ab na mudengi na hum rukengi  
Urh chali ek ursay baad khule gagan mein*

(We won't look back, we won't stop/ after ages we have begun to fly free in the wide open sky)



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## FROM BEHIND THE VEIL, TOWARDS POWER

Lata Srimali

Rajasthan Statement, 15 July, 2010

Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 was start of a silent revolution in local governance. This was the government's first step towards women's empowerment. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment when women in Rajasthan came to public office for the first time (1994-1999) in different levels of Panchayati Raj as Ward Panchs and Sarpanchs/Pradan they experienced great difficulty in taking decisions. Traditional village customs of wearing a veil (ghoongat), illiteracy, male dominated society, lack of freedom to speak their minds and ignorance of the law pulled them back.

Illiteracy, lack of training and experience led to the floundering of the system. Allegations of corruption and no-confidence motions rocked the system for the first five years. This was expected in the initial stages but it is no longer the same. Learning from experience, women representatives of the people have planted their feet on the ground. Women from scheduled caste and scheduled tribes, even though lacking in education have carried out the welfare work for the rural societies as people's representatives from the ward to the highest levels. Their work has set significant milestones in the development of society. Some notable examples are stated below:

Amri Bai, an illiterate woman from a scheduled tribe was elected Ward Panch of Gram Panchayat Kesuli, Panchayat Samiti Khamnor, District Rajsamand. One day the BDO went to the extent of saying, "How would you function? You can't even read or write". This remark stung her but at the same time generated a passion for educating herself. She got support from The Hunger Project, an NGO working in the area, which helped to her acquire knowledge regarding the Panchayat rules. This enabled her to provide nutritious food to the children, jobs cards to the people under NREGA, widow pension and issuing BPL cards after making inquiries about schemes. As a result Amri Bai was elected unopposed on an open seat in the Panchayat elections of 2010. Other noteworthy names in the same category are Sarpanch Ratan Soni of Gram Panchayat at Samal, Panchayat Samiti Khamnor, Ward Panch Manju Salvi of Panchayat Kotharia, Sarpanch Maya Paliwal of Gram Panchayat Kesuli who despite being illiterate, having little knowledge and almost no co-operation from the administration have accomplished major things in the areas of girls education, maternity care scheme, construction of dams and other development works.

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj has been dotted with problems and challenges. Despite being talented and capable, initially women may not have worked well but bitter experiences and hostile circumstances have gradually given way to a more positive picture. Viewing their work qualitatively we can say that in spite of being unlettered and lacking untrained they have performed well in the areas of construction of dams, widow pension and issuance of BPL cards. This has been because of their hardwork and honesty.

Looking at the morale and the desire to achieve, one feels that there is no stopping these women. Looking at Sarpanch and Ward Panchs Amri Bai, Ratan Soni and others and their achievements, it is evident that there is a renaissance afoot not only in rural democracy but also in gender democracy.

Women representatives of the people have proved that though a straw is merely alive it can change the direction of the wind. They have a long way to go but looking at them one can say that representatives of Panchayati Raj are firmly determined to create a clean society and develop the villages with hard work, sincerity and honesty. To quote a poet in this context -

*“Ho iradon mein haqiqat, hauslon mein Zalzak  
Aasman jhuk kar tumhare paon taka a jaayega  
Dekh lena yeh Kinara nao taka a jaayega”*

(True intensions and powerful aspirations would move the heavens to fall at your feet/ you'll see one day that the bank of the river itself would come upto the boat, instead of the boat sailing to it)



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## **RIGHT TO INFORMATION HAS BECOME AN EFFECTIVE WEAPON FOR WOMEN**

Amarendra Tiwari

Dainik Jagran, 11 April, 2010

**M**uzaffarpur: The rules of Right to Information are proving to be a weapon for the women representatives. Women public representatives of Madhwan/Marwan and Kanti Panchayat have formed a federation of their own. They have grouped together and organized their own movements on different issues themselves.

How the Federation was formed: Ramdha, the moving force behind organising the women in a group says that after 2006 panchayat elections it was revealed that at many places the male mukhiyas did not give importance to the ward members about development projects. An initiative was taken to prevent violation of people's rights and to bring about transparency in the implementation of the plans. The initiative acquired the form of a federation. Madhwan/Marhwan and Kanti block have become a model for the entire district.

Assuming their posts after the elections in Kanti, Upmukhiya of Bahuana Kamni Pandey, Upmukhiya of Dhamauli Lakshmi Devi, and ward member of Sherukanhi Parvati Devi and Shushankapur Madhwan/Marwan Lalita Devi and Jeevan Khurd Ward Member Shahnaz Bano and Lalpari Devi, all

office bearers of federations have been performing their duties responsibly. They hold meetings in the block office every month. Problems brought to them are discussed and plans of action are determined to resolve them.

Issues on which they won: Mukhiya of Mukhdumpur Kodatia Panchayat was not giving information about the development projects in progress at that. Women of the federation organized themselves in a group and knocked at the door of the Chief Minister. Their demand was met. In Harchanda Panchayat women had to go from pillar to post for birth certificates. It was brought to the notice of Kanti Pramukh's office. A gherao was organized. It worked and people are now relieved. In the areas of public distribution system and nutrition schemes in Saadatpur, women have formed a strategy to fight those who refuse to accept applications in the Block Office.



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## **WOMEN SAY WE HAVE HIGHER GOALS – WE ARE SECOND TO NONE**

Ashutosh Sinha

Aaj, 14 July, 2010

**M**adhubani: A change is perceptible in the society in the wake of the three-level election. 33% and now 50% reservation has now enabled women to leave the confines of their homes and participate in the socio-political and the financial spheres of the society. They are topping the lists of successful candidates in matriculation, intermediate and other exams. Ranti panchayat is situated in the heartland of Mithilanchal on the Indo-Nepal border just 5 km from the district head quarters in the Rajnagar Block. This Panchayat has a population of about 6000 people, most of the families being poor and from backward classes. Sandhya Devi became a member of the Panchayat Samiti after winning the 2006 panchayat elections. She belongs to the Paswan-Dusadh caste. She has not received any formal education but she has learnt reading and writing after being associated with the Gyan Vijay Samiti and Saksharta Abhiyan. An example of women's empowerment, the middle-aged Sandhyaji humming "hum honge kamyab (we shall overcome)", is driven by enthusiasm and a desire to achieve her cherished goals. She has been going from strength to strength and has been elected the Block Pramukh of Rajnagar. She plays an important role in

the implementation of all schemes at the block level. She has paid special attention on health education, especially girls' education, in her panchayat. She is leading a campaign against traditional practices like child marriage, unhygienic sanitary conditions and illiteracy. Almost 100% children in the panchayat are attending school. She has spearheaded a movement for education by opening three new schools in her panchayat. She has established 8 aanganwadi kendras for children. She said that it was tough to convince guardians to send their children to school in the beginning. Instead of sending them to school, the guardians of girls wanted to send them out to graze the goats, look after the cattle and work in the fields, to earn money. They forwarded the logic of "what is the use of educating girls?" Sandhya Devi went around the slums of her Panchayat to spread awareness about the importance of education and the facilities being offered by the government. She visited parents in their homes and told them that if they sent their girls to school, the child will get an allowance of Rs. 200 for the uniform. She also enlightened them about *khichri* and other food served in the *aanganwadi* centre. That led people to start sending their children to school gradually. Elected Block Pramukh from Ranti Panchayat, Sandhya Devi lives in Divadh Toli. She says she has seen the aged and the children dying of minor illnesses in her neighbourhood. Illnesses like malnutrition, TB etc were causes of death in her panchayat. Now she organises camps on health, hygiene, cleanliness and vaccination to create awareness about their importance in the villages. With the collaboration of district administration, District Magistrate, Deputy Director of Development and the Civil Surgeon she has had a 6 bed health centre sanctioned in her Panchayat. Asha, Amol Devi, Pinki, Sanju and Rekha are workers involved in the area of health. They say that Block Pramukh Sandhyaji's tireless efforts have led to make women understand the importance of education.

She also plays an important role in encouraging inter caste marriages. Umesh Paswan, a resident of Paswan Toli ward no. 7 wanted to marry Sonam Devi of Mochi caste whom he had brought to Ranti. But his parents threw them out. Taking note of the young couple's wishes, Sandhyaji made arrangements for their wedding. Afterwards his parents accepted the wedding. Sandhyaji inspires women towards economic independence and self reliance. With her cooperation a dozen or so support groups are already operational in Ranti Panchayat. She helps them get bank loans to make Mithila paintings, lahati and tikuli.

Similarly, there is Saeeda Bano of Sakri, the Zila Parshad elected from Pandol area, ward number 28. Inspite of being from Akliat community she has forged ahead, casting away obsolete customs and traditions and getting elected as Zila Parshad twice in a row. Saeeda Bano tells us that she is the first graduate of her community. She has done substantial work in the areas of education, health and economic independence amongst the Dalits and women in the Akliat Samaj who are caught up in obsolete customs and traditions, caste system and a medieval mindset. For that reason, women and elders of her area and her Panchayat give her almost a hundred percent support, respect and affection. As a result, majority of children from Muslim families have started sending their children to school. Her active participation in the Pulse Polio programme made it successful. She visits Muslim slums of her area to caution people against addiction to and the need for abolition of drugs and drinking. She informs people that drinking is a taboo in Islam which has a positive impact on men and women of their community. Saeeda Bano told us that she has opened Kasturba Kanya Vidyalaya in collaboration with the district administration. She goes to Muslim Dalit slums to disseminate information about

the incentives and useful schemes the government is offering for children who are going to school. Her efforts have started yielding fruit. You can now see young burqa clad girls from Akliat community riding bicycles to school. This is definitely the influence of the women representatives of the three level Panchayat elections. Influence of their exertions is now visible on the slums.

Because of the above reasons Saeeda ji has been elected Zila Parshad a second time inspite of stiff opposition from her political opponent Naiyar Azam. She is a source of inspiration amongst women, especially Akliat women of the area.



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## A SPARK OF FLAME

Binodini Roul

The Khabara, 7 May, 2010

*Like any other ordinary person, even they used to be confined to their homes. Education was little. Time was spent attending to children, ladle and stove. But then opportunity knocked on their door. They became people's representatives. Many laughed at them; ridiculed them; "a goat cannot thrash grain", they said. Some even derided them as 'dummy representatives'. A few days went by. Then, people got a whiff of their indomitable spirit. They were not ones to go back on their promises to people. Public service became their measure of work. They were actually not 'weak'. They had an inherent strength which lay hidden in them. And when this spark of flame spread out, everyone was left wide-eyed. Following is about a similar spark of flame.*

**G**angabada Gram Panchayat is one of the most inaccessible and neglected Panchayats not only in the block of Rayagada but in the entire district of Gajapati. And because of a history of Naxalite activities in the area, even Government officials are hesitant to visit the Panchayat. There is no direct road to reach the Block Office. One has to travel 60 kms via Andhra Pradesh to reach the Block Office at Rayagada. To Become Sarpanch in this difficult Block is a challenge for any person and more so for a woman.

Into such a situation stepped in Sumitra Sabar. Though the position of Sarpanch was reserved for women still Sumitra had to contest with 4 others. And winning the seat strengthened her resolve to improve the living conditions of her constituents. She has studied only up to class 7. But during her tenure as Sarpanch she has demonstrated extraordinary courage and confidence while discharging her duties. Drinking water was one of the biggest problems in most villages of her area. She pursued the matter with the District Water and Sanitation Mission and the Collector's Office and has been successful in getting piped water in at least 70% of the villages by now.

Not only this, she has also tried to help provide livelihood support to people by bringing about improvements in the implementation of NREGA in her Panchayat. Payments were faulty and late which through her efforts have become regular. With her efforts most of the villages in Gangabada Gram Panchayats are getting electrified under the Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification Mission.

But the most important and challenging thing that Sumitra has achieved is opposing the construction of an irrigation dam by the neighbouring state government of Andhra Pradesh. If the dam would have been constructed it would have submerged three villages in Gangabada Panchayat and several acres of land in surrounding areas as well. But Sumitra as Sarpanch galvanized and led her community in launching a successful agitation against it and made it an inter-state issue. It was due to her initiative that an issue of such magnitude could catch the attention of the powers that be and now the construction of the dam has been stopped.

In her effort to achieve all-round development of her Gram Panchayats, she has also seen to it that people are able to get

access to basic needs of food, health and livelihood; hence, she has tried to get maximum number of actual beneficiaries to avail pension under different social and food security schemes in her Panchayat.

These small steps undertaken by a class 7 educated and holding public office for the first time is surely an inspiration not only for her colleagues but also to society at large.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Oriya*

## SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATIVE - PREMALATA

Binodini Roul  
The Khabara, 24 May, 2010

*Opportunity does not come twice. Only those who put the opportunity at hand to good use become examples for others. Using this one opportunity, they build their own success step by step. Of course, they also get the support of others in this. An example of a successful peoples' representative who has climbed the ladder of success by taking advantage of an opportunity is Premalata Raita.*

**S**he was once known by another's identity to people. Her identity used to be 'someone's daughter,' 'someone's sister', 'someone's daughter-in-law' etc. But now everything has changed. She has built her own identity now. Today no one is calling her 'so and so's daughter' etc, rather are calling her 'Our Sarpanch' with respect. The names that were used once to identify her, are now attached to her's as - 'Sarpanch's so and so' etc. Having created such a unique place for herself in such a short span of time is Sarpanch, Premalata Raita.

Premalata Raita is the Sarpanch of the Panchayat of R.Udayagiri in the Block of R.Udayagiri in the district of Gajapati. Both Government officials and the public respect her as a Sarpanch. In the previous term she was a ward member. Because of her simplicity, good behavior and more importantly, willingness

to help others, she was persuaded by many to contest for the post of Sarpanch, even though it entailed a contest with eight others. Though she has studied only up to the class 9, this has not posed any limitation on her becoming an effective leader.

What, one may ask is unique about this particular panchayat, when there are over 5000 panchayats in the State. The uniqueness of R.Udayagiri Panchayat is that unlike most other Panchayats, it opens every day and Premalata has made it a point to attend the Panchayat office every day to attend to the peoples' needs and grievances. Indeed, there would be just a few peoples' representatives today who would care to serve the people since they have been elected by them.

Realizing that education is an important key to development, and that by educating and nurturing children one can help usher in holistic development, she undertook to regularize the functioning of the local schools and ICDS centres in her Panchayat. Fixing particular dates for supervising different centres and schools every month, she visits schools and ICDS centres in her Panchayat. Because of these regular visits, there have been significant improvements in these institutions, where truancy of students and teachers alike have stopped, and the health and nutrition needs of children are taken good care of.

After improving the state of education in her panchayat, she turned her eyes towards improving the quality of life of her constituents. The sale of the Rs. 2/- per kg PDS rice meant for BPL families was irregular in her Panchayat and there was a lot of manipulation in the price, quantity and quality provided to the mostly gullible people in the panchayat. Many deserving families were also deliberately deprived from getting it. But with her strict monitoring the scheme has since been regularized,

and many hitherto deprived but actual beneficiaries are now availing it.

Similarly, she has also ensured that all the needy beneficiaries eligible under various govt. welfare schemes get food and other social security benefits in her Panchayat. She also personally visits government offices such as the Revenue office, Block Office etc. which, fortunately for her, are located nearby for pursuing and getting necessary clearance for various proposals and schemes meant for her people.

It is due to these efforts that she has become a favourite of all, and because of this popularity and leadership quality of hers, she has now been made the President of Panchayat Mahila Pratinidhi Maha Sangha of R. Udayagiri Block. That Premalata's service as a successful peoples' representative will be a source of inspiration to other women representatives, is something everyone will agree.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Oriya*

## NO NEED TO BE VEILED NOW

Kalpana Mishra

AROMV, 23 May, 2010

*In our society, it is considered virtuous for women to remain veiled within the confines of their homes. But even as this opinion is fast on the wane in urban areas, in villages though, women still have to contend with a lot of restrictions on their mobility. However, since 33% of the seats in the Panchayats were reserved for women, they have been able to come out in large numbers. Not only this, it has been seen that in many instances these peoples representatives have discharged their duties with greater success and efficiency than men. The women representatives of Odisha have justified the reservation of seats for women by their exemplary service in the panchayats. Accordingly, the district of Dhenkanal in Odisha has also benefited immensely from such women representatives. By dint of their willpower and able leadership, a lot of villages have seen great progress in the areas of education, health, sanitation, drinking water supply, forest protection etc. Through their efforts benefits from government schemes and programs have been reaching all sections of the people...*

**N**ayana Patra is a Ward Member in the village of Maluagoda, Baruan Gram Panchayat, Bhuban Block, in the district of Dhenkanal. Before becoming a Ward Member, the still unlettered Nayana learnt to read and write through sheer grit and will power. But to make every child in the village literate

has always been her main concern. Since 2002, when she first became the Ward Member of Maluagoda, she has been working towards this aim. Attendance of children in the village school was very less. Nayana prepared a list of all the children in the village. She went to houses of those children who didn't attend school and convinced both parents and children about the merits of education. Her efforts bore fruit and slowly, attendance levels in the local school increased and the drop-out rate also fell drastically. What the government couldn't achieve even after investing huge amount of resources, Nayana could due to her hard work and dedication. Where only a handful of children used to study, now the attendance in the school has gone up to 115. Moreover, this school is also now functioning as a boarding school for 110 tribal and dalit children. Says Nayana, "This school is my dream and aspiration; I forget myself when I come here."

Women in Maluagoda never used to attend the Palli Sabha. Now due to Nayana's efforts, many women are participating in these meetings. She has also undertaken protection of the local forest by gathering together these women. Organizing women in her own and surrounding villages into 15 SHGs, she has enabled around 150 people to be economically self-sufficient. Being but a ward member, who figures at the lowest rung of the Panchayatiraj system, she has nevertheless executed all government programs and schemes successfully. Whether it's the construction of a culvert in the village road, or of the school building, in every activity, Nayana's role has been noteworthy. Setting up a tube well in the school, she was able to solve the drinking water problem there. Around 25 landless people in her village can never forget Nayana's contribution to their well-being; this is because she was the one who single handedly undertook all the steps required to provide them with land.

Says Nayana emotionally, “God has made us human- so that we may do some good in this world. So before leaving this life, let’s do something worthwhile seeing which the next generation may be inspired likewise.”



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Oriya*

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP - MORE EMPOWERED THAN MEN

Dinesh Das

The Dharitri, 6 July, 2010

*Women are capable, not weak, rather, self-determining. That women are more caring, laborious and far-sighted than men has been made clear through instances from mythology and history to events in modern times. Starting from the Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati in our mythology, to Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi and Odisha's first woman Chief Minister, Nandini Satpathy in our history, their personalities have been models beyond compare than that of most men. However, women's effort to forge ahead overcoming persisting obstacles in this patriarchal society is surely to be welcomed. Women representatives have given a fitting reply to critics of women's reservation in the Panchayatiraj system. That women's leadership is more empowered than men has been proved effectively by them. Sisirika Amanta (48) is an example of such a leader.*

**B**eing elected thrice consecutively from Kantamila Gram Panchayat, Hindol Block in the district of Dhenkanal in the 1997, 2002, and 2007 PRI elections, proves Sisirika's leadership and competence. Even though she had contested from a reserved seat in 1997, subsequently she fought against male candidates in the 2002 and 2007 elections, and won convincingly. From 1997 onwards, the G.P of Kantamila saw

rapid progress in the fields of health, education, sanitation, irrigation, road connectivity, women empowerment, economic development along side youth involvement in the overall development of the panchayat under the leadership of Sisirika, testifying to her successful and far-sighted leadership skills.

#### *Nothing Happens Without Education*

Sisirika had realized that progress is not possible without education. Thereupon began efforts to get all the children into school. Right from preparing lists of children staying away from school, she also attempted to find out the reasons for not attending. And taking time out, she led them by hand to school. Some children didn't have books and some, uniforms, so she gave these out of her own resources and made them go to school. Making time, she also teaches some of them in her own house. And when they get sufficiently interested in studies, she sends them to school. Not only this, she also monitors the local school and Anganwadis regularly and finds ways to solve problems that arise.

#### *Priority to Health and Sanitation*

Sisirika is quite watchful about the health of the panchayat residents. As the President of the Village Health Committee, she prioritizes implementation of all government health programs and schemes. Starting from Pulse Polio, DEC, DOTS, to institutional deliveries, she monitors all such activities watchfully. If required, she even spends her own money to help any poor patients. She dreams of setting up a primary health centre in her village. She has identified a space for it and while on a trip to New Delhi to attend training, she even met the Union Health Minister to press her demand.

Along side, making efforts to improve the sanitation in her village she visits every home to raise awareness to construct toilets, and has been successful in providing toilets in about 30% of the houses.

*Road Connectivity Facilitates Higher Education*

Higher secondary education has been made possible in Kantamila G.P. Earlier; students had to traverse 25 Kms. to the neighboring district headquarters of Anugul to attend high school, which thwarted many a student. Hence studies had to be stopped after high school. To solve this problem Sisirika set about repairing and re-building a connecting road that had been planned earlier. After completion, the distance between Kantamila and Anugul came down to 10 Kms. As a result, children could stay at home and cycle to Anugul to pursue higher education. Not only education, due to this road, even essential health care could be availed by the residents of Kantamila in Anugul.

*Employment increased, Water supplied to farmlands*

Residents of Kantamila depend mostly on agriculture. But lack of adequate irrigation facilities and disuse of minor irrigation projects made people depend on the monsoon to grow a single Kharif crop in a year. People had no work for 9 months in a year. To solve this problem, Sisirika started renovation of a pond spread over 40 acres in the panchayat. Due to this 700 to 800 acres of land could get enough water. This apart, by leasing the local pond for fishing, she has been able to ensure a steady income of more than Rs. 35,000/- for the panchayat annually.

But she has not remained content with this. Efforts to make Kantamila economically self-reliant and to raise enough

resources for meeting any exigencies without depending on anyone else continue without fail. Her abiding wish to realize many other dreams like these has kept her active, she says. And the cooperation of the panchayat people has lent support and inspiration to her. For this wisdom, leadership skills and competence of Sisirika, PIPAR, a local organization has felicitated her with the “Nandini Devi Samman” in 2009.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Oriya*

## SANITATION FAIRY – PRATIMA

Bimal Krushna Thamb

The Khabara, 9 July, 2010

*“Where shall we get a bucketful of water from, when we make do with only a mug?” was the question of panchayat residents to Sarpanch Pratima Behera. When Pratima Behera Sarpanch, Gobara Gram Panchayat, Talcher Block, in the district of Anugul, tried to implement the Total Sanitation Program in her panchayat, she was faced with such questions like this. However, she did not lose heart but strove to raise awareness of people with greater determination. And in this mission, she took the help of the women Self Help Groups to spread the message widely. At last, her dream was fulfilled; from 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2007 to 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2008, she had helped construct 1,012 household latrines for which she was awarded the “Parimal Mitra” Prize and a cash award of Rs. 100,000/- by the State Government.*

Elected for the second time as Sarpanch, Pratima is only 38 years old. She had first won the Sarpanch seat in 2002. As a dalit woman in politics, she has had to struggle a lot. Initially, for the hitherto housebound Pratima, her husband Pabitra Behera, who was the former Sarpanch of Gobara, helped her discharge her duties. Thereafter, through her sense of responsibility and sheer will power, Pratima involved herself in all development activities in her panchayat. However, alongside, she had also resolved to make her panchayat a ‘totally clean’ one. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2005, which is also celebrated as Gandhi Jayanti, she

called a meeting of the panchayat residents to discuss this issue. Since there was a problem in availability of water, the people questioned her as to what use will the toilets be. While they are currently managing with only a mug of water; where can they get buckets full to use them? “The government is giving Rs. 1200/- for constructing toilets in every home to keep you and your families healthy. And you will need to add only Rs. 300/- to avail of this,” Pratima had explained, and eventually succeeded in persuading them. Everyone vowed to make Gobara Gram Panchayat a completely “nirmal” (clean) panchayat that day and no one has looked back after that.

And not just sanitation, she has also been addressing health and livelihood support for women by forming Self Help Groups. At present about 78 SHGs are functioning in the panchayat. Women are availing loans to rear cattle and make dry food items like *papad* and *wadis* etc. Pratima has taken a lot of steps to bring women from BPL categories to the mainstream of society. When she took charge as Sarpanch, only 36 beneficiaries had been given pensions. Now the list has gone up to 221. 70 people have been allotted Indira Awas houses. While 91 people have benefited from the Antyodaya Yojana, 7 have been included in the Annapurna Yojana. Even under the NREGA program, Pratima has been able to provide two square meals a day to many people. Till date she has spent about Rs. 27 lakh under the scheme. She also hasn't lagged behind in matters of health. Apart from being awarded the Best Women Health Committee for her panchayat from the District Family Welfare Committee, she has also involved herself with the Red Ribbon Express program. This B Positive woman is a regular donor of blood herself and inspires others in her panchayat also to do the same. She had got a work order of Rs. 800,000/- passed for setting up a health sub-centre in her panchayat. But even after 2 years, work is yet to start for which she is rather upset.

Even in the matter of sports, Pratima's effort has not been insignificant. Since she was a State-level Kho-Kho player herself, she's now trying to set up a mini-stadium in her panchayat. Ousting some people from the identified government land, she has started construction of the stadium, which has been allotted 3.60 acres of land.

For her outstanding performance, the district administration had awarded her as the Best Sarpanch with a cash prize of Rs. 100,000/-. However, she used this money for the improvement of the panchayat. Exercising her powers as Sarpanch, she persuaded locally based big plants, MCL (Mahanadi Coal Limited) and NALCO (National Aluminium Company) to concretize all roads in her panchayat and village. As a measure to stop pollution, she is now trying to set up a electric crematorium at the local cremation grounds with Nalco's assistance. Under her, the panchayat of Gobara was also judged as the best panchayat in the district, for which she received Rs. 100,000/-.

She attributes most of her success to the cooperation of her constituents. She smilingly recalls that in her endeavour to make Gobara a clean panchayat, she had even threatened to stop rations to families who didn't construct toilets in their homes. But she didn't have to do it since people had readily agreed to follow her advice. Through her dedication and service, the much felicitated Pratima has also solemnized a dowry less marriage of an orphaned girl, thus becoming a role model for others, and an able woman leader in a village of Odisha.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Oriya*

## **FOREWORD TO DEVELOPMENTAL PREFACE WRITTEN BY THE PEOPLE OF KILPADI VILLAGE**

Chidambara Baikampadi  
Vartha Bharati, 27 June, 2010

*It is to the credit of Kilpadi to write a foreword for the progress of the Gram Panchayat with the help of its people. As the president, Sharada Poojari has demonstrated here that a woman is not weak. With the help of co-members and Panchayat staff she has set a role model for the land in the Panchayat's march to progress.*

**C**an a woman be as efficient as a man in matters of administration? Is it possible for her to implement a political will – decision in a democratic set up? A woman is only capable of running a house, be a devout wife and a loving mother to her children ... thus runs the writ for the women. Ultimately she is pushed to the secondary position. She cannot find a prime slot for herself, because this is a male dominant society.

Such thinking and such efforts to keep the woman away from power have been prevalent for centuries. This attitude continues even today. Kilpadi Gram Panchayat is a witness to the fact that a woman is second to none in a democratic set up and that she can handle administration as efficiently as men.

Kilpadi is a Gram Panchayat of 3 villages situated near Mulki of Mangalore Taluk. It is on the road from Mulki to Kinnigoli.

There are several reasons to cite Kilpadi Gram Panchayat as a model for other Panchayats. The president of this Panchayat is a lady by the name Sharada V.Poojari. The Panchayat has a total of 18 members out of whom, seven are women. This Gram Panchayat has under its purview Kilpadi, Atikaribettu and Simanthuru villages with 1,563 families constituting a total population of 7,066. This includes 23 Koraga families and 112 SC families.

People of these villages are mostly agricultural labourers. Agriculturists and government employees are only a handful. If only this statistics is enough, Kilpadi can easily be clubbed together with the lakhs of Gram Panchayats of this country. But it has drawn attention as a unique Gram Panchayat.

All the Kilpadi villages have garnered the cleanliness movement. The entire open area of the village is toilet free. It leads in literacy too. People have bid goodbye to the use of plastics. Stree Sakti and Dharmasthala Self -Help groups are very active here. Hard work, earning and saving are their goals. As soon as the Gram Panchayat receives any circular either from the government or the District Commissioner's office, Taluk or the District Panchayat, the fact that it reaches each and every house shows the awareness in the people and its significance.

Members of the Gram Panchayat do not pay the usual lip service towards cleanliness. They personally pick up axes and shovels to dig up the soil and transport it in baskets. Toilet pits were dug up and built only through voluntary service. With the help of Corporation Bank and the Rotary, the village has been able to rid open defecations. Yakshagana is symbolic of the art of coastal Karnataka and the Gram Panchayat is to be lauded for using this art for promoting cleanliness movement.

Suresh, a Panchayat staff member composed a Yakshagana play “Swacchatha Yagna” and Sharada Poojari , the Panchayat President and other members donned costumes and apart from creating an awareness amongst the people about the importance of cleanliness they also enacted the play in the presence of the UNICEF team visiting Mangalore thereby earning accolades for the same.

This Gram Panchayat that has formed a mass movement against the use of plastics has set up a plastic house where people of the town throw the plastic garbage. Second hand traders cart these away once a month. From time to time families are reminded about not using plastic.

There are eight primary schools, one high school, and six Anganvadi centers here. The Gram Panchayat has also maintained its lead in literacy and two motivators by name Lolakshi and Anita visit each house to teach .Sharada Poojari's face beams with satisfaction that there are no illiterates here.

The Self-help groups and the Stree Sakti teams are so active here that with a firm determination that each and every person of the town has to know a vocation, training is given for tailoring, embroidery, nursing etc. The entire village recalls with gratitude the endeavors of President Sharada Poojari in taking the mentally and physically disabled as well as pregnant women to hospital and getting them treated.

The 745 houses of the village have water connection. 45 bore wells have been constructed and fitted with hand pumps. The village also boasts of 5 open wells, 12 large and 3 mini water supply schemes. There is not even a single public tap in the Gram Panchayat. The colonies of the Koragas and the

Scheduled Castes have been provided with basic facilities. She has provided a concrete road to the colony of the Koragas. Solar lights have been provided. Instances of Gram Panchayats not paying their electricity bills to MESCOM are many. But Kilpadi village is credited with cent per cent payment to MESCOM. Not even a single paisa is due towards the cess payable to the government. This year's cess payment has been Rs. 99,301. The annual revenue of this Panchayat is between 4-4.5 lakhs. The village depends on its own sources.

The most predominant aspects of the achievements of this Gram Panchayat are promoting equality and social justice to each and everyone. Commendable among them is the concern shown by the Panchayat towards the growth of Koragas and the Scheduled castes as also the projects earmarked for them. The keenness with which the Panchayat has provided these communities with housing, water, approach roads, electricity and other infrastructure facilities are indeed an eye-opener to the other Panchayats.

It is to the credit of Kilpadi to write a foreword for the progress of the Gram Panchayat with the help of people. The president, Sharada Poojari has demonstrated here that women are not weak. With the help of co- members and Panchayat staff she has become a role model for the land in the Panchayat's march to progress.

People of the village should be the instrument of development for their own village. The practice of yielding to the dictates of an IAS officer sitting in an air-conditioned room in Delhi should be put to an end. The system of villagers waiting endlessly in front of the houses of legislators and parliament member's day in and day out should be put to an end. The Gram Panchayat

office should be the power center for deciding its own course of action.

*A woman's mind behind the success story*

"This has not been my single handed achievement. My co-members and the Panchayat staff have extended co-operation for all these achievements. I brought together the minds of the people". This is the heartfelt admission by Sharada V.Poojari, president of Kilpadi Gram Panchayat.

In talking about the success story of the Kilpadi Gram Panchayat, Sharada Poojari sets aside politics. She asserts that a woman is as entitled to her rights as much as a man. There is intensity in her voice when she says that women should get 50% reservation.

The apolitical achievements of Sharada speak eloquently of her capability to carry forward all people with her irrespective of party, caste, creed and religion. Panchayats should be given utmost power. The subsidies should flow directly into the Panchayat. The habit of waiting for dole from the Taluk Panchayat and the District Panchayat should stop, she says.

From her speech, it is implicit that at present the administrative machinery of Gram Panchayat is powerless. The power accorded to the Panchayat by Nazir Saab is now abbreviated. Though Sharada does not openly spell out that the Panchayat has to wait for higher-up doles, her voice betrays her sadness.

"Do I have the right to distribute site-ownership papers to the poor in my village? Is it possible for the Gram Panchayat

members to decide welfare for their own people?” asks Sharada. This is not a question asked by her only. This is a basic question asked every Gram Panchayat of the land.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

## GULABI THAT HAS BLOOMED IN SANUR

Muhammed Arif Padubidri

Vijaya Karnataka, 1 July, 2010

With the completion of Gram Panchayat elections, the President and the Vice-President have been duly elected and the new administration is now at the helm of power. The new members would like to know as to how infrastructure facilities have to be provided to the village, how co-operative facilities have to be created for people and how rural development can be achieved. The example given will be that of Gulabi of Sanur to prove how Panchayat members can develop the village if they have the willpower.

Gulabi was the President of Sanur Gram Panchayat of Karkala Taluk of Udupi District during the last term. It would not be wrong to say that Gulabi, a woman belonging to the Scheduled Caste and that too an illiterate one, was an active representative of the people to give a new glory to the village.

Gulabi who eked out her living as a labourer saw light when in 1990; the literacy movement under the leadership of Shina Shetty and Krishna Mulka illumined the minds of the people.

Gulabi who dreamt of all children of the village learning to read & write and also wanted facilities for women, backward

communities and the downtrodden kept up her mission to admit children to the Anganvadi and to the school, enroll poor girls to the Karkala Hostel and the boys to the Bailur Hostel.

She admitted more than 10 children to schools and on her own initiative she travelled to the neighbouring Nakre, Miyaru, Bajagoli, Nellikaru villages and encouraged self help groups under the Nava Sakshara movement .

**Arresting Arrack:** Her social service acquired a new dimension after she became the Gram Panchayat member in 2005. Her target was the arrack shops that were the root cause of men spending their earnings outside the house and create havoc in the lives of women and children. She gathered information about five illegal arrack shops in Muddanna Nagar, Vasanthigudde, Tandagudde and Sanur and through Stree-Sakti complained to the police and the excise department forcing them to shut the shops. The police stopped the illegal sale of liquor but took Gulabi to task for her complaint.

Having realized the futility in complaining to the Excise Department, Stree Sakti gave an ultimatum of a week to shut the shops down. When this did not yield any result, women marched straight to these shops and locked them up. Thus these women are to be lauded for making Sanur liquor free even while Karnataka Government cooled its heels.

**Clean village:** After assuming the post of the President, she created awareness in people about waste disposal. She was also in the forefront in constructing toilets in all houses under the ‘Swaccha Grama ’scheme. She developed a garden in front of the Sanur Gram Panchayat and thereby created awareness in the people about medicinal plants and environment.

**Education Enabled Efficiency:** “I was illiterate, but once I participated in the Literacy Drive, I came into contact with people and the importance of learning dawned on me. I realized the importance of the development of the village and this filled me with an aspiration that all children should be educated. We worked towards the empowerment of women under the Self-Help group. We were instrumental in pulling down the shutters of arrack shops that were turning out to be deadly for the village. We gave priority to cleanliness; Created infrastructure facilities like drinking water, roads etc. All these were made possible due to the co-operation of the Gram Panchayat members, officials and villagers,” says Gulabi, former President, Sanur Gram Panchayat.

**Construction of roads:** The locals say that the construction of the Bavdabettu Colony road, a demand unfulfilled for almost five decades, was Gulabi’s achievement. This road has now been constructed with the help of locals and the Employment Guarantee Scheme.

**Water to each house:** It is to the credit of Gulabi that each house of Sanur village has a tap water connection. In addition, there is 100% recovery of bills. The Panchayat is proud of the fact that it has remitted all bills due to the electricity board. Recognizing this, the government has given a subsidy of 10% as an incentive. Matadakere, the source of water to the village also owes its gratitude to Gulabi.

**The eternal spring:** Due to certain political developments, Gulabi lost the subsequent Gram Panchayat election, but this has not deterred her from her social service. She delivers governmental programmes like Bhagyalakshmi, Sandhya

Suraksha, old age pension, widow pension to people and never refuses help when called upon to do so.

Awards: Taking into account the achievements of the Gram Panchayat, google.org has awarded the International Google Gram Panchayat award along with a cash benefit of Rs. Five lakhs. Gulabi's achievements have earned her the "Dalit Chetana" title awarded during the second Akhila Karnataka Dalit Sahitya Sammelana held in Bidar in 2009. The village is the recipient of the Central Government's Nirmala Grama. NCDCC Bank and Navodaya Grama Vikasa Trust have honoured her at a conference held in Karkala.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

## MUNIRATNAMMA'S SOLITARY STRUGGLE IN TORNAHALLI GRAM PANCHAYAT

K.S. Ganesh

Udayavani, 10 July, 2010

A Dalit woman who stood as a rock against the onslaught of corruption and fought single handedly to utilize the Panchayat power to attain progress has emerged as a source of inspiration to women representatives.

This is the success story of Muniratnamma who, as a Gram Panchayat member and as President of Toranahalli, Malur Taluk successfully faced all obstacles and utilized the powers of the Panchayat towards its progress.

### *Poor family*

Muniratnamma, the sixth daughter of Chikkagiriyappa and Byamma of Toranahalli has seven siblings and like many rural girls, did not have any interest in politics. However when the Gram Panchayat was harassing the poor in the matter of releasing money for construction of houses, she often felt the urge to be a Panchayat member herself so as to be of help to them.

Despite her poverty, Muniratnamma passed S.S.L.C but was unable to continue her education due to financial constraints of the family. However, she learnt tailoring, strung flowers, and

was able to help the family by cultivating whatever little patch of land she had. This was when the 2005 Panchayat elections were announced and her ward was reserved for women of Scheduled castes. The 21 year old unmarried Muniratnamma who was associated with Nirmala Seva Sangha in voluntary services was pressurized by the villagers to contest the elections.

Muniratnamma who was totally in the dark about the nuances of campaigning and the administrative set up, garnered 306 votes and won over her rival with a narrow margin of only 6 votes.

#### *Dawn of Reality*

Within two months of becoming a member of the Gram Panchayat, Muniratnamma had an opportunity to participate in a training workshop on the rights & duties of women representatives conducted by Bharati Welfare Society, Malur Taluk Panchayat. Muniratnamma who had studied up to S.S.L.C gained knowledge about the ‘power ’of a Panchayat representative. This sowed the seeds of aspiration in her that developmental works to the best extent possible are to be implemented in her area Panchayat, be of help to the poor and put in effort for rural development.

When she started participating in Panchayat meetings, she was filled with total disgust at the behaviour and the style of working of members. The arrogance of the re-elected President, the irresponsibility of the Secretary in carrying out the administration and the laissez faire attitude of members who preferred to remain silent made Muniratnamma understand the reality of a Panchayat administration system. Whenever she questioned about the same, she would be shrugged off as a know-nothing youngster, berated and humiliated.

### *Social Boycott*

At this time she increasingly realized that if one has to achieve anything, one has to be the President of the Gram Panchayat. By that time she had completed the first tenure of two and a half years and as a Dalit representative, opportunity knocked on her door to seek the post of the President.

Even from the first day in office, Muniratnamma set forth on her efforts to construct more houses for the poor through the Panchayat; she wanted to implement developmental schemes like providing sewage, road, drinking water, student scholarships, old age pensions, Anganvadi, hospital for the village, school building, bus shelter and several other welfare measures.

However, none at the Gram Panchayat were willing to listen to the unmarried Muniratnamma. Not even a single member would turn up when called for a meeting. The meetings would be adjourned due to lack of quorum and her first year as President was thus futile.

She incurred the wrath of other members as she reined in the corrupt practices of the Panchayat Secretary. There was also an attempt to pull her down from the post by tabling a no-confidence motion against her even before her first year of office was over. But because of Panchayat rules which specifically mention that a no-confidence cannot be tabled within a year of assuming office, the same was re-submitted after 1 year and 2 months. There was also a vain attempt to change the reservation policy regarding the election of the President. However, as the Panchayat did not have another woman from the Scheduled caste to fill the post, Muniratnamma's post as President was secured.

As Muniratnamma undertook strict measures in the Panchayat the villagers boycott her socially. When the hapless unmarried Muniratnamma called for a meeting, situations like creating a lack of quorum, forcing members to sign the resolution book after scribbling whatever came to their mind, torturing Muniratnamma mentally to exert pressure on her were the order of the day.

*Complaint to the Lokayukta*

Muniratnamma who was aware of the widespread corruption in the earlier administrations of the Panchayat wrote to the District Panchayat CEO to take suitable action on the 20 points listed by her. As she did not have the backing of either the Legislator or the Minister, her complaint was ignored. Only when she personally visited the District Panchayat did the CEO stir out of slumber and order an enquiry by the Executive Officer of Malur Taluk Panchayat. This officer took Muniratnamma to task for her complaint and extremely hurt; she submitted the same report to the Lokayukta. He issued notices to the members to commence his enquiry and this infuriated them all the more. There was even an attempt on her life in a meeting. The police at the Malur police station refused to accept her complaint and this was accepted only when she directly approached the District Commissioner, submitted her complaint and provided a copy to the police official.

By this time Muniratnamma was determined to be an achiever and was successful in having the corrupt Secretary transferred out of the Panchayat by exerting pressure on the higher ups. Harassment at the hands of the members abated only thereafter.

### *Employment Guarantee Scheme*

By then, the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme had been brought into force in the Panchayat and this forced the members to step into the Panchayat office slowly and to curry favour with Muniratnamma. The heat generated over her social boycott gradually wore out and by that time one and a half year's tenure was already over. Muniratnamma wanted to utilize at least the remaining period fruitfully and with this intention, she prepared a list of civil works needed for the Panchayat and started implementing them on a priority basis.

Within the short time available to her, without wasting even a single paisa Muniratnamma implemented works worth about one crore of rupees in the Panchayat, and with the satisfaction of having completed three fourth of the works she ended her tenure as President.

### *Self Satisfaction*

Muniratnamma has the satisfaction of participating in the developmental works of the Panchayat despite hurdles. She is happy that she could build 70 houses for the poor within the purview of her Panchayat. She is proud to have earned the admiration of the people and also of having saved an amount of Rs 6 lakhs for the Panchayat.

Muniratnamma says that women representatives can achieve anything within the administrative framework of the Panchayat Act without bowing to the demands of the men and without succumbing to the lure of money. She however cannot forget the abuse she faced when she stood for re-election.

In spite of all her struggles, C. Muniratnamma who is the President of SUGRAMA Elected Women Representatives of Malur Taluk , does not want the other women representatives to undergo the same ordeal that she faced and declares that she is prepared to extend any help and training to them. She thus works as a source of inspiration to women representatives through SUGRAMA.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

## GRAM PANCHAYAT: A WOMAN'S DOMAIN

Ravindra Bhatta

Prajavani, 11 July, 2010

**M**ysore: In recent days, women have an upper hand in the Gram Panchayats with 33% reservation on one hand and on the other hand, their winning seats under the general category too. In all women win about 50% seats. There are 4300 seats in 235 Panchayats of the district out of which 1773 seats have been officially earmarked for women. As against this, more than 2500 seats have been won by women. Thus, the Gram Panchayats of Mysore district have unveiled a woman's world.

This however does not mean that the women representatives have an easy time in carrying out the administration. Their's is a harrowing tale. They experience humiliation. Very few people understand her mind and co-operate with her. Even when a woman is elected to the Gram Panchayat either through reservation or through her own efforts, she is not allowed to work independently. This is not restricted only to the Gram Panchayat. Even in Taluk and District Panchayats, the father or the husband or the uncle or the brothers try to exercise power on behalf of the elected woman.

When a woman transgresses these proxy powers, she is subjected to loose talk.

“You have a loud mouth. You behave like a shrew. You are the only one to talk in such a manner. Look at others. Can’t you keep quiet like them?” These are some of the ridicules she has to hear. In addition, she becomes a brazen woman, a shrew, a loud mouth and if she ignores these taunts the men have another ace up their sleeve – that is to cast aspersions on her character. Such men know definitely that the Indian woman is afraid of being labeled as immoral and use this as their ultimate weapon. This not only subjects the woman to mental harassment but also affects her familial harmony. There have been instances when such instances have broken up families.

Despite such ridicule and familial problems, there are a few women in Mysore District who have overcome these situations and proved their mettle through good work. They have families. They also have children. The responsibility of educating their children is also on them. Still, they are winners in public also. They are the role models for the recently elected Gram Panchayat women representatives. They are the source of inspiration. They have demonstrated that with self-confidence they can face any fault-finding and be achievers.

#### *Chinnamma’s golden touch to Dornahalli*

Chinnamma, a member of Dornahalli village, Nalandevanahalli Gram Panchayat, KR Nagar Taluk is one such achiever. As a member between 2005 and 2010 she realized the truth that “Nothing can be done without opening your mouth”.

Dornahalli consists of 100 families and till Chinnamma became a member, only 40% of the households had toilets. Chinnamma built toilets for the remaining 60%. When everyone else was hesitating to take up civil works under the Employment Guarantee Scheme, Chinnamma had works to the tune of about

Rs. 10 lakhs undertaken. She incurred the ire of the legislators as she had 30 houses built for the poor. The District Panchayat members once altered the house sanctioned by Chinnamma and enraged at this; she took the members to task right in front of the legislator. The legislator had to bring both the warring parties to a compromise and yielded to Chinnamma's sanction. In addition, she undertook asphalting of roads at a cost of Rs. 9 lakhs, 3 drainage works under the Gram Panchayat grant, had a bridge constructed, built bunds, afforestation, changing electric poles and also sanctioned pensions to the disabled as well as widows.

*Shivamma: Achievement second to none*

Shivamma of Kalanakoppalu village of Haradanahalli Gram Panchayat of K.R.Nagar Taluk got married as soon as she finished her SSLC. Family responsibilities! No political interest! No opportunities! But when she accidentally stepped into politics, her work raised many eyebrows in disbelief.

Shivamma belongs to ST and though she was elected to the Gram Panchayat thanks to the reservation policy, her work won people's appreciation. As Secretary of Sri Kalikamba Women's Self help organization, her public life received training and she properly utilized the same politically. This took her from Haradanahalli to Delhi to signify her improved status in life.

There were 19 members in the Haradanahalli Gram Panchayat out of whom 8 were women. While many women chose to remain silent, she advocated her rights. "Initially, I was also scared but with training I gained courage. I worked with the realization that we need not be afraid to demand our rights and that we do not have to beg for the same". With this confidence Shivamma has trained other women also.

She encouraged inter caste marriage. When a love affair destroyed the serenity of the village, she supported the lovers and by getting them married, she brought back the serenity to the place.

She visited Delhi, Bangalore and other places, watched assembly and Loksabha proceedings and learnt the nitty gritty of administration. She also met the then President Dr. Abdul Kalam who was a great inspiration to her.

Shivamma who has carried out developmental works like sewage, roads and houses under the Gram Panchayat grants continues to render social service even to day through her women's association.

Saraswathi of Hampapura, K.R.Taluk has also earned people's appreciation for her work. Apart from Gram Panchayat grants, she has carried out beneficial works out of sheer interest.

Yes, women who carry out any work in a male dominated society, especially in politics face numerous hurdles. Many incidents of ridicule occur. But once you lose courage, the society will take away all your rights and push you back into the kitchen. Hence let these women, who earned the appreciation of their village for their meritorious work, be your source of inspiration! May you realize that with determination it would be possible for you to do more! Irrespective of whether a woman enters politics or not, she still has to shoulder the responsibilities of her family. But when she steps into politics, the entire village stands to benefit.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

## **SESAMMA – THE ROLE MODEL**

**Pushparaj B.N.**

**Vartha Bharathi, 11 July, 2010**

*In contemporary times when the adage that “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” is restricted only to upper and middle class women , Sesamma, a literacy deprived, a socially exploited SC Dalit woman, becoming the Gram Panchayat President of Bannur village is indicative of the revolutionary changes in the Panchayat Raj system.*

**A**s a living example of the saying that “education is power”, Sesamma, who has risen to the post of the Gram Panchayat President of Bannur village stands tall before us.

Sesamma who was born in Chembu village near Kasargod, Coorg-Dakshina Kannada border, married Muthappa belonging to Puttur Taluk of Dakshina Kannada district about 35 years ago and became a resident of the present Bannur Gram Panchayat.

Even though there was a school right next to the house where she born and though the teacher requested the parents several times to send the girl to school, her desire to learn did not take materialize due to the ignorance of her illiterate parents, says Sesamma. Her childhood was spent in carrying fodder and timber to the house, shooing away the birds and the monkeys

in the field and cattle rearing. Her evenings were restricted to household work. Marriage also did not alter the situation. Apart from taking care of husband, children, family and the bedridden paralyzed mother-in-law, Sesamma had to eke out her living by rolling *beedies*. But she did not lose heart. She accepted all these travails as part of life. However, her deep desire to be literate did not dry up. Such being her background, Sesamma learnt to be literate, toured all over the State, earned fame , received awards for attaining total literacy in the village, swept away honours under Nirmala Grama Yojana and as President of the Gram Panchayat, is marching towards self sufficiency for Bannur. She is thus a glorious example of the empowerment of a Dalit woman.

In 1990-91 at a time when the total literacy campaign was in full swing in Dakshina Kannada with each and every adult acquiring literacy skills, Sesamma could not involve herself actively due to her never ending familial problems. But the campaign resurrected her ardent desire to learn. She was motivated by Aruna, an Anganvadi worker in learning to read and write.

“The guidance of Aruna teacher, Sheena Shetty, Krishna Moolka and others opened my eyes. I was reborn. I can now sign. I developed the capacity to think on my own and carry out my decisions. Earlier, I had never stepped out of my house. Through the literacy programme, I started understanding the outside world. I devoted attention towards the education of children. Inspired by neo-literates like me, I joined the Neo –Literates Club. Despite heavy work at home, meetings at the club were like a breath of fresh air. I grew through the Club: I accepted its leadership as a challenge and took it forward at the Taluk and district levels. This motivated me to contest

the Gram Panchayat elections held in May 2010. There are no official election symbols for the Gram Panchayat and I liked it. I was too worried about losing and I won. The Bannur Panchayat has 12 members and I am a ST woman. A total of six women including me, were elected. Subsequently the reserved posts of the President and the Vice-President were announced. I was lucky. I had the backing of the reservation policy too. I became the President. I could conveniently continue the earlier programmes on education, health and model village without a hitch,” explains Sesamma.

*Literacy zeal that took her to the post of the President*

“Literacy drive created an opportunity for me to think outside my house and family and about the illiterate poor like me. I invited them to participate in the Neo-Literate Club. I chanted the club prayer that “Leave aside your lonely life. Come together, start thinking about the society”. I slowly gained awareness as to what was happening around me. I never missed out on any literacy programme. “Why is there a differentiation between a man and a woman? Do we really need a class distinction between the rich and the poor, the upper caste and the lower caste? We ought to forsake all such notions. We would discuss that all human beings are equal at our Neo-Literate Club,” says Sesamma, explaining how she and others grew on the strength of literacy.

In contemporary times when the adage that “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” is restricted only to upper and middle class women, Sesamma, literacy deprived, a socially exploited SC Dalit woman becoming the Gram Panchayat President of Bannur village is indicative of the revolutionary changes in the Panchayat Raj system. The 33.3% reservation for women implemented as per the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the

Constitution and the reservation policy extended to SC /ST on the basis of the population was a significant step for the Panchayat Raj system. Literacy and empowerment aided her in securing the post of the President.

*The Silent Revolution towards Equality*

Sesamma has ushered in a holistic social change in her village through awareness programmes on education, literacy, health, environment etc thereby heralding a silent revolution towards “education empowers equality”. Sesamma who started thinking about the deep-rooted inequality over centuries, has achieved 100% success in conducting neo-literate meetings, women’s day, education for girls and readmission of school drop-out children. The team under Sesamma was successful in turning 317 people of Chikkamudduru village into literates.

The Gram Panchayat which had 75% literacy in 2001 has turned totally literate, thanks to the team led by Sesamma. She has played the role of a leader in mobilizing all the people of the village to create awareness on the importance of education through literacy drive. This was a significant step for the silent grass root revolution in Chikkamudduru, Padnuru and Bannur.

*Gender Equality*

The literacy movement that took place in the district of Dakshina Kannada in 1990-91 with a massive participation by the people not only lent an impetus to learning but also set the stage for a silent revolution to bring about a comprehensive social change. Apathy towards education for girls, gender disparity and social inequality slowly started disappearing. Bannur’s statistics substantiate this. The male/female ratio in Bannur Panchayat is 1,000-924.

But the gender ratio for children less than six years of age is 1,000 boys versus 1,043 girls. There has been an increase in the number of girls. Out of a total population in Bannur Gram Panchayat, 460 belong to SC, 134 to ST, 413 are from minority communities, 2,923 from backward classes and 642 are from the general category. Currently, Bannur has joined the ranks of major Gram Panchayats that have 100% literacy and 100% cleanliness.

#### *Nirmala Grama Puraskar*

The Bannur Gram Panchayat has already earned the Nirmala Grama Puraskar under the total cleanliness movement. It has under its purview an area of 580 hectares comprising of Padnuru, Chikkamudduru and Bannur villages. As per the 2005 census, 166 houses out of a total of 885 houses under the Panchayat are below the poverty line.

115 families that were below the poverty line did not have toilets. Now, toilets have been constructed along with water supply for all the houses, schools and *anganvadis* that did not have toilets (281 family toilets), thereby earning the Nirmala Grama Puraskar from the President of India for being a totally clean village.

On October 2, 2003, on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanthi, cleanliness drive began in the Birnahitlu Higher Secondary School of Bannur Gram Panchayat, Sesamma's village where people built two model toilets.

"On December 12, 2005, I along with other neo literates as well as people of local associations dug up 100 toilet pits. A total of 281 toilets were built due to the co-operation of neo-literates like me, labourers from Bannur, various organizations and college students," says Sesamma.

*Plastic Free Village Movement*

Sesamma is now set to make Bannur Gram Panchayat a plastic free village. As she herself says, “I have been trying to create awareness about this for 5 years. I would earlier burn plastic covers and garbage together as a pile and then would throw it out. But after our guide at the Neo-Literate Club created awareness in us that burning of plastic is detrimental to health and environment, I have stopped burning plastic. I and my guide Aruna teacher have collected plastic from house to house and have created a plastic hut in Adkaraguri, Biriga, Kodimbadi and Bellipadi. We have plans to recycle the same. We also intend to construct a collection hut for plastic waste”, says Sesamma thus demonstrating her awareness about the harm done by plastic to the environment. She has now extended this information to the Gram Panchayat with the aim of turning it into a plastic free zone.

*Organic Cultivation*

Sesamma possesses one acre and 15 cents of land near Birnahitlu of Chikkamudduru where she grows Okra, Brinjal, greens, black pepper, betel leaf etc. She rears cattle and the significant fact is that for the past several years she has been utilizing only cattle dung, dried leaves and water to cultivate vegetables instead of chemicals, pesticides and artificial manure. “The betel creeper that I planted 25 years ago is still in good health. If I notice any pest or insect, I sprinkle some ash on them. Carrying out farming without the use of pesticides is good for health as well as the environment”. Such is Sesamma’s knowledge on organic cultivation. She shares this knowledge with her kith and kin. The government has now taken up an awareness programme on this.

### *Awareness on Vices*

Most of the poor agricultural labourers of rural areas are alcoholics and thus subject themselves to penury. Sesamma's family too faced a similar problem, though on a minor scale. But with Sesamma turning literate and developing awareness about this vice, her family is now rescued from the perils of alcohol. Her husband who would at times indulge in alcohol consumption has now turned a new leaf as she has now involved him also in this awareness programme.

"Alcoholism should first stay away from my house. It should stay away from people's minds. Our fight against this will never stop", says Sesamma.

### *Health Insurance*

When the poor fall ill, their families are shattered. They have no money. When I thought about a remedy to this, I came to know of the health insurance scheme ((Rashtriya Bima Swasthya Yojana) . The head of the BPL family, the wife and three members can avail of free medical facility up to Rs. 30,000 through the insurance card. I have started this programme and 60% of BPL families under the Panchayat purview have been given this card. The remaining 40% will also be getting this card and be brought under the health insurance scheme, says Sundara Gowda, Development Officer of Bannur Gram Panchayat thus echoing the President's aims. Sesamma hopes, "Everybody in our Panchayat should get health insurance".

Reflecting the President's aspirations, 80% of the people have been, in one way or the other, included in the health insurance scheme due to the combined efforts of various organizations like the Bannur Agricultural Co-operative Bank, Navodaya

## Self-Help groups, Self-Help groups of Continuing Educational Centers and Dharmasthala Rural Development Project.

### *On the Path to a Model Village*

I have suffered poverty and have come up in life. I am now the President of the Panchayat. The Panchayat should help people like me. Facilities of the government should reach people. A model village is possible through a small and emulative family. Small problems are resolved through kind words from us. We have not felt the need to approach the police or the court. Ours should be a society where education, health, drinking water, atrocity-free atmosphere and equality are available to all. I have ensured land, building and water for all schools and six *anganvadis*. Many places have approach roads. No house, officially under the Panchayat, has a thatched roof anymore. They have been provided with tiles and concrete. Out of 119 houses of the poor that did not have electricity, 56 homes have been electrified under the Bhagyalakshmi scheme and we aim to electrify the remaining houses under Rajiv Gandhi Electrification Programme. Many places of the village have mud roads. Out of the annual revenue of 296,229, a major amount is spent towards drinking water and payment of electricity bills. If we have to increase the revenue of the Panchayat, it has to have self-sufficient assets. Expenses on open well maintenance, local water sources maintenance and use of solar energy are less. Apart from protecting the assets of the Panchayat, creating a conducive atmosphere for the people, providing work to hands that toil, continuation of cleanliness programme are some of the priorities. Sesamma says that a model village programme where ordinary women like her can lead a comfortable life will be implemented.

*Sesamma who attributes all her work to literacy and its movement recalls with gratitude the names of Sheena Shetty and Krishna Moolka of Jana Shikshana Trust as well as Aruna, the anganvadi worker. She further says that ordinary women and leaders like Badila Hussain, Chinkra Pujary, Sanur Gulabi, Kamala, Padmavathi, Chennamma, Sumathi, Saraswathi, Shanti of Udupi and Kuyikkara who would share their life's experiences at the Neo-Literate Club were her inspiration. Sesamma has a noble image of the Panchayat – a Panchayat without distinction of caste or creed and without party politics and where ten mothers and children live like one mother and ten children striving for growth and development.*



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

## PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATIVE WHO HAS EARNED PEOPLE'S LOVE – SUGYANI

N. Karantha Peraje  
Hosa Digantha, 11 July, 2010

*Panchayat - The Only Chant on Her Lips! Sugyani hails from Coondapur. She is a graduate. Subraya Shanbag is her husband and is an entrepreneur. She got married in 1986 and lives in Ellangala of Madhur and has two children. She gained interest in spirituality while at college and was drawn towards Saibaba's philosophy. "This taught me tolerance, patience and zeal in work and these were helpful to me in my Panchayat life," she says. "At times I get fed up with people's talk and want my term to end soon". It is not difficult to understand that behind this disgust lies society's 'respectful face' towards a woman. Sugyani's home is her office. Day and night she chants "Panchayat". The husband and wife duo co-operate with each other in Panchayat matters just as they do in their marital life. The elderly Kakkeppadi Vishnu Bhatt praises Sugyani's work, 'She is concerned that projects of the government should reach the people. She also has the will and the determination to fulfill any responsibility'.*

Kerala is a land of temples. Madhur of Kasargod district is of historic importance. You ask anyone about Sugyani Shanbag and they have good words about her. 'She has done good work. She has not betrayed the people'. She is the vice-president of Madhur Gram Panchayat. In addition she handles the finance department too.

The Indian Government has brought the 33% reservation policy into force and has created a free access from local administration to the Lok Sabha. Washing one's hands off with only this limited opportunity is not enough. Women need moral support, social security as well as shouldering of commitments by the government and the society. Bearing all these in mind, Sugyani jumped into the Panchayat fray.

"We were elected by the people and it is our duty to respond to their difficulties. When we lend a voice to their tears, they will listen to us and help us in implementation." says Sugyani.

The government formulates projects and grants are given to Panchayats. Many people feel that mere utilization of grants by the year end means end of Panchayat work. The projects have to be taken to the people and they have to be convinced. All these are not easy tasks and nothing can be more challenging than this, is Sugyani's experience.

When questioned about her achievement, she could have reeled out a list of implemented works. But she does not resort to this. She just says, 'It is all team work'.

Sugyani has won the hearts of people as vice-president of Madhur Gram Panchayat. She is a rare representative who interacts with people at all times barring Panchayat office timings and meetings. When she is in the office, a long line of young women and mothers with applications in hand or with a problem in mind come in search of her. They firmly believe that once they hand over an application to her, their work will be done, or that when they speak to her, their requests will be fulfilled. This is reflective of the love of people for the representative of people.

Madhur Panchayat predominantly consists of 50% of agriculture dependent small holders. Many of the projects launched by the government fail because people do not know about them. But this Panchayat is an exception. Right from the Panchayat President to the bottom level beneficiary, the communication link is very strong. Projects like Mallige Krishi, Kutumbashri and other direct family oriented developmental schemes are a success story.

#### *Awareness Leads to Success*

Sugyani's service that has led to success remains incognito. These never get publicized! When the Kutumbashri scheme was launched, she talked to people and convinced them of its merits.

This is intended for young girls. Financial empowerment of the family is Kutumbashri's aim and the goal is to ensure participation of young girls from every house.

Young girls of rural areas remain confined to the four walls of their house and the priority is to bring them to the main stream. With this in view, Sugyani visited each house in her ward. She mingled with the family. She became the ears and eyes for their problems. She painstakingly explained about the project. She invited them to the meetings. Sugyani recalls "Many people naturally liked Kutumbashri as it related to financial savings. In the beginning they were reluctant to attend the meetings but subsequently gave up their hesitation."

On the basis of the experience she gained in her ward, she toured the other 18 wards, held meetings and constantly endeavoured to implement the project. "In our Panchayat, the money saved out of the Kutumbashri savings facilitated loan

facilities within groups. This led to women creating their own lives without having had to beg for money.”

### *Impetus to Self Sufficiency*

Sugyani also lent her support for jasmine cultivation under the Mallige Krishи scheme. This is a government scheme where young girls can optimize their spare time and earn some money. Sugyani’s help ranged from planting the jasmine creeper and feed it with manure. As of now, more than one hundred people have taken up jasmine farming and the failure rate is low.

We have fifty jasmine plants and at the very least we get an average of Rs, 1,500 every month. The income peaks during the season. If we start early in the morning we finish our work even before 11’o clock. All this is due to Sugyani Akka’s motivation, says Sudha of Ellangala with gratitude. Jasmine has made life fragrant for many young girls like Sudha. They also take a special interest in carrying out home to home delivery of dairy and poultry products.

Many a time, when women face familial problems, they find it impossible to discuss it with the men. Sugyani has resolved such many issues. She has become a real Gyani, successfully handling incidents of wife-bashing due to alcoholism thereby preventing it from reaching the police station.

### *High in Hygiene*

The Panchayat has written its success story regarding health and hygiene. Every house has a toilet, thanks to the financial support of Rs. 2,000 from the Panchayat. People at first grumbled, “It is impossible to build a toilet with such a small amount”. People have now responded well. They added their share of two thousand and built the toilet. They reacted without

knowing about the benefits. This would have been a set back to the project. “When they understand an issue, there is no grumbling. Thus Madhur Panchayat is now totally hygienic”. In 2007, the Kerala Government honoured the Panchayat for its cleanliness initiatives.

#### *Society Oriented Tasks*

Plastic collection through Kutumbashri group, meetings to create awareness on health, precautionary advice on monsoon related diseases, Sugyani never compromises on explaining these issues to people.

She always takes the lead in attending to public problems. For instance, if the street lamp does not function, she does not wait for the concerned authorities to turn up at the spot. She spends out of her own purse and feels relieved only when the light burns again by the evening. “Such society oriented tasks are ample in her career. But it is never exhibited,” says Mahalingaiah, a member of the block Panchayat.

“Without understanding the Panchayat schemes and projects, people talk in a condescending manner unnecessarily. Even though I go to them to help them out, they look down upon me as a mere woman,” says Sugyani in a voice filled with anguish. “At such times I recall Saibaba’s sayings. Baba’s sayings have taught me that one should not retort despite being ridiculed.”

Svajal drinking water project; visit to houses in each ward as vice-president; an effort to create awareness. She recalls, “There has been a good all round response towards drinking water system. Yes, there have been problems, here and there. With co-operation from one and all, a mountain of problems has become as light as a bird”.

There are 26 *anganvadis* in the Panchayat and in her ward there are three of them. A personal visit to all *anganvadis* every month to enquire about the joys and sorrows of people and special attention towards health of children is always on her agenda. *Anganvadi* teacher Shubhalata says, "As the vice-president visits the *anganwadi* every month, it becomes convenient to put all our problems before her." Sugyani participates in all auspicious occasions of the ward.

Panchayat President K.Vittal Shetty Prabhakar of Standing Committee, Ganesh Parakatti of the Welfare Committee and Mahalingaiah her mentor always remember Sugyani. Her husband Subraya Shanbag is by her side for all her social work.

The Panchayat term will end in just three months. Irrespective of whether she is in power or not, Sugyani's heart beats with concern for the society. The society would do well to utilize this.

Service rendered by women like Sugyani does not get registered. Theirs is a silent penance. They never aspire for any recognition or honour by the society. There are many Sugyanis amongst us. All that we need are our eyes and our hearts.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Kannada*

# PHENOMENAL JAYVANTIBAI

## Janardan Jadhav

Parivartanacha Vatsaru, 1 December, 2009

Undil is a tiny village with 775 populations in Devgad block in Sindhudurg district. Undil was ill famous for its dissentious Gram Panchayat. Every now and then some member or the other used to exercise no-confidence motion on the then head of Gram Panchayat making it dysfunctional. As a result the body was defunct and village lacked any development. Way back in 1989-90 a health sub center was started in the village. However, due to divisive politics in the village people were unable to access its services and subsequently it was closed down completely.

Local political leaders got a real blow when the post of Sarpanch was declared reserved for a woman from OBC category. However some good hearted people in the village saw it as an opportunity and got together to constitute a body with people's consensus with due representation from all sections in the village. The villagers identified Jayavanti Jagannath Nar as the candidate for Sarpanch and supported her campaign. Furthermore some villagers proposed to have an all woman Panchayat, as they were bothered with the petty politics of leaders elected so far. After heated arguments the people who were for an 'all women' Panchayat defeated their

opponents. Undil decided to have an all woman body – total seven women members with Jayvantibai as the head of the Gram Panchayat.

After taking charge of the Gram Panchayat, Jayvantibai made whole hearted efforts towards the development of her Panchayat. First she got the village roads done for smooth commuting. Then she revived the health sub center, which was closed down almost two decades ago. Till then the nearest health facility was Primary Health Center in Phanasgoan situated 7 kilometers away from the village. The sub center with two ANMs became functional in 2008 and with this many health services became accessible and immunization sessions became regular. So far there is no full time doctor in the sub center, but weekly visits of the doctor are ensured by the Gram Panchayat.

The village had one Aanganwadi center situated at the far end of village. It is inconvenient for the villagers on the other end to send their small children. Hence the Gram Panchayat proposed got approved one more Aanganwadi center.

Although the village has school up to class VII the basic facilities like drinking water and toilets were missing. Jayvantibai gave them a priority and made proper arrangement for drinking water. A proposal for toilet blocks and other sanitation facilities has also been submitted to Zilla Parishad.

Undil has become a cleaner and peaceful village; a major shift from what it used to be. This is a major achievement in itself, which has been duly recognized at the government level. The village has received two prestigious awards – Nirmal Gram Puraskar and Tanta Mukti Gav (dispute free village).

Recently a number of SHGs have been formed and women are engaged in income generation activities. Thus women's situation is also changing after the charge was taken by an all-woman body.

The policy of reservations to women in local governing bodies has helped many women – from SC, ST, OBC and open categories – to realize their leadership potential. Earlier male politicians thought that they would control the power through these women. However, many women like Jayvantibai have proved them wrong by making a significant difference.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Marathi*

## SARPANCH WHO MORTGAGED JEWELLERY TO RAISE FUNDS

Rajendra Shinde  
Tarun Bharat, 9 July, 2010

**C**hiplun: With opportunity and proper guidance women leaders can do even better than men to develop their villages. Two recent incidences in Ratnagiri, which have drawn immense public attention, bear testimony to this statement. In both these incidences the women Sarpanch mortgaged their jewelry to raise emergency funds for the village and also took their pleas to the level of the State Ministry.

Because of reservation, women got a special opportunity to get involved in village governance. However, politics is considered to be a male prerogative and hence women were seen as uninvited intruders. As a result men controlled the power from behind women and this remained a scene in majority places. However, proxy representation can not be generalized and we come across a number of examples where women have outperformed the men. A number of such incidences are taking place if one is willing to see them. This reporter came face to face with such courageous women in a gathering organised by a voluntary organization working to support elected women representatives.

Women Sarpanch from Mandangarh and Chiplun, in order to raise immediate funds for the water scheme for their village, mortgaged their jewelry. Later they recovered their jewelry after funds were disbursed by the authorities. They have demonstrated a rare courage and affiliation for people, which the seasoned politicians should imbibe. Their other initiatives are also equally remarkable.

Pratibha Chichgharkar, Sarpanch of Kondoli village, has implemented income generating programmes for the women. She insists on proper usage of public funds and checks its manipulation or wastage.

Savita Kosimbkar is a widow with five children in Kondoli village. She works as a maid for survival and aspires for a better future for her children. With a relative's help, she arranged to send her daughter for education to Mumbai. The school teacher asked her to pay Rs 50 for the school transfer certificate. She gave it as she needed the certificate. When the Sarpanch came to know about this, she confronted the teacher for his misconduct and made him return the money. She has also taught a lesson to the contractor who constructed village road. He did not clear the debris after completion of the work. This may be his usual way of working, but Kondoli Sarpanch did not tolerate this and approached police station and public works department against the contractor. He had to oblige finally.

Savita is forthright in her approach whether it is her village or the Mantralaya – the Ministry. When she participated in the meeting on the issue of National Health Insurance called by the

Department of health and attended by Labor Minister Hasan Mushrif, Secretary Kavita Gupta, Additional Commissioner Kakatkar, Savita explained with the help of examples that the scheme was not at all working on the ground.

Such courageous stories are abounding. Suvarna Bhosale from Sakhari Trishul village, Sunanda Aambekar from Dapoli and Vibhavari Mule from Talavali village – all these women have impressive work records. Sunanda Ambekar's Gram Panchayat covers three villages. Her own house is at the outskirts and on a hill. Still she attends every Gram Panchayat meeting and has mobilized women through SHGs. Suvarna Bhosale has successfully implemented Jalswaraj scheme by earning support from villagers.

These are a few names in the ever growing list of active women Sarpanchs. With proper training and lessening of societal challenges, they would certainly prove more efficient and effective than men.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Marathi*

## PANCHAYATI RAJ BRINGS CHANGE AMIDST TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

Bornali Boruah

Ajir Asom, 16 June, 2010

Chitapati on her forehead, Khansa in her hair, Jumka in her Ears, Nath or Nakphool on her nose, Haslior Chandrahar on her Neck, Matar Baju on her forearms, dangling Suri adorning her hands, Angti on her fingers, Zutia on her toes, kamargaath on her waist and a red Sari in place - the tea garden woman moving jovially around the tea bushes makes up a familiar picture. Though they live in a male-dominated world their earning capabilities make them different from the other women of Assam. During the British rule, tea garden labourers who were brought from famine-affected areas of Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh etc. settled in different tea gardens of Assam. They were landless agricultural workers and migrated illegally to work in tea gardens. The women workers were also employed in the tea plucking, weeding, cleaning and leaf processing jobs at the factory, but their wages were far less than the legal benchmark. According to the data available, it is known that in 1884, at most 78,274 women were employed in such kinds of work. Presently the number is three lakh and sixty thousand. The British planters wanted a permanent labour force to run the tea industry and an expert work force who would engage themselves generation after generation in the same work. After Independence, the picture changed to some

extent and equal wages for both genders was granted in 1991 which relieved the aggravating condition, but still the women in the tea gardens were living a life of social and economic misery. They lagged behind in formal as well as informal education.

In conducting household affairs, child health and education and moral guidance, they are neither conscious nor active. Most of their children are seen ruining their growing-up years in useless fun and frolic, they are usually in rags and suffer from malnutrition for want of required nutritional diet because of poverty. The future citizens of our country are thus, deprived at the beginning of their lives by their own mothers, who forcibly employ them as keepers of their younger sisters or brothers instead of sending them to school. Poverty and non-literacy are the root causes of this social phenomenon.

The socio-economic development of this largest community in Assam is dependent on the wills of the owners since the British period. There are about 835 tea gardens in Assam, including big ones and small, where a population of about seven lakh people dwell. The tea garden labourers benefited as the tea gardens were included under the Panchayats in 1992. They got the opportunity to be a partner in the developmental process and are now able to participate equally in decision making on issues of development, taking part in grass-root governance, and increasing political consciousness to achieve their goal. To get information regarding this we contacted a few elected Panchayat Representatives.

Gangajali Rai is President of Bokahola GP under Titabor Development Block of Jorhat District, elected to the Panchayat for the first time from reserved seat as a ward member. She was a new comer to this field. Though she was heartily sincere

in doing something good for the common people, she had to face a strong challenge as the seat for the President was not reserved for women. Moreover, she had represented the Indian National Congress (INC) earlier. Now several claimants demanded party seat and she had to face a lot of challenges within the party. But due to the goodwill she had built for herself in the party and her self confidence, she was successful not only in getting the party ticket, but also in coming out with flying colours in the elections defeating nine other candidates. There are a total of 9,483 tea garden labourers in her area, where 90% of the people are economically, educationally and socially backward. Unhygienic conditions, and an excessive usage of Haria (a kind of country liquor made of rice) in the name of tradition, stand as impediments to the development of the community. To eradicate these problems permanently, she keeps struggling to spread awareness to the people about the ill effects of unhygienic conditions and the excessive use of Haria. She informed us that more than two hundred families had been provided with sanitary latrines in her area. She also actively participates in immunization programmes under National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), which began in 2005 and with the help of ASHA workers, visits every pregnant woman and monitors their regular check-ups at the Health Centre. On the other hand, she gives importance on getting electricity and water supply to her village and has already set up twenty tube wells and applied for a bigger project to the Public Health Engineering Department.

We also had the chance to talk for a long time with another elected woman representative recently. She resides in Gabharu Parbat Tea Estate, at the foothills of the historic Naga Hills, and lives a very simple life but proves to be very high in thinking. She is none but Renu Bedia, who can actively

participate in any kind of intellectual discussions, can explain to Budhua, about the harmful effects of Haria at the market place, and explain to the UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi about the hazards of drinking river water in the village of Jorhat District or in Assam. She has won three consecutive elections and now as the President of East Nakachari GP, she knows everything about Panchayat. Her experience has taught her to apply herself efficiently. When the Assam Tea Corporation managed by the Govt. of Assam went bankrupt and the fate of the workers was at peril, she encouraged all of them not to lose hope. Initially she won uncontested the seat of Ward Member from the Ward no 10; in 2002, she contested against three opponents and won the Ward Member's seat and in 2007, she got elected as the President of the East Nakachari G.P. She serves as a Staff Nurse at the Gabharu Parbat Tea Estate Hospital and starts her daily journey to her work place at 6am, every morning. She is very punctual about her daily routine and after returning home at 10 am she completes her household affairs very quickly. She leaves home at 11 am/12 noon to perform her Panchayat duties. As her husband goes out early in the morning for his job, which is at a distant place, she alone has to take care of 26 goats, 60 hens and 8 cows every day. Based on the income generated from these domestic animals her three children are pursuing their education at Jorhat. She believes that because of her service to the public, her children are good at their studies. From an early age, she has been inclined towards social service and being a health sector professional, she emphasizes on it the most. With the help of nine ASHA workers in her Panchayat, she succeeded in bringing a revolutionary change in eradicating superstitions and traditional rites and rituals. Ever since she has taken charge, all the babies have been born in Govt. Hospitals.

As the idea of Panchayat is a new one to the tea garden people, they are very reluctant to co-operate and therefore the Panchayat representatives have to face difficulties on several occasions. Rupali Guwala, the President of Borbam GP, is passionate and works selflessly for the welfare of her fellow tea garden people. When we reached her home she was preparing to attend an awareness campaign on the Hariali Project. Though the meeting was scheduled to be held at 12 noon, she was preparing to reach at 10 am. Because even though the people had been informed about the meeting before, they had to be brought to the meeting from their homes. During the discussion she told us that in her area she had to fight against the use of liquor, unhygienic conditions, lack of family planning, ignorance about healthcare and frequently transmitted diseases of an unknown nature. The increasing participation of people in the state and centrally sponsored schemes of Panchayats have not only brought development to the people, but also made them socially and politically conscious. Due to the lack of clear legal directives, conflicts between the Panchayat and the tea garden owner are a permanent issue. Not a single beneficiary within the tea garden is allowed to build a building under the IAY. In the early years of the tea industry, the company had provided accommodation in the lines of huts to the labourers. Though the population has increased in large numbers, the number of employed labourers remains the same. The rest of the population were partially or seasonally given employment as 'Faltu' and were dependant on tea garden jobs. They were permitted by the owner to build temporary buildings for their shelter, though the ownership of land always remained with the owner of the garden. Therefore, their authority permits them to build any permanent house or any sanitary latrines. It also applies in case of roads and paths. Despite all these

obstacles, Rupali Guwala had provided Job Cards under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act (MGNREGA) to two hundred unemployed workers to construct two roads within the two years of her political career. Negotiating several intense arguments and discussions with the garden authority, she succeeded in facilitating three hundred families with sanitary latrines in two wards. Every single day of the year witnesses her dedicated fight against the illegal sale of liquor as well as her active service in implementing various welfare schemes under Panchayats. She has taken this as her mission in life and has formed nearly thirty SHGs to support this cause.



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## VILLAGE GLOWING IN THE LIGHT OF FIREFLIES

Bornali Boruah

Ajir Ashom, 9 June, 2010

Men have ruled the human society since the beginning of the human race and the dominating ideology that governs the society is male-oriented. This ideology engulfs the women by propagating that women are weak; childcare and domestic activities are their main duties. They are dependent on the father in adolescence, in youth they are dependent on the husbands, and in old age they are dependent on the sons. Age old scriptural belief which says that women cannot be independent, governs the whole psyche of the women as well and in many cases most of them forget that they have an identity of their own. Like most states of India, the position of women in our state is lower than men. Despite this, we must say that the position of women in Assam is better to some extent than the other states as *Sati Dah* and infanticide are not in vogue in Assam. Polygamy and owning harems were also not in practice, because Assam and the entire Northeast region is mainly inhabited by tribes. In a tribal society, the position of women is higher. Non-existence of the dowry system, child marriage and social privileges like the ability of women to choose their husbands and widow remarriage has created a liberal environment for women to create their position in the social system. However, they still have to live under restrictions

in the name of traditional rites and rituals. It is due to these restrictions that women in Assam are not interested in politics. Massive political debates and discussions have stormed Assam in the last fourteen years; it is only the 33% reservation of seats for women at the grass-roots which have enabled them to take part in active politics and have created extraordinary women.

Such a woman representative is Kavita Gogoi, President, Bebejia Gaon Panchayat, under Titabor LAC of Jorhat District. She was awarded the Nirmal Gram Award 2009 by the state. Elected in 2007 for the first time, as a dedicated president, she succeeded in creating an awareness wave within her area covering all the members of the Panchayat – such is her powerful leadership. She has to do her share of physical labour in the farms, look after her two daughters who are studying in class five and class one respectively, and after completing all her household affairs she has to walk to her office. Her sense of responsibility is so strong that even without any honorarium she voluntarily organizes the local people to spread awareness about contagious diseases like Jaundice, Diarrhoea etc. and provides quality sanitary latrines to all the families of her Panchayat with the help of Public Works Department and beneficiary's own shares. She has really made the impossible possible.

A dominant number of women politicians belong to states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc., which are economically, educationally or socially backward. They not only participate in the Loksabha or Legislative Assembly, but also in Panchayats in large numbers. Comparatively the status of women in Assam is better than these states. Even though they are not so interested in politics, the women must come forward for the development and welfare of the society as a whole. A socio-economic analysis of the village poor reveals the

degraded standard of the women. For long, the life of women has been miserable. The structural changes needed for better economic development will complete when the women start stepping out of their houses into the open and take part in decision making through the platform of Panchayat. For welfare and development, the Government of India allots a lion's share to the village poor. According to the Panchayat Act of 1991, twenty-nine departments are connected to the Panchayats for infrastructural development. The process of development cannot start until and unless infrastructural changes are completed within a stipulated framework. Presently we notice a dark picture in case of the women and children who are the backbone of the society. The true sense of life is felt in an environment where good health, food and scientific thinking have a systematic order to be enjoyed by the people. The health of the mothers and malnutrition of the children seem to be posing a serious problem in our country. Though NRHM brings hope in this regard, the indifferent attitude of Panchayat representatives is responsible for the failure in solving this issue. Only the awareness of the women representatives can bring about a positive change in this respect.

Nutrition required for a pregnant woman or for a newborn child is not satisfactory in some areas. One third of the babies are below the average weight in India, and most of them are born in villages. Twenty percent of them weigh even lesser than the bare minimum required for survival. The statistics of income generation in Assam is not as high as Gujarat, Maharashtra or Karnataka. Due to inadequate nutrition premature birth, low weight babies or post-natal deaths may happen. During the advanced stage of pregnancy, most of the women remain deprived of adequate food and sufficient care. In some backward areas, at least 60-70% women do not get any

maternity care. In remote areas around 95% of the women give birth at home. Only 42% person women get maternity facility in India. No immunization is made available, due to existence of superstitious beliefs, to children between one to two years of age. Knowledge regarding nutrition is very essential for women residing in villages and this should be a part of the programme of any training. New methods of childcare need to be imparted to women so as to mitigate child death. We got the chance to visit a Panchayat which has achieved partial success in this regard.

Balijan Gaon Panchayat, under Mariani LAC of Jorhat is within the tea estate area. The President of this Gaon Panchayat, Mrs. Maloti Tanti, proudly declared that though they have little education and belong to the tea garden labourers' community, not a single child has been delivered at home during the last two years of her term as President. Being a nurse, she very successfully utilizes her professional skills with the help of nine ASHA workers in her Panchayat, which on the other hand, gives her an opportunity to provide all the facilities meant for women. Her work is an example for the proper functioning of a welfare state. We have also spoken to a woman who visits every *Anganwadi* Centre and Sub-Centre, though it does not fall under her official responsibilities. She is none other than Mrs. Aruni Gogoi, President of Banmukh Gaon Panchayat. The name reveals that the area is affected by frequent floods. Formerly she was a teacher, but resigned to devote herself to her role in the Panchayat. People belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, religious minorities inhabit her Panchayat. Regular floods generally breed various infectious diseases. To mitigate this hazard, she made the use of sanitary latrines compulsory and took necessary action in this regard with the help of the respective departments. She even personally went to

every household with loads of sanitary wares in a handcart with the cart puller, to provide it to the beneficiaries. This anecdote was shared by the local people. If all the women, specially educated ones, work in such a manner, there will definitely be development in the Panchayats.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Assamese*

## WOMAN EMPOWERMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF A JOURNEY

Bornali Boruah  
Ajir Dainik Batori, 6 June, 2010

In the fourth week of last April, we three colleagues went on a journey to Demow. The journey was mainly aimed at meeting few selected women and our conversations with them gave us new hope. We have begun a new journey - a journey which brings the message of hope and expectation not only to any particular woman, but to the entire womankind in general. After the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats by the Amendment of the Constitution of India, Panchayats in Assam have completed two years last March, and this is their third year in office. As this was their first experience in Panchayats, so problems like inexperience in decision making, ignorance etc. were responsible for their excessive dependence on their family members. However, two years of experience and knowledge have helped them mature and now they can independently perform their duties. To put it simply, they have already covered many miles. Now they do not need any help in decision-making or in travelling if necessary – this is what our journey has revealed.

Demow, under Thowra LAC of Sivasagar district is a small town, and there in Demow Development Block we met Joyanti Bhadra, President of Khorahat Gaon Panchayat. From her

we came to know that in the tea garden areas women are also making rapid progress under the Panchayats. Women come out in large numbers to take part in Panchayats, or to attend the Gaon Sabhas. The tea gardens deal with the economic development of the people who are mostly illiterate and economically backward. The tea garden areas came under the Panchayat very recently, and so it is very difficult to organize the people for any scheme meant for their welfare. Amidst all shortcomings, through the Anganwadi Centre emphasis is laid on education, eradication of liquor and on the issues of sanitation and healthcare. Immunization programmes, maternal care implemented by the Health Department and other programmes like childcare and nutrition are formally made available to every family at their doorsteps with the help of ASHA workers and this is not an easy task. Nevertheless, along with other developmental works these have added to the betterment of the residents of the panchayat. This panchayat is a model of democracy, where five of the members belong to the Indian National Congress (I) Party; one is independent and six are from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Here Rina Masua, Asha Masua, Rajani Gusua and the uncontested winner, Anima Munda with Dipa Pradhan represent unreserved seats constituting fifty percent of the total membership. Under the leadership of Joyanti Bhadra, this panchayat has already provided sanitary latrines to two hundred families with the help of public health and engineering department and has also implemented schemes funded by 12<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission. Under the scheme, 20 families have been facilitated with sanitary latrines. The tea company does not give permission, because those who live in the lines of the Tea Garden Area do not have the ownership of land. Therefore, though they want to, it is very difficult for them to build a house.

For a discussion at Kushal Path, Demow gathered Punyalata Gogoi - President Nangalamara Gaon Panchayat, Dipa Chelleng - President Gohain Pukhuri Gaon Panchayat, and Amiya Gogoi - President of Na-Hat Gaon Panchayat (all three under the Demow Anchalik Panchayat). All of them have different views about Panchayats. Despite this, they stand united for the empowerment of women. From experience of working, they are now aware about their own duties. Now political parties need not force them to contest in elections. Amiya Gogoi willingly stood for the elections and got 1,345 votes out of 3,239 votes in Na-Hat Gram Panchayat. She told us that though she had not had any former experience, she did not have any difficulty in her Panchayat. Five hundred workers have been provided with job cards out of whom 55 are women. Under NREGA, four schemes have been completed during the past two years. She had established Bhagyalaxmi Child Welfare Centre with the active participation of the public for the physical and mental development of the child along with emphasizing on women's health and hygiene, family welfare, maternity care etc. and regularly visits PHCs and Sub-Centres to monitor immunization programmes herself. Moreover, she is trying to bring an economic change by forming 130 SHGs in her panchayat. She has also provided for 93 sanitation services in her Panchayat.

Being a woman activist, Punyalata Gogoi, President of Nangalamara Gaon Panchayat, was involved with the woman issues in her local area prior to her induction to the Panchayat. As the president of Co- Ordination Committee of twelve SHGs, she earned recognition as a successful fish farmer in the state. The fish farm titled as Sonali Fish Farm, has been awarded for its excellence in Fish Festival 2009. Spot training by experienced person in feeding, cleaning, rearing, and other allied services

have made the whole production process cost effective, because they do all manual work personally. They are planning to extend the 12 bigha fish farm by adding another pond measuring six bighas to it. She has also organized training camps to teach the woman about knitting, cutting, tailoring, embroidering, food processing, handloom etc. to make them economically independent under the aegis of the Mahila Samitee. Being President of the Panchayat it becomes easier for her to do such kinds of work. Recognition earned by her position at the official level and knowledge about the Government schemes have enabled her to carry out any kind of task easily. In this regard, she has sanctioned aid from the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGCL) independently. Punyalata Gogoi, with her amicable nature, can easily turn strangers into friends. She revealed to us that if the women properly utilize their spare time in productive activity then they could easily get economic benefit. She also criticized women who spoil valuable time in useless gossip or by watching television. She has already provided two hundred sanitary latrines with 90% fund from the public health engineering and 10% from the beneficiaries. Nearabout 600 Job Cards have been given to unemployed workers. Out of these one hundred are women who are involved in digging and carrying at work sites for road constructions.

Dipa Cheleng was elected to Gohain Pukhuri Gaon Panchayat (supported by Samaj Vikash Mancha) by a margin of 851 votes. Her dedication and sacrifice cannot be imagined if not seen personally. One can be proud of her sacrifices in highlighting the role of Panchayati Raj movement in Assam. Dipa always walks three miles to her office, and also visits her area on foot regularly, but she does not feel tired. She is really happy about her role. She only feels unhappy when she has to ask

her husband for money for the bus fares to go to the Block Development Office. In her Panchayat 400 workers have been provided job cards, out of which 50 are women. Near about 133 families have been provided sanitary latrines with the help of Public Health Engineering Department and 24 families have been given sanitary latrines funded by the 12th finance commission. Through this conversation that we had, one thing is clear, that leading the people from the front will always lead to a better society – and this applies not only to women but to every leader.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Assamese*

# RESERVATION POLICY: A NEW PATH FOR DEVELOPMENT

Junu Borah  
Edinor Sambad, 14 July, 2010

## *Education under the Open Sky*

*“Hami Eha me padhel aawehi. Ekta chithi padhel ba apon chehia karel parbo seta soske eha aawehi. Hamniye baaidou je hamniye padh weho se khatir hamni baadi bes paawehi.”* Roughly translated, this means “We are coming here to learn. We are coming to learn how to read a letter or how to sign. We are very keen to read and write. We feel very happy when Madam teaches us.”

These are the feelings of some aged women, in their colloquial language, from Negheriting tea garden area under Golaghat district. These women are Asiful Nisa, Rupali Muha, Khatiban Nisha, Khuteja Begam, Manju Mahili, Rebika Naagbangshi, Samiran Nisha and Ritu Mahili as well as all the women from the Negheriting Tea garden, who are now learning how to read and write under the open sky in the most advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rupali Rabidas is their beloved and respective teacher who has involved herself to teach these elderly women. She is the President of the Gaon Panchayat (GP) of the Negheriting village under the Kakodonga block of Golaghat district. She was elected to this Panchayat (reserved for tea garden women) in the 2008 panchayat elections.

Presently, the GP President Rupali Rabidas took initiatives, through evening school, to provide education to the deprived and uneducated elderly women in Ward No. 1 and 2 – that has been continued over the last ten years. These tea garden workers are deprived from education that is playing an important role in the tea industry. Mrs Rabidas is planning to eradicate illiteracy from the tea garden community and Bipul Bouri, the vice-president and member of ward No.1 of this Panchayat has extended immense help and support to this venture.

Since her childhood, Rupali has been familiar with this situation of deprivation from education as her mother was married at the age of 8 years. There is a long story behind it. Her grandfather agreed to marry her daughter off only for a single glass of wine. Her mother always felt sad because of her illiteracy. Educating the illiterate elderly women came to her mind when she was studying in class VIII. Now her mother knows how to sign and reads fluently. After her marriage into the Negheriting tea estate, the aspiration of educating illiterate women of the tea estate became a determination. She started preparing ground to turn her childhood dreams into reality. She started collecting old books, and raising funds from the poor women for buying Kerosene. After being elected as President, she appointed Khusbu Gupta, Guleza Begam and Dipali Rabidas as the teacher and ran the school very nicely. The women of this tea estate feel the need of education to open a bank account in order to avail jobs under NREGA and so they are regular at her evening school in large numbers.

Out of 830 job cardholder workers in her Panchayat, the majority are women. Developmental works have not been hindered so far due to the conflicts caused by land eviction

required for implementing the scheme, which has been a common barrier in many areas. But pre-monsoon floods, continuous rain fall and delay in releasing of funds by the government etc. have been the main barriers in the full implementation of the scheme for which many workers are yet to get 100 days of work in the year.

On the other hand, the President has made an appeal to the society to eradicate the loopholes in public distribution system by taking the help of RTI Act and also popularize the utility of this act among the public.

In our society, women are backward and especially the tea garden women are lagging far behind the mainstream women. Though she belongs to the tea garden community, she has acquired some confidence after being elected as the President from this community. She believes that women engaged in the household and kitchen chores bear the ability to play a major role in the political life, if they get the scope and healthy conditions.

#### *NREGA: Conflict and Success*

The South Kaziranga Village Panchayat near Bokakhat town is under the West Golaghat Development Block, attached with Kaziranga National Century, which is famous for the one horned Rhino. This Panchayat seat is reserved for a scheduled tribe woman candidate and in the year of 2008 Mrs. Mamoni Doley from the Mising community has won this seat.

After being elected as the President, she has also become President of the Education Committee of this area. It has given her the chance to monitor all the Anganwadi centres, lower, middle and high schools under her GP area. Recently

she received some complaints such as irregular attendance, corruption etc. against the teacher of Defolu Tea Garden Lower Primary School. After her enquiry, the allegations proved to be true and finally the higher authority deducted half the pay of the teacher as a punitive measure. It was possible only because of the prompt initiatives taken by the President.

Mamoni Doley feels that the child is the future of the country. None should be a silent spectator and see the tea garden children being deprived from schooling. She works very hard to provide education to the children of the tea garden labourers. She organizes various games; an extempore speech etc. among the children for mental as well as physical development and rewards them with books to inspire them for further education. She has helped students who have passed the HSLC examinations financially as well as by providing books to the economically backward students for higher studies.

In this Panchayat, more than 1,000 people have got job cards under the NREGA scheme and more than 33% of them are women. She says that women have worked very sincerely. At present three road constructions of PMGSY are going on under the NREGA scheme in her Panchayat. Many disturbances have occurred so far in the work of road construction in this Panchayat. Even the panchayat authority has had to take the help of the police in this regard. One business person of the area of West Kolakhua did not agree to accept the land requisition under government rule and lodged a case against the panchayat. He has gone to the extent of blocking the road by constructing a *pucca* wall on the road. However, the President had taken quick initiative with the help of the local people as well as the government officials to solve the problem and finally carried on the work after breaking the wall.

*Realisation of the Member of the District Council*

Mina Kumari Das is the member of Dergaon District Council under Golaghat district. This seat is reserved for scheduled caste woman candidate. She resides in Sheetal Pathar Gaon Panchayat under Kakodonga Block near the famous Negheriting Shiv Mandir. She monitors seven Panchayats under her council constituency. From them five Panchayats are inhabited by the schedule caste people. She can grant only 10% from the District Council to each Panchayat due to lack of funds. In her area too, many disputes regarding land acquisition had surfaced, but with her sincere efforts, panchayat could overcome them. She opines that with the advent of elected women representatives to the panchayats and district councils, the number of women job cardholders under NREGA has increased.

She was attracted to politics since her childhood. Her father-in-law was a renowned leader in the Negheriting area. People of this area frequently came to her father-in-law to get solutions to their various problems. However, she did not agree with the solutions given by her father-in-law and thought of providing better solutions.

Earlier, the Panchayats were regarded as the judiciary of villages. Even at present, victims come to the Panchayat members instead of going to the court. The Panchayats that have women representatives get more problems from the people. Mina plays a very important role to make the people conscious about the Panchayatiraj system. In her locality, one man tortured and expelled his unmarried sister from the house and tried to deprive her from the paternal property. Mina got involved in the case and warned the man not to deprive his sister from the property. Likewise, she took the initiative in solving many cases of domestic dispute and violence. Moreover, this elected woman

representative creates consciousness about the importance of the RTI Act among the village people.

These three women representatives got the chance to attend the “Women’s Political Empowerment Celebration-2010” organized by Institute of Social Science, which was held in New Delhi on 24 and 25 April, 2010. They benefited from this conference and were able to exchange their views and experiences with other representatives of various states.

A lot of new information has come out from the discussions with the women representatives of the Panchayats. The reservation of seat for women in Panchayats has created political awareness among the women in the grass root level. Women feel that they are an integral part of the society. Their level of confidence has increased in decision-making as well as in exercising leadership in social life. It is a new and important trend towards political empowerment. In general, women are not experienced in political life as they are mostly engaged in household activities only. In many cases, the government officials take advantage of this. They can run the government very sincerely if proper training is provided to them. In political processes as well as the government system women representatives are not sufficient and they have always been suppressed by the men. 33% Reservation of women should not be confined in the Panchayats and District Council alone; it should be extended to the upper level, up to the Parliament.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Assamese*

# THE PILLAR OF DEMOCRACY

## ‘TEJASWINI’ - THE MOST ENERGETIC WOMAN

Praban Sarmah

Dainik Pratikshan, 14 July, 2010

Unanimously the Indian democracy can be called successful when each citizen of the country achieves real freedom and security. Almost 70% of the people live in rural areas in our country even after the 63rd anniversary of our independence. Some sections of people have still been struggling for food, cloth & shelter. They still don't know the meaning of independence. Many children are deprived of primary education. In the typical methodology for keeping good health, the system of treatment procedure is critical. The Panchayati Raj system has been introduced in the country so that each citizen can benefit from various schemes launched by the Government. The 73rd amendment of Indian Constitution has reserved 33.33% seats for women. This is the opportunity that women took to serve the country, a work for which the MLAs and MPs are paid to prove their competencies. Most of the Panchayats governed by elected women representatives are found to be sincere and more developed compared to the other Panchayats. Where the women lead, the Panchayats have been able to get the national ‘Nirmal Gram Award’. The scholars have rightly stated that the diamonds of the political field may be discovered at the grass root level of politics. A group of women panchayat representatives from the most backward regions has dedicated

themselves in trying relentlessly to turn Gandhiji's dream about the panchayati raj system into a reality. Let us discuss the achievements and contributions of such women panchayat representatives to the society through the panchayati raj system.

Kusum Dehingia (A.P. Member Khubalia Panchayat cum Dhemaji Anchalik Panchayat President): The district of Dhemaji is situated on the north of the river Brahmaputra of northeast Assam. This district has been recognized as one of the most under developed area of northeast India. The inhabitants of Dhemaji district are leading an intolerable life due to factors some of which are natural and geographical but some are because of the negligence of the government. Even the daily newspaper reaches there the next day. In such an area, she is determined to set up 'Eco-Tourism' so as to keep a regular link with the national and international tourists. This project taken up by her has been widely applauded by the public.

The Project of Eco-Tourism: This project has been set up 7-8 k.m. away from the town of Dhemaji under the Khubolia G.P. This project covers a wide area measuring 60 bighas (8.5 hectares almost) of land. The natural condition of Dhemaji district is not favourable and due to specific geographical factors, frequent floods affect people. After a serious study about the system of living of the common people, a special conservation of minnow has been provisioned by building a fishery. Through this project, the people of the district will be benefited to a great extent because they would be able to collect the hybrid kind of minnow and play a vital role in the cultivation of fish. Consequently, the production of fish would increase and the market rate would decrease thus reducing poverty and unemployment.

This pleasant Eco-Tourism costs Rs. 7 crore and contains a vast pond. This pond covers 40 bighas of land (5.3 hectares almost). Around the pond, various valuable plants have been planted and a social forest has been created. Moreover, hotels and lodges, motels, malls and a children's park have been built to attract people and work is in full swing presently. Almost 70% of the primary foundation has been completed by spending about 3.27 crores until now. It is worth mentioning that through the scheme of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Assurance) job cards have been distributed. It is to be mentioned here, that a person having a job card should be given work at least for 100 days with a wage of Rs.100 per day. It is reported that the NREGA scheme has been successfully implemented in the Khubalia G.P. The job cardholders cannot fill up the demands and so, they help the other job cardholders from the same panchayat. However, the work has been stopped because of unfavourable weather for the last two months. They hope the work of construction will be finished by November or December 2010.

After having been elected as the Anchalik Panchayat President of the Khubalia, G.P. Kushum Dehingia has been working as the chairman of Dhemaji Anchalik Panchayat. She reported sadly that all the Panchayats of the block have not developed hand in hand, because there is no permanent block development officer in these flood affected blocks. The responsibility of 2-3 blocks are entitled to only a single person (B.D.O) due to which the development of various schemes is lagging behind.

Lakshyana Lagasu (42) President, Hatigarh GP: It is a panchayat under Dhemaji development block. It is an area where the majority are people from the Scheduled Tribes because of which the election ticket was reserved for the scheduled tribe women

is the last panchayat elections when Lakshyana Lagasu won by a huge margin. This H.S.S.L.C Exam passed ‘Mising’ woman told me that the Hatighar goan panchyat is very backward. It is almost 8-10 km away from the Dhemaji town and often the Brahmaputra and its tributaries and Jiadhal flood the area badly. The low areas like Telijan, Dihingia, Hatighar and Nalanipam are all affected by flood. More than 107 families of those wards are compelled to leave their household and property and take shelter for 2/3 months in higher places or in all old army camps and in different schools. They can go back to their own houses only when the floodwater goes down. It causes various diseases and wants among them.

**Health and Hygiene:** There is only one health sub centre where there are only two nurses serving more than 10 thousand people of the panchayat. There is no better way of solving the problem of pregnant women. They have to be brought to the Dhemaji civil hospital for emergencies, which is situated at 10-12 km away and becomes inaccessible. The government pays no heed and recommends bringing emergency cases to the Dhemaji hospital. The dedicated Lakshyana Lagasu is determined to solve these problems of the area. The following Sanskrit phrase keeps her going – “Sarirom, Aadksam, Kholu Dhamma Swadhanam” meaning we need a sound life to live in this world. With this aim she has been giving importance to health of people of Hatighar GP for the last three years. Six out of ten ward members are women in this panchayat. They are Nilima Borgohain, Tarumoni Gogoi, Kunjalata Bora, Dalimi Bhuyan, Swarnalata Bordoloi and Phulkumari Koch respectively and during the floods they conduct health awareness camps and get the health of flood affected peoples’ health checked by the doctors who come from Dhemaji town. Mrs. Lagasu further lets us know that a demand has been

made to promote the Hatighar sub-center to a primary health center so that a doctor and nurse be appointed to secure better health of the inhabitants of the locality. She hopes that their expectation would come true very soon.

**Education:** The contribution of Mrs. Lagasu to education is undeniable. She says that the primary education is a fundamental right of the children. It is compulsory for every child to get primary education. However, it is a matter of sadness that many children of Hatighar GP have never been enrolled in schools and most of them are dropouts, as the children have to walk a long distance to school due to geographical conditions. The sikksha committee of the panchayat is striving to enrol the deprived children through three “Sanjuki Siksha Kendra”, “Amar Parhashali Vidyllya” and “Integrated education for disability”. The members concerned have informed us that no children will be deprived of primary education by the end of the year in their locality. Songs sung by the children of S.S.K centre of Hatighar and Nalanipam

*Mother we shall go to school*

*Mother we shall take our slates and books with us*

*We shall read...read*

*The lessons of our text book*

*What is a school?*

*It is a fair of children*

*In that fair*

*The flower of the future is blooming we find...*

The children will get the light of education through these centres. They will get the light of knowledge. They will become the future of our country. The parents are optimistic and think that their children will bring to reality the dreams, which they have in their mind.

NREGA: 850 men and 470 women have been given the job cards under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Assurance (NREGA) schemes, which totals to 1,320 people for this panchayat. Mrs. Lagasu proudly says that the NREGA scheme is successful in her panchayat. The vice president Mrs. Nilima Borghoian (ward No 3) has completed many more works in her ward already under various schemes worth about 28 lakhs. On the other hand the main road which runs to Eco-tourism of Khubalia GP has been under construction for Rs. 1 crore where the 1,320 job cardholders of Hatighar GP have been appointed. The length of the road may be almost 2km. Only the black topping is left and it is because of the unfavourable weather that the work could not be completed. Moreover it is reported that the job cardholder of Hatighar GP have helped the Khubalia GP in the construction of eco-tourism.

Anamoi/IAY: The president of the panchayat Mrs. Lagasu lamented that according to the governmental survey of 2004/05 there are 991 families living below the poverty line (BPL) in the panchayat. But it was a defective survey and so the ward members of the panchayat conducted it again where they recognized almost 1,300 families living below the poverty line. It needs to be stated here that the survey of every panchayat of Assam is defective because of which many of the poor families are not listed under BPL and are deprived of even common advantages. Therefore, in this panchayat also the BDO was

appealed to, to include 300 people in the list and give them their due. It is worth mentioning that out of the former list of 991 BPL families 503 have been benefited by IAYA and the rest 488 of them are in queue. The work has not started, as the funds have not been released. In the same way, the rural sanitation scheme of the central government is also going on in full swing. Sanitary toilets have been constructed for 519 BPL families by funds of the 12th financial commission in very low expenditure. The procedure for the rest of the 480 families has started. Mrs. Lagasu added- it has been attempted to make the panchayat free of pollution and neat and clean by giving the same scheme to additional 500 families. If the government grants enough funds, the Hatigarh GP will become an ideal panchayat in the next year. In addition to it, she says that they will be able to get the Nirmal Gram Award from the President of India. The poor families have received electricity in their homes by the Rajiv Gandhi National Rural Electrification scheme free of cost. However, due to negligence of the state government and carelessness in public distribution of co-operative system the Antodaya and Annapurna schemes could not become successful.

Lakshyana Lagasu knows that-she is not only the president of Hatigarh panchayat but also the president of Hatigarh Mahila Suraksha Samiti (Association for women's security in Hatigarh), and Samiti of Women's Empowerment. She has been working tirelessly for the promotion and betterment of women since long. She informs that statistically, there are total 400 nongovernmental associations and SHGs out of which 145 are women's associations. It is necessary to mention that a special market has been developed by 145 SHGs in the entire Dhemaji district. Many of women of the SHGs are collectively working and bringing agricultural produce,

livestock husbandry, handloom, and textile to the markets and attracting the attention of consumers. They have developed a market in Dhemaji town named “Polo store” and there they sell the produce particularly the textiles etc. Moreover five women from the SHGs of the panchayat especially are projecting a plantation of *Antherea Assama* (*Machilus Odoratissima*) in 50 Bighas of land (7.1 Hector) for the last 15 years with the help of the government subsidy scheme in Kachaytin, Nalamukh and Telizan of this panchayat. Almost 75% of the preliminary work is completed. The price of silk cloth is very high in the world market and in such an underdeveloped area this project will serve the public better. She states that two of its women SHGs are running a fishery in 2 Bighas of land (4 hectare). The public of Hatigarh panchayat is very happy and content with such all round development of the panchayat.

Ranu Gogoi, President, Simen Chapari GP: The jonai (Murkong selek) is situated in north east of Dhemaji town about 130-140 km away. Murkong selek is the last station of northeast boarder line railway as well as the national highway no. 52. It can be termed a very backward area with all BPL families as inhabitants. The development of this SC/ST dominated area can be realized only by spending time with the locals.

The woman president of Simen Chapari GP Mrs. Ranu Gogoi (38) tells us that she has come out only to share the problems of the panchayat. There will be progress in the country only if there is development in villages. She is giving importance mainly to the wholesome development of the Panchayat. Presently the biggest problem of her area is that in the large population of Samkang Dekapam, Michamora and Simen Chapari under Mukang Selek development block is served by only a mini-PHC in Decapum.

There are 11,400 people in Simen Chapari and there is only a health sub centre at Rangpuria. This small health sub centre cannot give service even to 10% of total population. The water of Simen, Dekapam and Samakong Rivers badly affect the area and hinder transportation and communication, which deprives the people of the interior area from better treatment. The sick and ill cannot be taken to hospital. A seriously sick man or a pregnant woman is taken to Assam Medical Collage Dibrugarh across the river Brahmaputra by boat or to the civil hospital of the Dhemaji town. The sick often die on the way before reaching the hospital. Mrs. Gogoi has demanded from the health minister and the officials a 30 bed hospital with every modern facility at Simen Chapari to serve the local people. As there is no doctor in the area, the people have to depend only upon the Asha workers and nurses. She always advises the Asha worker and the two nurses to provide good support at the time of emergency of the patients.

Though there is a college and two high schools, sixteen lower primary schools, yet 20% of the children have not been enrolled in school. The panchayat is working towards enrolling the children belonging to the age group of 6-14 years into seven Samjuti Siksha Kendra, four EGS centres under Assam Sarba Sikha Mission.

Presently 500 out of 753 BPL families have been given homes under the IAY by the 12th Finance Commission Fund. 253 families have not yet benefited as the fund has not yet been released. 614 families out of the 753 on the BPL list have been given hygienic toilets through rural sanitation scheme. All the BPL families will be covered during her tenure.

The floods of Simen River destroyed the houses and property of 16 families. However, they were given better settlement under the various schemes of the government as well as the IAY. The floods caused landslides, soil erosion and the destruction of paddy field. So the concerned department and the concerned executive engineer have sanctioned Rs. 88 Lakhs for preventive work. Simultaneously the ring bandh, channel cutting etc. is going on. The Simen chapory G.P. is at present supervising the construction of a stadium, an auditorium and a market complex worth Rs. 35 Lakhs, Rs.20 Lakhs and Rs.25 lakhs respectively released from the development fund of ZPM.

The crisis of pure drinking water is gradually being felt in northeast India. It is reported that the availability of iron, oil and traces of arsenic in the water cause diseases. Although there was a water supply scheme in 1988 in Simen Chapori it has long since disappeared and the government has promised a new one in the future. At present, they are striving to resolve the problem of pure drinking water by repairing the old one within this year.

Jili Pagu (A.P. Member, Dekapam G.P): The Dekapam G.P. is situated near the Simen chapori G.P. The A.P. member of the panchayat Mrs. Jili Pegu reports that there are 15,300 people out of which 90% people are from the Mising and Bodo community, and 4 of the villages are bodo dominated villages. About 80% people of the panchayat are under the BPL group. These people are wageworkers; they sell firewood and farm to run their families. There are 2040 job cardholders out of which 940 are women. Though 47% of wageworkers are appointed, practically 65% women are seen at work. Men do not come to work. In the Dekapam panchayat there are 9 Assamese medium lower primary schools and 4 Bodo medium

lower primary schools. The Sanjuji Siksha Kendra and the EGS centre established in these remote areas are substitutes for mainstream education, which cannot reach to serve the purpose. It is a matter of great sadness the children of schedule tribe people are addicted drinking alcohol as the liquor is fermented in all their houses. Mrs. Pegu lets us know that as the organizer of All Assam Association of Women's Equality, she has been generating awareness amongst the women regarding alcohol abuse. She feels that lives will be jeopardised with continued use of home-made liquor. The plantation of an *Antheroea Assama* (*machilus Odoratissima*) has been started under her leadership in 20 Bighas of land (about 3 hectares) named as Jili Wild Silk.

Though the central and the state government have devolved 29 departments to the Panchayats, in reality it is not so. The development is slow because no financial grant is given to the panchayat. From a practical survey, it is seen that merely 8-10 departments are successful in execution though 29 departments have been entrusted to them. Until and unless the government hands over the complete charge, funds and the responsibility of all the departments to the Panchayats there will no rural development. Though a few authoritative women come up to take part in rural development they are compelled to stay in the background because of different social factors. The MPs, Ministers and the MLAs of the Government get every facility. But the ward members of the Panchayats are not accorded importance. According to the norms of the government the ward member should be paid Rs. 500 monthly. But in some of the interior panchayats they get only a little remuneration during the festivals like Durga Puja, Baisag Bihu etc. At the time of GP elections there is a lottery for the reservation of councillor, president and ward member, which is led by the

men. Obvious corruption is seen here. More often it is seen that after the elections the 5-year term is run monotonously. This type of rule has to be abolished otherwise it may hinder development.

Summing up, I would like to say that corruption at the state and central level of government officials has decreased the speed of development in different sectors. If the departmental heads or the superior officials leave their A.C rooms and start working in the fields, they will be able to witness the real development of these rural areas. Instead of looking at files if they physically join in the developmental work, it will encourage the workers of the panchayat to march ahead. As no country's progress and prosperity is possible without the development of the villages, only if Indian villages become prosperous will Gandhiji's dream come true.

Let Panchayati Raj become a source of making available every developmental scheme to every Indian in every corner of the country. Statistics show that women representatives are less corrupt than the male representatives of the panchayat. Therefore, Gandhiji's Panchayati Raj system will be more successful if more women take part in the representation of the panchayats.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2010 and has been translated from Assamese*

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Praban Sarmah, *Dainik Pratikshan*  
Prashant Dikshit, *Aaj*

## Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

Preethi Nagaraj, *Deccan Herald*

Premchand Gandhi, *Jat Express & Rajasthan Patrika*

Priyamvada Kowshik, *Marie Claire Local Report Magazine*

Pushparaj B.N., *Vartha Bharathi*

Pushpendra Pal Singh, *Dainik Nai Duniya*

Rajendra Shinde, *Tarun Bharat*

Ramakrishna Sidrapal, *Deccan Herald*

Ranjan Kumar Shrivastava, *Hindustan Times*

Ravindra Bhatta, *Prajavani*

Rumni Ghosh, *Dainik Bhaskar*

Sanjeev Kumar, *Patrika*

Shankar Singh, *Diamond India*

Shoumojit Banerjee, *The Hindu*

Shruba Mukherjee, *Deccan Herald*

### **Editor**



In 2010, The Hunger Project celebrates 10 years of partnership with the print media. Till date more than 10,000 articles have been received from journalists for Sarojini Naidu Prize which is awarded annually by The Hunger Project. This fifth volume of Thus Spoke the Press is a collection of 44 articles, each capturing the achievements of the elected women leaders in Gram Panchayats.

Read them to get a glimpse of the changing face of rural India where elected women are navigating the corridors of politics, bureaucracy and a patriarchal society to bring power to the people of this country.



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