

# Thus sp̄oke the press

Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

**Volume 6**

THE  
HUNGER  
PROJECT



*This book is dedicated to  
Ms Krishnaveni, Dalit President of Thalaisyuthu Panchayat in  
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu who was brutally attacked in June 2011  
because of the many bold decisions taken by her.*



## FOREWORD

Thus Spoke the Press started out as a compilation of select articles sent by print journalists from across the country for The Sarojini Naidu Prize. The Prize, given annually by the Hunger Project, aims to encourage journalists to document and share the achievements of the remarkable elected women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In the last five years, five volumes have compiled over 212 stories, forever stamping in print the incredible leadership journey of over 500 elected women leaders.

Each story is unique. Every challenge faced by the elected women representatives speaks volumes about the deep-rooted structural problems in our society. Every success documented tells us of the many changes at different levels – personal, social, political – that have been initiated by the elected women. These volumes of Thus spoke the Press will continue to inform all about the first generation of rural women leaders who exercised their leadership under fire. While some survived to tell their story, many paid the price with their lives. Whatever the outcome, they will always remain the trailblazers, an inspiration to young women and men who are motivated to forge a new path.

As we bring out the sixth volume of Thus Spoke the Press, we would like to acknowledge and thank all those journalists who believed in the elected women leaders and recognized the important work undertaken by them in building the nation - village by village, Panchayat by Panchayat.

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The Hunger Project

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## INTRODUCTION

Exercising leadership. Building constituencies. Navigating power. Making change happen! Do these describe the job profile of an elected woman representative in Gram Panchayats? Well, the daily routine of elected women representatives is crowded with much more. Having been elected as representatives of their communities, expectations from them are high. A chance to make a difference beckons every day. They deal on a daily basis with issues of education, water, nutrition, midday meal schemes, ration shops, immunization, Anganwadis, primary health centres, sanitation, roads, electricity and much more. Schools are sub-standard and government sponsored schemes for rural welfare remain unimplemented. Elected women representatives like Pankajini, Purnabasi, Bharati and Mamatamayee<sup>1</sup> in Odisha don't hesitate. They have shown that they have the ability to take leadership roles, bring change and make a difference. In rural Odisha they are ready to contest the next Gram Panchayat elections scheduled for February 2012, where for the first time 50% seats have been reserved for women.

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<sup>1</sup> All about Pankajini, Purnabasi, Bharati and Mamatamayee by Bimal Krishna Thamb

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) which mandated reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions gave birth to more than a million women leaders at the grassroots in India. Mostly semi-literate, they have become politically active and are learning the rules of leadership on the job. Theirs has been a leadership journey beset with pressures and challenges, successes and gain, hardships and pain. Most of them are new to public office. ‘When asked if being a housewife left her unprepared for her role as a public figure’, Sharifa<sup>2</sup> answered slowly, “I am mentally prepared. I know my community well and we will sit together and make decisions on what needs to be done.” In nearby Dudipora Panchayat of Kashmir, Rosie says that there are no footpaths, no electricity and many of the men are unemployed. She has advised people to use their votes carefully to ensure genuine improvement in delivery of basic services. Like Sharifa, one million elected women are using this opportunity to lead their constituencies into a better future. They are meeting with people, identifying developmental gaps, accessing government schemes, demanding rights and are also solving day to day problems of their communities. Reservation for women at the Panchayats has given women across the country a chance to exercise their political agency and has also created a space for women to participate in the development of their villages and communities. As Sheba says, “Women talk to women leaders without embarrassment or fear. They can approach me in a way that they will never be able to approach a male Panch.” Sheba’s quiet confidence is representative of the collective voice of women leaders that has emerged because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

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<sup>2</sup> Ordinary women, Extraordinary Courage by Aditi Bhaduri

The elected women in Panchayats have steadily taken charge of education, health and social security schemes. But as they know, exercising leadership often means going beyond authority. Bisalya Sabar, a tribal woman who is also a Naib Sarpanch, hails from the famous Debirising village of Pandmapur block. She has raised her voice against the corruption in the distribution of Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) houses in her Gram Panchayat. She says that officials are allotting multiple houses to citizens who are not eligible for the scheme. When she confronted the Panchayat Executive Officer, she was directed to approach the Chief Minister for justice.

In another Panchayat, Jayanti Urlaka from Turiguda Gram Panchayat of the Maoist affected Chandrapur block sadly describes how middlemen have collected Rs. 2,000-2,500 from several Below Poverty Line (BPL) families to allot IAY houses. She has approached higher authorities but nobody listened. Ultimately she filed an FIR in Muniguda police station, a copy of which has not been given to her. Despite pressures and threats, elected women leaders like Bisalya and Jayanti<sup>3</sup> are determined to pursue the path of good governance and demand accountability from higher authorities. They question the unjust and corrupt system and are prepared to face the many obstacles that crop up in the path towards justice.

At a recent convention in Jaipur, elected women representatives spoke about their leadership agenda. Elected for the first time, Sarpanch Geeta Regar of Railmagra, Rajsamand, Rajasthan was keen to work on issues which require changing life long beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> Women of Rayagada join the fight to ensure good governance by Badal Tah

and traditional mindsets. From an SC community, Geeta wants to raise her voice against caste discrimination and remove the patriarchal tradition of 'purdah' from her village. She knows that she is treading on a path which is not easy and might not showcase instant results. Like Geeta, other EWRs are also addressing issues of sexual exploitation, harassment of young girls, dowry menace, low child sex ratio and domestic violence. In most cases, women leaders face the wrath of the community and are often intimidated, ostracized and sometimes physically beaten up. "Leadership lies in facing threats, bribery and political pressure", says Jyothi Muralidhar<sup>4</sup> from Hosuru GP in Karnataka. "There was a teacher harassing a girl student in my village. I came to know of this and went to the school. I understood the problem. We asked the media to write about it. This teacher tried to close the case by greasing the parents' palms. He also leveled allegations against me. This was truly disturbing. If parents had been alert and shown the courage to protest against the injustice, the teacher could have been punished", Jyothi recalls. "One should be hard-hearted in rendering justice for a town or a community, isn't it"?, she says.

To lead is to live dangerously. Like Jyothi, Zeba from Kashmir says, "Life and death are in god's hands, and are not dependent on contesting elections. We are fed up of the violence, of the marginalisation of our people. We want change", she says. Zeba has taken a step forward and has now become the harbinger of change in her Gram Panchayat. Ganga, Dhapu, Renuka, Hasina Begum and their one million elected women colleagues are all new leaders who face grave dangers in order to transform

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<sup>3</sup> A bold leadership for the Panchayat Court by N. Karanta Peraje

the lives of others. They have become the voice and face of a restless public impatient for change and justice.

The thirty three articles which follow in this sixth volume of *Thus Spoke The Press* published by The Hunger Project tells us that leadership does not have standard formats and easy answers. As the stories progress, one is able to better understand and grasp the urgency of these women leaders, witness their ability to stay poised in the midst of ambiguity and marvel at their ability to respond with faith and creativity the toughest of the leadership challenges in a developing country.



# A BOLD LEADERSHIP FOR THE PANCHAYAT COURT

N. Karanta Peraje  
Hosa Digantha, 12 June, 2011

*Jyothi appears different in a system where signatures are attested with a green pen sitting in an easy chair. Apart from rendering justice to her own post, Jyothi is all eyes and ears and resolves the problems of the people on a day-to-day basis. Jyothi, true to her name, is a bright example of how an educated Panchayat head can contribute to administration.*

**P**eople coming under this Panchayat jurisdiction do not run around the courts to settle disputes. They do not approach the police station. They resolve all their issues in the Panchayat court itself. The village scenario has changed, thanks to the bold steps and the courageous attitude of Jyothi Muralidhar, the people's representative. The entire village benefits if a people's representative is educated.

“Orders, circulars and motions do not constitute a village's development. You come to know of people's pain when you mingle with them. You realize the difficulties. It is the duty of the people's representative to study this and seek a solution to the problem”, says Jyothi of Hosagunda near Sagar.

Jyothi was elected as the Vice President of Hosuru Panchayat for the first time in 2001 and in 2005 as the President. She won for the third time in 2010. If a lady has got elected thrice in a

row at the village-level politics, money power and manpower cannot be the reasons. Since she responded to the people's needs, Jyothi was elected again and again.

Jyothi has a *laissez faire* job, but she never took it easy. No, this is not an exaggeration. Her policy is 'as a people's representative, be where the people are'. Thus, all that she has to do is to express herself, and this becomes the final word for the Panchayat. This is the impact of the trust and reliability placed by the people on her.

### **Panchayat Court**

Every Panchayat has a social justice committee – a system to solve the disputes and issues of the village. Justice made available at the Panchayat platform is now obtained through this committee. Judgements are according to the intellectual levels of the Panchayat leaders. People place their trust when justice is rendered without any fear or favour. Justice also gains value. How relieved will the courts be if only all our Panchayat-level disputes find a happy ending locally! Before submitting an application before the people's court, the applicant has to submit it before the Panchayat court. The Panchayat examines it and transfers it to the social justice committee. Only then is the enquiry process initiated.

The Vice President of the Panchayat is the Chairperson of the social justice committee. Human resources of the rural areas are laid to waste due to rivalry, hatred and disputes. If this were to be settled at the lower level, the same resources can be utilized for rural development. Jyothi who has understood this has ensured a 'court touch' to the justice committee, with a vision that all disputes have to be settled in the Panchayat itself.

“Our people should not knock at the court doors. They should not set foot inside the police station. They would feel humiliated by compromising issues elsewhere. This should be settled in the Panchayat itself”, says Jyothi who is bound by this self-cultivated stand, and has rendered justice by conducting enquiries before the justice committee for a majority of disputes that occurred within the Panchayat limits.

### **Unending Issues**

Land disagreements, harassment to young girls, sexual exploitation, dowry menace, marital discords, fights over fuel-wood, quarrels over fences, encroachment are a bagful of problems. Emphasis is laid on changing the mindset when these issues come up before the justice committee. If this proves to be impossible, the next step would be an enquiry. In cases of marital disharmony, the husband and the wife are questioned separately, and often they have been brought together once again. A wife who goes back to her parents after deserting her husband is counselled and the couple is advised to lead a happy married life. If a dispute occurs between two brothers, the cause for the same is ascertained before pronouncing the verdict. She has the satisfaction of bringing together two factions of a warring family, of settling an issue related to disputed land, of solving a dowry case amicably, etc.

“There was once an instance of a teacher harassing a girl student. I came to know of this and went to the school. I understood the problem. We asked the media to write about it. This teacher tried to close the case by greasing the parents’ palms. He also levelled allegations against me. This was truly disturbing. If parents had been alert and shown the courage to protest against the injustice, the teacher could have been punished”, Jyothi recalls.

### **Recognition for services**

Jyothi is a law graduate. Muralidhar, her husband is a teacher. Her's is an unusual personality to have obtained a law degree just to provide good justice at the Gram Panchayat legal platform. She is praised for examining many cases during her tenure and delivering verdicts. She dreams of development the entire week and on Saturdays and Sundays, she visits the village along with her husband. Her's is an open house for people to meet her with their problems. She has also been elected to the Taluk Panchayat in the beginning of this year. She bears partial responsibility for Yadehalli and two other Panchayats apart from her own Hosuru Panchayat.

Families are devastated due to alcoholism. At such times, Jyothi visits these houses, make them aware of the menace of alcoholism, and urges them to give up the vice. She consoles the family. It is said that at times drunkards, fully inebriated, squat in her house. Waiting till they are sober, she asks them their intentions and then packs them off home even if it is past midnight. Plenty of patience is needed to tolerate all these. There is no alternative. She says that at times she has no privacy.

The main problems that the village faces are lack of roads and fuel-wood. Jyothi has solved this in a very delicate manner. The way she faced the dispute between the households of Jamburu and Chennashettykoppa over fuel-wood is thrilling. "One should be hard-hearted in rendering justice for a town or a community, isn't it?", she asks. Leadership lies in facing threats, bribery and political pressure! "After all she is a woman, what can she do?" is their ridicule. "If you do not care, everything can be sorted out. If you sit at home with fear, these people will feel further emboldened". This is how she clarifies her attitude in her social work.

### **A Law Degree for legal knowledge**

People should not have problems. Instead of spending 10 years going up and down the court, spend 10 days to contact the Panchayat. Money, labour and time can thus be saved. This is how Jyothi tries to convince people. “People often question us. Why should we accept your verdict?”, is how they scorn us. She accepted such talk in a positive manner. “How about obtaining a law degree (LLB) to gain knowledge about legal issues?”, Muralidhar, her husband concurred.

“I have no desire to become a lawyer. I have no ambition to earn money. People of the village should get justice in the Panchayat system. It became necessary to study for LLB in order to learn the various aspects of law”, says Jyothi. “People gained more confidence in me after my law degree. Many people accept me after explaining the law. They also respect me”, she adds.

“When compared to other Panchayats, about 60% of the cases have obtained justice here. Approaching the courts has been avoided”, she says happily. Other lawyers are said to have chided her, “If you resolve cases in the village itself, how can you ever get a case? How can you ever practise in a court of law?”, she adds.

### **Pure development**

An endeavour for a value-added bakery production through women’s organizations and self-help groups is on the anvil and CFTRI at Mysore has been visited towards this end. Land has been sanctioned for schools to develop gardens. Development of ponds and lakes through the water augmentation projects has also been undertaken. Jyothi has also honestly tried to implement the free housing scheme of the government.

School drop-outs are encouraged to rejoin schools. This involves visiting parents and inculcating the importance of education in them. If nothing works, the parents may even be threatened with police action.

Jyothi has taken a lot of care in the proper and timely implementation of the MNREGS. “We have received jobs worth Rs. 50 Lakhs. Around 40 tanks have been developed and the others will also be completed in due time. In the Hosagunda catchment area, the number of tanks has risen from 20 to 80 with the co-operation of the department of minor irrigations .There is no point in office meetings. I am happy that the government has reserved seats for women and as a result many of us are in top positions. Women have also assumed leadership. At many places they suffer from a lack of knowledge. Reservation without knowledge is worthless”, articulates Jyothi. In all her tasks, she has the full support of the Panchayat leaders and members.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Kannada.*

## A LIVE EXAMPLE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Guruvapa N.T. Balepuni

Hosa Digantha, 14 June, 2011

*Idkidu is the very first Gram Panchayat of Karnataka to draw the attention of the world for its water literacy. Idkidu is also in the forefront for community participation. The village, under the capable leadership of a Scheduled Tribe lady, has intensified its rate of progress.*

**I**n a silent revolution towards Gram Swarajya (rural autonomy), rural development and self-reliance, a rare Gram Panchayat is situated in Bantwal Taluk of Dakshina Kannada. Its name is Idkidu Gram Panchayat.

The Gram Panchayat President Ratna has taken interest in introducing the 'Idkidu Model' of rural development to the nation. Ratna belongs to the Nalike Scheduled Tribe identified for its skill in Bhoota dance culture of Dakshina Kannada. She has risen to the post of the President through her experience as a Gram Panchayat member in the earlier term.

### **A learned woman**

There is a saying that having a learned woman is akin to opening a school. This highlights the significance of education. Ratna, the President of Idkidu Gram Panchayat is a matriculate. About 10 years ago, she left Nidle village, her birth place, and

joined the family of Sekehitlu of Kula village in Idkidu Gram Panchayat as its daughter-in-law. For two years, she worked as a motivator for neo-literates in the Centre for Continuing Education at Kula village. Ratna, who formed self-help groups for them, never dreamt that she would, in the near future, be the President of the local administration of the place.

When Gram Panchayat elections were announced for the term 2005-10, Ratna was motivated by an acquaintance to contest the elections and in the very first attempt, she was elected as a member of the Gram Panchayat. Thereafter, Ratna has been teaching lessons in rural development to the people and today, commands the respect of the village as its first citizen.

Ratna's husband Krishnappa has had primary education and is a worker in a rubber factory. Ratna is a *beedi* worker. Two young sons compliment this small family. Their assets are a six cent field and an eight year old small Ashraya house. Her husband's encouragement and support have doubled Ratna's interests.

While sharing her entry into the Gram Panchayat in Hosa Digantha, Ratna states, "I hesitated to contest the elections. I had absolutely no experience in Gram Panchayat administration. Once elected, I was able to learn about the Gram Panchayat system with the co-operation of my co-members, staff and the people. I gained the strength to understand the likes and dislikes of people."

### **Beyond the constraints of caste and creed**

"During 2005-10, the number of members, including myself, stood at 19 out of which eight of us were women. We were like a family and would discuss issues to formulate schemes for the village. We would forget all about caste, religion and status.

Gram Swarajya, self-reliance and rural development were our main goals. More than anything else, we were aware that these schemes and projects were for our own welfare. My high school education helped me in quickly understanding the Panchayati Raj system”, says Ratna. She exuded confidence that literacy, health, clean drinking water, empowerment of women, and basic facilities would strengthen the Panchayati Raj system.

Idkidu Gram Panchayat has under its purview, Kula and Idkidu revenue villages with seven blocks. Presently, it has a 19-member administrative council. It embraces representatives from all communities including SC/ST, women and backward classes. Eight of the members are women and presently hold the posts of the President and the Vice President. Members backed by independents, Congress and BJP conduct the administration together.

### **Augmented resources**

As the President she has now quickened the pace of rural programmes implemented earlier in her capacity as a member. Ratna has also paid attention towards augmenting the resources of the Gram Panchayat.

This Gram Panchayat President has been successful in providing clean drinking water at a cost of Rs. 1.5 Lakhs to 22 families of Marpalli, Pelattadi, Surya, Nerlaje, Mundrabailu and others. Ratna is prepared to take up works to provide clean drinking water to 30 families of Urimajalu and Alake Majalu through the Zilla Panchayat grant. Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), an amount of Rs. 4.67 Lakhs has been spent on road development, school grounds and construction of enclosure walls for the Anganwadis. An expenditure of Rs. 70,529 for the benefit of

land development for SC/ST under the Employment Guarantee scheme has also been incurred. In addition, Rs. 260,875 has been spent to improve lands belonging to BPL families.

“Gram Panchayat, administration and development can march hand-in-hand only if enough resources are available. In this context, we have already taken steps to augment the financial resources. Business and trade tariffs have been revised and increased from Rs. 37,000 to 87,000. The Gram Panchayat possesses 10 shops and this fetches an annual income of Rs. 35,000”, says Ratna.

### **Successful collections**

Tax collection has risen considerably. Ratna’s efforts to convince citizens by personally meeting them have yielded results. In the year 2009-10, dues for water charges stood at Rs. 2.25 Lakhs out of which Rs. 205,855 had been collected. In 2010-11, this was Rs. 3 Lakhs and an amount of Rs. 312,665 including previous dues was collected. This year’s dues are Rs. 3.05 Lakhs out of which an amount of Rs. 49,865 has already been collected.

In 2009-10, the tax demand of the Gram Panchayat was Rs. 185,525 and Rs. 160,325 was recovered. In 2010-11, this was Rs. 230,170 and Rs. 236,475 was recovered. In 2011-12, the figure was Rs. 237,830 and by the end of June Rs. 18,510 had been recovered.

### **Education**

The Gram Panchayat has, under its umbrella, three junior primary schools, a higher primary school, and a high school. There are 10 Anganwadis. A total of 763 children are receiving education, out of whom 387 are girls. All schools and Anganwadis have good water and toilet facilities. Nine Anganwadis have

their own buildings with electrical connections. Five Anganwadi centres have been provided cooking gas facility.

About five years ago, two children in the age group of 6-14 years had dropped out of school. Now there are no school drop-outs. All citizens under the age of 40 years are literate and the average literacy rate of the Gram Panchayat has exceeded 90%. About 25% of the funds are earmarked as incentives for the higher education of girls from SC/ST.

### **Hygiene and Health**

Idkidu Gram Panchayat has laid stress on health programmes. All pet dogs in the Gram Panchayat have been given anti-rabies vaccines in the last 16 years. This year's rabies immunization movement took place on February 10. Anti-foot and mouth disease vaccines have been administered to the cattle. Health check-up camps, eye-testing camps and programmes to create awareness against contagious diseases have been taken up in collaboration with organizations of the Panchayat area.

Due to its active role in total cleanliness movement, Idkidu Gram Panchayat has earned the "Nirmala Gram Puraskar" in 2008. There were 360 families without toilets before the launch of the cleanliness drive. Of them, 216 families were below the poverty line. Now with the initiative of the Gram Panchayat, various organizations and co-operation of the villagers, all households have toilets.

'Pick up the Plastic' movement was a success thanks to school students, organizations and the people. Naveen Kumar, Development Officer of the Gram Panchayat says that plastic consumption has significantly come down.

### **Water-Sanitation Committee**

The Gram Panchayat has a main water sanitation committee (WSC). There are nine area-wise committees and Ratna is the President of all of them. After she became the President, the separate bank accounts of these nine committees were closed and converted into a single account.

The rare WSC meetings are now held regularly every quarter. The water tariff collection has also increased. Schemes to provide clean drinking water are in force says Kareem, a welder of the village.

An action plan has been drawn up to utilize the Rs. 4 Lakhs cash award received as 'Nirmala Gram Puraskar' towards waste management unit and drainage works and the approval of the Zilla Panchayat has been recently obtained for the same.

### **White Revolution - Empowerment of Women**

The Idkidu Gram Panchayat has a ratio of 1,000 males for every 1,004 females. K.T. Shailaja Bhat, who was earlier the President of this Gram Panchayat, is now the President of Dakshina Kannada Zila Panchayat. Bhagirati held this post in the first term of 2005-10 elections and in the second term, Sujatha was the Vice President. Presently both these posts are held by women.

There are altogether 284 self-help groups here out of which 166 belong to women. The annual savings of self-help groups is Rs. 61 Lakhs and the contribution of women is Rs. 30.90 Lakhs.

### **Strength from dairy activities**

There are three milk production co-operative societies in the Gram Panchayat with a membership of 250. A majority of them

are women and all the labour involved in milk production is from them. Around 1,600-1,800 litres of milk is supplied to the milk co-operative society daily. Dairy thus plays a major role in the economic independence of women.

“There is no loss in dairy activity. Profit will be higher if the family members do not appoint servants and instead do the work themselves. Milk need not be bought from outside. The Gobar gas installation provides cooking gas. The dung is used for agriculture.” These were the words of experience of Teresa Pois of Uri Majalu, who has found contentment in dairy work for the past 25 years.

According to Dr. Krishna Bhat, a social worker and a veterinary doctor, dairy activity has been a source of strength to the women and their efforts have led to the white revolution. Bhat says, “When a cow or a calf falls sick, it is mostly women who call me up. They have involved themselves along with the family members in milk production. Men only carry the milk to the cooperative society.”

Idkidu Agricultural Co-operative Society has formulated 12 policies for the development of the village and the Gram Panchayat has duly included them in the administration. The present President is educated and people say that she has the capability to take decisions independently.

### **SGSY**

Under the Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), the Gram Panchayat has imparted training to many women in dairy farming, jasmine cultivation, tailoring, poultry and similar self-employment schemes in addition to release of seed-money. As a result, today many have taken up economic activities.

In the past two years, the Gram Panchayat received Rs. 22 Lakhs under SGSY and spent the entire amount fruitfully. Ishwar Naik, the CEO of Idkidu Agricultural Co-operative Society says that 230 members of self-help groups have benefited from this scheme.

### **Water Literacy**

Idkidu merits the first place among the Gram Panchayats for having created a true meaning for water literacy. People adopted rain-harvesting, setting up soak pits and erection of barriers about one and a half decades ago and continue to keep up this good work by evincing the same interest. Water rejuvenation experiments are carried out not only in schools, houses and government buildings but also in places of worship and are still full of life.

Kolpe Sri Shanmukha Subramanya temple has organized panel discussions on soak pits, medicinal garden, village plantation and rural development thereby earning applause from the land for its pro-people goals.

The caution displayed by the Idkidu village to conserve water efficiently is highly emulative. Its community participation in constructing water drainage systems has drawn the attention of the world. Efforts that can motivate others are many. Sri Padre, a water expert says that Idkidu stands distinctly apart from all the other Gram Panchayats because of its water conservation, organic farming, eradication of rabies and dairy farming.

### **Impetus to facilities**

According to Sephia of Alakemajalu who was associated with Ratna as a Gram Panchayat member, Ratna is a very good member. She has an excellent vision on hygiene, education for girls, and infrastructure facilities.

### **Transparent administration**

The rate of literacy, empowerment of women, water conservation and health programmes reflect the effective and transparent administration of the Gram Panchayat. A general meeting is held here every month and normally there is a 100% member attendance. Voters' reaction to revenue collections is good. The Gram Panchayat Development Officer confirms 100% attendance of the President in all types of meetings.

Around 44 monthly meetings took place during 2005 to 2010 and Ratna participated in 41 of them. Due to the presence of Ratna in all the six special meetings of the year, 2010-11 commenced from June 23, 2010. Uptill now, eight general meetings and three special meetings have taken place and Ratna has taken part in all these meetings. She has maintained 100% attendance even in WSC meetings.

### **The Madaka needs a helping hand**

There is a Madaka (a traditional system of water conservation) in Emaje of Idkidu but it is filled with silt. If it is de-silted, water can be provided to agricultural lands of Surya, Kolpe and Kedimaru, says Sudhir Kumar Vice President for the previous term and presently a Member.

Ratna wants cooking gas connections to the five Anganwadis, protection walls for five houses at a place called Mittur Bare of Idkidu village, road to connect Kabaka-Ojala-Kundadka, development of cross-roads at Devastha-Kolpe-Mittur, soak pits, as well as increase in the installation of *gobar* gas units.

Mallika, the Vice President of the Gram Panchayat feels that the administrative council of Idkidu Gram Panchayat is marching forward as a team to achieve rural development and

with people's encouragement, the foundation of the Panchayati Raj can be strengthened and rural development be achieved.

### **Towards pollution free Gram Panchayat**

More than hundred families involved in dairy activities have *gobar* gas installations. The number of families possessing cooking gas connections has crossed three hundred. Five Anganwadis have cooking gas facility.

The President now has visions of a smokeless Gram Panchayat. In the forthcoming days, Ratna intends to implement the scheme with the co-operation of the administration and the villagers.

### **No infant deaths**

During the three-year period between April 1, 2008 and March 31, 2011, 317 babies were born here and Dr. Ramakrishna, District Health and Family Welfare Officer confirms that there have been no cases of infant or maternity deaths. Only three Dengue incidents (no deaths) were reported in these three years and no other contagious disease has occurred in Idkidu.



*This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Kannada.*

## ALL ABOUT PANKAJINI, PURNABASI, BHARATI AND MAMATAMAYEE

Bimal Krishna Thamb

Orissa Post, 26 April, 2011

Participation of women in three-tier Panchayati Raj system has increased through the endeavor of late Biju Patnaik and this has shown results. Elected women representatives like Pankajini, Purnabasi, Bharati and Mamatamayee have shown that they have the ability to take leadership roles and make a difference in this male dominated society.

Pankajini Dalei (32) is the Samiti member of Sabarpalli Panchayat in R. Udaygiri block in Gajapati district. She could not study beyond Class IX due to poverty. Dalei formed a self-help group in the village and persuaded other women to join it for their all-round development. She started a campaign to make her village liquor free. This campaign made her so popular that Dalei won the election as a Samiti member in 2007. As part of the selection process for Gram Sathi in the Panchayat, last year it was made mandatory for candidates to provide caste certificates. But the clerk at Tehsildar's office demanded money for providing the same to the candidates. Dalei intervened in the matter and threatened to stage a hunger strike in front of his office if the candidates were not given the certificates.

Similar is the story of Bharati Behera (38) who is a ward member of Kurudol Panchayat. She belongs to Turang village in Anugul district. Behera has devoted herself to social service.

Behera says that she has completed Class IV but has no remorse that she is not well educated. She has helped eight BPL families to get houses under Indira Awas Yojana and four beneficiaries to avail widow pension. A widow, Susama Behera is getting rice under Annapurna Yojana, she says. In addition to this, Behera is handling the responsibilities of Grama Sikhya and Gaon Kalyan Samitis. She takes rounds of schools to ensure that mid-day meal schemes are managed properly by the authorities.

Another commendable work Behera has done in her village is with regard to sanitation. She has persuaded the villagers in the ward to set up as many as 40 lavatories. This apart, she is always trying to implement welfare schemes in the ward and gives topmost priority to water supply and electrification.

Mamatamayee Panda (40) is another ward member who has formed Nandini Devi Mahila Manch in Sadar block. Through the Manch, she has been trying to empower women in the block. The Manch has 200 women member on its roll and a 10-member committee has been formed to look into the problems of women. Panda has won Nandini Devi award this year for her services. Dhenkanal District Collector, Usha Padhi handed her the award on Women's Day in 2003 for her meritorious services. In 2005, she was given powers of a special police officer to deal with problems relating to women.

Damla Panchayat Sarpanch, Punarbadi Nayak of Rayagada district has accomplished a number of tasks during her tenure. She has concentrated more on solving the problems of

drinking water and communication in the remote parts of the Panchayat. She has also introduced cultivation of pineapple in the Panchayat.

Punarbadi has provided land to 150 farmers with the assistance of the district administration for the cultivation. Concrete roads have been laid in the villages and people get drinking water through pipes due to her efforts.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## WOMEN HELP CREATE A SUGRAMA IN DAKSHIN KANNADA

Naina J. A.

Deccan Herald, 12 March, 2011

*Empowerment of women is crucial for the development of a country. Through Sugrama Elected Gram Panchayat Women Members Federation, Vrunda has been silently working towards transformation in society.*

**P**anchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means for good governance. With the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution, not only Gram Panchayats came into existence but also provided an opportunity to the marginalised section of the society like SC/STs, and women. Though in many places, women representatives still function as ‘proxy’ candidates under the supervision of male members, there are several women representatives who have been making silent transformation at the Gram Panchayat level by taking bold initiatives. In Dakshina Kannada, there are few women Gram Panchayat members who have not only set an example for the male-dominated society, but have also demonstrated that changes are taking place slowly.

Sugrama Elected Gram Panchayat Women Members Federation (Bantwal) President Vrunda and members Lolakshi and Girija have been making efforts to bring about changes at the village

level by fighting against the loopholes in the system, and helping the poor get toilets and so on.

Vrunda is a first time Gram Panchayat member at Meramajalu Gram Panchayat in Bantwal. Lolakshi is a member of Kurnadu Gram Panchayat. Earlier, she had served as the President of Kurnadu Gram Panchayat. Girija is a member of Raji Gram Panchayat.

### **Fight against CHC**

The trio had fought against loopholes in a Community Health Centre (CHC) at Vamadapadavu and has been successful in setting right the loopholes to some extent.

Infact, the CHC at Vamadapadav in Bantwal Taluk is perhaps one of the best in the district or even State. It has a scanning centre, X-ray block, laboratory named 'Shodhana', heart check-up centre, ICTC and the other necessary surgical facilities. However, when the members of Sugrama Elected Gram Panchayat Women Members Federation received complaints from the general public that a private clinic 'Preethi Raksha' is run by Dr. Durgaprasad's wife Dr. Neetha J. Attavar at his official residence and the CHC staff were charging a fee from women who were going to the CHC for delivery, the Federation lead by Vrinda decided to fight for the cause of the poor patients.

Speaking to the City Herald, Vrunda said, "Running a private clinic at the official residence (quarters) is violation of the law. Interestingly, the license for the private clinic has been obtained from the Gram Panchayat (Chennaihodi) on November 20, 2010, though the GP meeting was held on November 27, 2010. It means that the GP gave the permission seven days before the meeting was held! But the clinic is being run since 2003."

Vrunda said, “Dr. Durgaprasad was sending most of his patients to Preethi Raksha clinic, headed by his wife Dr. Neetha, where fee is charged for every consultation. On the other hand, Dr. Neetha was giving allopathic medicine though she holds only a Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery (BAMS) degree.” Following the complaint by Vrunda and her team, the District Health and Family Welfare Officer (DHO) ordered an inquiry on the issue immediately. The inquiry was conducted on February 19, 2011 by District TB officer Dr. M. Ramakrishna Rao. “Infact, as soon as the complaint was filed by the Sugrama members, the clinic which was functioning from the official residence was shifted from the premises”, she said.

Vrunda added, “When we went and asked Dr. Durgaprasad regarding the running of the private clinic by his wife at the official residence, he had told us that he is an influential person and has obtained license from the Panchayat to run the clinic.”

“We were pressurized to withdraw the complaint by various political parties. However, we were firm on continuing our fight against the loopholes in the system. I was supported by my family, Federation members and Jana Shikshana Trust in our fight against the system.” On the other had, Lolakshi said that they were able to fight for a cause inspite of pressure.

### **Toilet**

When Vrunda realised that Nemu Poojary couple do not have a toilet facility in their house, the Federation decided to dig the pit for the toilet. “However, when we realised that the couple are alone in the house and do not have children to support,

we decided to construct toilet with help of the donors”, said Vrunda. She added, “Through Shramadaan, we constructed a toilet for the family within three days. Infact, the Meramajalu Gram Panchayat had given Rs. 1,200 for the construction of a toilet. We raised the remaining funds from the donors with the help of Gram Panchayat members. The cost of the toilet had come upto Rs. 4,000,” she added.

### **Vocational training**

Vrunda is also a trainer for vocational training for neo-literates being organized by the Directorate of Loka Shikshana, Dakshina Kannada Continual Education Association, Zilla Panchayat and Jana Shikshana Trust in 50 Gram Panchayats in Dakshina Kannada.

As many as 10 neo-literates in each Gram Panchayats are getting trained in the preparation of soaps, phenyl, liquid soap, detergent powder, bleaching powder, candle-making, medicinal oil preparation, and fancy products, along with eco-friendly products like cloth bag preparation and plate from areca, apart from jasmine cultivation, cultivation of vegetables, dairy farming, apiculture, poultry (especially rearing of Giriraja), vermi-compost and mushroom cultivation.

Vrunda has been training 10 neo-literates in vocational training at Meramajalu. Many women were a bit hesitant to join the training programme in the beginning. However, slowly they developed interest. There are a few more women who are eager to join the training. “Infact, several women have asked met teach them to prepare various products. Through these vocational training, several neo-literates can become economically independent”, she said.

Through Sugrama Federation, she wants to take up Shramadaan in every Gram Panchayat in Bantwal Taluk. Moreover, she wants to take up one work under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in all the Gram Panchayats in Bantwal Taluk.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## RADHA SPREADING SWEETNESS IN MITHI BERI

Narjis Husain

Lok Panchayat Weekly, May, 2011

The struggle that Radha had undergone in order to bring Swajal Dhara to her village is an example in itself. She is still fighting a legal battle, in which she is all alone. She says, “I had spared no effort to bring this World Bank project to my village. But I was absolutely shocked when all the government officials including BDO, CDO, DM, DPRO and the Chief Secretary waved a red flag instead of supporting me. If any of them had supported me at that time, I wouldn’t have had to start a legal fight.” The case for Swajal Dhara scheme is going on since 2005.

Mithi Beri has become synonymous with Radha today. There can be no Mithi Beri without Radha, and there can be no Radha without Mithi Beri. It is a very unusual relationship between a village Panchayat and a person. Radha has been the Sarpanch of this Panchayat (in Dehradun district of Uttarakhand) for the last 15 years. Of a short stature and fair color, Radha is a sweet tempered woman. She dresses so simply, that no one can guess that she is the Sarpanch.

About 42 years of age, Radha was elected Sarpanch of this Panchayat in 1996 for the first time. She although belonging to

the OBC category, has always won on an unreserved seat. She says that the 33.3% reservation of Panchayat seats granted by the government has not been implemented in her Panchayat. Upon asking how she could remain Sarpanch such a long time inspite of reservation, and didn't the upper castes oppose her, she says, "My sweet temperament is my biggest asset. I deal politely with everyone. Secondly, I know my place in the society and in the village. I would go so far as to say that I am receiving the support from the prominent villagers only due to my behavior. Nobody puts obstacles in the way of anything being done for village development."

When Radha first became Sarpanch, the women of her village had to go to Premnagar for delivery some kilometers away. But now she has opened two Anganwadi centres in the village much to the relief of village women. She said that she did not bring about this development soon after becoming Sarpanch. Whatever development has taken place is the result of sustained efforts over a period of time. Radha has also opened a school in this Panchayat with a population of about 2,000. Now the boys don't have to walk far and it is now easier for the girls too. When she was first elected Sarpanch, the Panchayat had only dirt roads. But Radha gradually amended the situation and all the streets and roads joining the highway are paved today.

Radha has also brought under control the extent of electricity cuts. There are street-lights all over the Panchayat. The roads leading away from the Panchayat are lit too. She claims that due to non-cooperation of some people, she had to put up 20 street-lights at her own expense. Upon asking how she could afford it from her small salary, she replied that love of the villagers was more important for her than money. The villagers

are like her brothers and sisters. She is here today only because of them.

The proof of Radha's honesty is that the pace of development has not slackened despite her being in the harness for so long. During each of her tenure, she has had a pre-planned agenda for development. Due to this, every woman in the village is empowered today. She has made arrangements for many small industries for housewives like sewing centre, pickle-chutney-jam making, mushroom cultivation, spice making, and milk and milk products. She also simplified the government loan process for women.

Since 2008, she has also constructed two 250 meter roads for the villagers, installed hand-pumps in many places from the MLA fund, and now her next targets are Swajal Dhara Scheme and MNREGS. By training women, Radha wants to make them stand on their own feet, and also wants to obtain at least 100 days per annum employment for the unemployed youth of her village.

After learning of all this work, one realizes that Radha is a woman of courage. It is not like she has forsaken her household duties after taking up this responsibility. She looks after her husband and two daughters properly. One will be surprised to know that she and her daughter appeared in Class X examination together in 1999. There was no hesitancy there. Ofcourse, her daughter completed her Class XII elsewhere and Radha passed her examination through a correspondence course in her area. She wants to study further.

Since 1996 till today, getting elected each time has not been easy for Radha. But her strong will-power did not let her back

out. Everyone knows that candidates, be they at any level of politics, try everything to attract voters. All the rivals of Radha indulged in buying votes with money and liquor. But she never tried anything of this sort. Yet she has been elected Sarpanch of Mithi Beri thrice. This is amazing when one considers that 33.3% reservation of seats for women has not been followed here. She says that people want work, not money and even the drunks know where quality is. Looking at her record, it seems that she is right.

Radha is an example for women today. She has achieved what she set out to achieve for herself and for her village. She threw herself into it whole-heartedly. It is a well known fact that development is more difficult to achieve in hilly areas than in plains, especially on issues like roads, electricity and water. Radha fulfilled these basic needs. She has shown how a woman with limited resources can bring about development. In the long run, there will be many more Sarpanches, but whenever and wherever development is mentioned in this context, it will be incomplete without mentioning Radha.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## FROM GP TO ZP, SHE SCRIPTS SUCCESS STORIES

Naina J. A.

Deccan Herald, 12 June, 2011

**W**ith 50% reservation in Panchayats, women who have rarely left the four walls of their homes are now stepping out to enter the fray. As a result, many women who have entered Gram Panchayat have successfully discharged their duties as Gram Panchayat members and have stepped the ladder of success and have reached Zilla Panchayat level by scripting a success story at the gram Panchayat level.

K.T. Shailaja Bhat, the present Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat President is one such woman who rose to success from Gram Panchayat by writing a success story at Idkiddu Gram Panchayat in a quiet and unobtrusive manner as its President from 2003 to 2005.

Idkidu and Kula villages which come under Idkiddu Gram Panchayat of Bantwal Taluk have seen several developmental activities like rainwater harvesting, anti-rabies vaccination, etc. during her tenure.

Speaking to Deccan Herald, Shailaja said, "In Idkidu, rainwater harvesting is not an activity, it is a mindset. It has permeated into the consciousness of the old and

young alike. “Idkidu had severe shortage of water in the past. Realising it, the Gram Panchayat, Amrutha Sinchana Co-operative Society, Shree Padre and other organisations tried creating awareness on the dwindling of water source and implement rainwater harvesting methods to ensure that dug-wells do not go dry. As a result, about 65% of the households in the Gram Panchayat have gone for rainwater harvesting and the ground water level has increased significantly.”

Infact, Shailaja’s house itself is a model for implementing rainwater harvesting wherein the system allows the family to use rainwater for half the year and lets the excess water to recharge the open well for usage in the remaining months. She says, “Even now I try to create awareness on rainwater harvesting wherever I go, as it is the need of the hour.”

Shailaja said that with the help of the Gram Panchayat and other organisations, Sri Shanmukha Subramanya temple has also implemented rainwater harvesting. “During my tenure in Gram Panchayat, we had planted medicinal plants in and around the temple”, she says proudly. All the borewells in Idkidu Gram Panchayat are recharged through rainwater harvesting.

### **Percolating ponds**

“When I was the President of the Gram Panchayat, we had dug percolating ponds in the backyard of Gram Panchayat and teakwood saplings were planted near the percolating ponds”, Shailaja said. “Infact, I want to implement rainwater harvesting system effectively across the district, so that ground water level is recharged”, she added.

The Gram Panchayat is following 12 simple principles of 'Grama Swarajya'. The Gram Panchayat has a population of around 7,218 with 1,700 households.

### **Anti-rabies vaccination**

With the help of donors and various organisations, free anti-rabies vaccination was carried out in Idkidu Gram Panchayat. "However, during my period, it was taken over by the Gram Panchayat and the drive is being carried out effectively with the help of Gram Panchayat and other organisations in the village every year at various places within its jurisdiction", said Shailaja. Now as a Zilla Panchayat President, she is planning to extend such an initiative in all the 203 Gram Panchayats in the district.

### **Awareness on plastic**

Shailaja says that awareness was created on the ill-effects of use of plastics in Soorya High School. As a result, the use of plastic has come down drastically in the school.

### **Nairmalya Rathna**

After Shailaja assumed the charge as the President of Zilla Panchayat, Dakshina Kannada district was adjudged for the State Government's prestigious "clean district" title (Nairmalya Rathna) in March 2011 for effective implementation of total sanitation drive. Infact, all the blocks in Dakshina Kannada have received Central Government's 'Nairamalya Puraskar'. However, she says, "It is not the end; we have a long way to go and sustain the total sanitation movement. We have to achieve 100% in total sanitation."



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## A WOMEN GP MEMBER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Rajesh Shetty B.

The New Indian Express, 14 October, 2010

**S**UGRAMA, a forum of like-minded Gram Panchayat members in Dakshina Kannada district, achieved its first success when a woman Gram Panchayat member facilitated the construction of an Anganwadi Centre in her Ward.

Florine Fernandes, the elected member of Mura Muttur Ward in Kuppepadav Gram Panchayat, is still reliving the memorable moments that led to realising a dream of transforming a dilapidated Anganwadi into a decent building.

Florine suffered guilt pangs whenever she passed by the Anganwadi which had no doors or finished flooring. She vowed to do something about it when locals predicted that the rickety building would collapse in the monsoon.

The task appeared more daunting than it seemed for 58-year old Florine Fernandes. Unsure from where to begin, she first raised the issue in the regular meeting of Sugrama.

“Members and organisers by infusing confidence in me made light of the task. They encouraged me to become instrumental in providing a good Anganwadi to children in the area”, she recollects.

“I had seen the Anganwadi before too, but I made no headway in getting the building repaired. Sugrama taught me to take steps with firm conviction and tap funds in Gram Panchayat”, she explains with a sense of gratitude.

I interacted with GP officials and got to know how to access funds for the Anganwadi repair works, she said and added that the officials neglected the work and took four months for its completion.

Undeterred, she roped in donors to complete the remaining work. The building sports a swanky look at a total cost of Rs. 21.5 Lakh. “This has been possible due to the help provided by Shashidhara Adapa, cinema art director and donor of land for the building”, she recollects with gratitude.

Florine is a greenhorn in politics and social service. Until joining Sugrama, she had been struggling to make ends meet with a meager income by rolling *bidis* and by working as a house maid. Sheena Shetty of Jana Shikshana Trust says that as first time elected Gram Panchayat member, Florine’s achievement is inspiring to all. SUGRAMA’s motive is to inspire women members to become instrumental in realising development programmes in their respective Wards so that the concept of model village can be realised.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## AWARENESS AMONG MUSLIM WOMEN: BREAKING OLD TRADITIONS

Lakhan Salvi

Kalam Ka Khel, 10 June, 2011

**M**uslim women had always been kept closed doors in the name of age-old religious traditions. They had been suppressed for centuries. But now they understand reservation and rights and are not only enjoying the benefits of reservation, but are also breaking many traditions that were obstacles to their development.

In order to free their rights, Raisa Khatun Hoshiari of Ajmer district had to remove her veil and Shama Khan of Barmer district had to free the women from the clutches of their husbands. These women not only broke the age-old traditions, but also did exemplary work like spreading awareness in the community and encouraging girls' education, which shows that these women are empowered.

Shama (25) of Barmer district inherited politics; her father-in-law Abdul Hadi had been an MLA multiple times and her husband Gafoor is a former district head and the current district deputy head. When the seat became reserved for women this time, Shama contested the elections and won by 450 votes to become a member of Panchayat Samiti. Then she contested for the post of Pradhan and won that too.

When she started attending the meetings of Panchayat Samiti, her husband used to accompany her. She noticed that people would handover their petitions to her husband instead of her. They would take their suggestions and complaints to her husband. She says, "It was like I had no recognition at all, whereas I was the Pradhan. What is the use of becoming a Pradhan when the people do not come to you?" She talked to her husband and told him to either send the people to her, or she would resign. Her husband started sending people to her. Then people started approaching Shama with their problems during meetings. Now Shama hears their complaints and settles them. She saw that instead of women representatives, their husbands were attending meetings of the Panchayat Samiti. She asked them not to come. They took umbrage at first, but Shama was firm and finally, the participation of women representatives was ensured.

Shama is also trying to further girls' education. She participates in events organized for Muslim women's empowerment. She participated in a 2-day workshop organized at Kanodia College by Vividha organization of Jaipur to discuss the condition and rights of Muslim women. While narrating her story, she spoke on the condition of Muslim women, and called them to come forth.

Raisa too has spared no effort to further the cause of girls' education. She is the Sarpanch of Aradaka village Panchayat in Ajmer district. Coming from a landlord's family, the family members opposed her at first, but seeing the determination of Raisa, relented later. Right from the elections till she took over as Sarpanch, the villagers used to say about Raisa, "What can she do from behind her

veil, and what can she accomplish in Gram Sabha? If she becomes Sarpanch, there will be no development in our Panchayat.” Seeing this, Raisa decided to discard her veil. Her family opposed it. They said that “veil is a necessary part of our religion. Removing the veil is an insult. We do not have a tradition of going in front of men without our veils.” The family tried to distract Raisa with many such traditions, but in vain. But her husband and father-in-law supported her. Raisa removed her veil for campaigning. Despite opposition from the remaining members of her family and negativity of the villagers, she visited their houses and was elected as Sarpanch.

Raisa felt bad due to many aspects of people’s attitude during her campaign. She decided to change the popular concept that women cannot run a Panchayat. She says, “Development of the village is decided at the Gram Sabha, and ensuring people’s participation in Gram Sabha meetings ensures development of the village.” She put emphasis on Gram Sabhas. She encouraged all the villagers, both men and women, to come to Gram Sabha. Her efforts bore fruit; people started attending meetings of Ward and Gram Sabhas in increasing numbers and development work was approved by the people themselves. She has been awarded the National Gram Sabha Award for holding the most number of Gram Sabha meetings. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh handed over the award to her on 24 April.

Raisa has also spread awareness about education. She pays special attention to Madrasa operations. She saw that there is a building for an Anganwadi in the village, but there is no worker. So she got an Anganwadi worker appointed by the

Gram Sabha. She has got the primary school upgraded to middle school so that the village children do not have to go elsewhere for their education. She wants that there should be no illiterate person left in the whole village Panchayat.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## PRIVATE CLINIC IN GOVERNMENT DOCTOR'S QUARTERS

Rajesh Shetty B.

The New Indian Express, 20 January, 2011

Unable to stand the gross abuse of position, SUGRAMA - the Federation of Elected Gram Panchayat women members, filed a complaint against a doctor of Vamadapadav Community Health Centre (CHC) in the city's outskirts.

The complaint submitted to the District Health Officer pointed out that Preethi Raksha clinic, a private clinic, was functioning from the official quarters of Vamadapadav CMC Medical Officer Dr. Durgaprasad M.R. The members in their complaint not only accused the doctor of referring patients to the clinic functioning from the government quarters, but also diligently attended to patients who sought an appointment in the clinic.

According to a copy of the prescription slip in possession of the newspaper, Dr. Durgaprasad attends to patients in the clinic from 7 AM to 9 AM.

While Durgaprasad is away at the CMC, his wife Dr. Neetha D. Prasad, a registered Ayurvedic practitioner with BAMS degree from Mangalore University, runs the clinic from 9 AM to 12 noon and 2 PM to 5 PM.

Dr. Durgaprasad is also available in the evening from 5 PM to 7 PM. Though the clinic has been operational since 2003, the local Gram Panchayat issued a license in 2010. Despite opposition from five Ward Members, members at Chennaithodi Gram Panchayat went by the majority and decided to issue a license.

SUGRAMA members suspected something amiss when it was found that Panchayat officials had issued the license on November 20, but the meeting to take a decision on the application was convened only a week later i.e., on November 27. Chennaithodi Gram Panchayat member and SUGRAMA Vice President Bharathi says despite advanced facilities in the CMC, Dr. Durgaprasad had given an impression that best service was available in the clinic.

Housewife Prema Poojary says she had visited the clinic in order to avoid long queues at the government hospital.

Receiving a complaint, DHO OR Srirangappa said under Classification, Control and Appeal (CCA) Rules of Karnataka, the State allows a medical officer or doctor to run a private clinic. The Taluk health officer is conducting an inquiry into whether he misused his power to open a private clinic at home.

SUGRAMA President Vrunda said the Panchayat before verifying whether the health centre was operating from an independent building or government quarters, had issued a license.

Denying the charges of Sugrama members, Dr. Durgaprasad accused his enemies of tarnishing his image, which he had built during the formation of a model hospital in a rural area like Vamadapadav.

“Following protests, I have planned to shift the clinic to a private building”, he added.

“The clinic is run by my wife, who is an Ayurveda practitioner and there is no intention to misuse the government services”, he asserted.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## WOMEN OF RAYAGADA JOIN THE FIGHT TO ENSURE GOOD GOVERNANCE

Badal Tah

The Pioneer, 22 December, 2010

**B**attling the barriers of the traditional mindset, the tribal and Dalit women of Rayagada together with the women members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the vanguard are now actively coming out seeking good governance.

Bisalya Sabar, a tribal woman who is also a Naib Sarpanch, hails from the famous Debirising village of Pandmapur block which is associated with the former Chief Minister of the State, Dr. Giridhar Gamang. She has raised voice against the corruption in the distribution of Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) houses in her Gram Panchayat. She complained that instead of allotting IAY houses to the recommended destitutes, the officials are allotting multiple houses to ineligible members. When she confronted the Panchayat Executive Officer, she was satirically directed to approach Chief Minister for relief.

Jayanti Urlaka is from Turiguda Gram Panchayat of the Maoist affected Chandrapur block. She sadly described how middlemen in her Panchayat have collected Rs. 2,000 - 2,500 from several Below Poverty Line (BPL) families to allot IAY houses. Those middlemen have also taken contract of NREGA work. In spite of giving representations to the higher authorities, nobody

listened. Ultimately she filed an FIR in Muniguda police station but was not given the copy of the same.

In spite of pressure and threats, Bisalys and Jayanti are determined to pursue the issue to their logical conclusion.

Radhamma, Ward Member from the same block, is fighting a different battle but with the same resolve. She wanted information on some government schemes and approached the block officials several times to seek information without much success. She thought she would be able to use the Right to Information (RTI) Act to achieve her goal but was thwarted by the high-handedness of the Public Information Officer. She still awaits the information and has decided to approach the appellate authorities.

State Convener of Odisha Adibasi Manch, Bidulata Huika described the process as a beginning in which the tribal women are coming forward to ensure that the benefits of governance improve their life too. They have started to assert their rights and redefined the development paradigm for their Ward, Panchayat and region. These women in Panchayats have steadily taken charge of education, health and social security schemes, or at least have started questioning the unjust system. They are prepared to face hardships for a cause and are determined to rectify anomalies in the distribution of benefits of government schemes.

In a pioneering move in 1995, Krishna Kumari Sabar, a tribal woman from the remote Gudari Block of Rayagada district, joined the Tribal Self-Rule Campaign whose objective was to fight the injustices meted out to tribals. As a frontline member of Odisha Adibasi Manch, an apex tribal organisation, she

advocated the full implementation of PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act in Odisha.

After 15 years of her struggle and after winning the Panchayat elections, she herself claims a mixed sense of achievement. In her opinion, the PESA Act has several provisions for empowerment of Gram Sabha but the State Government is yet to implement it fully. A non-cooperating bureaucracy has further weakened the little power the Panchayats have in tribal areas.

Krishna had to manage the Panchayat, Gram Sabha, Palli Sabha, development programmes like PDS, IAY and SGRY on one hand, and inter- and intra-village conflict resolution on the other. She pioneered the self-help group (SHG) movement in the area and argues that women can transform a lot in a village. For example, they can secure food security in a drought-prone district like Rayagada.

But there are success stories too. Manika Patika, Naib Sarpanch from Dhepaguda village of Gudari Block is jubilant in telling a success story of her community in mobilizing a work worth Rs. 2 Lakh after significant amount of struggles. However, instances of apathy and neglect outnumber such stories with happy endings.

Kumari Madapana, an OBC woman from the Kolnara block feels that the fight cannot be won without the co-operation from the men-folk. But care must be taken by the women representatives themselves. Women PRI members must rise above party affiliation while meeting regularly to handle issues like bureaucratic hassles, men's oppressions, their own capacity building, and knowledge of Panchayat systems.

Ex-Naib Sarpanch Kumari Mutika, has another grouse. Anguished over the two-child norm of the government which is applicable to PRI members, she points out that in the male-dominated society in which they exist, the women do not have control over their reproductive health. The health care system of the government is almost in tatters which increases the incidence of child mortality. So a stringent two-child norm only puts women to disadvantage as men either divorce their wives or stealthily give away the third child which women cannot resort to. So it is always the women who are at the receiving end. She wonders why the norm is being so stringently applied to PRI members when it is not applicable to government employees and ministers.



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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN  
PANCHAYATI RAJ  
Chunaram Godara  
Seemant Kerari, 16 May, 2011

The women representatives of Panchayati Raj have achieved success in the face of adversity. The impact of Panchayat participation on these women, with little education and living in a rural areas, are apparent. All the women representatives, whether illiterate or well educated, from forward or backward castes, have not lost courage despite all the obstacles on the political path and destroyed many pre-conceived ideas and misconceptions through their work.

These women are doing work for the rural good that nobody had imagined. Parmeshwari Devi is Ward Panch for Ward No. 2 in Pipera village Panchayat of Loonkaransar Panchayat committee in Bikaner district of Rajasthan. By providing a successful leadership, Parmeshwari Devi has turned the traditional belief of the macho 'Panch Parmeshwar' into Panch Parmeshwari. There was a severe drinking water problem in the village of Parmeshwari Devi. Women had to bring water from afar on their heads. Seeing this problem, Parmeshwari Devi started the fight for the right to water. Water had to be brought from a canal near her village. There was the danger of falling and drowning in the canal. One woman even died after falling and drowning in the canal while filling her pot.

Understanding the problem fully, the issue was raised at the Ward Gram Sabha. Apart from this, application was also given for bringing pipeline to the village and for providing a source of water by contacting high officials and representatives on various occasions. The officers did not heed Parmeshwari Devi and kept putting the matter on the back-burner on the excuse of technical difficulties and budget. Finally, she got the people together and started an agitation. In the course of this struggle, 200 men and women held demonstration in front of the District Collector and achieved success. Pipeline was laid to Pipera village and a water reservoir was made and the family of the drowned woman was given compensation. Parmeshwari Devi got a well dug for drinking water under the Swajal Dhara scheme, in which 10% of the cost came from public contribution. Today, this well is maintained by the public. Truly, seeing the power of one single woman in a Ward, it feels like taking a step backward is impossible now. It is clear from the struggle of these women representatives that in spite of the bad situation of women due to a traditional, aristocratic, male dominant society, social bad practices, and the bane of illiteracy, this woman Panch has not lost her courage.

The road is still thorny for the women representatives of Panchayati Raj. They will set an example for others by picking a path through it. Parmeshwari Bai is the Sarpanch of Deva Panchayat in Jaisalmer. Before becoming Sarpanch, she used to work as 'Jan Mangal Joda' for the State Government. She has brought public awareness about midwife-assisted delivery. Parmeshwari Bai got a health sub-centre approved for her village and got it constructed. She started an Anganwadi centre in every village and kept a close eye on whether the centres open regularly. She tried to provide the children with mid-day meal and also tried to persuade parents to send their girls to

school. Today, in two schools of the area, about 90 girls are enrolled.

As important as providing a meal to the children was, Parmeshwari Bai attached the same importance to whether the Anganwadi centres were operating regularly. In one case, when an Anganwadi centre was not operating everyday, she removed the worker, which invited protests against her. She did not lose heart and continued her work.

The way these women representatives have continued their struggle in the face of all the adversity is exemplary and inspires confidence. The goal may be far away yet, but seeing the determination of the women representatives of Panchayati Raj for construction of a new society and local development, it can be said that all it needs is a spark; the ammunition is ready.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

# TALKING WALLS OF VIJAYPURA PANCHAYAT

Narjis Husain

Rashtriya Sahara, 25 May, 2011

If anybody thinks of indulging in malpractice he would land in trouble here. This is Vijaypura Panchayat. This Panchayat is well known for its transparency. Transparency in daily work is a must here - like sharing information, accounts or informing villagers about government schemes, etc. This Panchayat shows everybody how one can use the Right to Information Act (RTI) effectively. A woman behind all these initiatives is Rukmini Devi Salvi. She is Sarpanch of Vijaypura Panchayat in Rajsamand district.

Vijaypura Panchayat's biggest achievement is to empower people who belong to under-privileged sections of the society. If anybody doesn't get their ration under PDS or their pension they come to the Panchayat. Through their Sarpanch they use the RTI Act. As a result they get everything they want. Their life has become much easier now. It seems that they have left behind the old days where they became the victim. During Rukmini's tenure, 85 women have got pension without any hurdle. She did a lot to curb all kinds of malpractice, graft or irregularities in MGNREGS so that the actual benefit of this scheme goes directly to the villagers.

Rukmini is 35 years old and she is doing pretty well in her area. Though she is not literate, she is very practical. This is her first job outside home. Earlier she kept a long *pallu* but now she covers her head only. About this great change she says, “My husband never objects regarding this and it becomes much easier when you are at work.” She belongs to the Salvi community which is primarily into weaving as a profession. She is quite sincere in her work and knows what she will do next. There is no confusion and everything is clear in her mind.

In her one and a half year tenure, Rukmini did a lot of work in the Panchayat. “*Daaru piyoge to paanch saal pachtaoge, imandari laani hai to Rukmini ko jitana hai. Or na ghoda, na gaadi imaandari se vote dena.*” With these slogans she stood for the Panchayat elections in 2010 and became the Sarpanch of Vijayapura Panchayat. It wasn't an easy job for her to win this seat. Some influential candidates also contested against her. On one hand, the opposition could spend a lot of money to win the election. On the other hand, Rukmini could afford to spend only Rs. 3,000. She declared that she would not offer any voter money or tea. She promised again and again that if she won she would bring transparency to the Panchayat. What else can one wish for? After her win she kept her promise. She proved herself in a very short time span of just one and a half years.

Rukmini's second achievement is to keep the Panchayat office open all days. Besides, meetings of Gram Sabha and Ward Sabha happen regularly. These are rare events in PRIs. Because of these systems, there are so many widows, poor, unemployed and under privileged people getting justice on time. In her Panchayat, everybody calls her 'Sarpanch Saab'. She is very articulate when she talks about her work. She

takes care of every task be it small or big like the ration shop, ANM's visits, school, Anganwadi, etc.

Nine villages come under her authority. Now her focus is that each and every village should have its own pond, so that the daily water needs can be fulfilled. Water plays an essential role in daily household chores. People never fall sick consistently if there is safe drinking water. Keeping this in mind she brought the water scheme for every village. Her emphasis is on plantation and water harvesting. Through this initiative, Rukmini is trying to create awareness towards the need of safe drinking water for villagers.

Her third achievement is transparency. Professionally, she is a very transparent Sarpanch and loyal towards her voters. All the information about the Panchayat office is written on the wall. She says, "Information is written in all public places like community centre building, Anganwadi walls, and school and health centre buildings. First all the walls are painted in yellow and then information is written in black or green colour. Information regarding government schemes, daily work of Panchayat office, muster rolls, vouchers, RTI, MGNREGS information and even Panchayat balance sheets is shared with the public in this manner. Rukmini's effort tells everybody that without computer, paper or pen how one can maintain and share all the information. From Vijaypura Panchayat, every Panchayat should learn the art of sharing information. It is a great tool for gaining loyalty. Through this change Rukmini won her villagers heart.

Rukmini issued land deeds to 125 villagers (including that of old residential houses). She brought Palanhaari Yojana to her village. Under this scheme, every widow whose children,

are studying gets rupees Rs. 700 per month. Apart from this Janashree Yojana is effective for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. Rukmini is not literate but she learnt all her work from her husband Kaluram who was also Sarpanch here. This happened when she herself worked first time under MGNREGS for hundred days.

After becoming Sarpanch, Rukmini dedicated herself to community service. She knows that knowledge is power and she uses it as a weapon. At present she is a leader of nine villages. She decides the fate of almost 10,000 villagers. She is taking all the decisions on their behalf. If Rukmini brought change in her Panchayat using knowledge as base, why not other Sarpanches do that? She shows the way to all female Sarpanches, especially those who haven't many options. Effective implementation of MGNREGS, correct use of the RTI Act, and establishing transparency through sharing information are Rukmini's greatest achievements. We salute her vision and her approach.



*This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## CARVING AN IDENTITY THROUGH THEIR WORK

Babulal Naga

Diamond India Monthly, June, 2011

There was a time in Panchayats of Rajasthan when the woman Sarpanch would sit in a corner wearing a big *ghoonghat* and remain a dumb spectator to the proceedings of the Panchayat. People wanted to keep them away from the power with taunts like ‘what will a woman do in a Panchayat. Those days are a thing of past now. The whole country now recognizes the power of these women, who used to be called puppets earlier. Praises are being sung of the work done by women Sarpanches in their Panchayats in Rajasthan. These women have changed the destiny of their Panchayats. A wind of development is strongly blowing in their Panchayats. Thanks to their laudable work in the Panchayati Raj system, the Panchayats of these women Sarpanches have earned recognition at national and international level.

The people who opposed Raisa till recently, are singing her praise today. And why shouldn't they? The village Panchayat of Raisa is included in the select Panchayats of India. Raisa Khatun Hoshiari is the Sarpanch of Aradaka village Panchayat in Shrinagar Panchayat Samiti in Ajmer district of Rajasthan. Aradaka village Panchayat has been awarded the national

award for Gram Sabha for holding the most number of Gram Sabha meetings timely. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh handed over the award to Raisa in New Delhi on 24 April. Aradaka village Panchayat has received rupees one million as prize money. This amount will facilitate development work in the Panchayat area, which includes education, hygiene, drinking water and health programmes.

Raisa had to struggle a lot to reach this point. She became Sarpanch of Aradaka after overcoming many obstacles. The villagers used to comment about Raisa. They would say, what can a Muslim woman do from behind her veil? Coming from a land-owning family and having a tradition of veils, her family was opposed to it too. But her husband and father-in-law supported her. Despite opposition from the remaining members of her family, Raisa removed her veil and contested election in the company of other Muslim women. Coming out of the house for the first time without their veils, they started campaigning. In spite of it being an unreserved women's seat, Raisa became the first Muslim woman Sarpanch of Aradaka after a bitter struggle.

Raisa has almost stopped wearing the veil now. She whole-heartedly takes part in Panchayat meetings now and also encourages others to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. During her one-year tenure, she has done much developmental work. Today, many Muslim women are taking part in MNREGS work on her urging. She has also spread awareness about education. She pays special attention to Madrasa operations. She has got the primary school upgraded to a government middle school. She has got the vacant posts in the Anganwadi filled.

There is another woman Sarpanch who has made a mark at an international level. She is Chhavi Rajawat, the first woman Sarpanch in the country with an MBA. Chhavi is the Sarpanch of Soda village Panchayat in Tonk district of Rajasthan. She has chosen to live in rural area over a high post and a heavy package in a multinational company. Today, Chhavi has changed the image of her village Panchayat. By projecting the image of the developmental work done in her village Panchayat in the United Nations, Chhavi has erased the conception of Rajasthan's women Sarpanches being *ghoonghat* clad and illiterate. She participated in the United Nations' 11<sup>th</sup> Info - Poverty World Conference on 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> March 2011. When she stood up to speak, she received a huge ovation. She expressed her thoughts on development and fighting poverty in front of senior leaders and ambassadors of the world. Chhavi made the world bow before her with her work and intentions. She cited her village Panchayat as an example which has undergone a change in the last three years. She said, "We did not receive any help from NGOs or the private sector. I do not need money. I need people who can understand the needs of the village and the projects being undertaken for it and work for the village. I am working here to fill this gap." Today, Chhavi has become an icon. She helps rural women working under MNREGS. Even well educated top officers are at sea when she starts speaking fluent English. When she stands up to speak in the Panchayat, there is pin-drop silence.

Sarmi Bai, Sarpanch of Nichalgarh village Panchayat of Sirohi district, has established a similar identity for her Panchayat. Her work has been praised by none other than Barrack Obama, the President of USA. The American President

was apprised of her work on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010 during his Mumbai visit. Upon greeting, President Obama shook her hand and praised her developmental work for her village. He said, “Keep up the good work. If you keep working with the same commitment and zeal, you can be the harbinger of change.” After this short meeting of five minutes, the American President did not forget to carry the case study report of her work. It may be noted that Class V educated Sarmi Bai has been an elected representative for the last 10 years. She has been working as a Ward Panch first and as Sarpanch now.

Many women Sarpanches of Rajasthan have achieved similar milestones. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011, 14 Sarpanches from Rajasthan received ‘Nirmal Gram’ Award for 2010-11. Of these, 10 were women. Vimala Devi, Madhujunwar and Menaka of Shriganganagar, Santosh Mehra of Hanumangarh, Mankanwar of Karauli, Utsav Kanwar of Bikaner, Santosh Saini of Jhunjhunu, S. Kanwar of Jaisalmer, and Shanti Devi of Jalaur are the women Sarpanches who are known in their Gram Panchayats for their work. ‘Nirmal Gram’ Award is given to those village, block Panchayats, district Panchayats and institutions that have achieved 100% hygiene. It means that these women have achieved 100% hygiene in their Gram Panchayats. These Panchayats are 100% free from outdoor toilets. They have also solved the issue of liquid and solid waste management. The women Sarpanches selected for the award also receive cash prizes.

Women elected representatives have made good progress at Panchayat level through their struggle. They participate in all the activities of their Panchayats. Today, they are working

to their capacity. The results that are apparent through their work strengthen the possibilities of increased participation by women. At the same time, these women are strongly helping their Panchayats establish their unique identities.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

# VILLAGE GOVERNANCE IN THE HANDS OF 'DABANG' WOMEN

Anand Choudhury

Sunday Nai Duniya, 26 September, 2010

*More than 5,000 women Sarpanches among 9,166 village Panchayats of Rajasthan are surpassing even the MLAs, both men and women of the State in education and other fields.*

**C**hhavi Rajawat, the Sarpanch of Soda village Panchayat in Tonk district of Rajasthan has left her job worth lakhs of rupees in a multinational to take up 'Sarpanchship' of a village that pays her just Rs. 3,000 a month. She picked up this gauntlet of being a Sarpanch not for money, but to improve the conditions in her village and to lead it in a right direction. Pooja Yadav, the Sarpanch of Teuwas Panchayat of Kotkasim Panchayat Samiti in Alwar district, not only looks after her Panchayat work, but is also a leader of the Sarpanch movement and has become the voice of Sarpanches all over the State. Pooja is a post graduate in two subjects and is the Vice President of Alwar District Sarpanch Association. Sumitra Devi, who left teaching to become Sarpanch of Budana village Panchayat in Jhunjhunu district, has eradicated the phrase 'Sarpanch Husband' from her Panchayat. She in spite of holding degrees like MA and B. Ed., performs all the large and small jobs of the Panchayat by herself, instead of her husband. Swantralata,

the Sarpanch of a village Panchayat in Rajgarh Tehsil of Alwar district, uses her education as a shield to obtain information about government schemes for Panchayats and to prepare proposals for development. The young and well educated Sarpanch of Ajadikalan village in Jhunjhunu district is working for women's empowerment.

The more than 5,000 women Sarpanches elected this time to the 9,166 village Panchayats of Rajasthan are surpassing even the MLAs, both men and women, of the State in education and other fields. Only one female and two male MLAs of Rajasthan hold MBA degree, whereas Chhavi Rajawat has earned her MBA from a prestigious Management Institute from Pune with high marks. These well educated women Sarpanches have not only surpassed the MLAs, but many of them have also left behind district chiefs and heads in terms of educational qualifications. Out of 1,013 Zila Parishad members in the State, 93 are downright illiterate, while 465 members have education of less than Class X. Only four members of the Zila Parishad have doctorates. All of them are males. Among the women elected as Rajasthan Zila Parishad members, not a single woman has received technical education, whereas among the 19 women district heads, most are graduates. Rita Choudhary, the MLA from Mandava is the only one to have done MBA from a State College. The women Sarpanches like Chhavi Rajawat, Sumitra Devi, Swantralata and Pooja Yadav know about all the schemes in the country and abroad that can be helpful in the development of their Panchayat.

Twenty years ago, women got 33.3% reservation in Panchayats through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution; the former Vasundhara Raje government raised it to 50%. Most of the women Sarpanches elected after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment were

illiterate. Their work used to be performed by either their husbands, also known as 'Sarpanch Husbands', or by officers like Village Secretary, Patwari or BDO. Now after 20 years, the fourth generation of Sarpanches has changed the whole scenario of Panchayats. The days are gone when the woman Sarpanch could be seen sitting in a corner being just a dumb spectator to the proceedings of the Panchayat. Today, the male representatives of the Panchayat sit in a corner and smoke *bidis* while the woman Sarpanch carries out the proceedings. When women Sarpanches like Chhavi Rajawat, Sumitra Devi, Swantralata and Pooja Yadav are leading the Panchayats, officers like Village Secretary, BDO and Tehsildar, who used to boast of being the 'collector' of the village, follow meekly.

The Hunger Project, an NGO working for empowerment of women Sarpanches believes that the situation of Panchayats in Rajasthan has changed drastically over the last 20 years. Virendra Shrimali, the Rajasthan representative of The Hunger Project says that women Sarpanches are also developing political leadership. The Hunger Project is working in ten districts for political empowerment of women Panchayat representatives, enhancement of leadership skills and increased political participation. Organizations of women Panch and Sarpanches are being formed at the Panchayat level. Women Sarpanches are also briefed on the proceedings of Assembly, secretariat, Zila Parishad and Panchayat. Watching women Sarpanches like Chhavi Rajawat, Pooja Yadav and Sumitra at work, the time does not seem too distant when the image of the Assembly will also change.

At present, women Sarpanches hold sway over village governance in Rajasthan. Nearly 55% village Panchayats has women in harness. This means that of the 9,166 village

Panchayats in the State, 5,215 village Panchayats have a woman Sarpanch. Out of 1,013 wards of the Zila Parishad, 543 wards are in the hands of women. In the 1995 elections for Zila Parishad Wards, only 340 women were elected. In the elections for 5,217 Wards of the Panchayat Samiti this year, about 3,000 women have been elected. Sixteen posts of district head were reserved for women this time in 33 districts of the State, but as many as 19 women were elected. In Nagaur, Ganganagar and Barmer districts, the post of district head were unreserved, but in these districts, women have come to power by defeating male candidates. Similarly, out of 243 posts of Panchayat Samiti chief, women have been elected to 150 posts. The growing sway of women in villages can be guessed from the fact that in this year's Panchayati Raj elections, 73 seats of Zila Parishad were allotted to women from Other Backward Classes, yet women have won 209 seats. Similarly, 83 seats were reserved for women of Scheduled Castes whereas women from this category have won 93 seats. 77 seats were reserved for women of Scheduled Tribes, but women from this category have won 97 seats.

### **Sumitra rules, not 'Sarpanch Husband'**

Sumitra Devi, the Sarpanch of Budana village Panchayat in Jhunjhunu district has chosen to serve the village over her job as a teacher. Sumitra Devi became the Sarpanch of her village after earning MA and B. Ed. degrees from Rajasthan University. According to Sumitra, all the previous women Sarpanches were illiterate, and hence, the work was in the hands of either their husbands or sons, or in the hands of officers like Secretary, Patwari, Tehsildar or BDO. As soon as she became the Sarpanch, Sumitra first became familiar with the work and took over command. She got a briefing on village development plans and passed instructions to the Village Secretary and Patwari. Her husband tries to assist her instead

of interfering. Sumitra Devi keeps a close watch on everything related to MNREGS, job cards, and wages of labourers. She also works day and night for empowerment and literacy of women laborers. She firmly believes that a literate woman can change the village and society for the better.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## A SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT AT WORKING TOGETHER

Lakhan Salvi

Vividha Features, 12 June-28 June, 2011

Savita Devi (28) and Ganga Devi (35) from tribal areas of Dungarpur district are representing the village Panchayat in a better way. Before elections, they had heard of neither development nor Panchayati Raj. In order to carry out development work in village Panchayat, both of them first gather information and then get the work done accordingly. Ganga puts up the proposals in Panchayat after taking the people into confidence, while the other completes the processes of getting them approved. Seeing the development work being done by these two, the other women Ward Panches too cooperate with them. By accomplishing so much in terms of development work, they have proved that it is not necessary for Panches and Sarpanches to be literate or well educated in order to do development work.

Savita Devi is the Sarpanch of Jalukua village Panchayat in Dungarpur district while Ganga Devi is a Ward Panch there. The seat was reserved for women. Savita came forward to become Sarpanch, but hesitated because of domestic financial issues. Her husband is a farmer and doesn't earn so much that she could spend the lakhs of rupees necessary to contest elections. Ganga Devi motivated Savita to contest elections. Savita and

her husband had good contacts in the village, so Savita decided to contest for the post of Sarpanch. She canvassed by walking all around the village and going to each and every house. She won by 975 votes defeating five women candidates.

At first, Savita was a little afraid after becoming Sarpanch. What will she do? How will she do it? What takes place in Panchayat? She was assailed by all kinds of doubts. When the time came to face the quorum for the first time, she started crying. But she went to the village Panchayat. She received a briefing from the secretary about the work going on in her Panchayat and took over the reins. Her friend Ganga Devi (Ward Panch) gave her many tips. Both of them joined the various training programs run by the Panchayati Raj department and other institutions. They learned the working of village Panchayat and the duties of a Sarpanch. They also learned about running a village Panchayat from other women representatives attending the training programmes.

After becoming the Sarpanch, Savita felt the need of a mobile phone in order to speak to officers about people's problems. So she bought one and learned its operation from her daughter. She doesn't know how to read and write, but has learned to recognize digits. She knows the mobile numbers of many people verbatim. She says, "If I had not become Sarpanch, I wouldn't have known how to write my name. I am learning from my daughter how to read and write." She informs that she signs on the proposals taken up by the village Panchayat only after listening to them and if necessary, asks Ganga to read them for her.

Women were demanding the appointment of a worker for the Anganwadi and water. The Anganwadi centre in the village

was standing idle for want of a worker. So she got a proposal written in the village Panchayat for appointment of a worker and to dig a hand-pump for drinking water. Soon a worker was appointed and a hand-pump was installed.

Savita, feeling the pain of being illiterate, is keen on children's education. Two new rooms were approved for the school, but the former Sarpanch had not allocated land for it. When the school principal talked to Savita about it, she put up a proposal in the village Panchayat. The proposal was passed and land was allocated to the school. Motivated by the knowledge gained during training, she started land-leveling work under MNREGS and obtained employment benefits for 129 people. After land-leveling, she wants to start digging wells under MNREGS. She says that it will prepare more land for farming and generate more water for farms; then the people won't have to migrate to cities. Leveling will not only improve the land, but with more wells available, more and more people will take up farming.

Savita and Ganga have divided the work among themselves. Twice a week, they inspect the Anganwadi, MNREGS work, school and ANM building, and PDS shop. They pull up concerned officers if there is any irregularity. Savita says, "I am able to do the development work with the help of Ganga. Ganga makes the people aware and gets proposals written in the Panchayat. If she wasn't with me, I wouldn't have been able to obtain benefits for 129 people."



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## WIND POWER TO BURN STREETLIGHTS

P.S. Sundar Raj

The New Indian Express, 24 August, 2011

A month after she received Uthamar Gandhi Award from Deputy Chief Minister M.K. Stalin for leading Bearhatty village Panchayat with impressive development works, Panchayat president K. Rajeswari Devadas is determined to introduce non-conventional energy sources.

“My forthcoming project is powering the villages with non-conventional sources. We are working on creating three windmill units at an outlay of Rs. 45 Lakh to burn streetlights in all 13 villages in the Panchayat. We will obtain applicable subsidy”, Rajeswari told Express on Monday.

Wind power concept comes on the strength of successful implementation of solar power in the Panchayat. “We already have solar-powered streetlights, but want to provide solar power to houses. Initially, we are developing a project to cover 100 houses”, Rajeswari disclosed.

Along with these, efforts are underway to provide drinking water connection to all the houses to reduce villagers’ dependence on public taps. “We have developed water sources by digging wells. We are working on giving individual water connection to each of the 1,200 houses”, Rajeswari said.

To raise revenue, the Panchayat has leased out its six acre tea area. “This is a major development. For the past 15 years, the tea area had remained unattended to. Now, we get useful regular income”, Rajeswari added.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## SHE PLAYS A PIVOTAL ROLE IN BOOSTING QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ATTAPPADY TRIBALS

K.A. Shaji

The Times of India, 14 June, 2011

*Easwary Resan (36) is worshiped by the Adivasis of Attappady in Palakkad district, Kerala, and not without reason. She has devoted her life to the welfare of the tribal women who are often abused and exploited by settlers from outside.*

Sharing borders with The Nilgiris and Coimbatore districts of Tamil Nadu, Attappady is the land of unwed tribal mothers and their father-less children. Identified as the most backward among all the development blocks in Kerala, the region suffers from high mortality rates coupled with extreme penury.

Thanks to Easwary's efforts, the tribals are optimistic that they will tide over their adversities. Her ingenuity in the health sector has helped reduce mortality rates in the region. There is also a sharp decline in the number of unwed mothers. Many of them are outcast after being impregnated by the powerful elite. A coolie turned Panchayat leader, Easwary has also played a pivotal role in curbing consumption of illicit liquor.

“My entry into politics was quite accidental as the Communist Party of India (CPI) wanted a tribal woman to contest from the reserved Block Panchayat Ward after one-third reservation for

women was enforced in Kerala. As I did not have any political background, I was shocked when my husband told me what the party had decided”, recalls Easwary, who became Kerala’s first woman Block Panchayat President in 1995.

Since then, she has grown in stature as a politician. A resident of Kukkampalayam tribal hamlet near Agaly, her activism in basic health, human rights, micro-credit, tribal education, and infrastructure development has endeared her to the people. One of her first tasks as Block Panchayat President was to purchase an ambulance for the tribals.

When cholera and Chikungunia wreaked havoc in the region, Easwary personally co-ordinated the relief works involving the health department, tribal welfare department and social activists. “I was heavily pregnant during the relief operations. Regardless, I carried foodgrains to many of the remote hamlets. I went into labour just 10 minutes after I got home one day and soon delivered a healthy baby boy”, said Easwary. After a 20-day break, she was back on her feet.

Though she successfully completed her term as Block Panchayat President in 2000, Easwary lost the next round of elections by a narrow margin of just six votes. She attributes her loss to the adverse campaigns of the liquor lobby. She was re-elected in 2005, although she lost the post of President to a male candidate. Last year, her party fielded her from a general seat for Palakkad District Panchayat and she won with a sweeping majority.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011.*

## DETERMINED TO UPLIFT HER VILLAGE - BINILATA

Binodini Roul

The Khabara, 23 September, 2010

*She is a living embodiment of service and affection. She has no regrets over her little education; but has one mission. That her village shall prosper. That the people shall be healthy, and shall progress in all spheres like others. Every face will have a smile, not least women, who shall be self-sufficient. This write-up is about an elected woman representative Binilata's commitment to her village's progress.*

Only the person who has experienced pain herself can understand the pain of others and extend a hand of help and support. Tears well up by themselves in the eyes of the person who has suffered when they see someone else suffering. Just as Binilata's eyes turn moist when she sees anyone in the village in grief! But she doesn't just shed tears or sympathize with others in their grief, but tries to help them overcome their pain and sorrow. Due to this very spirit of service, it may not be untrue to call her the 'Mother Teresa' in her village.

Binilata is the Ward Member from the village of Bimbala of Madhusahupatna Gram Panchayat, Sadar block of Dhenkanal district. Having studied only upto the Class V, 40-year old Binilata belongs to a backward caste. Prior to 2007, she had no experience of politics. However her service towards people

had made her their favourite. The village of Bimbala happens to be a very backward area with poor awareness levels and health conditions. There is no electricity in the village. A few years after her marriage, she lost her husband to illness. Nevertheless, she took up the reins of the family, comprising of her mother-in-law and son, and resumed her life. The trials that a family without an employed male member faces can be understood by all; but Binilata was not the one to succumb to any pressure, facing all odds brilliantly. Her husband's death 10 years back due to brain malaria had affected her greatly. She had realized that the unhygienic condition in her village was responsible for the fatal disease which killed her husband. She didn't want anyone else in the village to meet the same fate. Hence from that day onwards, keeping everyone healthy became her sole aim.

Most of the people of Bimbala belong to the Scheduled Castes, and apart from being educationally backward they are also unaware about health matters. To them Binilata became a ray of hope as she was the first to reach anyone who fell sick and make arrangements to take them to hospital.

In 2006, Binilata started working as an ASHA worker which broadened the scope of her work. Earlier she had been spreading awareness on health out of her own will; now that turned into a duty, one which doubled her satisfaction. Every morning she visited houses to enquire about people's health, advising expectant mothers on safe deliveries and giving important information on care of the newborn and mothers. This had resulted in over 50 women deciding to deliver their babies in the hospital. As ASHA worker, she did not limit herself to care-giving during pregnancy and neo-natal stage; rather she expanded her activities to caring for those suffering from

tuberculosis as well. She personally took care of 15 persons by taking them to the hospital and ensuring that they complete the entire DOTS course. Now they are completely cured and healthy.

In 2007, Binilata participated in the Gram Panchayat elections. After getting elected as the Ward Member from Ward No. 4, she expanded her services even more. Prior to this she had only been looking after the health of the citizens. But since 2007, she is now looking after myriad other needs of the people along with that of development of the village. She has got several village roads constructed and dug many wells and tube-wells to provide for clean drinking water to the people. In spite of being non-literate herself, she has paid attention to the educational needs of the village children, and has opened an Anganwadi Centre to encourage and motivate children to study.

Believing that if women are made self-sufficient they can be empowered, she formed SHGs. Inspired by her, other members have taken up agriculture on leased five acre farmlands, and profited from it. While this has brought a smile of satisfaction on the women's faces, yet another endeavour of Binilata has borne success. Electricity used to be a dream in the village before; but through her tireless pursuit, it has become a reality. Supply lines along with electricity have been provided to the village in the last six months.

Commitment to the overall development of the village has brought great admiration for Binilata from everyone. There is no doubt that her work will inspire other women similarly.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Oriya.*

## THE PRIDE OF GAJAPATI

Kalpana Mishra

The Khabara, 27 May, 2011

*Women's empowerment in the tribal majority district of Gajapati seems to be getting stronger by the day. And this movement is being led by the women Panchayat representatives. From Ward Member to Sarpanch, women have been striving relentlessly to uplift women's lot along with that of rural development - proving that they are more capable than the male representatives. Look at the Panchayat of S. Karadasingh of Rayagad block of the district, for instance. What the 30 year old Sarpanch Sudharani Sabar could do within a short span of time, the previous, much experienced and mature Sarpanches could neither achieve nor even attempt. During the Panchayat elections, she had placed a clear agenda before the people; made people aware about her priorities if she became the Sarpanch. In the 2007 Panchayat elections, Sudharani won after a tough fight, with a margin of 400 votes. She endeared herself to her constituency right from the first day, through her work.*

**A**t first the Panchayat Secretary did not cooperate with her. The Panchayat Office did not open everyday either. Only on the days of the mandatory Panchayat meetings did it open, staying closed for the rest of the days. This posed a lot of problems for women coming from far-off villages to get their problems addressed. Sudharani gave strict orders

to the Secretary and Executive Officer to open the Panchayat everyday. When the Executive Officer objected saying that “earlier it only used to open during meetings”, Sudharani told him to “forget old habits, not repeat past mistakes, and open the Panchayat office everyday”. Heeding her advice, the office is now being opened regularly. People no longer face any problems when visiting the Panchayat. This was the first success of Sudharani after becoming the Sarpanch.

Since none in her family were associated with politics earlier, she was of the opinion that all that Panchayats had to do was to build roads and dig ponds. After attending workshops held by voluntary organizations, she slowly learnt that raising living conditions of Panchayat residents, developing facilities for education and health. also came under the purview of Panchayats. After learning about her own responsibilities, she focused on regularizing the educational facilities in her area. Since nobody had enquired into this matter earlier, teachers in various schools in the Panchayat were sporadic in their attendance. By making surprise visits to these schools and pulling up absentee teachers, Sudharani ensured their regular attendance. The quality of studies has improved considerably since then.

Last year the Panchayat peon expired suddenly. Sudharani thought that if his widow could be reinstated in his position then the family would be able to meet their ends smoothly. But the Executive Officer planned to appoint somebody known to him. So much so that he had even acquired an approval letter from the BDO regarding this. This resulted in a conflict between the Executive Officer and her. But Sudharani was not one to let it off so easily. She stood firm on her decision and did

not allow the other person to join. Finally the widow of the late peon was appointed.

Her public service to the people continues. Whenever anyone from her own or the neighboring village falls ill, she takes the person to the nearest hospital. And for this warm and caring persona, Sudharani has become a very popular leader amongst her constituents.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Oriya.*

AT THE SUMMIT OF SUCCESS –  
SACHALA  
Bimal Krishna Thamb  
Janani - The Voice of Women (Weekly),  
9-15 April, 2011

Odisha's legendary figure of great qualities, Chief Minister Biju Patnaik was addressing a gathering in the Panchayat of Ramgiri in the district of Gajapati, extolling all the developmental activities undertaken by his government for the tribals. As the speech progressed, a young girl stood up from the audience and asked, "If your government is doing so much for the tribals, why doesn't our village have a drop of water?" Everyone was taken aback by this question from the girl. Even Biju Babu stopped his speech, and motioned the girl to come on to the stage. That girl didn't hesitate either and walked up fearlessly. Biju Babu resumed his speech, but there was no longer any mention about any government program. Rather he made the girl stand beside him and told the audience, "I'm proud of this girl and admire her courage that she could question the Chief Minister." He called upon every woman there to be like her. That girl was none other than a young tribal girl, Sachala Karjee. And the resident Sachala, of that day has today become the Sarpanch of the same Panchayat, Ramgiri.

That day Sachala herself was so inspired by Biju Babu's call to women, that she vowed to enter the political process and devote herself to social service. Subsequently, building links

with the block and district administrations, she was able to get a lot of demands for drinking water, roads and education fulfilled. These activities endeared her to the local people as a consequence of which she could be elected as the Sarpanch in the previous Panchayat elections. Though educated only upto Class VII, Sachala is quite clever and knowledgeable about reaching the benefits of various State development schemes and programs to the people. It's not easy for any official to hoodwink her.

She has paid special attention to the smooth distribution of the PDS supplies in her Panchayat. After assuming the post of Sarpanch she prepared a list of actual beneficiaries of the Antyodaya scheme and disqualified a lot of cards allotted to well-off families. About 53 real beneficiaries have now been issued Antyodaya cards under the scheme. This incident drew strong reactions from the local administration. The BDO of Ramgiri warned of stern action against her stating that as Sarpanch she has no powers to issue Antyodaya cards. This did not intimidate Sachala; rather she stood firm on her decision and challenged the administration to reject the new list, if it was faulty. Seeing such determination on the part of the Sarpanch, the block administration fell silent. The real beneficiaries are now very grateful to their Sarpanch for doing proper justice to them.

Sachala also has great concern for women. Wherever she sees any injustice or wrong-doing against women, she takes the lead in trying to address them. Having lent a hand of support to a girl cheated by a boy on the false promise of marriage, Sachala has earned the praise of her constituents. A boy of her own village Ramgiri had abandoned a girl from the neighboring block of Rayagada, after promising her of marriage. Hailing

from a poor family, the girl approached the Sarpanch for justice. As the Sarpanch, Sachala first tried to convince the boy's parents to accept the girl as their daughter-in-law. When this failed, she took the girl to the police station and filed a case of harassment against the boy. Since the girl had nowhere else to go, Sachala provided shelter in her own house for a month and later made arrangements for her in a short-stay home near Parlakhemundi, the district headquarters. The police for some reason has not been taking much interest in solving the matter, so now she has met the Superintendent of Police, Gajapati, and made a formal complaint against the local police.

Sachala's courage and penchant for work has made her a well-known figure in the entire district of Gajapati. She has become a favourite of both, the administration and the general public. Not one to compromise on matters concerning women's issues or rights, Sachala fights hard till justice prevails. If other women in the Panchayats emulate Sachala's simple living and uncompromising struggle for justice, there is no doubt that a healthy society can soon be a reality where women can get due justice and rights.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Oriya.*

## FRAGRANT AS A LOTUS – PANKAJINI

Binodini Roul

The Khabara, 29 April, 2011

*Adversity has taught her to struggle hard - a struggle that has also brought her success. However, she is not content with the little success that she has had so far. She wishes to see the oft-heard 'Ramrajya' of Gandhiji's dream take shape in her area. Committed to ensuring all facilities to everyone in the village and Panchayat, she has earned recognition for herself. And this has earned her praise and admiration.*

**P**ankajini Dalai is the Member, Panchayat Samiti of Sabarapalli in the R. Udayagiri block of Gajapati district. Born in a poor tribal family of village Lubersingh, Pankajini embodies a lotus blooming in the mud. The kind of service she has provided to people amidst her own poverty and scant education is not found easily everywhere. Leaving studies after Class IX due to poverty, this however hasn't lessened her levels of understanding from that of educated people. Rather, Pankajini's leadership qualities have earned her unstinting praise in the Panchayat as well as other areas close by.

Leaving studies midway due to financial hardship, Pankajini became a member of an SHG in her village. Within a few days, proving her abilities, she became the President of the group.

And her first fight was against liquor. She was particularly concerned that women and young girls couldn't move about owing to misbehavior by drunkards in the village. Hence, she gathered the women and girls together and motivated them to protest against liquor. It was no small matter to start a movement against liquor, particularly in a tribal community where it is customary to drink, and that too by women. This raised hackles of many, even as it brought forth praise by others in the community. However, not heeding to anybody, she kept up the protest against liquor and in the process could also learn about the support for herself in the community.

When in 2007 the post of the Member, Panchayat Samiti of Sabarapalli was reserved for women, some persons requested her to stand for it. Wishing to do something worthwhile for her people and the Panchayat, she filed her nomination for the post. None in her family had ever contested elections before; nevertheless, breaking the tradition she jumped into the fray. She had no money to spend for her election, but her resolve was strong. But crossing the high seas of election was not easy for her. Many instigated her to withdraw her nomination; some even threatened to kidnap her if she didn't pay heed to them. Many of her supporters were implicated in false cases simply to weaken her campaign. However, she didn't pay any heed to this and continued with her campaign. The fruits of her labour were sweet. She won the election and became the Member of Panchayat Samiti.

Despite her little education, she was quick to learn the ropes. She soon learnt that her presence at the monthly block meetings was necessary; hence, she has never remained absent in any of those meetings. Not remaining just a passive listener, she raised issues affecting her Panchayat. From building roads

to providing water, facilitating loans and reaching benefits of welfare schemes to people, she demanded action on these in the meetings. As a result of this, over 30 persons were able to get old-age and widow pensions. Continuously alert to any misbehavior or non-cooperation towards her constituents by local officials, she doesn't fail to remonstrate against such incidents. She firmly opines that it is simply unacceptable that the officers duty bound to serve the people should misbehave with them. At times she has even resorted to shaming these officials to get her word across. She has often succeeded.

As an elected representative, Pankajini has involved herself in serving the people. Not failing to lend a hand of assistance to anyone in need anywhere, anytime, her leadership abilities have not remained confined to Panchayat matters alone. She has been elected as the Secretary of the R. Udayagiri Mahila Panchayat Pratinidhi Mahasangha. But she still has more to do - she is particularly saddened at the fact that people from the Panchayats have to face a lot of financial and other hardships to come to R. Udayagiri block hospital for treatment. To address this problem, she aims to set up a hospital at the Panchayat itself. We sincerely wish that she achieves her goal.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Oriya.*

## THREE LADY PANCHAYAT HEADS SHARE DREAM

Nandita Dutta

Tripura Darpan, 7 June, 2011

**M**ohanpur Rural Development (RD) Block is primarily an agrarian village society under Tripura West district. The lush green at both sides of the Agartala–Mohanpur road and the blue sky together provides a treat to the eyes. Located very close to the Bangladesh border, this small area has repeatedly been afflicted by the rigours of terrorist activities. Yet, as the day always comes after the night, Mohanpur too has noticed development - and today it finally has been able to regain the ground beneath its feet and of course people in that region have been holding it very firmly.

One of the instances of development in the area is manifested in participation of women folk in local government or more appropriately in the Gram Panchayats. Of the 30 Gram Panchayats in the area, 17 are headed by women and surprisingly almost all of them are housewives. While they were quoted as saying, “We don’t understand politics”, however, they are into politics only because of the love that they receive from people.

Molina Sarkar of Tulabagan Gram Panchayat, Shilpi Das of Mantala Gram Panchayat, and Rupali Debnath of Mohanpur Gram Panchayat are the living examples of women

empowerment in India. None of them have received higher education; they all got married while studying. Each of them at present has kids, and then the kitchen, family and all other associated tasks. Nevertheless, they never allowed their minds to close; something beyond the four walls of their existence drew their attention - but the way out was not known to them. As they say, fortune befriends the bold - and similar was the case that happened to them - by the courtesy of reservation of seats for women, they got direct entry into the world of politics.

Very much aware about the importance of education, all three women have the regret of not being able to finish their education. All three of them, however, have a common desire and unanimous resolve that no single child between 6-14 years of age should remain deprived of primary education. Shilpi put in, "I always try to send back all drop-outs to the school again", and not only in words she has proven this but by her actions too - as she convinced four Santhal and one from unreserved community families to send their drop-out kids back to school.

As Mohanpur RD block is situated on the border, there are several other problems too - sexual abuse and molestations are common; there is also indications of sexually transmitted disease and of course HIV/AIDS. These Panchayat ladies have made continuous efforts to prevent emergence of such situations. Most of the times, Molina opined that the cause of such a situation is drugs and the ladies have to fight against it too. Along with the help of ASHA workers and a voluntary organization of Delhi, these ladies are contemplating to generate awareness among the folks and build up a cleaner and healthier environment.

They have also kept an eye on the death rate of infants and have been trying constantly to reduce the number of infant mortality. Perhaps, as an example of the efforts taken by them, the official figures on infant mortality claim that there have been no deaths in any of these three Panchayats in the last two years. In these villages, conducting medical camps and distributing free medicines is a periodical event. Under the leadership of the hard-working grassroots' ladies, Mohanpur Gram Panchayat is heading on the fronts of health, hygiene and sanitation. It received the Nirmal Gram Award in 2003. Presently, all the houses have proper sanitation facilities.

But it is not that they are never depressed - all of them doubt themselves and their abilities to fulfill their dreams. Their only regret is not being able to complete matriculate education. All of them, ranging from 32 to 35 years, are enthusiastic but somewhere in the corner of their hearts it pains them that they are not well educated. They maintain that the government is taking measures for the development of the villages and one day villages in this State too will become developed ones.

These three women leaders regret that a large part of the population of the country are suffering from illiteracy and malnutrition and are afflicted by evils like child marriage, trafficking, and sexual abuse. According to them, it is the women folk who have to face evils like that of infanticide. They wonder if there is anyone who can lead them to a secure future! The question may remain unanswered at the moment but the presence of Shilpi, Molina and Rupali show the way to dream.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Bengali.*

## NO CONFIDENCE MOTION FOR CHALLENGING MALPRACTICES

Reshma Shivadekar

Maharashtra Times, 25 August, 2010

“I do the flag-hoisting in my village”, shares Sangita Waghmare proudly. She is Sarpanch of Borgaon village in Mukhed block in Nanded district. Despite the legal provision of one-third reservations for women, in reality they have to face a number of challenges to get acknowledged as a people’s representative.

Flag-hoisting is one such challenge. Usually a Sarpanch gets the honour to hoist the flag, but in the case of a woman Sarpanch, local leaders do it themselves or share the honor with the husband of the Sarpanch. However Sangita asserted her rights from the very beginning and hence her fellow members think twice before denying her any of her rights.

Sangita got elected in 2007 and became the village Sarpanch. The very first thing she did after taking the charge was to take concrete steps to stop malpractices by the Gram Panchayat functionaries. One such practice was offering of treats by the Sarpanch on the occasion of Gram Sabha meetings. The Sarpanch would spend on liquor and non-vegetarian delicacies

to lure support. Sangita stopped this practice altogether but it provided grounds for her rivals to oppose her. After around six months she had to face a no-confidence motion. She struggled to prove that all allegations were baseless and hence the no-confidence was not passed.

Sangita turned her attention to the village school. Here, the head teacher and the class teacher never came on time. It was as if the school time-table was not meant for them! One day, Sangita, along with some women, visited the school at 10 AM sharp i.e. when the school starts. Both the teachers had not come. She and the women waited for almost two hours. The teachers did not come till around noon, so she locked the school. After a while the teachers arrived and were surprised to see the locked school. She refused to open the school and therefore they could not sign the register of their attendance. After this incident, the teachers began arriving on time and now the school bell in Borgaon village rings at 10 AM sharp.

These two incidents contributed to building Sangita's confidence and she has never looked back since then. She has got the Gram Panchayat office cleaned which earlier resembled a storeroom. She started sitting in the office on a regular basis. Gram Sabha meetings became regular and people were involved in finalizing development projects. New wells were constructed. Self-help groups started income generation activities. Roads were repaired. Other projects were executed smoothly. Sangita became a popular Sarpanch. Her opponents made allegations that Sangita was corrupt and tried to malign her image. But Sangita's work was transparent and the people turned down the allegations as they were baseless. Sangita has

studied upto Class XII. Her husband, who is a school teacher by profession, is very supportive of her. “Because of family support I am able to fulfill any responsibility that comes my way”, says the confident Sarpanch.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Marathi.*

## I WILL BECOME AN MLA!

Namita Deshpande

Loksatta, 29 January, 2011

**M**aya Sorte wanted to do something constructive for the betterment of her village. Hence she formed women self-help groups in 1997. The groups received a bank loan and started dairy business. However they could not run it properly. The women got disappointed with this failure; however, they did not lose heart and came together to reflect on their learning from this unsuccessful enterprise. At this juncture, they identified strengths and skills that they had. Based on their experiential wisdom they shared responsibilities among them. With this preparation and fresh capital they made a second attempt. The self-help groups have proved to be a golden opportunity for the women.

There were ration shops in the village, but people were not getting the grains on a regular basis. Since a separate register for BPL families was not maintained, many deserving people remained deprived. Women decided to address this problem and went together to visit the ration shop owner. The shopkeeper showed whatever records he had, but it did not have the names of poor families in the village. Clearly, there were a number of problems. After returning from the shop, the group of women visited the concerned officer at the Block Office. He

promised to visit the village to sort the problems. The women waited for him. Over eight days passed but he did not turn up. So the women went to visit the District Collector Shamal Shukla. On the second day she visited the village. At a women's meeting, she explained the functioning of a ration shop and also solved the problem of their village. On that day women also got to know about the functioning of the Gram Panchayat for the first time.

Maya tells, "The self-help groups were functioning smoothly. Meanwhile I came to know about 'Dharti Bachao Andolan' promoted by Prakash Reddy. I got involved in their work and subsequently also got associated with Mahila Rajsatta Andolan. I decided to enter politics in 2000. Prakash Reddy has backed me all through."

Earlier, the members of self-help groups were ignorant about the Gram Panchayat politics; however, later they developed interest and expressed their desire before the local leaders to contest elections. But the leaders did not respond positively. Hence, the women approached the opponent group, but received similar negative response. If neither party is interested in giving them a seat, the women can contest independently, said Prakash Reddy. Women chose this option and started their preparation. Sensing their determination, the ruling group became alert and invited the women for a discussion. However, at the time of selection of candidates, Maya was sidelined and four other women got the candidature. The leaders deliberately isolated Maya who was a women's leader. In response, the women asserted that Maya should get the seat and that they do not want to contest without her. Finally, Maya got the seat and won the election to become a Gram Panchayat member. Post the election, at the time of the formation of

Functional Committees, Maya was asked to take responsibility of the Women and Child Development Committee. She refused it saying she is capable of handling the responsibility of any other committee. She asked to have the charge of Construction Committee, and finally settled on the Finance Committee. By challenging the stereotypical division of responsibility, Maya set a new trend. She still insists that a woman should be given charge of the Construction Committee.

Gradually through experience, Maya and other women learned the rules of the game of politics. Maya can handle strategic matters with proficiency. For instance, the women thought that the single and needy women in the village should get a preference in the allotment of the housing scheme. In order to get approval to their proposal, they have to be present in majority at the time of the decision. Otherwise men will never let the proposal get passed. Thus, Maya encouraged more and more women in the village to attend the Gram Sabha meetings. Now their increased participation helps to have decisions in their favour.

Maya has had to face severe opposition to reach the position she holds today. It happened that her opponent group made her brother-in-law contest against her. She met him and told him, "I am sure to win the election, so you please withdraw from the election." He did not listen and got defeated. Soon after he went to her and cursed her in public. She was very hurt. She was more embarrassed because her son was around while his uncle was maligning her. But later she was overwhelmed by the mature gesture of her son, who consoled and supported her. "He takes interest in my work and wants me to make progress", she tells proudly. Her husband is also very supportive of her.

Mahila Rajsatta Andolan organizes a unique event, wherein the organisation highlights the contribution of male family members, especially husbands of the elected representatives so that it motivates other male members of the society on similar lines. Maya's husband has been felicitated as 'Jotiba Putra' – Son of Jotiba, a pioneer social reformer in Maharashtra who worked along with his wife Savitribai.

Maya's horizons broadened in 2005 in literal sense. She was selected to participate in a conference organised by United Nations in New York where she was to make a presentation on the 'Status of Indian Women in Politics'. She wrote an essay in consultation with Prakash Reddy, got it translated from Bhim Raskar, which got selected and she traveled to New York. She remembers her stay in the foreign country. She did not dare to speak with anyone for first couple of days. Then on the day of her presentation she gathered all her courage and spoke from her heart. Her speech was very much appreciated. She showed the photograph of Savitribai to the audience, a source of inspiration to her. One of the ministers from the South Africa stood up and appreciated her speech and her idol. She lamented that women in her country do not know who their ideal is and promised Maya that she will definitely look for the motivating force like Savitribai back in her country. A number of participants asked questions. Maya was supposed to speak only for ten minutes, but the organizers gave her double the time since the audience was interested in interacting with her. She is still in touch with the concerned minister from South Africa she met in New York. "I had heard that women in US are more advanced than their counterparts in India, but they are also marginalized in politics like us", observes Maya.

Maya has created a strong work-base. She is active in politics, and she is equally active in bringing social changes. For instance, women's gathering and Haldi-Kumkum programme takes place every year on the occasion of Savitribai Jayanti. Traditionally, such programmes are meant for only married women. However, it is organised in a different manner in Maya's village. All village women – married, unmarried, widowed, single, etc. – come together to celebrate the day. Earlier, single women used to hesitate to attend the function. "Who would greet us?", they would ask. "I would do so", Maya assured them. This has become a programme for every woman. Nowadays, women also get a book as a gift, which adds to their knowledge and motivation. "More and more women should enter into politics and get share of power. This is my dream", shares Maya.

Maya has traveled from Latur to New York and her goal is to become a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). She is determined to get that status by contesting the election from open seat. My salute to Maya's courage!



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Marathi.*

## WOMEN SARPANCHES BRINGING IN A WIND OF CHANGE

Lakhan Salvi

Nirala Rashtradhvaj, 28 January, 2011

**K**amala Bai Gurjar is a living example of how women Sarpanches are bringing in a wind of change in villages across India. She is the Sarpanch of Banssi village Panchayat in Boondi district. Kamala Bai campaigned for her election on foot. She defeated five women candidates. She won by 236 votes. Kamala Bai is not only undertaking development work, but also acting on all the suggestions and complaints of the villagers. After becoming Sarpanch, she got the village cleaned, got a public toilet constructed for women, started water supply through tankers, and got seven tube wells dug to settle the drinking water problem permanently. Not only this, Kamala Bai, who works on development with full transparency and the co-operation of the villagers, installed suggestion and complaint boxes at five places in the village. Boxes are opened every month and according to the suggestions received, development work is undertaken. Similarly, the complaints received are taken up at Gram Sabha meetings. The husband of Kamala Bai, Rajaram, motivated her to contest elections. Considering her illiteracy as a handicap, she refused at first, but agreed later. Her husband promised to teach her to read and write. Kamala Bai says, "In her caste, girls are not taught to read and write. I too was not sent to school and remained illiterate. But being literate is no

big deal. I am learning how to read and write. Her husband Rajaram is teaching her.” Now Kamala Bai can sign her name and is able to recognize alphabets. Every morning, she can be spotted reading a newspaper.

Upon becoming the Sarpanch, Kamla Bai found that every colony in the village was filthy. So as her first job, she got the village cleaned. She installed suggestion and complaint boxes in her Panchayat at prominent places. Now citizens of her Panchayat can put in his / her suggestions or complaints regarding health, banking, revenue, etc. in the boxes. The boxes are opened every month during meetings. The complaints received are settled right there in the meeting. The complaints that cannot be settled at the Panchayat level are sent to the concerned officials. The majority of the initial complaints were regarding drinking water. The women of the village asked Kamala Bai to do something about it since they were the most affected due to lack of drinking water. Keeping this in mind, water was supplied to all the Wards by means of water tankers, and seven tube-wells were dug to settle the drinking water problem permanently. All of them spout water today and there is no water problem in the village. Villagers Gulab Bai and Bhuri Bai say, “We demanded water from the village Panchayat and officers many times in the past, but our voice was not heard. Now our own Kamala Bai is Sarpanch and she looks after us.” There was no street-light in the lanes of the village. Kamala Bai installed solar powered lights in those lanes.

Women of the village faced another difficulty. There was no public toilet for them. Women had raised this demand many times in the past, but it was not heeded to. After Kamala Bai became Sarpanch, there was a death in the village. After performing the last rites, a water tanker was arranged for the

ritual bath. All the men took bath at the tanker site in the open. But it was not possible for the women. The hand-pumps were all dry; there was no water anywhere else. When women went to the nearby government school, the teacher there shooed them off. There was no water there for the children as well. The women made their arrangement somehow, but went to Kamala Bai the next day and narrated their tale. Kamala Bai made a vow to construct a women's toilet. She put up a proposal in the quorum and the women Panches passed it, deeming it valid and necessary. The women's public toilet was approved. But the land, on which it was to be constructed, was encroached upon by some people. They were not ready to move. Kamala Bai gave them an ultimatum and warned them that they will be removed forcibly if necessary. At last, the land was vacated and the public toilet was constructed for women.

At present, there are five MNREGS projects running in Bansi. Kamala Bai inspects them regularly and keeps in touch with the villagers. She informs that work is provided within 15 days of application being received. The list of employed persons is put up at the village Panchayat office and other prominent places in the village. She says, "The workers are paid on time. I accompany the engineer for measurement of work. Women tell me that men be allotted work in separate groups. Whenever I visit a site, I find that men are just sitting around and the women are working. Therefore, I have asked the Employment Assistant to form a separate group for men. Women's groups should be formed on a voluntary basis." All the women of the village are happy with the way Kamala Bai is working.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

# THE FACE OF CHOPDA CHANGING GRADUALLY

Navin Joshi

Rashtriya Sahara Dehradun, 30 May, 2011

*'You can change the course of a nation, you can change the face of a nation, O Woman!*

*Forget not that you are the strength of this world, you can change the destiny of a nation.'*

**W**ith ideas along these lines, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was brought and 50% seats were reserved for women in Panchayats. The positive results are now visible. To clarify this, we can take the example of Chopda Gram Panchayat, where rural women are keeping pace with development after adopting cultural models like 'Rangawali Pichaura' and 'Shagun Ankhar'. The smile on their faces can be seen clearly. Chopda Gram Panchayat is near Ampadav on Nainital-Haldwani National Highway. After a steep climb between 2-6 kms from the road, this 10 sq. km. area contains more than a dozen small 'Toks' i.e., small, scattered villages like Ampadav, Dangad, Basgaon, Ropda, Syalikhhet, Bhumka, Khadkakhhet, Simalkhet, Malla Chopda, Rahan and Funiakhan. Even after 60 years of independence, this village was far away from development. Bhagawati Suyal took over the command after the Gram Panchayat was reserved for women in 2008.

Daughter of Kedardutt Joshi, the Head Priest of the Nyay Dev Temple in nearby Ghodakhal in Kumaon, Bhagawati took over the responsibility with the intent of giving the villagers their rights. As a result, there is prosperity in the village. A proposal worth Rs. 30 million was sent to Forest Department for treatment of Chhida Gadere, which was a constant source of danger of landslide for the village, out of which Rs. 10 million have been sanctioned and the work has been started. Bringing diesel for the irrigation pump in the village was a chore that used to occupy a full day. Now it is being replaced by an electrical pump.

A road is being constructed for the village under the PMGSY scheme. The girls of Syalikhhet Tok had to walk for miles to reach the school at Jyolikot. But now a culvert has been constructed at a cost of Rs. 2 million and the journey has been shortened to a few minutes. Construction of streets, contact roads and check dams is also going on apace under MNREGS in the village. The Cassia and Litchi growers of the village are also happy, because officers of Agriculture and Horticulture Department visit them during Farmers' Festival and check their crops. Women bedecked in the traditional 'Rangawali Pichaura' welcome them with 'Shagun Ankhari' songs. Their men do not drink anymore and there is no lack of fodder.

A young man used to beat up his mother after drinking liquor from the money earned from a vehicle bought by his mother. Bhagawati first gave shelter to the mother in her own house and then counseled the youth, who first abused her. But since then, he and others too have distanced themselves from liquor. Women are learning soft toy making, sewing and embroidery in their spare time. Bhagawati says that this is just the beginning, and one of the impetuses behind it is also that

she is a woman. She can empathize with the women who have to face the difficulties of running the household everyday. She is also planning to train the women in using a computer.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

WOMEN ARE NO LESS THAN MEN –  
AMBITIOUS AND HAVE A POINT  
TO PROVE

Mahesh Bhanwre  
Nav Duniya, 12 June, 2011

Living in the hamlet of snake charmers, outside the village, and eye-witnessing the residents of the poor society suffering from and struggling for even the basic facilities of life, Laxmi Bai, belonging to Kalbelia society was watching the rigidness of the officials and the gaps in sayings and doings of the leaders, always rebuking her fate but waiting for only an opportunity. Ultimately, luck favoured her and her ambitious prayer was fulfilled during the previous Panchayat elections. In that election, eight women candidates, who were economically competent, were contesting against her. Still then, people reposed faith in her and she won by 275 votes. Thus, immediately after taking over the post of Sarpanch of Kanpur Gram Panchayat, without losing any time, she started putting her efforts honestly and actively to change the worst face of the village. During these one and a half years only, she has already established her identity as a bold lady. Her specialty is that every decision she takes is hers only and her husband or any other male member of her family does not have any say in the same. Laxmi Bai says that the opportunity to do something and to prove herself has been provided to her by the Panchayati Raj Act only. She wants to

utilize it fully. She would never forget the emotions generated in her while unfurling the national flag in the presence of the whole village.

### **Every talk directly with officials**

In the structural set up of the male-dominated society, the women have been denied the rights to take their own decisions and express themselves. But for Laxmi Bai, it has become a forgotten matter of the by-gone era. Now, she does not silently bear any hurdle in getting the decisions taken in Gram Sabha implemented, any fear of flood, black-marketing in ration, against the bribes clamored by the concerned persons for construction works, lack of teachers in the schools, lacuna in nutritious diets, and similar small and big short-comings just because she is a woman, she directly informs the officials over her mobile phone. The concerned officials also appreciate her alertness and take actions immediately. This is the reason that many anti-law and undesirable activities in the village have come to a halt now.

### **Daily visits to Anganwadi**

Only an educated person can correct the derailed system. Having studied upto Class V, Laxmi Bai understands this very well. That is the reason that she visits the school daily to check attendance of students and teachers. She has strictly asked the teachers to inform her about their absence due to whatever reasons so that the students may use that particular opportunity to learn good life-needs. She also monitors the attendance of children in Anganwadi and quality of nutritious diets; its distribution is passed only after obtaining everybody's opinion. Interference by anybody is outrightly rejected by her. Keeping in view the alertness and sharp attitude of her and

other women, now even the males have stopped interfering in each and every matter.

### **Mission for five years**

During her working-period, Laxmi Bai is fully devoted to making the Panchayat an ideal one. Her priorities include converting every mud-splattered road into *pucca* road, clean drinking water, regular cleaning, health examination for women, every child going to school, lighting arrangements on every street, alcohol-free village, the eligible ones getting benefits of the schemes, and constructing an auspicious building for all societies of the village. She tells that she is the first woman Sarpanch from her society. From the facilities point of view, by changing the picture of her village, she wants to make her tenure unforgettable.

### **Daily round of the Village**

Laxmi Bai definitely takes a round of the village daily. She visits every household to make them understand that a daughter should never be married before she attains the age of 18 years. She points out the harmful effects if this is not followed. She has launched a campaign to make the village aware of the ill-effects of alcohol usage. To the habitual drinkers, she tells them about domestic quarrels, bad effects on children, damaging effects on social prestige, and physical and mental ill-effects as well. Even, she rebukes and forces such persons who come to Gram Sabha in drunken state. She narrates almost verbally the details of pregnant women. It's the reason that she calls for Janani Express over the phone well within time. She got wells dug for irrigation in the fields of widows. Simultaneously, she provided them with engines and pipes.

### **Recognize the opportunity**

If women get the desirable opportunity to do well for the society, then they must use their capacities e.g., to educate the children and to give special attention on education and marriageable age of girls that will bring prosperity to the family and the nation, and advise the young generation against drinking. The poor and needy women may form self-help groups to start their vocation to become self-reliant so that they may not have to look to others for their and their children's livelihood in difficult circumstances.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## MYTHS ARE BROKEN BY TRANSFORMATIONS

Ravindra Jharkhariya  
Swadesh, 16 July, 2010

Cooking in kitchen, cleaning and sweeping the home and so on are the household jobs in which an Indian woman has to remain engaged day in and day out. When she walks out of her premises, she has to cover her head and face with her *saree*. She has to walk behind her mother-in-law or any other female relative like her shadow. This is what emerges as the general image of an Indian rural woman. But now, this image belongs to the past as the Panchayati Raj has transformed every colour of this image. There is a separate truth now regarding women who constitute half of the rural population. This truth is emerging from the headlines of our society, which is eager to break open the myths of by-gone days of our rural India.

Look at the Gwalior-Chambal division itself which is notorious for its impenetrable forests and valley, revolting dacoits and arms which remain in the headlines of media. But still, there are some more about this part of the land - the transformations gradually coming over here. Among these, there are women Sarpanches who are engaged in inscribing new headlines.

Indravati of Kishanpur is one such woman. She was born and brought up in the city of Gwalior, did her graduation there itself and when married, she settled as daughter-in-law in Kishanpur - a small village in the district of Morena. Then her rural life hovered over her as a challenge. In the beginning, everything was odd here as there was no comparison between the big city like Gwalior and this small village like Kishanpur. But when the Panchayati Raj era ultimately arrived, it provided a new opportunity to Indravati and all her regrets gradually washed away. Indravati became Sarpanch here - not once but twice. And during both the stints, MP government twice honoured this village as model village with award of Rs. 25,000 each on both the occasions.

The city-educated girl and now daughter-in-law of this small village, Indravati informs that only educated woman can become a foundation of a good home, a peaceful family, and a prosperous society. She treated this as her basic entity and continued with the same when she became the Sarpanch. She gave priority to education for girls and got schools opened for them. After education, she laid emphasis on health-care and constituted self-help groups of women so that they can become self-dependent. She is now no more a Sarpanch but she looks back at her both the tenures with pride and enjoys her new identity which she got out of it.

Mithlesh Gurjar of Jigani Panchayat of the same district made development work as her foremost priority. She got works done worth nearly Rs. 30 Lakhs in which greater emphasis was laid by her on clean drinking water and health-care management. Mithlesh remained extremely serious on education of girls. It was under her leadership that Momina Gauri, a 27-year old woman of this village,

went ahead with the literacy programme and did so much for it with dedication that she herself became an ideal for the rural women.

Momina is handicapped but she resolved to make literate at least 30 adults (male and female) every year. Impressed by her resolve and its implementation year after year, President of India Pratibha Devi Singh Patel honored her by inviting her to take lunch at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009. This honour even encouraged her more with her resolve.

In the same Chambal valley, there is a similar inspiring example of Kusum Tripathi who was Sarpanch of Choki Panchayat in Bhind district. This Panchayat having a population of around 2,000 includes Bessanpura and Teekari villages. Kusum made efforts to secure 'Aadarsh' and 'Nirmal' status for her Gram Panchayat. She laid much greater emphasis on girl's education and prevention of foeticide. She was successful to a great extent in her noble efforts. She says that women can do all the good things if they get the opportunity. It may be noted here that Bhind and Morena districts are among those 14 districts in Madhya Prdaesh which have disproportionate sex ratio. According to available data, these districts have only 900 females for every 1000 males.

Besides these stories from the Chambal valley, there is one more story from Deveran Gram Panchayat in Bara Malhera Janpad in Bundelkhand. Here, the Chief of Tejaswani group is Khargi Saur. She is an illiterate tribal woman. She provides training on election process through her group and she has been elected with record number of votes. She

has many dreams for doing developmental work and now she is engaged in bringing these to reality. Women Panches of the nearby Mungwari Gram Panchayat dared to tell the collector of their drinking water crisis in the open market and got their problem resolved on the spot itself.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## FEAR OFF, FIGHTING ON...

Prem Vijay Patil

Nai Duniya, 7 March, 2011

*Women of Kukshi Tehsil of Tribal dominated Dhar district are setting a worthy example by taking initiative to ban alcohol in their villages. Women from the villages of Dahi, Kukshi and Nisarpur blocks have strongly come forward against alcohol and for this, women committees are being formed. Now women are boldly facing and putting their views against sale and usage of alcohol in front of police and administrative representatives. This is for the first time in Kukshi that women have come forward in such a large mass. Elected women representatives are playing appreciable role in taking this initiative ahead.*

One of the most radical legislations in our Panchayati Raj system is the reservation of 50% of seats for women in PRIs. It enabled thousands of women to contest elections and enter the local government bodies. Now these women are taking their stands against other evils of the society and liquor is one of them. During his tour to tribal areas, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan made the tribal people of Kukshi Assembly area promise that they will leave liquor and other addictions. As a result of this, a positive action took place in 3-4 villages of Kukshi Tehsil. Women of Ambada village of Kukshi Tehsil formed a committee to oppose the alcohol intake and this committee handed a memorandum against use of

alcohol to the SDO and police. Committee-head Leelabai said that through the memorandum, a warning has been put up have mentioned warning in memorandum that if alcohol sale is not barred then the committee will charge penalty. Similarly, in Nisarapur women blocked the police station for about three hours. Besides this, women from Dogawa and Padiyaal area of Kukshi also came forward to oppose alcohol sale and usage.

### **Community efforts better than the Department's**

Infact it is the responsibility of Panchayat and Social Welfare Department to take and initiate such actions but in Kukshi it is opposite. Women of Dahi and Nisarapur which are the most interior areas of Kukshi have taken the initiative of banning alcohol. V.S. Iske (from the Panchayat and Social Welfare Department) told that his department is persistently organizing activities as per the government's order, and if women need and if there is some scheme under it, then the same will definitely be implemented to provide support to the women.

### **An inspiration for other villages**

The initiative undertaken by the women of Kukshi Tehsil is not a mere coincidence but it's a reflection that women are now aware of their rights. According to villagers, this initiative of women against alcohol is having impact on nearby villages; there also women are planning to take similar steps.

### **Support to women at all possible levels**

The efforts of women against alcohol usage have proved that the rights given to them under Panchayati Raj system are meaningful, says Sarjubai Solanki the Vice President of Zila Panchayat. Further she said that they will provide all possible support to women at department or at personal level if needed.

### **Sarpanch - the trendsetter**

Saraswati Patel, Sarpanch of Dogawa Panchayat said, “We women were highly annoyed with the use of alcohol by men of the village so we decided to follow the trend of Padiyal village where women took action towards banning alcohol. We called for a Panchayat meeting in which we proposed actions against sale and usage of alcohol in the village and a women’s committee opposing alcohol was also formed.”

### **Women of Konda village also got motivated**

The committee leader of Dogawa village Shailabai said, “We got inspired from Padiyal and now we are the inspiration for women of Konda village. Women of Konda village asked our opinion on what steps to be taken to ban alcohol in their village. This is how the movement of banning alcohol is spreading from one village to another, thus strengthening the women of the villages.”

### **The path is not easy**

Saraswati Patel, Sarpanch of Dogawa Panchayat, Padma Thakur, President of SHG and Shailabai said that women have to face a lot of challenges while trying to ban alcohol. They added that alcohol contractors get active in the night and still it is being sold in villages in secrecy. So they need strong support of police to make their movement against alcohol successful.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## THE WOMAN SARPANCH HAS DICTATED NEW HEADLINES

Mahesh Bhanwre  
Nav Duniya, 13 June, 2011

**I**n spite of having funds in the accounts of the Gram Panchayat, not getting the work done throughout the year, bargaining for commissions in each and every work, not giving information about the government schemes, and doing absurdities just because of his being a male were the regular habitual deeds of the Secretary. When he attempted to harass the first time elected Sarpanch of Sarsood, Aasha Vishwakarma, then to tackle his misdoings, the latter undertook such a bold step that he would have never even imagined. This matter reached senior officials and enquiry was conducted.

Keeping in view the alertness and courage of Aasha, the Janpad Panchayat issued a written order that the Secretary will draw monthly salary only after his attendance would be certified every month by the Sarpanch in writing – it was issued with a view to put a control on the mis-doings of the Secretary. It resulted directly into the Secretary's daily attendance in the Panchayat and after holding discussions with the Sarpanch, the schemes are being formulated to get the work done in accordance with the funds available so that basic facilities are made available to both the villages under the Panchayat. According to Aasha, adverse circumstances provide her encouragement to do

more and more. But, this opportunity to do something and to decide on her own for the same has been made possible by 50% reservation for women.

Sarsood Gram Panchayat having a population of nearly 1,250 has a majority of Gurjars. Even from the caste point of view, Aasha's family is the loner here.

In the contest for the post of Sarpanch, there were women aspirants from the Gurjar family as well. No party gave ticket to her, but Aasha had a dream to change the face of the village. In spite of all the political pressures, she contested the elections as an independent candidate and won by a good number of votes. Post that, she spent the first few days understanding the working procedure and obligations. Then people reminded her of her promises regarding providing basic amenities. When Aasha discussed these with the Secretary, he side-tracked the issues by stating non-availability of funds for construction and developmental work. It was a year after the same that she came to know that there were enough funds in the accounts but nothing was being done as the Secretary was not interested in the same.

Aasha explained in clear words to make the Secretary understand about her plans for development of the village but he did not agree to what she said. His coming to the Panchayat was also as per his own desire. When the matter went beyond the limit, she along with the Panches, went to meet the Janpad CEO and SDM with her complaints. She along with Panches dared them to resign in case the problem is not resolved within three days. The officials got the investigations done point-wise, and found the Secretary guilty on seven counts. Due to mutual wrangling and ego problems, and with a view to speed up the

developmental works that were on hold, the officials decided that the salary of the Secretary could be drawn only after the certification of his attendance is made by the Sarpanch.

### **Everybody knows of it**

Sarsood village was previously under Bawadiya Panchayat. According to its population, few years ago only, it was given the status of a Panchayat. Aasha herself organizes the meetings. She explains to the villagers that the Panchayat has enough funds. To make the villagers aware and to increase their participation, she tells them that foundation of every such work as desired by them will be laid.

During the meetings of the Gram Sabha, Aasha takes suggestions from each and every common person. She is well aware of every street of the village, and therefore she is equally competent to decide logically regarding where and what priority is to be given. With regard to maintaining transparency in every matter, Aasha wants everybody to know as to what is happening in the Panchayat. This is the reason that she produces the pass-book and cash-book before everybody in each of the meetings. She believes that if there is any discrepancy, then it will be caught surely.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

## ORDINARY WOMEN, EXTRAORDINARY COURAGE

Aditi Bhaduri

The Sentinel, 14 May, 2011

*As I left the main road, all roads disappeared. There was nothing but dirt tracks that had turned slushy because of the recent rains. Baki Aker village in Handwara in Kupwara district is only a two hour drive from Srinagar, but it seemed to inhabit another planet, with puddles in place of footpaths and electricity available for, at the luckiest, an hour a day.*

I had come here to meet a special woman. At first glance, Sharifa Begum (33) looked like any other Kashmiri village woman. Dressed in a khaki green *phiran*, a *kangri* close to her chest, and the dupatta framing her face, she welcomed me warmly. She was one of many brave women contesting a Panchayat election being held in the valley in more than a decade.

Sharifa decided to contest the polls, taking advantage of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, that mandates 33 percent reservation for women in local bodies, and she is doing this in difficult, conflict marked times. Indeed, a couple of houses away lies the debris of a house that was blown apart a few months ago in an encounter between the security forces and a militant. More recently, just two days before I visited Sharifa, a letter had arrived at the local mosque during Friday prayers in the

nearby Gulina Village, asking the villagers to boycott the polls. And, there were many villagers too with hardened attitudes who wanted all to boycott the polls.

A mother of two small children, Sharifa who has studied till Class X in this very village is married to a cloth shop-owner. She is well known in the village, having often counselled young girls on domestic matters. When I asked what motivated her to stand for elections, she explained that when she had voted for the first time in her life during the 2008 Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, she had liked the fact that her vote mattered. So when Panchayat elections were announced this time, she was thrilled to know that she could actually be a candidate herself.

Her husband also encouraged her, as did the villagers when she began campaigning from house to house. Since most of the household heads are male, her husband accompanied her and did his bit to convince the men about his wife's candidature. I asked her whether being a housewife left her unprepared for her role as a public figure. Sharifa answered slowly, "I am mentally prepared. I know my community well and we will sit together and make decisions on what needs to be done."

It is fitting that Baki Aker Village has been reserved for women. It has 150 voters, the majority of whom are women. While Kashmir has a number of high profile women politicians, women's political participation in the valley is still low. As Sharifa put it, "Women here will be able to approach a woman leader more easily with their particular problems. They cannot discuss everything with men."

Sharifa's opponent is Parveena Begum, who is in her early fifties. When Parveena campaigned, it was her husband Peer

Abdur Rasheed who did most of the talking. He explained that Parveena had always wanted to do something for the poor and that's why she has decided to contest. Is Parveena not intimidated by the boycott calls, I asked. He immediately piped up, saying that local elections have nothing to do with politics. "We are not going to Delhi. We only want to improve the lot of the village", Rasheed said.

In neighbouring Dudipora village, I met up with another candidate, Hasina Begum (30) wife of Bashir Ahmed Mallik, a fruit vendor. The couple has three children. Hasina was not only supported by her husband and brother-in-law, even her mother-in-law had unexpectedly proved enthusiastic about her participation. As the older lady put it, "We encouraged her to contest. Someone in the village has to become the local leader, after all. I am sure my daughter-in-law will do justice if elected."

Who will do Hasina's chores when she has to go out to attend meetings, and look after other matters, should she win? "We will. I have another daughter-in-law who can help", chirped Hasina's mother-in-law. What about her husband, I asked? "No", she replied with a smile. "Men do not do housework in our culture." Some things never change, it seems!

At a short distance was Rosie Begum's house. Slight of frame, Rosie (25) was all ready to take on Hasina for the reserved seat of Dudipora. Her husband is a driver for a local businessman and she has two children, aged five and three. Rosie has studied up to Class VIII and been to Srinagar twice.

What motivated her to contest the elections, given that she has had no prior experience, and that there had been boycott

calls? Rosie dismissed these queries, but confessed that her husband is an activist with the People's Democratic Party, and his colleagues were keen that she contested. Rosie claimed to be confident of securing 80% of the 200 votes expected to be cast in Dudipora.

Rosie had grown up in another village but moved to Dudipora six years ago after her marriage. She has since come to love the village. "There are no footpaths, no electricity and many of the men are unemployed", she stated. She advised people to use their vote carefully to ensure genuine improvement.

Village after village in the valley cries for change. Unemployment is high among the youth, there is no electricity to speak of, and neither are there roads and toilets. Schools and health centres are sub-standard, and central schemes for rural welfare remain unimplemented. Added to that, are the over-riding costs of conflict. Immediately after polling began in these Panchayat elections, a woman candidate from Pakherpora in Budgam district was gunned down. With that a shroud of fear seemed to descend, causing many candidates to withdraw their nominations.

This makes the courage and determination of illiterate homemaker Zeba Begum (46) from the village of Zuhama, also in Budgam district, all the more commendable. Zeba, a mother of four, fought for one of the two seats reserved for women in this block despite the fear unleashed by potential assassins. She was glad that there are reservations for women, so that people like her have a chance to participate in politics. As she put it, "Women's quota have atleast helped us become visible and make our problems known. The women here will get someone to talk to without embarrassment or fear. They can approach

me in a way that they will never be able to approach a male Panch.”

Like the others, Zeba too wants to help the poor and battle unemployment. She would also like to build proper roads and footpaths, and a place for the children to play in. The fact that another woman had paid with her life for contesting the elections, did not deter her. “Life and death are in god’s hands, and are not dependent on contesting elections. We are fed up of the violence, of the marginalisation of our people. We want change”, she said.

Zeba Begum, Sharifa Begum, Parveena Begum, Hasina Begum and Rosie Begum are all semi-literate ordinary village women, without any security cover, who are facing extraordinary dangers in order to transform the lives of others. They have become the face of a new Kashmir impatient for change.



*This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 in English category.*

## THE 'KALYANIS' OF KALYANPUR – PRIYATAMA AND RAJLAKSHMI

Binodini Roul

The Khabara, 18 November, 2010

*The Panchayat of Kalyanpur is situated on the outskirts of the capital city of Bhubaneswar. Yet, none of the splendors of the capital are to be seen here; rather, the village is beset with many problems. Almost like one remaining thirsty on the banks of a river, most households remain without water supply inspite of the river Kuakhai flowing nearby. However, a few women ward members of the Panchayat have been able to address some issues affecting their areas successfully, on their own efforts. And in these leaders can be found many future Indiras and Nandinis. After witnessing their brave steps anyone will accept their prowess in running not just the Panchayats, but even the State and country. That women can be very capable even at the grassroots of power can be easily gauged by anyone meeting Rajlakshmi and Priyatama.*

**K**alyanpur Gram Panchayat is made up of nine Wards, of which Priyatama Rout is the representative from Ward No. 7. Soon after graduating from the nearby college at Barang, she was married off. Her father was the village head before, and her uncle, a Sarpanch. Hence she had essentially grown up in a politically active family, with politics running in her blood. Due to this she was elected uncontested from Ward No. 7 during the Panchayat elections in 2007.

Her husband has never opposed her involvement in Panchayat politics, rather has encouraged her to move forward, she says. Being educated herself, it gives her immense pleasure to see other women getting more aware. Even with her limited scope, she has been able to solve gross irregularities in food distribution at the local Anganwadi centre. She brought this issue to the notice of the CDPO and Collector, due to which children, expecting and lactating mothers now get food and other dues regularly. She had even decided to move court if conditions did not improve immediately. However, things changed for the better before that. She has helped solve many a problem afflicting the Public Distribution System through her own efforts. As a result, people in her Ward are now getting their due supplies every month. As a woman she has been especially sensitive to problems that other women face; and for this she has striven to avail various pensions and other entitlements for those who are needy and helpless. Earlier people had to pay bribes and still didn't get the Annapurna or Antyodaya entitlement card. Priyatama staunchly refused to take any money for the help she rendered to the needy in getting these cards. "Where is the place for such corruption while doing one's own duty?", she asks, her eyes lighting up. She has been fighting against corruption and has vowed to keep up this fight.

Another major problem that women of her village faced was also solved by her. Depending on the nearby river for their daily needs, women had to walk through another small *nullah* to reach the river. Priyatama was able to build a bridge over the *nullah* and now the women don't have to wade through muddy waters. The bridge has enabled them to move around easily.

Apart from doing odd jobs for her Ward residents to the best of her ability, she has also paid attention to making women self-reliant. Using the opportunity of the State Government's Mission Shakti program, Priyatama gathered the village women to form SHGs. She personally motivated 10 women to form an SHG of their own, Lakshmi Narayan Swayam Sahayak Gosthi, of which she is the Secretary. In the first phase they took a loan of Rs. 75,000, utilized it successfully and have repaid most of it. Since only 4-5 members could benefit from the first phase of the loan, they now plan to extend the benefit to all the members of the group in the second phase by setting up a mushroom farm and flour mill - products of which will be sold in the local market. She has also been an active member of the Gaon Kalyan Samiti where she has paid attention to serving her people better. Mother of a single girl-child, Priyatama does not want to increase her family size. When asked whether this daughter can 'deliver' their clan she says that given a proper upbringing, anyone, whether boy or girl, can shoulder responsibilities equally.

Rajlakshmi Rout is the Ward Member from Ward No. 13 of the same Kalyanpur Panchayat. An unsuccessful attempt in her matriculation exams has not deterred her from shouldering her responsibilities as a Ward Member brilliantly. She had to face many obstacles in her path but she faced all of these bravely. She has always striven to use her time for the people and has stood by them when in need.

Never wavering in her commitment to work for the people as a grassroots' representative, she has discharged her duties well. She stood by the people during the 2007 floods and availed of all possible assistance for those in need. Looking upon others' needs as her own, she has paved ways for solving their problems

and availed various entitlements to beneficiaries. Striving to provide benefits of welfare schemes to all equitably, she has been successful in getting the needy into the social security net.

Realizing that management of the Mid-day Meal (MDM) scheme is best undertaken by the women's SHGs, she tried to handover this charge to one of the SHGs in the area. However with a tussle ensuing between groups, the MDM scheme was stalled for 8-9 months. She played the role of an arbitrator to solve the issue and chose one SHG to take charge of this. Now the SHG members are running the scheme smoothly and giving proper nutritious food to children regularly. As President of the School Committee, she has some noticeable accomplishments. Observing that children needed to get plates from their homes for their meals, she arranged for 50 plates, a water filter and a jug for them. She hopes to match the number of plates and other facilities with the number of children subsequently.

Rajlakshmi also aims to make the women of her area aware and capable in all areas of work. She has realized that economic independence is a vital means to achieve this and she is making other women understand the same. She has formed SHGs and is President of one of them, Somnath Mahila Swayam Sahayaka Gosthi. They plan to make profits through mushroom cultivation and sale. Rajlakshmi has three children, but gives topmost priority to her public duties when it is required. She finds great pleasure in helping others. Not having a son has never made her unhappy; rather she says that her daughters are her greatest treasures. She plans to do a lot more for the people; placing importance on taking every program and scheme to the needy.

There are many elected women representatives like Priyatama and Rajlakshmi in our State, who have vowed to work towards upliftment of their people despite their own minimal scope and power. With increase of seats for women in Panchayats to 50%, more women will be able to solve a greater number of problems, as a woman is likely to be more capable than a man in understanding other's problems and will come forward to help them.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Oriya.*

# WOMEN PANCHES AND SARPANCHES CHANGING IMAGE OF PANCHAYAT THROUGH HARD WORK

Babulal Naga

Vividha Features, 28 April-12 May, 2011

Women's participation is on the rise in the Panchayati Raj system. Women have progressed quite a lot at the Panchayat level on the strength of their struggle. Women, tortured and suppressed by female foeticide, child marriages, dowry killings, rapes, *ghoonghat*, patriarchy and other aristocratic values are determined to change this scenario through the power granted to them by Amendments to the Constitution.

The experiences of these women narrate how bitter their struggle to change the image of Panchayats was how they tried to provide basic facilities for the people. Women representatives are taking interest in implementing social security schemes, especially those related to women. They are keeping a close eye on basic facilities like drinking water, education, health, hygiene, nutrition, mid-day meals, etc. They are standing up to encroachment and corruption in their Panchayats. The women Panchayat representatives are breaking the age-old traditions and bonds of caste-based discrimination. Be it Sarpanch Geeta Raiger, who blew the whistle against the upper castes who would not allow the procession of a Scheduled Caste (SC) groom to pass, or Sarpanch Anita Bairawa, who closed

down liquor shops. Sarpanch Hansa Devi herself wielded a hammer to pull down shops constructed illegally. These women representatives today want to lead a life of honour by working for a better future of their people instead of living with insults under a restrictive family and society regime.

Anita Bairawa is the first elected Sarpanch of Shivdaspura village Panchayat in Jaipur district. Shivdaspura seat was declared reserved for Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Panchayat elections of 2010. STs have been dominant in this area for the last 50 years. Before becoming Sarpanch, Anita had worked as an assistant at an Anganwadi centre for 3-4 years. She also owned a beauty parlour in the village. So she had acquaintance with most of the women in the village. She also has degrees like MA and B. Ed. She is a good speaker. Seeing these qualities, the villagers convinced Anita to contest the elections for the post of Sarpanch. She was certain of victory due to people's support. She was never afraid that she would lose. She received 1,053 votes, the most among five contestants and won the elections.

Anita had to face many problems initially after becoming Sarpanch. No one from her family had ever been involved in politics. Secondly, the former Sarpanch put many obstacles in her path. He wanted her to work as his puppet in the Panchayat. He would force his thoughts on her and interfered in her decisions and her work. But when he saw that controlling her was not going to be easy, he started coming to the Panchayat meetings drunk and kept abusing. Anita registered an FIR against him. She was pressurized to take it back, but she did not budge. After this, the former Sarpanch backed off. He stopped harassing her. After this incident, Anita stopped liquor from being sold in the Panchayat neighborhood.

Anita says, “Initially, I was a little hesitant in going for Panchayat meetings. I didn’t know whether the male Ward Panches would support me. But with my leadership qualities, I soon won them over.” She also got illegal cutting of trees stopped in her Panchayat. Upon knowing that some people are cutting trees in her Panchayat, she brought the police to the spot and put a stop to it. She also stopped them from carrying the wood already cut. She auctioned it and deposited the money as additional income of the Panchayat.

Sarpanch Geeta Raiger had to struggle to take out a wedding procession for her own brother-in-law. Geeta is Sarpanch of Junada village Panchayat in Relmagara Panchayat Samiti of Rajsamand district. She had never thought that she would enter politics. She was limited to running her household. She contested elections upon being urged by her husband and society. Geeta holds an MA degree. She had seen how women Sarpanches go to Panchayat holding their husbands’ hands and wearing a *ghoonghat*. The first thing she did was to get the *ghoonghat* removed from the faces of the women Ward Panches. As a result, the women, hitherto hidden behind their *ghoonghat*, now unhesitatingly take part in the proceedings of the Panchayat. In Geeta’s Panchayat, dominated by Jats, some influential people did not allow SCs to take out wedding processions. Her brother-in-law was to get married. She knew that there will be obstacles in taking out the wedding procession. So she brought all the villagers together. She even got her opponents there. She gave SCs their right to take out wedding processions without fear. In order to promote social goodwill among the people, She got an ancient goddess temple renovated and started a three-day annual fair there. She says, “To put a complete stop to caste-based social discrimination and to ensure progress on the road to development is my dream.”

Murali Meena, Sarpanch of Dehlala village Panchayat in Chaksu block of Jaipur district wants to achieve something similar. She became Sarpanch for the second time in 2010. She won the post of Sarpanch defeating nine male and two female candidates. Speaking about her experience of 10 years, Murali says that when she first became Sarpanch, she had no idea of how a Panchayat works. If she did not wear a *ghoonghat* for Panchayat meetings, her husband would get angry. Initially, her husband used to perform all the work; she would only sign. She was uncomfortable in such a role. Just then, she had the opportunity of attending a workshop on women leadership organized by The Hunger Project. This workshop brought out the skilled Sarpanch in her. She became confident. After going back to her Panchayat, she first got her husband to leave the Panchayat to her. Next, she ensured that no women representative will be represented by her husband in village and Panchayat meetings. Murali made it clear that they can attend Gram Sabha meetings as a member, but they cannot take the place of an elected representative in the Panchayat.

During her one-year tenure as Sarpanch, Murali always accorded priority to women's issues. She divided the women of her Panchayat into different groups and got them started on rearing milch animals. She especially included the women who were the sole bread-winners of their families. Murali also put emphasis on girls' education. She started evening classes for girls through a volunteer organization in her area.

Deepa Rajguru became the Deputy Sarpanch of Udwaria village Panchayat in Sirohi district after contesting elections for the first time. She too learned the working of Panchayat after joining the workshop on women leadership by The Hunger Project. She decided that come what may, she will not remain just a

rubber stamp of the post of Deputy Sarpanch. Today, she meets the District Collector and other departmental officers without any hesitation. In her Panchayat, some influential people got a tender approved without following the due process for six water tankers at the rate of Rs. 300 a day. Deepa opposed this and got the tender cancelled. After completing the process, 18 tenders were invited. The new rate of water supply was fixed at Rs. 100 a day. The Panchayat saved expense of Rs. 72,000 in two months at the rate of Rs. 1,200 a day.

The women representatives, by facing all the adversities strongly, are carving a niche for themselves in Panchayats with their effective leadership. This is a slap on the face of the people who want to keep them away from the power with taunts like 'what will a woman do in a Panchayat'.



*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2011 and has been translated from Hindi.*

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## **Editors**







