Thus spoke the press

VOLUME 7

Select Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats
Thus spoke the press
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“...for it is true to-day as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle is the power that rules the world.”

Sarojini Nadu, 1906
We are happy to present the seventh volume of Thus Spoke the Press. What started out as an exercise to document and compile select articles sent by print journalists on the achievements of elected women representatives across States and languages for the Sarojini Naidu Prize, has now entered its seventh year of publication. In the last six years, 243 stories of achievements of elected Panchayat women have been compiled and disseminated.

In an effort to encourage the media to document the achievements of the elected women leaders vis-à-vis the various initiatives that they take to bring about real development every year, The Hunger Project honours journalists of the print media with the Sarojini Naidu Prize for best reporting on women and Panchayati Raj. This year 45 articles have been shortlisted for Thus Spoke the Press from among 1,259 entries received which showcase the body of work done by the women leaders. Each of the stories is unique and documents the changes at multiple levels – personal, social and political – that have been initiated by the women leaders inspite of the deep-rooted structural problems embedded in our society.

As we bring out the seventh edition of Thus Spoke the Press, we would like to acknowledge and thank all those journalists
who believed in the elected women leaders, and recognized and gave space to the important work undertaken by them in their newspapers and journals.

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly two decades have passed since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was ratified in 1993, mandating Panchayats as units of local self-governance and reserving 33.3% of seats for women. Affirmative action has contributed to increasing women’s representation in local governments and endorsed the politics of presence. As we celebrate the twentieth year of women’s representation and participation in Panchayati Raj, it is with satisfaction that we look back at the journey which has mobilized more than one million women every five years into the public political domain.

Much has changed in these twenty years, both at the grassroots and at the policy level. In the last five years, reservation for women has increased from 33.3% to 50% in several States, bringing a critical mass of women from all communities and castes into decision-making. While the electorate in several corners of this country still remains skeptical and thinks ‘who will listen to this tribal woman’, tribal women like Prabha Kol of Mataha Gram Panchayat, Rampur Baghelan block, Satna district are very active in ensuring not just economic development but also social justice, raising their voice against gender-based violence both in their homes as well as in the work space, addressing alcoholism, and ensuring proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Shyam Bai of Posta Panchayat, Rampur Neikin block in Sidhi district was a simple tribal woman who once herded her goats. Today, she is the Sarpanch of her Panchayat and epitomizes ‘good leadership’. Her priorities are to ensure participation of women Ward
Members in Panchayat affairs, bringing water, ensuring sanitation, and working towards arresting migration in her Panchayat. Dalit and tribal women now command respect, where previously their voices would have been disregarded.

Women elected to Panchayats have worked hard to fulfill the expectations and aspirations of the constituency that elected them as their representatives. Akhand in his article ‘From Daily Wager to Village Head’ writes that Ward Member Radhika ‘has understood the issues of the village’ and ‘has shown ways of surviving to a lot of people in the village. Especially those who have been discouraged by the complex ways of the local bureaucracy…’ Elected women like Radhika are more responsive to the needs of the citizens and bring hope to their communities as they work hard for the overall development of their villages. Their success can be attributed to the deep understanding of their constituencies and the need to deliver development, the basic reasons for which they stepped into the public domain. Tackling malnutrition, educating girls, reducing corruption, challenging sex selective abortion and child marriage – women in politics focus on distinct interests that may not have been prioritized in their absence.

There has been much speculation on improvement in the status of women with the inclusion of women in political decision-making. Have elected women representatives prioritized women’s issues and promoted women’s agency? Ruby Sarkar writes in Deshbandhu, ‘As soon as Shyam Bai was elected as Sarpanch, she started a campaign against domestic violence and paid special attention to the problems of women. After solving problems of water and cleanliness, she focused on the daily atrocities faced by women’. Shyam
Bai has shown great courage and fortitude. Representing women in a patriarchal society has never been easy and elected women often use the strength of the collective and federations to tackle intractable issues such as gender-based discrimination and violence. Presence of women in the public space has certainly improved mobility of women, enhanced linkages with public officials and liberated them from within the confines of the four walls of their houses.

The road to success has been paved more with craters than with concrete. From the corridors of power to the children in the households, people have been cynical about women’s ability to perform and deliver. The backlash has been enormous. In their article ‘Women in Governance’ Santosh Birvaykar and Lakshmi Yadav write, ‘very often, opponents try to bring the women’s morale down by charges of various nature, including corruption’. Character assassination has been yet another ploy. While transparent and inclusive action in the Panchayat help elected women in winning accolades and the confidence of the electorate, local leaders feel threatened and often resort to threats, intimidation and physical assaults. Having been thrust into politics, without any education or even role models to learn from, elected women become increasingly vulnerable to the scheming officials. At the institutional level their tenure is threatened by the rotation system, two-child norm and the no confidence motion. In Karnataka, while all Panchayat Presidents have a tenure of only 30 months as compared to 60 months in the rest of the country, women Presidents find it difficult to learn on the job and deliver within such a short tenure and need more time to nurture their leadership. In recent years State Governments have also proposed transfer of a large number of powers of the Gram, Block and District Panchayats to
the Panchayat Development Officers/ Secretaries, EOs and CEOs respectively. This will adversely affect the leadership of elected representatives, especially women representatives as they will no longer be able to prioritize women’s issues in Panchayats.

Holding public office has certainly empowered many elected women representatives as it has increased self-esteem, confidence, skills, mobility, their information base and interaction with the outside knowledge world. The forty five stories in this seventh volume of Thus Spoke the Press enumerate the successes and achievements of the elected women amidst all odds, their hopes and aspirations for their constituencies. The experience of women’s reservation in Panchayats has been very encouraging. We hope that this success will influence the passing of the Women’s Reservation Bill in the Parliament of India so that the women of this country will not have to wait another 20 years to celebrate that.
Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan (MRA) organised four regional workshops to consolidate experiences of women in local governance across 26 districts in Maharashtra. The workshop brought forth the journey of common women, at individual and collective levels, to assert for their rightful share in political power.

Over one and a half decades have passed since the introduction of reservations to women in local governance. Despite women proving their merit, people generally feel women do not make good politicians. What experience have women got? Their experience shows that women trying to make their space in politics invariably go through three types of struggles. First, they have to address the opposition from family members; second, they have to deal with societal prejudices and resistance; and third, they have to prove themselves capable of handling public roles. Indeed, this is a challenging journey.

**Struggle within home**

Having a supportive and understanding husband makes working easier for women in politics. However, very few are able to get such an ideal situation. Hence the struggle begins
from the home itself. If the man is not in favor of his wife taking part in politics, the woman’s task begins by dealing with his disapproval. The husband is likely to express his reluctance in the form of emotional or physical abuse. At times, men want the power that is associated with a position, but do not want the wife to get active in public sphere. Hence, they restrict women’s mobility, trace their calls out of suspicion, or take decisions on their behalf, so much so that women’s participation in Gram Panchayats or other official meetings depends on the permission granted by their husbands. Husbands expect wives to consult them before taking any decision.

The women, who pursue their course despite such restrictions and pressure, are able to create a space for themselves. Women adopt various strategies to deal with family problems arising out of non-cooperative partners and family members. For instance, women complete their share of responsibilities before going out to other work so that nobody faces any inconvenience. Some succeed in enabling family members to take responsibility, which reduces dependency on them. Women prefer to engage in consistent dialoguing with their husbands or close family members to convince them that they will not disregard their household duties. If all convincing efforts fail to make an impact, women proceed with what they think is right. Thus, at times they work against wishes of their husbands and family members.

Women in families having political clout get a chance to enter politics rather easily. However, they are expected to work within expectations and restrictions imposed by senior family members. For instance, women from upper caste families are discouraged to socialize with women from marginalized communities and take interest in their development.
One has to be polite yet smart while dealing with family members, share the women. Changes are needed in ones’ own behavior as well as in the family set up, they feel. Adopting time management skills and learning to be patient is a must. Women have also introduced collective decision-making processes within the family and keep family members informed about their work. A number of women shared that they have developed close and credible relationships with their mothers-in-law, which provides them necessary support to pursue their work.

Women have invariably involved their family members in their journey. Many come from agricultural families and devote time to farming in peak seasons. Or they arrange to hire labor. Some take one day a week off from agricultural work to give time to Gram Panchayat responsibilities. Some are part timers with voluntary organisations and some supplement family income through tailoring and other such home based employment. Involvement in self-help-groups has helped women to maintain financial records. They adopt these practices to keep family expenses under control.

**Struggles in public life**

By and large women representatives carry out proper and transparent implementation of government schemes, which helps people. However, local leaders get threatened once people start recognizing and respecting women as leaders. Local leaders, who held the remote control so far, now feel challenged by the newly emerging leadership and therefore try to bring hurdles in their way. Very often, opponents try to bring the women’s morale down by charges of various natures, including corruption.
Women shared how their opponents manipulated facts to make baseless allegations against them. Motion of no-confidence and character assassination are two commonly used tactics against active and independent minded women.

Recognizing the nature of opposition, women plan their strategy. Instead of dealing with the opponents individually they adopt a collective approach. For this purpose the forum of Gram Sabha meetings proved to be useful. Women ensured large participation in these public meetings and took decisions related to all government schemes and public works through this open forum. As large number of women began participating in Gram Sabha meetings, their views and opinions got reflected in the decision making processes. Gradually the resistance by the opponents declined.

At times it is difficult to take important information through Gram Panchayat office. The dominant group does not disclose information related to budget or other such sensitive matters. In such cases women made use of RTI to get the necessary information.

Besides dealing with the opponents in various ways described above, women in some places also tried to build bridges by resolving issues with their opponents. They took initiative to show willingness to work together for the benefit of villagers and appealed to the opponents to join in. Women focused their energies on planning and implementing programmes for the development of women and villagers. Some women created good rapport with family members of their opponents and resolved their significant issues. By properly studying various schemes, women ensured their implementation. Moreover, they even gave all credit for the development works to their opponents to win over them.
Dealing with government functionaries and officers

This is one of the challenging areas. Timely and smooth execution of development projects is possible if the elected representatives and government functionaries work in collaboration. However, many government employees are unwilling to work with women representatives and are insensitive towards their issues. Therefore they make unnecessary delays in implementing projects.

Information about various projects and schemes is made public in Gram Sabha meetings. This helps to maintain reasonable level of transparency in selection of beneficiaries and implementation. Women representatives also appeal to Gram Sabha members to help in monitoring execution of development projects. As the people are informed, Panchayat Secretary and other government functionaries cannot mislead them. Some women members help people understand procedures needed to access government schemes and some even try to raise contribution from people to undertake work in village schools.

Dealing with family members or members of Gram Panchayats or government functionaries is not an easy task for women members. But they have tried to develop cordial relations and dialogue at all these levels, to an extent possible. When these efforts fail, women adopt other strategies, such as exerting public pressure. Experiences of these elected women show that they have claimed their deserving space in political decision-making. Their efforts, so far, indicate a promising journey ahead.
Challenging the old power structures

Archana Jatkar

As a woman, Sarpanch Archana Tai has brought name and fame to her village by receiving several awards for her pro-people work in her village Pokhari.

Pokhari is a small village situated in Yeotmal district in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Due to shortage of water and lack of irrigational facilities, farmers migrate in search of work. The roads are poor, water is not sufficient; still the village is united. Pokhari is one of the few exceptions where no farmer ever has attempted suicide, whereas the district has become ill-famous with mounting cases of deaths of debt-ridden farmers.

“When I got elected, I realized that women neither visited Panchayat nor attended Gram Sabha meetings. I visited each and every household to convince women to be present for the Gram Sabha meetings. They were unwilling; hence I formed women’s self-help groups. As our interactions increased, women understood importance of Gram Sabha.”

When Archana Tai took charge as Sarpanch, the drinking water scheme was pending for lack of people’s participation. Archana Tai appealed to villagers to give the necessary contribution and people responded positively. In fact, the Panchayat Secretary and other government functionaries were quite surprised at her efficiency and convincing manner of working. Her opponents felt scared as she worked for people with full devotion. The five-year term passed quickly; this provided her good learnings about village dynamics, about her supporters, and of her opponents. In the subsequent election, she created her own panel and contested the election. She won with majority and worked as Sarpanch for two successive terms.
Kushavarta Bele

During her interaction with newly elected women, one of the participants asked Kushavarta to share her learnings from her struggles. “I have both pleasant and painful memories”, shared Kushavarta, “All good things are hard-earned as they have been achieved through a struggle. I feel life is a cycle of successful events that is a result of consistent efforts and struggles.”

Earlier, Kurshavarta took a job with a voluntary organisation to meet the family needs. There she worked to mobilize women through self-help groups. Within a short span of time, she formed 24 groups with 400 women. Eventually, she facilitated the formation of ‘Savitri Bai Phule Cooperative’ by federating 164 groups in 42 villages.

“If you want to develop your village, you should get into politics”, advises Kushavarta. “When I first contested a Gram Panchayat election, over 100 women together campaigned for me and local leaders felt threatened by this show of strength.”

After getting substantial experience at the Gram Panchayat level, she entered Panchayat level political work and eventually got elected at the level of Zilla Parishad.

When she got an opportunity to interact with the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, she presented before him the plight of elected women and demanded that they get the right to do flag hoisting. All through her social and political work, she has challenged established power structures.
Anuya Tai decided to step out of her home as she could not repay money to her family members that she had taken for her social work. Humiliated by their taunting, she decided to leave home accepting her defeat. But when she consulted her friends in MRA, they advised her not to leave home. She has equal right over the home and need not sacrifice her rights for the sake of failed repayment. Her friends stopped her from getting carried away by her emotions and made her aware of her rights.

Anuya Tai has always extended a helping hand to the village people in every manner she could - from stitching clothes for children to organizing health camps and to forming women’s groups. She also raised land issues on people’s behalf.

Earlier, she never wanted to enter politics and was happy with her social work. However, through her involvement with MRA, she realized that development is not possible unless you have power to decide. Therefore, she decided to contest election and work as a member of Gram Panchayat.

This article was submitted by the authors for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Marathi.
A WOMAN PANCHAYAT LEADER’S COMMITMENT MADE HER VILLAGE PROUD

Sundar
Dinamalar, 9 September, 2011

Not only these, but with a lot more facilities, Melapudhukudi is developing and becoming a role model village. Five years back there was no such facility in the village. But now, Melapudhukudi has become a wonderful village. A woman has developed the village like this.

In Thiruchendoor Panchayat of Tuticorin district, Melapudhukudi is a small village with not more than 1,000 people. Though to some extent this village has got groundwater and agricultural prosperity, like other villages this village did not have basic facilities and Panchayat President, Vedhavalli has converted this village to first grade. If a village has to be improved, fund is essential. To increase the fund, she consulted many for suggestions and most of them told her to grow trees.

But to plant trees and to preserve them, money is essential. Immediately she entered into the field, met two wealthy
persons at Chennai whose native place is Melapudhukudi and arranged for Rs. 50,000 from each as donation. With that money she started planting trees in the entire village.

On the road from the village to Arunchunai Kaatha Ayyanaar temple, the garbage dumping ground around the village and in vacant places, hundreds of mango trees were planted; work on fencing and their preservation was initiated. Not only that, she started telling village people about the importance of planting and growing trees and supported village people to plant mango, guava, chickoo and other vegetables in their houses. To take care of all the trees in the village, she appointed two persons for Rs. 200 per day to water them. The result is there within two years; the village has become full of greenery. In houses, the trees have helped the families financially.

She shares, “Except property tax and water tax, there is no income for the Panchayat. The fund from the government has also not been received properly. After becoming the Panchayat President, I met the government officials and the Collector and got grants which are used for developmental activities. Involving in constructive activities like having compulsory toilets for each house, 100% education for children and growing trees, this village has become self-sufficient. In 2007, the Central government had selected our village as a completely hygienic village and gave Nirmal Puraskar Award of Rs. 50,000. In 2009-10, the Panchayat received Uthamar Gandhi Award of Rs. 5 lakhs. Now the Panchayat’s existing fund is Rs. 12 lakhs. With that amount, a marriage hall has been under construction for public use. The cooperation of village people and the government officers is the reason for our village development”. Vedhavalli does not feel conceited about the popularity that she has gained, but acknowledges the government officials.
“For the trees planted in our villages, we have kept the names of freedom fighters like Mahathma Gandhi, Subash Chandra Bose and scientists like Abdul Kalam, Mayilsami Annadurai. Besides this, the names of the district government officers who have supported us have also been kept for the trees. Since we have kept the names of good people, the trees are also growing well and are giving good results”, says Vedhavalli proudly.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Tamil.
In a recent workshop organized for Women Municipal Councilors in Pune, the organizers invited former Mayor as the chief guest for the concluding session. Throughout his speech he spoke positively about the provision of 50% reservation to women. However, he concluded on a very stereotypical note. He commented in a lighter vain, “Since a large number of women are going to be here, now we should have beauty parlour within the campus of the Municipal Corporation!” Audience responded by clapping. The lady moderator was smart enough to sense his sarcasm. “We should have parlors for the men as well”, she remarked. “Everybody would like to have well-groomed men around!” Her comments were appreciated enthusiastically by the audience.

Certainly, there is a fear lurking in the minds of men politicians due to the quota system. What is left for us if half of the seats are given to women, they feel. No matter how much they support women openly, their fear and insecurities get exhibited in one way or the other. By now they seem to have got used to one-third seats, but now their apprehensions are far more with the increased quota. Usually women in public spheres are referred to as ‘Madam’; however, it is seldom done with genuine respect
towards women. We do have male politicians who really support women in politics, but such genuine supporters are very few.

Nevertheless, the announcement of 50% reservation for women has triggered a discussion at all levels, such as within parties, voluntary organisations and women's organizations. Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan (MRA) has a decade long experience of working with women in governance. Hence, we are invited to share our experiences and also to seek advice for contesting elections. Women active in the Aandolan come from diverse backgrounds and their stories present the vast nature of challenges faced by women entering the political field.

Women from Dalit and downtrodden families work as agricultural laborers for their survival. Most often they have to work with the big landlords or leaders in the village, who control local power centres as well. Conventionally, the post of the Sarpanch is occupied by men from dominant castes who enjoy support from one or the other influential political party. In this scenario, when the post gets reserved for a Dalit woman, the community identifies an educated, young woman among them. However, such novice women find it difficult even to sit on a chair in meetings along with the ex-Sarpanch or local leaders or to hoist the flag when he is around. Women representatives are unable to speak their mind before the landlord or the leader who they perceive as their Annadata (provider of means for subsistence). Therefore, although they sense the strength of their new found power, they are unable to exercise it before him.

Within such a difficult state of affairs, MRA along with P.V. Mandlik Trust and Maharashtra State Commission for Women worked to have supportive and enabling provisions for elected
women. Kushavarta Bele, one of the MRA activists, presented the plight of newly elected women in a compelling manner. Particularly she spoke about how they are denied their rightful space in public sphere, such as the honour of flag-hoisting. This led the State Government to pass a Resolution to protect the right of women members and allow them to hoist the flag. Although the Government Resolution (GR) necessitated sharing the honour of flag-hoisting with women, it did not necessarily change the patriarchal mindset. However, such provisions and their assertive implementation instill confidence among women members.

With more and more women entering politics, we have got a new breed of men – Pati Sarpanch. These are the men who feel that their wives should hold the post for namesake and leave the rest to them. On one hand women in politics are criticized for being dumb-dolls and rubber stamps and on the other they are pressurized by their husbands to keep mum. Women who take politics seriously and work devotedly as an elected representative are accused of ignoring family responsibilities. And if they take action in the interest of people, such as banning liquor or challenging corruption, they are most likely to face resistance in the form of no-confidence motion. The provision has been grossly misused against women by men to protect their vested interests. Hence, the procedural change was necessary to protect women’s right to work fearlessly. As per the amendment in Maharashtra, the motion can now be passed with three-fourths majority of the members; earlier it was two-thirds majority.

Very often the elected women are burdened with expectations. People expect them to bring about changes that have not taken place for years as if they are magicians, who know the trick
to amend everything. Also, the negative perception is equally prevalent. People doubt women’s ability to fulfill the duties expected of their role. They feel that women have no grasp of politics or budget or more importantly, they do not have contacts with MPs and MLAs the way men representatives have.

Throughout the past 50-60 years, it is the men who have dominated politics. However, people don’t confront them with these questions or expect results from them. Why then women are expected to do wonders when they are still comparatively new entrants in this arena? Nevertheless, MRA provided proper orientation to women and they learned to read budgets along with other skills. Together with village women and supportive men, elected members and women leaders initiated a campaign to know the village budget, demanded proper implementation of budget allocated for women and child development and for the welfare of Scheduled Castes. By addressing problems of the common people, women developed their credibility and earned public support. Women’s self-help groups became an effective medium to mobilize support for elected women. Government sponsored corporations like MAVIM (Mahila Aarthik Vikas Mahamandal) inspired women in SHGs to get politically sensitized. Maharashtra is the first and perhaps the only State to have a Mahila Gram Sabha. These gave village women a forum to come together to discuss and articulate their issues and build solidarity among them. Women do not form a homogeneous category; however, there is a need for all of them to come together and develop a collective identity, which has been facilitated by Mahila Gram Sabha. While Dalit women led struggles, Maratha women wrote memoranda, and Ambedkarite cultural troupes presented motivational songs. Elected women got strong collectives behind them and
everybody’s contribution made the process enriching. Women are immensely keen to learn to be more effective in politics. In our training workshops, women copy all informative charts in their notebooks till late night. Their desire to know and to learn is a booster for us. With these inputs, a team of women representing the State is ready to visit the Mantralaya any time on a short notice. All these women want to be part of politics to upgrade it from its present state.

It will take many more years to establish women’s quota as their right. Nevertheless, there is a certain level of acceptance. Now women should also have a say in the pre-election process, when candidates are selected and constituencies are allocated. When experienced women with good credentials get to take part in the selection process, women will get a fair chance to contest elections. Presently, ‘win-ability’ criterion is greatly emphasized and therefore, close relatives of men leaders can only fit to be perfect candidates. Elective merit is counted on very different parameters and not upon good work-base and rapport within the constituency. Clearly, this situation should be changed.

Now, we have more pertinent questions awaiting answers on issues related to women in politics. What needs to be done to make women take active part in politics? How the parties – their policies and structures can become more accommodative for women? How women will get to the level of decision-making within party? Political parties should stop perceiving women only as field-workers, who are conveniently required to showcase party strength but are often controlled by the male leadership. Just like the households, the party set-up provides negative orientation to women party members. Women are told that they know nothing and need not do anything more than
what they are told to do. Class, caste and patriarchy operate within all parties in one form or the other.

We observe a positive trend as the Municipal elections are approaching. Some of the women’s groups and organisations are taking part in the elections by fielding their candidates. With the impending elections, Mumbai Mahila Federation, Rationing Kruti Samiti (RKS), Builder, Loksatta Party, Stree Mukti Sanghtana, and Forum against Corruption have geared into preparatory process. Some are organizing orientations for prospective candidates, some are doing voter awareness; RKS has highlighted PDS and wants to get it on the election agenda. These are positive initiatives and will get intensified further in the coming days.

However, to make women’s quota meaningful and effective, men in politics should recognize women’s contribution. The political parties should open up to increase participation of women at the decision-making level across party structure, particularly in candidate selection. Women should get the election tickets as their right and not as a favour. Husbands of the women politicians should understand that they do not automatically get the right to interfere in public life of their partners. More young women should enter politics and for this purpose we should nurture a positive attitude towards politics. Until our outlook towards politics changes and gets reflected in socializing with our children, the nature of politics is not going to change and our country is not going to develop. Politics, in a good sense, should become a topic of everyday discussion for everyone. Women should become more active in public lives and take initiative to at least one power centre in her hand. Women should shed their inhibitions and attempt everything they have feared to do. It is difficult to control the horse when
you do not know how to ride it, but you can learn it through experience. Similarly, once women get into politics, they will learn the game. Women have the potential and have proved it whenever they have got the chance. Now, it is the turn of the parties and organisations to help their strength by giving more space to women.

Finally, why do women need to enter politics? Women or for that matter everyone should enter politics to change it. While defining the traits of a good political leader, Barrister Nath Pai said, ‘the leader who feels the pain of the people is the real leader’. Taking the political process close to people is a real challenge and the need of the hour. For this, we need politicians who are really close to their people.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Marathi.
The women representatives being elected into Panchayati Raj Institutions generally experience hurdles while doing their work. Efforts are made to shake their self-confidence with taunting comments such as, “Now the silly woman would run the Panchayat”, “Women would now wear turbans and sit on the choupal”, “Well, what work they would do, ultimately the husband of Sarpanch or Up-Sarpanch would be doing things”, and so on. But, these taunting words of male members of villages are being shattered one by one by the hard working rural women. The women representatives have by now achieved a lot, inspite of contradictions and hurdles on their way. They have achieved things on their own with their renewed zeal and by shaking off the age-old shackles imposed on them by their male relatives. Women skilled in domestic affairs are now sharpening their skills in village management as well. Chaturu Devi, the WardPanch of Panavarha in Baytu block of Barmer district is one such daring example. Chaturu Devi got married when she was a little girl but raised her voice later and launched a movement against childmarriage. She narrates the experiences over how hurdles were created over her persistent efforts.
She was mentally abused and tortured; her family-members were warned and threatened as well. Even though she raised the issue in the Panchayat meetings, nobody was ready to listen to her. Then, she formed a women’s self-help group to prevent child marriages. She was persistent in her ongoing efforts. Soon, nearly 200 women joined her campaign. She wrote to the district administration and sought its co-operation in her efforts. She requested the administration to take steps to prevent child marriage and suitably train and guide the village people against the same. The Collector responded by writing to all the WardPanchs and to the Sarpanch, making them responsible to act pro-actively in the matter. Chaturu Devi resorted to another campaign i.e., “Lift the veil, come forward and speak”. This campaign is also progressing successfully and positively.

Then, there is Pawan Kanwar, Sarpanch of Gita of Jaisalmer block in Jaisalmer district. Her area faced acute shortage of drinking water. She conducted a survey on this and submitted her report to the district administration.

Pawan was successful in getting a project cleared for 500 hectares under the desert development programme of the Government of India which aimed to save every possible drop of water through water-conservation. She got domestic conservation and storage tanks built; ponds were constructed. She soon assumed the charge as Chairman of the water-conservation committee, got afforestation done over 1,500 hectares of land. She gets animal health camps conducted from time to time, and gets the poor families trained in animal husbandry, environment conservation, etc. These are only some of her deeds as far as rural development is concerned. She successfully carried her message of water conservation...
from house to house and the result is that today, there isn’t any water problem.

The Sarpanchs are generally found to be less educated. But, Chhavi Rajawat, Sarpanch of Sorda in Tonk district in Rajasthan is an exception. She won the election by 1,200 votes. This MBA degree-holder is engaged in developing her area. When she deals with government officials with forceful arguments in fluent and polished English, they remain dumb-founded and are ready to do whatever she demands. She has made exceptional contributions by making fresh drinking water available, and through her efforts in environment conservation, education, afforestation and many other things. She knocks every possible administrative door to get things done. She remains in constant touch with nearly a dozen NGOs and secures unrestricted help from government officials and political leaders.

Keeping all these efforts in view, it is clear now that rural India is committed to moving forward and nothing can hold it back.

There are so many names of Sarpanchs and WardPanchs like Sarmi Bai, Chhavi Rajawat, Uma, Tulasi, etc. who continuously keep assuring us that rural democracy is reviving forcefully and positively.

No doubt, the destination is far away, but keeping in view the resolution and power of rural women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, one can be assured of the small steps towards creating a new society through local developmental efforts.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATIVES ARE FIGHTING AGAINST CORRUPTION
Ruby Sarkar
Shukrawar Magazine, 23-29 December, 2011

Women representatives from nine districts have formed an association for battling against the kickbacks demanded by officials.

The State Government may pat itself on the back for 50% reservation for women in Panchayats, but the ground reality is something else. The women Panchayat representatives have to grapple with the disinterested and lackadaisical behaviour of district authorities and workers. For implementing the approved proposals, the officials demand bribes. So much so that even when they go to their areas for flag-hoisting, they are kicked around by the local hoodlums. In order to face such challenges, they have found a way out. To increase their capabilities they have decided to work together and have formed an association from the districts of Satna, Sidhi, Rewa, Katni, Chhatarpur, Harda, Shahdol, Jhabua and Dindori. Now they do not have to fight alone. These women Panchayat representatives, who give strength to the Panchayat, are being heard. In 2001, when Kusum Singh was elected to the GramPanchayat of Mahurachkh Kandela in Satna district, she was unaware of the duties of a Panchayat representative. When everybody’s proposals were being put up during the district Panchayat meeting, the CO
was asking only the men and entering their suggestions in a register, she put her hand on the register to stop him from writing and told him, “I am also a member. Please write my proposals as well.” After Kusum’s protest, the CO immediately wrote down her proposal! Soon, she became pro-active for the development of the village. Today Kusum is a Panch in the same Panchayat. Her political acumen and astuteness are clearly visible. Through her efforts, two new Anganwadis have opened in the Panchayat. She got the classification of Nirmal village to the Panchayat by constructing Kapil Dhara wells and toilets in each house.

The Panch and Secretary of Bawadiya village Panchayat in Harda, Jayanti Solanki could not understand it when the officials used to ask for ‘percentage’ for every work, which also did not get done, adversely affecting the progress of the village. Whether it was the job of laying a road, or of employment guarantee, or of building a school, or for any work, the CO or the Panchayat Secretary or the sub-engineer would demand 5-10% as bribe. But when the women representatives, as a group, refused to bribe them and invaded their offices, they got rattled and started to listen to them. Thus, new dimensions were added to the development of the village. It was a similar case for Sarpanch Prabha Rawat. Prabha is not literate and the Secretary would get her to sign on any paper. Now she discusses everything and gets the proposals ready. At first the Secretary would not take her seriously, but now seeing the strength of her organisation, he has started conceding to the demands of the association. The ladies have been successful in getting the Secretary Gajendra Singh transferred also due to his stubborn attitude. The most startling incident took place with Shanti Dahay of village Gulahto who was beaten and kicked by the local ruffians during flag-hoisting on 15th
August. The women picketed the SDO’s office, after which Shanti could hoist the flag in the third year and that too under police observation.

Geeta Asage, Panch of Garkhuan in Chhatarpur, took the aid of the association for improving the education in the school. Also Vimla, Panch of Madhopur in Dindori took the assistance of the association to get 14 malnourished children admitted to the NRC. In addition to this, she is struggling to arrange water and housing in the tribal areas. Similarly, Prabha Devi Rawat, Sarpanch of Mataha in Satna collected Rs. 3,000 by levying a fine of Rs. 100 per drunkard for the Panchayat. She says that this amount will be utilised for development work. Whether it’s a case of providing snacks and mid-day meals in Anganwadis or getting a liquor shop closed, the association is able to influence the situation. Today there are more than 1,400 women representatives as members of the association. Together they share their experiences and try to learn from each other and search for their strengths.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
Looking at the office and premises of Samarda Panchayat of Khajuwala Panchayat Samiti in Bikaner district, one can easily guess that this Panchayat is one of those privileged Panchayats which are now setting examples for dreams of self-rule. The Rajiv Gandhi Bharat Nirman Bhavan, a well-organized office of the Sarpanch, computer-room with regular use of computers, various posters displayed on Panchayat walls, and daily visits of people in the Panchayat Bhavan... all proudly proclaim that a conscious and efficient leader is leading this Panchayat. Transparency and responsibility are no more theoretical here but are evident as a reality in the functioning of the Panchayat. Credit for this goes to a certain Tara Devi Baghela, the present Sarpanch here.

It is the second time that Tara Devi is leading this Panchayat. She was a Sarpanch here from 2000 to 2005. This seat of Sarpanch was reserved for women during the elections held in the year 2000. Although a woman of a Jat community contested against her and in spite of being a Scheduled Tribe woman, it was a great thing for Tara Devi to be elected as Sarpanch at that time. It was the second five-year tenure after the 73rd constitutional amendment was effectively promulgated. Still, till then there
was no substantial change in the social and political levels regarding environment and acceptance approaches. Tara Devi herself recalls, “I did not have enough information initially about the functioning of the Panchayat when my first term commenced. I used to hesitate a lot when speaking at the meeting and the functions. I was not even properly aware of the various plans and schemes. Naturally I used to turn to others for everything, asked them sincerely, and used to do the things with the assistance of others. It is the result of my attitude and behaviour that I got elected for the second tenure. I am immensely proud of the people who unhesitatingly supported, helped and guided me in my result-oriented functioning.

Tara Devi passed class VIII before marriage and completed class X after her marriage. She did not contest the elections for the post of Sarpanch next time round. Instead, from February 2005 to December 2010 she joined as a worker in a voluntary organisation and through this organisation, she kept functioning as a trainer in the training programmes for women representatives. The training programmes were organized under the auspices of a renowned international organisation The Hunger Project. The one-year course at the Aagaz Academy for developing leadership capability in women representatives was initiated and conducted by The Hunger Project. She worked as a reference person in this course as well. Then came February 2010 when Tara Devi contested the election once more. She won the election and is functioning as a Sarpanch again. Such examples are very rare wherein the women could become Sarpanch for the second time and that also without the provision of reservation for woman. Tara Devi says, “This time, there were initially eight candidates, and then people in the Panchayat held a meeting, a result of which was that four persons withdrew their names. Then, three other
candidates remained in the contest - two men and a woman. Most of the people in the Panchayat supported me. The main reason behind their support maybe that I function impartially, irrespective of the fact whether he or she has voted in my favour or not. Also, people believe in my leadership.”

Tara Devi says, “I remained with the voluntary organisation for five years and spoke more about working for human development to the women participants there. I used to work there to inspire the women representatives for achieving all the eight aims of the millennium development goal. When I was elected as Sarpanch for the second time, it was natural that I would adopt the same principles. Only achieving the material development is not an achievement.”

**All persons demanding employment under MGNREGA have been provided employment for 100 days during the year 2010-2011 and got full wages as well. At least 40% employment has been made available to the people so far in the current financial year and they are likely to get 100 days employment during the remaining days.**

The reality of whatever Tara Devi is proclaiming is being really reflected in the work being done during her tenure. She proudly says, “About 90% institutionalised delivery takes place in my Panchayat and vaccination is as high as 95%. Birth and death registration is 95% as well. When I took charge, there was only one ANM for five villages. I successfully persuaded to get two more ANMs appointed and now there are three ANMs. Although the government has put services connected with five department and the employees therein under the Panchayat, no power concerning the same is with the Panchayat. Still, whatever powers we have, the same are
being exercised by me personally and through the Panchs and Standing Committees by conducting inspection of all such departments. We keep advising them whenever any lacuna is found. There were only two teachers initially in the school of the Panchayat but with our persistent efforts, now there are five teachers out of which two are experts in Mathematics and English. Children are getting good education and the quality of the same is duly maintained. Earlier, the teacher at MadhoDiggi School was neither punctual nor gave the correct attendance. People complained and so I visited the school for three days, got the teacher marked as absent, and since then the teacher is coming to the school daily. I have evolved a joint supervision participation system for Panchayats - Anganwadis, schools, mid-day meals at school, public distribution systems, etc. – i.e., the basic services. I certify attendance of all the employees in the Panchayat and the implementation of basic services in my Panchayat is much better.”

“During 2010-2011, the employment for 100 days was provided to all under MGNREGA and they were paid wages in full. During the current financial year, people have already been provided with 40% employment and everybody under the same would get full 100 days employment during the remaining days. Under “Apna Khet Apna Kaam” of MGNREGA, 29 khet (pieces of land) were made permanent. Work is in progress for irrigation in the fields under Indira Gandhi canal project. For the people living below the poverty line, 53 Mukhyamantri Awaas and 21 Indira Awaas have been constructed. Besides, 35 widows, 35 disabled persons and 120 old-aged women have been linked to the social welfare pension scheme. A total of 15 families have benefited from marriage of daughters belonging to BPL families under the social security scheme. Although no new BPL survey has
been recently conducted, I will get all poor persons in my Panchayat included in the BPL list.”

Earlier the women of the village had to walk about 1 km to fetch drinking water. Tara Devi met the local MLA Virendra Baniwal and placed this problem before him. Now a new scheme has been worked out to resolve this issue and work on the same is now about to start, which is likely to be completed within this year itself. Water connection will be provided to each household soon. Besides, to relieve oneself of this problem at times of emergency, a generator has been installed to provide water through the tube-well and to store it nearby. Public water spots have been constructed in three Wards so that women do not have to travel long distances for water.

The efficient and successful leadership of Tara Devi is an open challenge to the maledominion that ridicules women representatives as namesake only but the leadership of Tara Devi has already an inspiration to other women-representatives as well. The reality today is that the Panchayats dealing with self-rule and human development are actually being continuously inspired by Samarda Panchayat of Tara Devi.

This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
In the face of opposition and resistance at every step, it is very difficult for a lady Sarpanch to take decisions to ban the consumption of alcohol. Even if decisions are taken, implementing them at the ground level is quite problematic. Given this, the achievement of Sarpanch Prabha Devi is surely amazing.

Mataha village is not suitable for drunkards. Drunkards roaming here are fined Rs.100. This decision was taken here by the GramSabha through Sarpanch Prabha Devi’s initiatives. For implementing this at the ground level, a committee of five women has been formed which sees that nobody drinks and roams around.

This Panchayat is included in the District Panchayat Rampur Baghelan of Satna district. Sarpanch Prabha Devi feels that drinking affects women and children adversely. Also drunkards who roam around vitiate the atmosphere in the village because of which women cannot work freely. Hence, it became necessary to impose a fine on the drunkards. Strict implementation of this decision is visible from the fact that from the day the decision was taken on 26th January 2011 till December 2011, a total
of Rs. 3,000 has been collected in fines. This decision was not taken in the air but has been implemented effectively.

Forty two year old Prabha Devi is from the tribal community and has been educated up to the class V. She got elected with 314 votes in the Panchayat elections and in the beginning, as a Sarpanch she had to face many difficulties. Prabha Devi could read and write and understood the rights and duties of the Sarpanch. That is why she did not want to become a Sarpanch just as a titular head, but wanted to fulfill her duties effectively. This was not acceptable to the domineering people of the village who started creating obstructions. In 2010, on Independence Day, when she reached to hoist the flag, they stopped her from using this constitutional right. Sarpanch Prabha Devi informs us that, “If I did not take any action for this then they would have been further emboldened. Hence I reported the matter in the police station.”

Once, when the Tehsildar visited the village, a person insulted the Sarpanch while he was under the influence of liquor. Just after this incident Prabha Devi decided to put restrictions on drunkards which was unanimously approved in the GramSabha on 26th January, 2011.

Before putting up the matter in the GramSabha, Prabha Devi talked to the women, and with their co-operation and support, she was successful in getting it approved. Thus, her political acumen and will-power come to the fore and even under adverse circumstances and opposition she could get this historic proposal approved.

It is evident that although decisions are taken by the Panchayat and GramSabha, they are not easily implemented properly.
To get this decision implemented strictly, Prabha Devi formed a group of five women who were given the responsibility of apprehending the drunkards. These women keep a watch to see that nobody is roaming around the village after drinking. If anybody is found moving around under the influence of liquor, his name is placed before the GramSabha and he is fined in the GramSabha itself. In this way, due to the strict attitude of the women, an amount of Rs. 3,000 has been collected as fine in a year from people going against the decision of the GramSabha. Now drunken troublemakers change their course on hearing the name of this village.
IMPLEMENTING GOVERNMENT SCHEME IN TRUE SPIRIT

Naina J.A.
Deccan Herald, 10 March, 2012

Kadeshwalya in Bantwal Taluk is in the forefront of community development. The Gram Panchayat under the capable leadership of a woman is climbing the ladder of success.

Elected women representatives in various Gram Panchayats have been creating a silent revolution by making use of a government scheme, selecting the right beneficiaries and monitoring the implementation of the government scheme. This is a story of rural development in Kadeshwalya Gram Panchayat in true sense. Kamalakshi is behind the success story of the development and transformation of the Gram Panchayat.

Be it supplying water to home, cleanliness drive, helping the poor in marriage, dealing with the corruption, implementing the government scheme, the Gram Panchayat did it all with stunning success. Kamalakshi has been serving the Gram Panchayat as its member for the last 11 years with the support of other Panchayat members and the staff; she has been able to carry out development work in the villages.
Total sanitation

When the total sanitation campaign began in DK, there were 560 households which did not have toilets in the Gram Panchayat limits. Now all the households have toilets and the Gram Panchayat is free from open defecation.

The Kadeshwalya Gram Panchayat with its two revenue villages—Kadeshwalya and Barumaru has a population of 7,480 and 1,422 households. The Gram Panchayat has won the ‘Swachhatha Gram Puraskar’ in the year 2010.

To sustain the cleanliness drive, Ward Committees have been constituted. Continuous awareness is being created in the village folk on the need for cleanliness. The Gram Panchayat has also decided to make five ‘model houses’ with a small kitchen garden, and compost pit to dump the degradable waste in every yard. By looking at these model houses, others will get inspired to make their house also a model. The Gram Panchayat has also announced a prize for the best model house. In fact, a 15-member committee has been constituted to look into the sustainability in cleanliness drive, said Kamalakshi.

Gram Panchayat PDO Ugrappa Moolya said, “The Gram Panchayat has also resolved to reduce the use of plastic. In fact, a plastic soudha has been constructed to dump the plastic covers. We have already held talks with the SKDRPD to supply cloth bags to all the shops, so that the use of plastic can be reduced slowly.”

Beyond politics

Kamalakshi says the number of Gram Panchayat members including herself, stood at 19, out of which seven are women.
“We are like family members and would discuss all the issues pertaining to the development of the Gram Panchayat. We are into development politics. Gram Swarajya, rural development and providing basic facilities are our main goals. At the same time, all Gram Panchayat members are given a file providing all the details on the schemes of the government and all the Gram Panchayat members have a uniform.”

**No to corruption**

The Gram Panchayat is the first amongst Panchayats in Dakshina Kannada to make an open declaration that they are against corruption. “In a programme held on November 29, 2011, all the members and the staff openly declared that we will not accept any bribe for any work in the Gram Panchayat.”

**MGNREGS**

The flagship programme of the government, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS), has been implemented effectively in the Gram Panchayat limits. Using the schemes, works worth Rs. 10 lakhs have been carried out so far. Leveling the land, repairing the roads, drains, constructing and retaining wall along with the construction of Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra have been taken up. The Gram Panchayat has also put up details on all works carried out during 2011 on the walls of the Gram Panchayat.

The dynamic board has been installed at the entrance of the Gram Panchayat. Moreover, individual boards have been installed at all the places where the work was carried out under the scheme. The Gram Panchayat members have decided to give priority to the construction of the wall in the schools using
MGNREGS fund, so that schools can become self-reliant by growing vegetables for the mid-day meals.

At the same time, the walls of the Gram Panchayat also provide details on vaccination for the new-born kids and pregnant women. Owing to these awareness programmes, the Gram Panchayat has not seen infant mortality for the last seven years except one recent death.

**Revenue**

The tax collection has risen considerably. “We have already collected 89 percent of the tax. We are confident of reaching cent per cent by March end”, said the PDO.

**Water**

About 465 households are supplied with drinking water by the Gram Panchayat. “We are planning to install water meter for the connection and the process is likely to be completed by June.”

**Housing scheme**

As many as 70 houses have been sanctioned under Basava Vasathi Yojana, of which 43 are under progress. Under the Indira Awaas Scheme, as many as 44 houses have been sanctioned and the works on 28 are under progress, said Kamalakshi.

The Gram Panchayat also helps the poor SCs/STs in getting their daughters married by providing a financial assistance of Rs. 1,000. In the last one year, five individuals have been given the financial assistance, said the Gram Panchayat president.
Gram Sabha

‘Halliya Vidhan Sabha’, a novel initiative of replicating Vidhan Sabha in villages was taken up at Kadeshwalya on February 28. The new concept of holding Gram Sabha on the lines of Vidhan Sabha was aimed at attracting villagers to participate in the meeting.

The day-long meeting also showcased talents of the villagers. “We thought of bringing in changes in the mindset of people and officials so that Gram Sabhas too have serious meetings like Vidhan Sabhas,” said Kamalakshi.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012.
NOBODY DARES TO RAISE A HAND ON WOMEN IN POSTA VILLAGE PANCHAYAT
Ruby Sarkar
Deshbandhu, 15 March, 2012

The Efforts of Shyam Bai have worked wonders.

Rampurnaik is a village in Posta Gram Panchayat in Sidhi district. These days the women of this village are very happy because the men of their families are behaving in a friendly manner towards them. This has become possible because of the magical and efficient efforts of Sarpanch Shyam Bai.

As soon as Shyam Bai, belonging to the Gond tribal group was elected as the Sarpanch, she started a campaign against domestic violence. The first step that she took after winning the election was that she paid attention to the problems of women. Along with solving the problems of water and cleanliness, she turned towards the daily atrocities being committed on women and liberated them. She took the help of the Domestic Violence Act and formed a group of women under her leadership.

Although this was not easy for Shyam Bai, she gathered courage from the women to create an awareness platform. She was successful in making the men understand that domestic violence was not a personal matter, it was a part of society and had to be uprooted and done away with.
At first the women were afraid to join the awareness platform, so Shyam Bai started inviting them for the mid-day meal which was an excuse to call them for a meeting. Since lunch is associated with every house, the men gave them permission to attend very easily. In this way, a group of 20 committed women members was formed. Following this, the women started a campaign against domestic violence. The members of the group went to every house and made the women sign an oath on a stamp paper against violence. Almost 62% of the women of the village signed this paper. Now everyone in the village is aware that the women know about the Domestic Violence Act and that Sarpanch Shyam Bai is in support of them. Although, according to the State Women’s Commission, there are seven cases of domestic violence under consideration.

Shyam Bai herself started her public life as a member of the women’s self-help group. Her political journey began with her election in the Panchayat. Before her, nobody in the family had been a member of the Panchayat. For Shyam Bai it was a new experience. She says that there is a big difference between political and social work. Those very people who encouraged her to do social work have today become her political rivals. This seat was reserved as a general category seat for women. In the election, besides Shyam Bai, including general category and five tribal and other backward category candidates, a total of nine women candidates were contesting. Shyam Bai won this election by a margin of 165 votes and became the Sarpanch.

There are about 350 families in Posta Gram Panchayat, out of which 250 are tribal families. Her struggle started the moment she filed her nomination in the general category. Actually the election officer allotted her a basket of vegetables as her election symbol. Later on, the Patwari came to her house and
told her that her election symbol was the bell and that she had been given the symbol of the vegetable basket by mistake. By then Shyam Bai had distributed more than 5,000 slips. She protested and said that she would complain to the Collector. When she reached the office of the Collector, she found the officer at the door apologizing for his mistake. She, out of the magnanimity of her heart, forgave them and returned to her village.

Shyam Bai gives credit to her demeanor for her win. She says that her social work is the reason for her winning the election. She goes to the self-help group meetings. During the discussions, she learnt that everybody is equal. No one should even think of discrimination. Everybody should be treated equally. She says that this thought got the votes of others too, apart from the votes of the tribal people. After becoming Sarpanch, Shyam Bai has carried out many development works under many schemes. However, she is remembered for implementing the Domestic Violence Act in her village with strictness.

She says that in her Panchayat, out of 18 Panchs, 10 are women. Nobody can lose an election if you take everybody along and also if you solve the problems of the poor and the deprived. From this thought of hers one can see her political point of view and her desire to go far.

During the last two decades women have faced many challenges in their political leadership. In spite of that, women have contested in unreserved seats against men in many Panchayats and have occupied them.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
India has a large number of rural areas. Villages have not developed as much as cities. Hence, in order to develop the rural areas, the government has decentralised to form the Panchayat Raj system. In Tamil Nadu, which has 33% reservation for women in Panchayats, huge resources have been allocated for rural areas through government schemes to provide basic services. However, the reality is that most villages have not yet achieved the expected target.

In the Rajakkaalpatti and Maravapatti villages of Alanganallur block in Madurai district, Magamayi has taken the post of President. She has been elected for the second time. For the last five years, she has been paying attention to basic problems and education and has been implementing developmental schemes. She has conducted Gram Sabha meetings and acts according to the expectations of the people. Hence, with the support of the people she has again become the Panchayat President. Though uneducated, she understands the problems of the people and negotiates with the Officials to find quick solutions. Because of the developmental schemes in her Panchayat, the villages have seen many developments. She has also sent social audit related to these activities to the Government. It is a rule that social
audit should be carried out by each Panchayat. But not all of them do this formally.

Panchayat leader, Magamayi says, “Melakkarandhai in Tuticorin is my husband’s village. I was a member of Agricultural Co-operative Bank for 10 years. I helped the farmers in solving their problems. Then we came to my native place here and got settled since 14 years. I contested the election last time and the barrier wall for the tank was constructed in Thalaakkulam, cement road in Maravanpatti, and a library in Rajaakkalpatti. We got a playground for the school. Under the 100 days MGNREGS, Pudhukkulam Tank and Maravankulam Tank were desilted.

We organized Gram Sabha meetings and seven literates were included in the Committee. The Committee members will evaluate the activities of the Panchayat and say if they are right and will list out the defects. We once again organized the Gram Sabha meeting and heard the grievances of the people and solved the problems. The government officers also scrutinized. We have sent the social audit report to the government. This time we have to completely sort out the water problem and compound wall has to be constructed for the school. The schools in two villages have to be raised to High School level. From the Tamil Nadu Village Habitation Improvement Scheme (THAI), group of houses has been under construction. I am helping the students to every extent possible.”

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Tamil.
PRAMILA AN UNBENDING PANCHAYAT LEADER
Nandita Datta
Ajker Fariad, 8 April, 2012

Pramila Sinha is a grassroot woman from Unakoti district whose life-long lessons ultimately made her a Panchayat leader and empowered her to challenge the oddities being faced by a woman, particularly one belonging to the opposition party. Headed by this exceptional woman, Goldharpur Panchayat, despite being controlled by Congress, is witnessing a face-lift as well as receiving developmental benefits.

At a tender age, while studying in sixth standard, she had been compelled by her father to discontinue her studies. Nevertheless, that threat which had hardly posed any challenge before such a bold girl made her flee from her house to take refuge with a young teacher of her village for the sake of continuing schooling. She had for years lived together with the teacher Radhika Mohan Sinha and ultimately got married to him in 1956. Few years later, ironically when Radhika Mohan married another woman, Pramila used to sleep on the floor of the room where her husband shared the bed with her second wife. Remaining unfazed over such a predicament, she had on the contrary, asserted on holding the shelter to pursue education taking help from her teacher-husband.
This wonder lady, who ended her career as a Headmistress of a government school, is presently heading a grassroots’ society in the capacity of President of Goldharpur Gram Panchayat at Kailashahar. This 73-year old lady, who fought against challenges the whole of her life, still dares to roar against corrupt practices however little bit, if it comes to her attention. She is bold enough on the question of corruption, saying, “I don’t raise these issue in Panchayat meetings, it would attack an individual.” She felt, “The whole system is required to change - and for this change to occur, a President should have minimum educational qualification of Madhyamik.” She was not at all a political activist. However, during her first election contest in 2004, she was fielded, according to her, by the neighbours under the fold of Congress, because of the seat being reserved for women. Since 2009 she has been acting as the President of Goldhar Panchayat. According to one Arjun Sinha, “Madam is very respectful to everyone. She has never been found to make any compromises with unfair means”.

According to her, the block authority has always paid importance to her opinion, and extended their assistance to the particular Panchayat even though it is ruled by the opposition party. She claimed, should the Panchayati Raj Institutions follow fair and healthy rules and regulations, development of rural areas would reach a new height. She for the first time claimed before this newperson that she had never signed on blank papers. She herself interpreted the reasons that this was not for the feeling that she was being deceived. Pramila said,“I believe common people should not be deceived.” She murmurs, huge amount of fund is now being pumped into for rural development and it hurts that this is being misappropriated sometimes here and there.
However, Goldharpur village, during the last 10 years, got a very good face-lift with all-weather roads, drinking water facility and electricity. Agriculture is the mainstay of her people even though some of them are in government services. Pramila felt sorrow with the output brought in by MGNREGS in her Panchayat. She said few scattered works like digging of ponds, and renovation, construction of Manipuri Naat Mandir (prayer hall and temple) was done. But many things that were proposed have not come up yet. She is repeatedly pursuing the block authority at present for sanction and completion of electricity connection under the Rajiv Gandhi Gramin Vaidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY) to eight or nine families. She is a regular runner to the block office so as to get all the dues for the villagers of Goldharpur. Few days back, she questioned the BDO as to why the families were not getting mosquito nets, which were supposed to be given away to all families much earlier. She said, “I will wait few more days.” She asserted, “I will continue my fight until the beneficiaries get the benefits”.

She is currently concerned with some complex problems over the old-age pension. Pramila pointed her fingers against the quota system being inducted for selection of beneficiaries under several pension schemes. She expressed her resentment and made her points clear to the BDO for necessary correction. This veteran Panchayat leader is not only working for the betterment of people of her Panchayat and keeping watch over proper implementation of welfare schemes, she also contemplates to involve common people in these schemes. When she is out of home or any local individual or group pays a visit to her, Pramila said, she discusses about one or the other scheme with them. She believes that the government would of course do its work,
but the people should also keep a watch over it; they should learn of the tidbits of such schemes and programmes and get in touch with them.

Asked if she thought about difficulties in playing her role in the Panchayat, Pramila said, “This is a new family to me. In a family so many problems come up at regular intervals and we get them resolved through dialogue amongst members. This is of that sort – a large family where there are many opinions, many voices and that gives a right direction in decision-making. Goldharpur is on the path of development by holding the hands of Pramila.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Bengali.
People are accepting the capabilities of women representatives.

Half the population i.e., women have always left the imprint of their intelligence and talent in every field, given the chance, inspite of endless questions being raised regarding their capabilities. Taking advantage of the opportunities received from Panchayati Raj, and by being in active politics, women are working tirelessly for the overall development of the villages. The Sarpanch and Panchs of Mandvi GramPanchayatof Athner block are classic examples of this.

Khem Kumar Jagait has had the reins of this Panchayat of 20 Wards with a population of around 6,000 firmly in her hands for the last four years. Khem is a tribal and is the wife of S.L. Jagait, a teacher. In Mandvi, not only do they have a woman Sarpanch but half of the Wards have women Panchs. Included amongst them are Sushila Bai, Seema Rathor, Jayawanti Barpete, Durga Suryawanshi, Phoolwanti Rathore, Gunta Ivane, Laxmi Bai, Somti Bai, Ranjo Bai and Seema Bai. Although all the Panchs are keen on development, due to the dynamism exhibited by the women Sarpanch and Panchs it is as if developmental work has sprouted wings.
Government schemes are implemented with determination through the Panchayat and the advantages are made available to the beneficiaries. By personal efforts put in by Sarpanch Khem, further benefits have been given to the Panchayat. Under the National Population Control programme held recently, Khem personally ensured that 18 sterilisations were performed during the sterilisation campaign. For these efforts, the administration provided 100 meters of CC road to the Panchayat. In view of acute water shortage in her village, this year in March, Sarpanch Khem reached the capital city of Bhopal and practically sat on a protest at the bungalow of the Public Health Minister Sri. Gauri Shankar Bisen. She got up only when a borewell digging machine reached her village.

Every year, influential people used to get digging done for borewells in their preferred locations, but this year she got it done in her place of choice against the will and objections of others. As a result of this, four inches of water supply became available. With her own efforts, she could get a water tank approved at a cost of Rs. 19 lakhs under the Swajal Dhara scheme. At present, the work on this is in progress. For providing better educational facilities to the village children, she was able to get an approval of Rs. 80 lakhs for a high school building, during the year 2010-11. The work on this is also in progress. Her determined approach and her working style and the all-round development of the village have deeply influenced the villagers. As a result of this, she was given a second chance to serve as the Sarpanch.

**Obtained the benefits from the schemes**

Khem does not want to miss a single chance to get benefits for the villagers from government schemes. This is the reason
for the better implementation of the schemes in this Panchayat compared to other Panchayats. She has a special interest in ensuring housing for the poor. This year she helped in getting approvals for 40 houses under various housing schemes of the government, including 10 houses under Indira Awaas, and 16 houses under the Chief Minister’s Housing scheme. Similarly for the poor beneficiaries she got the pension approved for about 300 persons under social security.

**Conversation with an officer**

Most women Sarpanchs are dependent on their husbands or the Secretaries for administrative work but Khem is setting a different example. She talks to officers directly in connection with Panchayat-related affairs and does not depend on others.

Khem is from the Congress while in the area the BJP has got the biggest say. Due to this, murmurs of opposition arise frequently but she faces them competently. As a result of this, not only her supporters but even her opponents are all in praise for her. BJP leader Devendra Amrute affirms that doubtlessly her working style is so effective that because of her the beneficiaries are able to get their due. The water problem was resolved only because of her dynamism. Khem agrees that it is her aim to get all the rights for members of the Panchayat and turn it into an ideal Panchayat through all round development. Although, she has studied only upto class VIII, she is not only an example for women Sarpanchs but also for their male counterparts to emulate on how to carryout their responsibilities.

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ABOLISHED FEMALE INFANTICIDE
R. Jayalakshmi
Dinakaran Press, 15 April, 2012

It is evident from history that female infanticide had existed among Arabian tribals, Yanomani Indians in Brazil, ancient Romans, among South Asian people, and in China before Communist rule, Britain, America and Canada. In India, female infanticide had taken place in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, West Gujarat, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Theni, Salem and Dharmapuri districts are prominent districts for female infanticide in Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu, during the year 1981, according to the census there were only 900 girl children as against 1,000 boy children. This fact about female infanticide that was published in 1986 was a great shock to entire Tamil Nadu.

The techniques that were used to kill a girl child in Usilampatti area include not feeding the girl baby and allowing her to cry until death, feeding paddy through mouth, feeding chicken gravy (kuzhambu), pouring cactus juice (Kallippaal), wrapping the baby in a wet sack, etc. The government struggled to control this social evil with support from NGOs.

Aariyapatti Panchayat President, Maheshwari from Usilampatti, Chellampatti Block has joined this struggle. She is trying to
eradicate social problems in addition to basic infrastructural needs. The government has honoured this Panchayat by giving away the Gramiya Rathna award and Nirmal Puraskar award. The Aariyapatti Panchayat has tar roads, cement roads, public health centres, desilted / dredged wells, school building, group houses (Thoguppu), rainwater harvesting facilities, and so on. The need for drinking water has been fulfilled for the villages in this Panchayat. The acquired 11 acres land was retrieved and used for school ground. Under the 100 days employment scheme MGNREGS, the well was desilted. So far, 500 saplings have been planted and taken care off.

Maheshwari says, “I have been the President for the fourth time. I have studied up to fifth standard only. During the first time, nobody opposed me and I got elected “unopposed”. Then I contested along with other candidates. When I gave birth to a second baby girl, others tried to kill my baby by feeding her chicken gravy. I strongly objected to that. Now, my daughter is studying in the twelfth standard. I wish her to study well. When I see pregnant ladies, I tell them to undergo family planning after their second child whether the child is a boy or a girl. Nowadays, we have completely controlled female infanticide. There were no facilities in our villages till 15 years back. Now we have a good school building, library, road, toilets and drainage. About 50 out of 100 houses have toilets in our villages. At present, I am implementing various developmental plans / schemes. In the past, I used to be scared of going out anywhere. But nowadays, I go out alone. I have got the courage to question anyone”, she concludes with pride.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Tamil.
ATTACKED FOR HER BATTLE AGAINST LIQUOR, BUT MITHIA’S FIGHT CONTINUES...

Rajan Raikwar
The Hitavada, 16 April, 2012

Though she and her family members have been brutally attacked by influential people as she dared to raise her voice against the sale of liquor in the village, her spirit to fight for the reformation of the village has not died down, rather it has become stronger. Notwithstanding the fact that she and her family members are living under the shadow of a constant fear of being attacked again, she is determined the work for development and committed to fight the next Panchayat election for the betterment of the village.

We are talking about tribal lady Mithia Bai (aged around 50), who is Panch of village Mendua, about 25 kms from the State capital under Pipalia Lorkar Panchayat in Obaidullaganj block in Raisen. After winning the Panch election, this illiterate and poor lady had shown a firm commitment to do the development in her village. When she saw that local people face water crises constantly, she raised her voice in this regard and got a handpump and water tank installed in the village. Apart from this, she had also done some more work for the village.
She looks like an ordinary village woman with disorderly hair, fair complex skin and with naive face. But she has the heart of a lioness. When BJP was taking out yatras across the State to spread the government message of development in January, she accompanied by other ladies had handed over a complaint to the local MLA demanding ban on sale of liquor in the village as it was proving to be a curse for the villagers. “I decided to raise my voice against sale of liquor in the village because even the children of 10 years have started to consume the liquor. Their future is being destroyed owing to the alcohol addiction. Similarly, local men used to create scenes at home after consuming the liquor. Meanwhile, some people have started eve-teasing women under the influence of liquor. However, my act of handing over the complaint to local MLA demanding ban of liquor had not gone well. The person involved in a liquor business got me, my husband Gangaram and son Santosh attacked last Sunday”, claimed Mithia Bai.

In this attack, she suffered a fracture in one her hands and had serious head injuries. She was admitted to Hamidia hospital where she remained unconscious for three days. Her husband and son too sustained head injuries. Mithia Bai alleged that she was attacked by Madan, Jeetenda and two others. However, police have not taken any stern action against the accused. “I want that police should be tough in this case”, she added. The accused are so powerful in the village that the victim’s family is living under a constant fear of being attacked again. When asked that despite experiencing so much injustice, whether she will contest the next election, Mithia Bai said in a loud voice that definitely she will as she wants to change the fate of the village.
One more lady Sharda, who accompanied Mithia Bai in the campaign against sale of liquor in the village, was also attacked by the influential people before the incident happened with Mithia Bai.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012.
Prosperity with greenery

Whatever may be the general perception about the intelligence of women representatives, but the tribal ladies, who are the Panchs and Sarpanch of GramPanchayat Kelbehra, 80 kms away from the district headquarters, are presenting a different example. On one hand where they are working towards economically empowering the poor, on the other hand they have taken cognizance of improving the environment by providing greenery through replanting of trees where forests have been cut.

Rewali Bai Gajam is the Sarpanch of Kelbehra Panchayat situated on the border of Maharashtra. Prior to this, she has been the Sarpanch for two consecutive terms till five years ago. When she won this time, the challenges before her were of a different nature. On one side the majority of the people in her village were being forced to lead a life of poverty, on the other side the forests around the village had been destroyed due to continuous felling of trees. Greenery had completely vanished because of this. When Rewali Bai discussed this matter with the women Panchs, Ratna Ivne, Sunita Wadiwa, Sindhu Ivne,
Shivkali Uike, Gunta Dhurve, Durga Patankar, and others, they were all in agreement that it was necessary to deliberate upon this matter. The poor families of the village either had to go to Maharashtra as labourers or else were forced to work in clearing forests by cutting trees. During discussions, Secretary Rajkumar Gawande informed the Sarpanch about the Nandan Phalodyan sub-scheme under MGNREGS. The Sarpanch and the other Panchs found this scheme to be the best solution for both the problems. Plans were made to work on a priority basis in this direction. It was decided that first wells would be provided to the poor families under the Kapil Dhara scheme and then fruit-bearing trees would be planted on their lands. The work was started on a war-footing and wells were dug in the lands belonging to 40 beneficiaries and fruit trees were planted on one hectare land each. Orange trees were planted as this was an orange growing region. Today the greenery of 40 orange groves can be seen waving about in the air at Topidhana and Hirodahi villages of Kelbehra Panchayat. The pain of cutting down the forests is also forgotten due to this. Each grove has about 300 plants which should be bearing fruits by the next year. Seeing the priority of the Panchayat, the recipients are also nurturing the plants as their own children. One beneficiary, Jaddu Ramji insists that Sarpanch Rewali Bai has completely improved their condition. A businessman wanted to have his garden this very year, where the trees have already started bearing small oranges for Rs. 2.50 lakhs but he did not give it as he felt it would not be a profitable bargain. Even the authorities are impressed by Rewali Bai’s dedication and farsightedness.

A prominent agriculturist of the village, Dhanraj Gawande informs us that whenever senior officials visit the village they are always shown the gardens of Kelbehra. A team from Delhi
which visited this Panchayat has also appreciated the work done here. Sarpanch Rewali Bai affirms that in addition to making the poor families prosperous, she also wants to work for environmental improvement. In this she has succeeded to a large extent.

The hillock will become green

The Panchayat is also working towards covering the barren hillock with greenery. Work on this hillock is being carried out under the Shailparn scheme. In a few years, the hillock will also become green. At present, work has been done on five acres of land as an experiment. The work will be expanded once this proves successful. Another praiseworthy initiative has been taken under which priority is given to providing jobs to the people belonging to the weaker sections, who may not be able to work in a normal competitive environment.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
The hands that held rolling pins now hold pens to write the story of development.

The last two decades of Panchayati Raj has been like a shot of elixir to the step-by-step progress of women in every sphere, whether social, financial or familial. It is such a golden page in the annals of Panchayati Raj that it can never be forgotten.

The erstwhile Congress Government of Rajiv Gandhi, during its rule from 1985 to 1989 drafted the Panchayati Raj bill initially that not only had the provision of finance being made available to the Panchayats according to their own needs and discernment, but also had the provision of reservation of seats for women in the election process, thereby opening up the path for their overall development. The results of this are so widely visible today in the women who were restricted to doing household chores, but are now wielding pens instead of rolling pins and are seen discharging their duties in the development of the nation. Whether it is education, health or upliftment of women, women have not let any chance go to make the basic significance of Panchayati Raj come true. Whether it is the
Panch, Sarpanch, member of the District Panchayat, member of the Panchayat, Nagar Panchayat, Councilor of the Municipal Corporation or Chairman, the way in which women holding these posts have sat as equals of the men and have begun to climb the rungs of development, it has become clear that they are exceeding the capabilities of the men. The helpless woman of yesterday has been given such a shot of the elixir of self-confidence by the Panchayati Raj Act that now she is a strong person, who by her capability and fame/reputation, has established herself firmly.

If we cast a glance at the courageous working style of these women who are occupying the posts of elected representatives from village Panchayats to the city municipalities, we can see without any doubt, the thread of revolution and their Herculean efforts along the route of development in their own areas. Thanks to the gift of Panchayati Raj, in Neemuch today, if we assess the political hold and participation of women, we can see that in the district municipality the crown goes to a woman Neeta Harish Dua, who despite her amateur political entry and inspite of not having a majority, without a doubt, established the steps in the development of the town. These point to her progressive and leadership qualities, and strong will-power, whether it is in the field of education, drinking water facility, or in the matter of beautification of the town; in every area Neeta has carried out her responsibilities beautifully. Similarly, Neelima Maru, a housewife, has worn the crown of the Chairman of the city council. She has boldly chosen the development of the town as her mission and has scripted a new and notable story. Whether it is the town roads or any other facility, she has established her own standard of fame. Maya Soni, Chairman of Town Panchayat of Ratangarh, and Hemlata Bundiwal, Chairman of Kukreshwar Town
Council, are scaling new heights of development everyday. In two Janpad Panchayats of the district, Kavita Satyanarayan of Manasa Dabkara and Saroj Bai Jagdish Gurjar of Neemach, after occupying the post of Chairpersons are continuously carrying forward the schemes for the development in their own areas. The way in which these women, with very little education and belonging to very small villages have crossed the threshold, and after occupying such important posts have carried out their responsibilities so diligently, is a huge achievement for the Panchayati Raj. Keeping an eye on every problem, taking effective steps for their solutions whether it is a government scheme or some social work at their own level, they have been instrumental in giving it substance and in doing so they have proved the myth wrong that they are mere pawns, while it is their husbands who are the actual forces behind the posts.

Rural regions are no longer backward, whether it is in the basic facilities or development. In rural areas too, women have played a significant role in the Panchayati Raj. They have played a vital role as Sarpanch, and by displaying their determination they have made the villages self-sufficient in fields of education, health, environment, etc. In Aantri Gram Panchayat of of Manasa Tehsil, Krishna Nand Kishore Porwal got elected to the post of Sarpanch and took the reins in her hands. Krishna has worked for almost three years. Using the Gram Panchayat as the medium, she has made the strong stream of development flow. She has given the invaluable gift of safe confinement to the region and so has made available better health facilities in the Panchayat. Whether it is the Anganwadi building or the cement concrete roads, she has made these facilities available to the people. She has taken up the responsibility of getting work worth lakhs of rupees
done. She has to her credit many achievements such as making the nal-jalscheme functional and thus solving the problem of drinking water. She has got wells dug and got the school-building constructed. She is encouraging people to get associated with education through street-plays and is spreading the invaluable message of saving the girl child. She may have been educated till class VIII, but her courage and ability to work is very strong.

Shyama Bai, the Sarpanch of Barariya Gram Panchayat of the same Manasa Tehsil has also established herself firmly by getting development works done worth lakhs of rupees. At the same time she has shown her dedication to progress towards her goals steadily. She is always full of praise for the Panchayati Raj. Shyama Bai by showing special interest in the environment has sown and nurtured 531 plants under the Rozgar Guarantee Yojana, the result of which is that on the Manasa-Mandsaur road today these plants have grown and wave in the breeze. From helping students get their scholarships, to eligible people their old age and handicapped pensions, she has made the Panchayat area totally beneficial. The construction of 65 toilets and two Anganwadi buildings will also be credited to her. From the fund of Members of Parliament, she has had Sulabh Shauchalya constructed for women. The nal-jal scheme has been given shape by her in Sarasi village with help from the National Relief Fund, and this too can be counted as an achievement for her. She has shown her mettle as a woman Sarpanch and a leader.

All these women representatives have worked hard to pay back the Panchayati Raj. They say that the full credit for awakening the hidden female power goes to the Panchayati Raj system.
The Progress of Women is due to the Panchayati Raj Act: Bairagi

The erstwhile representative and Member of Parliament from 1985-1989, Balkavi Bairagi told us that the Panchayati Raj came into existence during the rule of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who along with making finance available to the Panchayati Raj gave them the authority to spend it according to their needs and discretion and as a special consideration gave women 50% reservation in the election process and thus ensured their participation. Due to this, women today have risen and are showing their capability while displaying their achievements and have won acclaim for the works of progress. They have proved that in no way are they any less than the men. Sri Bairagi, a witness to the creation of the Panchayati Raj considers it to be the source of women’s upliftment.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
VICTORY OF WOMAN POWER IN A MALE FIEF

Binodini Roul

The Khabar, 5 May, 2012

...She hoisted a flag of victory in what used to be a male bastion, and won the hearts of people through a judicious use of her powers. People reposed their faith in her not once, but thrice in a row. All of which has made her male contenders quite wary of her. Stamping such a symbol of women’s empowerment in a hitherto male domain is none other than Pana Marandi...

Wresting success yet again in this year’s Panchayat elections, Pana Marandi scored a hattrick as Sarpanch. She retained her position as Sarpanch of Digapasi Gram Panchayat of Saharapada Block in Keonjhar district. Beginning in 2002, she has been holding aloft this crown of victory in successive elections of 2007 and 2012 as well. Possessing neither money nor muscle power, her work has been the chief factor in her victory. This simple tribal lady has been able to create a place for herself as a favourite leader in every person’s heart in the Panchayat.

In 2002, the Gram Panchayat seat of Digapasi was reserved for Scheduled Tribe women. An educated Pana chose to enter the political arena through this reserved seat. She tasted victory in her very first election contesting against eight other women. And
from that day onwards she has not looked back. She devoted herself fully to solving basic issues confronting the people in her Panchayat in the entire term of five years. Thinking of her constituents’ problems as her own, she acted accordingly. Even though she had no knowledge about managing the Panchayat at first, things became clear slowly. Every step taken towards solving problems strengthened her.

Retreating men...

*It is quite significant that men now think twice before contesting against the popular Sarpanch Pana Marandi. Pana had first won from a reserved seat in 2002. However in 2007, when the seat was unreserved, she had not given up and had contested against three men to win again. Losing to a woman was akin to losing face for her male contenders. Came the 2012 elections; the seat remained unreserved even this time. However, male aspirants in the area couldn’t muster enough courage to lose to a woman yet again! They decided to turn the tide by trying other measures. And they did this by putting up other women to contest against Pana. But Pana had so conquered peoples’ hearts by then that they voted for her once more...*

At first, Pana used to ask her husband or other relatives to accompany her to the block office. Soon however she began working independently and drove herself to the Panchayat and other offices on a mobike. She consults her husband sometimes, but has kept him away from the local echelons of power. Pana affirms that her husband never comes to the Panchayat or interferes with her responsibilities.

Awarded as the Best Sarpanch in 2009, Pana has aimed to make all families in her Panchayat economically self-reliant. Since
some people still migrate to other areas in search of livelihood, she wants to create enough jobs for all the residents of her Panchayat. For this she has laid great stress on agriculture. If enough irrigation facilities are provided to the little arable land in the Panchayat, it can help provide enough work for the people and stop them from migrating, she feels. She has even made a plan to ensure water supply to these lands throughout the year, and has started making all out efforts to realise it. Her foremost priority of the present tenure would be in accomplishing this, she says.

Piped water supply to all houses...

The biggest reason for Pana’s popularity is the provision of clean drinking water to every household in the Panchayat. Every home also has a toilet with a water connection solving a big problem of the people. Now they don’t have to take pains either in summer or any other day for water. After all “water is life”; so how could the Panchayat residents forget such a favour of someone? Even today when going out to the fields is a norm elsewhere, Digapasi Panchayat has a toilet in every home. Since Pana’s efforts have resulted in every household getting a water connection and toilet, the Panchayat has been selected for the award of Nirmal Gram Puraskar this year.

As the head of the Panchayat, Pana makes it a point to share the joys and sorrows of all her constituents. Ensuring attendance of every child in school, and that girls especially are not kept away from studies has been a priority with her. With most roads in her Panchayat built well, she has also been able to ensure proper beneficiary selection and cover to the needy under the appropriate social security schemes.
Motivating women to form self-help groups for economic betterment, she advises them on the merits of working in a co-operative spirit. Above all, as a popular Sarpanch she has never hesitated to respond to anybody in need, and do the necessary. This very connection with the people has resulted in the hattrick of victories, she says, and hopes this goodwill shall continue in the future as well.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Oriya.
CONSTRUCTION OF LIBRARY FOR STUDENTS BY A WOMAN PANCHAYAT LEADER

R. Jayalakshmi
Dinakaran Press, 5 May, 2012

There was an old proverb, “No one should live in a place where there is no temple”. But now we have a new proverb, “If there is no library people should not live in that place”. Besides developing reading habits among people, a library opens the mind to think. The Sozhangkurini Panchayat of Thirupparangkundrum block did not have a library. When Chittupillai was elected last time as the President of the Panchayat, she constructed the library and inculcated reading habits among students. In addition to basic problems, two new schools, desiltation of pond and well, building of stage for dramas, and many more services have been done. She was honoured with the Mahatma Gandhi Award for her services and received the Gram Ratna Award for the best Panchayat. It has to be noted that her Panchayat was selected twice by the Collector for successful implementation of MGNREGS.

While Panchayat leader Chittupillai speaks, “I had studied till third standard only and with the support of my husband and my people I was elected last time. In our Panchayat there are nine wards including Sozhangkurini, Samathuvapuram and Pillaiyaarpatti. The approximate population is 4,000. Most of the people are involved in agriculture work and some
work as building construction coolie. There was no proper road facility. Last time itself in most of the streets, cement roads were constructed. In two places in our Panchayat, sintex tanks have been placed to solve the water problem. Last time we gave petition to the Collector and got a library for our Panchayat. So, during holidays a lot of students can read now. We constructed the Panchayat office for Rs. 6.25 lakhs. We have only till eighth standard in the school of our village. So, this hinders students’ education. We need to raise the school to either higher secondary or high school this time. In Sozhangkurini, we have a Panchayat office and library near the market. We need to build cement roads. In Samathuvapuram, the metal road has to be changed to tar road. We have to build a market in Adi Dravidar colony. By fixing up a bore-well, we should fulfill the water needs. In this connection, we have given a petition to the Collector and are making taking efforts towards it. We conduct Gram Sabha meetings regularly and fulfill the needs of the people.”

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Tamil.
A CAMPAIGN FOR AWARENESS ON AIDS
K. Narasimhamurthy
Prajavani, 5 May, 2012

These female members of K.G. Halli Gram Panchayat of Malur Taluk in Kolar district are very active in the village community with their efforts to create awareness on HIV/AIDS in the villages under the Panchayat.

What can the female members of the Gram Panchayat undertake for the sake of the community that elected them? Provide basic facilities. Properly deliver all benefits of the various government schemes to the people. Implement developmental programmes successfully. Take timely steps so that the grants are not recalled. Ensure that there is no interference by anybody including the members in the administration.

Many people lay emphasis on such pre-determined responsibilities. But as Panchayat representatives, very few people devote themselves to undertake better work bringing dignity to their position. They are rare too. Two such rare female members are from K.G.Halli Gram Panchayat of Malur Taluk in Kolar district. After getting elected, they are very active in the village community with their efforts to create awareness on HIV/AIDS in the villages under the Panchayat.
One of them is Shantamma, who has studied up to only class III but can read well. She is 45 years of age with three sons and a daughter. She shoulders agricultural responsibilities along with her husband Venkataswamappa on their 18 acre farm. With the sole intention that “May people have better wisdom”, she is actively involved in awareness campaigns on HIV/AIDS. Shantamma who is the main source of inspiration at the village health information centre under the organisation for youth and development in the village has been instrumental in ensuring people’s participation in the programmes organised by the centre. Where there is Shantamma, it is easy to congregate people. The awareness campaign becomes facile.

“Prior to my election to the Panchayat, I never stepped outside the house. I only cooked. My eldest son Gopala Krishna introduced me to this centre. First and foremost, I read all the hand-bills. The resource persons explained everything very well. They convinced me of my capabilities. Now, I can talk to people very fluently about the disease. I ask them to take precautions. In these two years, I have created awareness in about 2,000 persons,” says Shantamma.

Another person who is similarly involved in the awareness campaign is Padma. The 35-year old Padma also visits villages to give speeches, and conduct health check-ups, confidential counseling and street-plays organised by the HIV/AIDS society. She urges the Gram Panchayat to extend the maximum possible help in holding these awareness creation programmes. This ensures money from the Panchayat to hold street-plays. School children also take part in the awareness processions.
It is to be specially mentioned here that Padma who is also the President of the committee for village health and hygiene, has a son Madan who is studying in a pre-university college. He is an active member of the Red Ribbon Club of this centre. Whenever the box of condoms placed outside the centre goes empty, he gets calls for replenishment and delivers them to the needy people. Padma’s another son Suhas is also developing interest in this; the mother’s commitment and encouragement being the reasons.

“This is a good service and that is why I have introduced my son here. Isn’t it better if they are knowledgeable in their teenage/youth?” she asks.

Moreover, many of Padma’s relatives are afflicted with this infection and some have succumbed to the disease. These have made her take up the work only with the hope that none should suffer such deaths and pain. She is lucky on one more count. She says, “My husband has full trust in me. It may not have been possible for me to take up this work if it were not for his encouragement”. Her husband is a driver.

An amazing fact is that she had never seen her village properly till she became a member of Adi Parashakti Stree Sakti Sangh. She recalls that she came to know the village only after she became a member of the organisation. She says, “I would read messages flashed on TV about AIDS. I felt that they could be prevented. Many of our people have died because of AIDS. I had heard that they were kept out of the house on the sole reason that they were afflicted with the disease.” Now she visits the neighbouring houses to hold confidential counseling sessions with women. She takes part in every programme of the organisation without fail.
In order to create awareness about HIV and the means of preventing it, the first step is to visit villages to mobilize the community and this poses a very big challenge. People hesitate to take heed of advice from strangers like us. The very mention of the name AIDS puts people off. But with Shantamma and Padma with us, our work in the surrounding villages gets easy. Printing handbills for programmes, organizing camps and providing food, snacks and water to people are undertaken by us, says Nandish, District Convener of the organisation.

Shantamma and Padma are good examples for the other Gram Panchayat female members. But they say they have many more miles to go. Their modesty is surprising.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
The maximum number of Kapil Dhara wells is present in the block of Kutanga Panchayat.

Kutanga, which is 6 kms away from Bhimpur block headquarters (often referred to as Kalapani), always gets every government scheme on a priority, even though nothing else may reach. This can be attributed to the active Sarpanch, Shyamsati Evane. Although she is an Adivasi, her commitment to development is praiseworthy. That is why she has won this seat for the second time, even though it was an unreserved seat.

Shyamsati first became Sarpanch of this backward Kutanga Panchayat in the year 2005. As soon as she was elected, she started laying stress on development work. Making sure that the maximum number of beneficiaries of schemes got their dues was also one of her aims. As the area started developing, the condition of the villagers started improving significantly. All this convinced the villagers that Shyamsati is the right leader for them. In the 2010 elections, this seat was declared an unreserved seat. Male candidates were sure to fight it out bitterly in this election but Shyamsati too entered the fray and was re-
elected by the villagers. This ensured that the development works undertaken by her continued uninterrupted. Shyamsati made sure that villagers had assured irrigation facilities, which helped them financially. That is why this particular Panchayat has 200 Kapil Dhara wells. Now they are getting the benefits of this. She is also aware of the disadvantages of using chemicals for agriculture and has been inspiring farmers to turn to organic agriculture. As a result, many farmers have started taking up organic farming. She also makes sure to give the farmers information about every scheme of the agricultural department.

Shyamsati is acquainted with the problems women face due to not having toilets in their homes. So, under the Total Sanitation Campaign, she gave importance to toilets being constructed first. Today, 80% of the homes in the Panchayat covering the villages of Kutunga, Dadhari and Gullardhanahave toilets. Now only some houses of village Moongajhiri are left. She constantly guides women on how to increase their income, and the women are taking advantage of this too. The villagers are given information on how to grow plants from seeds. She personally made sure that family planning targets were met. Work has also been done on water resources and environment management.

**Her advices to use medicines**

Shyamsati also has knowledge of herbal remedies. If villagers fall ill, she counsels them on how to use herbal medicines and also sometimes prepares the medicines herself. Her progressive attitude can be seen in the fact that every village has CC roads constructed by her. Whether it is the working of the Panchayat or religious or social functions, her involvement is far more than that of male Sarpanchs. Due to all these factors, all villagers agree on her being the best Sarpanch.
Focus on empowerment

Sarpanch Shyamsati focuses particularly on women’s empowerment. She believes that if the woman is empowered, so is the family. Towards this end, she introduces many other schemes apart from the ones in the Panchayat. She also collaborates with Pradeepan, an organisation, and tries to see that women get as many benefits as possible.
There was a time when the Panchayat remained limited to construction work only. The representatives leading their Panchayat kept stressing more and more on construction work exclusively.

Now, the women representatives have taken another approach. Instead, now they are putting forth efforts to reverse such a scenario with the help of the privilege obtained to rule through the constitutional amendments. They are now focusing sharply on the basic facilities like drinking water, education, health, cleanliness, nutritious diets, mid-day meals, etc. They are trying to bring these benefits to the needy persons. Now veils are no more on their faces; neither there is any hesitation in expressing themselves openly.

Ratan Soni (43 years old) is now the Sarpanch of Semal Gram Panchayat of Khamnor Panchayat Samiti in Rajsamand district. She is privileged to be the first member of her family who has stepped into politics. In general, she appears to be a simple woman of the village but the qualities of courageous spirit and struggling woman are anchored in her simplicity.
Sarpanch Ratan has reversed the concept that it is impossible to establish a corruption-free state of affairs.

She witnessed the prevailing corrupt affairs in the Panchayat when she took command of the Panchayat. Then the Panchayat Secretary used to collect commissions and bribes out of the development work being done. Although, he tried to do the best to keep hidden such nefarious activities, she kept opposing his wrong-doings and ultimately he was forced to bow down.

When Ratan walked out of her home to join the Panchayat meetings, she found that conducting the affairs of Panchayat is just similar to the functioning of the home. She decided that she would also learn to conduct the Panchayat's affairs. Since, she was elected as a public representative for the first time, she learnt the intricacies of the Panchayat affairs and how to carry them out very fast.

Ratan organised meetings for raising the awareness of women towards their participation in women’s affairs. She visited houses to contact them and acted towards strengthening their role in the society. She got small dams and bridges constructed, and secured BPL cards. There has been a forceful change in her leading capacity from the moment she was elected as Sarpanch. By raising her forceful voice against the wrong-doings of the Secretary, she is now proudly known as the courageous and struggling woman. After becoming Sarpanch, she could realise the powers and duties of a leader. She has strengthened her role in the Panchayati Raj.

Chandravali Parikh (60 years old) is another woman of similar courage. She is the Ward Panch of Lunkaransar Gram Panchayat.
in Bikaner district. The women representatives under her leadership struggled for income of the GramPanchayat. Some people wanted to encroach on a land belonging to the GramPanchayat located nearby the health centre. Taking assistance of other women WardPanchs, she saved this plot of land from the clutches of land-grabbers. The case even reached the policestation and in-charge himself came to the GramPanchayat, met and discussed the matter with them, and registered the case. This episode became a public issue soon, debated openly and Chadravali along with other women representatives bravely faced the land-grabbers, and ultimately could retain the land safely with the GramPanchayat.

Chadravali has to say that the administration is good but the officials therein work impossibly slow due to which the people are compelled to visit these official's repeatedly. It would be a welcome relief if such reluctant attitude of the concerned officials could be dispensed with.

Chunni Bai belonging to the ST community is Sarpanch of Gujol GramPanchayat of Khamnor Panchayat Samiti in Rajsamand district. Belonging to a simple family of Bhil community, Chunni Bai was WardPanch earlier as well. It is because of her efficiency that she was elected unopposed as Sarpanch of Gujol GramPanchayat.

She encashed her earlier experience as WardPanch when she got the privilege to function as Sarpanch. She established a new milestone for her Bhil community. Disregarding the prevailing caste customs, she tried her best to bring together whole of the society. The main problem during her tenure is that of making payments to the workers under MGNREGA. She has to struggle a lot against already prevailing irregularities therein
and resolving the problem of rightful wages to the workers. She has to repeatedly visit the PanchayatSamiti and Zilla Parishad offices to get these problems resolved. Her courageous efforts have prevailed and she has been able to get such payments made to the rightful persons.

Her leadership quality has not only developed successfully but her view of perceiving things has also acquired a new approach. Now, the choupal of the village is also just like the ‘aangan’ (courtyard) of her home. Her dream is to establish her GramPanchayat as an ideal one.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
 REGARDLESS OF THE HEAT, THESE WOMEN BUILT THE VILLAGE
Praveen Padigar
Prajavani, 16 May, 2012

Women who believed that they were fit enough only to roll beedis now hold a basket and a spade in hand. Wrapping the head with a shawl and ignoring the intense heat, they are involved in physical labour that would be a challenge even to men. They have repaired the main pit of the village that was once covered with thorns and stones.

The true image of Stree Sakti was unveiled in the village of Munnuru of Mangalore Taluk. It was MGNREGS that generated confidence in these women that they could work as hard as men. Under this scheme, the village has carried out public works under the leadership of women, worthy of emulation by other Gram Panchayats.

About 346 people of the village possess the employment slip and out of them 274 attend work. Of them, more than 200 are women in the forefront.

In many of the Gram Panchayats in Dakshina Kannada district, employment guarantee work starts only after the rainy season. But the village of Munnuru is an exception. Public works that have to be carried out under the employment guarantee
scheme for the year 2012-13 have already been spelt out. The Panchayat aims to take up works including sewage repair, road construction, and dredging of pits at an expenditure of Rs. 35 lakhs.

Those women who are in possession of the employment slips are the ones urging to allot work. The work on the dredging of Konaji-Amblamogaru link pit is on in full swing. More than 50 women are toiling here. When the Prajavani representative visited the place on Monday, it was found that more than 40 women were involved in the work, heedless of the intense heat.

Talking to Prajavani, the Panchayat president Shashikala said, “Silt would fill up this pit and create an artificial flood every rainy season. Crops also got damaged. Thus, we came forward to take up this work under the employment guarantee scheme. We have dredged to a depth of 500 metres even before the onset of rains.”

We gave up beedi work and took up the basket. We were earlier rolling beedis. Inspite of sleeplessly working, it was difficult to earn Rs. 50. Under the employment guarantee scheme, the daily wage is Rs. 155. When women of the village come together and work, the intensity of the heat is of no consequence, says Juliana Miranda enthusiastically.

**Proud to work for the village**

“We worked earlier on daily wages. But we never had worked for the entire year. Under the employment guarantee scheme, we work for 100 days a year. In addition, we have the pride that we are working for the village”, says 65-year old Yamunakka.
“In the initial years, we had explained the benefits of the employment guarantee scheme. Women now have a better understanding about it. They have now grown to the stature of advising us. We visit the place of work from time to time to encourage them. The participation of women in this scheme is a role model for other villages too”, says PDO Narayan Poojari.

The Panchayat has provided a small tent for taking short breaks, drinking water facility, and first aid tool-kit at the place of work.

Hundred days of work is not sufficient. A minimum of 200 days work in the year is needed. Medical expenses should also be borne, demand the women.

In the year 2011-12, 28 people have completed 100 days of work. Fourteen people have worked for more than 90 days. Fifty eight people have worked for more than 50 days. While many of the villages do not know how to utilise the sanctioned money, the village of Munnuru is different in this aspect too. The Panchayat had been sanctioned Rs. 9 lakhs for the scheme last year. But the Panchayat has undertaken works worth Rs. 20 lakhs after requesting the Zilla Parishad for additional funds.

**Fraternity through employment**

The women share their home-cooked food with others, irrespective of caste or creed. While working they also share the ups and downs of their lives. Good relations are developed because of the employment guarantee scheme, says Udyog Mitra Kamalaksha.
The Panchayat President also works

Shashikala, the president works alongside other women. She encourages women to get involved in their work. Last year she too put in 79 days of work for the village.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
When women get the opportunity in society to take decisions to implement and decide over their priorities, then changes taking place become more humanized. We have now entered the process of feeling the skill and importance of the female leadership. The female Sarpanch and public representatives who got the opportunity to take decisions and to take the initiatives in their Panchayats, have made efforts to fulfill the basic needs of the village, e.g., the maternity benefits and the family benefit schemes have been implemented in a better manner, more efforts have been made to resolve the water crisis, more attention has been given on girl education, and behavior of the teachers. Sumitra Devi, Sarpanch of Solana GramPanchayat of Chirhava PanchayatSamiti has also initiated such successful efforts. These efforts made by Sumitra Devi have become a milestone for women and the Panchayati Raj system. She has done such things in her Panchayat which have become exemplary for other women representatives. It is because of this, she has been recently given the National Panchayati Raj Empowerment Award by the government. She is entirely different in various ways from other woman Sarpanchs. She
remains highly pro-active at the three levels of information, understanding and sentiments regarding her own village, and basic problems of the same.

**The first attempt of drinking water**

Her first priority is to make drinking water available to the villagers who are facing acute shortage; she has initiated realistic efforts in this direction. She has secured finance from the MP and MLA quota and invested these in her GramPanchayat, got the tube-wells installed, and got 10 watertanks constructed through her sincere efforts. She was thus able to get rid of water scarcity. Her bold efforts encouraged other women and they have started coming out of their homes to assist her in her ongoing efforts. The Sarpanchis getting small watertanks constructed in the houses for drinking water. A budget has been procured from the State Government for these tanks.

**Initiated consciousness for education**

Sumitra is very conscious about education for girls. She is regarded as a responsible people’s representative in the area. She herself studied up to class VIII but desires that none of the girls in her Panchayat be denied the opportunity to get an education. For this, she is making efforts jointly with her husband Mohar Singh, who was earlier a Sarpanch and is now a member of the District Council, and is visiting house to house, encouraging the girls to undertake studies. She is even spending her personal money for assisting the cause of education. She had made those girls rejoin schools whose parents got them to quit in mid-session from the schools and discontinued their studies. The Sarpanch informed that by now more than 60-70 girls have been re-initiated in the schools.
Special attention on cleanliness

Sumitra has given special attention on maintaining cleanliness in her village. She has overhauled the situation in the villages of the GramPanchayat. She initiated the campaign to get lavatories built in each house. The dirty water from houses no more spill on the paths of the village. Sumitra has made the villagers understand the importance of cleanliness and even provided financial help to them for the same. Now there are lavatories in nearly every house in the village. The poor families are being helped by the Panchayat financially to get these built. She informs the villagers about the government schemes. The Sarpanch says that she herself decides what schemes are needed by which family, gets the application prepared on that basis, and the benefits of the same is made available to the concerned family.

Campaign against child marriage

Sumitra says that on becoming Sarpanch she vowed to eradicate the social evils. Her husband Mohar Singh has fully cooperated in this campaign. He is involved in politics since long. He fully assisted his wife and encouraged all the Panchs in the Panchayat meeting to carry on the struggle against drinking habits and child marriage. She took the vow that she would herself inform the administration if any child marriages were conducted. Since then, no child marriage has taken place. The campaign against drinking habit is bringing results and the villagers are actively helping her on both these issues.

Consciousness regarding government schemes

Although Sumitra herself is less educated, she remains a living example for other woman Sarpanchs. First she studies all the
government schemes herself and only then informs the people about them. As a result, 10 water tanks, roads worth Rs. 27 lakhs, drainage system at the cost of Rs. 3 lakhs could be built, and the encroachment removed from the government land. At the same time, all the schemes of the Central and the State Government could be implemented well in time.

**Environment conservation**

Sumitra is very conscious regarding environment conservation. She planted trees on the cremation ground, school, health centre, and government sites. The land of the cremation ground was leveled and then trees were planted. She has assigned the task of watering the same by the villagers. Similarly, she has done exemplary work in the area of water conservation.

*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.*
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been a lifeline for many in rural India. Economic independence of women and the Gram Panchayat is boosted by MGNREGS and this has been proved in Munnar Gram Panchayat in Mangalore Taluk.

The Gram Panchayat has taken up several works under the MGNREGS, under the able leadership of Gram Panchayat President Shashikala, who herself is a jobcard-holder. Speaking to City Herald, she said that, for many people getting work within purview of the village and to be paid a minimum wage is a big thing. The scheme has resulted in an increased in people’s participation in the developmental work in the Gram Panchayat.

“We want at least 100 labourers to complete 100 days of work during the year. As many as 364 labourers have a jobcard, of which, 247 labourers are regular in taking up jobs under the scheme,” she said and added that an action plan for work worth Rs.35.66 lakhs has been prepared for 2012-13. Stating that the action plan was prepared in the month of October itself in a special GramSabha meeting, she said the special GramSabha
was attended by the villagers, where the works to be taken up during the period was discussed and included in the action plan. This year, about 43 works related to road repair, desilting of tanks, canals and strome water drain will be taken up. The work on Rajiv Gandhi Sewa Kendra is under progress in the Gram Panchayat premises.

“Women who posses job cards are demanding jobs. At present, we are taking up the work on the desilting of a canal which passes through KonajeAmblamogaru. More than 65 women including myself and five men are working tirelessly on desilting the canal. With the silt filling the canal, there is artificial flood in the region every monsoon, which floods the farm land, thus incurring loss to the farmers. Hence, we had decided to take up the work on desilting of canals before the onset of monsoon,” she said. “I contested the GP election first time last year. It was MGNREGS which helped me to come out of the four wall of the house and take up work outside. It instilled confidence in me and helped me to contest elections. I was elected as the President of the Gram Panchayat in December 2011.”

Juliana Miranda, a labourer said, “We were rolling beedis in the past for several years. However, we were finding it difficult to earn even Rs. 50 per day. With MGNREGS, we get a minimum of 100 days work,” she said.

Meanwhile, Kamalaksha said that as the Gram Panchayats get a meagre amount of fund from the government, MGNREGS is an effective scheme to take up developmental works. In 2012-13, as many as 28 job card-holders completed 100 days work. “Even the president has worked for 79 days,” he said.

Rather than individual work, the Gram Panchayat gives priority to public work under MGNREGS, he said.
Panchayat Development Officer Narayana Poojary said: “In the beginning, we had created awareness on the project. Now women are empowered and know the MGNREGS well.”

Shashikala said that as per the Act, a small shed like structure has been constructed in the work site for the labourers to take rest. Drinking water facility and first aid are kept ready by the Gram Panchayat in the work site.”

The President said the blind labourer Koosappa is also working in the project of desilting the canal. “The Gram Panchayat saw to it that even a blind person is given employment under the scheme.”

**About the Gram Panchayat**

The Gram Panchayat has 2,139 households. All the houses have toilets and is free from open defecation. Rainwater harvesting has been effectively implemented at around eight places in the Gram Panchayat limits. A rainwater harvesting unit has been installed at the Gram Panchayat premises. With the recharge of bore-wells through rainwater harvesting method, the Gram Panchayat did not have to supply water through tankers during this summer, said the President.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012.*
Leaving the urban concretestructures at the backdrop and escaping from the dust and bustle, approaching slowly is a narrow black-top road; sometimes a brick soling serpentine narrow path. The apparent mundane environment however was changing to an unmatched landscape at par with the motorcade speed. It was full of bewildering skits in all sundry - small cropping fields, bared farmers, grazing cows, ponds, lakes and thousands of unknown aquatic plants and ducks floating therein, along with mysterious looking barbed wire-fencing, border road and armed men in uniform. Only 25 minutes ride from Agartala city to the west, the village named Lankamura, pitted in the vortex of lush green appeared with a simple but intricate design.

There lives a Madhabi-Malancha-Kanya (daughter of Madhabi-Malancha flowers – metaphorically meaning a lady who is living on the lap of greenery and orchard), named Jharna Kapali, a 35-year old Panchayat President. How is this semi-literate lady, being the President of a suburban village heading a family of 12,772 members? Has she become so empowered? She was found wiping off sweat from her face with the lace of her saree. That day she had spent long hours outside home under the
scorching sun and roamed about hither and thither in the locality since morning. Her gesture was seemingly pointing towards a sheer desire for a little rest. For, she would be chairing a meeting that afternoon at the Panchayat for discussion over the selection of beneficiaries under a state sponsored scheme of pension for old-aged and unmarried women.

Asked whether the task is really tough and whether it invited criticism, Jharna, a mother of two daughters retorted like an experienced personality. “If you work, you will be criticized – no work no criticism; it is not wise to stop work fearing criticism.” In fact, she could easily introduce her constituency with her gestures, words and by incidences. This signaled her close familiarity with the people of the Panchayat. She keeps herself always updated of most of the figures pertaining to her work-field. Asked about the population of the Panchayat, number of BPL families, number of job cardholders under MGNREGS and even the person-days of jobs provided to the aspirants in her Panchayat in the last financial year, she appeared to have learnt all the statistics by heart.

Huge cultivation of vegetables has given Lankamura an identity across the district. However, it was not so even a few years back. Rather, this bordering village has for long been known as a seat of smuggling and cross-border criminal activities. Presently, with the grace of border fencing on one hand and the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions on the other, it has transformed into a vibrant village with agricultural development; 90% of the dwellers eking out their living from farming. Yet, President Jharna evinced neither content nor discontent. She said her Panchayat is actively working keeping an eye on all the strata. Claiming enough performance by her Panchayat, she pointed her fingers back to the past when a
large number of villagers were compelled to sustain their living by begging or smuggling.

Lankamura soil had also been mixed with barren mounts, which have also presently disappeared. Locals say Jharna has been instrumental in rejuvenating those barren mounts for cultivation. The villagers do not mind giving credit to Jharna for this excellent work. She however said, we at the Panchayat meeting discussed the matter at length. During the meeting, the RD engineer of Mohanpur block was also present who gave his advice. Lastly, we utilized the MGNREGA for fund and manpower. She added, we the villagers manually toiled hard for this plan to materialize and truly we achieved a great deal. However, when asked about the exact area created through this, she did not fumble with the exact figures not being available in her hand. She neither posed any alibi nor pretended; rather she rang up the Panchayat Secretary and sought all the related figures. After the talks got over, she said 100 plus Kani (1 hectare equals 6.25 Kani) land came out where mainly chili, white gourd, melon, lemon and fruit plants are being grown. She made it clear that once labeled as uncultivable land, this has presently opened an earning avenue for the villagers, not only through cultivation, but also from digging ponds and raising birds and cattle. Of these newly recovered land, a Kani of land gives profit Rs. 20,000-25,000 whereas the investment is worth Rs. 12,000 a year, said Rakhal Debnath, a farmer of the village.

To many of the villagers, Jharna is really a workaholic and always stands for their interests. But not all villagers like Sunil Das subscribe to this notion. He exclaimed, “Why should we exaggerate? Is it possible to make anything big by a woman?” He added, she might be the President, but it is mainly the
Panchayat and virtually the ruling CPM that is working. The words of this villager may not be ruled out should anyone notice the Leftist work-style from the level of the State Government down to the Panchayat.

As exceptions never go by the rules, someone may break the stereotype fabric. Jharna may not prefer to set an example, but her deeds seemed to have drawn this stature about her in the village, a bank official who has repeatedly been contacted by her observed. Coining a story of his experience, the official said, the President had arranged a guarantor for providing a credit of Rs. 30,000 to a landless poor woman to finance her daughter’s marriage. She urged us to provide the loan under any scheme, as the bank had no scheme for giving assistance for marriage ceremony. For this purpose, the President had walked down to the Usabazar UBI office several times. Not only that, she had also taken care that the family was able to make regular repayment of installments, he said.

However, Jharna expressed her concern with some of the departments’ dillydallying process. Giving an instance she said, “We wrote to the top levels and met with the officials of the Water Resource Department for renovation of the LI pump that got damaged a few months back; three months went by without anything happening thereby causing acute distress to the farmers.”

One Tamal Sarkar, a rickshaw-puller by profession, was facing difficulties with the banking rules. His mother was unable to transfer some amount deposited by his late father in a joint account at UBI. Tamal and his mother felt they were being harassed; in fact they could not understand the things that the bank officials were advising. They at last went to Jharna thinking her to be the last resort. She extended her helping
A few days back, when a poor daily labourer of the village died when a thunderbolt struck him, Jharna first reached the home of the deceased. She went there not for showering words of compassion. Some locals said she arranged to take the body to the hospital immediately. She also went to the hospital. It was almost 4 pm and the postmortem was not allowed. She rang the local MLA to come over and request the authority to make arrangements for postmortem; she argued that the family would suffer more. When it was cleared for postmortem, Jharna became concerned of the immediate relief-money for the last ritual by the family. She immediately contacted the block and SDM offices. Not so easily, but due to her continuous persuasion, all these acts were conducted on time. Even the administration granted and handed over Rs. 2,500 as one-time aid next day to the family.

The sleepy village is also becoming culturally active. Here too, Jharna keeps her watch, encouraging cultural features in the Panchayat areas. She encourages everyone to take part in cultural programmes as much as she infuses the same in her two daughters. Seemingly most outward, Jharna is also sincere about her homestead duties. According to her, there may have been some difficult situations at times, but she has never tried to escape from the family responsibilities. One of her neighbours revealed that she practices skipping every morning and runs while skipping to accompany and encourage her VIIth standard daughter.

This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Bengali.
The remote Chakhu Panchayat in Jodhpur district has embarked on a path of prosperity under Sarpanch Durga Devi, despite multiple hardships.

Earlier this year, in the desert sand of one of the most isolated villages of Rajasthan, a brainstorming session was in progress at the Panchayat Bhawan of Chakhu Panchayat in Baap block of Jodhpur district. Conducting the meeting of 200 men was a woman Sarpanch Durga Devi Meghwal.

Unlike the usual Gram Panchayat meetings where people discuss, if at all they do attend, only problems and disputes, here the crowd was discussing the previous financial year, what funds the Panchayat had received, what proportion was utilized and on what activities. One person was reading the detail of the activities completed in the financial year 2011-12. The proposed strategy of 2012-13 was also on the agenda- details were given to the people and they were, in turn, given an equal opportunity to put forth their opinions on the strategy.

Heated arguments followed by serious discussions and then the silence of agreement confirmed the success of the meeting.
“No one used to visit the Panchayat earlier because no one ever asked us to. For the first time we feel a part of it,” said a participant who was all praises for Durga Devi, who got a chance to lead the Chakhu Panchayat on a seat reserved for Scheduled Caste women.

When people of various communities first approached her, Durga Devi had refused. “They decided to elect me unopposed. The villagers believed in me and my education. Seeing their faith that I can serve the Panchayat better, I agreed to become the Sarpanch on one condition – I will never follow any wrong path even if it would favour the same people electing me unopposed,” said Durga Devi, who faced opposition from all the former Sarpanchs. They feared that a woman Sarpanch would unearth their wrongdoings. Chakhu Panchayat is definitely not an easy Panchayat to lead. Besides being one of the most far-flung and backward Panchayats of Jodhpur district, it covers a huge area with a rough topography to boot and 17 revenue villages scattered over 28 sq. kms with very low population density. The Panchayat members have to travel 28 kms to attend meetings and public gatherings, which only men can manage. Hardly any woman can be seen participating in such gatherings, one of the major concerns of the Durga Devi.

Concerned about the lack of the women’s participation, Durga Devi feels that they are held back by two barriers - social pressure and the long distance. Undeterred, she is now looking for a way to increase women’s partnership in the Panchayat. There are other challenges too - of livelihood, health, education and governance which Durga Devi and her Panchayat have to face in their efforts to ensure a better life for the villagers.
There is one health sub-centre in such a vast Panchayat with none to fill the position of the nurse lying vacant for a long time now. The nearest primary healthcare centre is 30 kms away while the community healthcare centre is 60 kms away. As a result, children are not vaccinated, pregnant women and new mothers don’t get proper medical care. Most deliveries are carried out at home, thus depriving the new mother from the benefits of the Janani Suraksha Yojana.

At present, there are 10 Anganwadis, although the village needs seven more. In the 13 schools within the 28 km stretch, the student-teacher ratio remains very poor since teachers are unwilling to travel to these far-flung areas.

There are only two ration shops within the Panchayat limits. Below Poverty Line families have to walk 12 to 15 miles to collect ration.

With so many problems to resolve, Durga Devi is handling the situation quite strategically. She has informed the concerned authorities in writing about the issues in hand. All the departments have assured her to resolve the issue by April 2012. However, no major development has taken place till now.

Sharing her achievements, Durga Devi says, “In my Panchayat, all MGNREGA card-holders receive 100 days’ employment as well as the wages for their hard work.” Villagers support her statement saying that this has never happened in the past. Now, 90 per cent of the people have completed 100 days of work. Of the remaining 10 percent, some either do not live in the village or do not need the work.
To solve the problem of water in *dhanis* (small hamlets), where women had to spend their entire day travelling to fetch water, Durga Devi has made arrangement for pipelines and haud (ground water reservoirs). Similarly, houses for 80 families were built under the Chief Minister’s schemes and Indira Awaas Yojana. An equal number will be constructed by next year.

The work of empowering people is being implemented by self-help groups (SHGs). With the help of the Panchayat, nine such SHGs were formed and each started operating a bank account. In order to help them start small businesses, the Panchayat is expected to provide them professional training.

Durga Devi has increased transparency in the Panchayat and has taken the responsibility of spreading awareness among the villagers.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012.*
BRAVERY OF THE WOMEN PRESIDENT
S. Kant
Gaon Samaj Magazine, May-June, 2012

With her diligence and bravery the women President Ramdulari has not only saved a woman from being sold but also addressed and resolved her problems.

The episode is that of tarnished face of debt trap of money-lenders in rural areas, of their cruelty and of helpless persons writhing after getting trapped in their net and is compelled to undergo inhumanity. This story is mainly of a mentality which treats a woman as just being a slave and a domestic animal. Ramdulari Devi aged 40, is the President of Bhairava Panchayat. Bhairava is one of the most sensitive Panchayats in Bisfi block of Madhubani district. In this Panchayat, majority of the people belong to the minority community. Ramdulari Devi, belonging to the minority community, is the first President of this Panchayat.

Shobhani Devi aged 25, is wife of Balbodh Yadav who is a habitual drinker and a worthless man without any means of earning. Years ago he took a loan on interest from a money-lender to enjoy his drinking habit. Till date, the debt with interest stood at Rs. 18,000. He, by then, became fed up and
was troubled by persistent demands of the money-lender to pay up. Unable to repay the same, he asked the money-lender to take away his wife in place of the debt. The money-lender agreed to the proposal and Balbodh Yadav asked his wife to go along with him. When Shobhani Devi refused to do so, Balbodh beat her and forced her to comply. Shobhani Devi felt highly humiliated and tried to commit suicide by hanging herself. People gathered and took out the hanging rope from the neck of Shobhani Devi. Soon, this news reached Ramdulari Devi who rushed to the spot. She took Shobhani Devi to her house and got her medically treated. When things normalized, she summoned Balbodh Yadav repeatedly for many days, told him to behave reasonably, not to do illegal things, to dedicate his life to earning money, and to respect his wife. She also found means to repay the outstanding loan. The result is that now Shobhani Devi is living happily at her home, her husband is working and earning. He is now free from the debt trap. It is a small story of President Ramdulari Devi, who appears to be very simple. Still in view of the social environment of the Panchayat and the village, saving Shobhani Devi from disaster was her real courage to save humanity. Ramdulari Devi is from a minority community, her economic condition is just normal but on the basis of caste, Shobhani Devi is from a dominant caste. It is dangerous to interfere in the domestic life of people belonging to other castes in rural areas. Generally, nobody dares to do so. What she did was only as the Panchayat President. The credit should also go to the Bihar Sewa Samiti, Madhubani which conducts programmes to train and guide women Panchayat representatives on their rights and duties. They are now taking independent decisions in the Panchayat affairs. Ramdulari Devi is grateful
to Bihar Sewa Samiti for their programme and also to The Hunger Project for making her powerful. In spite of being less educated, she is now performing well with regard to Panchayat affairs.
THE WOMEN SARPANCH DEALING WITH CHALLENGES
Lakhan Salvi
Diamond India (Fortnightly), 1 June, 2012

Women representatives are participating fearlessly in politics with honesty and transparency. They are mainly mending the already spoilt political face of the village. Many women Panchs and Sarpanchs are conducting the affairs of the Panchayats in a better manner in Rajsamand district. Now many persons from distant places are regularly reaching here to watch their exemplary performances and returning back duly inspired by the same.

Look! Sisters are coming out breaking the bondages!

Look out! The sisters are now arriving!

They will come, wipe out the injustices, and they would bring a new era!

Yes, the sisters have come forward; they are wiping away the injustices and changing the world. Vardhani Purohit, Rakhi Paliwal, Mangi Devi Jatiya, Chunni Devi, Rukmani Salvi and Geeta Regar are these many woman faces who are all Sarpanchs and leading their Gram Panchayats and actively participating in their village politics. They have made real the emotions expressed in the above song.
They have done that what nobody else could do; they stopped the illegal mining of sand.

Vardhani Purohit, Sarpanch of Oda GramPanchayat in Rajsamand district has recently initiated action to prevent illegal mining of sand. Such illegal mining of sand was continuing since years together but when Vardhani got to know that it was under the domain of her Panchayat to stop such illegal mining of sand, she, despite strong opposition and pressure, stopped such illegal mining and started collecting toll taxes. It has impressively added to the income of the GramPanchayat. Recently, she initiated actions against the tractor owners who were carrying sand after illegal mining. So far 17 tractors have been seized after her complaints.

Attention is being given to girls’ education and women’s participation in the Gram Sabha

Her age is 24 years; she is sharp eyed and is a combatant. She always dreamt of becoming a PanchayatSarpanch which she has realized by taking on the reins of villagepolitics. She reveals that her father was a Sarpanch in 1995. She wanted to contest the elections in 2010 but then this seat was unreserved and contesting the elections remained a dream only. However, she did not give up and contested as Ward Panch, got elected and could become Up-Sarpanch unopposed. When elected, she had a list of about a dozen challenging assignments.

Rakhi Paliwal, Up-Sarpanch of Upali Odan Gram Panchayat of Khamnor Panchayat Samiti reveals that dirty politics prevailed in the village; the riches were donned with badges of poverty whereas the poor families were waiting to get enlisted therein. She met the Collector to get the fictitious
names removed from the BPL list. The Collector asked her to furnish the list of ineligible BPL families and the list of eligible families to the Block Development Officer. There were 10 such families in the BPL list who were actually rich. Rakhi got the names of the rich removed from the list and got the actual beneficiaries listed therein.

Rakhi has given special attention to girls’ education. She travelled around the village riding her bike to understand the real problem. She found that many girls belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes were denied education. She got in touch with the families of these girls and convinced them about the need for education. She took out a rally and was successful in getting 35 girls to attend the regular education system. She made a lot of efforts in speaking to the girls and telling them about the need for education, especially for girls. She also spoke to their family members who were initially reluctant as their daughters have grown in age and it would be shameful if they had to go to class I and II. But Rakhi informed them that the government has now evolved such a system under which the children would be admitted in a class which is appropriate to their age. Such girls and their families were not aware of this. With her constant efforts, many drop-out boys and girls got themselves enrolled again.

Rakhisays that after becoming the Up-Sarpanch, she took her role as a big challenge because she was not aware of the Panchayati Raj system and any development scheme. She was not even aware of the rights of the Up-Sarpanch. She revealed that she could know and understand the Panchayati Raj system and also about her rights when she got opportunities to participate in various training programmes conducted from time to time by Astha Sansthan and Jatan Sansthan.
She says that during the initial months she found that only a few women WardPanchs used to attend the Gram Sabha meetings. She made efforts to improve this situation. She visited Wards and persuaded the women Panchs to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings. She informed them of their rights and emphasized on the importance of their participation in the quorum. When the situation did not improve in spite of her efforts, Rakhi got a Gram Sabha meeting convened on February 14, 2012 with assistance of the activists from social organisations. For this, she went with traditional yellow rice and invited and persuaded women to become active. Her campaign was successful and all the women WardPanchs came to the meeting and highlighted the issues of their respective Wards.

Rakhi has formed a group of women Ward Panchs who are now conscious and are mobilising other women as well. They are making efforts to secure employment and benefits of the development schemes for the women.

Rakhi also advocated for toilets for women. She is ensuring that the toilets are constructed so that women do not have to defecate in the open.

**Did not allow corruption to take place**

Chunni Bai of Gunjol Gram Panchayat timely detected the defalcations being done by the Gram Sachiv in the construction of Rajiv Gandhi Kendra. Fictitious attendances were filled in the muster-roll used in the construction of the Kendra. When the Sachiv came to the Sarpanch to get the muster-roll countersigned by her, she flatly refused to do so. She enquired about the persons individually who had worked and on which days. Attendances of such persons were found therein who never came to work. The Gram Sachiv was about to embezzle
nearly Rs.23,000. On being informed about this, she refused to countersign the muster-roll. The development officer also pressurized her to countersign but she remained adamant and did not countersign the same. She thus saved Rs.23,000 from being embezzled.

Chunni Bai says that the seat of Sarpanch was reserved for Scheduled Tribe women. Till then powerful persons ruled. When no woman came forward to contest, such persons tried to persuade her to contest and to get elected unopposed. First she refused but the villagers and those of her community persisted and then only she participated in the elections and got elected.

**Doing development of the village dauntlessly**

Mangi Devi, Sarpanch of Pachhmata Gram Panchayat of Railmagra Panchayat Samiti in Rajsamand district has arranged for supply of electricity in the Bhilhutment and Indira colony that were waiting for the same for decades. She says that all the houses in the villages were having electricity but not the ones in the nearby Bhil hutment and Indira colony. As soon as she became Sarpanch, the first work was to bring electricity into these two colonies.

She was never afraid of powerful people of the village inspite of their repeated threats. They even encroach on the Panchayat land; many a times they occupy even the main road. It so happened in her village that some persons encroached on the Panchayat land and created obstructions. Due to this, people faced problems while commuting. Then Mangi Bai took help from the administration and removed the encroachment. She faced many protests while doing this.
She also worked for the Dalits with vigour. She got drains constructed for flow of water out of houses in the Harijan colony. When she started the construction work of drains, the Jat community protested. Actually their drain construction work was already complete and they didn’t want dirty water coming out of Harijan houses to pass through their drains. Inspite of all the protests, Mangi Bai got drains constructed in the Harijan locality. She said that discrimination cannot be done when it’s a question of work of development since all have equal rights. Answering to the question where did she learn about rights, she says that NGOs have given training on rights and functions of representatives of Gram Panchayats.

**As an Example in Transparency**

Regarding matters of transparency, women representatives lead. Thanks to Sarpanch Rukmini Devi of Vijaypura Panchayat in Rajsamand district, total transparency has been established here. She writes down details of expenditure in yellow color on any available vacant wall in the Panchayat. Everyone can see the details of expenditure there. Before Rukmini Devi, her husband Kaluram was the Sarpanch. He always had a vision of a transparent village. Vijaypura has been established as an ideal Gram Panchayat and serves as a role model for many Panchs and Sarpanchs who come to visit the Gram Panchayat as a case of best practice.

**She tackles the challenges**

Geeta Devi Rigar, Sarpanch of Junada Gram Panchayat in Rajsamand district keeps facing new challenges and establishing herself in politics. In her village, folks belonging to higher castes didn’t allow grooms from Scheduled Castes to ride a horse.
Before elections, she took out a procession with her brother-in-law riding a horse. After sometime she stood for elections. Taking the bold decision of taking out such a procession was painful; it affected the elections. But she crossed the first milestone with ease and soon became the Sarpanch. The first challenge faced by her was payment of the bill for road-lights which was due for the last 24 years. She increased income of her Panchayat and from that revenue paid the bill. The Panchayat now has light.

Her next agenda is to fulfill the drinking water needs of her Panchayat. She says that she is trying to provide drinking water through pipelines and construction of water tanks.

When one sees the courage of these women representatives, one feels that they are now completely aware and empowered.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
LAILA LADIES ENSURE ‘SAFETY’
Sandhya C. D’Souza
Deccan Herald, 2 June, 2012

The ladies of Laila village guarantee ‘safety’ for women to have a hygienic period.

A small group of ladies in Laila village of Dakshina Kannada district are striving to ensure that every rural woman maintains menstrual hygiene. Thanks to them, women can now have worry free monthlies at an affordable price.

Isiri-SelfHelp Group which comes under the DK Zilla Panchayat Total Sanitation District Support Unit is probably first of its kind unit in the state to manufacture hygienic and low cost napkins for women.

The production unit that started functioning in August 2011, prepares biodegradable sanitary napkins from wood pulp.

Headed by Laila Gram Panchayat Member Yashodha, this unit has five women who prepare more than 500 sanitary napkins a day and sell them under brand name ‘Safety-Feel Free’.

Speaking to City Herald, Yashodha reveals that the women in GP used to mostly roll beedies to make their living which was hazardous for their health.
“In March 2011, we received a proposal from Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat to open a sanitary manufacturing unit in Laila. We thought this novel initiative will enhance the menstrual health as well as create alternative job opportunities. Around 10 of us attended a workshop at Cauvery Matha Trust in Mysore where we received training to prepare these napkins,” says Yashodha.

Once back in Laila, there was no turning back. The production unit was set up under the name ‘Isiri’.

The Gram Panchayat officials offered us a place in the GP office and set up the venture at a cost of Rs. 7 lakhs.

We got help to buy machinery from National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), says Yashodha.

The pads are chemical-free and each costs Rs. 3. “At present we sell ‘Safety’ in packs of five. Each pack costs Rs. 15 which is half the price that is offered in the market,” she adds.

**Enhancing health**

“Most of the women in our village use cloth and husk during their periods. This causes severe infections and affect the reproductive tract,” says Yashodha who adds that the unit aims to spread awareness on maintaining menstrual hygiene.

Laila unit has become a model in the state and many women from other Gram Panchayats visit the unit to learn more about our venture. We give these women demonstrations on how the napkins are made as well as tell them the importance on using these. Many women have replaced cloths with ‘Safety’, says Yashodha.
Huge demand

The napkins became an instant hit and the unit is getting orders more than they can handle.

Dakshina Kannada District Total Sanitation officer Manjula reveals that the safety sanitary napkins will be distributed to girl students of class VII and VIII in all government schools in the district under the State government’s Kishori scheme.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) district unit has already earmarked Rs. 1,23,000 to purchase sanitary napkin from Laila Gram Panchayat.

“The unit has been given an order to prepare more than 10,000 packs of ‘Safety’, so that they can be distributed to students once the academic year starts. The government hospitals in the district too have decided to include ‘safety’ napkin in the Madilu kit, which is being distributed to the women after delivery at government hospitals.

The Zilla Panchayat plans to have another such unit to meet the increasing demand. There are plans to incorporate pads with wings in the new unit,” adds Manjula.

Model Gram Panchayat

Laila Gram Panchayat in Belthangady Taluk has won Rashtriya Gaurav Gram Sabha Award 2012. Laila Panchayat Development Officer Prakash Shetty says that Laila is striving to become a model village.

A solid waste management plant was recently opened, through which waste is turned into manure and marketed under brand
name ‘Laila Gold’. The sanitary napkin unit is only present in our village in the State.

Apart from that, the credit for the award can be given to the village people. All attend Gram Sabhas without fail and express their problems and see that they are solved, he adds.

**The Iron lady**

“I lived 39 years of my life in a dormant state, rolling beedis for income and bearing tantrums of my alcoholic husband. A literacy camp changed my life forever…”

Yashodha is an inspiration to several women who wish to be literate. “I was like any other village women. However, a literacy camp organised by Jana Shikshana Trust taught me to read and write,” she says.

“I used to feel suppressed and shivered when I went up on a stage. Once I became literate, I felt a kind of confidence and courage entering me,” she adds.

Yashodha admitted her alcoholic husband in a rehab in Mangalore. “He left alcohol forever. Together, we started motivating other women to make their alcoholic husbands join the rehab,” says Yashodha and adds that she has made at least 200 people join rehab and seen success.

“I used to receive threat calls. Many did not like me entering the male strata of society and telling them what to do. However, nothing deterred my courage,” she adds. Yashodha is also known for her strict approach against people who employ children for work. “I just get the child from the place and ensure that he/she goes back to school,” she says.
Yashodha is also an active member of Heera Foundation that works with sex workers, educating them about AIDS. “I work in five villages in Belthangady, educating people about AIDS. I motivate them to do the HIV test and if they are found positive, I guide them to ART centres for the treatment,” says Yashodha and adds that she ensures that the HIV positive people in the village get benefits from various government allotted schemes.

Yashodha is an example of a successful candidate that emerged from a neo-literate campaign. She performs in dramas, gives motivational speeches. She is a joint secretary of the Mahila Ookutta in her village and as a Gram Panchayat member; she is in the fore front in all the GP activities.

This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 in English category.
The scantily educated Radhika had never imagined that one day she would be looking after the welfare of the village community! That apart from working on village issues she would also be raising these issues with higher authorities. However, the 33% reservations for women in Panchayats at first, and the subsequent raise to 50% enabled Radhika to become an elected people’s representative. Starting in 2007, she has been re-elected uncontested, in the recent 2012 panchyat elections from her village. Radhika is now the Ward Member of Jharkusumukhu village of Adhmunda Panchayat of Kesinga Block in Kalahandi. There are around a 100 households in the village with the residents numbering 270.

Radhika’s sole occupation is agriculture alongside that of a daily labourer. Her husband Benudhar is also a daily wage-earner. Both have also built good relations with their village community and stand by them in their hour of need. It was due to this that the villagers decided to put up Radhika as their Ward Member in the 2007 elections. She got elected uncontested. She had understood the issues of the village by then. Even though she had studied only upto the fourth grade, Radhika had gathered enough knowledge about the
Panchayat’s activities and powers through various training programs and workshops.

**Road and water**

In 2007, one of her first activities was to construct the village road which was an immediate need of the people. It used to be practically impossible to use the village road during the rains. Radhika’s contribution in concretizing this road solved a long standing problem which the people are not able to forget. An amount of Rs. 2,38,000 was spent on re-building this road. The road to the village school was also the same. Hence a majority of the children had stopped going to school during the rainy season. Radhika got this road repaired with gravel and has ensured regular maintenance and re-gravelling once in two years. Now the rains do not pose any problem for the children. These steps of Radhika so endeared her to the people that they came forward to support her in all her endeavors, she says.

The 100 odd families in Jharsumukhu village did not have a single pond. Ponds have a variety of use for people staying in villages. From providing water to cattle, or for bathing and cleaning purposes, people dig ponds for these activities. Hence they requested for a pond in their village. Under the efforts of Radhika, a pond was dug under the MGNREGS at a cost of Rs. 5 lakhs. Due to this, people no longer have to depend on the dirty water of nearby nallahs and streams, with the pond serving all their water needs.

A tube-well has also been newly setup which has provided clean potable water to people so that they do not have to depend on the dirty nallah water for cooking purposes. As Bhaskar Majhi, a village elder puts it, “Now everything has been set
right. Our daughter has done everything for us. The road was built and water has been made available, now we do not have any problems.”

**Paths to survival**

Radhika has helped shown ways of surviving to a lot of people in the village. Especially to those who had been discouraged by the complex ways of the local bureaucracy when they sought to get some of their basic problems addressed, Radhika brought a new ray of hope. Although the village residents had elected her as Ward Member, they hadn’t put too much of a pressure on her to do things for them. Probably they’d assumed that it would not be of use to burden her with responsibilities since, “Who would care to listen to a simple tribal girl?” However, after Radhika’s efforts got their long standing demands fulfilled, they became hopeful. They realised that Radhika is the one who can help them resolve some of their pressing problems. A lot of the aged and widows were without any pension. During her first term, Radhika got 40 such persons covered under the appropriate schemes. Five homeless families in her Ward were allotted Indira Awaas houses by her. Above all, women have especially benefitted from Radhika’s efforts.

**Power to the Palli Sabha**

Even today, women are not allowed any say while framing policies or in decision-making in villages. But the case of Jharkusumukhu village seems to be unique. The manner in which Radhika has got about her work after becoming the Ward Member that people have now come to pay importance to other women also. The Palli and Gram Sabha never used to be held regularly. But now due to Radhika’s efforts, they are
being held regularly. Earlier, women never used to come to these meetings. There seemed to be a rule that women cannot be allowed to sit near the village elderly. However, Radhika motivated women to break this rule and attend the meetings in full strength. Now the attendance of women in the Palli or Gram Sabhas is the highest. Kuni Majhi, a woman member of these meetings shares that their opinions are given due importance now. Moreover, issues relating to domestic violence and the like are also being put up and addressed in these meetings.

Now, all these developments have made people to look upon Radhika as their village head!

**Bigger challenges ahead**

After working for a full five years for the people, they voted her back as their representative in the 2012 elections. She was elected uncontested even this time. However, this time her Ward was unreserved; but people reiterated their faith in Radhika once more. Big challenges lie ahead for her. Although a simple tribal lady, Radhika has understood that if due importance and priority is given to peoples’ issues, they will duly accept one’s leadership. She is helped by her husband whenever she needs it, and he allows her enough space to act independently. Benudhar is quite proud of his wife. For her part, having a sound knowledge of her constituents’ hopes and aspirations, Radhika is positively hopeful of completing the unfinished agenda of the previous term.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Odia.*
Their passion will save the environment.

Though the lines of fate for education maybe absent, the heart is full of passion for achieving something. A desire exists for a village full of greenery, cleanliness, no dearth of water and each child should be educated. Have you never read in books, what is environment? Or what should be done to protect it? But we are aware that if we do not save water the next generation will have to struggle for each drop of water and if we do not plant trees the earth will become barren. Although they are villagers, each person has vowed to protect the environment.

Here we are discussing Nipaniya and Padariya villages of Panaagar, about 15 kms from the Jabalpur Municipal limits. The tribal women Sarpanchs have converted their village into a garden. Whoever visits the village exclaims in wonder on beholding its cleanliness and beauty. Ten water harvesting soakpits have been constructed in the village.

Nipaniya village stands on a small hillock, but no water shortage was experienced throughout summer. Even though in cities
there is water shortage during summer, in places situated at heights. The mystery was cleared when it was found that, during the last two years, 10 water harvesting soak-pits have been dug in the village. The result is that the water level has increased leading to surplus water supply instead of having to bring water from neighbouring villages during the peak summer months. There are 12 handpumps and all generate water. No pump is dry, nor there is any other problem with regard to generation of water. One can get as much water as required. Villagers inform us that all this is the result of Sarpanch Ganga Bai Kol’s efforts that today there is excess water in Nipaniya.

Shanti Dham is enchanting. This area is near the funeral ground of the village where dead bodies are brought for their final journey. Can anyone imagine that children would play here or meetings would be held and the villagers would come here to relax? The Sarpanchs of Nipaniya and Padariya have indeed made the Mukti Dham heavenly. In these places, lots of tree plantation has been carried out. Beautiful gardens have been laid.

Excellent provisions have been made for sitting and swings have been put up for children to play. Ganga Bai and Rukmini Bai have got all this done under MGNREGS with the full co-operation of the villagers. Both the Sarpanchs claim that they had a dream about beautifying their villages and all the members gave their full support to realise this. Badri Prasad, the Secretary of Nipaniya, and engineer Manish Thakur had a major role to play in all this.

Works completed in Nipaniya include:

- Drilling of handpumps
Construction of soak-pits for water harvesting
Primary school upgraded to middle school.
Separate tank for drinking water for animals constructed
Face-lift of Mukti Dham under MGNREGS
Construction of boundaries
Tree plantation in large numbers
Construction of roads in the village
Construction of toilets as part of all round cleanliness drive
Pension for 28 senior citizens under the senior citizens’ pension scheme
Construction of houses under the Indira Awaas scheme
Time-to-time counselling of the villagers regarding cleanliness

Along with Nipaniya, all these works were also carried out in Jhur-JhurTola and Leel Kheda. Sarpanch Ganga Bai, aged between 35 and 40 years, has never been to school. Inspite of that, today she can write her name. Two and a half years ago she contested elections from Nipaniya for the post of Sarpanch and won. Today in addition to Nipaniya she also has Jhur-JhurTola and Leel Khedi with her. In the last two and a half years, Ganga Bai has completely changed the face of all the three villages. The road leading up to Nipaniya has been constructed under the Prime Minister’s Road Construction Scheme. Other than this, cementing of all roads and culverts within the village has been carried out by Ganga Bai. The three-metre wide road
constructed under the Prime Minister’s Road Construction Scheme has been widened by depositing muram along its sides so that three four-wheelers can pass simultaneously. Ganga Bai still wants to do a lot of work for her village in the remaining two and a half years.

Similarly, the Sarpanch of village Padariya Rukmini Bai has also taken a vow for the cleanliness of her village. She has studied upto class V. She believes that if one really wants to accomplish something, then ways open up by themselves.

Works accomplished in Paradiya include:

- Construction of Mukti Dham
- Construction of road
- Tap connections under the Tap-Water (nal-jal) Scheme
- Approval of the Panchayat building
- Making the village clean and immaculate

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
A BRAVE WOMAN’S BATTLE FOR WATER
Bharati Hegde
Vijayavani, 6 June, 2012

The tank in the village had dried up. The government was willing to rejuvenate the dried up tank. But the project slipped out of hand due to infighting between the men. Here is the success story of a woman who brought water back to the village and turned it into a green abode.

This is not the story of a woman who sacrificed her life by jumping into the tank so that she could save the village. Instead, she saved the tank in the village from perishing and replenished its greenery.

This is the story of Basavanahalli of Madhugiri Taluk, Tumkur district. Anita Lakshmi is the one who stepped forward to save the Basavanahalli tank. She formed a women’s organisation just to fight for the tank.

The story behind the organisation

This village with a population of 600 possesses only one tank, and its water is the sole source of support. But the tank was heavily silted and water had dried up. At this time, news spread that de-silting work was being taken up in the neighbouring village of Midukara Halli under the ambitious water
augmentation scheme of the State Government. The villagers of Basavanahalli were interested and hence approached the project officials to develop the tank in their own village. The project officials advised them to form an association through which funds would be made available. Sri Anjaneya Swami Tank Development association was thus born.

Tussles... Quarrels

Yes, indeed the men of the village did form an association but the tussle for the post of the president vitiated the atmosphere. Any number of village meetings and pleas by the project officials fell on deaf ears. Infuriated, the project officials refused funds to the villagers and walked away. A project that could have brought greenery to the village was dropped and the water problem remained unresolved. Ramesh, a water conservationist, who visited the village often, once suggested, “If they continue to behave like this, your place will permanently be deprived of water. Instead, why don’t you ladies come together and form an association?” Why not, since this will resolve the water problem, thought Anita Lakshmi and convened a meeting of all the women in the locality. At first, some households expressed opposition. There were many who were skeptical. “We ourselves could not do anything; what can they do? For a few days they will stutter about and then they will get back home”, sneered the men. This made the women all the more determined. We shall form an association and we shall bring water to the town. Till then, we will not cook, we will not wash clothes, we will not do any household work, they vowed.

The determined women did not relent. They went ahead and formed a committee of 19 women members. They forgot about their husbands and children and made trips to the District
Commissioner’s office. They stepped forward to enable the heavily silted Shetty Tank to provide irrigation facilities for the entire village. They assumed responsibility to manage the Sri Anjaneya Swamy Tank Development Association. The members of the committee included the President, Anita Lakshmi, the Vice President, Lakkavva, the Secretary, Siddamma, and the Treasurer, Sanna Rangamma.

In 2007, the State Water Augmentation Project selected Basavanahalli Tank for rejuvenation. Agriculture is the backbone of this village that has 157 families and a population of 850 people. This tank has a total capacity of 17 acres of water retention and when full, feeds the reservoir. But now the development work on the tank is complete and the village can have a sigh of relief.

**Made a list**

A village meeting was convened on behalf of the Water Augmentation Project. Officials representing the project, social experts, elders of the village, engineers, and the District Collector participated in the meeting. What are the works that need to be undertaken for the tank, what are the works that would prove beneficial, and other related issues were assessed right in their presence and listed.

“We estimated that the tank development would entail an expense of about Rs.7 lakhs and placed the same before the District Collector. Talaparige (freshwater spring) was the mainstay of our tank. We had given it up and they had been razed to the ground and erased from our memory. We requested the District Collector to develop the Talapariges also alongside. Our tank had two Talapariges. When the water
level in the tank went down, water used to flow out of these Talapariges. Our intention was to build it like a Kalyani but it was rejected.” “We cannot provide so much money”, they said. “We countered them and insisted, “If you feel so, you need not come to our town”. So they agreed and sanctioned Rs. 30,000. Thus, with this money we developed both the tank and the Talaparige.”

The tank filled up

Our tank would dry up every time we were to reap a good crop. Thus, there was a dire need of water for our village. As the tank has now been de-silted, water is getting filled up. Through voluntary labour, the Talaparige was also dredged and cleaned as a result of which its water has reached the doorstep of the tank. We are now able to harvest two crops in summer. Water can be supplied for 24 hours daily.

The Award Winner

In recognition of all the good work done, this association has received the Republic Day Award for 2011. Minister Shobha Karandlaje gave this award. Anita Lakshmi says, “We were happy to receive it from a person of her stature. We have to increase the revenue obtained from the tank. We have set up a fishery. We are collecting money from the farmers and donors. This has totaled to Rs. 35,000. Another Rs.16,500 has been collected from fish-breeding. We auction a certain quantity of fish every year.

“If we want more water, we have to take up further de-silting. For this we need money. We then have to fund it ourselves. Hence, such money will be utilized for the next phase of tank development”, says Anita.
Kudos said the village

Now the tank is full of water. The entire village is commending the women for this. The District Collector has also praised the effort. The neighbouring villagers visit this village to see the development of the tank. Paddy, Ragi, maize, pulses, sesame, horsegram and other crops are cultivated using the water from the tank. The ever active Anita Lakshmi as member of the Siddapur Gram Panchayat is all keen to solve its problems too. She is devoting attention towards hygiene, toilet facilities, sites, sanction of houses, providing drinking water, etc. The drains of the village have been cleaned under her supervision. She is present wherever there is a problem in the village.

How does deformity matter?

This person who moves everywhere has a deformity in the leg. She had an attack of polio when she was 7-8 years of age. The deformity is permanent. How does it matter if she has a deformity? Her enthusiasm is unabated. She has walked for several miles to serve the causes of rural development and social work. “If I walk for too long, my leg aches, but can I give up my work”, asks Anita. How can disability hamper enthusiasm?

What were their achievements?

“We have built a check-dam for the tank. We have erected border trench around the tank to prevent encroachment. We have dredged to a depth of 5,000 cubic meters. Earlier the tank would breach with excessive rainfall and the water would enter the village. This posed a big problem. So, we strengthened the tank bund and now a person can easily walk on the bank. We have also repaired the pond. People would fight over
distribution of water as everybody would assert his right over it. Water was also being wasted. We have stopped all these. We have provided five gate walls to the tank and this prevented the indiscriminate wastage of water. We constructed two Raja Kaluves and covered them with stone slabs. This has stopped the water from draining off into the soil.

We undertook dredging, strengthening the tank bund, repairing tank hedges and providing rods for tank sluices. There are two pits adjoining the tank. Overgrown plants and mud had choked them and thus water could not find a place there. We have had them cleaned up. The canals would be filled with mud and water was wasted. We constructed check dams for them.

There was a sump like structure at the back of the tank, which supplied water to the fields. We have repaired the sump and have appointed a Neeraganti to ensure satisfactory supply of water to all the fields.”

Anita Lakshmi is very proud to narrate her tank development story.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
LEAVE ME ALONE ON MY OWN FEET
Dileep Dudi
Rajasthan Patrika, 7 June, 2012

The woman Ward Member vowed to make the women representatives conscious about their rights.

The renounced Hindi poet, Bhavani Prasad Mishra, wrote an inspiring poem “Puppet” which somewhat says:

“The puppet boiled with anger and said –
Why are these strings in front and back of me?
Snap these and leave me alone on my own feet.”

These daring poetic lines are now being turned into reality by a woman Ward Member Haneefa Banu in the Mandar Gram Panchayat of Revdar area. Belonging to the minority community, presently the life of this courageous woman is exclusively devoted to bringing up the problems of rural people and in getting such problems resolved appropriately and also in bringing out the women representatives from the shelter of their male relatives. Haneefa stiffly and openly opposed the intrusions being made by the son of the Sarpanch in the affairs of Mandar Panchayat. Initially she was subjected to fierce opposition but it was her faith and
beliefs which ultimately prevailed. She strongly believes that a woman representative is certainly not a puppet who cannot protect her own rights and instead work as directed by her husband or son while she herself remains a puppet only.

The prevailing custom and tradition in western Rajasthan is that the decisions of women WardPanchs and Sarpanchs are being taken by their husband or son on their behalf. Such was also the circumstance prevailing in the GramPanchayat of Haneefa Banu. First of all, she told her husband that she would take her own decisions. Later on, she helped others as well to raise their voice in a similar manner. The Sarpanch did not make any effort to reach the Panchayat herself and therefore, her husband or her son started grabbing her rights and responsibilities. Here, Haneefa started making the women representatives conscious of their rights and responsibilities and also staunchly opposed interference by the son and husband of women representatives in the meetings of the Panchayat.

**The target was turned into a movement**

By now, Haneefa has converted her target of securing the rights and responsibilities of women representatives almost converted into a movement. She linked up with the programme of Sarad Sansthan being conducted in Revdar area and vowed to make the women representatives conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Today more than 200 women representatives have linked up and are working with Haneefa for this purpose and strongly raising their voice for the same. Dr. Sunita Sharma, Director of Sarad Sansthan guided them and they are how marching ahead.
Agitation brought the result

Haneefa took the agitation path when the woman Sarpanch was not attending the meetings of Gram Sabha and Panchayat. By picketing along with other women representatives, she met the administrative officials. Ultimately, the woman Sarpanch started attending the meetings and thus working well.

They have to say…

Haneefa Banu has done well for social justice in the Panchayat. In real sense, the fact remains that she has made the women representatives conscious of their rights and responsibilities.

Dr. Sunita Sharma,
Director, Sarad Sansthan

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
THE WOMEN SARPANCH HAVE DONE EXEMPLARY WORK THROUGH ADVANCEMENT IN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING CAPABILITY
Imtiyaz Bhati
Dainik Amber, 10 June, 2012

Better results are being ensured with increasing women’s participation in the Panchayats. The society now relies more on women’s leadership and their decision-making capability. Their role is commendable in the functions like education, self-employment, health, cleanliness, etc. The women Sarpanchs have earned laurels in their work being done. Their husbands are now interfering less and less as the women Sarpanchs are taking the decisions and leading development work. Although, their number may be a handful now, the educated women Sarpanchs now want to get all work done under their guidance. Some of the highly educated women Sarpanchs have even removed their veils on reaching the village platform. They are seen openly and freely discussing on development of the village with the elders, young ones and women alike. They are assertive in raising issues during the Gram Panchayat and the Panchayat Samiti meetings. They travel, unaccompanied by men, to attend meetings with the District Collector, CEO of district council and BDO to discuss and resolve important issues. They are missionaries in themselves and are even assisting other women Sarpanchs to perform fearlessly.
Now delivery will take place in hospital only

Haripura Gram Panchayat is one such Gram Panchayat in the district wherein people are beginning to realize the need for health-care. Vaccinations of pregnant women and children have increased considerably. On becoming a Sarpanch, Pramila took a vow that henceforth no delivery will take place at home and emphasized on the need for institutional delivery. This campaign has so far been successful. Moreover, she is also emphasizing on village sanitation. Pramila is one of the most qualified Sarpanchs of the district and has done M.A. and B.Ed. A lot of confusion prevailed in the village so far as vasectomy is concerned. Pramila took the vow to spread awareness in the village as soon as she became Sarpanch. Gradually, she attained success in her sincere and well-meant efforts. Now, every child and every pregnant woman is being duly vaccinated. She sits with healthworkers from time to time to review the health status of her Panchayat. Pramila also wants to look at the water-conservation with the help of experts and technicians. On one side domestic tanks are being constructed, whereas the systems have been installed in the government offices.

Campaign for protecting the daughter and preventing child marriage

Sarpanch of Panchlangi Gram Panchayat, Archana Sharma is an educated woman. She is better known as an educated woman Sarpanch who discusses the development issues very seriously during the Gram Panchayat meetings. She made personal efforts in getting gowshala (cow-shed) constructed in the village for vagabond cows. At present, about more than hundred cows are being looked after there. With her persistent efforts, a Rajasthan Grameen Branch has been set up in the
village. It has proved highly beneficial to the villagers. With her initiative, a community hall has been constructed in the village. She is now trying to get the science and commerce streams included in the higher secondary school of the village. She is a visionary and hopes that these dreams of her would also be realized soon. Now, she is trying utmost to bring the village gas kitchen scheme to her village. She got 13 borings done so far.

Archana proudly claims that child marriage has so far been successfully prevented in her area. She successfully persuaded the parents getting their children married to stop the same. She also sought active support from the State administration. She narrates how she placed the village problems before the administrative officials, and convincingly and courageously discussed them to get a favorable response. She says that she has always been awarded for her sincerity. She does not like any interference in the working of the Panchayat. She spreads awareness about vaccination, gets every pregnant woman and child vaccinated, and for that she works in close co-operation with the health workers. Now, people themselves are approaching the health clinic for the same. Archana is also President of the district Brahman community; she is also pursuing such efforts through this source as well.

A wonderful effort for education

Today, none of the girl child of Mandela Gram Panchayat is outside the school education system. Sarpanch Deepa Jangid is amidst the campaign to get every girl child admitted in the school. Besides performing the routine work of the Panchayat, Deepa regularly tours the village school, Anganwadi centre and the ration shop so as to make these services accountable. With the help of Anganwadi workers, the malnourished children
were identified and necessary medical help was ensured. She organised women of every caste and creed in the village and ensured their active participation in the GramSabhaso that development of the village could be equally shared by everyone. She struggled for securing BPL ration cardsof the poor families who were without the same till then.

**Village campaign for prohibition**

Saroj, Sarpanch of Kulod Kalan nurtured a dream of effectively implementing the prohibition as soon as she became Sarpanch. A resolution to this effect was duly adopted in the meeting of the Gram Panchayat held in the year 2010. After the same, she along with the Up-Sarpanch and other Panchs, first launched a campaign; she inspired the village women who in turn started making their husband and sons to understand the gravity of the issue involved. Male residents are also in this noble campaign. They told that the campaign has saved many families who are now living happily. Saroj is well qualified; she has done B.A. and B.Ed. She has also made dedicated efforts for water conservation, girls’ education and medical services. She approached and got implemented the water conservation scheme in all the pucca houses. Tanks were also constructed in a number of houses.

**New advent of cleanliness**

Today, Bhateri Devi, Sarpanch of Ojuto Gram Panchayat is known for her work in the areaof hygiene and sanitation in Chirhava Panchayat Samiti. Bhateri Devi is not much educated but still she understands the importance of hygiene and sanitation in the day-to-day life. As a Sarpanch, she undertook this as the first and foremost task. She made a list of such houses
which did not have lavatories. Then, the next step was to get lavatories constructed. She says that there might be a house or two still not having toilet but nearly all have the same. She got all these done by bringing money from relevant government schemes, and collected contributions from well-to-do families in the village. Now, the situation is so good that nobody from the village goes for open defecation. She encouraged the villagers to get tanks built in their houses and so there are no more water-spills now on the village streets.

Removed her veil to become part of the ongoing development

After becoming Sarpanch, Sumitra Devi discarded her veil and vigorously engaged in dialogues regarding the ongoing development work. Just one month after becoming Sarpanch of Nunia Gotharba, she started planning for development work. She is well acquainted with the rights and duties of a Sarpanch. Nobody from her family, even her husband is allowed to interfere in her Panchayat affairs. She does everything with her own discretion. Sumitra wants that every girl in her village to go to school and has established a separate fund for this purpose.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
Pusy Bai is the WardPanch of Dhidvada in Ajmer district. She is a resident of Khandach and is 62 years old. She has become WardPanch for the first time. She got the opportunity to contest in the Panchayati Raj elections held in 2010. She is linked with social work and attached to the Mahila Manch (women’s platform) at the research centre in Tiloniya.

She has always been known as a conscious, active and strong woman. When she filed her nomination paper for the election, she had two candidates against her from her in-laws. She did not even resort to election propaganda; instead her supporters actively did this on her behalf. She used to insist that she would win and she won ultimately by 191 votes and became WardPanch.

She never looked back after that. She used to participate in the various training programmes being conducted by the Tiloniya institution and therefore, she become well acquainted with issues like womenempowerment, gendersensitivity, Panchayati raj, MGNREGA, Right to Information, etc.

Pusy Bai has many achievements to her credit. She regularly monitors the Anganwadi, MGNREGS, school, and ANM
building. Pusy Bai also keeps an eye on the PDS shop and pulls up the concerned officials whenever she detects any irregularity in their functioning.

She pays special attention on the work being done under MGNREGA. Earlier, workers of the same were not being provided receipt of the application no.6. She was then forced to take up this matter with the Sarpanch and GramSewak. Now, the same has been regularized and the labourers are regularly getting the receipt from the GramPanchayat. These are now properly dated as well. Pusy Bai closely monitors the work that is provided under MGNREGS and ensures that the workers get their wages on time with proper receipt, etc.

Pusy Bai is barely literate and can read and pen down her signature. She actively participates in the meetings of the education committee and always puts extra emphasis on the education of girls. She also visits door-to-door and convinces the parents to allow their daughters to study. She regularly visits the nightclasses and is also regular in attending the Panchayat meetings. Pusy Bai encourages the villagers to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings and submit proposals for village development. She gets meeting allowance deducted for the absentee Panchs and arranges pensions for the needy villagers. She proposed installation of six solar facilities in the village, participated in many protest demonstrations, and even went to Delhi to take part in the demand for old-age pension. She says that she wants the people in her village to be happy and lead a hassle-free life. She continues working as Ward Panch so that she might keep doing well for her villagers.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
YASHODHA’S SUCCESS STORY OF THE NAPKIN UNIT
Muhammed Arif Padubidri
Vijaya Karnataka, 12 June, 2012

Realizing the need for hygiene amongst rural women and especially of young girls during their menstruation periods, Yashodha is the force behind the setting up of a napkin unit in the rural area of Laila of Dakshina Kannada for the first time in the State.

Yashodha belongs to the most backward of Scheduled Castes. She educated herself during the literacy movement, freed the village from the clutches of alcoholism, had child labourers admitted to educational institutions so that they gain education and employment, extended help to those afflicted with HIV/AIDS and as a Gram Panchayat member ensured that government facilities reached all. Thus, her success story in creating a model village is very great.

Starting from home

Yashodha who turned literate during the literacy movement held about 25 years ago, besides being a pupil herself, took active part in the movement and was successful in enrolling people of the village. Many lit the lamp of learning in their houses, thanks to her efforts. It is a matter of pride that as a
result of being the Taluk President of the literacy movement, she participated as a resource person at several places including a university.

Her houseposed the first problem while working for the literacy movement. Her husband was a drunkard and and this posed a hurdle for her. In order to seek a remedy, she vowed to make him give up alcohol. Acting on the advice of Sheena Shetty and Krishna Mulya of Jana Shikshana Trust, she sought the co-operation of Pragnya Counseling Centre and through medical treatment, was successful in curing her husband of the vice.

Enthused by this victory, she would admit each and every alcoholic to the de-addiction camp run by the rural development programme of Dharmasthala. While fighting against opening of liquor shops and also while impressing upon people to give up drinking, she faced opposition from several people. There were threats of kidnapping and causing physical harm. With Dr. Veerendra Hegde’s encouragement not to succumb to such threats, Yashodha has to her credit more than 200 cases of de-addiction.

**Education to children**

In the village of Laila, many children were not admitted to school due to poverty and other reasons. Some put an end to their education at the primary level itself and were working as household help or as agricultural hands. Once she attained literacy, she was determined that these children too should get educated. So, she had them admitted to the nearby school. Many were admitted to the school run by Pragnya Counseling Centre for the sake of the children belonging to the working
class. While many out of them have taken up teaching and clerical jobs, others have set up tailoring and garage shops as self-employment.

**Help to HIV afflicted**

With a view to help HIV/AIDS patients, she joined the HIV/AIDS Foundation at Belthangadi and has taken over supervision of Laila, Ujire, Mundaje, Thotatari and Charmadi villages. She went from house to house in these five villages and created awareness about HIV/AIDS. During such visits, she identified 15 afflicted people and had them admitted to Venlak Hospital in Mangalore and at times, had invited the doctor to the village and provided ART facility. She has organized a camp to create awareness in villagers about unprotected sex. She has ensured monthly financial aid from the government for the children of HIV patients.

After being elected as a member of the Gram Panchayat, apart from her regular social work, she is taking special interest to obtain government facilities for villagers. Ration card, old age pension, money to build houses, entitlement documents, caste and income certificates are delivered to people at her instance.

**Safety pads for girl students of rural high school**

The napkin unit was the first project set up in rural Karnataka by self-help groups. While women in urban and semi-urban areas use pads available in the market, rural women use the traditional cloth even today. With a view to encourage rural women to use pads, a napkin unit has been set up in Laila village of Belthangadi.
A team of 10 people including Yashodha, a member of Laila Gram Panchayat, had participated in the training given by Sri Mata Trust of Mysore Piriyapattana on napkin manufacture. Accordingly, the unit was set up at an expense of Rs. 9.34 lakhs, out of which NABARD disbursed an amount of Rs. 4.53 lakhs and the remainder was a loan from Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) with a subsidy of Rs. 1.25 lakhs.

The napkin unit was started under the leadership of Yashodha after procuring the necessary raw materials and was inaugurated on November 28, 2011. Vijaya Lakshmi, Husenabi, Ashwini and Nirmala, members of Laila’s Isiri-self-help group are managing it.

As per a survey conducted in the village, only 25% are using pads. Hence, with no demand in the village and with no comparison as to the quality of the pad available in the market, it was decided to distribute the pads to members of the self-help groups. Subsequently, as per the suggestion of Dr.K.N.Vijaya Prakash, the CEO of Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat, it has been decided to provide pads to the girl students of the government high school.

The Gram Panchayat President Sudhakar B.L. has been extending full cooperation to the members of the self-help group. By now, 3,000 pads have already been distributed among girl students and a unit is being set up in a room in the high school at Aladangadi. Panchayat Development Officer Prakash Shetty says that there is now an order for 10,000 pads.
STORY OF THE VILLAGE BUILT
BY A GRAM PANCHAYAT PRESIDENT
CALLED JAYAMMA
Bharati Hegde
Vijayavani, 14 June, 2012

Jayamma, the President of the Nyamagondlu Gram Panchayat of Gauribidanur Taluk, has to be credited for developing the entire village, fully utilizing all the facilities provided by the government. She is a prime role model for women politicians at our village and Taluk levels.

“Our village should improve.” Many people pose this question to themselves but very few bring it into action.

However, there is an unusual lady who posed this question to herself and turned it into a reality. She has studied only up to the class VI. Even then, she realized that her village faces umpteen problems and stepped forward to set them right. She achieved this through her Panchayat. She is none other than Jayamma, President of Nyamagondlu Panchayat of Gauribidanur Taluk in Chikkaballapur district.

It is a large Panchayat with 22 members, out of whom 13 are men and nine are women. She belongs to the Scheduled Caste and does not know how to read and write.
Held Panchayat meeting

She prepared a list of do’s for the village and based on it, she sought the co-operation of officials as well as voluntary organisations. Now the village is a role model for others.

She first paid attention to the water problem. The Taluk of Gauribidanur has always faced water problem. There were no rains for three years resulting in the drying up of tanks of nearby villages. But there is no scarcity of water in the seven villages under the purview of the Nyamagondu Panchayat. The reason being all the Panchayat members started a movement under the leadership of Jayamma to ease the problem. Under the employment guarantee scheme, dredging work was undertaken in the tanks in all the seven villages. Water got collected in the tanks. Thereafter, rain-water harvesting system was put in place for hospitals and schools. Each of the seven villages including Nyamagondu, Budagenahalli, Gundlahalli, Guttenahalli and Tyaragondanahalli were provided with 4-5 bore-wells. However, over time, water levels depleted in all the bore-wells. “That is why we abandoned it and dug up another. We discussed amongst ourselves and ensured proper distribution of water for the entire village”, says Jayamma. In addition, drinking water facility has been set up for all these seven villages. Despite all these measures, rain-water harvesting has to be taken up for the entire village. Only then can the water problem be completely solved, she adds.

PHC re-opened

Credit goes to this Panchayat for re-opening a defunct primary health centre (PHC) so as to benefit the people. It was facing closure. It did not have either electricity connection or water
connection and there was a lack of equipment too, thereby creating a problem. As a result, all the patients had to go to Gauribidanur. But power was provided on behalf of the Panchayat. The PHC annually receives Rs. 1,70,000 under the NRHM programme. They have co-operated in maintaining cleanliness and in purchasing gloves, medicines and other furniture required for the delivery room by ensuring that the money is not misused. The delivery ward of the PHC is now praised as having the best equipment among all PHCs of Karnataka. Villagers from the surrounding areas of Gauribidanur Taluk now come to this centre for delivery. The centre has two doctors and four staff nurses.

Attraction of Seemantha (pre-delivery ritual ceremony)

True, the PHC was at a stage of closure. But it reopened because of Seemantha. It was not an ordinary Seemantha programme. Here, the doctors create awareness about the health of the pregnant woman in the presence of elders. Ways of cooking greens available locally, and the vegetables and fruits that pregnant women should eat are made known here.

“Madam, nobody would ever come near the PHC. People felt that the PHC would have to be shut down if this were to continue. That was the time when we decided upon this programme. On behalf of the Panchayat, we gift a sari, blouse, bangles, flowers, fruits. We also prepare a sweet dish. Until now, we have performed 19 such Seemantha programmes”, recalls Jayamma.

As part of the programme, HIV test and scanning are also undertaken. About 15-20 women have their Seemantha at a time. Now, at least 10-11 deliveries take place here every
month. After the delivery, the women are discharged from the PHC in the traditional manner of Madilakki.

**Hygiene**

Even today, there is a shortage of basic facilities in Indian villages. Nyamagondlu has been no exception. No toilets to speak of, and people do not have even the tiniest notion of using it. This Panchayat is always ready to maintain hygiene in the village. Hence, funds have been received to construct 130 toilets in all the seven villages under this Panchayat, apart from creating awareness amongst the people about toilets. In all, they have resolved that all their villages should be completely cleaned up so as to enable the Panchayat to earn the Nirmal Gram Puraskar Award. In the past one year, cement roads have been constructed under the Suvarna Grama Yojana.

**Electricity**

Electricity was already there but was wasted. Street-lights were burning even during day time. Electricity bills were very high. She therefore introduced a control system in the Panchayat. Switching the power off at one place automatically turns off all the street-lights. In addition, she had meters installed for borewells. Now, there is no wastage of power and water.

**Revenue**

The quantum of tax collection in the Gram Panchayat was low. At the General Body Meeting, all the members discussed the issue. With the members’ co-operation, tax is collected from every house in each village. Tax collection now stands at 70%.
Education

The school children of Nyamagondlu were earlier getting their mid-day meal from Gauribidanur but the food was not good. The Panchayat has now assumed charge to supply mid-day meals and has appointed four people for the purpose.

Monthly meetings

All members meet every month and thus it has been possible to improve developmental works of the village. About 72 huts have been re-constructed as cement houses under Basava Indira Awaas scheme and in the previous budget, 33 houses in Budigenahalli and Saragondu and 50 houses in Tyaragondu were constructed. She has ensured monthly pensions due from the Taluk Panchayat office to about 60 aged persons. The Anganwadi centres in all the villages under the Panchayat are periodically visited, the quality of food and hygiene are inspected, and all facilities needed for the centres are provided. It is a matter of pride for the people that compared to all the other Panchayats of the Taluk, Nyamagondlu Panchayat is developing very rapidly.

Jaya means victory and the villagers say that Jaya follows Jayamma in whatever she does. They are also appreciative of the fact that her tenure has witnessed many developmental programmes.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
THE EMPOWERED GRAM PANCHAYAT
LADY PRESIDENT TAKES BOLD STEPS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT
Prakash S.N.
Andolana Dhinapatrike, 14 June, 2012

Rekha Sridhar, President of Ponnampete Panchayat in Kodagu district has within a short time of assuming power, demonstrated to the world that everything can be undertaken for rural development under the Panchayati Raj system.

Taking care of two sons and a daughter, she is self-reliant by running a small textile shop with the help of her husband and simultaneously manages the tasks of the Panchayat, which is commendable! She has studied up to SSLC and is a Bharatanatyam dancer. She has imparted Bharatanatyam training in many schools. Developing spiritual notions since a young age due to contact with Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, this lady has also shouldered responsibility as the President of Matru Mandali. She has served Ponnampete ladies association as a member and has also worked as a newsreader and compere for the local TV channel. In the midst of all these activities, she makes sure that there is no friction in the family.

She was chosen as President after being elected as a member to the Gram Panchayat. Rekha Sridhar says with gratitude that the experience she gained through several training programmes held by ODP helped her immensely. This Gram
Panchayat has 18 representatives including the opposition and has five Wards. But a heartening factor is that when the town faces any problem, the members of the Panchayat become one family. In seeking solutions to the problems faced by the people, all political affiliations and opposing stances become insignificant. The transparent administration by the President is the reason behind the support and trust shown by all members.

Ponnampete Gram Panchayat has marched towards Gram Swaraj and rural development by focusing attention on basic facilities like health, drinking water, construction of a commercial complex, employment, empowerment of women, houses for Scheduled Caste people, and toilet construction. With the help of a private company in Bangalore, interviews for jobs were conducted on behalf of the Panchayat and out of 66 unemployed, 55 persons have been provided employment in various private companies.

**High achievement in less time: Primary Health Centre (PHC)**

Within six months of assuming office as the President on March 7, 2011, the hospital project that had earlier been shelved was taken up and the present Panchayat has been successful in setting up a PHC, thanks to its efforts. An amount of Rs. 10,60,000 was obtained from the XIIIth Finance Commission and the building was renovated. This PHC at Ponnampete has been very beneficial to the public. In earlier days, people had to trudge to far off Hudikeri. The Panchayat bears the electricity bill and minor expenses. Subsequently, with the help of the local TV channel, an ambulance was purchased to benefit the neighbouring villages as well.
Three parties have set aside their varied ideologies and have come together to devote attention towards development. This unique Gram Panchayat is a role model to other Gram Panchayats of the State.

Hygiene

The plight of a house without a toilet is indescribable. Realizing this, the Gram Panchayat has pulled down 16 dilapidated toilets in Shiva Colony and has the new ones constructed in one go. Waste disposal had been a long time problem in Ponnampete Gram Panchayat. BCM hostel, court and ITI buildings existed very next to the dumping ground. As Rekha had been elected from this Ward, she could not renege on people’s aspirations and was committed to her assurances. On getting elected as the President, sanction was obtained through the Tehsildar and divisional officers to dispose of the waste on a two-acre land, a part of a nine-acre expanse belonging to the adjacent town. Meanwhile, a Gram Panchayat member of Aruvattuklu obtained a stay order from the High Court about the place. This got vacated through the court. With the hygiene of the village in mind, a modern tractor has been purchased at a cost of Rs. 6 lakhs. Funds to the tune of Rs. 5.50 lakhs from the XIIth Finance Commission have been utilized under the purview of the Panchayat. The prize money of Rs. 2 lakhs received under the cleanliness movement was spent on buying a tractor. She has provided BPL cards to SCs/STs and the disabled in her Ward. Ownership documents for 45 houses were gathering dust for several decades; these have now been distributed. Sewage work has been taken up by spending Rs. 1 lakh.
After negotiations with the District Panchayat, a big water tank is being built with a grant of Rs. 6 lakhs. New pipe-lines are being laid to provide water to the people involving an expenditure of Rs. 5 lakhs. Providing water to the Anganwadi centre was the first job taken up by the present Panchayat.

**In the field of education**

Students of the local government model primary school have been provided sports materials at a cost of Rs. 40,000. In addition, as the school is in close vicinity to the main road, the fact that small children face problems due to traffic congestion was taken note of. By spending Rs. 1,40,000, concrete slabs were placed which smoothened the movement of children. This school is about to celebrate its centenary and a wall barricade was built at a cost of Rs. 2.40 lakhs out of the employment guarantee scheme funds. Poor school children who go on an excursion to areas under the Panchayat receive financial help. The Panchayat helps 30 students of SC/ST financially.

Under the Suvarna Grama scheme, 30 beneficiaries were given training in driving by spending Rs. 90,000.

**Construction works**

The Speaker of Vidhana Soudha has already laid the foundation stone for the construction of a commercial complex with public participation for a budget of Rs. 90 lakhs. Rekha informs that construction of a building for the Gram Panchayat office will soon be taken up. Out of the four-stage building activity, administrative approval for the construction of a commercial complex has been obtained and it has been decided to take up the work after the rainy season.
An action plan of Rs. 40 lakhs has been prepared for the implementation of the employment guarantee scheme for the Gram Panchayat during the year 2012-13. Out of this, 20% will be towards afforestation and 10% towards road-work. Fourteen beneficiaries for the Indira Aavaas scheme and 65 beneficiaries for the Basava Vasati scheme have been selected. Twenty four beneficiaries for the Antyodaya scheme and five beneficiaries for Annapurna scheme have been selected.

Misappropriation cases relating to Ashraya housing were unearthed only recently. Two cases of transferring Ashraya title deeds and renting them out have been noticed by the Panchayat and suitable action has been taken. Rekha informed Andolana that a similar incident came to light six months ago and the money has been collected back.

Any amenity of the government is disbursed keeping the very poor in mind. There has been an equitable distribution of Astra stoves and solar lights received from the forest department.

**Focus on next goal**

Projects for organic cultivation, tailoring training, computer training, floriculture, vermi post cultivation and food processing are on the anvil.

The Congress and the JDS have set aside their party affiliations and have joined hands with the ruling BJP in a determined bid to march towards development in a democratic set up. The work of Ponnampete Gram Panchayat is a glowing example of the fact that if the people’s representatives show concern and care about rural people, all achievements are possible without any hue and cry.
Population under the Ponnampete Gram Panchayat:
Estimated population: 11,000
BPL population: 844
SC population: 51
ST population: 39

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY THE WOMEN WOULD NOT REMAIN BEHIND

Ratan Ravi
Aaj Bihar, 14 June, 2012

Although women have the natural ability and capability, she needs the opportunity to prove the same. Now, the Panchayati Raj Act has provided her with this opportunity. Due to it, the less-learned women belonging to simple families have become leaders. It has been so observed of Ramdulari Devi, the President of the highly sensitive Bhairva Panchayat of Bisfi block in Madhubani district. It has a majority of minority community and Ramdulari Devi is the first Hindu woman President of the Panchayat.

In a chat with Ramdulari Devi, she revealed that the post of the President is full of responsibilities. The earlier President used to work through middle-men. She was only a rubberstamp. Actually, her husband used to look after the functioning of the Panchayat. Consequently, the development of Panchayat remained limited.

Ever since in 2011 when Ramdulari Devi became the President, she has focused her work on four key issues. She takes decisions independently, ascertains needs of the Panchayat, properly uses the funds received by the Panchayat, and emphasizes on the proper functioning of the Gram Sabha. As a result, the
work culture in the Panchayat has assumed a new significance. The middle-men have disappeared while the speed of development has picked up. Incidences of domestic violence against women have reduced and the administration is more involved. The voters, particularly a good number of women who opposed during the elections have now become admirers.

The courage, devotion and dedication towards development by Sita Devi, the Ward Member of Jagwan East Panchayat of Bisfi block is being highly appreciated. She belongs to a poor and down-trodden family. With her approach, working initiative and hard work, she has today become a highly significant part of the Panchayat rule. She keeps struggling on behalf of the frustrated and disappointed people with the President of the Panchayat and the administration. She stresses that she is not only a Ward Member but also a member of the Panchayat, and development of the whole of the Panchayat is her duty.

Lalan Devi has become President of Nahas Rupali South Panchayat for the second time. She firmly believes that she would never be defeated in the elections. On seeking the reason for the same, she emphasizes that the President is not only supposed to be an official for the development of the Panchayat, but also a responsible guardian of the same. Her persistent efforts remain directed towards the reality that the residents of the Panchayat should never live without the basic facilities which are a must. They should avail of the benefits of the welfare schemes of the government.

Peaceful atmosphere should prevail in the Panchayat, domestic violence should be banished; such are the views and persistent efforts of Baby Yashmin, President of Bairva Panchayat and
of Rehana Khatoon of Tessi Versam Panchayat in Bisfi block. Both are today much talked about due to their sincere and dedicated efforts. Both were Ward Members during 2006-2011. In the elections held in 2011, both of them contested for the post of President in their respective Panchayats but were defeated.

Parmeshwari Devi is the President of Thengha Panchayat. It is her second term in continuation. She belongs to the highly deprived Mushahar caste. She asserts that it is because of her dedicated and sincere service that she was elected as President for the second term as well. According to her, taking decisions independently, discouraging the middle-men, regularising the Gram Sabha, and making good use of the Panchayat funds are means to her success.

Hemlata Sajjan is the President of Andharathadhi South Panchayat. She sent a strong-headed middle-man to jail. It is worth mentioning here that the said middle-man belongs to the majority caste of the Panchayat. This person has two wives and both of them are elected members from different Wards. As per Hemlata, this middle-man and both of his wives are likely to create serious problems for her in the near future. Inspite of this, she is highly satisfied that she has performed her role righteously.

There are 8,471 Gram Panchayats, 533 Panchayat Samitis, 38 district councils, and 1,16,036 Wards in Bihar. Women occupy more than half of these posts. It is true that all of these elected women have not been successful in executing their responsibilities well. Still the successful ones amongst these women prove that if given the opportunity, they will not lag
behind men. The graph of their success will be moving upward in the days to come. They have opposed the prohibition imposed on having more than two children.

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HIRA BAI, THE LAKSHMI BAI OF TODAY
Nandlal Singh
Nav Swadesh, 14 June, 2012

“I do not care if I have to pay with my life in getting the rights of people” – Sarpanch, Bhagwar Panchayat

People who had been all along enduring injustice and atrocities could never have imagined that a woman who had been confined to the home and hearth only would burst out like a flame and change the very face of the Panchayat. Such a woman does not care for her life for the sake of getting people their rights. She does not care about hunger or her honour but remains resolute in her purpose and remains courageous till her demands are met. She is an example for today’s women who stay in their veils. She makes the corrupt shake with fear by her courage. This is perhaps the reason why the government and the administration have saluted her. If we compare her courage and patience to the revolutionary woman Rani Lakshmi Bai, it will not be an exaggeration.

Yes, this is the story of the Sarpanch Hira Bai Singh of Bhagwar Panchayat in the tribal dominated Kusmi region. Five years ago, inspite of being educated, Hira Bai was limited to her home and hearth; where most of the men and women of the family were illiterate and it was a matter of mockery if anyone even
thought of asking for their rights from the government or the administration. She noticed that there were many beneficial schemes for the good of the people, inspite of which 80-year old men, labourers, farmers, and young people had to wander about for their rights from place to place. This used to make her heart ache.

When she could bear it no longer she tried to raise her voice against the system but was suppressed by her family and society, and also by warnings and threats. She got a little afraid and backed off even though she was dissatisfied. She made a vow to herself that she would make sure that the people would be given their rights. When it was announced in 2010 that Panchayat elections were going to be held, Hira Bai decided to fight for the post of the Sarpanch, and gathering courage she put forward this idea to her family members. However, it was not so easy for her to get permission for this. Her mother-in-law said, “If you become the Sarpanch, who will give us food and water?” Her father-in-law, on the other hand said, “There is nothing to be got from being a Sarpanch, our life long reputation will be ground in the mud.” In this way all the other people of the family began to raise objections over small things in their own way. Even then, Hira Bai did not lose courage. There was a glimmer of hope when her husband agreed with some conditions. However, when her father-in-law and mother-in-law and the other members of the family heard about it they ordered Hira Bai to take her husband and leave the house, stating that they had nothing to do with her. Under pressure, her husband gave in but still she did not lose courage.

People say that those who have noone have God with them. It happened like this. Most of the people wanted a new face as
the Sarpanch, someone who would be close to the public, pay attention to their problems, and who would have the courage to do something. They saw all this in Hira Bai. So they all got together and created a support base for her. Only five days were left for the elections. Hira Bai went from house to house requesting people to give her a chance to serve them and convinced them that she would fulfill their dreams. And it so happened, that she was declared the winner by a huge margin. Now nearly four years of her term as a Sarpanch are over. The people of the place openly say that Hira Bai is the Lakshmi Bai of Kalyug who has changed the face of Bhagwar. In these four years, Hira Bai has had to fight many difficult battles in order to get development works done in the Panchayat. Her enemies made many efforts to remove her from the path, even defaming her, but she did not turn back. She has continued in her efforts to fight against injustice and atrocities.

**When the administration had to accept defeat**

Everyone was fed up with the behavior of the corrupt Panchayat Secretary. Repeated attempts were made to have him removed from the Panchayat. His activities were even brought to the attention of the government and the administration but nothing succeeded in getting him removed. Then Sarpanch Hira Bai, along with the Deputy Sarpanch, Shambhu Gupta and the other Panchs and members of the public staged a fast unto death in the Collectorate courtyard. She sat hungry and thirsty continuously for seven days but still did not receive any assurance from the administration. During this period she got many messages putting pressure on her to stop the protest, from her family and others who began to say many kinds of things. Even then, she did not give up and at the end the administration had to bend down.
**Hira Bai has studied up to the class XII**

Hira Bai is the Sarpanch of the Panchayat of the tribal dominated region of Kusmi and has studied up to the class XII. She decided to fight for the rights of the poor people as a social worker and as a representative in 2001-02. She fought the election and entered the fray. During her term as a member, her work in the field of development according to a strategy has been unparalleled. Due to this she has been given the responsibility of a social worker by the people; the majority of the women have joined her. Today in 20 Wards, there are 13 women Panchs, in which Nanbai Singh, Shyamvati Singh, Savita Singh, Satyavati Singh, Kusum Kali Singh, Rambai Panika, Ramkali Vanshal, Saroj Gupta, Shanti Gupta, Munni Gupta, Savtri Gaharwar and Vimla Singh are there. They are with Hira Bai in all her work and difficulties, and by representing the village and Panchayat, are devoted to the development of their areas. They say that Hira Bai’s husband works as an accountant in the administrative set-up in Kusmi development block. However, Hira Bai is giving all her time for the people and not only her Panchayat but the development of the whole of Kusmi region is her dream.

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*This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.*
RESTRICTIONS WERE DEMOLISHED,
BREEZE OF CHANGE STARTED
BLOWING
Lakhan Salvi
Nyaya Chakra, 15 June, 2012

Five women Panchs of Payeediscarded veil, threw away the conservative ideas, avoided the social evil practices, organized women to get educated and know their rights, and ensured their participation in the GramPanchayat, and are assuming important roles in the development of their villages. Although all of these did not happen so easily since when thresholds were transgressed, the elders of the society imposed restrictions, the husbands resorted to physical violence. The husband of Devaly Bai hit her on her head with an axe. The restriction of veil was already there before their eyes since generations which prevented them from walking into the light of knowledge. They stumbled when trying to move forward or were made to fall. Imposition of veil kept their freedom suppressed. But these women were crazy enough to want a change. They came in contact with a social organisation, got educated and realized the power of GramPanchayat and GramSabhas. They availed the benefits of Panchayati Raj and reservations thereof and were not only successful with their persistent efforts, but also ensured their participation. Devaly Bai insists that if people watch her open-eyed, but still she says openly whatever she wants to say during the GramSabha
meetings and that too without any veil as she cannot speak freely with a veil before her face.

Five women - Devaly Bai, Kadoly Bai, Choukhi Bai, Rodi Bai and Somudi Bai - belonging to the tribal community in Payee village about 20-25 kms away from Udaipur in Rajasthan are making persistent efforts for change. About two decades ago they were inspired by a social organisation, secured freedom from restrictions, broke away from their timidity, and came out of their houses. At present these five women are Ward Panchs of Payee Gram Panchayat. Devaly Bai and Kadoly Bai are serving third term as Ward Panch; Rodi Bai and Somudi Bai are in the second term; Choukhi Bai is in her fourth term. Kadoly Bai has even been elected as member of the Panchayat Samiti as well.

These women made efforts to pursue other women to come forward. This time they have persuaded Velaki Bai to contest the election for the post of Ward Panch. Their full participation is explicitly reflected in the Gram Panchayat. They enjoy majority in the quorum. They put forth proposals for development of the village in one voice.

Devaly Bai says that politics of males prevailed earlier in the villages; they ruled in the Panchayat as well. Even if the women sometimes managed to reach the Panchayat, they could only sit aside in a corner with veils drawn over their faces. When these women contested elections for the first time, the males taunted as to what these petticoat wearing women would do in the Panchayat. A person named Bhairoolal from Nayaphalal village says that this group of five women is dispensing the benefits of development schemes of the government to the people. They consistently inspect the work being done by the Panchayat.
On certain days, they visit other villages of the Panchayat, get acquainted with people’s problems, and get such problems resolved in the quorum.

The Panchs were illiterate. They got associated with the literacy programme where first of all they themselves became literate and then inspired other women of the village to become literate. They inspired children to join schools. They struggled and submitted memoranda and got the Anganwadis and schools opened. Resolving the public problems became their main aim. It is this reason that about 3,000 women are now with them in their commitments. They came together to work for complete prohibition.

These five women Panchs have played active roles on issues like right to land ownership, right to information, right to employment from the Gram Panchayat and PanchayatSamiti. Devaly Bai insists forcefully on securing information from government officers. If not given, she demands the same to be given in writing. Even the concerned officers feel ashamed on her questions. She insists that securing information is our right and it must be provided. Many a times her application was refused; receipt of her application was not provided twice. The development officers even rebuked her by asking what she would do with the information. But the logical arguments and the awareness of Devaly Bai compelled the concerned officers to change their ways. They had to accept her application and were forced to furnish information to her. Recently, she has submitted an application demanding information on how many persons have been provided land between Udaipur and Sarada.

Everybody remains wonder-struck when Devaly Bai explicitly narrates data on title deeds of forest land rights. She informs
that deeds have been obtained for 103 eligible persons; about 400 applications are now being processed. They have done exemplary work in securing the pension benefits and have got applications submitted by eligible women. About 2,000 workers were not getting work under MGNREGS. They informed the District Collector on this during the meeting held for the same and their struggle became successful when such persons were provided jobs.

Kadoly Bai favours the government camps on the administration in partnership with the village. She says that many such works get done during these camps. Devaly Bai tells that such camps are a must in resolving problems of the villagers. She claims that they have got resolved people’s problems pertaining to ration cards, job cards, pensions, certificates, electrical connections, land, etc. during the camps. The Panchs evaluate and get redressesals vis-à-vis various programmes sponsored by the government. There have been instances of teachers of primary schools not being punctual; they arrived late and did not stay in the school during the school timings. When the village women informed Devaly Bai about such a case, she raised it in the camp. The camp in-charge got the concerned teacher removed and got another teacher posted. Since then the school opens at a proper time and the teachers also remain in the school during its full working hours. Besides this, she also inspects the nutrition programme at the Anganwadi and mid-day meals at schools.

With their persistent efforts, these Panchs have got opened primary schools in Pipalvas, Kumhariyakheda, Sukhamba, Nichalaphal, Paba and Kimbari. They repeatedly submitted memoranda for getting the schools established and persuaded the district officials for the same.
There is no school building in Wardno. 8 of the GramPanchayat; the teacher teaches the children under the tree. There are more than 30 children in this Ward. There is no Anganwadi centre. Today all these five Panchs are demanding buildings for the school and Anganwadi centre. Recently on February 14, 2012 they have submitted a memorandum to the District Collector demanding these.

These five Panchs are great opponents of corruption. They have utilized the right to information and exposed fictitious works done by the Payee GramPanchayat. After having got information about such fictitious works, they proposed a social audit. In such an audit, it was revealed that the GramPanchayat has never got the drainage work done but instead submitted forged bills and vouchers, and embezzled lakhs of rupees.

Kadoly Bai recalls even now that when she became Panch for the first time people used to taunt her saying what this petticoat wearing woman would do. But given whatever we have been able to do so far, the same people are getting us elected unopposed.

Devaly Bai became WardPanch for the third time. This time she got elected unopposed. Rody Bai insists that nothing can stop them now; they neither do anything wrong in the Gram Panchayat nor would allow any such thing to be done by somebody.

The social organisation Astha Sansthan had shown the way to these women some 25 years ago. There is no doubt that in the absence of this social organisation, such a revolution in the lives of these women would never have been possible. This organisation informed them of their rights vis-à-vis the
Panchayati Raj and helped them. Today these women could become Panchs and their villages developed. These women have already crossed their courtyard, discarded their conservative ideas, and established new trends. It appears that now they would not turn back or stop midway as they have learnt to fly in the open sky.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Hindi.
Kunjappanai Panchayat belongs to Kotagiri block in The Nilgiris district. As a backward Panchayat, a majority of Scheduled Tribes (STs) live here and the Panchayat President, Krishnammal proved that her Panchayat has been elevated through her efforts. Her husband Sivaji has already been a Panchayat Councilor and has put an end to water problem in this area. Even though she did not have much interest in politics, she wished to serve the people like her husband. In 2011, during the last Panchayat elections, Krishnammal, a very ordinary and poor woman contested the elections and lot of people gave their votes to her and got her elected.

After taking up the post of President, Krishnammal would go to villages where STs live - among bison, cheetahs, elephants, bears and many more wild animals. Pitying that these people do not have the benefits of street-lights, she decided to get the same installed.

Realizing that if one trusts the electricity board staff, all the villages would not get street-lights. So, she spent her own money and appointed an electricity department staff and
installed street-lights in all the 40 villages in her Panchayat within eight days.

Since the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has not been implemented successfully in most of the Panchayats in The Nilgiris, Krishnammal has taken it up as a challenge. She identified unemployed people among STs and constructed a 3km long mud road from Kunjappananai to Thudhikarai. Also, from Sundatti to Kakka Goondu tribal area, a 4km stretch, the bushes have been removed and a mud road has been constructed. Similarly, from Aadubettu to Kavattai, a stretch of 3 kms, the thorn bushes have been removed and a mud road has been laid. This has gained popularity among the tribals. While using the short-cut routes, the tribals, including school boys and girls, get trapped by the wild animals; either they lose their lives or get injured seriously. After Krishnammal got elected, the street-lights have been installed and are working properly. Hence, people now walk on brightly lit roads. Even if wild animals come their way, they can escape because of the brightness of the street-lights.

So far, the spare parts for drinking water services, electric light and street-lights are being given in the presence of the public, and everything is recorded in a register. Around 2,800 tribals and 1,100 backward community members are residing in this Panchayat and during the last 20 years, from Oamakkuli to Kottakkambai, the drinking water project is still pending. Krishnammal is very eager to implement the project. Under MGNREGS, from Sakkatha to Catherine waterfalls, the bushes along the road-side have been removed and tar roads have been repaired. Moreover, Rs. 1 lakh was spent for drinking water supply, 250 rotating lights were
provided, 12 collections of houses were built for Rs. 12 lakhs, 10 solar green-house were constructed for Rs. 18 lakhs, Rs. 1 lakh has been spent to construct a compound wall in Sakthi Nagar, 3 km long drinking water pipes have been laid from Mulloor to Vellarikkambai, and in Araiyoor the construction of a community building is going to be completed shortly for Rs. 3 lakhs. All the water tanks in this Panchayat have been cleaned and are being used. In Kunjappanai and Kottakkambai, the surrounding areas of the schools have been cleaned, and drinking water supply connection to both the schools has been laid. Krishnammal feels that her main duty now is to provide toilet facility to all the houses in Kunjappanai Panchayat.

Under MGNREGS, Rs. 30 lakhs have been spent for service activities. Moreover, under the Tamil Nadu Government Marriage Assistance programme, three persons have been given Rs. 25,000 each, amounting to Rs. 75,000. Also old age and widow assistance schemes and educational scholarships for 10 students have been provided.

There is a lot of support for this tribal leader who puts in a lot of effort in trying to get the buses to operate properly in the tribal villages, converting the Catherine waterfalls into an important tourist spot, sending uneducated children to schools, and providing provisions in the ration shops regularly. If there is more support from the Central and State Government, one can understand from her services for seven months that Krishnammal will convert Kunjappanai Panchayat into a role model Panchayat.

For women’s development, through more than 30 self-help groups in this Panchayat, education and sanitation
programmes have been undertaken. The country should motivate this kind of reformed women. In total, Kunjappanai Panchayat leader, Krishnammal has to be appreciated as she has done a lot of services within a short period of time.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Tamil.
BREAKING THE BARRIERS- BEDIA COMMUNITY WOMAN BECOMES SARPANCH IN RAISEN DISTRICT
Rajan Raikwar
The Hitavada, 15 June, 2012

A woman of Bedia community, which faces social stigma of being in the infamous ‘Rai’ dance, has broken the age old shackles and succeeded becoming Sarpanch in Raisen district. Now this woman is scripting the success story by carrying out a slew of development works and has become source of inspiration to women folk of her community. She is also creating awareness against the “Rai” dance that has become root cause of backwardness of her community.

We are talking about Krishna Bai aged over 50 who hails from Bedia community. She basically lives in Sukha Karar village of Raisen district. Like any other women of her community, she too was living a miserable life. Her fate took a long leap when she decided to contest the Sarpanch election of Ucher Panchayat.

The seat was general and five male including two Brahmins and one Thakur were in race for the Sarpanch seat. When she filled the nomination, she faced the malicious campaign from her rivals but she succeeded in winning the election. Now she is doing development works in a large scale thus proving her leadership skills.
“I decided to contest elections because no development work was done in my village Sukha Karar. However, fighting election was not an easy task as I had to face the malicious attack from rivals but it has not deterred me. Finally, I won the Sarpanch election of Ucher Panchayat. Now I am living a respectful life and doing development works without any hesitation,” said Krishna Bai

“There are four villages in the Panchayat and so far, I have carried out development works of around Rs. 40 lakhs. This is for the first time that development works have been done in the Panchayat in such a big manner,” she claimed.

When asked that often women and girls of Bedia community do the “Rai” dance and under the garb of this dance they are physically exploited by prosperous and influential people, Krishna Bai said she too had done the “Rai” dance 40 years back but later on she left this profession as she started to hate it. Now she is spreading the awareness against the “Rai” dance in her village and had succeeded bringing back at least one dozen girls to mainstream life and two such girls are going to get married shortly.

According to her, girls of twelve to thirteen years of age are pushed into the “Rai” dance in her area.

After becoming Sarpanch, she has become a source of inspiration among the women of her community and they too want to live the respectable life which Krishna Bai is living presently. Krishna Bai has a daughter who is studying in ninth standard.

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This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012.
Balthila Gram Panchayat is the only Panchayat to create a nutrition garden for Koragas.

This was two years ago. Several people had enrolled for the employment guarantee scheme. But none came forward to work. Lakshmi Gopala Acharya was then the Vice President of the Panchayat. Even though enough information had been given about the scheme, nobody was ready for employment. She therefore observed the anniversary of the launch of the scheme to create awareness amongst the people.

In November 2011, at a day-long programme at the local government school, Lakshmi congregated those who had to work under the guarantee scheme and those who have already worked. The programme was organised by the villagers for the villagers.

At the function, even as blue colour was being painted on blank sheets, a picture of Gandhiji was formed thereby giving a message that Balthila should lead in the implementation of the employment guarantee scheme. Prizes were given to the contest winners, and commendation certificates to all.
A 70-year old lady by named Kakke who was desirous of working under the employment guarantee scheme was honoured. Such a programme had never been held before in the district. This exercise is being used as a model during the training programmes held by Abdul Nazir Saab State Institute of Rural Development in Mysore.

Under the employment guarantee scheme, Stree Sakti Sangha has itself undertaken construction of rain-shelter for the government school, road construction in Birapade, Dasakodi and Panaramaja, leveling work for the Anganwadis at Dasakodi and Sannakukku. Till now, 53 families have benefited; Rs. 9 lakhs have been spent to generate 4,363 man-days of work.

**Corruption free village**

Ever since the commencement of the employment guarantee scheme, there is no Gram Panchayat that is untouched by corruption. But Balthila has been an exception. Not even a single instance of corruption has been reported. Neither the Panchayat office nor the members let corruption come anywhere close. The villagers also have taken an oath that no opportunity for corruption will be allowed.

**Nutrition Garden**

It is credit-worthy that Balthila is the sole Panchayat to have created a nutrition garden for Koragas. Nutrition gardens on behalf of the Panchayat have been provided to Ittha Koraga of Nelli and Kakke of Kashekodi. Papaya, banana, custard apple, mango, neem and other vitamin rich horticultural products are grown in the nutrition gardens.
Continued Cleanliness

This Panchayat has won the Nirmala Gram Puraskar in 2008. It continues to maintain cleanliness. A rickshaw vehicle has been purchased at an expense of Rs. 2.5 lakhs and used for waste collection. This is the only Panchayat to have purchased a vehicle for solid waste disposal.

It has constructed a unit for solid waste disposal at an expense of Rs. 13 lakhs. Apart from distribution of hand bills, workshops, street plays, each house is visited under the leadership of the Panchayat president Lakshmi Gopala to create awareness and uphold the concept of Nirmala Gram.

Social concern

Last year, students of Roshni Nilaya camped in the village for 10 days and conducted a study on atrocities on women. Balthila has earned the credit for being a female atrocity-free village and for creating a healthy society.

Around 25 Stree Shakti groups have been formed, toilets in 246 houses have been constructed spending Rs. 2.94 lakhs, and four houses under Indira Awaas scheme and 38 under Basava Ashraya scheme have been provided.

Community hall

A community hall at an expense of Rs. 17 lakhs has been constructed in Balthila Panchayat. A service centre at an expense of Rs.10 lakhs is on the verge of inauguration. President Lakshmi says that the community hall is intended for performing marriages in the poor families, etc.
President Lakshmi Gopal

The Panchayat President Lakshmi, also a member of SUGRAMA, is instrumental for all these developments. She undertook a campaign to promote home-made products in villages besides holding a programme for neo-literates through the Jana Shikshana Seva Trust. She has visited houses to spread information on Sandhya Suraksha scheme and has also helped the poor with personal donations. In addition, she has admitted several people to the de-addiction camp and helped them come out of alcoholism. As President of the Bal Vikas Samiti, she is to be hailed for admitting children of minority communities to the government school. Lakshmi plans to start tailoring classes and training sessions for women for making the traditional leaf plates.

Female power dominates here

The population of the village is 5,720 with 2,823 men, 2,897 women. It has an area of 342.49 hectares and has 412 people belonging to Scheduled Castes (214 men, 198 women) and 568 people belonging to Scheduled Tribes (281 men, 287 women). Among the STs, women have an upper hand. Out of 989 families, 58 are SCs, 96 STs and 835 other families. 489 families belong to the APL category.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Kannada.
IMPRESSIVE INITIATIVES
Dharitri Joshi
Loksatta, 23 June, 2012

Vaishali Tai has no prior experience in political work; still she has worked effectively and changed the face of her village. Working as a Deputy Sarpanch, she made women aware and taught villagers to live with dignity. She closed down illegal liquor sale and is a living example of what women can do by bring in governance.

Women have immense potential, but they hardly get opportunities to develop and utilize it. Despite odds, women take part in all public spheres and prove their caliber to shoulder responsibilities. Women naturally possess excellent management skills, be it at home or in office. Society needs to recognize women’s innate skills and provide appropriate opportunities to them.

Vaishali Pohkar Patil is a young, animated Deputy Sarpanch of Nagapur village of Manchar block in Pune district of Maharashtra. Living in a joint family she performs all her duties in various capacities along with working in the family field. Her husband is very supportive and therefore she is able to work in the Gram Panchayat, she feels.
Vaishali Tai is the first person in her family to enter politics. Nobody from her maternal or in-laws’ home has ever gotten into politics. Vaishali Tai’s husband appreciated her public relation skills and sensitivity towards social issues, and everybody from his family always encouraged her social activities. Being educated, villagers decided to elect her unopposed in 2002, when she became a Ward Member for the first time. Getting into politics was easy but the journey from a being a Ward Member to a Deputy Sarpanch was not as easy. Although villagers supported her, Vaishali Tai sensed the need to change their mind-sets in order to implement development projects.

“I look at every challenge as an opportunity”, says Vaishali Tai. As she entered politics, she felt more responsible towards the role she was expected to play. She had to leave her education halfway. After a gap of over 10 years she wanted to appear for Higher Secondary School examinations again. Although she did not have much spare time to study, she combined studies with her household work and not only appeared for the examination, but also passed with a first class. “I wanted to set an example before the village women. If you are determined and committed then you can make seemingly impossible things possible. You reach your goal no matter how much problems you face”, she says.

Vaishali Tai remembers when she first became a Ward Member; the village was still very orthodox as far as women were concerned. Women never used to step out or take part in public meetings in the village. She made personal visits to convince them to attend Gram Sabha meetings. Then she started implementing various schemes for women such as on tailoring, and also distributed a few sewing machines to
women through government schemes. After self-employment activities, she encouraged women to start saving through self-help groups. Gradually, women started to come together quite often and became more open and confident. Vaishali Tai now encouraged them to be part of Gram Sabha meetings and other public events.

Several development projects are to her credit after Vaishali Tai became the Deputy Sarpanch. But the most important among them is her crusade against liquor sale in her village. By opposing illegal liquor sale, she succeeded in closing down the shops.

Vaishali Tai was inspired to take up this issue when once she saw two women, both engaged in the liquor business, fighting. One of them was persuading one of her woman family member to drink and carry forward the business. Vaishali Tai got very upset. She mobilized the village women and approached the women selling liquor. Initial requests to close down shops did not make much of an impact. Rather the sellers became aggressive against her. But as the public opinion against the liquor shops grew, the sale had to be curtailed and eventually stopped. Vaishali Tai rehabilitated the concerned families by providing an alternate source of livelihood to them. After the liquor sale stopped, cases of domestic violence got reduced. By acting as a pressure group, the women’s collective became a well-recognised force in the village.

Similarly, Vaishali Tai stopped illegal sale of gas cylinders, smoothened functioning of ration shops, and ensured that all marginalised families get a ration card.
Vaishali Tai has an impressive work record; to the extent that even her male counterparts would not be able to achieve. Construction of road, drainage system, community centre and crematorium was completed during her tenure. Two bus stops were built with her initiative making transportation easier for the villagers. Construction of a new school building, gymnasium and bridge, and renovation of the village temple are few more works to her credit.

Women like Vaishali Tai show that they are able to perform well in positions of power. They can efficiently handle local as well as global issues. But unfortunately, the provision of reservations is not taken as seriously as it should be, by the political parties. When common women with potential and caliber will be able to get into politics, instead of wives and daughters of political leaders, things would certainly change for the better.

This article was submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2012 and has been translated from Marathi.
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To the elected Panchayat women leaders of India our deepest appreciation; may your shining example pave the way for women in the Indian Parliament.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the following authors and publications for bringing to public attention the journeys of the elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj through the awe-inspiring stories that are compiled in this book.

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Sundar, *Dinamalar*

Suresh Sannata, *Nav Bharat*

Uttam Malviya, *Nav Duniya*

Editors
Fifty five articles written by journalists across States and languages and published in different newspapers have been compiled in this seventh volume of Thus Spoke the Press. At a time when cynicism regarding democratic decentralization is high, the success stories of women exercising their leadership in sectors such as nutrition, education, health, employment and sanitation in rural areas inspire confidence and hope. These articles reflect not just the zeal of the elected Panchayat women in building India one step at a time, it also highlights their efforts in taking local governments closer to people, thereby deepening democracy and enhancing civic participation.

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