

THE HUNGER PROJECT



Thus
spoke
the press



VOLUME 8

Select Articles on
Elected Women Leaders
in Village Panchayats

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Volume 8

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Compiled and Edited by: Sriparna G Chaudhuri

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*If we all can persevere, if we can in every land and
office look beyond our own shores and ambitions,
then surely the age will dawn in which the strong are
just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.*

– John F. Kennedy in his Address to the United
Nations General Assembly (1961).

FOREWORD

This is the twentieth year of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1993), which formally mandated 33 per cent reservations for women in local government. The idea of women's reservations in Panchayats was first mooted and put into action by Ramkrishna Hegde, then chief minister of Karnataka, in 1985. In the years that followed, there were many who were not only sceptic about women's capabilities to function as leaders but also wondered if they would actually take up the challenge of standing for elections and address the concerns of their communities. Proving the cynics wrong, more than 4 million women over the last 20 years have come on board and been constitutionally elected from across 2,38,054 Gram Panchayats in India.

Twenty years is a long time. While political and economic reforms may have increased the pace of development in India, it is the elected women representatives in Panchayats who are ensuring the last mile delivery. Redefining development, they are struggling against a patriarchal social order to strengthen the democratic processes, build an equal and equitable society through inclusion, respond and resolve women's issues and enhance women's status in society.

For the last seven years, The Hunger Project has published Thus Spoke the Press, a compilation of select articles from

all over India on elected women leaders in Panchayats. The success and achievements of over 1.3 million elected women in Gram Panchayats is a narrative that regularly informs us of the changes that are sweeping through rural India. At the same time, it records the evolution and political maturing of the elected women representative. From being a reluctant representative she has become a respected leader today.

To mark this journey of two decades, The Hunger Project supported Women's Feature Service, an agency mandated to visibilize gender in media coverage by generating women centric stories, to commission a special series of features entitled '20 Years of Empowerment: Women and Panchayati Raj in India'. These pieces trace the evolution of women's representation in Panchayati Raj over the last two decades and present best practices on the ground.

The Hunger Project is proud to present the eighth volume of Thus Spoke The Press. This volume comprises 44 select articles out of a total of 1925 submitted for the Sarojini Naidu Prize. It also carries an additional 20 articles from The Hunger Project-WFS series. While this publication is certain to prove a source of information on the subject, we hope you will also enjoy reading it.

New Delhi
October 2013

The Hunger Project

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INTRODUCTION

JamunaBai¹ is an extremely poor woman who had to face tremendous problems throughout her life; she could not go to school as her family was extremely poor; when she married, her husband abandoned her. As a single mother, she brought up her three children doing a coolie's job.

Living on the margins of society, Jamuna never dreamt of exercising her citizenship. Or her leadership! But in 2010, she became the Sarpanch of Meerakabad Panchayat, Mungawali, Madhya Pradesh and was able to change the face of all three villages in her Panchayat.

For most women in rural India, the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill has been a turning point in history. Reserving 33 per cent seats for women in PRIs, it has provided an opportunity for women to be a part of the political decision making process, an opportunity to influence change, a status in the public domain which was hitherto denied, and a sense of self-worth that comes when you are a part of the nation building process.

In the last 20 years, most women who have stood for elections have been from non- political backgrounds. In the

1. The Framework of Jamuna Bai Redefines Development by Vijaya Pathak, Nav Bharat Bhopal, 23 May 2013

beginning they may have been persuaded by their families. But despite their initial reluctance, lack of formal education and in the absence of any political mentor, they have shown great maturity in responding to the needs of the people, in their understanding of their roles and responsibilities and in enhancing civic participation for overall development.

But for every woman who has been persuaded by her family, there is a Shyama Bai who jumped into public life of her own volition. From Posta Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh, she was out grazing her goats when she chanced upon the pre-election campaign of The Hunger Project. She spent an hour listening, standing at far the edge of the circle. On her way home, she sold her goats. Using the money from the sale, she printed pamphlets that she distributed during her campaign and filed her nomination. It was a hotly contested election but Shyama Bai prevailed and won as sarpanch from the unreserved seat.

But even after 20 years, women's first entry into public political life is never easy. Elected women are disrespected, snubbed and misguided. They are expected to remain in the background while their work is conducted by their husbands. Their lack of education is the biggest weapon that is used to intimidate them. On the other hand, Navali² who had studied till Class XI says that "I would sit silently beside another Ward Panch who was illiterate but here I was quite literate. Both of us felt equally ignorant about the state of affairs in the Panchayat and both felt extremely intimidated."

2 Education And Village Development Along With The Challenges, by Lakshmi Lal Balai, Tarun Desh, 12 June 2013

Ask them what gives them the strength and confidence to take on these first time leadership roles in challenging local milieus and they are unanimous in their replies that trainings organized by NGOs, government and local bodies have helped them to increase their political understanding and prioritize local issues. Up-Sarpanch Rakhi³ says that if she had not got guidance and training from The Hunger Project, then her dream of working for her Panchayat might not have been realized. She has learnt a lot about the Panchayati Raj, various government schemes, duties and responsibilities. And when these trainings have a rights based approach, elected women reveal, it helps them to challenge the status quo and question age long traditions and discriminations.

Lack of education notwithstanding, elected women representatives have redefined the political agenda of their Gram Panchayats amidst severe challenges. Their achievements range from correctly implementing MNREGS and other central and state sponsored schemes to combatting child and human trafficking, counselling victims of domestic violence and putting rapists in jails. Sudha Mohan⁴ tells Survarna Times writer Nalina, 'It was not easy. The rapist was out on bail the first time as he had the support of the politicians. We realized that we had to fight them in our endeavor to put the rapist back in jail. I gathered the support of all local women and ultimately we succeeded'. In Tonk District of Rajasthan, Badam Bairwa⁵, is not literate but that

3 The Up-Sarpanch Engaged In Realizing The Dreams by Lakshmi Lal Balai, Tarun Desh, 4 June, 2013

4 Sudha Mohan, Who Made The Life Of The People Of Ammadi Village Pleasant, Nalina D.Suvarna, Times Of Karnataka, 12 May, 2013

5 Discarding Veils, Embracing Change: Rajasthan's Extraordinary Sarpanches, by Abha Sharma

hasn't deterred her from carrying out extensive development work in her panchayat ever since she was elected Sarpanch in 2010. A proper road, electricity, 25 hand pumps, four tube wells, old age pension for 50 women – she has made all this happen. How does she get things done when she can't read or write? Pat comes her reply, "Padhe likhe nahin hain, par dimag to haina (I may not be literate but I do have a brain)."

The profile of the elected woman representative seems to be changing, albeit slowly. In this year's *Thus Spoke the Press* you will read, among others, about Dorothiya⁶ in Jharkhand and Rakhi and Anita in Rajasthan. One a backward state, the other a feudal one! But what do these women have in common? Dorothiya is a registered lawyer at the Ranchi Bar Council. Rakhi has completed her graduation and is studying law. She too dreams of becoming a lawyer. Anita is a graduate. All three are well educated. They are dedicated, better informed and want to redefine development. They were motivated because of the pitiable conditions of women in their Panchayats. Says tech savy Rakhi who has a facebook page on her Gram Panchayat, 'I could not bear the fact that women had to defecate in the open!' Dorothiya too gave up everything to help women find livelihood options in Aara Gram Panchayat. She says, 'Women do not find jobs easily because men are still preferred when it comes to employment. But they have tremendous potential, and if their natural skills are honed, they will excel'. Belonging to a feudal society herself, Anita at a recent meeting of elected women in Chaksu Block said, 'Men expect us to keep the veil and at the same time question our ability to work from under it. Either way we are doomed. But if we challenge their authority even

6 After 30 Years, Jharkhand Gets A Taste Of Woman Power by Saadia Azim

once, things improve. I pointed out to my husband that Indira Gandhi, our former Prime Minister had never kept her veil. So I asked him, 'why cannot people look at me as a leader but insist on looking at me as your wife'? It took a lot of courage to stand up to my husband, but things have improved since then. I have dropped my veil. My mobility has increased and subsequently my courage and confidence”.

Their demands too have undergone change in the last twenty years. Among others, they now demand equal wages for women workers, functional PDS shops, functional anganwadis, legal counseling centres, toilet and rest rooms in block offices, property and land rights for women, policy reforms like repeal of Dhara 40 and Two Child Norm and 33 per cent seat reservations for women in the Parliament.

These are the new age elected women representatives. Better informed, politically savvy and more confident of themselves and their capabilities to bring change. One elected woman representative from Rajasthan recently told the author, 'Only when I go out, I learn; only if I learn can I make changes'. To remain effective and to influence change from a position of strength they have also built support structures like federations and associations.

The articles, in this year's Thus Spoke the Press published by The Hunger Project, speak of the determination of elected women representatives to succeed against all odds and at the same time script the journeys that changed them forever from a reluctant representative to a respected leader.

EDUCATION AND VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT ALONG WITH THE CHALLENGES

Lakshmi Lal Balai

Tarun Desh, 12 June 2013

It was really a big change for women to come out of their homes, especially for those living in the villages. Although, the women were provided reservation in 1993 but before the same, they were confined within their homes and were kept deprived of education, employment, health, etc. The government has, during the last two decades, undertaken several important steps towards women's empowerment. Hardly three years ago, has the women's reservation been increased to 50 percent in the State, but the real transference of power has already started emerging. The deprived, Dalit and tribal women also got the opportunity to come forward. Earlier, they used to put the signature with shaking hand but now they are doing so in a click. Their self-confidence has developed many folds. Earlier, hiding their face under the veil, they used to sit in remote corners but now the women Panch-Sarpanch have discarded their veils. The women representatives in the Panchayati Raj have left behind the males, acquiring information through various means and mode in this age of information revolution, and are actively engaged in the process of overall development.

Rukmani Devi Salvi is at present the Sarpanch of Vijayapura Panchayat in Devgarh Panchayat Samiti of Rajsamand district. When she walked out of her door with her face under the cover of her veil, people in general laughed at her, calling her a doll. But during the election campaign itself she discarded her veil, setting aside the taunt; she started speaking openly and that also forcefully. Then after having won the election successfully, she introduced a series of development works in Vijayapura Panchayat. She brought in the benefits of all development related works. She introduced transparency in the functioning of the Panchayat in such a manner that not only in the State but in whole nation, her Panchayat is now known as the most transparent Panchayat. Today, people from the rest of the country and also from abroad visit her Panchayat to watch the transparency prevailing in its routine functioning and go back with awe. There cannot be two opinions that women in India have displayed an important role in maintaining independent functioning of the Panchayats.

Not only as Sarpanch, women are becoming the Ward Panchs and actively contributing their efforts in the process of development. Navali Garsiyan belongs to the tribal community who left her education in-between and became Ward Panch. When the elections under Panchayati Raj were to be held, the seat of Ward Panch was reserved for women in Ward No. 8 of Kyaria Panchayat under Abu Road Panchayat Samiti in Sirohi district. People of the Ward started searching for an educated woman to contest as Ward Panch. This Ward is largely populated by the tribal community. They enquired all the families but could not get such a woman. Suddenly, they saw Navali who was a student of class XI. They gave the proposal of becoming the Ward Panch to her and Navali agreed. Her

family members were also pleased with her decision. The citizens of this Ward said that the Ward Panchs elected earlier from this ward could not bring any real development as they were all illiterate, were not aware of various schemes, and particularly about the development process, and therefore, failed to get any worthwhile thing done. It was this reason that when Ward No. 8 was reserved for women, they were searching for an educated woman and who could be better than Navali, although then she was young and was studying in class XI.

Well, half of their task was complete; Navali filed her nomination as a candidate but two other women in the Ward also did so. But the citizens of the Ward were determined to elect an educated Ward Panch this time and that is how, Navali got elected.

Navali was elected certainly but she did not know anything about developmental works or even the Panchayati Raj. And so, it was a challenging assignment for her to ensure development in her Ward.

Navali said that after becoming Ward Panch when she reached the Gram Panchayat, she felt completely at unease. She was studying so at least she knew that the mind becomes weak in absence of necessary knowledge. She says, *“First when I used to go to the Panchayat I would sit silently beside another woman Ward Panch who was illiterate but here I was quite literate. But, both of us had no knowledge about the state of affairs in the Panchayat and both were extremely hesitant.”*

Since, Navali became a Panch, her studies got discontinued. She was anxious to know everything about her Panchayat.

So, she started moving around in the Panchayat, Wards, school, Anganwadi centre, etc. Her regular inspections improved things to some extent but Navali wanted to solve larger problems of her Ward.

She started attending the meetings of her Panchayat like other male Ward Panchs. Her proposals got recorded for development in her Ward. Navali always remained sensitive about the problems of women and children and made persistent efforts to get such problems resolved.

The first year of her tenure passed in this manner. Navali reviewed her performance during the first year and she became worried as so far she could not do anything worth mentioning. Then she came across the activists of a social service organisation who were engaged in social work in that area. This organization was working to create consciousness among the people regarding various developmental schemes of the government and was trying to uplift the marginalized people. The organisation named Jan Chetna regularly holds workshops on various issues and subjects from time to time. Navali got linked with this organisation and received necessary information and knowledge from them and also got trained in their workshops. On becoming knowledgeable, she started using her rights and is now actively engaged in getting the developmental works done appropriately and suitably.

In the meetings held with the women citizens, she came to know that no work was done under MGNREGA in Ward No. 1 and none of the women in her Ward has done any work under MGNREGA. Then she started using the information obtained during the workshops she attended earlier. She got a proposal for drainage construction work in Rewarikalan recorded at the

meeting of the Gram Sabha. Later, the sanction was received and 150 women of the Ward got employment.

The women labourers said that many works under MGNREGA in other Wards were done earlier. Since the workplaces were quite far, the women from Ward No. 8 did not apply for the same. They told that if the work under MGNREGA was not sanctioned for their own Ward then they would have never be able to work under the same.

Navali undertook the task of securing the deed leases in the name of women, getting issued the amount of instalments under the Indira housing scheme only in the name of women, and to get the handpumps installed not only for Ward No. 8 but also for the entire Panchayat.

Navali also undertook the important function of changing and improving the pitiable condition of women in her community. She explains that earlier the lease deeds used to be issued in the names of males only. The amount for house building under Indira housing scheme was also issued in the name of the male head of the family. In majority of instances, the male heads used to spend this amount on other purposes and consequently cheaper and substandard building materials were being used to build the house. There were such instances as well where inspite of having a wife, the husband used to bring in another woman as his second wife. Then, generally, the first wife was forcefully driven out of the house. Such a woman is either compelled to return to her parents or remarry another person. Such things used to take place repeatedly with women. Navali pondered over this complicated issue very seriously. She pondered on how to ensure dignity and security for women. Lastly, she put the proposal before the Panchayat

that the lease deed should only be made in the name of the concerned woman and the amount under Indira housing scheme should also be issued in her name. This procedure was likely to prevent the males from throwing out the first wife and to bring in another woman as second wife. It would also help the rightful wife to live with due respect in her own house. Although male Ward Panchs in the Panchayat opposed her proposals, but Navali insisted with courage and she ultimately got her proposals duly recorded. She believed that it would bring down the number of such cases. Navali has done much work towards women's empowerment. She not only helped women citizens in the Panchayat but also stood in getting restored the rights of women Ward Panchs. Navali revealed that when she became Ward Panch and went to attend the Gram Sabha meetings, she saw that women Ward Panchs used to sit aside in long drawn veils and their husbands used to interfere in the proceedings. Even the husband of the woman Sarpanch Santosh Devi Garasia was handling and controlling the proceedings of the Gram Sabha meeting. It continued to be so for about a year. Then when Navali came in contact with a social service organisation she became highly conscious and aware. She openly started opposing the husbands of the Sarpanch and the Ward Panchs. The result was that all such undesirable elements had to stop their uncalled-for and unauthorized interferences in the Gram Sabha meetings.

The women in the Ward said, *"We are constantly struggling on water issues and have to fetch water from the distant places. We put up our problem before our Ward Panch. We do not know how and what our Ward Panch Navali did. But certainly she acted and got the handpumps installed and now we have no water problem or crises."* Navali herself shared, *"I got the proposal recorded in the meetings of Panchayat. I also spoke to the officials of the Panchayat Samiti."*

Then the tubewells which were not functional since many months were repaired and thus the women citizens became very happy. Nowadays, the water level had gone down and the water crisis is again there in the Ward. Then, I got a proposal recorded in the Gram Sabha meeting to supply water by tanker to the residents.”

Navali says that the road leading to the Ward is in such a bad shape that the government officials do not like to visit her Ward. Even the 108 ambulance, engaged in making the government medical service available, also cannot reach the Ward. She says, *“I want to get gravel road laid here so that the Ward citizens get relief from this problem. I have got the proposal recorded for getting a proper road constructed here. The sanction for the same is still awaited from the District Council.”*

Since Navali understands well the importance of education, she displayed an important role by linking the tribal boys and girls with education. To persuade the girls, she went from house to house, explained its importance to women and men therein. When there was increase in the number of admissions, she assisted in getting the primary school upgraded to higher primary school so that the children of her Ward and the village would not have to go anywhere else for further education.

The children started going to the school but a stream on the way became a problem. Particularly during the rainy season the children were unable to cross it and reach their school. During the rainy season, water level in the stream increased and it would flow forcefully. So, Navali submitted a proposal to get a permanent passage constructed over it. Navali happily shared that the culvert has been constructed and now the children have no problem in reaching their school.

Successful efforts were made to link the young children with the educational stream. The State Government runs Ma Bari (mother's house) centres to link the young children from tribal community. These children are not only provided education at these centres but are also provided nutritive diets. These children are provided right from study materials to clothes, sweater, tie, belt, shoes, socks along with morning breakfast and mid-day meals free of cost. Not only this, the men and women belonging to the tribal community are appointed to teach the children, to prepare their breakfast and mid-day meal for them. According to the information available, a Ma Bari centre can be established in a settlement or Ward where at least 30 young tribal children are present. Navali conducted a door-to-door household survey in which it was found that there were more than 30 young children but the Ward had no Ma Bari centre. Navali then took up the matter and approached the administration to start the centre there. Due to her persistent efforts, the long closed centre was reopened and thus the young tribal children started attending the centre. One male youth and two women also were given employment there.

Not only this, Navali educated the women as well. She started teaching the women at her home under lamp light and made them literate. Navali wants to undergo graduation and obtain the degree. After having become the Ward Panch, she dropped out of regular education for nearly a year but thereafter she studied upto class XII under open school. Now she studies and also carries on her duty as Ward Panch.

In the staunch patriarchal society, some males do not like the freedom of women and their being representative. It's evident from the instances coming up now and then. Many persons

are jealous of the increasing popularity of Navali. One person even made a call to her on her mobile phone and talked to her in abusive and dirty language. He even threatened to kill her if she dared to lodge a complaint with the police. But Navali was not scared of it and she went to lodge an FIR at the police station but the police did not register the same. Then she approached the Superintendent of Police on whose orders the FIR was lodged and the unknown caller was finally arrested by the police. She was also provided security by the police.

Along with tribal Sarpanch Sarami Devi Garasia or the Ward Panch Navali Bai Gerasia, Sarpanch Yasoda Saharia or Ward Panch Mangi Devi Saharia, Dalit Rukmini Salvi or Geeta Devi Regar, there are others like Manpreet Kaur, Rakhi Paliwal, Vardhani Purohit and Kamlesh Mehta, and like them hundreds of other women Panchs and Sarpanchs in entire Rajasthan. The work being done by these women representatives show that the spirit behind the 73rd constitutional amendment is really being fulfilled by these women. The first generation of women representatives was under the veil but now there is not a single veil. Whether anybody accepts it or not, transformation at the grassroots' level is very much self-evident.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DIVERSING MOFUSSILS

R. Samban

Yojana (Monthly Magazine), May 2013

When women were legally provided with their rights, a lot many people thought that it is like casting pearls before the swine. But they realised it was wrong, when many social issues like drinking water, alcoholism, domestic violence, environment protection, etc. were taken care of by Panchayats. A new developing culture in Kerala under the helmsmanship of women sans prior political experience got initiated.

Traditionally, women have been compelled to play the second fiddle in every sphere, be it in family or public life. Women were denied the right to own or inherit property and they become dependent on men, which renders them vulnerable to exploitation. Most poor women have never been allowed to think for themselves or to make their own choices except in unusual circumstances. Their life in the 18th and 19th centuries was torturous. Women were considered as mere things for carnal pleasure.

Today, women are not what they used to be some years ago; they have now made their presence felt in every domain of life. Women have ultimately discarded their homely image and are now making meaningful contribution to the progress of the nation. Panchayati Raj Act which came into force

two decades ago was a turning point in this regard. Kerala introduced 50 percent reservation for women in elected local bodies bringing in a new crop of leaders to the grassroots' governance, which paved the way for the women to come out of the kitchen to the forefront. That was only the beginning of a silent revolution. When women were legally provided with their rights, a lot many people thought that it is like casting pearls before the swine. But they realised it was wrong, when many social issues like drinking water, alcoholism, domestic violence, environment protection, etc. were taken care of by the Panchayats.

Many women were unwilling entrants into the tumultuous world of elective office. It was in 2000, the time of the second election, after the implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act. People were in search of a woman candidate in west Kodur Ward of Kodur Panchayat in Malappuram. Both Fronts wanted a suitable woman candidate and found one in Pulppadan Sakkina, who was running a tuition centre. LDF party men approached her first. But Sakkina, who never went to a Panchayat office for anything in her life, declined the offer. Her husband was a business man in Nilambur and she couldn't think of leaving her three little children, to serve the public. Then it was the turn of the UDF. They approached Sakkina's husband and a family friend of their's to compel Sakkina to the cause. Finally she agreed to become a candidate. She remembers that it was the first time in her life, visiting a Panchayat office. Once the nomination was submitted, she was under constant pressure and anxiety. There were memories aired of the terror of facing the first public meeting and making the first speech. Her first speech was at Kottaparambu Colony in Kodur. When she stood before a mike, no one could hear her say

anything; her voice shook and she somehow managed to finish it off.

Sakkina won the election and became President. She had to wage battles against fault-finding male colleagues and a society that was not always sympathetic to women who had stepped into what were considered male roles. Even more difficult was fighting patriarchal attitudes in organisations and mass movements that were themselves engaged in struggles for social and political change. It took some time for the women to find their feet, the Secretary of the Panchayat was the only male at the body's meetings. Initially, they had a tough time with most of the members finding it difficult to file proposals, but after a year, they understood their work well. That slow start is understandable given that an overwhelming proportion of women Panchayat members are holding political office for the first time.

In the same way, Sakkina too was ignorant of holding committee meetings and she prepared an agenda as per the opinion of one of her colleagues. But the Secretary shouted at her and enlightened her that, such a power was vested in him. Pride of male dominance was evident in his words. Eventually, he called for the meeting. The opposition consisted of veterans and experts and it was a period of survival. She collected many books on Panchayati Raj and learned what it was. Training in Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Trichur was very useful. Though unprepared, women have not hesitated when given the opportunity.

Many men in the council would just ignore the women members. Women first took it and then decided to change all

that. They insisted on performing their assigned administrative tasks, and efficiently too. That made a difference in public attitude towards them. Sakkina stood firmly and sincerely in her mission which brought more issues. She faced them courageously, still then many opposed her. She took severe action against sand mining amidst strong opposition. The incident saw the power of woman, which spirited many.

Kodur became the first Panchayat in the State to submit the project. In the election to Zilla Panchayat held in 2005, the party didn't have to hunt for another candidate in Makkaraparambu Ward this time. Sakkina won with 7,500 votes in her cache. During the previous polls to the Zilla Panchayat, Sakkina was in the fray and won with a huge majority recorded in the State, by 25,000 votes from Othukkungal Ward.

Battle in Kodumon is against alcoholism

Kunjannamma is a 70-year old, young at heart and daring enough to know how to fight a battle. She represents Kodumon Panchayat in Pathanamthitta district. Today, Kodumon Panchayat is free from alcohol, and there are no unauthorised toddy shops of any sort. Alcohol was a bane to hundreds of families in the Panchayat. Kunjannamma had a strong political background and experience of decades. She won for the first time in the 2005 polls. Her Ward being only 10 km away from her home, the voters perceived a candidate of her caliber for the first time. She didn't request her voters to vote for her but reminded them of their rights and explained to them about Panchayati Raj and distributed pamphlets for the same. She won the polls hands-down. The victory gave her the impetus to fight against all forms of declining social values. Kunjannamma repeated her feat in the next polls

too; this time from another Ward, and that too with a huge majority of votes. Today, Kunjannamma is very active in her campaign against alcohol and drugs, not only in her Ward but also in the nearby panchayats. She calls for the assemblage of women. She makes arrangements for rehabilitation of alcoholics and counseling centre in the Panchayat is a part of this programme.

Agricultural Progression in Thodiyoor

Thodiyoor Panchayat is in Ochira block in Kollam district. The village is progressing towards agricultural prosperity which is visible from the 150 acre Malummal Pancha paddy fields to the two cent betel leaf fields. Gram Panchayat President L. Shylaja is very happy to share the advancement of her Panchayat, “We give more prominence to agro field, which was not in the past”, she says. Acres of barren land in the Panchayat were effectively utilised for farming. Authorities and Kudumbasree are now busy making Thodiyoor self-sufficient in green vegetables too. Farming is done with organic manure. Bitter gourd and snake gourd are available in plenty. Sesame is cultivated in the areas of Puliyoor Vanchi and Aramudumadom. Maize, which is a rare crop in this part of the country, is also cultivated abundantly.

Betel leaf farming was meant for people with land up to two cents. That was a major success. Panchayat gives Rs. 645 as financial help. More than 50 people, including men and women are working as betel farmers in the Panchayat. Moreover, some are interested in floriculture and they grow Anthurium, orchids and other ornamental plants and benefits from it.

Empowerment in cashew field

Poothakkulam Panchayat is in Ithikkara block in Kollam district. It is famous for cashew and cashew workers. In the seven cashew factories in the block, more than thousands of women labourers are finding their livelihood. They were devoid of their rights and worked like mules. But now they have a voice to fight for their rights in the form of K.N. Sreedeviamma, the President of the Gram Panchayat.

Sreedeviamma was actively participated in the literacy mission and this paved the way for social service. In the 2005 elections, Sreedeviamma was elected to the Block Panchayat. She turned her attention to women empowerment activities, when she was the Chairperson of the Standing Committee. She carried out studies on the Anganwadis, hospitals, police stations and many other places of work. Sreedeviamma was much concerned about the problems of the cashew workers as they deserved better attention. Women cashew workers had to squat for long hours in the workplace, much to their discomfort, had uterine problems which was proved in the medical camp conducted there. As per the report, she asked the factory owners to provide facilities for basic needs like clean toilets, drinking water and cemented floor to sit and work on.

In the 2010 elections, Sreedeviamma was elected to the Gram Panchayat and sworn in as the President of the Panchayat. This gave her more opportunities to serve the women workers in the cashew factories. This time she conducted medical camps to detect cancer patients in the Panchayat. It was found that many of the women workers were suffering from cervical cancer and she ensured effective treatment for them. In a

recent study held in the Panchayat on the situation of women, it was revealed that most of the women were suffering from domestic violence at the hands of their husbands and sons. In order to give them protection, Jagrata Samitis have been introduced and their activities were being monitored.

Progress par party politics

Today, the Gram Sabhas of Kerala are predominantly attended by women. In the beginning, it was just presence and it has gradually transformed into actual participation. In the Gram Sabhas, women have started taking up a lot of issues that are challenging to women in their areas. The Gram Sabhas have become one platform where they are heard and seen. Mainstream political parties agree that women leaders have brought in considerable change in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). If the empowerment of women has been one of the achievements of the Panchayati Raj movement, public policy and making sure women are involved in the implementation of local governance initiatives and programmes has created a sort of a virtuous loop, both feeding off and amplifying the phenomenon. Women's empowerment in the State is implemented through a three-tier system. Women whose presence was restricted in the kitchen and backyard have come out into the mainstream of social life. And Panchayati Raj was a turning point in this regard. When 33 percent reservation was inducted in the three-tier system of Panchayats, major parties combed out the area for suitable women candidates. In the beginning, wives of party workers were selected and were elected to the local bodies and 'back seat driving' method of administration was in force. There were also cases of proxy elected women representatives. But everything has changed now. Gram Sabhas, once namesake

are very much active now. Most of the members are women too. They are now busy discussing social issues, environmental issues and awareness issues. Gram Sabhas in Kerala are based at the Ward level, unlike the practice in other States. Women's reservation in the Panchayat opened doors for the development of the State. A new impetus is seen in the activities related to anti-alcoholism, woman and children protection. And new schemes are being initiated for environment protection giving ample significance.

50 percent reservation for women

Kerala assembly passed two bills reserving 50 percent seats in local bodies and Panchayats for women. The provisions of Kerala Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Bill, 2009 and Kerala Municipality (Amendment) Bill, 2009 were implemented in the next Panchayat and civic polls in the State in 2010. In fact, effectiveness of women leadership in Panchayats was seriously noticed in the State. This reflects 'social acceptability' of women's leadership in governance at local levels. Reservation of seats for women in local elections has been perhaps the most significant political step taken by the State to provide overdue political spaces for women. It also helped to give local development a much desired direction. The amendment was a path breaking event in the annals of the state, which will be written in golden letters.

Highly commendable works by elected women representatives make the State rightly feel proud on providing reservations to women and thus mothering silent social revolutions in villages and cities. It's a good opportunity for women to show their efficiency and justify the reservation by working hard for the welfare of the people using these Panchayat bodies, which are acquiring more autonomy and new funds to implement

various schemes. The increase in reservation for women from 33 percent to 50 percent reservation in the three-tier Panchayat and Municipality system at all levels as stipulated in the constitutional amendments helped in ensuring women's participation at the local government level and bringing women to the leadership and including women's problems in planning. A special working group at the Panchayat level was formed to discuss women's problems, prepare projects and conduct the needed studies and data collection. There was an instruction to include representation of women in various Working Groups to solve problems of women in various sectors.

After 50 percent of the seats in three-tier bodies and half of the governing positions were set aside for women, hundreds of women from orthodox families saw themselves in elected positions for the first time. Women representation was assured from the Gram Panchayat level to the State Development Committee level of which the Chief Minister is the President. Fifty percent reservation was implemented not only for the members of the local government institutions, but also for the heads of the corresponding institutions as well. Reservation is also applicable to the posts of Vice Presidents and Deputy Mayors. Women representation was also enhanced in District Planning Committees (DPCs). Among the five corporations in Kerala, three of them have women Mayors. Standing Committees have an important role in the local self-government institutions (LSGIs). They give guidance to the developments, functional activities of the LSGIs. Fifty percent of the seats are reserved for women for the positions of heads of the Standing Committees, DPCs, Metropolitan Councils, State Development Committees and many other important

positions. At present, striking changes are visible in the three tier panchayats in Kerala.

Transforming Countenance of the State

Women empowerment in the LSGIs is shifting the countenance of the State itself. Many new projects are being implemented in the coastal and Adivasi areas. New schemes are in force to increase the participation of women in acquiring suitable employment. It helped to eradicate poverty to a large extent. Palliative care units are established in all the Panchayats as healthcare units that focuses on relieving and preventing the suffering of workers. The incentive scheme of Nirmal Gram Puraskar has been introduced to encourage the Panchayati Raj Institutions to take up sanitation promotion to achieve open defecation free status; and Kerala went far ahead of other States in implementing the same. Remarkable progress was achieved in ensuring food security too. A lot many women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes became heads of many LSGIs. Panchayats are heading to a successful future with varying fruitful schemes which was not so in the male-dominated past. Among such schemes are Labour Army in Kunnathukal, Trivandrum, Food processing unit in Erumapetty, Trichur, Women prisoners welfare scheme of Kannur District Panchayat, and Agricultural advancement of Kanjikkuzhi Block Panchayat.



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ACHIEVING SUCCESS STEP BY STEP

Naina J. A.

Deccan Herald, 16 July, 2012

This woman GP member has become a catalyst of change in Kolthige.

Gram Panchayat members use their power to ensure that the villagers have access to drinking water supply, good roads and try to bring in change in their village. They also make sure that the grants do not return back to the government, following non-utilisation of funds. However, there are a very few Gram Panchayat members who carved a niche in their Gram Panchayat limits.

Yashodha, President of Kolthige Gram Panchayat in Puttur Taluk is a woman of substance and has become the catalyst of change in the Gram Panchayat. Elected to the Gram Panchayat for three tenures, she has served as the Vice President of the Gram Panchayat and she believes in love, patience and unity, which finds an answer to all the problems.

“Male members of my village were spending their earnings in toddy shops. I have enrolled over 80 such individuals to de-addiction camps and now there are teetotallers and are leading a decent life”, she says with pride.

“As I come from an agriculture family, I learnt the art of SRI system of paddy cultivation through SKDRPD and I started disseminating information on the same. As a result, as many as 13 families in my Gram Panchayat are following SRI system of paddy cultivation”, she said.

In addition, she has been creating awareness against dowry system, self-employment among women, healthy food, need for saving, ill-effects of mobile phones, need for attending Gram Sabha and cleanliness. “Along with the help of the rest of the Gram Panchayat members, we have tried to create awareness against gambling which was rampant in the village. Through the efforts of the Gram Panchayat, the gambling has come down drastically”, she says.

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), she has roped in unemployed villagers to construct compound wall in schools and planted coconut saplings. “I clear the bills under MGNREGA only after looking into the quality of work taken up. Under individual work, poor were asked to take up the work on planting saplings of rubber, arecanut, coconut, banana, under Suvarna Gram scheme, the work on roads, drains and water tanks have been taken up in the Gram Panchayat limits. There was no electricity for the houses in Palchod for the last several years. However, through the effort of the Gram Panchayat, the villagers have got electricity. There are 1,240 households in the Gram Panchayat, of which, over 200 houses do not have electricity”, she says.

Water supply

The Gram Panchayat has been supplying water to those areas which do not have means of water. As many as 11 water

committees have been constituted to look into the system of distribution of water. “In the past, none of the villagers were paying the bills. However, now we have succeeded in persuading the villagers to pay water bills as well as house tax”, say other Gram Panchayat members Rajeevi and Bhavani.

Yashodha says that in the last two years, as many as 90 houses have been sanctioned to poor under various housing schemes. “I pay surprise visits to every school once in a month and taste the food prepared under midday meals. Even PHC at Petambady which was in news for various reasons has started functioning without any hurdle.”

Through the efforts of the Gram Panchayat members, the villagers have started loving the Gram Panchayat.

Asked on her future plan, Yashodha says that she wants to convert the Gram Panchayat into a Sugrama, where people live peacefully without any problems.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

HALF OF THE POPULATION LAUNCHES FULL CLAIMS

Shirish Khare

Tehelka Magazine, 15 May, 2013

After filling up fifty percent reserved quota in the Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh, the participation and activity of women has enhanced much more than that. Now, they are on the way of transforming several traditions and symbols of politics in their own style and manner.

It does not take much time to form ideas, especially when these are negative and related to women. Nearly two decades ago, the women were provided with one-third partnership in elections to the Panchayati Raj system in Madhya Pradesh. Several promises were made to them but most of the same was that the males would continue to dominate the system indirectly inspite of reservation being offered to women. To further strengthen this notion even the new concept of “Sarpanch Pati” was coined.

Later, women have been provided with increased reservation upto fifty percent. It is, therefore, necessary to examine whether real efforts have been made so far to enhance leadership amongst women and has it reached a meaningful level.

Although, the previous Panchayat elections were held nearly two years ago but its data are not available, and so it is not possible to ascertain as to what is the present proportion of women in Panchayats. Now to find the same, Tehelka has started investigating this matter by compiling the data received from the department of Panchayati Raj and the Election Commission. On examining and analyzing the same, many surprising results were obtained. The first and foremost, and happy as well, was the conclusion that these women Sarpanchs and Panchs not only established themselves as important and effective leaders in the Panchayati Raj during all these years but have also been successful in completely changing the male dominance and their symbols as well. They have also been successful in transforming the definition of leadership and also its language. If we travel across this political journey of women in the Panchayati Raj system since 1993, then the women have already played two successful innings so far. The prominent one is that the women have defeated the male contestants even on the general seats and that also on a very good number of seats and thus they have demolished their misconception of political superiority. Their second achievement is that the number of women contestants on the reserved seats has gradually increased election after election. Many young women, belonging to various fields, contested and are winning elections. Many of these women contested twice or even thrice and won the elections. Many of them reached Janpad as members or occupied the seat of district chairman. They have changed the political scene of the state, even the working and functioning style and thus established the reality that women can provide leadership even better than their male counterparts.

The welcoming fact is that in the Panchayat elections, which is the first step of the ladder of politics, a total of 3 lakh and 96 thousand representatives were elected, out of which there are 2 lakh and 5 thousand women and even among them more than half belong to tribal, down-trodden and backward communities. One Sarpanch in Madhya Pradesh represents 1,695 persons and thus nearly 12 thousand women Sarpanchs represent nearly 2 crore and 75 lakh persons. They have climbed even higher levels of the Panchayati Raj system. There are 30 women among the 50 District Panchayat chairpersons; meaning 60 percent of the District Panchayat chairpersons are women. Even the most surprising and pleasing fact is that there are more than six thousand women representatives in the state who have defeated male contestants on the general seats. The reality still is that the general seats are wrongly claimed as reserved for male only and the women candidates are discouraged to contest from the same.

The data of seats reserved for women reveal that the graph of women contestants is rising very rapidly. The fact remains that women representatives give more attention on the issues like water, old age pension and distribution of ration. This is the reason that women representatives have proved that they can do better and they are worthy representatives. These qualities in the women have helped in developing a new and vibrant leadership among women representatives. They go on devising new approaches of development.

Munni Saket is Sarpanch of Maronha Panchayat in Satna district. She says, "*The Panchayat was earlier dominated by higher caste people and so our grievances were not attended. Once when my request for ration card was turned down, then only I thought of becoming Sarpanch. When the election was held, there were many*

contestants but it was I who became victorious.” The leadership of Munni Saket is more important from the point of view that the social system forbids women into entering politics but it were the belongingness to her class that contributed to her winning. Now, other women like Munni Saket are realizing the change. She is proud of her people who have provided her the opportunity to prove herself. She got women of her class to include their names in the voter’s list and strengthened her electoral field. Similarly, Kusumbai of Mauhara Panchayat of Rewa district who became a Sarpanch after being a Panch has understood the number game of votes. She reveals how they have elected a Panchayat where 9 women were elected as Panch amongst a total of 16 seats.

Shyama Bai is a tribal woman Sarpanch of Posta Panchayat in Sidhi district. Her story is more interesting. When the election was notified, she sold her goats, got pamphlets printed and distributed them, brought several persons by tractors and got her nomination filed for the post of Sarpanch. It was a hotly contested election but she prevailed and won on the general woman reserved seat. The election of this tribal woman on a general woman reserved seat and that also with huge majority is good omen for women’s leadership.

Beti Chowdhary has been elected as Sarpanch of Devgaan Kala Panchayat in Rewa district. She gets the Panchayat office opened on time and she herself is present there for nearly eight hours daily. She started the tradition of listening to the problems of all deprived classes and established her political grasp. She does her politics from the margin only but is dedicated to ensure her return again.

Similar is the case of Fundibai, the tribal woman in Saarangi Panchayat of Jhabua district. Her Panchayat has 20 wards but this veteran tribal woman has contested thrice in the last one and a half decades and got elected twice as Sarpanch.

Shivakali Bai, the Sarpanch of Khapa Panchayat has proudly contested the Panchayat elections four times successfully. In the fourth time, she got elected as member of the District Panchayat. She has proved, whether it is development or to earn fame in politics, the women of the deprived classes are not weak anymore.

The fact is that women of such tribes and classes freely move around in the agricultural fields, market, etc. without veils or any restrictions. The more they were suppressed earlier by the people of higher castes, the more they are becoming fearless.

Women Sarpanchs say that when they talk to government officers they do so in groups and not alone so that they are not perceived as being weak.

Tehelka spoke to many women Sarpanchs and Panchs. They informed that they did not get cowed down by overbearing persons. They meet such officials in a group. It provides them security, protection and courage. Some women representatives informed that they work as a unit along with other women Panchs and Sarpanch.

It is now evident that women in Madhya Pradesh are now the real face of Panchayati Raj. Gradually, as the leadership is changing from male hands to women hands, the leadership is also acquiring new meaning and definitions.

Although, Alagu Chowdhary, the central character of the famous story 'Panch Parmeshwar' of Munshi Premchand was a male, but more than half of representatives in the Panchayati Raj system in Madhya Pradesh are now women who are giving a new dimension to 'Panch Parmeshwar'.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

Anitha Pailoor

Deccan Herald, 11 June, 2013

EMPOWERMENT: The story of Sesamma Guttikallu, Vice President of Bannur Gram Panchayat, is one of grit and determination. The path she took to ensure the welfare of her people also helped her become literate and socially aware. Her hard work shows today - Bannur Gram Panchayat is a model local body.

Poornima of Chikkamudnur village in Puttur Taluk hardly knew that an informal chat with Sesamma could result in a new house for her. Though she owned a house, it was barely enough for her expanding family. Though her's was a belowpovertyline (BPL) family, she was not sure if they were eligible for another house. It was Sesamma, the then Gram Panchayat president, who understood the situation and informed the family about a provision under the Basava Vasathi scheme. "I also ensured that the new house had a toilet."

Taniappa, a cancer patient, approached Sesamma to learn more about how to get the financial assistance for his treatment. Sesamma found a way and approached the local MLA, who offered monetary help. Even as she narrates her journey from being an illiterate woman confined to the four walls of her home to becoming a people's representatives, the phone

rings. The caller seeks her support to investigate the case of missing women. “I was shocked when I learnt that this mother of two has been missing for the last ten days. Lodging a police complaint and consoling the family is my responsibility, as a people’s representatives”.

As an active member of a Taluk-level committee to combat child and women trafficking, Sesamma has many stories to narrate. They range from saving her neighbor from domestic violence to staging a protest against parents who left their new-born girl child in the hospital. Also, she protested against the hospital for not bringing the incident to the notice of the Child and Women Welfare Department.

Striving doubly hard

Belonging to the ‘Nalike’ community, which is categorised under the Scheduled Castes, Sesamma Guttikallu always felt doubly oppressed. The tag of backward community and her gender meant she had to strive harder than the others. She never got the opportunity to attend school as she was forced to take up work. Beedi rolling was an income generating activity she was involved in, like most girls of her community. An early wedding to Muttappa in Chikkamudnur village didn’t change the pace of her life.

Her hard-working husband was also an alcoholic. Running a household with three children was not going to be easy. Struggling hard to meet the demands of her family, Sesamma flatly refused an invitation by Aruna, a Prerak (motivator) to join the Total Literacy Campaign initiated in 1990. It was later on that she understood the progressive nature of the movement and joined the programme in its second phase in 1995.

The campaign gave her a platform to channelise her concerns for the well-being of society.

For Sesamma, the literacy campaign was not merely something that taught her the alphabet. It brought about awareness and enabled her to contemplate on an issue and take decisions independently. An informed Sesamma also became proactive. She became a star campaigner and became President of the District Neo-literates Federation.

Formation of the self-help groups and active participation in different programmes add to her experience. In 2010, villagers persuaded Sesamma to contest the local governing body elections. The first-time member also got the opportunity to grace the top-most post in Bannur Gram Panchayat of Puttur Taluk which was already progressing in the right direction. The Panchayat, which was the front-runner in the Literacy campaign, was also awarded National Nirmal Gram Puraskar in 2007. Panchayat officials say she ensured they read out each and every circular and manifesto to her, before taking a decision. “Humility and eagerness to keep the villagers informed about different provisions and policies catalysed her decisions”, feels Panchayat Secretary N. Shantharam. During her term as the President, she was available at the office every day.

Gender Equality

During her tenure as the President from June 2010 till December 2012, Sesamma led several campaign related to education, health, environment and livelihood. Her association with the literacy movement made her gender sensitive and created a strong base for gender equality with programmed like women’s day, compulsory education for the girl child,

awareness on nutrition and hygiene, meetings of neo-literates, etc. Be it upgradation of facilities in the Anganwadi centre or creating awareness about the environment by setting up a kitchen garden in the village school or enhancing infrastructure by repairing roads and electrification of colonies, Sesamma continues to lead from the front and inspire others.

“I want women in the three villages of Chikkamudnur, Padnur and Bannur, which constitute the Panchayat, to learn to think independently, and decide for themselves”, she explains. According to a survey in 2012, the Panchayat has 1,214 families of which 401, including Sesamma’s, are below poverty line. On October 2, 2005, a sanitation programme was organised in Chikkamudnur Higher Primary School. Villagers volunteered to construct two toilets for the school.

Ten days later, Sesamma led by various organisations, ensured that 100 toilet pits were dug in her village. This was the prelude to the success of the total sanitation programme in her village. In a move to create awareness about the harm caused by the rampant use of plastic, Sesamma and Aruna went from house to house in 2006, collected plastic and constructed a plastic hut in their village.

The Gram Panchayat constructed similar structures in other villages. These waste collection and separation units are still used in these villages. Sesamma feels Gram Sabha meetings are crucial because they help people familiarise themselves with various allowances and schemes chalked out by the government for the welfare of the common man. Her constant efforts to persuade people to be part of such meetings by paying house visits and talking to each individual have resulted in a greater participation during her term.

A Model GP

Though Sesamma's position has changed to Vice President since December 2012, her thrust to change the lives of the needy remains the same. Gram Panchayat President Udaya Kumar Peruvodi is all praise for Sesamma and her efforts. Bannur Panchayat is also at the forefront when it comes to making the literacy campaign a greater success. Model Gram Vikas Kendra, which operates from Beeriga Anganwadi Centre, hosts self-help groups comprising women, particularly neo-literates.

Sheena Shetty, ombudsman of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) Programme in Dakshina Kannada, lauds the work done in Bannur Gram Panchayat. Shetty is confident that Bannur will soon become a self-reliant Gram Panchayat. Bannur is one of the few Panchayats says Shetty, where MNREGA is being implemented in its true spirit. An active member of the Santhwana Kendra and SUGRAMAFederation, Sesamma spends most of her time resolving the problems of people around her. One can clearly see how 'Gram Swaraj' (village self-reliance) is taking shape as she plants pepper vines in her small areca farm, the source for her livelihood.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

MARKANJA GRAM PANCHAYAT: DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN

Harish Motukana

Vijayavani, 13 June, 2013

There was massive corruption in the Gram Panchayat. All the facilities provided by the government were being cornered by the President and Secretary, thereby systematically denying the benefits due to the villagers. The people finally woke up to this. They formed the Anti-Corruption Protest Committee, and started a continuous struggle. An enquiry was begun. The President and Secretary escaped from the village. The village which had such a dubious distinction at the State level was Markanja village of Sullia Taluk!

But now, in just two years, the face of Markanja village has changed. It has witnessed a silent revolution with respect to Gram Swaraj, village development and self-reliance. The person who was at the helm of affairs during this amazing transformation was Harinakshi, a woman belonging to the backward class.

Harinakshi, who is a native of Somwarpet in Kodagu, got married to Sankesha, a resident of Markanja village. She has studied upto class X and has two children. The small family depends on agriculture for their living.

Development of facilities

As a result of personally visiting each and every household and convincing the people, there has been significant progress in the collection of taxes. For the year 2012-13, the target for tax collection was Rs. 1.37 lakhs. Rs. 1.24 lakhs have been collected as taxes.

During the year 2012-13, under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, with an expense of Rs. 4.17 lakhs, jamun, jackfruit and shade-giving trees have been planted on the roadside. Tree protectors have been put up, and are being cared for properly by adding manure and water. A plan of action worth Rs. 3.85 lakhs has been drawn up for the Employment Guarantee Scheme for the year 2013-14.

Around 122 houses have been constructed under various housing projects, where 95 percent progress has been achieved. At an expense of Rs. 2.65 lakhs, a total of 20 tanks and wells have been constructed for the beneficiaries. Rs. 36,500 has been spent to provide drinking water facilities for the scheduled castes and tribes (SCs/STs). Around 96 beneficiaries have been provided with drinking water facilities from four drinking water plants.

Education

Five Anganwadi centres, one primary, two higher primary, and one high school are operating in the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat. All schools, Anganwadis have excellent water and sanitation facilities. Special care has been taken to ensure that children do not remain out of school.

Health and Sanitation

Special attention has been given to health and sanitation programmes. Doctors come to the primary health centre every Wednesday, check the patients and prescribe medicines. Every year, dogs are given rabies prevention vaccine, and the cows are given foot and mouth preventive vaccination. Health check-up and eye camps are conducted regularly; awareness regarding communicable disease is given on a regular basis. All houses have toilets, which has earned the village the credit of being a Total Sanitation Village.

Transparent Administration

Literacy levels, women empowerment and health programmes are proof of the transparent administrative practices followed by the Gram Panchayat. Currently, there are five women and four men members in the Panchayat. There cent percent attendance in the monthly general meeting. The Gram Sabha *jamabandhi* takes place on time. Vidyadhar K.N., the Panchayat Development Officer, confirmed that there is 100 percent attendance of the President in all the meetings.

Water Literacy

Importance has been given to water literacy within the Gram Panchayat limits. Villagers have expressed interest regarding water harvesting and water drainage. Water conservation is successfully being conducted in homes, schools and places of worship. The Gram Panchayat has been a model to others through water literacy, organic farming, and eradication of rabies.

Under the guidance of Harinakshi, who strived for the overall development of the Gram Panchayat, the new President

Girija, who belongs to the SC, is making progress. Both women, under able leadership, have taken charge of village administration, and have gained for the village the sobriquet of a model village. They are being ably supported by the Vice President, other members and the villagers as well.

Corruption-free village

Under the previous administration, rampant corruption was present, which resulted in an enquiry at the district level by a special enquiry officer. An Anti-corruption Struggle Committee has been constituted under the leadership of their fellow-villager Dola Shankarananarayana Shastri. The villagers undertook a model struggle for two months in front of the Taluk Panchayat office.

Details of the Gram Panchayat	
Area	4829.38 hectares
No. of Households	1,004
Total Population	3,655
Male Population	1,870
Female Population	1,785

Literacy of Panchayat

Through total literacy movement, post-literacy programme, and continuing education programme, the Panchayat has achieved total literacy status. Vocational skill training has been provided through model development centre, and self-employment opportunities through manufacture of phenyl, cloth handbags, and tailoring has been given. The Gram

Panchayat is providing a market to their products. More than 100 neo-literates in the village are involved in such self-employment activities and are becoming self-reliant.

Harinakshi says, "I was apprehensive when I contested for the Gram Panchayat elections. Due to the encouragement of my husband, I contested and won. I did not have experience of Gram Panchayat administration. Through the cooperation of the members and staff, and the cooperation of the people, I got to know and gained awareness about the Gram Panchayat system, making it possible to bring into force people oriented programmes in a transparent manner."

During the tenure of the previous tenure of the Panchayat, Harinakshi played an important role and managed to wipe out the corruption stigma attached to the Panchayat through developmental programmes and increased the village resources as well.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

TRIBAL RANI HELPS TRANSFORM VILLAGES

Pramila Krishnan

Deccan Chronicle, 8 June, 2013

DRani 38, an Irula tribal woman heading the Siddhamur panchayat in Kancheepuram district, is an example of how society may transform when a woman is in charge of the administration. After the class 5 dropout was elected president in 2006, Siddhamur Panchayat villages have home been to many development projects.

Having been briefed by government and voluntary organisations on the powers and responsibilities of a Panchayat President, Rani understood that she was the grassroots-level leader who was a bridge between the government and public.

Rani, Siddhamur's first woman president, opened bank accounts in the names of the women in the families and brought them together to form SHGs. She ensured that NREGA workers received their full salary. She opened a library in the village and also conducted Gram Sabha meetings. She also paid a lot of attention to de-silting ponds as part of the welfare projects she executed.

Rani was elected unopposed for a second term in 2011 that runs up to 2015. She then approached the collector to point

out that when promoboke lands were available, people were living in tents on roads. As a result of her initiative, 60 tent families were given new concrete houses.

“I never dreamt of living in my own house. Now, I have thatched roof hut built on three cents of land and I have the patta in my name thanks to President Rani. She explained about the funds and construction and demanded only love from us”, Kasthuri Yezhumalai, one of many people eager to talk about their President, told DC.

Rani says, “I want to be true to my people. I am answerable for every single rupee that I spend. I tell them that they can enter my office any time and check the account books. We explain in detail about the expenses in the Gram sabha meets.”

Rani’s husband Devaraj, a postman, never tries to capitalise on her post and doesn’t interfere in her work. Her two sons welcome people to their home whenever anybody comes to meet her. Rani, who won the award for the best woman Panchayat President in TN in 2009, cycles to the block development office to attend meetings and returns home loaded with new ideas and plans for the village.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

DOROTHIYA ENGAGED IN ADVOCATING FOR SELF-RELIANCE

Vishnu Rajgarhiya

Panchayatnama, 29 April - 5 May, 2013

Dorothiya Dayamani Ekka associated herself with social activities while studying law and her only dream is to make her Panchayat self-reliant. She obtained graduation degree in Law and got herself registered with Ranchi Bar Council. Now she is studying LLM in the Ranchi University. Meanwhile, when the Panchayat elections were held, she was elected as the President of Aara Panchayat of Namkum block under Ranchi district. Instead of adopting the legal profession, she has already committed herself to advocate the case of her Panchayat to make it self-reliant. Therefore, her activeness has highly influenced the lives of local people.

Aara Panchayat has a special peculiarity in that it has nine wards but only one ward has a male representative. Hence, there is specific importance of aiming for self-reliance in this Panchayat with majority representation of women members. Dorothiya reveals that after the Panchayat was elected in full, she sat with all the women members and discussed the problems in their Panchayat. All agreed to a point that although male residents have several opportunities of gaining employment, the women have very rare opportunity. It would be better if they get opportunities to work at home itself. This view was further expanded when Gram Krishi Vikas Kendra

(Rural Agriculture Development Centre) actively cooperated on this issue.

Emphasis was laid on animal husbandry and kitchen garden for self-reliance. One highly bred foreign male goat was made available to each of the ward so that the breeding of goats may be improved upon and breeding activity may be speeded up. Its results are self-evident and the foreign bred male goats remain much in demand here. Even, people of other areas also come now to borrow the same for few days, so that they may also be benefited.

Similarly, 150 chicks of broiler variety were distributed for stepping up poultry-breeding. One chick was provided for Rs. 30 only whereas its market rate was Rs. 60. Such chicks are now growing up rapidly and self-dependence has been strengthened in this field as well. Similarly, the women were provided with five ducklings each at an estimated price of Rs. 50 only. These ducklings are of good breed and are not available in the open market.

Stephen Ekka, a mechanic in the village became physically disabled in an unfortunate accident. He was trained on pig breeding, and was provided five pigs for breeding. It is now very helpful to his family in maintaining the livelihood. The rate of each pig in the market is about 7-8 thousand rupees. He has sold many pigs so far and still has 14 pigs with him. Two farmers in the village were trained on bee-keeping and later were provided with bees in two boxes. Pond is being searched for fish breeding. About twenty types of seeds of brinjal, tomato, chilli, lemon, beans, etc. and calendars containing information on their use were arranged and distributed to encourage kitchen gardening. Dorothiya says that every house

has some place for such purposes, even though it might be a small one. The used domestic water can be easily utilized in the kitchen garden. Drip-irrigation has also been introduced for this purpose. About one hundred women in the Panchayat have been trained on mushroom cultivation. Some others have been trained on production of sweet corn.

Sofiya Toppo, Panchayat committee member, is highly excited and encouraged by these achievements. She proudly informs that about one thousand fruit-bearing plants were planted in the last two years which will soon grow up into trees. These include papaya, mango, guava, litchi, banana, etc.

The papaya trees started producing very sweet papayas in very less time. Experiments have been conducted on increasing paddy production through Shrividhi method. A total of 11 farmers experimented with these methods last year and looking at the success achieved by these farmers, now nearly 20 farmers are using these methods this year.

There are twenty self-help groups of women functioning within the Panchayat but as they are not formally registered as per rules, these groups are unable to avail the banking and subsidy facilities. Now, Dorothiya is trying to get these formalized.

Efforts are being made to let these women self-help groups open new shops under the public distribution system and be allowed to run the same. These self-help groups have diverse activities. If there is need of funds for mid-day meals, the SHGs give loan towards that. One of such group has purchased an auto vehicle (three wheeler) which is being used by others on

hire basis. Another such group has purchased and stocked the tent materials which are used by the local population on normal rent basis.

Efforts are on to link the other women with employment opportunities of various kinds.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN A BIG WAY

Afsana Rashid

The Kashmir Images, 1 August, 2012

Panchayati Raj in Kashmir

Thirty-three percent reservations for women helped them to make their entries as Panchs (members) in rural local body of the governance at grassroot level (Panchayat system) in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Interest drove middle-aged Zana Begum, resident of Buren-Pattan in north Kashmir, to contest multi-phased Panchayat elections in the State. Though her family didn't support her but she took up the challenge and despite all odds, emerged successful.

“I was interested in contesting elections for local governance. My husband didn't support me. Oftentimes, he told me that our family will be killed if I contest elections. One of my children supported me and I went ahead with elections”, she said.

Begum recalls that after filing nomination form, her husband asked her not to return home as he apprehended serious repercussions.

“Even my parental side didn’t support me. Due to fear psychosis, I went out of village for 15 days prior to elections”, she said.

Now that she has been elected as Panch, unopposed, her husband supports her in work.

Like other Panch members, Begum demands travel and other expenses of Panchayat members to be borne by the government. “We go to various places and attend several meetings. Government should provide us some financial assistance so that we can bear the expenses that we’ve to manage from our own pockets”, she emphasised.

Being illiterate, Begum says that her husband and children guide her in dealing with issues related to local governance. “I only know how to append my signatures, rest I seek assistance from my family members. They guide me well and suggest me what and how to do things”, said Begum.

She feels that Panchayat system can prove a great help to villagers, if implemented in letter and spirit. Recalling an incident she quotes, “Few days back, I went to a nearby school to cross-check the facilities available to students. Apart from lack of management and indiscipline in the school, I found teachers irregular and mostly engaged in knitting and gossiping.”

After a brief pause, she continues..... “I asked one of the concerned employees about cleanliness in the school. She observed silence and later in the evening her mother-in-law turned up to my house asking me who I was to question her daughter-in-law. Being a Panch member I feel it my duty to

question and check if our children are getting appropriate facilities. They've a right to secure future and shouldn't suffer the way we did."

Welcoming the decision of the government wherein women were granted reservation in Panchayat elections, Ghulam Nabi Bhat, Sarpanch of the village said that the move will encourage women towards liberation and they will learn the leadership skills.

"We contested elections on risk. Had there been no element of fear, illiterate women wouldn't have got a chance to contest", he argued.

Ghulam Mohammad Mir, president Village Welfare Committee chips in saying, "we would prefer a literate woman but due to fear psychosis women didn't come forward to contest the elections the way they should. After elections were over, many women repent for not contesting."

"Our purpose of contesting election is that masses should be benefited in various aspects", said Hasina Akther, another Panch from Buren-Pattan. She says that Panchayats can play a positive role in the development of a village and empowering women-folk.

"Our objective is development of village in terms of infrastructure like better roads proper transportation, safe drinking water and adequate health and education facilities", she stressed.

Akther says that her elders in family supported her to contest the elections.

Being illiterate she admits that Sarpanch guides them. Development of the village like proper roads, fencing of playground and availability of water, transport facilities and electricity is on her agenda as a Panch member. “I want to serve my people and work for welfare and betterment of village.”

Couple of kilometers away, lives Zareefa Begum in Rather mohallah in Buren-Pattan, who lost the election. Her father-in-law insisted her to contest the election.

“Personally, I was not interested in contesting but since my father-in-law asked me to, so I couldn’t say no. But I did no campaigning at all”, she said, adding that her daughter, who is a graduate was asked by many to contest but she wasn’t interested.

Begum keeps herself busy with sozni work (handicraft) and feels women in the area face innumerable problems on account of water-scarcity. “We’ve to travel long distances to fetch water. Our day begins with collection of water. Once it is over, only then we can go to our fields to work. Then we have to feed cattle. It is a situation wherein we don’t have water to quench our thirst. How can we think about other developmental works? My aim of contesting Panchayat elections was to find solution to all these issues.”

Commenting on water-scarcity in the area, she says, “tube-wells are sanctioned in favour of blue-eyed people; others suffer for want of water. Women suffer the most as they’ve to collect it”.

Similar views were echoed by Raja Begum, Sarpanch, Yaadeepora in Palhallan. Begum, who is in her late 40’s

contested Panchayat elections and won. She was elected both as Sarpanch as well as Panch. Then she resigned from the post of Panch.

Having a political background for past four decades, she yearns to be in politics. “Since my childhood I used to participate in political rallies, meet ministers and take decisions in my village. My parents always supported me later my husband and in-laws too supported me”, said Begum.

Her husband, Abdul Jabbar Wani who is a retired government employee, contested against Begum but lost. “I am happy with her success.”

Four candidates contested against her for the position of Sarpanch. As she won, it was time for celebrations in her family as well as village. People applauded her courage and celebrated her victory.

“People supported me and I knew I will win as I have worked hard for the development of the area”, she said, adding that her purpose for contesting election is that women should get Islamic teachings, fear Almighty and social evils like drugs abuse and alcohol addiction should end.

Mother of three children, Begum is popularly known as ‘aapaa’ in her village. Only four people in the village based on 575 households are government employees, rest are engaged with agricultural work and as laborers.

Five years ago, the government primary school in the village got upgraded as middle school. Begum is of the opinion that

the school should be shifted to other place in vicinity so that students have innumerable facilities like playground etc.

“Education is widespread nowadays. Earlier, it was restricted to a particular class and was gender specific. Few girls received education, but new generation is very lucky in this regard. They receive education with least hurdles. There is also one Darsgah in the village but no private school. No dispensary exists in the village”, Begum added.

She said that there was no sweeper in school and the teachers asked students to do the work. “I made it a point to see that such things are stopped.”

Begum further stated that though it has been announced that the area will be a model village, but they haven’t received any benefits from the government, so far. “Say for example, toilets aren’t constructed under Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) in the area. Everyone here has a dry latrine except a couple of families. Besides, other facilities ought to be made available to people.”

She underlined that she will try to get job cards for women as well.

The Sarpanch added that the village based on 2,500 voters has no transformer for electricity and four such transformers are required in the village.

“We were scared to contest panchayat elections, but despite all odds we did it. Consequently, government should provide us stipend so that Panchayats are able to function properly. Otherwise we will quit”, she said, adding that the Panchayat in the village conducts meeting once a week.

The village has four Panchs and two among them are women.

Few kilometers away, lives Tahira Akther in Moulanabad in Trikolbal, Pattan in north Kashmir. She contested for the position of Panch in her area and won unopposed. Her father-in-law motivated her to contest the elections.

“This was the government order to have woman candidate as Panch. My father-in-law asked many women in the village to contest, but they denied”, said Akther.

Her father-in-law generally looks after Panchayat affairs on her behalf. “But I have to personally attend official Panchayat meetings.”

Akther plans to highlight various issues concerning women including domestic violence, awareness about various development schemes offered by the government and basic issues concerning them like scarcity of safe drinking water, proper health-care facilities, better roads and transportation and education of their children.

Khazeerah Begum, a local from Moulanabad said that it is good to have a woman candidate in Panchayat as she can better understand problems concerning women and highlight them accordingly.

“Women face scores of problems and meet injustice in their day to day lives, so here women Panchs have a bigger role to play. Usually decisions in rural areas are male-centric. So role of female Panch is imperative. We expect her to take up issues concerning women and solve them at the earliest”, commented Begum.

Her counterpart, Shahzada Begum feels “we can easily approach a female Panch and explain our difficulties and requirements”. She added that women representation in the Panchayat process can go a long way in addressing basic issues like water-scarcity and generating awareness about welfare schemes offered by the government at grassroot level.

Hasina Akther, a resident from Mundyari-Pattan and a treasurer of Gulfam self-help group in the area that was framed under aegis of Indo Global Social Service Society (IGSSS) and European Union and Welthungerhilfe (WHH), Germany said, “We cast our votes, now it is the duty of the Sarpanch and Panch members to work for the development of village and people have to be after them”.

She said that she was interested in contesting panchayat elections but owing to her household engagements she couldn't contest elections. “It is good that women candidates have been given a chance. They can cater to fundamental issues concerning masses especially women-folk and play their role in the development of village.”

About Panchayat elections, Mymoona Bano, another local resident said that though she didn't exercise adult franchise during 2011 Panchayat elections, but she finds Panchayat an effective system to empower masses especially women at grassroots.

She regretted that some women in the village wished to contest Panchayat elections but due to social pressure (from families and the community) they couldn't.

Despite losing Panchayat elections, Rafiq Akther, a resident of Khanpath in Pattan has her hopes high to try her luck in

future. “I would contest elections in future as well but that time I would contest for the position of Sarpanch.”

Her husband, who does pashmina work and works in PHE mechanical section on contract basis, says he is ready to support her. “I will support her in next Panchayat elections as well. I wish to see her dream come true. I am always by her side.”

Akther, mother of eight children, contested from Ward number one in the area. There were three candidates contesting against her. She lost by two votes.

“It is fine to be a Panch, but we did nothing so far. We appeared in the first meeting of Panchayat”, said Shakeela Akther, Panch from Dangerpora in Sumbal, Bandipora district, adding, “We want to take up issues like water, roads and welfare schemes offered by the government”.

Akther was elected unopposed. She was supported by her husband. “We would not have contested the elections if our family wouldn’t have supported us. However, we spent from our own pockets and had celebrations at our respective places for couple of days after we won the elections.”

She argued that government should provide them certain incentives or honorarium so that they can bear travel and other expenses incurred on various items and programmes and can carry forward the work assigned to them without any hurdle or hindrance.

Mehmooda Akther, another Panch member from Dangerpora said that women should feel proud if they work as Panchs and are able to contribute for the development of the village and welfare of its people.

Welcoming government's decision of 33 percent reservation for women in Panchayat elections, Haji Ali Mohammad Dar, Sarpanch from Dangerpora said, "It is a good decision. May be six years later, there will be 50 percent women in Panchayats".

Ghulam Rasool Rather, Panch from Dangerpora added, "We organise meetings almost every day and invite female Panchs as well, but often they don't turn up for such meetings. Though it is a healthy sign that women have come forward for such elections but they need to be more diligent and hardworking".

Sheeba Akther, a Panch from Hanjivera-Singhpura in district Baramulla, about 22 kilometers from the city-centre dreams about eradicating poverty and working towards the development and betterment of the village.

"My mission is to help poor as I am poor myself", says 30-year-old Akther. She contested from Ward three of the Halqa and defeated two candidates.

Akther is from Uttar Pradesh and eight years down the line, she tied nuptial knot with Mohammad Jaffar, a local resident. "Initially, it was difficult for me to settle down here, but with time I mingled with people around. Having won Panchayat elections, I not only got encouraged but aspired to work hard for betterment of masses and the society."

Her husband said, "I supported her because a female candidate was required from this Ward. Had this condition not been there, I would have myself contested."

He stated that her choice to contest elections wasn't an easy task. "Many people opposed me on the fact that being a non-

state subject she can't contest, but I told them that she is now a state subject and I stood by her."

Akther stresses that she would work towards the development and prosperity of the village and would see that all welfare schemes offered by the government reach masses at grassroot. She, however, regrets that Panchs aren't taken seriously by the people especially the literate class.

Sharing an example, she said that she went to a middle school in the area to monitor its functioning. "I was nervous as I entered the school. But the moment I enquired about certain things in the school, teachers rebuked me, made fun of my poverty and asked about my credentials. I know I am illiterate and economically weak but I have every right to know how things are developing in my village."

The Panch member said that she not only got disheartened, but wept and told her husband that she wouldn't like to be in such a system. Her husband in turn boosted her morale and asked her to boldly take-up the challenge, she added.

Khateeja Begum, a Panch member from Zangam in Pattan said that they lack awareness about various schemes offered by the government like TSC. "We've no awareness about loans for artisans or welfare schemes for the needy. I have been fighting for ICDS centre for the village. Many people here don't have ration cards. We wanted to construct a sanitary latrine but have no space."

Minister for Rural Development, Ali Mohammad Sagar has said that department of Rural Development is all set to change rural face by following well-defined strategies and guidelines.

“Promptness in service delivery and redressal has improved remarkably during past three years”, said the minister, while replying to a discussion in legislative council at Jammu on 29th March, 2012, adding that the government in 2010 initiated development of rural areas by way of involvement of people in development process through Gram Sabhas.

“With the result, people in large numbers participated in Panchayat elections, last year. Funds have started flowing at grassroot as Panchayats have started functioning and improving their management system”, he added.

Sagar stated that deputy commissioners have been directed to ensure that functions of 14 departments are transferred to Panchayats. “A Panchayat fund will also be constituted to manage flow of funds to these institutions. Some 30 lakh rupees will be given to every Panchayat in the state for the development of respective areas next year.”

Minister for Public Health Engineering, Irrigation and Flood Control, Taj Mohi ud Din, while addressing number of public meetings and interacting with local Sarpanchs and Panchs at Ramban and Batote in Jammu on 22nd December, 2011 said that the Panchayat elections conducted after 30 years and devolution of powers to them are monumental measures of the government.

“Panchayats can even start water supply schemes up to one lakh rupees and recommend schemes in groundwater”, he added, while asking Sarpanchs to act as change agents in their villages and ensure attendance and service delivery by field-staff of Public Health Engineering and allied departments.

However, Sarpanchs on 16th April threatened to go on an indefinite hunger strike if the government fails to implement Jammu Kashmir Panchayat Raj Act within 15 days.

Sultan said that no one spoke on their behalf in State Assembly whereas outside Assembly everyone raises hue and cry. He was joined by Shafiq Mir, a Sarpanch from Rajouri and convener of Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Conference. “A year has passed since panchayat elections have been conducted in state, but the government has failed to complete election process”, said Mir.

He said that Panchayat Raj Act clearly states that elections at block level are to be conducted within 45 days after elections of Halqa Panchayat. “But no such thing has happened so far. They are giving lame excuses and buying time. All parties are responsible for this. When they’ve to implement AFSPA and other controversial acts that time they don’t give any excuses.”

Accusing ruling as well as opposition parties of dividing Sarpanchs on party lines for their interests, Mir said, “National Conference, Congress and Peoples Democratic Party are our common enemies and they united on the issue of not giving powers to Panchayat members”.

Mir said that no powers have been transferred to Sarpanchs. “Our role is no more than a mere informer. We organise meetings but we can’t take decisions.”

Explaining the point further, he said, “Government asks us to supervise various schemes but we can’t take action. Say for example if we see anything unusual in schools in our area of jurisdiction, we just have to inform Zonal Education Officer.

Besides, NREGA is a defunct scheme in the state. It hasn't been formulated keeping in view local conditions.”

Meanwhile, with the start of Panchayat Raj institutions in the valley, some non-government organisations too started a campaign to strengthen these institutions so that their impact is felt on ground. IGSSS, a non-government organisation, working for empowerment of masses at grassroot level and supported by European Union and WHH, Germany organised sensitisation programmes for Sarpanchs and Panchs about Panchayati Raj system and offered trainings about micro-planning.

“The decentralisation process of governance in Kashmir valley has not taken a proper shape despite enactment of legislation by the State Assembly in 1989. Now that Panchayat elections have been successfully conducted and elected representatives are in place, it would be imperative to capacitate members of local panchayats towards essence of the governance and development. This will help them develop a right perspective behind exercise of having local governance institutions and initiate development works in their respective villages”, said Yasir Qureshi, Manager Programmes, IGSSS.

Qureshi added that training workshops of 1-2 days duration for 50 participants each per year is proposed for Halqa Panchayat members and the same would focus on powers, functions and resources of local government, poverty alleviations, human resource development, self-governance, devolution of powers to Panchayats by different departments of the state, micro-planning, women empowerment, gender issues and social audit.

Pertinently, 33 percent reservation for women in panchayat polls attracted a good number of women candidates as Panch. But mere political will and articulation of policies will not translate into benefits for women. Vibrancy and efficacy of panchayat system would remain dismal without active participation of women.

Women have to be on their toes to make their voices heard and presence felt. Mere reservation for women alone can't help to make any remarkable difference.

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WOMAN PRESIDENT EMPOWERS THIS MADURAI PANCHAYAT

V. Devanathan

Sunday Times, 12 April, 2013

Residents of Thirali, a Panchayat of 5,400 people in Madurai district, were unaware all this years that a three-acre agricultural plot in the possession of a villager was once a tank. For more than half a century, the owner was farming in the land.

Recently, the Panchayat recovered the land and restored it to its original state-a water body. In the past one and a half years, Thirali Panchayat has recovered about 50 acres of village land that had been encroached upon for several years. Villagers attribute this remarkable land recovery spree to the 52-year old woman Panchayat President Chandra Pitchai. Pitchai, who was recently awarded the best woman Panchayat President in Madurai district, has been working for long to make Thirali a model Panchayat.

One of her initiatives was to make villagers pay taxes. Now, Thirali residents proudly claim that none in the village defaults on taxes. "Initially, residents didn't support me and when I insisted that they pay the taxes properly. Similarly, they were against removal of encroachments. However, they gradually understood the importance of paying taxes and the

advantages of keeping the river area free of encroachments”, she says.

Pitchai describes herself as uneducated though she can read and write Tamil and English. She even took an initiative to provide free tuition to students from the villages up to class XII. She also played a crucial role in eradicating child labour in the village. Another challenge that she took on was to educate the villagers about the importance of voting in elections and attending Gram Sabha meetings. She charged that former elected representatives failed to carry out any developmental works. “Infact, the village Panchayat office remained closed for the last 15 years. Hence, I contested the election as an independent candidate and won”, she says. Now, the village Panchayat office building is a busy place.

K. Pandiammal of Sundararajapuram Pudur village says the road leading to Thirali used to fall under darkness in the absence of street lights. “But Chandra took efforts to install solar powered lamps. At present, there are 10 solar lamps at regular intervals which help villagers to commute without any fear”, she says. National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has also been streamlined. “When I urged the people to work according to the stipulation they initially denied and even protested. As time passed, they started to change and now work well and get paid due wages. They worked hard and restored the water bodies in the villages”, Pitchai says.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

WOMEN LEAD THE WAY IN VILLAGES

Garima Prasher

The Times of India, 28 March, 2013

The lines of fate and education may be missing from her palm, but her passion to work for the poor is incomparable. Meenakshi Rangayya, an elected women representative of Sanyasihalli Gram Panchayat in Hubli, aspires to be the change and wants to set an example for women of Nittur village. She wants the women to be independent and children to be educated.

While most of us rush to a school to learn driving, Meenakshi who has never been to school, decided to learn riding a bike on her own. “After being elected as GP member in 2010, I had to commute to places and at times, during unfriendly hours too. I had to depend on my neighbours to drop me but they were never keen on it. It was then that I thought I should learn how to ride a bike. Once decided, it was a matter of a few days and I learnt it without any help”, says Meenakshi, whose next goal is to learn driving, again on her own.

Right from preventing the village school from being shut to ensuring pension for widows of Nittur, Meenakshi says she loves helping the needy. “I belong to a backward class and thus wasn’t very popular in my village. People used to maintain a distance from me. But after all the work that I did, they

respect me now”, says Meenakshi. She was sharing her story at an event organized by The Hunger Project, a non-profit organisation that works for women empowerment and gender equality.

While Meenakshi ensured education for many, Bhagyamma Manjunath, member of Androgala Gram Panchayat in Shidlegatta, fought to ensure that illegal liquor shops in her village are removed. “The shops were creating problems in many households. I had to fight hard to get them removed. I had to face many blunt answers from officials, but finally got my ways”, says Bhagyamma.

Komala P. Madhu of Hosahalli Gram Panchayat in Srirangapatnam is instrumental in the overall development of her village. From ensuring supply of drinking water to helping hundreds under ‘Aashraya Scheme’, Komala says being a human is not a hurdle if you want to work for the good of others. “I met several officials for development works and got a good response. I never faced a problem”, says Komala.

But not all are as lucky as Komala. Indrammma Puttswamy, President of Besigrahalli Gram Panchayat had to undergo lot of hardships to get rid of illegal establishments. “There were many shops in our village operating without a licence. After repeated complaints, I decided to get rid of them, but it wasn’t as easy as I expected to be. Many abused me and I also got life-threatening calls. But I knew I had to help villagers”, says Indramma, who has also worked for a cleaner and greener village.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

THE UP-SARPANCH ENGAGED IN REALIZING THE DREAMS

Lakshmi Lal Balai

Tarun Desh, 4 June, 2013

Rakhi Paliwal is Up-Sarpanch of Upali-Odhan Panchayat in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan. She had dreamt a lot about village development while she was only a child. Her father was Up-Sarpanch then, and now on being inspired and encouraged by him, she contested the election for the post of Ward Panch, became Up-Sarpanch unopposed, and immediately got engaged in changing the image of her village.

Rakhi was very much a common girl, studied in school, and used to move around in the village. But even during her playful childhood, she used to get upset with the prevailing problems of the village. Such worries compelled her to dream about actual development of her village. Today, she has not only played an important role in village development but also created awareness among women, men and youth of the village.

Rakhi says, "My father had already been an Up- Sarpanch in the Panchayat. I used to tell my father that I would get educated and become a lawyer but my father used to insist that when I get duly educated I have to become a Sarpanch. It is since then that I became interested in becoming Sarpanch. Then, in 2005 I became highly

desirous of becoming Sarpanch but the seat was unreserved. Then, my father suggested me to contest as Ward Panch. I contested and won and then was elevated as Up-Sarpanch quite unopposed. After becoming Up-Sarpanch, my dreams again started chasing me. I was worried that the condition of my village was not in proper order; the earthen roads have to be made pucca, electricity has to be provided, toilets have to be constructed for women, bathrooms required to be built, and cleanliness has to be ensured in the village. Thus, I dreamt of improving conditions in my village.” Rakhi was completely dedicated to ensuring development but the challenges were so many. She could not decide as what to do and how to do after assuming the responsibility in the Panchayat. What were the responsibilities of an Up-sarpanch? Initially, she was hesitant enough to even go to the Panchayat.

The dreams of Rakhi then were simply learning to fly, but she put aside her hesitation and arrived at the office of the Panchayat. First, she tried to understand the functions of the Panchayat and in the course of the same, she faced several difficulties. The biggest difficulty was that there was nobody to explain the working of the Panchayat to her. Although, she was taking information from the village secretary and employment assistant, but she required more of the same. During all these, in the Gram Sabha and in the Panchayat she happened to have come across some persons from a non-government organisation. It was only from here that her dreams started taking flight towards the reality. She participated in various workshops and training programmes being organised by the non-government organisations and obtained every information about the Panchayati Raj system, and actually started working towards the real village development.

One specific problem in the village was troubling her since her childhood days – and that was the absence of toilets for

women of the village. She could not bear the fact that women had to go in the open for defecation. She used to stop and rebuke the women of her locality. But, it was not a solution to the problem. Still, she started moving around the village on her motorbike right from 5 a.m. to stop women from open defecation. On finding any woman doing so, she used to rebuke her. Then, gradually she found the root of this undignified act. Well, what was the option with the village women except going out in the open? Then, Rakhi stopped her act and engaged her efforts in the campaign for getting the toilets constructed. She kept raising the issue forcefully in the meetings of the Panchayat, Gram Sabha and even that of the non-government organisations and acquainted all participants with these problems.

Rakhi further says, *“The Sarpanch Jugal Kishre Mali and I undertook various steps to overcome and improve the pitiable condition of the Panchayat. Due to our persistent efforts, an organisation Miraj Group adopted our Panchayat and the same is engaged in converting our village into a Nirmal Gram Panchayat. The organization has planted several trees in the village; regular cleaning work is being done, several dustbins have been placed at different points so that instead of throwing the waste here and there, the villagers can put the wastages in the dustbins.”* Rakhi said that the proposed place for constructing the public toilet is very close to the village temple and so another suitable venue is being searched for the same. She insists that public toilet is a dream and it would soon be set up at an appropriate venue.

She raises the village issues through the Facebook

Internet is of great use in this age of information revolution. She has due understanding of its importance. Any information can be obtained through the internet. Nowadays, she shares

complaints of villagers on Facebook. She has brought this to the notice of the Panchayat that the villagers share their complaints on her Facebook page. The District Collector and other administrative officials are also connected with Rakhi's Facebook page. Rakhi collects the complaints of the villagers and forwards the same through the internet to the District Collector and other officials and also shares the same publicly on her Facebook account. It is the Facebook through which she got resolved several issues and problems of her village. Not only this, but also trains women in the village on the use of computer and that also without charging any fee.

Persistent efforts for Women's Empowerment

Rakhi has moved one more step ahead i.e., empowering the women in her Panchayat. She has taken several steps to make the benefits of various governments' schemes available to women and to make them aware and conscious about the same. She has done specific work on education for girls, moved from house to house to link the girls with education, made the parents understand its importance and the benefits, and played the important role of linking the village girls with regular educational process. She keeps visiting the village schools now and then, talks to girl students and encourages them in the learning process. Rakhi says, *"When I was a child, I had to go to attend the school nearly 5 km away from the village but now luckily the village has its school."*

The Up-Sarpanch is also part of 'Save the Girls' campaign. She staunchly opposes female foeticide. She also keeps a continuous watch over this issue in the village. She keeps visiting and monitoring the Anganwadis and due to the regularity in her visits, the Anganwadi workers also remain on their feet and stay active. Rakhi says that these visits help her to

be updated about the pregnant women in the Panchayat. She also studies the list of registered children, regularity in their attendance, takes stock of supplementary nutrition diet being provided, pregnant women and vaccination thereof. She has made the village women aware of social welfare schemes and helped them apply so as to avail the benefits under pension and Paalanhar schemes.

Rakhi organises group meetings with women, and teaches them to acquire consciousness about themselves. She trains women on the use of computer at her home and also sewing, knitting, handicrafts, etc. so as to make them self-reliant. It is her dedication that attendance of women has increased in Gram Sabha meetings. When she became Up-sarpanch, attendance of women used to be very poor in such meetings and even the women Ward Panchs were absent. Males used to dominate the meetings with sizeable presence. But with Rakhi's persistent efforts, women now attend these meetings in good numbers. She also ensured that women Ward Panchs attend Gram Sabha meetings.

Rakhi has one more childhood dream of becoming a lawyer. She continued studying even after becoming Up-sarpanch. She has completed her graduation and has now appeared at the examination for the first year of LLB course. Since having the dreams and turning these into realities is her childhood habit, it appears certain that she will be a lawyer soon.

Up-Sarpanch Rakhi says that if she had not got guidance and training from Astha Sansthan, a non-government organization, then her dreams might have faced difficulties in getting realized. She proudly mentions that by participating in various workshops and training programmes conducted

by this organization, she has learnt a lot about the Panchayati Raj, various government schemes, duties and responsibilities of Up-Sarpanch and community mobilization. This has helped her do much development work in her Panchayat. She said that attending several training programmes of the State Government has also helped increase her knowledge. She also attended many programmes of Astha Sansthan. This gave her the opportunity to meet several women Panchayat representatives having come from different districts and also learn from them. Praising such programmes of Astha Sansthan, Rakhi says, “*Many women Panchayat representatives are doing excellent work in the State. They have become aware and empowered due to their association with one organization or the other.*”

Recently, the Vodafone Foundation recorded the interview of Rakhi under its ‘Red Rickshaw Revolution’ programme and carried it across various countries across the world. Vodafone Foundation also broadcasted the interview on its web page. Since she has worked for the development of her village under Panchayati Raj, Rakhi has remained in the headlines of the media. The girl with dreams, Rakhi and her passion is not only saluted by Rajsamand but also by people in the country and abroad.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

THE GUARDIAN ANGELS OF THE PANCHAYATS

Rudra Ranjan Sejjpada
Sambad, 7 June, 2013

A radiant complexion, wary eyes looking shyly from behind a veil, anklets tinkling along as she wades through, adorned with a beguiling smile sometimes, and a tearful visage next... busy from dawn till dusk with not a moment to spare - that was the picture of a woman in the eyes of Indian men. But the wheels of time have brought about much churning and change in our social life. And in the new social configuration, women have proven their capacities from Panchayats to the Parliament, even to the United Nations. As heads of their village councils, some such women have turned guardian angels in their areas.

The Jewel of Kushalada - Phoolamani

Weathering forty two summers, she has striven on alone on the path of public service, with not a care about her age. From the time of serving the sick through her electro-homeo shop to becoming the Sarpanch today, she has become a familiar name. Phoolamani Soren was born in Sialmundali village of Kushalada Panchayat, to her father late Phagu Soren and mother Dulari Soren. The call for serving the sick had come early, and she had turned into a symbol of service in no time. She completed a course on Nursing after Matriculation, and

started serving as a Nurse in a private hospital in faraway Bhubaneswar. Overwhelmed with the pain and suffering of people visiting the hospital, her concerns soon took her back to the tribal dominated Simuliabandh village where she set up a home shop and resumed with her earlier service sick and ailing. In the midst of all this, she forgot her own needs and devoted herself to that of her five siblings. Even now at 42, she knows nothing else but the call of the sick. Phoolamani had passed the Matriculation exam in 1990 and finally completed graduation in 1996. Time soon came when everyone wanted an empathetic person like Phoolamani as their Sarpanch. Seizing the opportunity at a greater scope for public service, she bowed to their wish. A close friend of hers since long, Sara Soren helped her visit people on a scooter through which Phoolamani could gauge her capacities and popularity. Elections came, and she won by defeating her nearest opponent by a margin of 1,835 votes. Phoola, the flower had blossomed into a fragrant flower now. And whatever she has managed to accomplish till now has become an example for many. From availing of pensions to the needy to reaching various social security programs to the people and implementing schemes like MNREGA, etc., she has made her Panchayat responsibilities her prime concern now. Overcoming the vagaries of life through a strong sense of duty singlehandedly has become her mission in life.

Favorite Leader – Lakhmipriya

Politics is not new for her, starting her foray right from her college days. Completing her Matriculation in 2006, she had started college soon after. In 2008, she completed the +2 exams from Betanoti College, Mayurbhanja. During this period, politics had left an indelible stamp on her, as she participated actively in the college elections and campaigned

for others. She realised that politics was a strong means to work for the larger interest and to raise voice against injustice. That woman's unspoken feelings and silent protests can be brought out in a revolution. Soon her career in politics started as she got a chance to join the Panchayat. At the young age of 22 she has become the Sarpanch trouncing her opponents comfortably. As the Sarpanch of Sathhilo Panchayat in Betanoti block, she has immersed herself in various developmental undertakings. This year as the tribal dominated backward villages of Kathapala, Garudabasa, Purunapani, and Bahanada were reeling under shortage of drinking water; she set a wonderful example by reaching drinking water through tankers to every home in these areas. Her father, Surai Tudu and mother, Parbati Tudu derive great happiness and pride in their daughter being such an inspiration to others. A strong willpower has served to override concerns of age as clamour to get her married has started around her. But she brushes these aside saying that peoples' concerns and needs are more important and foremost on her agenda and that she shall strive to meet those first. With the mandate of a Sarpanch, she is now trying to give concrete shape to all the potentials of her panchayat and bring them to reality.

Prize in the hands of Parbati

Aged 28, Parbati Hembram is a daughter-in-law now. However her identity is that of a former Sarpanch and a present Member of Panchayat Samiti. In 2012, she won as the Member of Panchayat Samiti from Baunsanali Panchayat of Jashipur block. Parbati has had to stay with her parents to attend to her duties now, to which her in laws have agreed wholeheartedly. Her husband takes pride not merely in his wife's personal achievements as former Sarpanch but for the fact that the panchayat has got a guardian angel in her. She

first got elected as the Sarpanch in 2007. Starting her career in politics at the age of 21, she has dedicated herself totally to the service of the people. Unaware of the webs of politics at first, Parbati had started working to help the local tribal people become self-reliant and join the mainstream through various activities for five years. She was helped in this by the Lutheran World Service (LWS). On the advice of Kalyan Kandal, the functionary of LWS, and the request of the community members she stepped into the world of politics, and became everyone's favourite Sarpanch. Not only did she become the *laadli* of the Panchayat; her Panchayat soon caught the notice of the government and, at the Athletic Association Meet at Guwahati, she received the Nirmal Gram Puraskar from the President of India in 2008. That she had become the angel of her panchayat was proven by this award; for which she was also elected as the Member of Panchayat Samiti in 2012.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Oriya

ANNAPURNA OF HER WARD

Binodini Roul

Khabar, 20 May, 2013

She has lived up to her name. Her parents had called her Lakhmi, Goddess of sustenance, who can ease hunger pangs of mortals. Today Lakhmi has proved this true through her work. She has been able to alleviate hunger pangs of her Ward residents. She has turned into the Annapurna of her Ward...

Lakhmi Bhuyan aged about 50 years is the Ward Member in Santundi Panchayat of Rayagada block in the district of Gajapati. No government has been able to match what this tribal woman of little education has done for her Ward. Today not a single soul is hungry in her Ward. Owing to her foresight alone does every house have a pot of rice boiling every day. In a backward district like Gajapati where the Government provisions of rice gets siphoned away without reaching the people and even many people with BPL cards go hungry, Lakhmi's Ward is an exception. Like the Goddess Annapurna in Hinduism, she has turned into a similar form in her Ward.

Her family consists of her husband and two sons. She has been elected for the second time, unopposed, as Ward Member from Padasahi village in Santundi Panchayat. The plight of poor tribals had always weighed down on her. She used to think

about ways of removing their poverty. However opportunity came along; *'where one cannot, a group can'*, she believed. So before becoming Ward Member she united women and forming self-help groups, inspired them to be economically self-reliant.

Lakhmi was always in the fore front in fighting injustice. Not one to tolerate any wrong doing, she challenged anything that came in the way of justice. After becoming the Ward Member, she focused on how to avail food security to all her constituents. How to get BPL cards for the poorest and link them to all the benefits of the cards became her first priority. In the event of people not getting the BPL card, her concern next was to get them other cards so that the poor can benefit from other government benefits. For this she had to face the ire of the Sarpanch and the Panchayat Executive Officer last year.

Last year, additional cards were distributed to non BPL families to receive subsidized rice. In her village there were many poor families who were not included in the BPL list, so Lakhmi wished these cards to be given them first. However, without consulting any Ward Member or organising any meeting, the Executive Officer and the Sarpanch decided to give those cards to their nominees and prepared a list. When Lakhmi learnt about this she asked them upfront how they could decide the beneficiaries list without calling for a village meeting, and how could undeserving people avail the benefits instead of those who do? When these two authorities ignored this uneducated tribal lady and went ahead on their agenda, she took the matter to the block and questioned how could a list of beneficiaries be prepared without the mandatory Palli Sabha? Seeing the merit in her argument, the BDO ordered the Sarpanch and Executive Officer to convene a proper Palli

Sabha and with the consent of all, decide the beneficiaries list. So a proper Palli Sabha was organised and names of actual beneficiaries finally found place in the list. *Could 'Annapurna' have let the hungry go without food?*

The problem of hunger was solved temporarily with the help of government rice. But there was no guarantee that this support would always be available for the people. Hence, she started seeking ways to help people become self-reliant and develop their own means of sustenance.

The farmers in her area were not able to get a good output from their crops due to poor water and irrigation facilities in the area. She reflected that if a check dam on the nearby Mahendra Tanaya river could be built, this can solve the area's problem greatly. But a check dam cannot be constructed with a small amount. A lot of money is required for the purpose; so she ran from pillar to post and apprised every officer about the matter. Realizing the importance of her need, the local MLA has agreed to help her from the local area development funds at his disposal. She is now hopeful that this small dream of hers will also be successful in the coming days.

As the Ward Member, she regularly visits her village Anganwadi center and school, which has helped in regularizing the running of these centres. Earlier a lot of absenteeism by students and teachers, even Anganwadi helpers used to happen. With her continuous monitoring this has been solved. Such responsible action on her part has brought her immense recognition in the entire block, so much so that the EWR federation in Gajapati has made her the President of the Alibha Mahila Panchayat Pratinidhi Mahasangha in Rayagada Block.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Oriya

SWORN TO PUBLIC SERVICE -
SANTOSHI
Jagdish Naik
Khabar, 21 August 2012

Santoshi Das has been actively associated with The Hunger Project and its local partner, LASK, since the previous term when she was the Sarpanch of Talbelgaon Panchayat. In the last elections, she had contested for the post of Sarpanch from an OBC (women) seat with three others winning by a margin of 500 votes. Hailing from a socially active family, Santoshi used her term to bring about a lot of development in her panchayat.

A tale of success...

There was an outlet for country liquor right next to the Panchayat office which emboldened miscreants to drink and harass women and girls in the vicinity. When Santoshi protested and asked the shop owner to shift elsewhere, he and his supporters played the caste card saying it was customary for tribals to drink and they should not be stopped. They even started creating disturbances and threw stones at her house to intimidate her. She then motivated women Ward Members in the Panchayat to join her and together they met the District Collector and Excise Officer, apprised them of the situation and succeeded in shifting the outlet deep inside the nearby forest of Chandili.

The Panchayat Samiti Member of Talbelgaon used his influence to overrule the Panchayat and carry out work orders as per his interest. One such activity was building of a road in a developed area whereas other places were badly in need of one. Santoshi prevailed upon her colleagues to put up a united and stiff resistance to such willfulness, and succeeded in cancelling previous orders which didn't have the sanction of the panchayat, and regulated all proceedings subsequently to prevent similar occurrences.

There was an acute water shortage problem in Palsipada village in the Panchayat. Santoshi met the BDO several times pleading for a bore-well, but the official grew impatient and started misbehaving with her. Santoshi mobilised other men and women Ward Members of her Panchayat to protest against this, finally filing a case of harassment against him. This made the BDO realize his mistake and he apologized to Santoshi at the police station promising to expedite the bore-well matter immediately. Thereafter, the Project Director, DRDA of Kalahandi visited the spot and sanctioned Rs. 2.5 lakhs for the work.

Even though Talbelgaon Panchayat is just 5 km away from the district headquarters of Bhawanipatna, the number of SC/ST people staying here is quite high. Amongst them, the practice of polygamy and exploitation of young girls on false pretext of marriage is quite rampant. Santoshi used to convene meetings to make people aware and protest against these practices apart from going door to door to enlighten and embolden young girls from falling prey to such advances.

Other achievements in her previous tenure which raised her stature amongst her constituents include 300 old age pensions to members of SCs/STs, including 30 persons under other social welfare schemes, stripping double job cards provided to some influential people and giving those to the

actual beneficiaries. 2 check dams, 14 farm ponds, 10 tube wells and cleaning 3 village ponds under NREGA secured her the first position in the block for being able to create and provide jobs.

In 2012, the post for Sarpanch was reserved for STs, which effectively excluded Santoshi from re-contesting as Sarpanch. However, her zeal and dreams to develop her Panchayat, eradicate social ills, provided employment and other necessities to the needy made her contest for the post of Member, Zilla Parishad (ZP), which was unreserved. Around 20,000 votes were polled in the election; however, Santoshi romped home winning a total of 12,196 votes, and was declared “vote champion”. However, her campaign was far from smooth during the elections. Having won the support of most voters, she was opposed in a particular village where direct threats of murder were thrown at her. But she didn't back out of the race and proved her mettle to people. This brave streak made her so popular that after becoming a ZP member, she was subsequently made the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Health and Member of the District Planning Committee.

In her near future, she has plans for empowering SHGs in her zone. She says, “If we want women to progress fast, then we must make their self-help groups self-sufficient, or else they will continue to lag behind.” Proper identification of actual beneficiaries under old-age and other schemes, developing health and education, drinking water supply system and awareness creation against liquor and polygamy are some of her goals. It now remains to be seen when she reaches these milestones as well.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Oriya

INTERVENTION BY TEJI HASTENS DEVELOPMENT

Rajnish Anand

Panchayatnama, 16 June - 31 July, 2012

Teji Kispotta strengthened the Gram Sabha by assigning herself with Mahila Samakhya.

Strengthened Panchayats was Gandhiji's dream for successful decentralization of power. If not nearly hundred percent, but at least to a very large extent this dream appears to be becoming a reality in Khalari Panchayat of Ranchi district. Khalari has one village and nine wards. The Mukhiya of the Panchayat is Teji Kispotta. She was elected as Mukhiya of the Panchayat in the Panchayat elections of 2010. Her persistent efforts have ensured that the meetings of Gram Sabha are convened and held regularly every month. All villagers regularly attend the same, discussions are held regularly on various schemes and plans, and decisions are taken. Work to be done under MGNREGA is also given acceptance here. According to Teji, three meetings are convened every month - the first is of Gram Sabha which is attended by all the villagers; the second one is of the Panchayat in which the Ward members join; the third one is of the Panchayat coordination committee which is attended by all the members at the Panchayat level. The works as sanctioned by the Gram Sabha is implemented by one and all.

Teji reveals that there were difficulties when the developmental works were first taken up. Initially, the villagers were very much disinterested in the government schemes and plans because they were of the view that no government scheme can do any good for them. So, under such circumstances, it was really a difficult situation. She made the villagers mend their thinking and join the mainstream. It was quite challenging but now, the villagers have started realizing the importance of their active participation in the development schemes and welfare plans. She informs that when she joined the Panchayat as the Mukhiya, there were a good number of schemes and plans pending since 2005. But, by now, nothing is pending and now approvals for the schemes of the financial year 2012-13 are being awaited.

Today, there are roads and wells constructed under MGNREGA. The kachcha roads have also been made uniform. Teji has put in special efforts to regularize the shops of public distribution system and has put in appropriate accounting and recording systems. Now, the Panchayat conducts its audits. The Panchayat representatives are present on the spot whenever stock is received and takes on record, and to ensure that distribution is taking place systematically. This is to ensure that beneficiaries are not at the receiving end.

The newly added primary school is functioning normally and appropriately. Teji made special efforts to get it established as the only school in the village, but its own building is yet to come up due to which the students at present attend classes in the open under a tree. Whenever it rains classes are held in a nearby room. She reveals that due to fund block, the school building could not be constructed so far. The Panchayat

members also monitor the mid-day meal scheme to ensure nutritious food to the children.

Teji has one more important achievement and that is creation and functioning of 15 self-help group. These self-help groups are actively engaged in strengthening the women's empowerment. Their objective is to make the women economically self-reliant. Besides, a platform has been created in the Panchayat that deals with matters pertaining to the youth. The "Mukhya Mantri Dal Bhat Yojana" is functioning in an adequate manner; the Anganwadi is functioning smoothly. Teji actively assisted in establishing the women's court which deals with women's problems and tries to resolve the same. The land disputes are also attended here.

Teji informs that nearly Rs. 4 lakh was received for getting the Panchayat Bhawan constructed due to which now there is a two-storied Panchayat building. Necessary furniture, a computer, a photocopy machine, generator and carpet have been purchased out of this fund. Nearly 500 persons can be seated in the hall of the Panchayat Bhawan. Farmer credit cards have been made available to the farmers and arrangements have been made to get seeds for them. All employees of the Panchayat come every week to the Panchayat Bhawan on Thursday which is marked as the Panchayat Day.

Teji informs happily that now the villagers look hopefully towards the Panchayat. Some becomes unhappy when their problems cannot get resolved. Before becoming the Mukhiya, Teji worked as a Sahyogini of Mahila Samakhya. She felt during that phase that the people are deprived of benefits. She knows that the brokers are the main reasons behind it. It is for this reason that Teji, who is a graduate, contested

the Panchayat elections and also got elected. It is a matter of pleasure that seven ward members are women out of a total of nine ward members.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

SELF-EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY
FOR 50 WOMEN
S. Muruganatham
Dinakaran, 1 March, 2013

Dhanushkodi is the President of Mangathevanpatti Panchayat of Kunnandar Kovil Union in Pudukkottai district. Having competed in the local bodies' election for the first time, she has come out successful as the first woman President, with the support of the people of the village.

Two years have gone by since she has taken over the position, and the one aspect she focuses very much on is basic needs of the people. Not a very learned person, but she is an expert in correctly assessing the needs of the people. She is solving the problems then and there, and consulting the government officials.

The very first thing she did on taking up the position of Panchayat President was that, she selected 50 women who have completed their studies and created employment opportunities right in their villages. There was only an elementary school. Students, who completed their class V here, necessarily had to go to the neighbouring town to pursue education from class VI onwards. Hence she made efforts to upgrade the school as middle school and also succeeded. Henceforth children of the village need not bother till they complete class VIII.

Dream Projects: *The middle school has to be upgraded to high school and then into higher secondary school. Only one bus is plying once in the morning and evening. Because of this people of all the four villages are facing hardships. A petition has been given to the collector in this connection. Necessary steps are being taken for operating more trips of the buses in addition to the morning and evening trips. For want of toilets, women make use of the open spaces. There is no security for them. So efforts are being made efforts to provide toilet facilities for every house, she pointed out.*

She initiated and developed the road which was in a bad shape with potholes, into cement road. The awful condition of sewage water running all over the streets was changed. She brought out solution for the drinking water. As a result of such development programs carried out in the Panchayat Board, several improvements have taken place.

Talking about this, Dhanushkodi says, “I have studied up to class V only. I contested and won the election because of the encouragement given by my husband and the local people. Our Panchayat consists of the villages Mangathevan Patti, Mosakudi, Kottarapatti, and Thulukkapatti. Over 2,000 people are living here. Most of them do agricultural jobs and a few are coolies doing construction work. Basic problems relating to road, drinking water, sewage, etc. have been solved to a certain extent. I have been taking efforts to solve all the problems of the people.”

Since 50 women who completed their education had to go for employment travelling a distance of around 10 km earlier, employment opportunity has been created in the village itself through the guidance of Gracy, a voluntary service

organisation. A building has been constructed at a cost of Rs. 2.5 lakhs and perfumeries for export to countries abroad are manufactured here and the women are engaged in the activity. They are earning up to Rs. 200 daily, she said.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Tamil

RAMKO BAI BECOMES SYNONYMOUS TO DEVELOPMENT

Vijaya Pathak

Akhand Doot Bhopal, 30 May 2013

Brought Overall Changes in Three Years

Revolutionary Initiatives for Education, Health, Housing

Angariya Panchayat under Goharganj sub-division and situated on the bank of Barana river is better known as a Panchayat of Bhils. The Sarpanch here is Ramko Bai who has proved that if there is a desire than nothing can hold you back. Her Panchayat is wide and covers Angariya, Imalipura, Bolladhar, Hanuman Ghat, Jhansi and Suraitola villages. She wants her Panchayat to progress and prosper and to achieve the same that she had assured the voters when she contested for the seat of Sarpanch. She had assured the voters that she would bring revolutionary transformations if she is voted to become Sarpanch. The tribal dominated voters believed in her honesty and sincerity and voted her as Sarpanch. She won the contest by 80 votes inspite of the resistance and difficulties created by the rivals and overbearing and dominating persons.

Her Panchayat is spread over an area of 2,200 acres and Ramko Bai dreamt of prosperity and development of the villages in her Panchayat. Earlier she only heard about the administrative

bottlenecks and hurdles but on becoming Sarpanch she came face to face with these. She used to visit the concerned officials with the problems and needs of her Panchayat but was always sent back empty handed with blank assurances. She herself is a labourer and her wages support her children. Her husband Sitaram Bhilala is a farmer, and has three and half acres of agricultural land which is shared among three brothers. In spite of her own hardships, she continued with her courage, remained determined, and ultimately could get her several schemes approved and was successful in getting these implemented successfully.

Her Panchayat has only one school – the primary school in Imalipura. She worked persistently for its upgradation, and could achieve the same by getting it upgraded as a high school. She could also secure free medical facilities and examination tests for a population of nearly 4,000 in her Panchayat. The Kharanja road got constructed connecting all the villages in her Panchayat; more than half dozen houses got built under the Indira housing scheme. Ramko Bai is persistently working towards getting the Panchayat building constructed and she is very hopeful to get the same done. She enlisted the names of needy persons who could be provided houses under the Chief Minister's scheme. She always remains engaged in giving concrete shapes to her future plans.

She eats something early in the morning so that she can go out to work on daily wages; she also takes care of Panchayat affairs and handles them in-between. She always remains alert that nobody alleges her of being more supportive and careful of her own village Angariya only. Instead, she launched the cleanliness drive first in other villages and the turn of Angariya came last. Her efforts towards providing toilets in each of the

houses are bringing results. Now, a total of 3,500 toilets are being built in the villages in her Panchayat. The achievements of Ramko Bai do not remain limited to development only. She is also known for her hot temper against the wrong doing and corruption. There were a lot of irregularities in the Anganwadi and she acted forcefully to eliminate the same. She ensured righteous things so as to run the Anganwadi smoothly. It is her sincere effort only which ensured quality and regularity in the mid-day meals.

Ramko Bai has launched a campaign against the social evils and wrongful practices, towards ensuring girl child education, and against the child-marriage. Now, there are no more child-marriages in her Panchayat. She has not forgotten that special day when Chief Minister Sri. Shivraj Singh Chauhan visited her Panchayat. He travelled around the Panchayat on foot to see the development of the villages himself. He appreciated and lauded the work being done by Ramko Bai. This inspired her further; she re-engaged herself with a stronger dedication to work even more towards the development of her Panchayat.

Ramko Bai is a living example of a pioneer in furthering the cause of Panchayati Raj system and the role of women in the same.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

A CLEAN VILLAGE IN A DROUGHT- AFFECTED DISTRICT

R. Jeyalakshmi

Dinakaran Vasantham, 9 June, 2013

If you do your duty with hard work, perseverance, along with patience, you can not only come up well, but you can lift others too – Jesu Mary stands as an example for this principle.

Michael Pattinam Panchayat is in Mudhukulathur Taluk of Ramanathapuram district. A big pond and a church welcome us on entering the Panchayat. Clean streets, rain water harvesting arrangement in each and every house, offer a bright look on seeing. An 'A' class Panchayat among the Panchayats of Tamil Nadu, having rainwater harvesting, small savings, cleanliness of the village, etc.; all these make it a pioneer among other villages.

Ever since the local body elections have been conducted in Tamil Nadu, Jesu Mary remains as the only leader with a lot of influence among the people.

“After my marriage I came to Michael Pattinam. I was doing agriculture along with my husband. Since I studied up to P.U.C. in 1986, I was teaching people how to read and write in the government’s adult education programme. When our

constituency was reserved for women in the local body elections, I was elected by the people unopposed. I participated in each and every government training programme without fail and started doing my work as per the guidelines. Earlier we used to go the neighbouring Panchayat for collecting drinking water. In this dry area, we decided to solve the drinking water problem through rainwater storage and collected Rs. 200 from every house. The rainwater which falls on the terrace was taken through PVC pipe to the pond and the entire water which gathers in the village is stored in the village pond. As a result, our water in the pond stands as a source for other Panchayats also. There was an invitation to visit America. The World Bank gave a reward of Rs. 5 lakhs in recognition of this. Making use of the fund, we desilted the other three village ponds, raised compound wall and formed a pit, digging six feet deep and thus we arranged to store water.

The activities continued, with construction for individual toilets for houses, library for students, Anganwadi centre, etc. and went on as a long list. I joined as a Small Savings Agent by myself and inculcated the savings habit among all. Now 250 families here are having small savings accounts in the name of 400 persons. I enquired about the needs of the people by asking them, gave applications to the officials and carried them out one by one. Having collected funds from everyone including MLA and MP, I have done various development works. Whoever be the party in rule, I go in person to Chennai for the people. I get the scheme for them. Besides the co-operation of the people, everyone including Collector, engineer, BDO, etc. gives me their support and are leading me.

As it is said that if we do our duty, the result will come automatically, our Panchayat has continuously received various

prestigious awards and funds support from the Central and State Governments. Out of the Rs. 2 lakhs received through Nirmal Puraskar award, we have laid cement roads throughout the village. We sort the wastes collected in the panchayat into biodegradable and non-degradable wastes. Biodegradable wastes are further composed through EM solution and used for agriculture, while the non-degradable wastes are used in laying tar roads.

In order to increase the tax revenue of the Panchayat, we have gradually increased the house tax which was at Rs. 3 and now we are collecting Rs. 120 towards the same. In the encroached land of 3 acres, we prepare vermi-compost, grow wild castor seed plants and we have thus provided people not only the employment opportunity but also income. In this village, there are no discontinued students, nor do we have child labourers. Several persons of this village are in various jobs, after finishing their engineering, teacher's training, nursing courses.

In our Panchayat, there are four women self-help groups and one relating to the physically challenged. People receive various trainings through them and take up the agricultural allied activity of cattle rearing. The group savings which were at Rs. 5 lakhs earlier has now increased to Rs. 11 lakhs. As they say in Tamil 'Kaaindha maramthan kal eri padum' (stones are thrown only on trees with fruits), since we exhibited patience even during times of problems on various occasions, we could turn our enemies into friends.

Now in order to put a full stop to the electric power problem, we are trying to get power for the entire village through solar energy. We are going to implement this project, by gathering

Rs. 10,000 per house combined with Rs. 20,000 as subsidy from the government. The Project Report has been submitted to the district administration. Once the permission of the government is obtained, in a month or two, we will have a solution for the power problem for our village”, she says with pride.

This sense of pride is also found in Michael living in Michael Pattinam. “In the beginning, the government was distributing Rs. 200 as old-age pension. At that time we were asked to keep Rs. 100 only for our expenses and save the remaining amount in the post office savings. We also followed it. We enjoy its benefits now. In times of difficulty this savings helps us. Besides this, whatever difficulty we face in the family, we use share it with Mary Amma”, he said.

Clara agrees with him and continues, “Tasmac shops are not permitted in our village. A few years back illicit liquor was manufactured on the outskirts of the village. We, ladies, under the leadership of Mary Amma formed a group and went there. We broke the pots containing the prepared liquor. The concerned people ran away. Also, she has built four toilets for school children out of her personal money. For all girls who have attained the age, she gets the free napkins distributed at the ICT centre without fail and gives them.”

It is worth mentioning that Jesu Mary, who has achieved so much with the support of the people in the village, is an independent candidate!



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Tamil

THE PANCHAYAT PRESIDENT WHO STRUGGLES FOR RE-ADMISSION OF CHILDREN INTO SCHOOL

J. Mariappan
Dinathanthi, 12 May, 2013

The President of a Panchayat Board, in a mountain village near Kelamangalam is striving eagerly, to re admit children into school, who discontinued their studies for are cattle grazing, and also the physically challenged ones to educate them.

In Krishnagiri district, which stands as the most backward district in education, Veppanapalli, Kelamangalam, and Thally Unions are found to be very backward with regard to literacy of women. The literacy of women in these three Unions is even lower than the national women's literacy rate of India.

Subsequent to this, the Central and State governments are taking a variety of intense measures to encourage and improve women's education in these Unions. Special schools, residential schools, etc. have been opened to improve status of women's education. Various steps are being taken through voluntary service organisations also.

Padma (35), President of Bevanatham Panchayat of Kelamangalam Union, has engaged herself in the readmission of children in the mountain villages, especially girl children, and

is attempting to give them education. Here again, she has been spotting out the physically challenged children in the village areas and admitting them into residential schools. A person who has studied upto class VIII, she has been elected for the first time as Panchayat President. She has been making door-to-door visits in villages including Chinnapalehuli, Periapalehuli, Kothur, Bevanatham, Alasatti, Magadi, Kadulakkachandram, Nanjundapalayam and Narappanampatti and collecting the details of children who have discontinued going to school.

Residential School

Further, she collects the details of the school children, who have discontinued schooling from the respective school headmasters, and goes straightaway to the parents of such children, talks to them convincingly and gets their consent. As a result of her intense efforts, a new residential school has been started in Bevanatham village. At present, more than 25 children who have discontinued their schooling have been admitted in this school.

It is significant that of these children, seven are physically challenged. Many of the parents in the mountain villages such as Rathinagiri, Sathanakkal and Dhadikkal in this area do not send their children to school. Padma talks to such parents, gets their consent and admits the children in the residential school.

Poverty is the reason

On enquiring about this to Padma, she says, "Ours is the most backward area. Parents are illiterate. While they are struggling for their day to day living, it never occurs to them that their children should be sent to school. On the contrary, the children

are sent away for rearing the cattle, and for other jobs. It is felt that in case they are sent to school, it will affect the income and they may have to spend money. We explain to them about the freebies offered by the Tamil Nadu Government to the school students, and admit them in the regular or residential school. In the residential school started by us with our intense efforts, presently more than 25 discontinued school children, including seven physically challenged ones, are studying.”

Toilet facility needed

“There are two teachers and two ayahs here. But there is no toilet or bathroom facility in the residential school. Hence the students and the employees have to go in the open air. So they are subject to lot of difficulties. Therefore, it is necessary that bathroom and toilet facilities are to be provided”, expressed Padma.

Padma who struggles to readmit the children in this mountain village area and educate them, standing by the Thirukural, “Karkai Nandre, Karkai Nandre, pichai puginum karkai Nandre” (Learning is good, learning alone is good, even by means of begging, learn, it is good), is being appreciated by the social activists.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Tamil

HARMONY BEGINS IN PANCHAYAT OFFICE

Pramila Krishnan

Deccan Chronicle, 10 June, 2013

R. Dilliammal, 37 a Dalit woman Panchayat President of Ammanampakkam village in Kancheepuram district, is a motherly figure. The villagers come straight to her house for any grievance – ranging from getting caste certificate scholarship for children to availing of old age pension. She explains the procedure to apply for beneficiary schemes and makes sure only the deserving get government assistance.

Transparency and accountability are the pillars on which she has built her image as a ‘clean’ President. “I would show the accounts book to the public during the Gram Sabha meetings and the villagers are also encouraged to get clarification”, says Dilliammal, who lives in a thatched roof house even during her second term.

She recently got Rs. 7 lakhs from the district administration to construct a new building for the Panchayat office. Dilliammal did not complete her school education but she wanted all the girls in her village to be empowered with education. She would insist on the parents sending their daughters to school without fail.

There is no room for discrimination at Ammanampakkam as Dilliammal is close to people belonging to different castes. Panchayat Vice President Latha Sethuraman and four other Ward Members belong to different castes. “We work without any trouble, and harmony which prevails in the Panchayat office is what you can see in our village”, she says proudly.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

I HAVE COME, JUST TO SERVE THE PEOPLE

A.P. Muthukumar

Makkal Velicham, November, 2012

Our dear sister Sivagami Arumugam, who has been a technician once and then served as teacher, has occupied the position of Panchayat President, with the sole aim of serving the poor and the pitiable and also serves her own people. We heard about the services rendered by her.

It is said in Tamil that the one who gives education especially to the poor is equivalent to god. Like that, she has given assistance for the education of a girl student. To another poor girl student, she has financially helped to the extent possible for the treatment of heart problem. So many people were saved by Mother Teresa. This leader also has few other ideas in mind for social services like building an orphanage and to protect everyone with equal care.

Whoever comes with health problem, whether it is day or night, Sivagami arranges treatment for them. She has contested in the election with four competitors and won it, which means that she has occupied a place in the hearts of the people.

Let us look into the further services rendered by her.

Drinking water, streetlights, road facilities, handpumps have been provided. In order to make the village clean, suitable medicines were sprayed on the shrubs, followed by anti-mosquito spray application.

Water tank has been cleaned. The public well has been desilted and cleaned. Public toilets were constructed on the main road. Loans were given to women's self-help groups through banks, having their livelihood in mind. They are now progressing having taken up with self-employment activities.

In order to ensure that Mel Adhanur village should be totally healthy, the dustbins have been segregated into bio-degradable and non-degradable wastes and are kept separately.

Drinking water facility has been provided for school students by erecting mini tank.

Compound walls have been built for temples, with trees planted around. Plastic has been banned as per the order of the District Collector. Sivagami says that it is possible to convert the Panchayat into a plastic-free Panchayat.

In order to prevent water from entering the village during the rainy seasons, small bridges are about to be constructed.

Pig rearing has been banned. She has given help to the Children's Home in Madurai. She says, "I will make it the best Panchayat. By so doing, I will earn the appreciation of the Chief Minister Ms. Jayalalitha as the Best Panchayat President and I will also bring laurels to my village."



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Tamil

SUCCESSFUL WOMEN CHANGING THE FACE OF THE VILLAGE

Amitabh Pandey

Dainik Yalgar Times, 13 June 2013

There are many instances of excellent roles being played by elected women representatives in rural development. The example of Prabha Kaul is worth quoting in this context. She is Sarpanch of Mataha Panchayat under Rampur Baghelan Janpad in Satna district of Madhya Pradesh.

Mataha was already under the dominating influence of overbearing persons. This Panchayat is nearly 18 km from the district headquarters. All decisions of this Panchayat were continuously influenced by such overbearing persons. When Prabha Kaul, a Scheduled Tribe woman was elected as Sarpanch under stiff competition and assumed the charge of her office, these overbearing persons tried their best to control and dominate her.

When we think of a village, the images of farmers, their green fields and their khalihans (grain-storage) emerge in our minds. Those days are no more there when a village was without roads, electricity and water facilities. Now, its image has changed completely especially since the Central and State Governments has started giving priority to rural development and providing adequate budget allocations

directly to the Gram Panchayats. It has assisted a lot in providing pucca roads, enough electricity feeds, conservation and cleanliness campaigns, and for agricultural development. Special programmes for all these are now being conducted in the Panchayats with adequate budgetary support and in active coordination with dedicated administrative officials. Thus an entirely new history of rural development is being written. To reinforce these efforts, reservation has been provided to women belonging to various castes and tribes. The women, who were earlier limited to their household affairs and kitchen, are now getting elected at various levels of the Panchayati Raj system and a good number of such women representatives are becoming milestones in rural administration and development.

Prabha Kaul, the Sarpanch of Mataha Panchayat under Rampur Baghelan Janpad of Satna district has also established herself as such a milestone. This Panchayat is about 18 km from the district headquarters but over-dominated by some overbearing persons. When Prabha, an ST woman, was elected on the reserved seat and assumed her assignments, these overbearing persons tried to influence, dominate and control her. But, she was firm and resolved to link the village with mainstream development. First, she took the initiative of laying pucca roads in the village, explained to women the importance of having toilets at home, conservancy and cleanliness. She went from house to house, took the women into confidence and encouraged all the villagers to do the needful in this regard. Thus, she did a lot in creating awareness in her Panchayat. She secured a resolution for providing toilets in the households from her Panchayat and took it to Janpad. In spite of having achieved this, certain villagers could not leave

their old habit and used to go for defecation in open. Prabha secured a resolution from the Panchayat that any villager found doing so, would be fined for Rs. 50. She also got a women's committee formed in the village to supervise these efforts. The success could only be achieved when the defaulting villagers had to pay the fine under their own nose. The result is that now nobody goes in the open and all are using the toilets in their own houses. Her efforts towards conservancy, cleanliness and household toilet system won laurels. Her Panchayat was declared as 'Nirmal Panchayat' and Rs. 50,000 cash award along with 'Appreciation Certificate' was awarded. With this, now Prabha is being identified as the woman Sarpanch fully committed and dedicated to rural development.

A similar story emerges from the developmental work being done by Munni Devi Saket, Sarpanch of Maroha Panchayat in Satna district. Further, Kusum Devi Kushwaha, Sarpanch of Mahruch Kandella Panchayat or Rewati Bai of Jaidhpur Panchayat, Sugana Bai of Gajinagar Panchayat - all Sarpanchs and Rukmani, Panch of Jamanya Khurd Panchayat, Kanya Singh, Sarpanch of Khamha, Kala Bai Khangar, Sarpanch of Boukan Panchayat, Ramkali Adiwasi of Saraina Panchayat, and Rannu Bai of Hathanjhiri Panchayat - all of them have accomplished remarkable developmental work in their Panchayats and are still continuing to doing so. These women Sarpanchs and Panchs, even though less learned or even illiterate, have provided new identification to development in their villages. Their leadership has established wonderful records today.

There are 26 lakh elected representatives in our country out of which women constitute more than 9 lakh and 70 thousand.

We can proudly claim that this number is the highest than the total number of elected women representatives in the world. The society expects much more from our women representatives.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

LOSS OF POWER DID NOT STOP THE STRUGGLE

Dinesh Patwardhan

Jana Mithra, 30 May, 2013

A woman member of the Panchayat, who had to forego her President's post, as she raised her voice against corruption, did not lose heart and continued her fight, thus earning the appreciation of the people.

Educated only upto class VII, she comes from a communist background and has been residing in Koppa town since the past 20 years. Her husband, who is a Central Government employee, has always stood by her side.

Sudha Mohan has been elected from Ammadi constituency (1st division) to Koppa Gram Panchayat for two consecutive terms. Coming from a family which struggled to make both ends meet, she responded to the problems of the people. She has organised women and helped raise voices against injustice and oppression.

By contesting the Taluk Panchayat elections, she entered the world of politics and did not face any loss or disappointment in her first attempt. She contested in Panchayat elections, not heeding to the threat of having her husband transferred. With the blessings of the people, she won the elections.

Whatever injustice occurred in neighbouring villages, she addressed and condemned it and has been a woman who can speak frankly and without mincing words. She got elected for the second term as a Panchayat President and completed 2 years and 2 months of the term. She did give in to the pressure of officials and members who tried to force to sign a false bill.

Within a week of the occurrence of this incident, a no-confidence motion was moved and she was removed from the post of President. Though there were nine women in the 15 member team, women succumbed to the enticements placed by the men, which is ironical indeed.

A woman who had constructed a home on government land was vacated from there by a woman Panchayat member herself. Sudha began a powerful struggle against this. Though she faced many obstacles and pressures, she did not back off. As a result of this, the hut in which the woman was living was saved.

Nearer home, 15 families had been living in huts for more than 10 years on government land. The Panchayat department came forward to evict them. She stood in support of the people and began a struggle. Some people left from there, due to the fear of the police, and pressure and oppression of other staff. Only three families stayed put at the place. The responsibility of getting them legal papers for the land lies with the legislator.

There is a government school right next to her house. A rumour was spread that the child of a woman labourer who was affected with AIDS had been admitted to the school. The next day, parents of children came to the school, removed their wards from the school, with a result that 11 children got their transfer certificates within a few hours.

Faced with a situation of closure of the school, Sudha intervened. She kept the child in her home. Along with officials of the Education Department, she went from door to door and convinced the parents. She requested them not to heed to rumours about AIDS. Ultimately, her efforts paid off. The children started coming to school, as before.

There are many AIDS infected women in and around Hirekere in Koppa. She visited their homes, counselled them and played a significant role in creating awareness regarding AIDS. She has also been working as an ASHA worker.

She has also been involved in going from village to village to create awareness regarding infectious diseases, women's health problems and primary health. She assists those who come to her with their problems. She visits the revenue and police departments to get justice from them.

Taking the parents into confidence, she has also conducted inter-caste marriages. In order to ensure that the children of migrant labourers who come from the districts of North Karnataka, to work in the coffee estates are not denied education, she has begun tent schools, thereby assisting the education department.

Though the police protected the accused in the rape case of an Anganwadi worker, she took the protest to the streets, and saw to it that the accused was put behind bars. When attempts were made to close the case of a woman's (named Ashwini) murder as suicide, she initiated a movement through the elected women's representatives' federation (SUGRAMA), thereby ensuring that the accused is put behind bars and ensuring justice.

Her role in revealing the mystery behind the death of Navya, a student of Jogisara, which was on the verge of closure, is memorable. The Ammadiga Anganwadi had been sanctioned under the Suvarna Gram project. Attempts were made to cancel the sanction, due to political machinations. Without being disheartened, as a result of complaining to the District Collector, the chief officer of the District Panchayat, the Anganwadi was opened, and a building was constructed as well. There are 15 children in the Anganwadi.

Along with stopping the sale of illicit liquor, she has been involved in conducting a continuous struggle against social evils. She has taken constant care to see that old age pension, disability wages and other government facilities are not cornered by the well-placed, and that they reach the needy.

During her tenure as President of the Panchayat, except for a Congress member, she is unhappy that the other members did not cooperate with her in her attempts to provide good administration. Under the leadership of elected representatives, she has also been praised for providing good administration.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

DREAM OF A CLEAN VILLAGE

N. Karanth Paraje

Udayavani, 30 November, 2012

Confiding closely and fearlessly, husband-wife problems, conflicts of space, problems related to lending and borrowing money, fights between brothers, divorce and innumerable other problems are presented at Mahadevi's doorstep every day. The people descend directly onto Mahadevi's house with their problems. There have been times when complaints have poured in even at eleven in the night. Responding diplomatically, she says, "Let's decide about it tomorrow at the Panchayat", and provides food and shelter for the night at her house to those who present their problems. In the morning, they are provided coffee and breakfast, and then taken along to the Panchayat. She sees that justice is meted out to them.

On the days they need to attend to their problems, they lose out on their day's wages. There have been instances when Mahadevi has paid Rs. 100 from her pocket to these people. She says she feels a sense of empathy about the loss of a day's wages and the difficulty they would have to face to find a meal for the day.

“Initially, it was irksome. Serving people and striking a balance in our lives takes time. Even if we face difficulties, we should not let it show”, says Mahadevi and therein lies a message for the Panchayat system as well.

Visible development

The number of children in Noolvi’s Kannada school is not encouraging. The children hesitate to come to school. The parents take the children with them for work. Mahadevi says, “The children of our village should not be denied education. They should at least be able to read a newspaper.”

At the beginning of the academic year, she gathers the students together and goes on house visits. There, she elaborates on the problems that arise due to lack of education. She organises meetings as well. Despite these efforts, if the parents do not send their son or daughter to school, she threatens them by stating that ration will be cut off. She hopes that this threat will work.

There were no roads within the Panchayat limits; there were only pathways. It is extremely cumbersome to transport the sick and the infirm. Mahadevi takes the village elders into confidence. She got a 2 km long kachcha road constructed passing through the middle of the village, with the help of the Panchayat.

Many villagers laughed and made fun of her. She did not heed to their jibes. “Now, the road has helped the elderly. Two-wheelers have increased. There is a constant movement of people. Communication between people has improved”, says Mahadevi, sharing the story of her village’s progress.

Last year, during the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti, a free eye camp was organised. About 75 persons were treated in Hubli. She personally overlooked the welfare of the patients, looking after their needs of food and giving them a patient hearing. She rendered selfless service to the people.

If there is any death in the village, it is Mahadevi who is the first person to be there. Panchayat members accompany her as well. They console the bereaved family and after the last rites are performed they return home.

The Panchayat is at the forefront of collecting the village garbage through waste bins. It has also been responsible for planting of more than 6,000 trees and plants through the Employment Guarantee scheme and in collection of tax as well. In Noolvi, the village fair has been developed and a local market created for agricultural produce.

Tracing the path of progress

Prior to taking over as Panchayat President, Mahadevi was a housewife. She was nervous even to speak in front of others. Her inferiority complex was so strong that she would want to hide when there were guests at home. But when Parvati, a worker at Sree Kshetra Dharmasthala Gramabhivruddhi Programme's Jnanavikasa set foot into their house, a new door opened up in Mahadevi's life!

Parvati advised her and talked to her constantly about getting rid of one's inferiority complex, involving oneself in the mainstream of society and growing academically. It was then that the Kariyamma Devi self-help group (SHG) was formed with Mahadevi as its President and a membership of 17. The SHG conducted weekly meetings where problems

and solutions were discussed on a common platform. In this manner, Mahadevi, who grew intellectually in a phased manner over a period of three years, contested the Panchayat elections on the insistence of her husband and won. She became the President by contesting on a reserved seat.

She was already attuned to the problems in the village. Giving priority to the construction of toilets, she was successful in executing and implementing it. She became the eyes of the village. She became a favourite with the village girls. In Noolvi, the practice of open defecation does not exist anymore. The number of people, who have toilets at home, has increased. This is what village development is all about, isn't it?

Getting Panchayat work done through grants provided by the government is not a big deal. Village development, in its true sense is when all the people in the village are brought together, awareness is created among them and development is brought about.

Mahadevi, who was a common housewife, has grown personally, upgraded her life at a personal level, along with managing the Panchayat and being at the helm of affairs, she is the driving force behind the successful completion of many a project.

She lives on a two acre plot of land which she owns. The village women have the freedom to walk right into her kitchen. "Have you ever seen this happening in any President's house?", asks Parvati of Jnanavikasa. "Education is not a market-place for degrees. Talking easily in front of anyone is education too", says Mahadevi. "Don't go wayward. Tread on the right path", is the advice that the President gives to the community.

In the course of the conversation, when one brings up the question of whether she has been given any awards for the yeoman service she has rendered in the Panchayat, she merely says, "I don't need awards; I don't bother myself about it."



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

SUDHA MOHAN, WHO MADE THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE OF AMMADI VILLAGE PLEASANT

Nalina D.

Suvarna Times of Karnataka, 12 May, 2013

Sudha Mohan is a resident of Koppa's rural area. Originally Shailing from Kabbina Setuve of Coorg and belonging to the Malayali Nair Community (OBC), she is the sixth daughter of her parents. Since she came from an economically weaker background, her education came to a standstill after class VII. Mohan, a Brahmin youth who was in government service, and used to come to their house every day to buy milk from them, fell in love with Sudha. She reciprocated the love. Both families agreed to get them married.

The process of becoming part of the Panchayat

While staying in Ammadi village, she observed that the elected representatives of the Gram Panchayat were illegally registering Panchayat lands in their names. Convinced that this should not be ignored, Sudha was determined to protest against this injustice. In spite of stiff opposition from others, she contested the Gram Panchayat elections, won by a huge majority and was elected as the Panchayat President.

Relationship with SUGRAMA

When SUGRAMA was started by Vikasana in 2008, in partnership with The Hunger Project, a Women's Leadership

Workshop was organised for women in the rural areas of Koppa. She actively participated in the workshops and trainings with this organisation. She was also elected as the block-level President of SUGRAMA. Later on, she provided support for trainings, workshops and movements on a regular basis.

Another opportunity for Ammadi Government School

Due to lack of students, the Ammadi Government Higher Primary School was in danger of closing down. The people of the village were under the mistaken impression that the woman who cooked mid-day meals in school was infected with HIV. But it was far from the truth. Her husband had earlier died of HIV infection and using this as an excuse, the people of the village cast baseless aspersions on the woman. They stopped sending their children to the school and instead involved them in housework. Since the students who were earlier coming to Ammadi school were seeking admission in other schools, the strength of students in the school began decreasing with each passing day. In such a situation, Sudha visited the school, met the lady who was cooking and discovered the truth. With the help of their local Panchayat, school children related the true facts to their parents. After the parents were convinced about the truth, children started returning to school. Though there were many problems plaguing the school, it became a model for other schools in and around the area, by getting good academic results.

Support for inter-caste marriages

A girl and a boy belonging to the same village were in love with each other. But, since they belonged to different castes, there was stiff opposition from both families. The girl belonged to

a Scheduled Caste (SC) and the boy belonged to the priest class. There was a great deal of opposition from both families. Realising the problem, Sudha took necessary steps, and got them married at the Social Justice Board, without any opposition.

Struggle for land rights

The main occupation of the people in this area is agriculture and they depend on it to support their families. Many agricultural families in Ammadi village did not even have a square inch of land to their name. The law stating that land is for the tiller was in place. But, though many of them had been farming on the same plot of land for decades, they were upset that the land was not in their names. In order to find a solution to the problem, Sudha launched a campaign in support of land for the tiller with the help of the Panchayat. As a result of this effort, 65 farmer families got land rights over the land that they were tilling.

Tent schools

There has been an increase in the incidence of migrant labourers coming in search of jobs to Koppa and its surrounding areas, which is famous for its coffee plantations. These migrants stay on for the coffee season and return to their respective villages. They come from the districts of North Karnataka. During that period, the children of these labourers go without schooling. While their parents are busy at work, they whiled away their time on the coffee plantations. Concerned about the fate of these children, Sudha began an alternate school for these children. She discussed this possibility with the field education officer, saw a ray of hope, and began the tent school. For the first time, 13 children

enrolled in the tent school. Ultimately, this helped them enroll in schools that provided basic education and continue with their education.

Atrocities against women – the struggle

A local man had raped Mary, an Anganwadi worker in Ammadi village. A case was registered against him at the police station, as a result of which he was put behind bars. But, within a week, he was out of jail. A few anonymous politicians were behind his early release. Gathering the support of all local women, Sudha condemned this heinous act and undertook a struggle to get him punished. Ultimately, it was possible to put him behind bars through legal recourse.

Ashwini, another girl from the same village fell in love with a man, who was also a local. After convincing Ashwini that he wanted to marry her, he developed a physical relationship with her. Later, when she started pestering him to marry her, he murdered her and fled from the village. When a post-mortem was conducted on her body, he fabricated evidence to make it appear like a suicide. But, the locals strongly believed that it was murder. Though the person who committed the crime was caught by the police, he managed to cleverly get bail and escaped. Sudha, along with SUGRAMA members, opposed the Panchayat members and organised a procession at the block level and protests throughout Koppa. Finally, an appeal was submitted to the police sub-inspector working under the jurisdiction of Koppa and the incident was recorded submitted for review, thereby ensuring that the girl received justice.

Suvarna Gramodaya scheme

An Anganwadi centre was sanctioned for Koppa Panchayat, under the Suvarna Gramodaya scheme. Due to interference

of a few local politicians, attempts were being made to utilise the sanctioned amount for other purposes. Observing this, Sudha immediately wrote to the District Chief Secretary. Later, the District Collector examined all documents, and made arrangements for the establishment of an Anganwadi centre, under the Suvarna Gramodaya scheme. In August 2011, basic facilities were also established in this Anganwadi.

Protest against alcohol

Sudha encouraged and initiated the participation of SUGRAMA women in the struggle to make Koppa free from the consumption of alcohol. An anti-alcohol jatha was conducted all over Koppa, in order to convince and inform people about the ill-effects of alcohol. With the objective of making the village alcohol free, the protests were taken to the streets. Villagers were convinced to give up alcohol consumption.

Struggle for the cause of social justice

Navya, a student was murdered by her own father, due to a family dispute. He was abusing his wife and other members of the family as well. Even then, the police had not arrested him. The enquiry into Navya's death was neglected. In June 2012, with the help of local people and members of SUGRAMA from Koppa Panchayat, the Koppa police station was gheraoed. They pressurised the police to provide justice to the dead girl. But, it was ultimately a failure.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

WOMEN PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATIVES ARE PROVING THEMSELVES BETTER THAN THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS

Khasti Bisht

Uttar Ujala, 12 June, 2013

Although the geographical conditions of Uttarakhand are difficult, the life of women here is even more difficult. Till recent years when they did not have the right of participation in the Panchayati Raj system, they remained confined to their home and farming activities. Decisions apart, they even had no right to place their opinion on any social issue including the ones related directly to their families. But now, since 50 percent reservation has been mandated for women in the three-tier Panchayat system, the situation of women has gradually started improving.

It was not easy for the women representatives to surpass the social dominance and ego of their male relatives. The males felt their traditional rights were being curtailed. Also, they treated women just like a servant, and so they were disgruntled by watching them moving ahead. Due to these reasons, in the initial stages their husbands or some other male members of the family used to participate and represent the women representatives and even used to put their signature as well on the decisions of the Panchayats. After some years, these conditions changed. Now, the conscious women representatives are not only using their rights freely

but even setting inspiring examples by performing better than male representatives.

In this era of change, hundreds of names can be quoted such as Shyama Devi, Saraswati Routela, Maya Rawat, Shobha Devi, Meena Devi, Nandi Devi, Deepa Brijwasi and Anju Arya who are not only representing in the three-tier Panchayats but are also dedicated to the issues pertaining to the development and social concerns as well.

In this connection Hema Kabdwal, the head of a community-based organization named SARAL, which is working with women Panchayat representatives in Nainital Janpad, mentioned that the women Panchayat representatives are now certainly becoming more conscious and they are managing the Panchayats even better than the males. These women representatives are not only ensuring transparent administration but also showing their interest in every field. If, besides being encouraged, they are also trained duly, then the image of Panchayats in the State can be transformed positively.

The Pradhan of Salarhi Panchayat in Bhimtal block and vice president of 'Veerangana' federation, Shyama Devi is nearly sixty years old and is entirely dedicated to public service through the Panchayats. She says that until the women become aware of their rights, neither the village would develop nor can social changes be brought about. Shyama Devi has been the head of Van Panchayat continuously for 15 years and now she is Gram Pradhan. She is completely dedicated to environmental protection. She mentioned that since the year 2009 till date, she has successfully converted nearly 27 hectares of barren land into green, fertile land. Even at this age she is extremely serious and dedicated to social reforms. She believes that if

the women become conscious then both the family and the village would be certainly bound to improve. Therefore, she convenes and conducts the meeting of village women every month. She listens to their problems and provides appropriate suggestions to solve the same.

The women need to be encouraged and guided suitably, the reason being that even the educated women of today generally hesitate in putting forth their issue and to voice their problem before any official. The habit of alcoholism is making the hill people hollow in every aspect of life. Shyama Devi is conducting an awareness campaign against this and the consequent change is evident. Her other colleagues are also working along with her in this noble campaign. Now, the males in the society herein are able to realize the evil effects of alcoholism.

Like Shyama Devi, there is 51-year old Saraswati Routela who is a ward member of Meharagaon Panchayat in Bhimtal block and is also the Up-Pradhan. She is also equally concerned with social issues. Till now, she has mobilized women on the issues of alcoholism, rape, domestic violence and foeticide.

Saraswati mentioned that it is foeticide due to which the gender ratio is getting imbalanced and it is because of this, the residents of states like Haryana and Punjab are coming here and taking away the innocent young girls with false promises of getting married. After taking away such innocent girls, they are not only treated inhumanly, but at many a times, a single girl is sold in turns one-by-one to many hands. Saraswati further mentioned that now she has organized women and is protesting against such abominable work. She is also creating consciousness among people. The males earlier used

to reach their homes in completely drunken state, and used to abuse and beat their own family members. It was causing not only economic damage to the family but many of such families reached the point of being broken for good. She took up this issue very seriously, talked to the concerned families, consoled the suffering women, and duly admonished the erring males. All these have helped in transforming the village life. The males are trying to completely get rid of alcoholism. She further told that it will now help the women to become economically independent, and then they would automatically be respected in their own family and also by others. With this in view, she has launched a campaign for constituting self-help groups of women and by working through these, the women are now becoming economically self-dependent.

Self-dependence has reinforced self-confidence among the women. Now, they are competent enough to strongly oppose any evil or torture. Saraswati is not happy with the government machinery not taking due interest in the cases of rapes in her area. She led enough of struggles to help the victims get justice. Through demonstrations and taking out marches, she was successful in getting justice in certain cases but could not in some other such cases. When asked about challenges coming from males, she informed that she had to face many challenges in the initial stage but the mental attitude of male members in the society is changing gradually for the better. She says, *“Now they are also cooperating with us in our work which is a symbol of real change. This is good for every woman in the society.”*



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NETRAMMA – A MODEL FOR VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

D. Nalina

Suvarna Times of Karnataka, 19 May, 2013

The manner in which an ordinary village woman became a Gram Panchayat member

Netramma, who dreamt of getting higher education, provided a conducive atmosphere for her children's education, although they were reeling under severe poverty. Duggalapura is at a distance of 12 km from Tarikere. She belongs to the Nayaka community (ST), with agriculture being their main profession. The family of Netramma would extend a helping hand to those who were in trouble.

Inspiration to contest in the elections

After involving herself in various SWEEP (Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Electoral Processes) programmes and participating in various trainings, Netramma became interested in participating in the elections. The desire to participate in elections arose after participating in radio programmes, awareness camps, federation meetings, and interaction with experienced staff from organisations which was encouraging and endearing. During the Gram Panchayat elections held in May 2010, she won with a thumping majority. She has contested and won elections four times.

THP training

Netamma attended a Panchayat training programme from the Aagaz Academy; WLW training, training regarding internal programmes, issue-related workshops, SUGRAMA federation trainings, and work done in many other areas have created self-confidence in her.

Elected woman representative

This has been a Gram Panchayat where six men and women share the power equally. Netamma has won four consecutive times from Adarahalli constituency. Since 1995 when Gram Panchayats were established, women have been elected as Panchayat Vice Presidents.

During monsoons, the village drain would overflow and make it difficult for people to walk around. She put an end to this problem by laying stones over the drain. After a month-long struggle, she got an Anganwadi constructed in her village. Taps were installed all along the village roads, thereby ending the water problem.

By bringing together women, Netamma started eight women's self-help groups (SHGs). At the group level, she established women's SHG and named it Bhuvaneshwari Mahila SHG. This has been actively working towards solving problems and issues faced by women.

Banning sale of liquor and encouragement to families belonging to weaker sections

Though it is a male-dominated society, she has seen to it that no untoward incident takes place. She has developed the capability to discuss issues on an equal footing with her husband, thereby

developing the potential to take independent decisions. Joining hands with various organisations, she stopped vehicles carrying liquor packets. A complaint was also lodged against them in police stations. The federation members were also getting life threats from the contractors who were supplying liquor. But, with the help of local legislators, these problems were nipped in the bud.

Though sale of liquor was totally prohibited in villages, later it got resumed with people's support. When the women's organisations discovered the secret sale of liquor, a lot of enmity arose. The person who was selling liquor illegally himself gave a complaint against 13 Sangha women, including the Sangha leaders. Due to this incident, the women too had to attend court.

Ultimately, judgement was passed in their favour; later, an appeal was forwarded to Abdul Kalam, regarding solving the liquor problems plaguing the surrounding villages. The Bhuvaneshwari Mahila SHG helped making her Panchayat completely liquor free. Since the men of the house were themselves consuming liquor, they were against their women participating in the struggle. But, without paying any heed to all these hurdles and without losing heart, they have unitedly participated in the struggle, thereby gaining victory over the problem.

Under Indira Awaas, Ambedkar scheme, Ashraya programme, sanctioning of home grants to the homeless for 35 homes in Siddarahalli limits, repairing of Jantara road, and construction of 40 homes have also been done. Without bribing a single official, she has ensured 100 homes to beneficiaries under the Sandhya Suraksha scheme. In the same manner, agriculture

chits have been distributed to 10 homeless tribal community people, Bagair Hukum agriculture being carried out from them were discovered, and in 2012, they were provided with agriculture legal right papers. Twelve unemployed youth, both girls and boys were provided computer training, and scholarships were sanctioned to them from the government. Sewing machines were distributed to four women, from the Social Welfare Department.

Under the water and soil conservation programme, Netramma got drainage, bunds, check dams, and Panchayat compounds constructed. Encouragement was provided for the establishment of a plant nursery, and 24,000 plants have been distributed so far. Quarters have been constructed for primary health helpers. Plans for construction of a primary school, later on bus facilities to the school, hospitals, community hall, and a veterinary hospital have been drawn up. Along with this, she has developed a strong relationship with community based self-help groups, as an elected woman representative. By bringing together the women, she participates with a spirit of unity in village and Panchayat development programmes, and taken comprehensive action against social problems. She participates in Gram Sabha and Ward Sabha meetings.

After getting duly elected, as a woman representative, taking pro-women steps, Netramma has been successful in solving the problems of women in her Panchayat. She has been successful in solving various problems of women in the village. Discussions on an equal footing, effective planning at the Panchayat level, and campaign against liquor are some of the important issues that have been taken up by her. She has also conducted press meet at the district level regarding 50 percent reservation for women, gender equality, and so on.

She has participated in many School Development and Monitoring Committee meetings. By implementing unique programmes with regard to Back-to-School programmes, four child labourers who were working in a brick kiln were freed and were admitted in the school.

“My husband and relatives treat me on an equal footing. I supported my son, who married a girl from another religion. They continue to live with us. By treating people from all communities equally, gender discrimination has been reduced. The situation of women in the villages has to improve; liquor should not destroy the lives of the farming community. I am ready to launch a struggle for the development of the people and the community”, says Netamma, with a quiet resolve.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

YARLAPADI: A SMALL VILLAGE WITH HUGE ACHIEVEMENTS

Suresh D. Palli

Hosadigantha, 13 June, 2013

The village came into prominence under the leadership of Korapalu.

Yarlapadi Gram Panchayat spread over 2,036 hectares, is at a distance of 24 km from Udupi district and 16 km from the Karkala Municipal Council. It has five Wards with a total of 777 families, inclusive of 70 Scheduled Caste (SC) and 17 Scheduled Tribe (ST) families. The literacy level is 87 percent.

Treasury got filled

When Korapalu took over as President, tax collection which was at Rs. 1.87 lakhs has now reached Rs. 4.80 lakhs. The surcharge collected on water, which was Rs. 37,000 has now reached Rs. 1.15 lakhs, which means the collection stands at 100%. By installing water meters in each and every house, water wastage has been stopped.

“Korapalu has never antagonized anybody. She participates with enthusiasm in all activities. It is a matter of pride for us that as a woman, she has been a source of inspiration for developmental activities in the village”, says Ambika, a teacher of the local Anganwadi, with a lot of pride. Gopal Mulya, a resident of the same village is of the same opinion.

I had to step aside when I gained experience...

“During my two and a half year tenure, the people of my village have provided me with a lot of experience. I was selected as the Vice President for my next tenure as well. But, in the meanwhile, the government issued an order that there should be a continuation in the post held. Since I was not economically strong, I have chosen to work as an Anganwadi worker and had given up my post of Gram Panchayat Vice President. Even though I am unhappy that I had to walk out of the Gram Panchayat as I was gaining experience, my 2 ½ tenure has infused new thoughts and perspectives into me”, says Korapalu, a woman of few words.

The Yarlapadi Gram Panchayat in Karkalla Taluk in Mangalore is a very good example of how model development can take place if a woman is in charge. Within a period of 2 ½ years, this village has tread on the path to progress and attracted the attention of everyone in the State. Making use of the position of power she was in, as a Dalit woman who strengthened the Panchayat Raj system and created a model village, Korapalu has created history.

The person who dreamt of making her village a model one in the whole State and realised the dream is none other than Korapalu, the lady who donned the role of the Gram Panchayat President. Due to the people-oriented programmes undertaken by Korapalu during her tenure as President, between 26 June 2010 and 25 December 2012, Yarlapadi Panchayat has been adjudged a model Gram Panchayat. Though living in dire poverty, Korapalu who has studied upto class X, has stressed on the comprehensive development of the village and self-reliance for women in every sphere of life.

Korapalu belongs to the Adi Dravida community of the ST and because of the encouragement of her family and her fellow villagers, she participated in the 2010 Gram Panchayat elections and won the very first election she contested in. Since reservation was brought in around the same time, Korapalu easily got the post of Panchayat President. Since there were six women members among the 12, it helped fuel her dreams further.

Mohan Rao, an efficient PDO

Mohan Rao, an efficient Panchayat Development Officer (PDO), cooperated fully with Korapalu to help her realise her dream. Due to this, whatever programmes were possible to be implemented through the Panchayat have been implemented. During Korapalu's tenure as President, Yarlapadi Gram Panchayat saw unprecedented development. Mohan Rao says that this is a record.

Among four persons chosen from the 146 Gram Panchayat Presidents in Udupi district, Korapalu was one among them who attended a training programme on the Implementation of Panchayat Programmes, at Hyderabad. It was her sincerity at work that got her selected. Yarlapadi, which was a nondescript village, gained recognition due to her. Behind the progress of the village are the efforts that the team under the leadership of Korapalu put in.

Multi-village drinking water

The minute she realised that groundwater levels were sinking and there was a possibility of the village facing acute water shortage, Korapalu discussed the issue with the PDO and other members, prepared the ambitious "multi-village water

scheme” and undertook the bold step of its implementation. As a result of these efforts, a plan to construct a dam across Suvarna river that flows through the village was drawn up. A survey of three acres of government land was undertaken for this purpose. Governmental approval is being awaited.

Achievements of Social Justice Committee

For the first time in the history of the Panchayat, apart from the Social Justice Committee, Biodiversity Committee, and six other sub-committees have been formed under the leadership of Korapalu. She is the President of all the committees.

The Social Justice Committee is doing good work, and that has come as a surprise to the village.

Whatever be the nature of problems in the village, Korapalu wishes that it should not reach the doorstep of the courts or police station, but that it should be resolved at the Panchayat itself. Should one say more when there are six women members? Other members supported them. Usha Poojarthi, the Vice President of the Committee strengthened it further. As a result of this, apart from issues related to domestic violence and exploitation of women, 14 serious issues of various types have been resolved by the Social Justice Committee itself.

Says PDO Mohan Rao, “The cleverness of Korapalu in providing justice has been appreciated by the judge, as well as the District Administration.”

Biodiversity Committee

No sooner did the realisation that native medicine was on the verge of extinction and it should be revived at all cost,

resulted in the birth of the 'Biodiversity Committee', under the President-ship of Korapalu. A list of herbal doctors in the village was drawn up. Herbal doctors like Rama Shetty Jarkala, Gopa Devadiga Ganadakottige and Shakila Hegde Jaddamane were brought together and suitable encouragement was provided to them. Feeling the need for a 'Medicine Garden', a letter has been written to the government requesting for suitable help. If grants are provided, a Medicine Garden with different varieties and species of medicinal plants will take shape in Yarlapadi. The blueprint for this is ready.

Stress on Child Rights

Korapalu, who has given special prominence to Children's Gram Sabha, has responded to the problems of children, thereby endearing herself to the people.

Without a pathway near Yarlapadi Kelamane Shankara Acharya's house, they had no other option but to take a 2 km circuitous route to reach school. If a walking path were to be created, the distance would be a mere ½ km. The children put forth a request to solve this problem.

But, there were no funds in the Panchayat to respond to this request. It was then that Korapalu came up with the idea of 'shramadaan' and resource mobilisation. She did not hesitate to plunge in. With the help of other members, a team under the aegis of Korapalu, created awareness about the children's problems in each and every house. Rs. 17,000 was collected. Essential materials were purchased from this amount. At a total cost of Rs. 50,000, volunteers from Bharat Nirman and the villagers jointly constructed the pathway. The decades-old problem faced by children has now been resolved.

When asked about this, Korapalu smilingly says, “Taking the people of the village along on my journey has resulted in the realisation of all my dreams.”

The same problem existed near Govinduru Tammanahitlu. In order to prevent the crops grown by the farmers from being flooded away in the rainwater, the contribution from people in the form of money and shramadaan saw the construction of a pathway along the embankment thus scoring another success for Korapalu’s dreams.

Cattle shed

The people of Yarlapadi depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Stray cattle grazing on their fully grown crops were a huge headache for them. This was a topic for discussion in the Gram Sabha as well. Korapalu declared that a cattle shed would be constructed in the Panchayat. A set of rules and regulations were drawn up for this. She was successful in getting contributions from donors this time as well. Rs.1.69 lakhs was collected in the form of contributions. Making use of Panchayat grants, a well-equipped cattle shed was constructed at a cost of Rs. 2.35 lakhs. The farmers were instructed to get hold of the cattle that strayed into their fields and bring it to the cattle shed. If cattle-owners had to get the cattle released from there, they had to pay a fine of Rs. 50 and Rs. 250 towards the upkeep of the cattle. This became a burden on the cattle owners as well. When they started taking responsibility for their cattle, the farmers’ problems were resolved. Now, the cattle shed is there but there are no cattle!

Bharat Nirman Seva team

Initially, when Korapalu became the President, she got the details of Central and State Government projects, and ensured

that it reaches the poor people in a proper manner. To provide information regarding the programmes, a volunteer team called Bharat Nirman comprising 24 boys and girls came into being, which was a 'lab to land' system. Each member of the team interviewed 40 families and got involved in providing information and creating awareness among them. It is continuing with shramadaan and other activities.

Collection of grants for development

Instead of merely expecting grants from the government, along with hard work and contributions from donors, a long-cherished dream of developing Yarlapadi has been realised. Behind all these activities is the vision of Korapalu. There is unbounded enthusiasm towards the strengthening of the Panchayat system. The Gram Panchayat and people of the village supported her in this cause. "Korapalu has strengthened the Gram Sabha. Earlier, the participation of voters was less. Now, hundreds of voters participate in the Gram Sabha", says Suresh of Govinduru Devagiri.

Special stress on cleanliness

Special stress has been laid on cleanliness and health programmes in the village. Various health awareness programmes, anti-rabies vaccination campaign, and vaccination programme for cows to prevent foot and mouth disease from spreading among them have all been continuous, ongoing programmes. Panchayat officials say that there have been no maternal or infant deaths.

...And then the award!

After Korapalu took over the stewardship of the Panchayat, a series of awards and honours came their way. Through the

achievements of the Bharat Nirman team, the best team award, Nirmal Gram Panchayat, district Rajyotsava team award for the year 2012 given to the achievements made by Bharat Nirman team, award given for the empowerment of the Gram Panchayat by “Abdul Nazeer Sab State Village Development Organisation” are the many awards that Yarlapadi Gram Panchayat has been decorated with.

Transparency in administration

One does not need to go about enquiring the works that have been undertaken in the village as a whole. If one looks at the many boards that have been affixed on Gram Panchayat walls, it is enough. It holds a mirror to the transparent manner of functioning of the administration.

Korapalu remembers with gratitude, the cooperation of all Panchayat members, staff like Kantha Poojary, Harish, and Sunita.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

GRAM PANCHAYAT MEMBER WHO STRIVES FOR COMPREHENSIVE VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

Hosur Venkata Rao
Janasakshi, 13 June, 2013

In these days, women have been dedicating themselves in various fields and proving efficient and being role models. It will not be out of place to say that the reason for all this is resolve, efficiency, service-mindedness and literacy. Women have had the courage, strength, presence of mind to put a break to exploitation, cheating, injustice, cheating, and bad behavior and even risen to positions of power, thereby earning the recognition of the people.

A woman with keen interest, who noticed the functioning of the jaded Gram Panchayat, entered the field of politics, and got elected as a member of Gram Panchayat during the first election itself. She then led the villages coming under the jurisdiction of her Panchayat on the path of development and became a model to others as well.

This lady, who has studied only upto SSLC and comes from a farmer's family, says that with the support and encouragement of her husband C.R. Rajanna and blessings of her in-laws, she entered the field of politics, and is rendering service to the people. "The very mention of elections gave me jitters but

everyone's affection reduced the nervousness. My fears have vanished due to the Panchayat members and officials", says she, sharing her experiences with the Janasakshi newspaper.

S.L. Kathyayani, of Badavanahalli village, Dodderi hobli, in Madhugiri Taluk of Tumkur district has been functioning as the Gram Panchayat President and was chosen unanimously for the post reserved for women, and is now the first citizen of her Gram Panchayat. As soon as she was elected as the President, she turned her attention towards basic facilities like water, light, toilets, and paved the way for the overall development of the Panchayat. "In order to ensure that all the members provide basic facilities in their Wards on a priority basis, we discuss issues on a cordial note and come to a decision; it is a matter of pride that there were no differences based on caste, creed, status, gender and so on. We were also aware that projects and rules were made for us, and, through these, the importance of the role of women in Panchayati Raj system was realised", says Kathyayani. She also praises her fellow members, both men and women, wholeheartedly.

After being elected the President...

The Panchayat, in order to provide for the various needs of the villagers needs resources. In this direction, the efforts of all the members in ensuring the flow of funds for activities has been successful and, with the systematic collection of taxes that needed to be paid by the people, rents from shops, and so on, it has been possible to collect finances. Three shopping complexes have been constructed during her tenure. Wages of employees, staff and workers of the Gram Panchayat are being given systematically.

Expressing the opinion that more trainings help in increasing knowledge, she has participated in many programmes like a camp on budget presentation organised by SUGRAMA in Delhi, nutritious food, information on agriculture, special information provided to the new President, and programme on legal awareness was also attended. Experts and officials from 28 departments have been invited to impart information and awareness through special programmes organised by the Panchayat.

Under the Suvarna Bhoomi scheme, farmers with small holdings who have been selected as beneficiaries are provided Rs. 10,000 each. Malnutrition, food, water, housing, pollution, agriculture, horticulture, apiculture, information and awareness regarding crops like mango and arecanut have been provided to the concerned people. Free tailoring training is being provided even to this day. Legal help and awareness programmes have been conducted with the help of the Magistrate of Madhugiri. The special agricultural fair (Krishi Mela) has attracted agriculturists and found success as well. Under the SGSY scheme, Stree Shakti groups have been provided Rs.10,000 as a revolving fund and Rs.100,000 as supporting fund.

Education

More stress has been laid on education; in all the nine villages coming under the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat, there are Anganwadi centres, and primary and high schools. Education centres have been provided with basic facilities, and all the Anganwadis have gas connections. Uniforms and stationery items are distributed to children. Personal supervision of good quality mid-day meals provided in schools

and necessary information is provided. Eight children who have remained outside the school have been brought into the educational system by conducting Jathas and lessons are conducted even on holidays.

Water and sanitary health

Kathyayani, the President of the Panchayat and its members, who believe that more attention needs to be paid towards water usage and its wastage, walk through the streets in a group through every ward, get street taps and cisterns installed, repair the old ones and make efforts to ensure proper and legal water supply. Where there is scarcity, water is supplied through tankers, thereby meeting the needs of the thirsty. By arranging for the supply of specially adapted filtered water through a private company, apart from ensuring the availability of 20 litres of water for as less as Rs. 7, she is also making special efforts to make 20 litres of water available for only Rs. 4. A monthly members' meeting where cleanliness issues are discussed, is conducted without fail, along with discussions related to development and awareness creation. Under the Suvarna Gramodaya programme, drains and concrete roads have been built; special interest has been taken regarding rainwater harvesting. As President of the Health Committee, she has participated in meetings and as per the advice of doctors, health workers and ASHA team, she has been successful in creating awareness regarding dengue, swine flu, proper treatment of pregnant women, old age pension, facilities for the disabled, cleanliness of water collection centres in the village, etc. Thanking the members who have supported her, she recollects fondly how she managed to get widow pension sanctioned and prevented a foeticide from happening by providing proper guidance,

which she says have been some of the unforgettable memories during her tenure as President.

Toilets

Having seen the sorry plight of innocent women in rural areas, who need to defecate in open spaces and deciding to put an end to this practice, all the members discussed and decided that all homes should have toilets; in order to help them do this, initially 150 families have been given Rs. 9,000 each. They have organised to distribute funds to the second team of 150 families.

Apart from this, Kathyayani has organised to provide a supporting fund of Rs. 1 lakh, thereby encouraging them. A poor student has been adopted and sent to college. APRO Company has provided village sanitation training and a demonstration on water. Proper information and guidance has been provided to everyone to get their Aadhar cards done.

“If the betterment of a village has to be done in all spheres under a woman leader, her position has to be strong. And, the mind has to be steady”, says Kathyayani with pride. “Participating in elected women’s federation, speaking fluently and with confidence with officials, clear stand and other such qualities and capabilities have to be inculcated; in this direction, it would not be wrong to state that SUGRAMA, The Hunger Project, ASED A and all the functionaries thereof are the force behind my success.”

“Being legally aware and walking on the right path is a sure-fire formula for success. When my sisters rise to positions of power, if they move on without being disheartened and work

sincerely, they too can achieve and be a model to others. For this, one needs to be self-reliant. One needs to stay away from vicious circles, and build a conducive atmosphere through a harmonious life – only then can a woman’s life be fruitful”, says Kathyayani, expressing her heartfelt opinion.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

POWER TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE

K. Narasimhamurthy

Deccan Herald, 3 July, 2012

DEVELOPMENT: Two women Gram Panchayat members from KG Halli in Kolar district are playing a crucial role in creating awareness about HIV/AIDS in their immediate surroundings. They have gone to show how power can be used to bring change.

Gram Panchayat members wield the power to bring about change in their community. They are empowered to provide basic amenities, ensure that people have access to basic amenities, implement development programmes, make sure that grants are not returned to the government without their optimal utilisation. However, most of these responsibilities are part of their jobs as Gram Panchayat members. There are not many members who look beyond these set responsibilities, to carve a niche for themselves. There are two such women representatives, both belonging to KG Halli Gram Panchayat in Kolar district's Malur Taluk. The two women are playing a crucial role in creating awareness about HIV/AIDS in the villages that are under the jurisdiction of their Gram Panchayat.

Shantamma's story

Shantamma is a 45-year old woman who has studied up to her third standard, but can read and write. She has one

daughter and three sons, and shares the responsibilities with her husband Venkataswamappa of farming on their 18 acres of land.

With the intention of creating awareness about HIV/AIDS, she has been at the forefront of organizing many jathas and awareness programmes. She also plays a major role in the village's health resource centre, functioning under the Youth and Development Society. Shantamma is seen as an important person, when it comes to her ability to influence people and organise campaigns.

“There was a time when I would not step out of my home. It was my older son Gopalkrishna, who introduced me to this centre. As a starting point, I read through all the pamphlets here. The resource persons explained how things function here. They encouraged me to volunteer to do something for people. Today, I stand in front of people and talk without inhibitions on issues relating to HIV and AIDS. I tell people to be cautious and also have succeeded in creating awareness on the issue among 2,000 people in the last two years”, she said.

Much like Shantamma is another woman of the same Panchayat, Padma, who is 35 years old. She also participates in several AIDS awareness campaigns and organises jathas, street plays, etc. on the issue. Sometimes, even school children participate in the awareness programmes, she points out. Padma explains that she has seen many people from within her family circle who have suffered from AIDS. She therefore made a conscious decision to involve her college-going son Madan in the AIDS awareness activities as well. Madan is an active member of the Red Ribbon Club, a club that belongs to the village health and hygiene committee of which she is also

the chairperson. Her husband, who is a driver, has stood by her in her efforts to create awareness, she adds.

A whole new world

Interestingly, Padma points out, that till she joined the Adiparashakti Stree Shakti Sangha, she hadn't even stepped out of her home and seen her village properly. "I have seen many campaigns on AIDS on television, and understood the importance of such campaigns. There are several people I know who have succumbed to AIDS. I have also heard that several of these people had become social outcasts because of their condition", she explains, and adds that today, she goes to the homes of this victims and talks to them about their conditions.

The organisation's district convener Nandish notes that it is a huge challenge to reach out and get the victims to talk openly about their situation. This, he says, is easier in village where most people are strangers. It is easy for people to open up to strangers, he says, and add that their job becomes easier because of the presence of the two women, who have shown how they can bring change while being in the Gram Panchayat.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

WOMEN'S PANCHAYAT

Bharati Hegde

Vijaya Vani, 11 June, 2013

It is true that leaders speak about progress of villages being the cornerstone of the nation's development. But, villages continue to suffer from problems. Roads, water, health, sanitation, education are all problematic areas. Along with this, female foeticide and domestic violence is continuing unhindered. In an effort to overcome these problems, many women have been working under the Panchayat limits, which has gained recognition for them. Among them, the work done by A.C. Rukmini of Mayagondanahalli Panchayat stands apart from the rest.

Making good use of government programmes is in itself an art. When most people grumble about not having this or that, this woman has made proper use of all facilities provided by the government efficiently towards the betterment of her Panchayat and in the villages that come under the jurisdiction of her Panchayat, gaining it the sobriquet of a model Panchayat, which is indeed commendable.

Though her education is only upto SSLC, Rukmini is worldly wise. She is the Vice President of Mayagondanahalli Panchayat, in K.R. Nagar Taluk of Mysore district. It has been 6-7 years

since she has been a Panchayat member, and six months since taking over as Vice President.

Mayagondanahalli has 20 Panchayat members; among them, eight are women. Fourteen villages come under the jurisdiction of this Panchayat. Rukmini nursed a vision of the development of all these villages.

Implementation of health programme

Earlier, many governmental programmes and facilities were not reaching Mayagondanahalli Panchayat. It works in this manner – Rs. 1 lakh is given every year for the hospital that comes under the purview of the Panchayat, from the NRHM. It is from these funds that facilities and medicines are bought for the hospital. Due to gross negligence on the part of those who were at the helm of affairs in the Panchayat, this facility had not been utilised since the past two years. Being the Panchayat Vice President, Rukmini is also the President of the Village Sanitation Committee. Hence, while participating in the meeting called once in three months by the Taluk Health Officer, she learnt about this issue. At the meeting that took place in the presence of the Taluk Health Officer, the doctors themselves pointed out that annual fund of Rs. 1.75 lakhs allotted through NRHM is provided to every hospital and was being used by other Panchayats, whereas Mayagondanahalli Panchayat was the only one which was not making use of it. Hence, this amount was going back to the government treasury. On hearing about this, Rukmini woke up to the ground realities. It was then that she realised that this money was meant for primary health centres in villages.

Till then, Rukmini was not even aware that this sort of a facility existed. Due to this reason, the hospital lay neglected. There

were no facilities in the hospital. The cots and chairs were rusted. There were no medicines. Without proper water and drainage facilities, the hospital became synonymous with a nasty odour. Because of this, no one was going to the hospital; even for a small ailment, patients used to go to the bigger hospital in K.R. Nagar town. This was at quite a distance from the village, putting the people into a lot of trouble.

Having learnt about this, the SUGRAMA members and Panchayat women, under the leadership of Rukmini, went to the district office, submitted an application, and got the amount sanctioned for their Panchayat. The fate of the hospital took a turn for the better, after that.

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, a big compound was built. The hospital now has new chairs, tables and cots. It is well-stocked with medicines as well. A water tank has been built. Now, all the villagers coming under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat come to the hospital. Since there is a hospital in the village itself, everything is being attended at the village level. There are special counseling centres for pregnant and post-natal women in the hospital. Demonstrations and awareness building programmes are conducted for them every month.

Saving the lake

Rukmini's Ward is Hadya. The lake in Hadya is spread over 33 acres. But the area mentioned in the documents was a mere 15 acres, which became obvious from the records. A handful of people were misusing the area around the lake. They were not paying taxes to the Panchayat either. When Rukmini came to know about the evasion of taxes and land misuse, she raised the issue in the general meeting of the Panchayat. When she

put forth the query as to the reason behind notifying the area of the lake as 15 acres (while it was actually 33 acres), she was asked to mind her own business. The opposition even got down to character assassination. Angered by this, Rukmini walked out of the meeting and affirmed that she would protest, get all the women of the village together, and ensure that they get the necessary information. Not resting at mere rhetoric, she lodged a complaint directly with the district officer. He in turn, asked the village accountant to conduct a survey of the lake. After this they got the land released after a struggle. “Now, it belongs to us. We got all these works completed through the phone-in programme”, says Rukmini with a lot of pride.

Now, they have converted the area into a grazing ground for cattle. Vegetables are also being grown, which has helped the village to a large extent. The villagers say that it is proving profitable for the Panchayat as well.

Auction of fish

A fishery was developed in the same lake. The fish were auctioned for an amount of Rs. 1,500. It was felt that the amount could not be so low. An account of the sales was asked for. The concerned persons hesitated to provide with the accounts. It was then realised that irregularities were occurring even in this process. Fish worth Rs. 33,000 was being auctioned for a mere Rs. 1,500. It was turning out to be a non-profitable exercise for the Panchayat. Rukmini ensured that this was stopped and brought the whole process under the control of the Panchayat. Now, fish is being auctioned at a proper rate.

Capturing of tree smugglers

Kaggala Ward, coming under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat had 80 acres of land. A large number of eucalyptus trees grow

on this land. Trees that had dried up and were hollow, when cut down fetched lakhs of rupees when sold. This was also being misused. When these activities were questioned, threats were given by the wrong-doers saying that they had the backing of the MLA. This came to light through the forest guards, who informed the Panchayat about the theft of trees. They said that if this was not prevented, it would be profitable only to a handful of people, while the village would stand to lose.

Says Rukmini, “Along with members of the SUGRAMA and a few Panchayat members, we reached the place where this was happening. The forest officer, when questioned about this, threatened us and said that they were from the MLA’s camp and had his orders to carry out the tree felling. In spite of this, we did not heed to his words. When we asked the forest officer to name the MLA, he was not ready to reveal the name. We raised a hue and cry that the tree felling should not go on. We did not allow them to touch even a single tree. This led to a fight between us and them. Finally, we said that we would file a case against them. On hearing this, they softened their stand. After raising attention towards this problem, tree felling and smuggling stopped. They pleaded with us and asked for forgiveness and said the matter needed to be handled by the Panchayat.” Now, the revenue from the proceeds comes to the Panchayat. In this manner, the credit of stopping tree smuggling goes to Rukmini.

Rukmini, who walks around fearlessly in the villages coming under the Panchayat limits, basically belongs to a farmer’s family. She lives with her husband and two children. Wherever there are irregularities and injustice, Rukmini is sure to be present. Along with the development of the village, if injustice is meted out to women, and in case of female foeticide, she

puts up a fight against this. As a result of all these struggles, Rukmini has had to face a lot of threats.

Are you wondering what 'food in a pot' is? This is a reflection and example of the different ways and means in which people take to committing irregularities. Earlier, the number of food packets requisitioned for the Anganwadi was more than needed. That is, in the name of children, pregnant women, post-natal care, more number of food packets were requisitioned which was later transferred to their homes in pots. When some women questioned as to what was being transferred in pots every day, they were not ready to show them the pots. This practice was being continued for the past 10 years. This reached the ears of Rukmini, who was also the President of the Bala Vikas Committee. She questioned this practice in the meeting. She threatened them and said that she would take this matter up with the District Collector, if this continued. Along with this, she brought into force another system – those who requisitioned the packets would need to register their names, and affix their signatures, once the packets were received. When this was done, there was a clear account of the number of packets that had been sent. Hence, such irregularities were stopped.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

STEWARDSHIP OF A SCHOOL EDUCATED GIRL

Mithuna Kodethur

Hosa Digantha, 14 June, 2013

The President of Tenka Gram Panchayat in Udupi Taluk, Jayashri Poojary has been the talk of the village due to the struggle undertaken during the implementation of housing scheme, interest shown in getting an office building for the Panchayat, attempts made to find solutions to problems that have arisen due to the power plant of Udupi Power Corporation Ltd. (UPCL), and increasing revenue through tax revision.

Sharada Poojary, her mother, was earlier a member of the Panchayat. Taking inspiration from her, Jayashri after her graduation stood for the Gram Panchayat elections and became the peoples' representatives. She was 23 years old then. She has been a Gram Panchayat member continuously since the past 13 years. Having successfully completed another term, she was elected as the President for another term as well. Jayashri, who was born to an ordinary toddy tapper's community, has attracted the attention of everyone throughout Udupi due to her leadership qualities.

The Housing Project

By 2007, around 80 illegal squatters had set up tenements on 4.5 acres of governmental land in Admar. Noticing that

land grabbing was taking place, Jayashri decided to put up a struggle. This struggle spread to the district level. It even entered the portals of the court. As a result of sustained struggle, one and a half acres were set aside for housing projects through an order passed by the Udupi district officer. The struggle reached a stage in 2011, wherein 36 eligible persons were given title deeds. At present, a housing project is being implemented there.

Work on provision of roads, street-lights, wells, drinking water facilities is in progress. Nine acres of government land in Tenka village were allotted to eligible people in and around the village. The Panchayat has received many applications for these houses. Priority is being given to those who live within the Gram Panchayat limits. Jayashri says that the eligible from the neighbouring villages will be provided houses, based on availability.

Sumitra, a beneficiary of the housing project, reacting to the manner of functioning of the President says, “Without her efforts, we would have not got houses. The housing project would not have been sanctioned as well.”

UPCL struggle

It is a known fact that the setting up of a coal-based thermal power plant has had a detrimental effect on the environment. Massive pipes that carried water from the sea to the power plant passed through Tenka Panchayat. When the pipes burst, salt water rushed into more than 15 homes, creating problems. Not only that, it harmed even agricultural land. Deaths had occurred due to coming in contact with live electricity wires. Wells got filled up with salt water. A struggle was again initiated, under the leadership of the President. A letter was sent to the Chief Minister as well.

The villagers got together and closed the pump house and turned the heat on UPCL. As a result of this, the company woke up to the situation and came forward to solve the problem. The company provided drinking water facility to the affected people. As a result of the struggle conducted under the leadership of the President, the affected people say that atleast a part of their problems have been resolved.

Tax revision

There is a rule that tax needs to be revised once every four years. But since 2004, tax revision had not been done within the Gram Panchayat limits. During the year 2011-12, due to the tax revision, the demand rose from Rs. 2.4 lakhs to Rs. 3.60 lakhs. Jayashri visited around 100 households that raised objections to the increase in taxes and undertook measurement of the buildings. Later, imposing taxes as per the rule of the law, she was able to convince them to pay the taxes. Jayashri has begun the process of collecting taxes even from UPCL Pump House and other couple of buildings.

Says the Deputy Secretary of the Udupi District Panchayat, Pranesh Rao, "The manner in which the Tenka Gram Panchayat President revised taxes is a model for the entire State. Going from house to house, taking measurements of the buildings, and fixing taxes based on these measurements shows the systematic style of functioning."



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Kannada

TRASH TO TREASURE, KADABA GP SHOWS THE WAY

Naina J. A.

Deccan Herald, 10 June,2013

Women elected representatives have demonstrated women power by instilling silent transformation in the Gram Panchayats by initiating development programmes and disseminating information.

Neelavathi Shivaram, a graduate, whose life long lessons and leadership qualities ultimately made her a Panchayat head and empowered her to challenge oddities being faced by women. Having elected for the first time, she had the chance to get elected to the top most post in the Gram Panchayat. It was during her tenure as a president in 2011-12, Kadaba got solid waste unit and Liquid Waste Sewage Treatment Plant(STP) for the first time in the State.

With the available funds from Malnad Area Development and MGNREGA, the Gram Panchayat successfully implemented STP. "The GP has made arrangement to segregate waste from source by distributing two bins(red and green) to shops, hotels, banks, cooperative societies and restaurants. The degradable waste is converted into organic manure. The organic manure is prepared using OS solution and the manure is sold in the name of 'Kadaba Kadamba organic manure'. "The manure

was tested in the lab and has found that it has all the nutrients for the plants. There is a demand for manure. We have a stock of nearly 15 tonne manure for sale”, she said.

Two women employees employed at the unit, segregate plastics. All the collected plastics are sold to contractors who asphalt roads.

STP

Before the setting up of STP, all the sewage water was flowing directly to the streams in Kadaba. “We have plans to use the treated water for agriculture. At present the water is let into an arecanut plantation. The treated water is odourless. Before the unit was set up, sewage water from the Angadimane SC colony was flowing on the road posing health problems to the colony residents. After the project, the colony has become clean and tidy without mosquito menace”, said Neelavathi. The STP has been designed for a total load of 50,000 litres. However, at present 24,000 litres is being purified per day.

Women empowerment

Realising the need for empowering women, the Gram Panchayat has encouraged activities in Gram Vikas Kendra. The neo literates have been taught to prepare phenyl, liquid soap, cloth bags and are earning their livelihood. The Gram Panchayat has constituted 16 water users committee in Kadaba and Kodimbala villages, to ensure regular supply of water. The Gram Panchayat has also developed a software for the collection of bills from the consumers

Education

“As a GP president, I had ensured that no child has remained outside the portal of the school. In fact, when we received

complaint on school dropouts, we personally used to visit the families and convince parents to send children back to school. A government school was on the verge of its closure following shortage of students at Kujakal during my tenure. However, I intervened and persuaded the villagers to enroll their wards to school and now the school is functioning without any problem”, she said.

Health

Kadaba has not seen outbreak of major vector borne diseases in the last three years. There is no infant mortality in the Gram Panchayat. At the same time, all those civic workers working in solid waste management units are given gloves and shoes by the GP. The GP in association with various organisations also holds free health camp for the civic workers every week. To create awareness on dengue and malaria among students and general public, a jatha was held recently. The GP has also created voters awareness programme on the need to exercise franchise, she said. By implementing MGNREGA, the GP has taken up the work on leveling school ground, planting saplings, digging of wells, thereby guaranteeing employment to job card holders.

De-addiction camp

To check liquor menace, the Gram Panchayat in association with SKDRDP has been organising de-addiction camps regularly. “As a member of SUGRAMA Federation of Elected GP members, I have learnt to face challenges. I have brought in transparency in the administration of the Gram Panchayat.”

“We members at Kadaba GP plan to plant medicinal plants in and around solid waste management unit and make it a

model”, she said. Zilla Panchayat CEO Dr. K.N. Vijayaprakash said, “Kadaba is developing and becoming a role model village in the State. At a time when conserving environment has become a challenge, the GP has achieved sanitation standards.”

Jana Shikshana Trust director Krishna Moolya said “Kadaba is a model village in the country. It has given importance to integrated development of the entire village by taking community to confidence on the path of progress.”

Neelavathi was the only GP member from DK district having invited to be part of National Panchayati Raj Day celebration in New Delhi.



This article won the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 in the English category

PUPPET OF THE POWERFUL TURNS AGAINST THEM

Ruby Sarkar

Shukrwar Magazine, 23 May 2013

An overbearing and dominating person encroached the public road in Mungawadi village of Chhatarpur district and started his own construction work. When Phula Bai, the Sarpanch came to know of this she took the assistance of law, filed an FIR at the police station against the person. It led to chaos and threats but Phula Bai gathered the women of the village and staunchly opposed and demonstrated against the encroacher who was compelled by the women through unity and resistance to withdraw from the land. Although Phula Bai is uneducated, but this episode reinforced her self-confidence and thereafter, with a new courage she kept raising her voice against the misdeeds and injustices of the overbearing and dominating persons and bringing justice. The village women remain united in the sincere and valiant efforts of their Sarpanch Phula Bai.

The reality is that the dominating persons in the village coaxed Phula Bai to contest the Panchayat elections as Sarpanch as they wanted to use her as their proxy, and get things done for their own benefits. After being elected as Sarpanch from the SC seat – where she defeated 8 women contestants by 54 votes – she assumed the charge since January 2010. She

belonged to Kumhar (earth-potter maker) family. Her family owns only one acre of land; she assists her husband in earthen pot-making which is their only means of livelihood. There were many challenges before Phulabai when she became the Sarpanch as the higher caste persons in the village were coaxing her to do the things in their own interests. Phulabai gathered her courage and the first thing she learned was how to make her own signature as the mark of her own.

She started gathering the village women in the name of religious assemblies. They used to have such women assemblies to sing Bundelkhandi folk songs with little music, devotional and religious songs and so on. Phulabai also used such women assemblies to provide information on new development plans being proposed, changes being turned into realities, proposals being thought of, and sought their cooperation in doing all these for the betterment of village life. In between all these, Phula Bai underwent women's leadership training which infused her with a new zeal. Earlier she used to talk by keeping a veil over her face but after this training, she started talking more forcefully at the Gram Sabha meetings.

Phula Bai proudly narrates her role, *"I visit the Anganwadi and supervise the mid-day meal there, get it served properly as everybody there is entitled to equality."* She tells the village women in the gathering about what she learnt during the training, and seeks their support in getting the resolutions passed in the Gram Sabha meetings. Her husband Baijnath Kumhar supports her fully.

Phula Bai is mother of four children and therefore, she understands well the importance of education. First, she got the resolution passed at Gram Sabha to get the middle school

upgraded to high school so that the village girls may get duly educated along with the boys. But the file kept moving from one table to the other, one office to the other, but nothing happened. Then, she called a meeting of the village women and got prepared an application in this regard, addressed to the Chief Minister. The Sarpanch herself, all Panchs and women of the village put their signatures on the same. When, the Chief Minister visited Rajpura village in the district, she handed over this application to him with a verbal request to help the girls in her village study upto class X atleast. The Chief Minister was moved by her sincerity and approach, and assured her of the needful very soon. And thus, the middle school was upgraded to high school where nearly 150 girls of the village are now studying in classes IX and X.

Phula Bai launched the active campaign to make her Panchayat as free from malnutrition. She kept visiting, meeting and talking to the concerned families, encouraging them to regularly send their children to the Anganwadi. It is her sincere persistence that Mungawadi Panchayat is completely free from the problem of malnutrition.

Phula Bai is a very good listener and follower of Vidya Balan – the ambassador of ‘Nirmal Gram’. She is a very good student and is now fully dedicated to transform Mungawadi into a Nirmal Gram Panchayat. Like Vidya Balan, she has also linked the village women to self-dignity and has thus created sensitivity regarding the issue. She is performing each and every assignment with utmost interest and dedication. Till now, 307 families have been identified and enlisted under the Maryada campaign and construction of toilets at their houses has been already initiated. She visits and inspects the primary

health centre regularly. She gets the old women linked to social welfare schemes.

Her only regret is that she has not been able to do much towards prohibition of liquor. She tells that although the drinking episodes have lessened but these could not be wiped out completely. Widows come to her seeking pension as they had become handicapped, aged, and the children are not supporting them.

Keeping in mind the security concerns of children of her village, she got a boundary wall constructed around the school adjoining the national highway.

Phula Bai, 43 years lives in a kachcha house situated in the middle of the village.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

FUNDI BAI CREATES AWARENESS REGARDING EDUCATION

Vijaya Pathak

Prakhar News Express, 13-19 May 2013

*On Becoming Sarpanch – She Transformed the Image of Panchayat
Every Girl Child Goes to School, Dreams Started Becoming Reality*

Women are emerging as the new face of development today. During this age of women's empowerment, they are persuading and working actively even on those basic issues which are generally ignored by the elected male representatives. While remaining in politics, the women representatives are generally proving themselves as a real transforming entity in the society as their holding the specified influencing posts essentially benefit the women in particular. Acting intervening role on issues pertaining to women specifically, they insist for betterment of women which ultimately provide benefit and well-being positively to the families, rural residents and the local society as well.

Fundi Bai, even before contesting the elections for the post of Sarpanch has made an outline of her priorities to be undertaken and getting the same implemented. And, such an ambition of Fundi Bai, the Sarpanch of Sarangi Panchayat in Jhabua district wrote her name in the honors-list of the nation as a whole when she made her dream a reality.

She defeated her nearest rival by 14 votes in the election. She was worried even during her childhood that the society is basically male dominated, the boys are given more importance over the girls; the boys go to school but the girls do not enjoy this privilege. After becoming Sarpanch, Fundi Bai decided to do something revolutionary and such a thing happened also. Earlier, the school-going girls in Sarangi could be counted on fingers itself, but today the situation has changed so much that majority of the girls of the village are now going to school regularly. They are even attending high school and college as well.

Although illiterate she understands the importance of education

This tribal woman – Fundi Bai – is herself illiterate and she has learnt from her personal experience that life without education is just like a blank paper. Her being illiterate is actually a gift of the male-dominated society and therefore, on becoming Sarpanch, she started teaching the women in the village lessons on self-reliance, education, rights and empowerment.

Fundi Bai used to visit every house, trying to find the number of girls in every family, and whether they are going to school or not. She prepared a list of such girls who were not going to school. She used to persuade the parents of such girls to start sending them to school. Soon, positive results started emerging and the girls were enrolled in the school. These girls started learning lessons of self-reliance.

Dreams started touching the sky

Today, the girls of Sarangi can be easily observed going to primary, middle, high and higher secondary schools. They have ambitions of attending technical and commerce colleges

and institutions. The girls earlier used to remain uneducated, illiterate, getting married and being sent off to their in-laws. But, now it's no more so. Now, girls of Sarangi have ambitions to become doctors and engineers. Now, they are well acquainted with the name of CAT, NET and IIT examinations. They even know about the competitive administrative examinations which may lead them to become a collector, IPS and IAS. The opportunities are knocking their doors. Now, even their parents are happy with these opportunities for their daughters.

Girls now receiving equal attention

This inspiration from Fundi Bai helped in transforming the mental attitude of the families in Sarangi where the girls are now receiving equal attention as the boys. From education to upbringing, the girls are now entitled to equality, getting rid of age-old rotten mentality that only boys can advance the family tradition and heritage. The girls here have become entitled to education, to nurture ambition to become something in life, to earn better results and marks in examinations, obtain degrees to get suitably employed or get self-employed. These all are the results of Fundi Bai's persistent efforts which she made and spread from house to house in Sarangi. She also spreads the information about the initiatives undertaken for the girls by the government.

Keeps a sharp eye on schools

Fundi Bai not only actively works on education of girls but also keeps a sharp eye on school affairs, attendance, facilities to all students, quality of mid-day meals, toilets and drinking water facilities, regularity of teachers and in their teaching, and so on. Anyhow, the education and regular attendance of girls are her priority and dedication. Even the teachers and

heads in schools are quite impressed with her zealous efforts and dedication.

She volunteers when help is not forthcoming

Sarpanch Fundi Bai is assured of herself and her efforts. She does not look this way or that when help is not forthcoming, but believes in herself in doing the things. If there is dirt and waste, she herself cleans, picks and collects the waste. She not only inspires and encourages others regarding greenery but makes a point of taking care of vegetation herself. Now, a good number of villages are partners in her plantation and up-keeping the same.

Struggles against undesirable customs and superstitions

Although she is a tribal woman, Fundi Bai knows well about undesirable customs and superstitions and also that real progress cannot be made with all these. She goes from house to house, spreading messages against these. She firmly campaigns against child marriage, dowry and so on. She is also working towards increasing the age of marriage for girls in Sarangi by campaigning against bride price. Bride price is a tradition of Bhil tribal community whereby the groom's family is asked to pay a price for the bride to her family before marriage is solemnized.



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TENKA GP CHIEF SHOWS THE WAY

Manjushree G. Naik

Deccan Herald, 31 May, 2013

Women who have crossed the threshold of almost all male bastions have many a times proved to be immensely better in the positions they adorn. These days women entering the three-tier system of local governance and acting as the administrators is nothing novel as usual, however only handful of them have been successful in being effective catalysts between the public and administrative decentralisation process

Tenka Gram Panchayat stands as the testimony with changing facets as it paved way for the women president. Jayashree S. K. Poojary, the President is part of the success story of Tenka Gram Panchayat in Padubidri in Udupi. The development process that is taking place in the region has left her with applauds from the public in Tenka. “Sheer dedication and hard working with the aim to be honest is enough to attend to the grievances of people. We respond more quickly than men to the problems”, she says sharing her views with Deccan Herald.

Popularly called as ‘Tenka Yermal’, Tenka GP comprises of 1,471.40 acres of total land area. Jayashree said the changes are profound and she has been keenly involved to change the

features of Tenka. “Priority is given to judiciously utilise the funds released under various development programmes. It is indeed necessary to deliver the benefits to the needy. People vote us expecting the betterment and it is our foremost duty to fulfill their aspirations”, she said.

Tenka earlier was an overlooked area lacking better civic infrastructures. The resource mobilisation is very pathetic and hence Tenka GP should be dependent on the funds released by the government. She said it is too difficult to mobilise funds even to small projects. The only way is to expect government to release funds. Tenka Gram Panchayat has the acclaim of furnishing the programme to distribute houses to the homeless needy in the district in the first phase. Around 36 houses were distributed to the needy in the first phase. The second phase work is in progress. The local administration has provided power connections to SC/ST colony situated in the remote area of Poondad in Tenka, which was in the dark since many years.

The other core areas of problems are drinking water problems and bad condition of roads. The team led by Jayashree is striving hard to meet both ends with available funds. However, the early showers have erased the problem of drinking water shortage at present. Jayashree said tanker water was supplied to the houses facing water problems. She added that the government had released a fund of Rs.1.0043 crores under Suvarna Gram Yojana, which is used to set right the potholes of the roads and also build connective stretches and bridges.

Major Initiatives

The major initiative taken up by Gram Panchayat is to ban plastic totally and it was a successful attempt. Currently,

Tenka Gram Panchayat is devoid of plastics. Under Grama Swachatha Andolan, awareness was created among people over sanitation and hygiene. Adolescent girls are trained to maintain hygiene, especially during the menstrual periods, she said. The government programme Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is effectively introduced. A team from Delhi to inspect the progress of the programme has visited Tenka recently. The fund released under the programme is utilised to construct toilets and build percolation ponds. Besides, the only crematorium in GP was also renovated under the scheme. Under Basava Vasati Yojana, around 84 houses are being constructed.

Localite Gunapal Anchan said that Tenka is improving a lot and the people over here are living their life with ease when compared to earlier days. “The President who works all through the day strives hard to help solve problems. Tenka GP is indeed blessed to get her as President. Roads are paired and problems like water are sorted out to maximum extent. We have toilets in almost all houses. The problems of the people are addressed immediately by the people’s representatives in Gram Panchayat”, he added.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

REMOVED ENCROACHMENT FROM CREMATION GROUND

Mahesh Bhawre

Navduniya Harda, 12 June 2013

Ever since she arrived as daughter-in-law in the village, Sangeeta nourished a strong desire to change the image of this and the nearby village. She was in need of an appropriate opportunity. And, she ultimately got such a chance when she contested for the post of Sarpanch which was reserved for Scheduled Caste women. Some villagers opposed her as she was not the daughter of the village but an outsider. But, Sangeeta did not turn away from the contest and won by 135 votes against four contestants.

She came across challenges from her first day itself as Sarpanch but she had self-confidence, uncompromising desires and strong ideas to do better. She struggled against every odd and kept moving ahead. She never turned back. Sangeeta, the Sarpanch tried her best to change the age-old ideas of the villagers. Even, the persons opposing her till yesterday became her followers. All the persons in her Panchayat started contributing their might in strengthening her noble developmental efforts.

Issue raised in Assembly

Those defeated in the elections challenged her becoming the Sarpanch. They complained and the issue was even raised in the Assembly. After nearly three months, the decision was made in her favour. This provided impetus to her mission. A total of 11 women were elected from the 19 wards of her Panchayat. She marched ahead keeping these elected women representatives along with her in her mission of development. They got constructed 50 toilets, secured 20 houses under the Indira housing scheme, stood and supervised the site for getting the pucca roads constructed, got the old drainages deepened so that the rainwater may not overflow the newly constructed pucca roads. When the water level fell and the water scheme was badly affected, they got dug two tube wells, got boundary walls erected in between the fields to hold back the rainwater.

Did not bear the wrong doings

According to Sangeeta, she takes her own decisions. She came across the wrong doings being committed at the primary school where attendance for even the absent were being recorded as present. She also found that more chilli powder was being mixed in the cooked vegetables. She caught up and revealed such wrong doings at the school. When the overbearing controller of school complained to her husband, he told the concerned person that he was not in the habit of interfering in his wife's functioning.

Every child should be educated

There is an unsecured stream in Padwa on way to school which becomes full of mud and difficult to cross during 3-4 months of rainy season. It prevents the children to crossover and reach the school during rains. Hence, she is trying her best to get a

gravel road laid across this unsecured stream. The Anganwadis here are located under the roof of other buildings. She has sent umpteen numbers of requests for independent housing facility for these Anganwadis but the officers are not coming up to her rescue. She takes along the village women in getting the village rid of toxicities. She insists for providing benefits under various government schemes only to the eligible person and in the process got several names of ineligible persons struck off from the rolls who are also influencing, dominating and resourceful in the village.

Although Sangeeta is a class VIII pass, she likes to use her free time to keep learning more as she wants to keep herself updated with the news around the State and nation. Creating awareness regarding education of girl children, prevention of female foeticide and child marriages is her routine affair.

Removal of encroachment from the cremation ground

A two-acre government land was being used in the past as the cremation ground but was encroached by an influential villager who used it for cultivation purpose. It created problems in burying the dead children. First, she tried to persuade the concerned person but he in turn threatened her. Then the matter was taken up in the court of SDM where the concerned person was sent to jail. Sangeeta herself supervised the crop-harvesting, handed over the same to administration, and got the fence erected there to preserve the plot as cremation ground.

Persuasion for changes

There are some small forest borne villages adjacent to Padwa village where the children are badly suffering from malnutrition. The tribals get grants for ration and uniform

for children but they used to spend this money on their alcoholic habits. The tribals have their own superstitions and refuse to get their children admitted in Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) when required and instead use their superstitious measures. Sangeeta fought against these superstitions and got their children admitted in the NRC and contributed valiantly towards their rehabilitation. With regard to resolution of problems she does not depend on the Panchayat Secretary entirely and instead she herself directly approaches the concerned authorities in getting the problems resolved appropriately. She does not permit any interference or political interference in the developmental work.



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HOME MAKER TURNED GP CHIEF TRANSFORMS MARKANJA

Naina J. A.

Deccan Herald, 6 June, 2013

A neo-literate Girija had never imagined that one day she would be looking after the affairs of Gram Panchayat and the welfare of village community. Apart from tackling the issues at the village level, she also raises the issues with the higher authorities. The reservation for women in Panchayat helped Girija, who hails from Scheduled Caste, to get elected as the people's representatives of Markanja Gram Panchayat. Even though she is a neo-literate, she has gathered enough knowledge about the Panchayat's activities with the help of her colleagues and also through various organisations which she is the member.

In fact, Markanja Gram Panchayat in Sullia Taluk was in wrong news following the illegality and misappropriation of funds, when Girija's predecessor Harinakshi took charge as the President during 2010-11. It was Harinakshi who initiated development programmes in the GP in association with 'Brashtachara Virodhi Janajagruthi Samithi', by availing funds under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The development work initiated by Harinakshi is being taken over by Giriji. Under the guidance of the GP president, the GP has prepared an action

plan of Rs.35.68 lakhs under MGNREGA during 2013-14. In fact, there was zero achievement under the scheme during 2008-09, which has grown steadily over the years.

Last year, work worth Rs. 8.88 lakhs was implemented and 100 days employment was guaranteed to nine persons and employment was provided to 220 households. Along with the members of Brashtachara Virodhi Janajagruthi Samithi, she has a desire for a village full of greenery. Accordingly, during 2013-14, the GP has plans to plant 100 fruit bearing saplings in the Gram Panchayat premises. About 600 fruit bearing saplings will be planted by the side of the roads. The saplings will also be planted in the land available in three government primary schools and one high school and in Anganwadi centres. The process of planting saplings has already begun on World Environment Day.

Sanitation

The Gram Panchayat wants to ensure that all the 1,004 families in its jurisdiction have toilet facilities. There are atleast 68 families which do not have toilet facilities and will ensure that the families get toilet using the funds available under MGNREGA. Awareness will also be created among the villagers on the need for using toilets. "I may be a neo-literate, but I have information on various schemes of the government, which I disseminate among village community", says Girija. Moreover, recognising the value of a good education, she personally monitors the school in her Gram Panchayat, and ensures that even her children attend school regularly. She is focusing on implementing women empowerment programmes. Though there are no special funds earmarked for the purpose, she had devised her own way of doing things through Grama Vikasa Kendra.

“Through Grama Vikasa Kendra, a few neo-literates were imparted skill development trainings and we prepare phenyl, liquid soap and earn our livelihoods by selling it. I have learnt stitching and now I am able to stitch a small carry bag. The Gram Panchayat helped us to sell our products during Gram Sabha, by opening a stall in the GP premises. There is a demand for phenyl in the shops as well”, said Girija.

The Gram Panchayat has also plans to take up the work on removing silt from water tanks, leveling the school ground, leveling Anganwadi land, constructing a vented dam across Minunguru stream to increase the water level in the vicinity, leveling the land belonging to the temples using the available funds under MGNREGA and thereby provide employment to the job card holders. The work on atleast six wells have already been completed in the month of April-May, said in-charge PDO Vidyadhar and added that the Gram Panchayat has also taken the decision to provide 35 water meters to SC families free of cost. “Using the funds under MGNREGA, about 20 wells were dug last year and about 28 wells will be dug during the year, to solve drinking water crisis. With the digging of wells, many families have started growing vegetables in their piece of land. Even I have planted saplings (paushtika thota) in my land under the scheme”,said Girija.

“As the work on storm water drains in all the roads was taken up last year with the available funds from MGNREGA, roads in Markanja are in good condition. After we took up our fight against corruption in 2010-11, the GP has become people friendly and responds to the needs of the people. There is transparency in administration. We need not bribe to get our things done through the GP”, said Samithi conveners Shankaranarayana Shastri and Veerappa Gowda.

“We want to make Markanja a model village on the dreams of Swarajya of Mahatma Gandhi. Though there is liquor menace, we will create awareness on the same,” said Girija, Shastri and Gowda unanimously.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

LALITA VERMA BECAME SYNONYMOUS WITH WOMEN POWER

Basant Pandey

Bageshwar Ki Aawaz, 01-15 June, 2013

The women in veils are not supposed to come out in the open. It is not easy for any woman to violate this tradition. But a poor ward member of Takula block in Almora district has thrown away this conservative belief and that also how. Lalita Verma is associated with the women federation which is actively campaigning for appropriate conservation and protection of water, forest and land. She has not only raised voice against the irregularity in providing foodgrains in her village but also challenged the males. She herself took over the responsibility of foodgrain distribution and removed the irregularities.

Lalita was born in 1970 in Bagwali Pokhar of Almora district. Bhagwati Verma is the name of her mother and Devi Lal Verma is the name of her father. There are three brothers and four sisters in her family. Her father was working as a jeweler and he tried his best to fulfill every wish of his children, and made them study well. Lalita at the age of 18 years was married to Vinod Verma of Chanada village. Vinod was then working in a hotel. They are four brothers and two sisters. Lalita became the third daughter-in-law in the family. She is landless. She became mother at the age of 20 years due to which she had to suffer a lot.

Lalita holds meetings in her area with the local issues as main agenda for discussions held therein and puts special emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene. She got a special pit dug in her village for disposing the polythene and waste. She participates equally on occasions of happiness and sorrows in the area and discusses the issues of alcoholism, violence against women and female foeticide on a regular basis. She says that earlier, she did not use to participate in the social gatherings and federation meetings but she has changed herself a lot. She says, *“I now participate regularly in the Gram Panchayat meetings and attend social events wherever and whenever possible.”*

There is only one family of Verma community in the village whom the villagers consider to have arrived from outside and therefore they were given less social importance. But Lalita considered herself very much being part of the village; she contributed and participated in very collective work and activity in the village. She informs that especially after attending the trainings of The Hunger Project, she made special efforts to get involved with fellow villagers. She placed her views before the villagers quite plainly – *“If I have the right to exercise my voting rights then I also have the right to seek votes for myself.”* Today, she insists that she is actively working together with the entire Gram Sabha. There were continuous irregularities in the ration distribution system of Bunga village but nobody raised voice against the same. Under these circumstances, she tried to discuss and settle the matter with the then ration dealer in the village but he in an inebriated state started threatening and misbehaving with her using dirty language. Whenever, any woman used to arrive at his shop for getting ration the ration dealer used to throw out her bag and misbehave with her. Due efforts were made to persuade him and to see the reason but he did not do so. Then Lalita organized the

villagers on this issue, convened the meeting of Gram Sabha and discussed the proposal for a new ration dealer who was to be elected through a lottery system. Lalita's name was selected through this system. Now, the male villagers became highly annoyed; they got inebriated and started abusing her but she was courageous and retained her patience. The notorious elements started threatening her husband who in turn got scared. He also did not have enough funds to start the ration dealership and wanted to let go. In spite of all this Lalita stood her ground fearlessly and took loan from a nearby bank and started her own ration shop.

Lalita is today running the ration shop successfully in Chanoda Market from where she is also in continuous dialogue with the Gram Panchayat regarding the management of bio and non-bio waste. She has been duly assured of cooperation in this regard. A landless woman, Lalita has always been known to be continuously and sincerely struggling for livelihood. Her husband had become handicapped due to an unfortunate accident and he is compelled to remain at home. They have a house which was mortgaged. They managed with the income from running a tea-shop and later on got their house released from the mortgage and also got their children properly and duly educated.

Lalita struggled a lot for setting up the ration shop in her Panchayat. For this she had to convince fellow villagers to be on her side. In this she showed her immense capabilities. Today she runs the ration shop and is able to manage her family well. She has also become a symbol of women power.



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PANCHAYAT PREZ GOES ECO FRIENDLY

Pramila Krishnan

Deccan Chronicle, 9 June, 2013

A woman Panchayat president, who has only completed schooling, has revolutionised solid waste management in Adigathoor village in Tiruvallur district while thousands of educated families even in neighbouring Chennai metropolis drown in thousands of tonnes of untreated garbage piling up like mountains in the city. Ms. Sri Sumathi (36) has arranged for the youth in Adigathoor to collect the biodegradable kitchen and other domestic waste in gunny bags and non-degradable waste, such as plastic, in separate bags for proper treatment and disposal. Spending her own money, amounting to Rs. 42,000, she bought gunny bags and dustbins and distributed to 700 families in her village as part of her 'green and clean village' project. Started in January 2013, Sumathi was very successful in getting villagers segregate the waste at the source and discard the plastic waste for reuse.

"Mine is a model village, very clean", declares Sumathi proudly to DC. She was elected for the second time consecutively as she had addressed the grievances of villagers and remained approachable. "All grocery shop owners here insist that buyers bring their own bags for purchase. They hesitate to give plastic bags. As we organised awareness camps on plastic usage, they

are alert and avoid giving carry bags”, she said. Presently, Sumathi is working on construction of cost-effective sanitary complexes in her Panchayat. “With the help of experts, I have proposed to the District Collector to build cost-effective toilets. We will build 300 new toilets in our Panchayat this year”, says Sumathi.

Sumathi had won the Nirmal Gram Puraskar award in 2010 for transforming her Panchayat as ‘open defecation-free’ Panchayat. She is not content yet. She has sought private firms to pitch in to exploit the renewable energy source by providing solar streetlights.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013

KAMLA DEVI - A SYMBOL OF EFFICIENT LEADERSHIP

Babulal Naga

Ujala Chhari, 10 June 2013

Tilonia Panchayat in Silora Panchayat Samiti of Ajmer district has been dominated by one family for five decades. The command of this Panchayat remained in the hands of this family which belongs to the Jat community. The family used to put up the candidate who used to win and become Sarpanch. When the reservation was introduced in the Panchayati Raj, then only Kamla Devi, the first Dalit woman broke this sequence of dominance here and became the first Dalit woman Sarpanch of Tilonia Panchayat. Today, Sarpanch Kamla Devi Meghwal is a great example in her Panchayat due to her able, efficient leadership and capability.

Kamla Devi became Sarpanch of Tilonia Panchayat for the first time. In the first year in 2001, Kamla was elected as Panchayat Samiti Member. She contested as an independent candidate and got elected by 590 votes. The biggest challenge then before Kamla Devi was to get a government school established in the locality of gardeners. There was no government school there. The children had to travel nearly 2 km to Tilonia village. With the persistent efforts of Kamla Devi, a primary school was sanctioned in the locality of gardeners in 2001 but not the school building. So, she decided to locate the school

in her own house. For, nearly four years, she got the school held and conducted from her house itself. Two teachers used to come there to hold classes. She, meanwhile, continued her efforts for getting the school building. Ultimately, the school could get its own building only after five years. Kamla says, *“I promised to get the school opened in this locality then. I did fulfill my promise; otherwise I could not have got the opportunity to contest the election for Sarpanch.”*

When the Panchayat election was held in the year 2010, then Tilonia seat was reserved for the Scheduled Caste. For the previous 55 years, the general or OBC community dominated here. Kamla Devi knew it very well that it would not be easy for a Dalit woman to win the election in a Jat-dominated Panchayat. But the women were with her and that was how she decided to contest the election for the post of Sarpanch. There were four candidates against her. The opposition used all tricks to defeat her. Still, the women were with her and Kamla Devi was confident that she would certainly win. She did not resort to distributing liquor or money, nor did she have any vehicle. She used to move around on foot along with village women. She went with them from house to house. The village women were pre-determined that they will ensure that “Dhokal” wins (Kamla is lovingly known as “Dhokal” in the village). With the strong public contact and in the partnership of village women, Kamla Devi won by 1,070 votes. Although, the opponents got the counting of votes done five times but she emerged as the ultimate winner.

After becoming Sarpanch, Kamla Devi had to take many hard decisions. She expressed extraordinary courage in getting the encroachment removed. Nearly 100 bighas of grazing land was being encroached upon. First of all, she got this

land free of encroachment for which she had to struggle a lot. The administration did not extend any support to her, nor did the villagers. She was continuously being threatened but ultimately she was able to get it reconvered into a free land. Under MGNREGA, she got trees planted, a water tank constructed, installed a handpump, and today, the land is full of green plantation. She wants either a hostel for girls to be constructed or even a nursery may be started there. Similarly, she also got 21 bighas of land meant originally for the school's playground free from encroachment. It's Kamla Devi's dream to convert it into a stadium. She is in fact determined to make her Panchayat absolutely free from any type of encroachment.

Kamla Devi insists more on quality of education. It is her desire that girls of her Panchayat should not remain behind so far as education is concerned. So, she met with MLA, MP and government representatives and got a high school of Tilonia upgraded in this very year as senior secondary school. She remembers proudly how the girls of her village used to insist, *“Dhokal Ma, only when you will become Sarpanch, then only our school will get upgraded.”* She says, *“And now, that I have become Sarpanch I got the school upgraded. Now, there is only humanities stream but I want science and agriculture streams to be added. I am trying for this as well.”* Her efforts are liked and appreciated by one and all in the Panchayat. She keeps a sharp eye on basic amenities such as drinking water facility, education, health, supplementary nutrition, mid-day meal, etc. Thus, implementation of such basic services is very good in the Panchayat. There are four Anganwadi centres, two Balwadis, one sub-health centre, one Ayurvedic centre, and eight government and non-government schools in Tilonia. A unique measure and fixing rate system has been set up by Kamla Devi under MGNREGA. There are a total of 1,600 job cards in the Panchayat out of which at

least 1,000 job card holders have worked for 100 days under MGNREGA. Minimum wages are being paid under it. The work is provided group-wise. A total of 35 work projects got done in the last three years. Kamla Devi herself records attendance at the worksite. Caste system has been set aside and only one earthen pot of drinking water has been placed at the work-site for everyone to use. She never forgets to stand with the women labourers and get a group photograph taken on the site. She goes to the Anganwadi centre every Thursday to monitor vaccination. She also monitors the Anganwadi on 6th and 21st of every month, the days on which the supplementary nutrition food stock is delivered.

Kamla Devi visits every house, provides information about widow pension and other social welfare schemes. She carries forms with her, gets this duly filled and signed. She has so far included names of 175 widows and 40 old age pensioners, 40 Paalanhar Yojana beneficiaries and 20 disabled pensioners in the respective lists. Around 363 beneficiaries were included in the list during the pension camp organized recently.

Kamla Devi has remained non-literate throughout her life; she regrets it even today but she does not put her signature on any paper until and unless the same is read well and explained to her by a responsible person. She has also learned to use mobile and computer as well. She works on the computer of the Panchayat office. She herself records every activity of Panchayat, photographs of panchayat meetings and activities on her mobile. She has extremely cordial relations with all village women. She is not at all different from any other village women. However, when she speaks people get automatically attracted towards her. Moreover, the village women get assembled with huge enthusiasm on the eve of programmes

held on every 26th January and 15th August to listen to her speech.

Kamla Devi has also done a lot of work on women's empowerment. Earlier the village women did not visit the Panchayat office in Tilonia. But now it's a common sight to see women being gathered there. Earlier in Gram Sabha, women used to come in veils along with their husbands or male relatives. They would quietly sit in the back rows. But Kamla Devi changed this. She ensured that in Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings husbands won't come as proxy for the women representatives. One can now see the change. Now the women are so empowered and encouraged and that they come alone, sit in front rows in the meetings and programmes. Even if their husbands come, then they sit only in the back rows. Proposals are put up in every meeting. Kamala Devi works in accordance to these proposals. There is complete transparency in the functioning and recordings of the Panchayat affairs in Tilonia. Anyone can see the records since books are kept open for everybody. Different kinds of information are displayed on the walls of the Panchayat Bhawan, Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra and other public buildings. In IT centre, a single window has been set up for dealing with cases under the public hearing act. Kamla Devi says, *"If people have got me elected I have to be accountable to them."*

Kamla Devi's husband passed away nearly 11 years ago and she had to perform a dual role. She is providing good motherhood to her four children and she equally performs well as the Sarpanch. She has made a special place for herself in the village and in the Panchayat as well. She has it in her to change the scenario of Panchayat through the power acquired through the constitutional amendment.

She strives for realizing the dream of changing the system for the better. Kamla Devi has overturned the belief that women are not capable enough to run the Panchayat and that their constitutional powers are always used by the men. Thus she has achieved success by getting a breakthrough in this traditional set up.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

RECOGNITION FOR WOMEN'S STRUGGLE: STOPPING THE SALE OF LIQUOR IN EIGHT VILLAGES

Dinesh Patwardhan
Jana Mithra, 25 May, 2013

As a result of the continuous struggle and efforts of a woman, sale of illicit liquor in eight villages has been stopped. Resisting persistent pressure and incitements, the combined efforts of women has borne fruit here.

Since the past several years, illicit liquor was being sold in eight villages coming under the jurisdiction of Siddarahalli Panchayat, near Duggalapura of Tarikere Taluk. It had the acquiescence of the officials and peoples' representatives as well.

In many small shops and houses, liquor was being sold surreptitiously, which had a detrimental effect on the youth of the village. If it was left as it is, there was the danger of not only the youth going wayward, but the peace of the village was also in danger of being disturbed.

Having noticed this, the new President of the Gram Panchayat, Rukmini issued a notice to everyone last December. While some accepted this move, others resisted. After contacting the women's groups and workers of self-help groups (SHGs), everyone has stopped selling liquor.

Behind the firm resolve of the President to stop sale of liquor, there is a humane and touching story. One night in 2001, at Duggalapura gate which was densely populated, hundreds of people were waiting for the bus. From a house nearby, a woman came running out, screaming at the top of her voice, which stunned the people who were there. Most of the woman's body was already burnt. The dastardly act of her drunken husband snuffed her life out within a few seconds. Though this inhuman act occurred in front of hundreds of people, the case was closed due to political pressure and other pressure tactics. The husband was thus saved.

The story behind this act was, as usual! As always, the husband came home completely drunk and on that day, pestered his wife to serve him non-vegetarian fare. The wife refused to do so. Angered by this, the husband threatened her that he would douse her with kerosene and burn her. The wife chided her husband and said that there was nothing new about his threat. These sarcastic words became her undoing. Angered by her taunt, the husband poured kerosene over his wife and set her on fire. Everything got over within the blink of an eyelid. Having been a witness to this incident, the women decided that the liquor shop in a densely populated area like Duggalapura gate had to be closed, come what may. The mental strain that women and students were put through, due to the presence of this liquor shop was untold.

Rukminamma, a Dalit woman who had studied only upto class II, took on the leadership of this struggle. She organised the women; two SHGs with 20 members each came into existence. In the first phase, awareness was created among people. They convinced them that the presence of the liquor shop was making it difficult for people to move around freely.

On the one hand, the women began the struggle to close the liquor shop, while on the other the men got fully intoxicated and began verbally abusing the women. Swallowing all the insults hurled at them, the women stood firm on their resolve. Though appeals were submitted to the District Collector, security officials, ministers and legislators, nothing came out of it. It was around the time of the annual fair of the village deity Adiparashakti near Duggalapura gate, during April 2001. People streamed in to take part in the festivities. The owner of the liquor shop, sensing an opportunity for making good money, had ordered extra crates of liquor. As soon as the women got to know this, deserting the fair, they rushed towards the jeep, scattered and spilt the liquor crates everywhere and set fire to the jeep. Sensing the anger of the women, the police who were near the place did not react. A case was registered against 40 persons. They had to run around to the court for four long years. In spite of this, they did not let go of their goal. The women united together and were successful in getting the shop closed. Though many of the women, against whom cases were registered have married and moved to other villages, they have not missed attending the court. By the time the case was completed, more than Rs. 40,000 was spent.

The women did not get a single paisa from their homes. Neither was the struggle supported. Instead, these women were subjected to taunts and snide remarks. The expenses were met by taking a loan from the SHG. A lot of pressure and enticements were put forth to open a liquor shop in a populated area like this. The Sangha also was assured of support. But, the women were not swayed by all these enticements. The struggle, which had a social base, could have garnered the support of the government on the basis of a humane case. It is indeed ironical that our peoples' representatives and government cannot have such a general awareness and humaneness.

Rukminamma, the Gram Panchayat President, who had had experience of being part of this struggle / incident which occurred 12 years ago, with the help of SHGs, was able to successfully stop the sale of liquor in eight villages. She has the support of Netramma and others, who have been representing the Panchayat since the past 15 years. Though she had studied only upto class II, with the support, guidance and encouragement of Vikasana, she has been successful in creating awareness among women. The people too supported her and made her the Panchayat member.

After becoming a President, she has been successful in releasing seven acres of Gram Thana land. The eight people, who had encroached the land have been rehabilitated elsewhere. A woman was convinced to let go of a piece of land, for the construction of an Anganwadi in that place.

In these parts, there are more manual labourers; 50 of them have been provided with homes, ration cards, five disabled persons have been assisted, old-age pensions have been given, people have been registered under the Employment Guarantee scheme, and many other beneficiaries have been helped as well, thanks to the proactiveness of Rukminamma. She envisions providing good administration in the Panchayat and ensuring that facilities meant for the needy reaches them.

In Panchayats and especially for women who have been elected under the reservation category are members merely for namesake. The husbands of the women rule them from behind. Extreme interference and political pressure are ever present. It is not an easy task to overcome all these hurdles and do good work. In spite of these circumstances, Rukminamma has been successful in fearlessly surging ahead and achieving her goals.

The desire to achieve much more is deep within Rukminamma. But, the grants provided to Gram Panchayats is not enough. If the legislators and the government are able to get more grants, Rukminamma is of the opinion that it will go a long way in improving the situation.



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THE FRAMEWORK OF JAMUNA BAI REDEFINES DEVELOPMENT

Vijaya Pathak

Nav Bharat Bhopal, 23 May 2013

Jamuna Bai Bagarhi, Sarpanch of Meerakabad Panchayat, Mungawali, has enacted overall development and completely changed the faces of three villages under her Panchayat with her unlimited efforts, labour and dedication. A systematic implementation of various government schemes could become possible here with her serving attitude. Awareness regarding education could be reinforced, society's ill-customs could be eradicated and seeds of development and prosperity could be sown only with her dedicated zeal and courage.

Initiator of Panchayati Raj

Jamuna Bai is an extremely poor woman who had to face tremendous problems throughout her life; she could not go to school as her family was extremely poor, even when she was married, her husband could not maintain her and abandoned her. She had no shelter and brought up her three children by doing laborious jobs on a daily basis. Even after becoming Sarpanch, she continues doing such daily laborious jobs to earn livelihood for herself and her three children.

Meerakabad is located about 4 km from Mungawali subdivision of Ashok Nagar district. The credit of arousing the

flame of Panchayati Raj goes to her only because before her becoming Sarpanch, three Panchayat elections were held; the three Sarpanchs just went after their terms and did nothing of mention. The image of her village remained same as it was earlier; no suitable implementation of the government schemes; neither the developmental work could be implemented. But after her becoming Sarpanch a storm of changes started blowing; many important works for betterment of the village and people were undertaken. These include especially the work of toilets under the employment guarantee scheme which provided employment to 100 families and as a result 78 toilets could be constructed. With a view to extend the benefits of various government schemes, she went from house to house in her Panchayat, collected information about able-bodied villagers who could do labour-work and got labour registration card issued to more than 50 women. More than 30 women could later get various benefits under the labour-scheme and their economic condition improved.

In the field of education, Jamuna Bai initiated tremendous revolution in the three villages under her Panchayat. There was only one primary school when she assumed the charge as Sarpanch. The primary school did not have any facility worth mentioning, number of children attending the school could be counted on the fingers itself. Although Jamuna Bai herself is illiterate, she understood the importance of education. With her dedicated attempts, number of school going children increased four-fold, mid-day meal was introduced, irregularity in the school was eliminated and it started functioning daily, and the standard of teaching-learning has also improved.

Impetus on girl child education

Whether it may be called social evil or custom, but less attention was given to the education of a girl child. The boys

were somehow being sent to school but the girls were not. Jamuna Bai herself suffered from this when she was a child. She understood this sensitive social issue well. She went from house to house, talked to the parents, and persuaded them to send their girl child to school. These efforts of Jamuna Bai brought good results and now the girls of her Panchayat are regularly attending school. After passing the primary, now the girls are going to Mungawali daily to attend high school.

Jamuna Bai herself is shelterless but providing housing to needy persons

One may wonder, but Jamuna Bai herself has no house and she is dedicated to providing houses to widows under the Indira housing scheme. Jamuna Bai lives in an old, broken house which the villagers have volunteered to repair and made it somehow livable.

There are more dreams

Jamuna Bai was abandoned by her husband about 15 years ago and she is somehow bringing up her two daughters and one son. She is the daily bread-earner for her family, living in utmost poverty but has taught her children well. Her son is taking training in ITI, Bhopal. Her daughters are attending school regularly. Her dedication towards her own children as a mother and towards the fellow villagers as a Sarpanch is really superb.



This article has been submitted by the author for the Sarojini Naidu Prize 2013 and has been translated from Hindi

20 YEARS OF EMPOWERMENT

Women and Panchayati Raj In India



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GREEN SHOOTS OF POWER: TWENTY YEARS OF PANCHAYATI WOMEN

By George Mathew

It is 20 years since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were passed by the Parliament. They got translated into the law of the land on April 24 and June 1, 1993, respectively. This was a historic moment in the history of this country because these two amendments constituted what could be termed as post-Independent India's most revolutionary exercise in democratic decentralisation and devolution of power. What gave these laws even more relevance was the fact that they mandated one-third seats in all local governments would be reserved for women.

For me, the biggest significance of women's reservation was that it unlocked the power, talent and commitment of millions of women for the progress of society and the country. Women who had earlier not stepped outside their homes could now participate as equals in the public space.

The idea of reserving seats for women in panchayats was introduced for the first time when Ramakrishna Hegde became the chief minister of Karnataka through the Panchayati Raj Act of 1985. Hegde, along with his minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Abdul Nazir Sab, made sure that 25 per

cent seats in panchayats and municipalities were reserved for women under the law. I remember at that time there were fears that women would not come forward to fill these posts. Yet, when I went to observe those elections, I discovered that for every seat reserved for a woman, there were at least three contestants!

The initiative proved so successful that when Rajiv Gandhi came to power, he wanted to do one better and reserved not just 25 per cent but 30 per cent of seats for women at the panchayat level. Later, when V.P. Singh introduced the Panchayati Raj Bill, he advocated 33 per cent reservations for women. Then came Narasimha Rao. As prime minister, he saw that “reservations for women should be one-third of the total number of seats” in all local bodies. In 2005, when Nitish Kumar became chief Minister of Bihar, his dream was to give 50 per cent reservation for women, which became a reality in the following year. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, wanting to appear women-friendly took a Cabinet decision in 2010 to make it 50 per cent nationally but the Parliament has not yet amended the existing Acts. However, today 15 states have followed Bihar.

I remember the first panchayat election that took place after the law came into being. It was in Madhya Pradesh and the chief minister of the state at that time was Digvijaya Singh. It was very inspiring to see a state that was among India’s poorest, taking the lead on this process, beating even its so-called advanced counterparts like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The year was 1994 and the mood was rife with expectations. But those elections and the following years were marred in my mind by the violence that accompanied them. Sometimes the women who stood for office were actually stripped naked

by forces that just could not accept the idea of women taking positions of leadership. For centuries these very forces had ensured that women were not allowed to come out of their homes. Now that they did, they wanted to intimidate them, punish them, drive them back into their homes. Then my concern was: “Panchayats at work what it means for the oppressed” (EPW July, 1996).

Because of interventions from enlightened citizens, these attempts failed. There were also wonderful instances of genuine women’s empowerment, even from the very earliest days. I remember Geeta Rathore of Jamonia Talab gram panchayat in Madhya Pradesh’s Sehore district. In the early nineties she had been elected sarpanch from a reserved seat, but in the year 2000 she repeated this feat – this time from a non-reserved seat. That she could do this testified to her personal growth from being a shy homemaker to a community leader in every sense of the term, working hard to change the face of her panchayat and ensuring the well-being of its people. She was able to renovate water tanks, build a school building, construct village roads, get people to plant trees – and even fight domestic violence.

Tamil Nadu was one of the states that delayed the local government elections. It was in 1996, when M. Karunanidhi became chief minister that the elections were held. One particularly inspiring woman who was successful in being elected as Councilor of Madurai Corporation was K. Leelavathi. She came from the weavers’ community and was very conscious of the real needs of the people. Water shortage was a huge problem in her area and even after pipelines were laid, no water came through the taps. This meant that even the poorest of the poor had to pay for water, which was being

supplied by the local mafia who ran water tanker services. Six months after she was elected, Leelavathi's efforts to get water for her locality bore fruit. When water gushed through the taps, there was widespread delight, even dancing. But she had, in the process, obviously alienated a powerful section. Next day morning, when this woman stepped out of her home to buy provisions, six people came with sickles and killed her on the spot.

I remember taking a train to Madurai to understand why this had happened. I then realised that social change has both a conflict and an evolutionary dimension. When radical change bring women like Leelavathi to the forefront, it is inevitable that there will be resistance – often leading to bloodshed. It is the price that is often demanded for the transition we make to a more humane and evolved society. I later anchored a film on the Madurai incident. It was called, 'Swaraj: The Little Republic', and it went on to win the President's Gold Medal.

But with all its challenges, the 73rd Amendment proved to be a catalyst for change. Today 1.2 million women are making their entry into public life every five years breaking barriers of class, caste and culture. Initially, they may have depended on the men within their families to help them, but this trend too has changed in many parts of the country with women showing the ability to discharge their duties as public representatives.

Many significant social interventions have taken their cue from panchayati raj. For instance, the idea of gender budgeting, where the component for women in budgetary allocations is clearly demarcated, emerged from this very process. But what I consider its single biggest impact is that it has been able to

send out a message to every family – and there are at least 300 families in every panchayat – that women are equal to men.

This amazing empowerment of women at the grassroots is still a work in progress, but it can never be reversed. The floodgates have opened; they cannot now be shut again. Today, the old cry – from Gram Sabha to Lok Sabha – is ringing in the air. Going by the experience of the last 20 years, women will continue to emerge into public space in ever rising numbers, even in the face of resistance and hostility. They will not give up and, finally, I have no doubt that they will march in full force into state assemblies and Parliament.



(George Mathew is Chairman, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, and was associated with the Panchayati Raj movement for three decades.)

BLOCK LEVEL WORKER TO MLA: HILL WOMEN WREST CONTROL OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

By Nitin Jugran Bahuguna

Dehradun - Radha Devi, 54, had a good innings as Pradhan (village head) when the seat was declared reserved for women in Meethi Beri village in Dehradun district during the first Panchayati Raj elections held in Uttarakhand in the late nineties. When the seat became open (unreserved) in 2003, she decided to contest again to continue the development activities she had ushered in the area. That was when she came face to face with the ugly side of politics.

Men who had raised no objections when the seat was reserved for women, now became openly hostile over what they felt was her temerity in encroaching upon a now open seat that they regarded as a male preserve. Overnight, she became a figure of ridicule among the men in the village, who even penned an insulting song about her. Recalls Radha Devi, “Whenever I went outdoors, jeering comments would follow me and they would sing that song. Once, I was even attacked by a couple of men.”

A tough woman otherwise, she was on the verge of withdrawing her name when the intimidation became unbearable. Fortunately, at that point, the women in the village rallied to her

support. Meethi Beri village had established a strong women's Self-Help Group (SHG) and its members accompanied her wherever she campaigned. They also escorted her on house visits to scold and counsel the men. Radha Devi went on to win her second term as Pradhan. It was a hat trick for her, when in the 2008 elections, she won the seat for a record third time – that victory is recognised as a first in local self governance in the state.

Also take the case of Mamta Devi, 35. A housewife with four young children, she had only studied up to Class V and felt ill-qualified to dabble in politics. Even then put aside her reservations and contested the reserved seat of Pradhan in Singhor village, in Dehradun district, to foil the chances of a rich and influential woman who hardly lived in the village. "How could she be effective if she did not stay in the village and understand its problems?" Mamta Devi now asks.

The fight turned out to be a close one and she won by seven votes. Initially, Mamta Devi's husband undertook all the activities of the Panchayat, but before long she got better acquainted with her responsibilities and began visiting the block office and participating in training programmes with the ward members. She also learnt about many of the illegal activities her husband had undertaken in her name. In fact, he had procured a duplicate stamp of the Pradhan illegally and was forging her signature to embezzle public funds. In an exemplary act of courage and leadership, Mamta lodged a police complaint against her erring spouse. Her stance immediately won her the respect and confidence of her community.

Both Radha Devi and Mamta Devi, in their differing ways, reflect the new phase of grassroots empowerment of hill

women. Uttarakhand, incidentally, is one of 14 states to have brought in 50 per cent reservation for women in all three tiers of the Panchayati Raj system.

According to Dehradun-based NGO, Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), every five years 85 per cent of the elected women representatives in local self government are first timers. In order to broaden their political education, vision and skills, RLEK has come up with many capacity-building exercises for them. Through its resource centre - Panchayat Rule and Gender Awareness Training Institute with the apt acronym of PRAGATI – these local leaders are being trained in advocacy and lobbying.

Established in 2000 to promote gender equity in local self governance in the states of Uttarakhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand, this institute focuses on raising women's awareness on their rights across a broad range of issues. Says Damini Mumgain, a gender trainer with PRAGATI, "We encourage the formation of cohesive, articulate women's collectives at the village level, which can take up their own group struggles on shared issues." According to Mumgain, PRAGATI sets out to assist village women in collectively addressing various forms of gender injustices and lobby for policy-level changes to ensure women's rights to inheritance, ownership of property and maintenance in case of divorce or desertion.

The impact of this intervention is discernible in the observations of village women leaders. Says Shaila Rani Rawat, in her fifties, who has come a long way since her first stint as Block Pramukh of the Khetra Panchayat, from Agastyamuni in Chamoli district, "What had struck me was that women worked in the

fields from morning till night, in between taking care of the livestock as well as juggling family and household duties. Yet, they had no dignity, self respect or self confidence and were resigned to considering themselves inferior to men.”

Poor education, domestic violence, and superstitions based on caste were major problems in the area. Rawat decided to promote female literacy as a priority. “I opened my own high school, which has resulted in 70 per cent of the girls being educated in my area. This has also lowered child marriage by 20 per cent,” she claims.

According to Rawat, the development plans made by the government have not yielded the desired results. “The formalities involved in implementing government programmes hinder their execution. For example, construction work is contract-based, which often leads to the misuse of funds. The extent of corruption at various levels is evident from the fact that a very limited portion of the funds are actually being utilised, the rest is embezzled,” she alleges.

Contractors routinely threaten Panchayat representatives whenever they attempt to supervise programme implementation and Rawat has had her fair share of death threats. But she did not allow them to deter her from contesting and winning the post of president of the Zilla Panchayat, the highest tier in local government Panchayati Raj.

It is precisely this progression from lower to higher forms of government that PRAGATI wants to encourage. Says Ruchi Kukreti, PRAGATI’s chairperson, “The vision of the institute is not just to train elected women representatives local self governance but to prepare them as future Members

of Legislatures (MLA) and Members of Parliament (MP). Women strongly feel that as they constitute 50 per cent of the population of the country, they must be represented at the national level too," she emphasises.

A woman like Rawat has shown that this is not a utopian dream for women. In the 2012 elections to the Uttarakhand State Assembly, she emerged victorious as an MLA from Kedarnath Constituency in Rudraprayag. Says she, "I feel that the village government (gram panchayat), and not the state government, should have control over land, forest, water and other natural resources because local people have a higher stake in protecting natural resources," she states.

Rawat wants to make a difference at the state level. "As a policy-maker, I want to formulate and enact laws that will guide, support and monitor the welfare of rural women in India," she says. Women-oriented laws, she is convinced, will help strong and confident women emerge and they, in turn, change the nature of decision-making within the country and the home.



AFTER 30 YEARS, JHARKHAND GETS A TASTE OF WOMAN POWER

By Saadia Azim

Ranchi – Despite a promising career in the law, Dorothiya Dayamani Ekka opted to work for the development of her village. She had completed her bachelor’s degree in law from Ranchi University, Jharkhand, and had been inducted into the Ranchi Bar Association. She had even applied for a seat to pursue a Master’s degree in law when she decided to give it all up and tread a different path. Having contested the panchayat elections from Ara village in the Namkum block of Ranchi district in 2011, Dorothiya is now the ‘mukhiya’ (village head) of Ara and is focused on providing sustainable employment for the women of the village. “Women do not find jobs easily because men are still preferred when it comes to employment. But they have tremendous potential, and if their natural skills are honed, they will excel in activities like kitchen gardening, poultry rearing and cattle breeding. We are working to develop small operational business models that will prove profitable for this village,” she explains.

Today, the political scenario at Ara is in favour of women. Women head its nine wards and the village panchayat samiti has just one male representative. “With women in positions of power, it has been easier for other women here to build up

their home businesses. It is not just making them self sufficient but also working for the overall progress of the village,” says Ellen Ekka, a health worker in the area.

Like Dorothiya, Shalini Gupta, who heads the Domchach block in Koderma district, is another inspiring grassroots leader. She is a vocal anti-corruption campaigner and along with her team of village women representatives, keeps a sharp eye on the working of the anganwadis (government-run mother and child care centres in villages) in the area and tracks government schemes and funds that come to the panchayats.

This English graduate, who also has a diploma in software, has been able to bring to light the underhand practices of a corrupt Child Development Protection Officer, whose demands for money from anganwadi workers led to his arrest by the enforcement department a few of months ago. Shalini and her vigilant colleagues want to make Domchach corruption free. Remarking on their commendable work, Dr Vishnu Rajgadia of the Jharkhand Panchayat Women Resource Centre, which works to develop the capacities of women panchayat leaders in the state, notes, “This is a great effort from the women, not just because they have become the guardians of good practices but because they have been able to check corruption in the area to a large extent through a self monitoring process.”

In 2011, Jharkhand had witnessed panchayat elections for the first time in three long decades. The Jharkhand Panchayat Act, 2005 has a provision for 50 per cent women’s reservation. But history was created when women contested and won in 56 per cent seats - the highest in the country. Observes Rajgadia, “Interestingly, women also contested from unreserved seats

as well and won handsomely. This has helped build up their confidence and they can now think of wresting their due position in local politics.” If the outstanding work of leaders like Dorothisya and Shalini is any indication, then women leaders are bound to outnumber their male counterparts in the years ahead.

Of course, it is not just a matter of getting elected. Today these grassroot women leaders have come together to form a core committee to demand a greater role in policy-making. Their aim is to overcome the various bureaucratic hurdles in the implementation of developmental schemes. Recently, over 31,000 women leaders together participated in a rally at Ranchi’s Morabadi grounds, after which they handed over a charter of demands to the Jharkhand governor. The rally had been organised by the Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan, a platform that gives them an opportunity to brainstorm on their ground realities and work towards resolving problems together, with support from the central government’s Panchayat Mahila Evang Yuva Shakti Abhiyan.

Their charter of demands lists, among other issues, equal wages for women workers in every field; women help-desks to provide police, legal and social support at block offices; property and land rights for women; and 50 per cent seat reservations for women in the legislative assembly.

Dorothisya explains why panchayat need to be more empowered, “Today, because panchayats do not have the authority to disburse funds or take decisions, most of our schemes get stuck in bureaucratic hassles at the district level. We have to adjust to the policies of a given government, which in most cases are very driven by politics.” Adds Dr Rajgadua,

who is presently working with UNICEF and the Panchayati Raj Department of the state government on behalf of the Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan, “With more power at the local level, grassroots issues gain importance and elected representatives can devote their work for the development of the area.”

In Shalini’s Domchach block, women representatives are concentrating on effectively running the anganwadis. The recent incidents of corruption in the disbursement of cycles and scholarships for village students prompted the panchayats in the block to intervene. “We need the panchayats to play a proactive role. We live here and know the people well. Why should elected bodies not be given the control to implement schemes for our villages?” Shalini asks.

Rahini Bibi, block head of Danda (Garwa), has faced a similar challenge. According to her, when cycles for students were earlier being distributed at the district level, evidence had emerged of non-existent beneficiaries being included. “Now that cycles are being given at the block level, we can ensure that only those who truly fulfill the criteria get to benefit from the scheme,” she says. A high school drop out, Rahina is now pursuing her own education while working to get a girl’s college sanctioned for her block.

Women-headed panchayats are now taking seriously issues that were once dismissed as “trivial”. For instance, Archana Mahato of Muramkala Panchayat in Ramgarh block of Ramgarh district has taken up local irrigation. Thanks to her efforts to get wells dug in four villages, vegetable cultivation in these villages has increased. To compensate for the use of electricity to distribute water for household purposes and

vegetable farming, the panchayats have fixed a water tax for those who are willing to pay. The panchayats now have four water pumps as well through which groundwater is pumped out. Since electricity supply is irregular a generator has been installed at the well.

If Archana has got wells built, Putul Tigga, head of Brombai panchayat in Ranchi district's Mandar block, has ensured that a once defunct water tank in the premises of the government hospital can store one lakh litres of water. Today, it supplies water to local homes every day and on time. "We had lived almost all our lives without enough water to drink – that's not the case now. Life has certainly changed for the better," remarks Rajesh Kumar, 35, a government teacher of Ramgarh Boy's School. Another success story has been that of Shruti Deogam, the block head of Ghatshila, who could revive the Tussar silk thread mill in the area by organising self-help groups to start a small mill at the panchayat office itself. Presently 50 women are working in shifts to spin and reel silk treads with the support of the district administration and Jharcraft, an NGO working to develop craftwork in the state. "If this works fine the women in my region will be able to earn not less than Rs 6,000 a month," she says proudly.

These are all instances of incremental but significant change brought about through the efforts of committed panchayati raj women leaders. They know they have a long way to go, but the process has begun well and is now unstoppable.



SECURE THE LIVES OF KASHMIR'S PANCHAYAT LEADERS

By Sana Altaf

Kashmir – It was around 6.30 in the evening on January 13, 2013. After a hard day's work Zoonia Begum, a panch (village panchayat member) from Sopore in Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir, was spending time with her family when there was a knock on the door. When she went to answer it, she found an unknown person standing before her. Before she could react Zoonia was shot in her head. Within seconds she lay unconscious in a pool of her own blood.

It's been three months since the horrific incident and Zoonia is bedridden. The entire left side of her face has been damaged, including her eye, nose and throat. Although she is receiving treatment at a leading medical institute in the Valley, the threat of danger and death still looms large. Till date, no investigation has been initiated to catch her attacker, whose identity remains unknown. Moreover, doctors have told her that the nerves in her neck can get a block anytime, which can cause death. "I live in constant fear," says the gravely injured leader.

As a youngster, Zoonia always wanted to do something for her people, her village. While she was in school, she got involved

in local politics and developed strong political affiliations. “I worked with the Congress party as well as the National Conference for nearly a decade because I always wanted to help people,” says the 42-year-old, who has studied till Class Eight.

Then when panchayat elections were held in Kashmir in 2011 after a gap of 20 years, Zoonia decided to contest. She elaborates, “I never wanted it for myself but the villagers wanted me to be a panchayat member so that I can work for them. I was appointed as a panch.”

According to government figures, nearly 80 per cent people had cast their votes during those panchayat polls. The overwhelming turn out took everybody – separatists and mainstream leaders alike – by surprise. Previously Kashmir had witnessed spells of unrest in 2009 and 2010 and hundreds of people were killed in the clashes that had ensued between the security forces and civilian protestors. But, interestingly, in 2011 no militant group had called for a boycott of the elections.

However, once the polls were over, threats against panchayat members began to surface in the form of posters that demanded that they resign or face dire consequences. This was followed by attacks on several panchayat members, which resulted in the killing of over 10 office holders with several others being injured across the Valley. Zoonia was one of the victims of such attacks. In fact, over 500 panchayat members have tendered their resignation citing threat to their lives.

“I never thought that my work would lead me to this state. I am not only suffering physically but psychologically, too,” says this mother of three who, today, is being taunted by her

husband and in-laws for having stood for elections. Rues Zoon, “My family is suffering. My husband works as a manual labourer and although he does not earn much he has to spend huge amounts of money on my treatment.” Ironically, the government has not provided any kind of relief or monetary assistance to her as yet and this apathy has disappointed her greatly.

When asked if she would continue as a panch, Zoon says, “I have not thought about it so far. I can only decide once I get well.”

Unlike Zoon, Suriya, a sarpanch from Tangmarg in Baramulla district, is undeterred by the threats of violence against her. “Life is in the hands of God. I do not fear anyone else. I shall continue to work for my people,” she says emphatically.

An active social worker from her youth, Suriya used to facilitate aid for conflict victims, widows and orphans. “Women in our village have been suffering for years. Those who lost their husbands had no means to live a normal life. I have worked a lot to provide them with financial assistance from the government,” she says.

After working independently in the community, Suriya contested the local body elections to become one of only two women sarpanches in the Valley. “Being a sarpanch gives me more say with the government and I can work better for the people,” she explains.

Of course, Suriya’s own life has not been free of trauma and pain. Her family went through hell during the 23 years of conflict that had gripped the Valley from the late 1980s. She

was forced to drop out of school after Class 12, her brother-in-law was killed in the violence and their home was razed to the ground. “My brother-in-law’s death left my sister and her three children all alone. It was turning point in my life. My sister was not in a condition to support her children and my two brothers were not bothered about them. This put a lot of burden on me,” she narrates.

Family pressures made Suriya give up the idea of getting married – a decision that provokes caustic comment from some in the community. What has helped her overcome all her personal problems is the work she took on. “My primary aim is to give the best education I can to my nephews and niece. Then, I have to work for my people. I shall struggle and work hard for it,” she adds.

While Suriya truly believes that panchayat members must not fear threats from any group, voices demanding better security for the local self government leaders are getting louder, particularly in view of the rising attacks.

“Security of sarpanches and panchs has become a very important issue. We want the government to provide security cover to at least those who live in volatile areas and have been receiving threats,” says Imtiyaz Abdul Beig, Provincial President of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Conference. He insists that the government should seriously investigate the attacks that have taken place and book the culprits.

For now, the government has declined the demand for security cover, stating that it is impossible to provide security to over 34,000 sarpanches and panches in the state.

In addition, panchayat members have also been demanding the inclusion of 73rd Amendment in the Panchayati Raj Act of Jammu and Kashmir – or at least some of its best provisions like better salary and incentives. Presently, the panchayats in the state are governed by the J&K Panchayati Raj Act 1989 and they lack the powers that the panchayats in the rest of the country enjoy thanks to the 73rd Amendment of 1993.

The state Congress Party, headed by Prof. Saif-u-Din Soz, has also led a campaign for implementing the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in the J&K constitution. This has created a rift between the Congress and National Conference (NC), which heads the coalition government in the state. The NC has strongly objected to the move saying that it would be against the spirit of Article 370 of the Indian constitution under which J&K enjoys a special status. In fact, senior NC leader Dr Mustafa Kamal even led a counter campaign for some time.

However, amid the growing demands by panches and sarpanches, the NC agreed to incorporate relevant provisions of the constitutional amendments in the J&K constitution.

Committed grassroots women leaders such as Zoona and Suriya can do wonders for the development of their communities, but only if they are protected and feel secure while they discharge their duties.



MANIPURI HILL WOMEN LEADERS ROOT FOR RIGHTS, EMPOWERMENT

By Ninglun Hanghal

Imphal - Hatlhing Doungel, 45, is a single mother of three boys and one girl. Like any mother, she takes care of her home and kids with love and diligence, but today she is not responsible for their well being alone. Ever since she was elected to the Autonomous District Council (ADC) of Tamenglong district she has taken her duty of ensuring the development of her region and her people very seriously. Though she lives and works from her office in Manipur's state capital, Imphal, Hatlhing visits her Phaituol constituency once every week, never mind the security threats or the long hours away from her children.

In the violence-affected northeastern state of Manipur, while the panchayats perform the function of local governance in the Valley area, the ADCs look after the local administration in the five hill districts. Presently, there are six ADCs operational – one each in Ukrhul, Tamenglongun, Churachandpur, Chandel and two in Senapati district in Senapati and Sadar Hills.

The ADCs have a long and turbulent history. The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971, under which the ADCs

were constituted, was passed when Manipur attained statehood in 1971. The first district council elections were held in 1973. From the beginning, the functioning of the district councils was plagued by a number of problems, including the non-delegation of a number of enumerated powers and functions as well as the absence of financial autonomy. Therefore, despite the clear objective behind establishing ADCs - to uphold and protect the interests of the local tribal people - they were merely relegated to implementing state schemes. From 1988 onwards, the councils began to be suspended and were fully dissolved by 1990.

The disappointing experience of the people led to widespread demands for improving the Act. Three amendments followed, with the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council (Third Amendment) Act, 2008, being the most recent and exhaustive one.

It was in 2010 that the ADCs were reconstituted after a gap of 20 years, which was when Hatling was elected. In fact, three elected and two nominated women made their way into the ADCs of Umrhul, Tamenglong, Churachandpur at the time.

Hatling lost her husband in 1996. Undeterred, she became actively within her community as a social worker. Her years of dedicated work as the secretary of the women's wing of the Kuki Innpis Manipur, the apex body of the Kuki community, helped her win the confidence of the people. So when elections for the ADC were announced, she was encouraged to contest. Hatling defeated three candidates to secure her position on the Tamenglong ADC. Today, she is happy that she is in a position to contribute to her community in a new capacity. "Undertaking development work and the implementing

welfare schemes is number one on my agenda. And to ensure smooth functioning, I work along with the tribal chiefs, who are the appointed chairmen or heads of village councils,” she says.

In the last couple of years, Hatling has dealt with a number of crises. She recalls the stand off between the state officials and the villagers in None, owing to land acquisition during the construction of the Jiri-Toubal railway line. “When the villagers came to me with their problem I called for a face-to-face meeting with the officials to ensure that everyone got adequate compensation,” she narrates.

It’s the larger administrative problems she has to face that frustrate her. “Even after the ADCs have been revived, the Tamenglong council is not fully functional yet. Moreover, our budget is still allocated by the state government, which ties our hands,” says Hatling, who is provided with a special security cover during her weekly trips to Phaituol, the only non Naga constituency in the district.

Grace Zamnu, 41, the lone woman on the 26-member Churachandpur ADC, is also passionate about her work. She was elected from Muallum constituency on a Congress Party ticket. Unlike Hatling, for Grace contesting an election was not unfamiliar territory. In fact, due to her father’s political ambitions her family has gone through some tough times. “A succession of failed campaigns compelled us to sell off our property and other assets to survive,” recalls Grace.

Despite that she could neither keep herself away from activism, nor could she say no to joining politics, as it provided her with the perfect platform to raise her voice for women’s rights.

Interestingly, it is her father, currently the Village Chief of Zou Veng and Advisor to Zou tribe's apex body, United Zou Organisation, who has been her greatest supporter.

Grace started out as a student leader and then went on to become the General Secretary of the Zomi Mother's Association, a federation of women's groups of the Zomi community. "Women and children's rights are closest to my heart, so be it leading demonstrations against rapes and domestic violence or setting up shelter homes or rehabilitating orphans, I'm always ready," she says. It was her spirited activism that caught the eye of her community elders and tribal leaders, who suggested her name for the Churachandpur ADC.

Sadly, this dynamic leader's pro-woman agenda has also been fuelled by her own unfortunate marriage. Despite being a busy homemaker she used to participate in the church's welfare activities but her life was marred with incessant rounds of mental and physical harassment. Even when she finally decided to get a divorce in 2006 she was forced to give up her two children as per the customs of her community.

Nowadays Grace is focusing on implementing women's empowerment programmes. Though there are no special funds earmarked for the purpose, she has devised her own way of doing things. She plans fund raising activities, helps women form Self Help Groups (SHGs) and assists them in managing money by facilitating the opening of bank accounts. Besides this, Grace lays a great emphasis on involving women in income generating activities such as starting up handlooms. Says she, "These days, it is profitable to market our traditional outfits by giving them a modern twist. They are in great demand." Moreover, recognising the value of a

good education, she personally monitors the schools in her constituency, regularly visiting and interacting with teachers and the school board.

Naturally, all this good work has not been achieved without a few hiccups along the way. But nothing disturbs her more than the fact that the ADCs are not being allowed to do anything more than implement state welfare schemes. She elaborates, “The ADC Act is not strictly put into practice. The council, therefore, neither has any specific development plans and policies nor has it got funds of its own. Even council members are not paid any allowance.”

Hathling believes that things can change if more women become part of the political landscape at the grassroots. “Women’s reservation needs to be implemented in the hills. While the valley benefits from this - because the Panchayati Raj system exists there - why can’t the same be done here?” she questions.

Grace agrees, “While the quality of participation for women in the hills has a long way to go in terms of decision making in politics, at least women’s representation should be increased through reservation.”

Hathling and Grace are leading by example. Remains to see how far they succeed in ensuring women’s issues take centrestage in local politics.



DISCARDING VEILS, EMBRACING
CHANGE: RAJASTHAN'S
EXTRAORDINARY SARPANCHES
By Abha Sharma

Jaipur – As a child she used to keenly observe the government officials and leaders who came to her village Bassi, near Jaipur, Rajasthan, for official functions on occasions like Independence Day or Republic Day. Sitting in the audience, she used to watch in fascination as they addressed large crowds. She even had the urge to join them at the dais but knew she needed to become “someone important” in order to be able to do that.

Born into a family of daily wagers, it never really seemed likely that Murli Meena would achieve this desire. Although she was a natural leader, there simply were no opportunities for her to distinguish herself. Her fortunes, however, changed when she got married to someone who lived in the neighbouring village of Dehlala and decided to discard the ‘ghunghat’ (veil traditionally required for all married women). Looking back, Murli says she wanted to “live as freely as the daughters and daughters-in-law of the Brahmin and Jain communities in my neighbourhood”. Says she, “During the ‘pheras’ (Hindu marriage ritual) when my mother pulled my ‘pallu’ (free end of the sari covering the head up to the waist) down, I pulled it back with equal force – and this happened quite a few times!”

While initially no one liked her “bold move” - for quite some time she had to bear the criticism and nasty comments of her family and friends - slowly everyone reconciled to the change. What young Murli didn't know at the time was that her “audacity to stand up for what she believed in” would actually become the stepping stone she was looking for to fulfil her dream.

In the year 2000, when Dehlala Gram Panchayat in Chaksu tehsil became a reserved seat for women for panchayat elections, the villagers instantly saw in Murli a capable candidate. She was elected unopposed to the post of Sarpanch (village panchayat head) and she did so well in her maiden term that she was elected for a second consecutive term – that too from a general seat. Presently, Murli is in her third term; having defeated nine men and two women to emerge victorious.

Over the last 12 years, this dynamic woman, who has only studied up to Class Eight, has gained a sound understanding of village administration. Confident and active, Murli, now 37, is managing her responsibilities effortlessly. In fact, she was invited by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia for a 10-day visit to Australia – her first trip overseas - to share her experiences of grassroots democracy and leadership.

Over the years, Murli has truly done some remarkable work in her panchayat. She has managed to get 295 women registered under the government's Indira Aawas Yojna that provides housing for the rural poor; she has pursued various development projects with the help of the Pradhan, the Block Development Officer (BDO), Zila Parishad members and, at times, even the local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA).

Today, Murli is one of the many women who have become the flag bearers of women's empowerment at the village-level in Rajasthan, a state still deeply rooted in a feudal culture. What has enabled women like her to step out of their homes and make a real difference to their community is the fact that in Rajasthan there has been 50 per cent reservations for women in local government bodies since early 2010.

The change such a quota brought about was not instant. Initially, it was hard to find women candidates who expressed willingness to enter village politics. This is not because of their incapability but their inherent lack of confidence and fear of annoying family members.

For the last few years, agencies such as The Hunger Project and the Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society (CECOEDECON) have been working with grassroots women in the desert state to train and build their capacities. Observes Virendra Shrimali, Convenor of The Hunger Project in Rajasthan, "In the beginning, in order to overcome existing cultural norms, we would request elderly women of the village to step in and fight the elections. Now we no longer need to do this."

With greater awareness, the scenario has changed significantly. It is not unusual to find anywhere between five to ten women candidates contesting for one panchayat seat. "In a sense, women have realised that they have an advantage. Where men can contest in only 50 per cent of the seats, women can contest all of them," says Shrimali.

That's why many more women representatives are now winning from general seats. Like Murli herself or Laxmi Bai

from Morthala village in Rajasthan's Sirohi district, who may have suffered defeat the first time she contested, but has been able to register three consecutive wins thereafter.

Badam Bairwa, 35, who belongs to the Scheduled Caste community in Luhara Panchayat of Tonk district, is yet another inspiring grassroots leader. She is illiterate but that hasn't deterred her from carrying out extensive development work in her panchayat ever since she was elected Sarpanch in 2010. A proper road, electricity, 25 hand pumps, four tube wells, old age pension for 50 women – she has made all this happen. How does she get things done when she can't read or write? Pat comes her reply, "Padhe likhe nahin hain, par dimag to hai na (I may not be literate but I do have a brain)."

For young Sunita Rajawat, ward panch from Vanasthali Gram Panchayat in Tonk, coming to power has given her the sanction to shed her veil. Hailing from a Rajput family, she admits that the 'ghunghat' is often a major roadblock for women in Rajasthan. Women, according to Rajawat, face a strange social paradox. "On the one hand, they are expected to stay behind the 'ghunghat', on the other hand, men never fail to take a dig at us by saying 'ghunghat wali kya kar sakti hain (what can you expect from veiled women)?" she reveals.

In the 19-member panchayat that Rajawat represents, there are nine women. In the very first meeting, the male members occupied all the front chairs as if to suggest that the women should continue to play second fiddle to them. Rajawat, however, asked all her female colleagues not to take this lying down. Their persistence paid off – now the seating arrangement has changed forever. "There has been no attempt to discriminate against women since then," she laughs.

This matriculate ward panch reiterates that while women need lots of guts and courage to make a place for themselves in the male-dominated political arena, if women public representatives have “janhit” (public interest) as their top priority, respect is bound to follow. “First, my identity was of a ‘ghunghat’-clad woman confined to the realm of her household. I have now found a platform where I can speak out my mind and do something worthwhile,” she says.

Rajasthan has historic links with the Panchayati Raj system. It was in Nagaur district that the country’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had laid its foundations on October 2, 1959. The recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, set up to examine the community development programme, were accepted by the National Development Council in January 1958. But the concept of “democratic decentralisation” initially failed in other states except Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Since Rajasthan was one of the pioneering states in adopting Panchayati Raj after the recommendations of the Committee, Nagaur was selected for the official inauguration.

The state has not looked back since then. This year, it received the Panchayati Raj Award for outstanding performance that carries a cash award of Rs 1.5 crore. As for the women who made this possible, they have been given a historic chance to explore the world beyond their homes – and help make a difference.



KULTIKIRI PANCHAYAT'S 20 YEAR THUMBS UP TO WOMAN POWER

By Saadia Azim

Paschim Medinipur – Kultikiri is a special village. Located in Sankhrail block of West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district, a region once infamous for being the hotbed of Maoist activity, the people of this small hamlet have set a unique precedent – for the last two decades now, they have only voted women into the local panchayat. Contrary to what many may assume, Kultikiri has successively elected all women panchayats not because of the reservations for women. The fact is that its women leaders have beaten their male counterparts fair and square on the basis of their superior leadership qualities and a spectacular track record of development.

These days, Anamika Sahoo, a 38-year-old mother-of-two, is at the helm of the village panchayat. She is a first-time panchayat member, elected to be the pradhan (head) of a seven-member gram panchayat. Talking about the reasons behind Kultikiri's legacy of grassroots women's leadership, she proudly says, "Although this has been a woman-ruled panchayat for the last 20 years, it's not like the men have not stood for elections. They have simply lost every time. What has worked in favour of women for four consecutive terms is our good work."

According to local activist Partha Khanra, West Bengal has successfully held regular panchayat elections for the last 35 years and it is a great model for thriving grassroots democracy. “In fact, it is the only state in India where even panchayat elections are a very political affair. The Left Front, which ran the state government for over 35 years, initially promoted Kultikiri as an all-woman panchayat with the idea of giving a fillip to women’s participation in grassroots politics. Today, however, it is a well-established, successful panchayati raj unit running on its own merit,” he says.

Ever since the women gained control of the Kultikiri panchayat, the 12,000 people who inhabit this village have only prospered. The literacy levels are generally high – around 70 per cent women and 60 per cent men are educated; and nearly everyone is gainfully employed, thanks to the proper implementation of the central government’s flagship scheme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). In the last fiscal year, the panchayat actively disbursed more than Rs 53 lakh under this scheme. Says Sahoo, “Our major thrust has been to identify work and then facilitate the proper disbursement of funds under the MGNREGA.”

Significantly, every woman in Kultikiri enjoys economic independence and is in a position to contribute to the family income. They are either running small village-level enterprises or have joined different Self Help Groups. Pradhan Sahoo, a graduate, also supplements her earnings by taking tuitions.

What Kajal Rawat, 27, the Up-Pradhan (deputy village head), is most satisfied about is the high rate of literacy in her village. “Ours is not just any all-woman panchayat. We are young, energetic women, who are full of new ideas that can enable

our community to grow and flourish. The fact that all of us in the panchayat are well educated has made a big difference. I can confidently say that we do not have a single drop-out from our village,” remarks the youthful leader, who after graduating from a local college now divides her time between her panchayat duties, her job as a school teacher and taking extra classes for the girls in the village.

Besides Sahoo and Rawat, there’s Pramila Singha, a panchayat member who is also an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) worker, and Sushama Kisku, 26, another part-time teacher. All the women take their official work very seriously. Says Kisku, “I go to the panchayat office every afternoon after school. In the evening, I meet up with the Self Help Groups that the panchayat has helped set up. These all-women groups undertake a variety of activities, including integrated farming, bamboo basket-making and puffed rice and bori (sun dried lentil nuggets) making. The stuff they produce or make is sold in the local village market. On our part we also conduct regular weekly village haats (market fairs) to promote fair business practices amongst farmers and cattle breeders.”

Ramani Singha, 26, another enthusiastic panch, is really glad she got the opportunity to work with such a committed group of women. She is currently pursuing her Masters degree in Bengali literature and feels that it is her education that has motivated her to do something for her people. “We feel so empowered because we can understand the community’s needs,” she notes.

But even as these women understand what works for their people and have also been able to deliver on their expectations, the political environment is becoming increasingly tougher

for them. Panchayat elections in West Bengal were scheduled to be held in early May. But because of a case in the Calcutta High Court between the State Election Commission and the state government over the deployment of para-military forces during panchayat elections the polls had been deferred. Now fresh dates have been announced and elections are to be held from June 28 onwards in three phases.

Of course, in this election season, Kultikiri's panch's have been at the receiving end of political mudslinging. Says Sahoo, "The village is now politically very sensitive. After the Left Front was voted out of power there have been several instances of clashes because of political enmity. My husband is on the run for the last one year after he was threatened with dire consequences by rival outfits. But I have not lost hope. We have the people's support and I will fight for my rights."

Kisku has her own take on the situation, "All members of Kultikiri gram panchayat had been Left nominees and the seat was with the Left parties since 1992. But with the change of power at the helm of the state, the political approach is also changing." Another reason for the rise in threats is the fact that whereas earlier "even rival political parties had nominated women to fight elections in this village now the people want to grab power and not leave it solely for women".

But Rawat and Singha are not too worried about their political future as they are both contesting elections. Explains the duo, "There has been pressure to grab power from elected members like us. Our panchayat members were jeered at and asked to resign by our rivals. Even now, although the polls have been deferred, we are being constantly threatened and asked not to file our nominations when the time comes. But we will fight the next elections just as we have done in the past."

Sahoo, the leader of this inspiring bunch, has the final word: “We do not want this seat to be reserved for women. All these years, our village has been a model for women’s empowerment. These days we even have a woman chief minister, so all we hope is that whenever panchayat elections are held in West Bengal they will be free and fair. If they are indeed free and fair, women will certainly come to power again.”



FOR TRIPURA'S TRIBAL WOMEN LEADERS PEOPLE COME FIRST

By Ninglun Hanghal

Agartala – It's not often that one gets to hear about resounding success stories of women's grassroots leadership from Tripura, a small landlocked hill state in the northeast. While exceptional panchayat women from other parts of the country have been routinely making headlines - just recently three panchayat leaders from Odisha, Haryana and Tamil Nadu were feted in the capital on the occasion of the 20th Women's Political Empowerment Day - not many are aware that there are several tribal women leaders in Tripura who have been quietly doing dedicated work within their communities for many years now.

Notable among them are the female members of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), an independent council administering the tribal areas of the state. Sandhya Rani Chakma, 36, is one of them. Elected to the TTAADC from Karamcherra constituency in Tripura North district for a second term in 2010, she is the only woman on its nine-member Executive Council and holds the portfolio of social education and health. Then there's Sabitri Debbarma, 55, member from Demdum-Kachucharra constituency in North Tripura. Over a busy career spanning 15 years, she has

been elected to this Council thrice - first in 1995 and then in 2000. She is now doing her third stint since 2010. Additionally, she has spent one term in the state assembly in 2008 as well. Completing the terrific trio of capable female leaders on the 30-member TTAADC is Madhumati Debbarma, 43, from Kulai-Champahour constituency in Tripura West district, whose commitment towards the welfare and rights of her people got her elected into the local governing body for the first time in 2010.

After Tripura attained full statehood in 1972, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Bill, 1979, was passed by the state legislative assembly in March 1979 under the provisions of the 6th Schedule of the Constitution. The idea, as per official documentation, was to “fulfill the long cherished demand of the people of Tripura for self-government in tribal majority areas... and strengthen the bonds of unity between the tribal and non-tribal masses as well as emancipate not only tribals but all the deprived people from all types of injustice and exploitation”. The council started functioning in 1982 and in the last 20-odd years of its existence women have regularly been elected as members and have made their presence felt as efficient administrators.

The Council administers four zones and 17 blocks spread across eight districts with its functioning headquarter at Khumulwng, 26 kilometres from the state capital, Agartala. There are 527 village councils under it, which function as primary institutions of the local self-government.

Sandhya presents a very positive picture while talking about women’s participation in local self-government in her state, “It is very good and encouraging. I find that women are pro-

active when it comes to working for their community.” This experienced leader first forayed into politics during her college days as an active member of the Student Federation of India (SFI), the student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), besides being a part of the Tripura Tribal Student Union. In addition, whenever she had the time she would keenly involve herself in CPI (M)’s party work. This approach won her the confidence of her party colleagues and her name was proposed for the list of candidates for the Council. “I was elected to the Council even before I got married,” she smiles.

Uniquely, unlike in other northeastern states, Tripura’s women have always been active members of political parties. Like Sandhya, her two other female colleagues also started out as “dedicated CPI (M) party workers” in the local units at the grassroots. Interestingly, the three were also active members of the All India Mahila Sangathan.

Naturally, women’s welfare has been central to their agenda from the very beginning. Though education has changed many rules for their lot, as is prevalent in most other parts of the country, a majority of the women are still disempowered and deprived of their basic rights. Those living in the rural areas are even more vulnerable. This is why Sandhya, Madhumati and Sabitri have taken up women’s empowerment, particularly economic sustenance, with a vengeance.

Discuss work with the trio and they all speak the language of development. Healthcare is an issue that is close to Sandhya’s heart and she feels that access to proper and affordable medical care in rural areas is the urgent need of the hour. In the last couple of years, she has managed to set up two working hospitals in her constituency and considers them among her biggest achievements.

Providing means for income generation has been another priority area and for this they help local tribal women to organise themselves into collectives that make handloom as well as handicraft products from cane and bamboo. Besides this, incentive is given for rubber plantations and animal husbandry, too.

Every fortnight Madhumati makes it a point to tour the villages in her area and spend time with various women's groups during her visits. "I stay in the villages for 15 to 20 days as I feel good living and working along side the local women. These trips motivate me and strengthen my resolve to continue working for them," she remarks. Like her Sabitri too travels to her constituency quite often, as she loves being among "her people".

Of course, they have done work within their communities by smartly managing the funds that come their way through the TTAACD, which in turn is financed by the state government. But even as they call the Council's budget a "development budget" they do admit that "a majority of the money goes into paying the salaries". They also rue the fact that many a time they end up undertaking projects that have already been commissioned by the state and that leads to unnecessary expenditure.

Sold out on woman power, the trio puts in a strong case for reservations and bigger role in party politics to boost women's entry into the political arena. Sandhya informs that while gram sabhas - operational in districts that do not fall in the TTAADC area - implement women's reservation, it is not extended to the district council. She believes, "If institutionally women are given more support then many more will come forward to

contest elections.” She adds that political parties, too, will need to nominate more women as candidates, “As women leaders this has been a constant demand from our end. We are always trying to ensure more nominations for women.”

With women actively participating in the development process at the local level, particularly in the rural areas of the state, the vibrant and inclusive autonomous district council is a testimony to the fact that Tripura’s women are more than capable to lead as elected leaders. Sandhya, Madhumati and Sabitri are just a glimpse of female power.



PEOPLE SAVVY, TECH SAVVY:
DIFFERENT FACES OF PANCHAYAT
WOMEN
By Abha Sharma

Rajsamand - Amri Bai, a simple woman in her fifties, had never had the opportunity to deal with the world until she became the Ward Panch of Kesuli Gram Panchayat. Once a shy housewife whose life revolved around her family, she is a completely changed woman now. If Amri represents one face of women's grassroots leadership in Rajasthan, then Rakhi Paliwal is the other face, albeit a contrasting one. An aspiring law graduate, this Upsarpanch (deputy village head) is trying to transform her Upli Oden panchayat with the click of a mouse.

Both women are shining examples of political empowerment in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan, although they are entirely different personalities – Amri is traditional whereas Rekha is a tech savvy and modern. What they have in common, though, is the zeal to bring about change in the lives of the people they represent.

Amri, who belongs to the Gameti scheduled tribe, has brilliantly scripted her success story. She never had the chance to go to school and was, as she puts it, an “angootha chhap” (illiterate) like most of the women in her village, Pipalwas. But because

she was a respected member of the community, when Kesuli Gram Panchayat in Khamnor block became a reserved seat in 2005, she was considered the most suitable candidate for the post of Ward Panch.

Prior to her entry into public life, Amri never had the courage to speak up for what she believed in. First she used to fear her parents and, later, her husband and village elders. Even after her nomination to the panchayat, she knew most people would expect her to remain in the background. As she grappled with questions regarding her role, responsibilities and capacity to handle public office, Amri got a rude shock when the Block Development Officer (BDO) snubbed her for being illiterate. “He angrily retorted, ‘What can you do? You can’t even read and write’,” she recalls, speaking in her regional dialect mixed with Hindi.

His words hurt her but she did not take time to make her next move. Amri decided to study. Around that time, Aastha, an Udaipur-based non government organisation (NGO), was also conducting a women’s leadership training for panchayat members with the support of The Hunger Project, and this exercise helped her immensely. She was finally on the path of transformation.

From then on, Amri had one goal in life. She would practice her alphabets all day, even as she did the household chores, worked in the field or took the cattle for grazing. “I would write on the slate, on walls or the floor, wherever and whenever I got time,” she elaborates. Her hard work paid off when “it was the turn of BDO Sahib to be shocked when I sent him a development proposal written in my own handwriting”.

“I was not able to write and used to put my thumb impression because I couldn’t sign. Now I can read and do official work myself,” she says with great pride. Thanks to the leadership training she also learnt about her rights and duties as a Panchayat representative.

When she sat for the first time on the chair opposite a ‘thakur’ (upper caste) in the village, her husband hurriedly asked her to sit on the floor. But she replied courageously, “If I have been chosen the Ward Panch, it is my right to sit in the Panchayat.”

Amri’s commitment ensured that she won for the second consecutive term in 2010, this time from Ward No. 5; earlier she was elected from Ward No. 4. Of her many achievements, she is most pleased with the fact that she has managed to get a concrete road laid in the village, a hand pump installed in the Bhil basti and ensure the BPL list was rectified successfully.

Unlike Amri Bai, who started her political career with nothing, for Rakhi Paliwal, the road to success has not been fraught with any inhibitions and worries. Educated and brimming with confidence, Rakhi, in fact, has an edge over others because she is computer savvy as well. She truly believes that solutions to even the toughest problems are just a mouse click away.

Rakhi has also been lucky to get guidance from her father, who was the Upsarpanch of Upli Oden panchayat in 1995. He, however, could not contest elections after the introduction of the two-child norm that disqualifies those with more than two living children from contesting panchayat elections. Fascinated by politics, Rakhi, who is in her early twenties, decided to take the plunge and proved herself by winning from the general seat in 2010. Although it was not easy getting

elected – everyone felt that she would get married and won't be able to work for them – she was determined to win.

Exhilarated over being the youngest deputy sarpanch, Rakhi started a Facebook page where she posts the problems of her panchayat, shares information with people and keeps herself abreast of the latest developments in the region. How does posting village information on the web help the village? She replies, “There have been times when the District Collector has immediately responded to my queries on Facebook and directed me to the concerned department for follow-up. It is true the elders are not net savvy but even in villages you will find youngsters using the Internet and they update their family on welfare issues.”

Rakhi's daily schedule is packed because she is pursuing a law degree. Her college is 50 kilometres away so she leaves home at 6.30 am. Back by 2 pm she has lunch and gets on to her official responsibilities. Focused on girls' education these days, she is trying to get the collapsed wall of a local school repaired. She has spoken to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) about this, but work is stuck due to a lack of funds. Pictures of the broken walls have been put on the Facebook page to keep everyone abreast of the situation.

Her e-approach to problem solving has attracted a lot of attention and other panchayats are also planning to follow suit. “Social networking is now possible at the grassroots because many youngsters are using Facebook these days,” she observes.

As she awaits the results of her first year LL.B. exam she has devoted her vacation time for panchayat work and is holding

training courses in painting, toy-making and computer learning for women. She says, “I don’t want to invest time and energy in getting buildings made. It is my dream to see my village as a Nirmal Gram. I want proper supply of “bijli-pani” (water and electricity) and a toilet in every home. And, of course, the benefit of government schemes should reach all deserving people.”

Rakhi would be a law graduate in two years and perhaps get married too once she completes her studies. Would she then like to practice law or continue in public service? “I would like to do both – have a good practice and work for the people as well,” she says.

In the early years after reservation for women in Panchayat elections was made mandatory, very few women dared to step out of the boundary of their homes. Now, they are not just taking an active interest in public life they are doing commendable work as well. Says Yogesh, who is associated with Vikalp Sansthan, an NGO that holds trainings for women in Jodhpur, “After the 73rd Amendment, the present generation of women candidates has successfully got rid of the veil and they are interacting with officials and the public alike.”

The amazing confidence displayed by women like Amri Bai and Rakhi Paliwal demonstrates the potential of women leaders to bring about much-needed change in society.



HEALTH TO THE BEAT OF DRUMS, THE PANCHAYAT WAY By Swapna Majumdar

Banswara – The day the drums start to beat, residents of Navgaon in Anandpuri block of Banswara district in the desert state of Rajasthan, immediately know it is a Thursday. And it is no ordinary Thursday; it is that one day in the month earmarked as Mother and Child Health Nutrition (MCHN) Day. Women start queuing up at the anganwadi centre, waiting patiently to access health services provided by the government. Whether it is for ante- or post-natal care, routine immunisation, distribution of vitamins and folic acid tablets, or for dispensing information on reproductive health, the village anganwadi centre is buzzing with activity.

While this may not seem like an extraordinary occurrence elsewhere, in Banswara district this intervention to increase access to health services is making the difference between life and death for scores of women and children. The district recorded the highest number of deaths of children in the age group 0-5 years and second highest in the number of maternal deaths in Rajasthan in 2011-12.

One of Rajasthan's most backward districts, Banswara's predominantly tribal population is dependent on agriculture

as their main source of income. In Anandpuri block, villages are scattered across the hilly and remote terrain and often fall off the government's developmental radar. Female literacy is a mere 27.9 per cent, a big reason for the low awareness of health schemes among women and their right to access them.

Of course, sustained efforts of panchayat (local government) members, who have been working closely with local civil society organisations, have had a positive impact on the health seeking behaviour of the people of the region and the Navgaon experience only underlines this.

It was as late as 2010 that villages in Anandpuri block started to hear more about their health rights when an initiative to address the lack of communication about the various services available under the National Rural health Mission (NRHM) was launched by the Ahmedabad-based Centre for Health, Education Training and Nutrition Awareness (Chetna) as a part of its work with the Communication for Health India Network (CHIN), a group of NGOs working on health.

The initiative has been implemented in 794 villages of select blocks in Alwar, Banswara, Churu, Karauli and Udaipur districts that were chosen on the basis of their poor health indicators – high infant and maternal mortality, low rate of immunisation, poor antenatal care (ANC) and institutional deliveries.

Meenakshi Shukla, Deputy Director, Chetna, explains that a needs assessment carried out in 2009 – at the start of the three-year initiative – revealed that 1,800 pregnant and nursing mothers wanted information on public health services and entitlements, particularly that relating to the Janani Suraksha

Yojana, Balsakha Yojana, Chiranjeevi Yojana, and MCHN Day. They were unaware about whom to contact at the village level for such information. It also became clear that frontline health workers like the accredited social health activist (ASHA) and members of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as well as Village Health and Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) lacked clarity about their role in facilitating access to maternal and child health entitlements provided on MCHN Day. Around 148 VHSNC/PRI members and 227 ASHAs in the five blocks expressed ignorance regarding their roles and responsibilities.

To overcome this hurdle Chetna undertook some steps. “Our local partner in Banswara, the Association for Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) interacted closely with panchayat members to explain to them the importance of their role in improving awareness of the health programmes, including MCHN Day,” states Shukla.

But after Vijender Dosi, block in charge, ASSEFA, held several meetings with the panchayat members, he realised that none of them had accurate information about the funds available for propagating health schemes. Recalls Dosi, “The untied funds allocated to the VHSNCs under the NRHM for the promotion of MCHN Day remained unutilised because the panchayats did not know how to use it. We told the panchayat members, many of whom were also part of the health committees, that they could use this annual sum of Rs 1,200 to spread awareness on health schemes and that this would have a positive impact.”

From this sustained interaction emerged an unusual champion of women and child health – Devlal Masar, a member of Navgaon panchayat. Realising that many of the local women

would be unable to read the government's communication materials on health services, he hit upon a culturally appropriate strategy. He decided to use drums – traditionally done as part of religious functions – to promote MCHN Day in four villages.

Initially, the response was poor. The few women who did come out of curiosity were disappointed on being told that the drums were not beating to invite them to a village celebration but to avail of health services. But Masar was not deterred. He continued to beat the drum on MCHN Day every month. Slowly, the number of women who responded to the drumbeats began to grow. As word spread, attendance also increased dramatically.

The success of approach led the sarpanchs of six more villages to adopt this strategy where, according to Dosi, the beating of drums has pushed up the numbers of women accessing health services on MCHN Day.

Another impact of the participatory communications strategy evolved to mobilise panchayats was seen in Churu district. Just how important health services are for the women and children of Churu is evident from the fact that the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) here is a very high 343, while Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is a grim 55. Clearly, ignorance about existing government health schemes was having a tellingly negative impact.

In addition to the lack of knowledge, what Shikshit Rojgar Kendra Prabandhak Samiti (SRKPS), Chetna's local NGO partner in Churu district, found was that poor sanitation was clearly a serious concern. The broken-down bathroom at the

anganwadi centre in Sirsili village of Churu block had become a cause of worry for the parents of the children enrolled there. They were afraid that their children would get hurt or fall ill if they used the bathroom. Even the number of women who visited the centre during MCHN Day started declining because of the lack of access to functioning toilets.

Some vocal community members did raise the issue before sarpanch Ramniwas Saran but their words fell on deaf ears. When an SRKPS activist spoke to panchayat members about the declining attendance on MCHN Day, they were told that there was no money to get the ananganwadi's bathroom repaired. "We realised then that in Churu, too, panchayats were unaware of the importance of untied funds provided under the NRHM," says Shishir Kumar, block coordinator, SRKPS.

After identifying the gaps in information, SRKPS block link worker, Saroj Devi, not only spoke with the sarpanch and panchayat members about the significance of the MCHN Day but also explained how funds could be used to get the toilet rebuilt. Armed with this information the sarpanch swung into action. The toilet was functional within a month. As expected, attendance at the anganwadi increased dramatically – by almost 80 per cent – leading Saran and panchayat members to accept the principle that health care delivery was an important part of their responsibilities.

In fact, so inspired was Saran that he shared his experience in the monthly meeting of the panchayat samiti at the block level. The block development officer who was present at this meeting asked all sarpanchs and panchayat samiti members as well as zilla parishad members to participate in MCHN Day

proceedings and fully utilise the untied funds available, just as the sarpanch of Sirsili had done. Moral of the story: health is central to the welfare of the community and panchayats have a key role to play in delivering it.



CAN THE LOCAL PANCHAYAT HELP MALAPPURAM'S TORTURED YOUNG BRIDES?

By Shwetha E. George

Malappuram - Sameena, 31, a resident of Nilampoor village in Malappuram district, Kerala, was married at 16 to a grocer in a village near Mysore, a city in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. A year later, she returned home pregnant. She never went back.

Reem, 33, was married at 27 to a 28-year-old small-scale entrepreneur in another village in Mysore. Her husband's friends rescued her when he tried to kill her by setting her on fire. Today, she is a deserted single mother back in Nilampoor trying to come to terms with her life.

Mehnoor, 30, was married at 25 to a 28-year-old Mysore-based embroiderer. A year later, her relatives brought her and her infant son back to the village after a frantic telephone call from the young woman.

In the last 20 years, young Muslim girls from Malappuram's impoverished families, particularly those hailing from the Nilampoor Gram Panchayat, have been suffering physical and emotional abuse in their marital homes in Mysore's remote hamlets. Most of them are back home within five years of

marriage – poorer, weaker and with the added responsibility of bringing up fatherless children.

Incredibly, this practice of marrying off girls in Mysore is referred to as the ‘Mysore Wedding’ phenomenon – and it continues to happen even though everyone is aware of the unimaginable tragedy it has wrought upon a whole generation of women.

Saleena C., a municipal coordinator with the Nilampoor Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society, terms the trend as “a deep-rooted malaise that takes advantage of the economic and educational backwardness of these families”. In extremely poor Muslim households – as in those of many other communities – an unmarried girl over 18 years of age is an abomination. “It is deemed better to have a married but deserted daughter at home than an unmarried one,” she observes.

When a family finds it impossible to provide the substantial dowry required for a “good match” at home, they look towards Mysore for a “cheaper” option. Brokers, usually relatives looking to make easy money, enter the picture bringing in news of potential alliances from remote villages like Shanthinagar, Rajnagar and Kessara. Hardly any inquiries are made about these families.

“At times, the girl’s family is so poor that the whole community doles out cash for the dowry because helping a girl get married is considered the greatest form of charity,” Saleena continues. The amount could range anywhere from Rs 25,000 and five sovereigns to Rs 50,000 and 10 sovereigns.

But in their eagerness to marry their daughters, their families don’t realise the hell they are pushing them into. For Reem, the months that followed her nuptials were nightmarish. While her

sisters-in-law took away her jewellery and wedding trousseau a week after the wedding, she was treated like a “servant and given old clothes to wear”. She recalls, “I couldn’t follow Kannada but I could perceive the hatred in their tones. When I couldn’t take the indignities any more, I asked my husband in half sign language where my gold was. He flew into a rage and hit me repeatedly. While I was crying, he went and got petrol and doused with me it. Screaming, I ran into the bathroom and locked myself in. I stayed there the whole day.”

In Mehnoor’s case, after she made a frantic call to her relatives on the sly, they immediately went to meet her. What they saw was unforgettably disturbing – the young woman had bruises everywhere, even her gums were swollen. Says Mehnoor’s mother, “She came home for her confinement but didn’t speak a word about the torture she had faced. Three months later, her husband took her and her son back. One day, our neighbours come running to us after getting a call from her, saying that her mother-in-law and husband had tried to push her into the water tank.”

Afreen, 39, married at 23 to a mechanic in Mysore was also rescued by her neighbours back in Nilampoor. Although her husband agreed to live with her in Nilampoor, domestic violence came to mark the marriage. “If he saw me smile, he’d hit me. If the food didn’t meet his expectations, he’d hit me. Once, he refused to buy me water throughout out the trip back from Mysore because he saw me speak to a few Malayalis at the busstop. My two older children witnessed many such fights. Finally, the neighbours intervened and my mother with other relatives came to take us back,” she elaborates.

Almost every home here has similar stories. In 2011, out of the 350 reported cases of deserted wives in Nilampoor

Municipality, 85 were victims of Mysore Weddings. Of the 60 cases reported to the police, only 14 had been registered so far in Nilampoor's police station, as per sources in the municipality.

According to Swapna S., advocate with Nilampoor First Class magistrate's court, getting legal redress is not easy, "The women come from the poorest families, with no legal guidance and support. At Mallappuram's only Family Court, numerous couples come every day to reach a settlement on issues like alimony, child custody and compensation. But here too justice is either delayed or denied."

The affected women now want to do something about the demeaning, cruel and repressive manner in which they had been treated and, above all, they want to find a way to bring up their children with dignity.

Says Vanaja Teacher, Chairperson of the Welfare Standing Committee of the Malappuram Zilla Panchayat, under which the Nilampoor panchayat comes, "Only a social change can truly rectify this situation." She sees education as a major game changer for these women, "With education and awareness we will see a difference. Girls, aged less than 15 years, need to be trained in job-oriented skills along with pursuing mainstream education, so that they and their families do not conclude that marriage is their only option."

During her 15 years in public service, Vanaja has seen many girls earn their way to freedom. She remarks, "All you need is a thread and you can earn Rs 20 in 10 minutes. A pair of scissors – and you can earn Rs 75 by cutting a two-metre fabric."

Initiating literacy programmes is not new to the Nilampoor panchayat. Its Jyothirgamaya initiative has helped tackle primary education in the area, while under its 'Oppathin oppam' (towards equality) learning centres, set up in each tribal and dalit colonies, education is encouraged.

For the survivors of 'Mysore Weddings', the Sameeksha programme - started with the support of the Kerala State Literacy Mission – has come as a beacon of hope. Approximately 2,591 people have been registered to write/re-write the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination under this programme, and the majority comprises victims of the Mysore weddings.

Of course, enrolling for classes is easier than actually finding the time to attend them. More often than not, life's basic hardships catch up with the women as they need to provide for their children. Being daily wagers, they are unable to attend day classes and the night school, too, is not convenient. Keeping these limitations in mind the option of Sunday classes has also been provided.

Today Sameena, Mehnoor, and Afreen have seized this opportunity provided by their local panchayat. At the moment they are making do with daily earnings of around Rs 100. While Sameena and Mehnoor work in a bakery, Afreen toils in a brick kiln. They live in crumbling homes and barely manage two meals a day, but they have ensured that their children attend school.

It's a long journey ahead for them, but at least they can hope for a future that is brighter and free of violence.



(The names of women have been changed to protect their identity.)

**J&K NEEDS TO EMPOWER PANCHAYAT
WOMEN: ZAITOON BEGUM
TELLS YOU WHY**
By Ashutosh Sharma

Jammu – Boonikhet is a nondescript panchayat, cradled in the lofty Pir Panjal mountains in Surankote block of Poonch district in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), but its ward panch, Zaitoon Begum, in her mid-fifties, is anything but ordinary. This leader is raring to make a difference. Says Zaitoon, “Militancy prevented developmental activity for years together. Panchayats were non-existent and government functionaries, fearing for their life, refused to come here and attend to the problems faced by us in the villages.”

Panchayat elections were held in J&K after a gap of more than three decades in 2011 on the promise that it would strengthen grassroots democracy and create a strong cadre of local women leaders. According to official estimates, the state lost about Rs 1,200 crore of Central assistance during the 12th Finance Commission period because of the non-existence of panchayats and this loss was felt most in under developed rural pockets like Boonikhet.

Surankote – which forms an arc along with the twin border blocks of Mendhar and Haveli – has remained a hot bed of militancy for several years. Even in defence circles it is labelled

a “liberated zone”. Situated on the historic Mughal road, this snowbound region is now silently witnessing economic development, thanks to a junior panchayat woman official, a panch. Unlike many women panchayat leaders in the state, who usually remain indoors while their husbands run the show, Zaitoon actively participates in panchayat meetings, and wants to reach out to the poorest of the poor.

“Women’s dignity and safety remain my top concerns,” she says firmly, adding, “After I was unanimously announced the panch of my ward since the post was reserved for a woman, I attended a workshop by the district panchayat office on Nirmal Bharat Abhiyaan (Total Sanitation Campaign), which appealed to me immensely.”

Motivated thus, she set about on a village cleanliness mission. “Providing one toilet to each household in my ward became by top priority,” she says. According to her, open defecation has been totally eradicated and more than two-thirds of the 64 households in her ward have installed toilets.

With her focus on women, Zaitoon has been able to reach the benefits of the Indira Awas Yojana, which provides housing for the rural poor, to two widows in her ward. Poverty is a huge challenge in Surankote and this ward panch has submitted a list of residents living below the poverty line to the concerned department.

Undeterred by militant threats and attacks on her counterparts across the Peer Panjal, she says, “Women were at the forefront in this area when Village Defence Committees (VDCs) were constituted to fight militancy. Now that militancy has declined, woman should fight the other enemy – poverty and

underdevelopment. The years of turmoil only pushed us into backwardness.”

Unlike the central legislation the higher post of sarpanch is not reserved for women and marginalised communities in J&K. The state has only 28 women sarpanches out of total 4,113 such posts in 22 districts.

One of them is Vimla Devi, an elected woman sarpanch in Samba district. “Why didn’t you join the night patrol party last night? Where have you been? Your phone was switched off. Don’t do it next time,” she says, ticking off a village youth, as she makes a round of her panchayat constituency of Gagwaal, which is near the international border. This area was in the news in 2012 after the Border Security Force discovered an underground tunnel connecting it with Pakistani territory.

“Alarmed by a spurt in theft cases, we have formed night patrol teams to keep a watch. Youths of the village accompany VDC members, who have been issued weapons by the government to fight militants and to tackle unidentified burglars,” explains Vimla. She has put in some hard work to change the face of the panchayat, “Despite a lack of funds, I got at least five ponds restored and de-silted. A road has been constructed over the last two years as well as some pathways.”

The problem that she faces is that the real decision-making powers for development works done in the panchayat remains in the hands of government officials. “The government has assigned us the responsibility to oversee the work of 14 departments but we want these departments to be transferred to panchayats with the power to supervise their functioning, funds and officials,” she says. According to her, the panchayati raj system is in urgent need of reform.

So far in 2013, Vimla has received Rs 1 lakh for her panchayat under the border area development fund and Rs 10 lakh from the local MLA's constituency development fund. But given the infrastructural work that needs to be done in Gagwaal, this is clearly inadequate.

“Elected panchayat members are not getting any honorariums despite the government’s public announcement that they will be paid,” she reveals, adding that her job is more like social work. While her family is fully behind her in her activities, she complains about non-cooperation from men in general, especially those she defeated in the election. This is no surprise considering, patriarchal attitudes dominate society in a state where, according to 2011 Census, there are 141 girls missing for every 1000 boys. In Vimla’s Samba district there are 223 girls missing for every 1000 boys.

“My opponents are fully aware that there are fund constraints but they keep levelling false allegations against me. But I am not fazed by their attempts to cow me down,” she states.

In one of the paradoxes of panchayati raj, in J&K, the ruling party – the National Conference – has been opposing the extension of the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution to the state. The party argues that this would dilute the state’s special status. But without the adoption of the Central legislation by the state, political observers feel panchayats here will only remain as ornamental bodies. Some commentators even argue that should the state frame an even better law than the Central legislation, it would make a remarkable difference to the lives of ordinary people.

As it exists, the state law is disappointing. In 2009, the Union Cabinet had approved 50 per cent reservation for women in

PRIs. In J&K, however, they get only 30 per cent reservation and that too only for the post of panch, without any real powers. Out of 28,248 elected panchs, 9,424 are women, which is symbolic representation at best.

Points out Rekha Choudhary, a professor of political science in Jammu University, “Women are under-represented not only in PRIs but also in the state assembly - there are only three elected women MLAs in an 87-member House. Incidentally, the three elected MLAs – Shamima Firdous from Habbakadal, Mehbooba Mufti from Wachi and Sakina Itto from Noorabad – are all from the Valley. The Jammu region has no elected women representative.

Choudhary also points out that apart from the funding under centrally sponsored schemes, panchayats here are completely dependent on administrative agencies. “The empowerment of panchayats, therefore, requires fundamental changes in the administrative set up in rural areas. Panchayats must provide opportunities to the oppressed sections of society, including the SCs/STs and women, to be represented in the true spirit of panchayati raj,” she says.

Rabia Baji, a Kashmir-based woman activist and chairperson of the state chapter of the All India Centre for Urban and Rural Development, blames male domination in the public sphere for the inadequate representation of women in J&K’s political institutions. Says she, “All women activists need to come together on a single platform and lobby for representation of women in political institutions. And, as a first step, we must demand 50 per cent reservation for women at all levels of local governance.”

Women like Zaitoon Begum and Vimla Devi, who are doing stellar work at the local level, need this message to reach those inhabiting the corridors of power.



IN TRIBAL MALKANGIRI, WOMEN LEADERS TAKE ON HUNGER

By Sarada Lahangir

Malkangiri – “Food security is a big issue in our tribal region. In the absence of proper livelihood opportunities, scores of families here are heavily dependent on the Public Distribution System (PDS) to meet their ration needs. Streamlining the PDS, therefore, is a top priority. We have tried our best to ensure that everybody gets their entitlements on time.” That was Malathi Gudia, 25, sarpanch (village council head) of Nakkamamudi panchayat. Not only is this young woman a popular, conscientious and articulate leader, these days she is determined to ensure that no one goes hungry under her watch.

Gudia’s agenda stands to benefit thousands, considering that Nakkamamudi panchayat is located in the Kudumulugumma block of Malkangiri, one of Odisha most impoverished districts. Most of the villages in the region are geographically inaccessible and poor communication and infrastructure facilities only make it tougher to get things done.

Around 100 villages falling under four panchayats are situated within the Balimela Reservoir Project on the River Sileru. During the monsoon season – from July to September – and

sometimes even in the post-monsoon months, these hamlets are completely cut-off from the block headquarters. Almost every year all the cultivable land here gets flooded, destroying the crops and leaving the already severely disadvantaged population famished. Most families live below the poverty line (BPL) and literacy levels are very poor: female literacy is a dismal 26 per cent.

It is under these challenging circumstances that women leaders like Gudia have made an impact, with some help from 'Thread – Siddharth Village', a local non-government organisation based in Jatani block of khurda district. Thread is working to empower tribal women in the region, helping them to understand the various ways in which they can better their own lives. Interestingly, it uses the power vested in panchayats in their bid to usher in change.

The process began with the setting up of a tribal women's organisation, aptly named as Nari Mukti Samaj (society for women's liberation). This organisation is 'of the tribal women, by the tribal women, for the tribal people'. It has ensured that several local women sarpanches and panchayat members work for the local community. All of them, incidentally, have gone through a three-phase training programme designed by Thread. In fact, all the women selected to contest panchayat election – Odisha has 50 per cent reservation for women in local bodies – are put through this rigorous, year-long orientation.

While they are already aware of the problems afflicting their people, the training allows them to gain a better understanding of the functioning of the panchayati raj system to enable them to do their job effectively, once elected.

Gudia, who also emerged through this process, has proved her mettle and gained a lot of respect from the villagers. And here's why. Two years ago, the family of Chanda Sisa, 40, a resident of Nakkamamudi, was waging what looked like a losing battle for survival. Even scraping two square meals a day was proving difficult. She had a BPL card but it was all but useless. Sisa never got the foodgrains at subsidised rate. "While the PDS price for rice was Rs 2, we were being forced to buy from the open market at an exorbitant rate of Rs 10 to 15 per kilo. Whenever I went to get ration the PDS dealer would say that the supply hadn't come in. Sometimes he would tell me to come back the next day. When I did go back I was told that our entitlement had already been taken. This happened quite often but there was no way to find out who was doing the pilfering," she recalls.

Once, of course, Gudia became sarpanch things changed for the better. "Now every month I am getting my PDS ration on time which is a bid boon for my family," Sisa adds.

Today, hundreds of families in Kudumulugumma block are benefiting from the PDS, which is currently the country's largest food security scheme. And the credit for this goes to the women leaders, who, as part of the Nari Mukti Samaj, have taken on the responsibility of ensuring a properly-functioning PDS.

Gudia and her colleague Maha Devee Sisa, 35, have succeeded in bringing the PDS under the control of the Nari Mukti Samaj-run women sangha's (groups) in five villages - Dykethri, Godiguda, Nakamamudi, Muduliguda and Arangi - which has benefited over 27 villages in the area. Every Thursday the PDS supply is brought to the five key villages and from

Friday onwards the foodgrains are duly distributed across all villages under the supervision of the respective 'sanghas' of the villages.

Dayanidhi Majhi from Godiguda village is ever grateful for the activism of these elected women. A landless wage labourer, he has an Antodaya card though it is only from last year that he has been able to derive any real benefit from it. The card entitles him to 30 kilos of rice at a reduced price of Rs 2 per kilo.

He explains, "Earlier, the PDS delivery was very erratic. The ration shop owner used to give us grain once every three to four months and he would tell us to buy our entire quota at one time. It was trick, because he knew that we could not afford it all at once. He used to sell it in the black market forcing us to buy at full rate when the need arose."

When there was no work available it was difficult to earn Rs 60 to buy rice from the open market. "So many of us had to mortgage our card to the local money lender, who bought the rice using our card and gave us five kilos per month. This system has stopped now," Majhi adds.

In the last panchayat election in 2012, as many as 2,056 women leaders – who are also part of the Nari Mukti Samaj – contested the polls of which 970 women won the election from different places of Odisha.

Says Gudia, who came to power last year with the support of the Nari Mukti Samaj (NMS), "We are not only involved in PDS but our NMS members in different places in the district have initiated many other activities to ensure food security."

For instance, there's the community cowshed and collection of cow dung initiative to make organic manures, in addition to the introduction of collective cultivation for added food security. At present, six community cowsheds have been constructed by the local people in Kodikajodi, Godiguda, Tikarpada, Amilibeda and Muduliguda villages that are benefiting 67 families. Collective cultivation – under which villagers work together on a common land and then the harvest is stored in community grain banks - has also been taken on in a big way. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) method of rice cultivation is practised to maximise the yield.

From shortage to self sufficiency, these days, community grain banks set up in different villages are stocked up on eight quintals of rice and five quintals of ragi. In addition, there are seed banks where indigenously produced seeds like kanthulo (97 kilos), tho (92 kilos) and biri (145 kilos) have been stored.

According to G. Johns, the founder of Thread, “Our main thrust has been to empower poor tribal women, who are deprived of many key government entitlements. Our women's groups, which also include panchayat women, not only mobilise the villagers but also local resources to ensure food security.”

Leaders like Gudia and Sisa know that “women suffer the most during a food crisis as they are anyway at the bottom of the family's pecking order”. As Karmi Besra, another progressive local women puts it, “Women and food security are closely linked. So all our efforts are trained at ensuring that tribal villages can become food surplus in the next five years.” Amen to that.



**‘LET GIRLS BE BORN’: PANCHAYATS
MANTRA IN UP**
By Swapna Majumdar

Lucknow – It was a cold December morning. On reaching the hospital, the three months pregnant Sheila Devi, 21, and her husband met up with a ward boy, who had promised to take them to meet a ‘special’ medical practitioner. Neither paid attention to the car that had followed them discreetly.

The ward boy asked Sheila’s husband to deposit Rs 5,000 for the ultrasound test. When the money was paid, the couple was told to go to a diagnostic centre nearby. At first, her husband was reluctant but then he agreed. Little did the ward boy realise that he was actually just buying time to convey the change of plan to an inspection team waiting in the car outside.

The couple accompanied the ward boy to the ‘clinic’ where the sex determination test was performed. The medical practitioner told Sheila she needn’t worry - she was going to be the proud mother of a son.

Within minutes of the couple leaving, the inspection team comprising a senior sub-divisional magistrate and three

police personnel inspected the centre and found many violations under the Pre-conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 2002. The medical practitioner was confronted with the recording of his conversation with Sheila. Later, he and the owner of the medical centre were arrested.

This was the first time that a medical practitioner was jailed for violating the PCPNDT Act in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. The inspection operation on December 31, 2012, carried out on the diagnostic centre near Sheila's village in Lucknow district's Bakshi ka Talab block was a big success not just because the medical practitioner had been unable to get bail, but more importantly, it had led to the closure of the lab aiding sex selective elimination.

Uttar Pradesh has the highest birth rate and the highest number of missing girls according to Plan International. About 78,873 girls have been lost in one decade, reveals Sudha Sundararam, general secretary, All India Democratic Women's Association. The latest 2011 Census reveals a steep decline of 17 points in the child sex ratio (CSR). The number of girls between the age of 0 and 6 years for every 1,000 boys has dropped from 916 in 2001 to 902 in 2011. Alarmingly, the decline has been steeper in rural areas - dipping by 15 points from 921 to 906 as compared to the urban pockets where the CSR reduced by five points from 890 to 885 in the same period.

Obviously, girls are unwanted in these parts. But hope in these times of crisis has come from a campaign, 'Let Girls Be Born' (LGBB), initiated by Plan India, a Delhi-based non government organisation, which has been trying to correct

the imbalance by enlisting the help of local panchayat leaders, activists and the people. Aiding them in their endeavour is Vatsalaya, a local NGO.

It was in 2010 that work on this grave issue began in Bakshi ka Talab block, which emerged as one of the worst offenders, registering a drop in CSR from 937 in 2001 to 910 in 2011 (Census figures). In order to formulate its strategy, Vatsalya conducted a study in April 2011 to examine the prevailing knowledge, attitude and behavioural practices in the community towards a girl child. The findings were much on the expected lines. “Traditionally, the status of the girl child has always been low. The thought that they are a burden was still prevalent and the son preference was strong that even in villages where sex determination was not possible female infanticide was known to happen,” says Dr Neelam Singh, Chief Functionary, Vatsalya.

Realising that only rigorous advocacy could be the game changer Vatsalya roped in the panchayat to set the process in motion. Across 20 panchayats chosen for the intervention in the block, panch’s were encouraged to join hands with health workers like the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and anganwadi workers to uphold girls’ rights. In addition, religious leaders and other community members were also brought on board to generate awareness on the PCPNDT Act and the importance of birth registration.

Besides community meetings held to spread the word, rallies were taken out and engaging street skits were put up to help the community to understand the importance of daughters. Some key community groups were also identified to reinforce and take the messages forward.

It was a proud moment for Sheila when her efforts led to the closure of the diagnostic centre. “When I heard about the number of missing girls, I felt it was my duty to help stop this practice. Besides my husband, even my mother-in-law and father-in-law supported me,” says this mother of a six month old son.

Though Sheila’s is a rare household, it has emerged as a fine example for the entire village and neighbouring ones as well. For example, in village Katwada in nearby panchayat Katwada, the birth of a granddaughter celebrated in a ‘grand’ way – drums were beaten and sweets distributed – inspired others to follow suit. Rejoicing in the birth of the girl child, with just as much fanfare as that of a boy, has received the wholehearted support of the panchayat leaders and helped to promote gender equality.

In order to keep the community motivated, other tools were developed. A comprehensive pictorial flip-book, conceptualised and designed by Vatsalya and Plan India, has proven very useful. Further, interactive games using beads, cards and boards have been used to throw light on traditional cultural practices perpetuating gender discrimination. Magic and radio shows, too, have been used to dispel myths and disseminate information.

Then, panchayat leaders have helped to mobilise families to participate in celebration of days earmarked for girls. In Dasauli village of Adharkheda panchayat, pradhan Kedar has been active in promoting awareness on valuing the girl child. Organising community celebrations on Women’s Day (March 8) and International Day of the Girl Child (October 11) has been supplemented with evening rallies (mashal juloos) so that

men, who are generally unavailable during the day because of work, can also be sensitised. “I have told the community that anyone ill-treating their daughters or considering sex selective elimination will face punitive action. I am keeping an eye on everyone,” he states.

Displaying the number of births through an information board in the panchayat office has motivated the community to improve the CSR of their village. In Bhauli panchayat, pradhan Rambahadur Singh stated that the number of girls born in Bhauli village increased from 700 girls per 1000 boys in November-December 2011 to 1021 girls at the end of December 2012. The positive trend continues in 2013 with the number increasing to 1214 girls by May-end.

“The multi-pronged approach adopted has contributed towards this encouraging development. In fact, so motivated were some panchayat and community members that they eventually persuaded those responsible for facilitating the sex determination to stop doing so. Two hospitals - City Hospital and Star Hospital - close to Bhauli were closed down,” says Rajesh Tiwari, LGBB state coordinator of Vatsalaya.

Singh has been pushing for birth registration as well. He says, “The number of girls registered born between November 2011 and March 2013 increased even though it was just one less than the number of boys, (51 girls, 52 boys). Soon, it will be the other way around.”

Vatsalya’s strategy to bring 100 civil society organisations on a common platform (Sanjha Manch) to work with the panchayats is helping to change attitudes towards the girl child at the grassroots. Meanwhile, the Allahabad High Court judgement

of May 2013, which dismissed the petition of a medical practitioner and directed state to take criminal action after finding him guilty of conducting sex selective elimination, is a historic milestone in this campaign. Hopefully, this will be a big stepping stone towards advancing girls' right to be born.



WOMEN SARPANCHES WHO KEEP A SHARP EYE ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

By Rakesh Kumar

Nagaur – Sharvan Lal first visited the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Bhadsiya village, 115 kilometres from the district headquarters of Nagaur, which lies in the heart of Rajasthan in April 2012.

He had observed on that occasion that some of the girls were not in their classes and were instead lugging heavy buckets of water from a hand pump outside the compound to the kitchen where their mid day meal was being prepared.

Lal found this odd but did not follow it up with the administration. Later, when he visited the school for a second time and noticed it happening again, he couldn't remain a silent spectator any more. When there were two officially appointed mid day meal workers in school, why were the students working in the kitchen instead of studying? As a member of the village monitoring committee, when Lal put this question to the school principal, Shailesh Tripathi, she took offence and dismissed his query, terming it an 'interference' into school's 'internal matters'.

Lal was not discouraged. The next day he went to the panchayat office and informed other members of the monitoring committee about the incident. This was when sarpanch Radha Devi decided to visit the school and look into the matter. When Radha spoke to the girls, they discreetly told her and other members of the committee that the principal had fixed one day for each one of them to fetch water. Those who didn't like doing the chore would absent themselves from school on the day allocated to them. Asha, a student of Class Eleven, told the sarpanch that she didn't want to fetch water, but could not gather the nerve to refuse "lest principal ma'am should fail us in the exam".

When Munni Devi, another member of the village monitoring committee, spoke to a few other girls to verify this, she got a similar report. This infuriated Radha Devi. She told the principal in no uncertain terms that the panchayat will be forced to take action against her if the practice was not stopped forthwith. The pressure worked and now none of the 129 girls enrolled in the school in Bhadsiya are made to do any non-academic work. Absenteeism has also decreased.

This is just one of the many ways in which Radha Devi has ensured that the dropout rate in the three institutions under the panchayat – a primary school (up to Class 5), a middle school (up to Class 8), and a girls' higher secondary school (up to Class 12) – has been brought down and enrollment increased.

Says the dynamic sarpanch, who has herself studied only up to Class Five, "I realise the importance of education. The government is doing so much for education so it becomes our duty to make sure that nothing comes in the way. There

should be no discrimination in schools, and in the last three years since I have been the sarpanch, I have made sure this doesn't happen in my village.”

Radha talks about six girls from her village who had dropped out due to their families migrating to brick kilns for work. Ensuring that their education did not take a hit was an uphill task for her. She elaborates, “Migration makes it difficult for these children to get regular schooling. Most often their parents don't re-enroll them once they come back. Last year our village monitoring committee identified six girls from the Babri caste, a Scheduled Caste, who were not attending school. I spoke with their parents to convince them to send them to school again.”

Initially, the girls were put into a bridge course and later moved into regular classes. Three of them, Matiya, 12, Puja Jagdish, 11, Saroj Baluram, 10, are in Class 5; while Rekha, 14, is in Class 7, Asha, 14, in Class 8, and Saroj, 15, has gone to Class 9.

Helping Radha to implement her agenda of protecting the girl child's right to education is the Delhi-based Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), an international centre for learning and promotion of participation and democratic governance. As part of a special three-year initiative on strengthening gender responses of panchayats in Rajasthan (SGRPR), the local self government bodies in the project districts have been enabled with appropriate capacities to help them address gender issues under their jurisdiction.

A network of Civil Society Organisation (CSO) partners, trained by PRIA on various themes of gender, health and

governance, has provided regular information and other support to panchayats for effective gender-responsive actions at the grassroots.

According to Shushila Chouhan, secretary of Social Action and Mobilization Participatory Rural Community (SAMPARC), the CSO partner in Nagaur's four blocks of Parbatsar, Kuchaman City, Makrana and Nawa, "After the state transferred five departments to the Panchayati Raj, it became even more imperative for the community, especially their elected representatives, to monitor functioning of Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), anganwadi centres and schools, to make sure that the benefits of schemes reached the last beneficiary. We had a training session for elected representatives, members of the village health sanitation and nutrition committee (VHSNC) and social justice and social welfare committee (SJSWC), to make them aware about existing schemes. Then an eight-member monitoring committee was formed comprising active community members, health workers and panchayat representatives."

Like in Bhadsiya, in Ekran gram panchayat in Rajasthan's Bharatpur district, sarpanch Anguri Devi has been working hard to keep girls in school. When Anguri went through the enrolment figures for 2012-13, she noticed that girls clearly constituted a smaller percentage of students – of the total 389 children, only 170 were girls. What was even more disturbing to her was the fact that most of them did not attend school regularly.

When Anguri made further inquiries, she found out that the fear of being teased and harassed was keeping the girls away from class. At the time some incidents of molestation had

even come to light. The girls simply hadn't told their families, either out of fear of being scolded or because they themselves had little interest in pursuing their studies.

As a first step, Anguri asked her son, Saheb Singh, to identify the boys who were misbehaving, and warned them of action. But when that didn't seem to help, she did the unthinkable. She threatened them with rustication and also decided to speak to their families. The intervention worked. As a follow up, Anguri's deputy, Meera Devi, counselled the girls and motivated them to attend school regularly.

Today there is a decidedly more gender-friendly environment in the school and teenaged girls do not miss their classes. The sarpanch makes it a point to visit the school and keep an eye on the situation.

“These may seem like small steps,” says Nishu Kaul, programme officer, PRIA, “but they are very significant particularly as they indicate that the panchayats in patriarchal Rajasthan are actually working towards promoting an equal and safe environment for women.”

In the first phase, the SGRPR project was implemented in around 1,000 gram panchayats (GPS) across 21 districts in the state. In the second phase, which was more intense, it was taken to 330 GPs across 16 districts, while the third phase involved 70 GPs across 13 districts.

Manoj Rai, Director-PRIA, emphasises the significant role of the panchayats in bringing about change in a rural setting. He is right to assert this. In remote hamlets like Bhadsiya and Ekran, it was only the intervention of the sarpanches

that could get the girls back into school. Despite the Right to Education Act, thousands of children across Rajasthan are deprived of their basic right to schooling; at least Radha Devi and Anguri Devi have made sure that this doesn't happen under their watch.



PANCHAYAT STRATEGIES: POLITICAL HEROINES MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

By Bula Devi

Delhi - Young or old, educated or illiterate, savvy or simple – local self governments in India have thrown up some real-life political heroines, who have worked hard to make the lives of their communities better. Displaying remarkable skills they have emerged as architects of change and empowerment at the grassroots.

Shushma Bhadu, 35, is one of those progressive women from rural Haryana who has chosen her own future by entering public life. Elected in 2010 as the sarpanch of the Dhani Miyan Gram Panchayat in Fatehabad district, she has proven to be a true revolutionary.

In a state that is known to reject the girl child, Bhadu has managed to make her village of Dhani Miyan Khan, located nine kilometres from Fatehabad town, a ‘model’ when it comes to women’s rights and the survival of daughters.

To put an end to the inhuman practice of female foeticide, this feisty leader announced a handsome cash reward of Rs 51,000 for informers who provide tip-offs on those seeking and conducting sex determination tests and backroom abortions.

In addition, she instructed the local anganwadi and other health workers to remain alert and immediately intimate the panchayat in case any such incident came to light. As a result of this approach, even though Haryana in general presents a bleak picture when it comes to the female sex ratio, “focused efforts in Dhani Miyan Khan have produced excellent results. The village has 426 females to 416 males”, informs Bhadu.

At the same time the leader has taken on the charge of educating local girls very seriously. Though a Class Seven dropout herself, she is determined to ensure that no child in her area remains illiterate. Under her leadership, the panchayat has started covering the fees as well as expenses incurred on uniforms and books for girl students up to Class Five for those parents who cannot afford to support their daughters’ schooling.

The outcome of this move has already started yielding results. It has not only given every child in the village an opportunity to study up to Class Five, if not higher, attendance is reportedly 100 per cent now with zero dropouts. In fact, students of higher classes, who have to go to distant schools, have been provided with cycles to help them continue their studies. “Every family wants educated, qualified daughters-in-law. So I try to explain to them that if they don’t send their own daughters to school, their sons will not get educated wives,” says Bhadu, in a matter-of-fact manner.

While she may not have undergone formal education, the leader does have experience and vision that have enabled her to draw up a road map for the girls of the community. Elaborates Bhadu, “I hold meetings with parents, mostly mothers, in small groups and try to explain to them that if

they do not educate their daughters, their fate, too, will be sealed like them and the vicious cycle of struggle for survival will continue for generations together. Their daughters will remain shackled by household work.”

Despite belonging to the conservative Bishnoi community that does not allow its womenfolk to move around without the ‘ghunghat’ (veil to cover their face), Bhadu has broken conventions to exercise her rights as a progressive woman. She discarded the veil as she found it an obstruction to her work and her initiative has given other women the confidence to shun this age-old practice that is extremely restrictive.

One major factor that has helped her village to script such tremendous success stories is the panchayat leader’s constant endeavour at advocacy and information dissemination in the community. Under Bhadu’s stewardship, a tailoring centre has been set up where women gain vocational training and she has arranged funding from a bank to sponsor these women as they set out to be entrepreneurs.

Bhadu’s work for women’s emancipation and empowerment in Dhani Miyan recently brought her the Outstanding Women Leaders Panchayat Award, instituted by the Institute of Social Sciences.

Like Bhadu, Nayana Patra, 45, too, was recognised in the same way. Patra has devised her own unique strategy to liberate the women of her ward, the Baraun Gram Panchayat of Dhenkenal district in Odisha. Whether it has to do with the health of the environment or adivasi rights, whether it concerns education or sanitation, this ward member has been able to make a significant difference.

But of all her interventions, it is her innovative method of putting an end to alcoholism in her village that has gained her the support of the people. By imposing a fine on those found drunk, she managed not only to discourage such anti-social behaviour, but to create a fund to build toilets in the village.

While sanitation continues to be an issue routinely neglected by the civic administration of many towns and cities across India, Baraun has able to built six public toilets at convenient places to usher in a higher standard of public hygiene than it has ever known.

Patra, who has been elected a ward member twice, and was given the Outstanding Women Panchayat leaders Award 2013 for her initiative and leadership qualities.

Her project of getting a residential school built for village girls is an example of her community-centric approach. There was no school in Baraun and so the children had to undertake a very risky journey to attend classes at the nearest institution located on the other side of a dense forest.

In the late 1980s, Patra enrolled herself along with her daughter in a literacy mission. That is when she realised the importance of girls' education and the idea of building a school for them came to her mind. Once she decided to enter public life, she worked steadfastly to set up the school. There were many challenges to be faced. First, she had to secure funds from different sources under various government schemes, including the MLA fund. Then began the tough job of getting the school constructed. Today, over 150 girls gain an education through this school and among them is Patra's granddaughter!

Unlike most other schools, this one gives mid day meals to students from Class I to VIII and keeps a strict vigil on the quality of the food served. For instance, Patra recalls, that when they realised that the Self Help Groups were not managing the meals properly, they were immediately replaced with a seven-member Village Education Committee. The members of this committee come from different castes and classes and are part of the panchayat.

Seeing Patra's energy, capacity for forward thinking and experience, all newly elected panchayat members invariably consult her before initiating any programme. She may belong to a backward community but she understands the needs of the entire community very well.

Another arena in which Patra has proved herself is the protection of the local forests from the timber mafia. She has put together a brigade of fierce women to patrol the 250-acre Sal forest that abuts the village. "There is an old saying here that where there is forest, there will be water and fresh air necessary for life. So we decided to take up patrolling seriously," informs Patra. Five groups of 15-20 women have been formed and they discharge their forest protection duties by rotation, each with a stick in her hand. Simultaneously, Patra has helped in planting around a thousand cashew plants on unused government land.

As Bhadu and Patra have shown, women's leadership at the grassroots is helping communities make a transition from stagnation to change.



KERALA'S KUDUMBASREE: WOMEN POWER FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

By Shwetha E. George

Kottayam - Vishnupriya, 45, was just another quiet homemaker in Nattakom Municipality of Kottayam district in Kerala, who feared public-speaking and had no idea of how to handle important financial transactions. Recalls the middle-aged woman, "I would go to the municipal meetings, sit in the last row, and hope that no one would notice me or ask questions." Today, however, when Vishnupriya walks into a packed hall, she first searches for an empty seat in the front row.

So what was it that transformed Vishnupriya so significantly? Says she, "Kudumbasree does that to you." Not just her but this initiative of the Kerala government to wipe out absolute poverty from the state through concerted community action under the leadership of local self governments, has empowered scores of women and enabled them to create identities for themselves outside their homes. It has also helped to buttress family incomes and even ensure social change.

Kudumbashree, one of the largest women-empowering projects in the country, has 37 lakh members and covers more than 50 per cent households in Kerala. It is built around three

critical components – micro-credit, entrepreneurship and empowerment.

There is a definite organisational hierarchy followed under this programme. Each unit, called Kudumbashree Ayalkoottam or Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), comprises more than 10-15 local women. These NHGs are federated democratically into the Area Development Society (ADS) at the Panchayat/Municipality Ward level and then into Community Development Society (CDS) at the Panchayat/Municipal level. Incidentally, most of the gram panchayats interventions in the areas of poverty reduction and women's development use the CDS network.

At the state level, the activities of the Kudumbashree mission are controlled by the mission head office at Thiruvananthapuram, while a District Mission team handles the work at the district. At the panchayat level, a charge officer is given the responsibility of the administration along with the CDS governing committee.

The Kudumbashree members are active in the political and development process at the local level. For instance, Vishnupriya regularly attends the ADS meetings that bring members of 12 Kudumbashree units together. It is held at the Municipal Councillor's residence once a month. She also attends municipality meetings.

Over the years, the main focus of Kudumbashree has been on vegetable farming and the marketing of hand- and home-made goods like masalas, detergents or clothes. Vishnupriya's unit comprises 20 members and has a bank balance of Rs 25,000. In Kudumbashree parlance, this money is called the 'thrift deposit' to which each member contributes anywhere

between Rs 20 and Rs 50 every week. Their first 'linkage' loan of Rs 1,20,000 – it is mandatory for every unit to form a link with a bank by availing a loan – was paid back in 52 weeks.

“One of our members' daughter needed an operation, another one wanted to pay her child's high school tuition fees, and so on, so we all get together to make it happen,” elaborates Vishnupriya. Once the process is set into motion, each member of the group becomes equally responsible for paying back the loan taken to fulfill these objectives.

Nandini B.K., 56, the president of the Aswathy unit in Nattakom, is also proud of the tailoring work that her unit has undertaken. They stitch nighties for the special sales held during Onam, the annual harvest festival in Kerala. As festival time draws near, the women split the work between five households and a few members decide on a mutually convenient time to meet in any one of these homes. Recently, they took a bank loan of Rs 10,000, which enabled them to source the material in bulk. This year during Onam they expect to sell at least a hundred nighties, which would give each member a neat profit of Rs 500. “This money would be our own,” remarks Nandini happily.

The concept of Kudumbasree, as envisaged by the government, was to alleviate poverty, although according to Usha Sathyaprakash, chairperson of Kottayam South's Community Development Society (CDS) that administers the programme at the panchayat level, “poverty can only be alleviated and not wiped out through such self-help schemes.”

Of course, communities derive benefits from many government schemes as they are being implemented at the

grassroots through the collaborative efforts of the panchayat/municipality and Kudumbasree units. Says Sathyaprakash, “The panchayats helps to implement BPL schemes. Panchayat members or municipal councillors, who supervise these schemes, are the link between the state and the community, ensuring smooth implementation of funds, particularly for widows, the destitute and elderly.”

In Nattakom municipality, this synergy has ensured that the Aasraya scheme for destitute women, widows, unwed mothers has improved the lives 51 women. There’s the Jagrithi Samithi, which empowers women through training on legal rights and gender issues. Moreover, the panchayat/municipality, in coordination with the police women’s cell, also helps enforce legal action when necessary.

Financial stability is ensured through the provision of bank loans. Group farming, which has 80 per cent female participation, too, has empowered household. In Nattakkom, a total of 127 acres is being used for farming, of which 123 acres are earmarked for paddy. The Kudumbasree units take a picture of their plot, attach the land receipt and submit it to the Jilla Mission office at the Kottayam Collectorate. The members show their yearly expenses and the office reimburses the amount just before harvest. Post-harvest and sale, the unit repays the Jilla Mission office and takes home the profit.

Sathyaprakash is all praise for the way in which Nattakkom’s women have taken to the Kudumbasree concept. “We have around 321 units across 52 wards and not one has folded up since the inception of this programme in 2002,” she says. But she adds that women at the lower rungs are unable to derive full benefit from the intervention because they are forced to

focus on earning a living. This makes it impossible for them to be present at the weekly meetings and discharge the duties that are mandatory for a Kudumbasree worker. In contrast, middle-class homemakers do much better. Take Padma Prakash, 55, another Nattakkom resident. She has attended classes on gender studies, legal rights for women and sexual harassment, apart from the numerous General Occupational Training classes organised by the Jilla Mission.

So what is the profile of a typical Kudumbasree member? Many women are married to those who earn a steady income, whether as daily wagers or white collar workers. They have all studied up to the Higher Secondary level, and most have passed the State Matriculation Examination from a Malayalam-medium school. A handful could be Public Service Commission-certificate holders with a full-time clerical job in a government office.

It is the prospect of getting an easy loan that attracts many to join up. While as an individual a woman would have to negotiate a heap of paperwork, as a Kudumbasree representative she can walk out of a bank with a Rs 25,000 loan (the premium limit) once all her unit members provide written consent regarding the amount, its purpose and the procedures of paying it back.

Such is the empowering capacity of this programme that even a woman like Sathyaprakash, who once “knew nothing outside my kitchen”, can coordinate any number of women working in the numerous Kudumbasree units in the vast Kottayam South zone. Says she, “I have great respect for this establishment, which has given me only positive energy.”

She could be speaking for thousands of women, who step out every day from their homes to spend just one hour in working as part of a team and end up achieving a lifetime's worth of self-confidence and self-reliance.



HOW DONGRIA KONDH WOMEN EXERCISED THEIR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

By Sarada Lahangir

Kalahandi - “Niyamraja is like a parent to us; he is God. The hill has given us food, water, shelter and livelihood and we can die for it. We are neither urban people nor educated like you all, but to save our Niyamraja we can sacrifice our life.” This was the clear message that the women and men of the Dongria Kond tribe gave to the world during the course of the 12 gram sabha (village council) meetings that were held in July and August 2013 in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts, located in the shadow of the verdant and abundant Niyamgiri hills in Odisha.

By fearlessly exercising their democratic rights and freely participating in the gram sabha meetings, the Dongria women gave a big thumbs-down to the controversial Niyamgiri bauxite mining project mooted by Vedanta, a multinational corporation that wanted to mine bauxite ore in 660 hectares of the Niyamgiri hills to keep its alumina refinery at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi going.

“We worship Niyamraja. The sacred hills are owned by Niyamraja. It is the hill that provides us with fresh water, air and food. How can we allow anybody to destroy it?”

says Chanchala Harijan, 50, a former Nayeb Sarpanch of Phuldumer village in Kalahandi. It is among the five villages in the district where this first-ever environmental referendum was conducted on the directive of the Supreme Court. She goes on to emphasise, “This is not only a fight for our livelihood but a fight for our dignity, our divinity and our existence.”

In Kunakadu, another tribal hamlet in Kalahandi where the vote was held, when Kunji Sikoka, 50, started swinging an axe to express her anger, everybody in the gram sabha was taken aback. “I told them, ‘You may have money, power and guns but I have my axe and I will kill with it if anybody eyes our hill’. I am ready to sacrifice my life but I will not allow anybody to ravage this holly hill,” she says.

Judging from these vociferous reactions, it is quite clear that Dongrias, especially its women, are not to be brushed aside as unsuspecting, illiterate tribals who can be persuaded to give up their entitlements. A major sect of the Kondh, a primitive tribe, they mostly stay in high hills known as Dongars, and call themselves the descendents of Niyamraja (The King of Law), the presiding deity of the Niyamgiri hills. Protecting the environment is their calling and they see themselves as the guardians of the hundreds of perennial streams that flow from these hills.

Dongria Kondhs have an estimated population of about 10,000 and they live in over 120 settlements around the cool Niyamgiri range, which receives 80 per cent of the total rainfall during the monsoon. The forests here are not just rich in fruit-bearing trees such as jackfruit, tamarind, blackberry, mango and many citrus varieties, but are also known for valuable

timber like Sal, Biza, Sisu, Asana and Haladu. Besides this, the hills have large deposits of bauxite ore and other minerals.

For sustenance, the Dongria Kondhs are primarily dependent on this natural habitat. “We mostly live in isolation and the hill is our only means of survival,” stresses Sitari Majhi, a tribal woman from Lakhpadar village.” Majhi’s family has been living here for generations and they grow millets, peas and beans to feed themselves.

The problem in the Niyamgiri hills began in 2003 when Sterlite (now Vedanta), a British multinational, signed an agreement with the state government to extract 70 million tonnes of bauxite from the mountain range. As a first step they built a refinery in Lanjigarh village, which led to the displacement of 103 families there. Today, red mud swamps seen in this area are an indication of the devastation that was wrought in the name of development. Large pipes from the processing unit discharge dirty water mixed with clay and other pollutants into the ground, even as bulldozers and earth diggers continue carving even more space to contain the ever-increasing waste. As expected, the water resources in the vicinity have now dried up and the land has been poisoned by toxins.

The Dongrias have witnessed this rapid destruction near Lanjigarh and have, therefore, opposed the proposed mining in Niyamgiri from the beginning. In August 2010, they had registered a small victory when the Indian government found Vedanta guilty of ‘total contempt’ for the rights of the tribals, and denied them permission to mine in Niyamgiri. On April 18, 2013, the Supreme Court, in a landmark judgment, directed the forest-dwellers of Niyamgiri ranges to take a final

call on whether bauxite mining would indeed infringe on their religious and cultural rights.

While the court's order clearly stated that all the 112 affected villages should be consulted, the Odisha government strategically chose 12 to hold the gram sabhas. Of these, seven were in Rayagada and the remaining five in Kalahandi, home to the Dangaria, Jharania and Kutia Kandha tribes. In the first gram sabha that was held in Serkapalli village in Rayagada, media reports quoted District Judge Sarat Chandra Mishra, the appointed supervisor in the district, saying that all the 36 members present – including 16 women – opposed the mining. And the trend continued in all the meetings.

The state administration had been under the impression that they would be able to manipulate the verdict in their favour. But thanks to the efforts of women like Parbati Gouda, 49, of Ijurupa village, who came out in large numbers to participate in the gram sabha meetings, the tribals were able to assert their democratic rights. The total number of voters registered in the 12 selected villages is 518, and 404 participated in proceedings. Of these, 234 were women and 169, men.

An emotional Gouda recalls the gram sabha that was held in Ijurupa in end-July, "I told the government officials and the district magistrate present quite clearly: 'Where will we go if the hills are mined? And even though you may shift us to a city to make way for the mines, where will our wild leopards and bears go?'" Her five-member family – including two sons, two daughters and a husband – survive on the bounty of Niyamgiri. Last year, she sold Rs 20,000 worth of cauliflowers grown in her vegetable garden in the foothills. Gouda hopes to send her sons for higher education but if the family was

displaced due to the mining project all their dreams would have been shattered.

It is the Dongria women who bear the major burden of keeping the family and the community going. They work in the fields, do household chores, take care of the children and, when required, find the time to get together to raise their voice for what they believe in. Earlier they had successfully tackled issues like displacement, corruption and alcoholism in their region. A threat to the Niyamgiri hills hit close to their belief system and way of life, has once again brought their remarkable fighting spirit to the fore.

According to Lado Sikoka, President, Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti (NSS), a tribal body opposing mining, “Our women are our strength and this time they stepped out to quash Vedanta’s plans. They know that for our Kondh tribe, the Niyamgiri is much more than a mountain; it is a living God, a life source, thriving ecosystem. We do not even cultivate on the hilltop as a sign of respect for the spirit within the mountain so mining is out of the question.”

Concludes Bhalchandra Sarangi, advisor to the NSS, “These tribal women have been standing shoulder to shoulder with their men to protect Niyamgiri. The unanimous voting by the Dongrias, the overwhelming number being women, could have been the only logical end to their protest. It’s a victory of democratic rights over the interests of the powerful.”



ANDHRA'S GRASSROOTS WOMEN GET A SHOT AT POWER

Usha Turaga-Revelli

Mahbubnagar – Andhra Pradesh has provided 50 per cent reservation to women for the first time in the panchayat elections held recently. With half of the total 21,590 panchayats in the state having been allotted to women, the polls – that took place in three phases – have thrown up many successes as well as some learnings. Surprised candidates, intensely political contests complete with gimmicks and deceptions, and clear battle lines drawn between the major political parties, were all part of the electoral process.

When her panchayat was declared reserved, Jyothi of Metlakunta in Mahbubnagar district suddenly found herself being pushed into the political arena. She filed her nomination because her husband, a long-standing politician in the area, was forced to withdraw due to this reservation. She says, “It was completely out of the blue. Here I was this housewife whose role was restricted to supplying chai to the endless stream of my husband’s supporters and then, quite unexpectedly, I am made to wear this party kanduva (upper cloth worn usually by men in rural areas) and become a leader. Even now the feeling has yet to sink in.” The fact that her husband, too, was taken aback by the notification reflects

in the many flex banners that still adorn the village, with his smiling image seeking votes.

But Jyothi's inexperience is not about to hamper her work since she has a firm supporter in four-time ward member, Chukka Bai, who has decided to take the first-timer under her wing. Chukka Bai declares, "It was earlier Sarpanch saab. Now it is Sarpanch Madam. The issues are the same and we will fight for them. Whatever she needs to know, we are here to explain."

Incidentally, the reservation notification did not just take the women by surprise, but severely hit the ambitions of many male politicians, who resorted to their bag of tricks to deal with this "problem". For instance, while a village in Prakasam district 'chose' an old beggar woman as its consensus candidate, just to avoid an election, elsewhere in the state a candidate advanced his wedding date just so that his new bride could stand in the elections in his place. "The power has to remain within the family. What else can he do?" a local journalist laconically comments. At places, the Election Commission even disqualified candidates for auctioning the posts of sarpanch.

But despite such efforts to cast a shadow on the polls and manipulate the results, the reservations have given wings to many women who were up for the challenge. Savitha Srinivas, Sarpanch of Garshakurthi village in Gangadhara mandal, Karimnagar district, is happy that she will play a major role in shaping the future of her community. She says, "I had no political aspirations before this. But when our panchayat was reserved for women, I kind of started seeing so many issues around me – and also ways to solve them. So, I thought, let me

take the plunge. And today I am proud to say that I won on my own steam as an independent candidate.”

Interestingly, despite the fact that Andhra has been going through troubled times owing to the volatile Telangana issue, this was not a factor that affected either the contestants or the voters at the grassroots. They stuck to the basic development plank. In Tunkimetla village of Mahbubnagar district, the absence of proper roads was the central issue, while in Bomraspetta mandal, it was the poor drains. Health care, schools, public toilets, drinking water, uninterrupted electricity supply and aid to farmers were some of the other major issues that dominated the campaigns.

Today, in fact, there is unanimity in identifying the challenges. Limited funds is one and the new sarpanches and ward members are all worried about how to make allocations and how to lobby for more money. “The road that my son takes to the school is broken down and full of potholes. I know its repair should be a priority but I am already being told that there are no funds this financial year. There are many such roads and I know all mothers, like me, would be worried too,” remarks Shakuntala Yantrapati, a leader from East Godavari district.

Of course, the one aspect the poll experience has highlighted is that women sarpanches and ward members need to make dedicated efforts to win over their constituency, manage funds and, most importantly, handle hostility from the men under their governance. Sadly, these are tough hurdles to get past. Observes S. Janakamma, a former sarpanch from Anantapur district, who has dealt with the problem of lack of control over the panchayat, “In the villages, the domination is never

overt. The men make way purely because it is the rule and they have to let a woman contest. Often, the sarpanch herself has no say in what happens in the panchayat. It is the senior party leaders who take decisions. There was a time when my supporters clashed with opponents and I got to know of it only when a case was registered and I was summoned to the police station.”

Women sarpanches also complain that the men are in a habit of pushing them into the background when it comes to dealing with district-level officials or making decisions related money. In Mahbubnagar district’s Pulponupally village, sarpanch Manemma is called only to sign or pose for photographs while her husband has de facto been playing her role, unquestioned and unchallenged.

However, for every Manemma, who has been being relegated to play a minor part, there’s also a Savitha Srinivas. This feisty leader, who garnered a majority of 400 votes, winning 1,620 votes out of the total 3,200 polled in Garshakurthi, is firm that she will not relinquish her hold over the agenda of her panchayat. “I am a graduate. And I have won in spite of the local dynamics and caste factors. Of course, the goodwill of our family over generations has helped. But now that I am here, I am going to do my work. The nearest Public Health Centre is 8 kilometres away at Gangadhara. I am going to lobby for one here to make it convenient for at least four villages. There is also a library sanctioned that I need to start setting it up,” she says with determination.

After a moments silence, Srinivas declares with a broad smile, “I am going to be a model sarpanch, like that lady from

Rajasthan.” She is referring to Chhavi Rajawat about whom she “remembers reading in the papers long back”.

In Dhanwada mandal of Mahbubnagar, women have more than half the seats – apart from those reserved they contested from general seats as well. “Keep watching, the numbers will be even more in the next elections,” asserts Tirupatamma of Jangamreddy village in the mandal.

The women sarpanches and ward members, it appears, are taking a lot of interest in the political and administrative matters in their villages. And they are out to prove that they are no longer willing to a mere “pretty” presence in the panchayat office.



WOMEN IN CHARGE, KARNATAKA'S QUIET REVOLUTION

By Pushpa Achanta

Bengaluru - The population of Anekal block, which falls in the district of Bangalore Urban – some 40 kilometres to the southeast of Karnataka’s capital, Bengaluru - is largely dalit, although it has a Muslim and adivasi (tribal) presence as well. Of its three lakh people, around 35,000 live in the eight wards of the Attibele Gram Panchayat, which is the site of a quiet revolution.

Forty four-year-old Kanthalakshmi N., knows this gram panchayat (village council) very well. After all, she was its former president. Says Kanthalakshmi, “Over the last 10 years, we - women like Shahina, the two Prabhavatis, Suvarna and myself - have been active members of Panchayati Raj Institutions here, holding posts like president/chairperson and vice president at the village and block levels.”

The women have been able to make considerable difference to the lives of the local community. For one, they have been able to reach out to people in numerous ways, especially women from marginalised communities who were otherwise outside the loop. They have been to do this in spite of the fact that many men are not comfortable with the presence of women

in the gram panchayat. Observes Kanthalakshmi with a wry smile, “Even if the men do not express their resentment towards us in the open, some of them are known to talk ill of us behind our backs!”

What is also striking is that there have been no instances of financial irregularities in the Attibele Gram Panchayat, which redounds to the credit of its women members and office bearers.

According to the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act 1993, a new gram panchayat chairperson is selected every two or two-and-a-half years. The category from which the candidate is chosen – whether Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Backward Class or Muslim among the various sub-divisions – is decided through a computerised draw of lots.

V. Sulochana, the current president of the Attibele Gram Panchayat, is optimistic that women will find it easier to lead in the days to come. She herself has been in active politics for some time now. “I believe that women are beginning to gain acceptance in our gram panchayat in a gradual manner. But, as in any sphere, we must be pragmatic and persevere in order to mobilise the support – societal, political and financial – that we need in order to achieve our ends.”

Sulochana’s personal evolution is intriguing. At 47, this determined dalit woman has had to spend a lot of time and energy convincing her father, husband, father-in-law and a brother, to allow her to pursue her academic interests. That effort culminated in Sulochana getting a Ph.D. in Women’s Studies from Bangalore University a few years ago. However, she could not take up a teaching job because of domestic

commitments but, undeterred, she went ahead and set up a pen manufacturing unit a couple of years ago. Through this unit, she has been able to provide employment to around 50 women from economically challenged backgrounds.

Yet another former president of the Attibele Gram Panchayat is Asgari, 39, who runs a small tailoring business. She talks of her own evolution as a community leader, “I was a novice in politics when I was approached by one of the local leaders of a national political party to contest for a seat in the gram panchayat in 2005. After spending some time as a member, I was elected as the adhyaksha, or president. Although I was hesitant at first, I learnt a lot about managing people and problems in the public realm and at home.”

According to Asgari, lack of bargaining power is the reality for most of the women in the Karnataka’s gram panchayats, who have typically belonged to one of the three large national parties in the state – the Congress, Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Janata Dal (S). “But this has not come in the way of us standing as one when the need arises for any of the women inside or outside the village council. For instance, when I was facing a personal crisis because of the ill health of my husband and one of my children, I received tremendous emotional backing from Kantha ‘akka’ (sister in Kannada), Shahina akka, Sulochana akka and some of the other women who are in the gram panchayat. All this has enabled me to handle my personal problems as well as to be of assistance to other women and girls, particularly those in trying circumstances.”

But do these women receive any training? This seems to be the weak spot of the model. Apart from a few three-day audio-

visual awareness sessions conducted by the government on governance structures and the roles and responsibilities of panchayat members and leaders, there's not much by way of training. What is particularly disappointing to the women leaders is that only a few of the women members of the village council are even willing to sit through these classes or understand their significance.

Some members have complaints. Reveals Prabhavati R., who became a member of the Attibele Gram Panchayat for the first time in 2010, "We are supposed to receive a honorarium that ranges from Rs 250 to 500 for every gram panchayat meeting we participate in. The president receives the higher sum as she is the one who organises them at least once in a month. Apparently, the amounts have been increased to Rs 500 and Rs 1,000, respectively, but we are made to wait for many months to get this entitlement. There are also instances when we have not been paid at all." Having said this, she quickly adds, "Of course, that has not stopped us from carrying out our public duties."

What is interesting to observe is that hardly any woman members of the gram panchayat has been asked by their parties to stand for elections for a second term. But, in the words of Suvarna and K. Prabhavathi, all of them derive encouragement from the recognition and appreciation their work has received. They have evolved personally in the process, being able to speak to the police or government officers with courage and conviction. This is significant when one considers that many of them had barely conversed with anyone outside their families or immediate neighbourhoods before they joined the gram panchayat. In addition, they have learnt to address the infrastructural requirements of

the residents of their wards or villages and helped to create awareness of government schemes among the community.

Mamtha, a committed and vocal activist with Vimochana, a well-known women's rights forum in Bengaluru, is full of praise for these women for having taken on violence issues. "They have been able to intervene and even successfully counsel women who have been assaulted." She recalls a case when one of the gram panchayat members was placed under 'house arrest' for aiding a woman in distress. Fortunately for her, her colleagues in the gram sabha raised their voices against this and the matter was quickly resolved. Incidentally, Mamtha, who is from this area, started to work on violence issues with women members of the gram panchayat a couple of years back and now envisages a greater and more lasting role for them to check violence both within and outside their communities.

Change is perceptible at every level with women in charge – and this trend is going to get accentuated as time passes. At present, only 33 per cent of seats have been reserved for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka. However, from the next elections – scheduled for 2015 – the new rule reserving 50 per cent seats for women would come into force, bringing even more women into grassroots decision-making in the state.



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HUNGER
PROJECT**

Saheed Bhavan
18/1 Aruna Asaf Ali Marg
Qutab Institutional Area
New Delhi 110 067
T: +91 11 4168 8847-50
W: www.thp.org/india