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## Challenging the *panchayat*

**Rasheeda Bhagat**

*She forced the holding of a special gram sabha to tackle women's problems, such as wading through knee-deep water to access the village well.*

Prakash Rani, a 36-year-old Thakur woman from Gorkhi village in Raisin district of Madhya Pradesh, about 200 km from Bhopal, has never gone to a school. For most of her life she didn't even know how a *panchayat* worked or what a *gram sabha* was, till she was elected as a ward *panch* member from the Sunwaha *panchayat* in 2000. The women in her village faced innumerable problems; they had to wade through knee-deep slush to draw water from the village well, pregnant or sick women had to travel 50 km and more to get medical care, and the electricity supply in her village was more of a joke as the transformer, based in another village, had to be shared.

Four years of her term as a *panch* went by without her making any significant contribution, as she was unaware not only of her individual power but also the collective power of women.

But in 2004, the Krishak Sahyog Sansthan, an NGO working under the PACS (Poorest Areas Civil Society) initiative of the UK government, entered Gorkhi and changed her life forever. As the KSS started holding meetings to spread awareness among the women on how they should come out of the house, tackle their own problems, assert themselves and take the *panchayat* to task if it did not help get healthcare, education and other facilities to the village, Rani too



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started attending the meetings, more out of curiosity.

But soon these programmes made her sit up and think... along with other women, and ask questions. Rani asked for a special meeting of the *gram sabha* to be convened at the Khair mata temple in the village. She also went around the village mobilising women and urging them to support her in her endeavour to make the *panchayat* more responsive to their needs and problems. "If there was no proper road to the well, it was not the men but we women, who suffered because fetching water is our task," she says.



Meenabai

She was aware that a quorum of 20 per cent was required for a special session of the *gram sabha* and thanks to her advocacy and appeals, women turned up in large numbers for the meeting. "But missing were the Sarpanch and the *panchayat* secretary, who were reluctant to attend the meeting. They came five hours late thinking we'll get tired and leave," chuckles Meenabai, the president of the SHG in Gorkhi. "But we did not budge from the *mandir* till they came."

At the meet the women demanded a *kharanja* (a concrete pathway) to facilitate their trips to the well; repair of the hand pump, and some other facilities. The women also asked what was the use of having power supply to the village when "bulbs flickered only like earthen lamps", recalls Rani. Thanks to the women's initiative, an application was sent from the *panchayat* to the engineer in charge at the electricity board. The result was the installation of a transformer in Gorkhi.

So does the village have electricity now?

Rani's response is a grin. "At least on Ganesh pooja day, the bulb burned. *Hamarey liye na sahi lekin Ganeshiji ke liye to bulb jala woh*

*din!* (If not for us, at least Ganesh saw the lighted bulb)." But she is confident that with persistence some day the village will have proper power supply. Thanks to her efforts a *kharanja* has been laid to the village well.



H.B. Sen

Today Rani has become an icon and a symbol of what a woman can achieve. "We took her to Delhi recently to participate in a national forum, and she met the PACS chairman, Shabana Azmi and other activists," says H.B. Sen of KSS. She herself recalls her Delhi trip with a giggle: "For a few days I was so scared, I couldn't sleep. And my husband (whom she will not name, keeping with tradition) had to go into hiding for the five days I was away because everybody was making fun of him saying god alone knows where his wife has gone!"

She is an active member in her group when it comes to deciding on the economic activity the group will undertake once the bank loan comes, and is very keen to make "soap like Nirma". But she is also aware that many more battles are ahead.

Such as the liquor shop that has come up near the village school. "We have tried very hard, but the shop continues to function. How will the girls go to school if they have to pass by a liquor shop," she asks. Rani is also concerned about the perennially absent schoolteacher. "In our village schools, half the time they are away on government work such as election duty, surveys, etc. The other half is spent doing their own work; either on their own land or somebody else's land," is her scathing comment.

Encouraged by the KSS, Rani and other women did march to the school to see for themselves what the teachers teach and examine the quality of the noon meal. "But they were abused by the teachers who questioned their *locus standi* on the whole thing," says Sen.

But Rani's example is enthusing other women. In these villages, you notice that the Dalit women are more articulate and forthright in voicing their opinions or problems. Perhaps greater suppression

results in a greater assertion of one's rights or voicing of aspirations. Though Rani's term as a ward *panch* is over, Halki Bai from Khammariya village is currently the only woman *panch* from her ward. But her problem is that "the president and the secretary do not call me for meetings at all. But I keep trying to find out when the meeting is scheduled," says the agitated woman. Looking at her resolve, there is little doubt that she is another Rani in the making.

And, she is not afraid to dream. She was not afraid to marry a Thakur, after his first wife died. Even though this resulted in his land being taken away from him. Her next dream? "To become the *sarpanch*; I know I can make a difference to the village's problems," says the woman confidently.

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