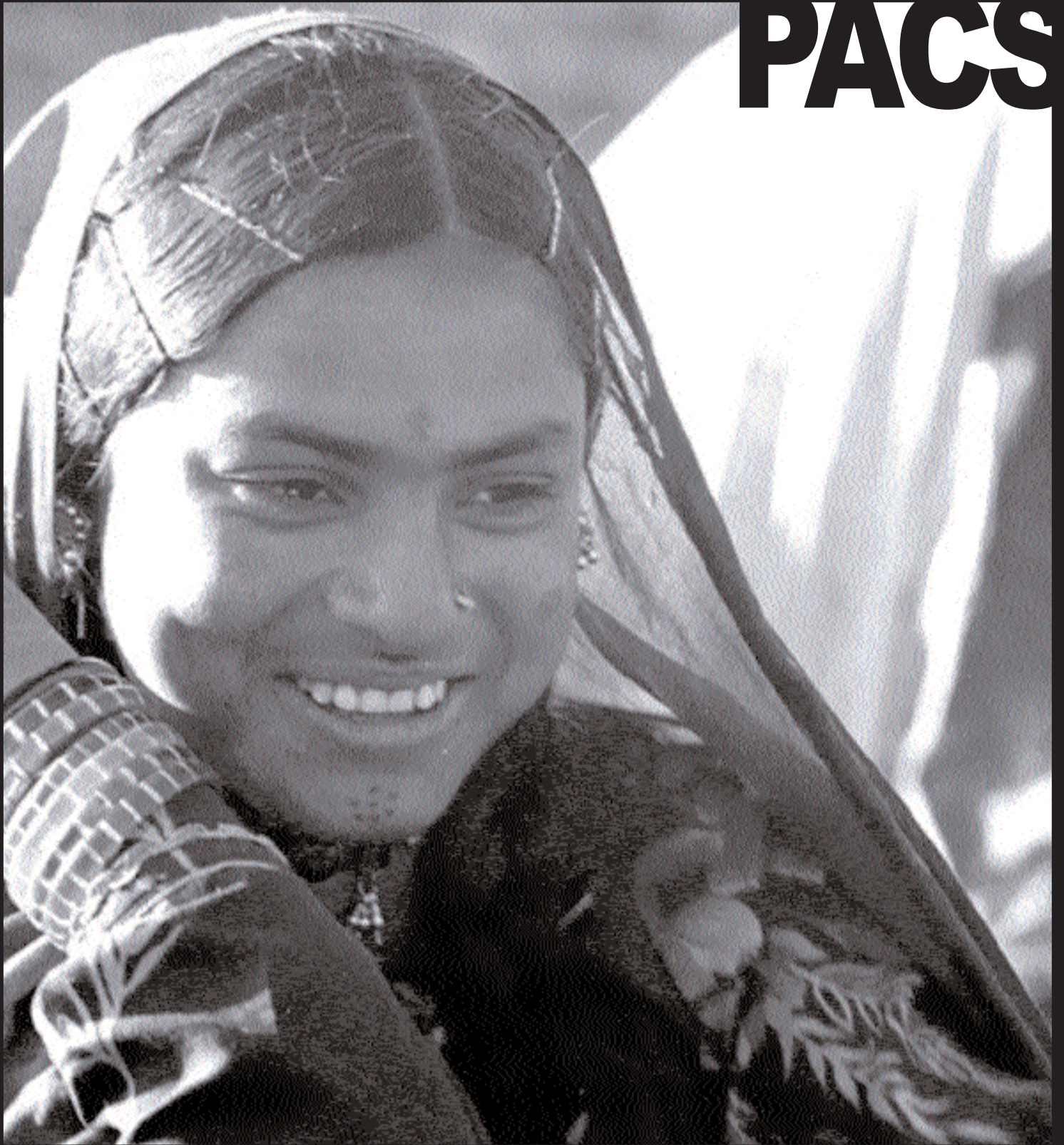


**PACS**



# Leadership Profiles

Write  
Solutions



# Leadership Profiles

**Profiles of Men and Women in PACS Villages of  
Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh Who Have  
Displayed Exceptional Leadership Qualities in  
Overcoming Odds.**

Leadership Profiles 2005, PACS Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh

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## "Finally, Bulbs Instead of Earthen Lamps in my Village!"

Village Gorkhi is a non-descript village in an equally non-descript Sunwaha Panchayat of Raisen district in Madhya Pradesh. Backward and seemingly forever on the fringes of development, this village of a thousand-odd souls nearly 120-kms from Raisen seems to plod along in a time warp. Consider this: until six years ago, there was no electricity supply in the village, and when it did arrive, the transformer was shared between two villages, leading to endless outages and downtime than any real semblance of a regular electricity supply. And, to top it all, given the dismal power scenario in the state, most bulbs in Gorkhi homes flickered and blinked more like earthen lamps than electricity bulbs given the poor voltage.

But that was then, and Gorkhi has changed. But what brought about this change? The story began when Krishak Sahyog Sansthan (KSS) began work in 10 villages around Sunwaha as part of Government of UK's Department for International Development (DFID) - supported Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme in the district, in 2004. KSS knew that the caste system was very firmly entrenched in village society and very nearly dictated - indeed determined - a person's social standing and his or her place in the village hierarchy. With this backdrop, KSS had its work cut out for itself - what to talk of women's rights when women were barred from even stepping outside the four walls of their homes; when the place of a woman, especially those belonging to the general category, was within the confines of her home and not outside. It was asking for miracles if even one woman came forward to tell a complete stranger stories



about domestic abuse and gender violence. KSS realized that Gorkhi village would take a lot of perseverance and patience to bring about any perceptible change in people's attitudes to women, and this process may well take several years.

But this did not deter KSS: it went about organizing meetings after meetings, programmes after programmes on women's issues in the village, going from house to house, cajoling the women and their men folk into joining, putting paid to their apprehensions and misgivings, and getting the women together so that they could at least talk to each other about their common problems and find common solutions. The effort began to pay off and women began to trickle in, a few at a time who dared to step out and were willing to listen to ideas like self help, economic independence, local enterprise, etc. Armed with this information, the women then began the process of putting together their own Self Help Group (SHG) or Samooh. KSS, on its part, continuously played the part of a facilitator, hand-holding groups who were taking their first tentative lessons in socio-economic freedom. Programmes were held to build on, and strengthen the capacity of, these SHGs. In particular, women were made aware of the fact that they were also party to the decision-making process of the village Panchayat and the gram sabha, that 33% seats were reserved for women, and that any one could, with a simple application to the sarpanch, call a special meeting of the gram sabha.

Enter Prakash Rani, who attended these programmes with great earnest and



who had been elected as a Ward Panch from the village. Prakash Rani was intrigued by the fact that women could actually help solve the numerous problems besetting their village and which they inevitably had to contend with. She got together some women and put up these problems in front of them, problems like women having to wade through knee deep muck to draw water from the village well, women in labour or people who were ill were forced to go either to Begumgunj or Sagar, (both of which are close to 54-kilometres each from the village) to seek medical aid, of course, the electricity problem. 35-year-old Prakash Rani is pivotal in getting the women together. From forming an SHG with the help of the KSS, opening bank accounts to motivating women to work for village, she says, "Although all 16 of us in the group pull in different directions we are trying to work."

Prakash Rani then organized a meeting between the women of the village and a representative of KSS, who, after giving a patient hearing to their grievances, encouraged them to call for a special meeting of the village gram sabha to put forward their problems. In the meantime, before the gram sabha was to be called, Prakash Rani went about organizing the women of Gorkhi and asking for their support in resolving problems of their village. Finally, on June 20th, 2004, a special meeting of the gram sabha was convened (on the basis of an application submitted to the panchayat) at Khairmata Mandir, a place of their (women's) choosing.

The sarpanch and Panchayat secretary, for their part, were reluctant to go along, and did their best to avoid the meeting. They reached 4-5-hours late, in the hope that the women would have, by now, left for their homes having given up waiting for them to turn up. Unfortunately for them, the women were waiting for them, and the first thing they did was to give the sarpanch and the Panchayat secretary a lesson on punctuality. They then demanded that a kharanja (concrete pathway be constructed from Banna Ka Ped (tree which was a local landmark) to Ganesh Singh's house near Tola Gorkhi, since there was usually slush a foot deep in these places, making walking difficult for everyone in the village. This was the first proposal, which was unanimously passed and forwarded to the janpad Panchayat. The second proposal was the repair of the hand pump in Tola Gorkhi, and the third proposal pertained to removal of encroachments from



the village thoroughfare. All these were passed and forwarded to the janpad Panchayat.

The same day, the women also accomplished a first for their village: they submitted a proposal for the provision of electricity supply and the installation of an electric transformer in their village. The application was submitted via the sarpanch to Engineer-in-charge, Madhya Pradesh State Electricity Board, and was passed unanimously by the gram sabha. It was subsequently forwarded to the MPSEB office at Begumganj for follow-up action.

But Prakash Rani was not one to sit back and let things happen in its own sweet time. She trudged all the way to the Begumganj Panchayat to find out what had happened to the proposals passed by the Tola Gorkhi gram sabha. She was told that the application submitted by one Prakash Rani had been accepted by the vide letter No. 4553/3/1/2005 (issued by the CEOs office) for the construction of a 100-meter kharanja at a cost of Rupees Fifty Seven Thousand under the JGSY Programme, while another 33-meters would be constructed as part of another programme. Similarly, she also was informed that vide Letter No. 4553/3/1/2005, issued by the Assistant Engineer's Office of MPSEB, Begumganj, Tola Gorkhi would soon have access to electric supply for the first time in the villages' history. Today, MPSEB has made an estimate of Rs 2.5 lakh for bringing the villagers of Tola Gorkhi one step closer to development. In all this, support from the KSS team was pivotal in bringing about awareness and getting over the initial inertia of the community.

There has been no looking back for the women in her group since. With a little hand holding now and then from KSS, women have been able to demand for -



and get - a road sanctioned connecting them to the well in the village. Since they did not have a proper road, all the women had to face a lot of difficulty drawing water. When former sarpanch Nathuchand Jain said he did not have funds to make the complete 133-meter stretch of the road and made only 100-meter claiming nevertheless that the entire stretch was complete, Prakash Rani and other women did not hesitate to write to the SDM/ Collector - and the Chief Minister, too! When the Government sent their observers, it was apparent that the sarpanch's claim that the entire stretch was complete was untrue.

Relentless in their struggle for a better life, the women have pursued officials of concerned departments for redressal of their demands. "Today, to get work done in the village, sometimes 10 or 11 women travel 54 kilometers to Begumgunj to the SDM's office to file our complaint," says Prakash Rani. Their grit has paid off - for the first time, two handpumps and two wells in the village have been repaired, and the village chaupal renovated.

Their new-found ability to address their own problems was demonstrated yet again when a country liquor shop opened about three months ago in the village. The women came together and wrote to the SDM, Collector and the Chief Minister seeking their intervention in ridding the village of the nuisance. Says Prakash Rani, "The desi sharab theka (country liquor shop) is right in the middle of the village. Women and children frequent the route every day and are harassed by drunk and abusive men all the time." Prakash Rani is particularly delighted with this intervention because "many women who signed the petition to the SDM were in fact not from the women's self help group." The shop has long since closed now.

Now the women are busy lobbying for a hospital in their village, and they have already roped in the CMO for assistance. Says KSS worker Bhagirath Sen, "There is no building for a hospital here. No doctor is posted."

Prakash Rani and others from her group - Ladli Bai and Sheel Rani - have already met the Chief Minister demanding water, employment opportunities and a hospital, and more. Ask her why she has taken the lead, and she answers candidly, "I have not gone to school and I did not know what a Gram Sabha was, either. On 24-27 April, 2005, I attended a

meeting on occasion of Women Empowerment Day to celebrate 10 years of the 73rd Amendment. I think that's when I realised the vast difference that I as a panch could make."

Says chief functionary of Krishak Sahyog Sansthan, HB Sen, on the process of change in women: "For the first time in years, women attended a Gram Sabha in June 2004; they have fought for electricity supply to be brought to the village, for the construction of a kharanja and wells." What has been a challenge for KSS, though, is to sustain the local administration's interest in addressing women's issues. Says Sen, "On several occasions, despite invitation's to various officials, they don't attend our meetings and remain indifferent. What is even more challenging is the constant challenge in encouraging women to empower themselves, take their own decisions and put forward their problems at the village Gram Sabha."

From the not-so-recent time when men in the village sarcastically murmured "What will you women do even if you got together?", the accomplishments of women of the village have more than put an end to wagging tongues - it has touched and forever changed lives, be it man or woman, in ways quite unheard of in the village's long history. Although it has been a long journey from when no woman could even dream of attending the village Gram Sabha to the current scenario, when women from 10 villages come in all sorts of ways -tractors and trolleys, bicycles, driven on their husbands' mobikes and mopeds, or simply walking the distance to attend the Gram Sabha, KSS worker Ramlal Sen cautions against celebrating. Says he: "The battle is not quite won. With the recent round of elections complete, new elected panchs don't come to the Gram Sabha. Thus, the quorum is not complete and hence, no work is done. The same is true for SHG formation - it is so difficult to get the women together, to attend meetings, to understand their role in creating a better tomorrow for themselves."

The story, it seems, will go on for a longtime to come, but at least there is a precedent to learn from in case their steps falter.



## “People were so poor they went to work on a glass of water...”

For this 27-year-old Gond woman one thing has led to another. She first taught in one of the local schools, was given training by the State Government to be a Jan Swastha Rakshak (JSR). She worked in the villages as a change agent in a CARE project and when the PACS programme was launched in her block she worked as one its animators. Today, leaving all that behind she has been elected sarpanch of her village, Gudma panchayat.

Meet Chainwati Uike, who was urged to contest the 2005 panchayat elections by people in her village. "I was working in the three PACS villages, and I knew many women, because over the last year I had been helping them initiate their groups. I was very surprised when people began asking me to fill in the form for sarpanch," she recalls.

She adds that people kept urging her to contest because, "you are fearless, you go everywhere alone on your cycle. You have gone to Bhopal, Delhi, only you can lead the village' were the pleas that were made to her.

From the time that she was working a teacher, Chainwati would occasionally interact with Nav Jeevan Samaj Vikas Samiti functionaries which is implementing the PACS programme in Baihar block. The Samiti is networked with Community Development Centre, Balaghat which works under the lead Gramin Vikas Mandal.



While her father Gobar VK always encouraged her to study, her regret that she could not complete her Class XII examinations because of a bout of fever.

She remembers when she began her work as a PACS animator, people were very suspicious about her. Since she was working with Christians, villagers would often avoid her saying that she has come to convert them. "One of the reasons why I took the offer to become a PACS animator was because I knew from experience that most of the people in these three villages were so poor that they would often have only a glass of water and leave for work. With the little money that they earned in the day, they would buy liquor and go to bed," he explains.

When she began asking women to come together to form a SHG, she was often faced with taunts like - "Our men will drink. Who are you to stop us." In some cases people just asked her to stop coming to their village.

Relentlessly, she kept going to the women everyday and trying to meet them, even though many of them would not listen.

With the help of the anganwadi worker (name) she patiently explained to the women that because they were unable to save, when they needed money they would go straight to the Patel. To repay him, the woman would agree to work as bonded labour. In case the Patel refused them the money, in an emergency the women would begin to sell their belongings.

But that was not the only problem that Chainwati had to counter. Many of the women recalled that on several occa-



sions other people had made them form groups, save money but they had been looted. To this Chainwati's only answer was. "I live in the next village. You can find me there anytime." Even to this offer, some women just said they could not save money at all.

Even when a few women began to get-together, it was still not easy. Their meetings were erratic as it was difficult to get all the women together. Chainwati would often take her uncooked grains and camp the night in the respective villages to be able to interact with the women either late at night or in the morning and talk to them.

During her work as an animator Chainwati says she actually began knowing people not only from her village but from the surround villages too. "I was happy to know so many women."

Soon she was selected by PACS to attend a meeting on Women's participation in Governance organised by the Indian Social Institute to mark Women Political Empowerment Day, April 24, 2004. This was followed by the December 2004 meeting organised by Sangini and Oxfam '*Khamoshi Tode*'.

For the woman who was among five sisters, these meetings opened out avenues for her. "I always thought that my world was Baihar and Balaghat. When I met people from other states, I realised that there was so much to be done to give women a better life."

Even though Chainwati had seen how sarpanchs were abused knew that there was very little that a sarpanch could do for his/her village, after a lot of consideration, she finally went to fill the form-alone.

As she went house to house to canvass for herself, the women who she had been interacting with began to say, "Don't go alone, we will come with you." Slowly more women from SHGs, neighbours began to join her. She won the sarpanch's post by 38 votes without spending a single paise.

Unknown to her though was the fact that her real fight began once she tried to function as a sarpanch. Having limited knowledge of the nitty gritty of running a panchayat, she found herself getting involved in messy politicking as the upsarpanch and panchayat secretary tried to sort out an old enmity.

The 55-year-old up sarpanch

Ghanshyam Nikose, first hinted to Chainwati that she should hand over all the work to him and that he would run the panchayat. "This is how it has been done over the years. Do not bother with the daily work," he offered.

For the first few months Chainwati did not realise what was happening. At five of the six meetings that were held he only created trouble for her.

Says Chainwati, "He only wants the panchayat to go along with him. And for this, the villagers say that during the elections, he spent roughly 30,000 to influence the panchs. In fact he paid rivals Rs 5,000 to withdraw from the contest so that he could win the seat without a fight."

Since Chainwati has been an animator she wants the panchayat to help people. "Whenever I try to get work done, he makes it a point to humiliate me in front of the villagers saying, why are you doing this or that. If I try to discuss things with him before a panchayat meeting, he is never available at home."

Her expresses her dilemma, "If I do not listen to people and address their problems, why should they vote for me."

Not knowing where to go Chainwati relied on picking up information from PACS programme co-ordinator Utkal Nandi and taking her problems to the Janpad. When Janpad officials urged her to take charge or lose her position, a more confident Chainwati, did so, much to Nikose's chagrin. "Now I know a few things which I did not know earlier." She is meticulous in her work and says when grains for the mid day meal came to her at the dead of night, she let them off load the grains. The next morning when she began to make arrangements to keep them safely, she says she thought the sacks did not look as if they had 50 kg of grain each. Just to confirm, she got them weighed and sure enough the sacks had only 30 to 35 kg so grain. By now she knew where to complain, and the next time the grains were delivered they were less only by a few kilos.

But her battle continues as she has been informed that Nikose is planning a no confidence against her.

Chainwati has continued working against a traumatic personal life. Ten days after she was married to Megaraj Checham, she was paralyzed below the waist onwards. When she did not recov-



er, one day on the pretext of taking her to a doctor, her husband left her in a jungle saying that she could go home to her parents. Pulling all her strength together, she crawled out of the jungle and fortunately at the nearby weekly market people recognized her and took her to her parent's place.

Today she recalls those as her darkest days. "I do not know what happened. My in-laws who used to dote on me, begun shunning me when I was paralyzed. My husband who used to look after me initially, began to ignore me."

When Chainwati recovered, her husband made one lame attempt to come to take her. But she was appalled in the manner in which he came to take her - drunk and he came in the middle of the night and demanded that she go with him immediately. She refused and asked the panchayat to get her a divorce. She says she could not forget that they had not looked after her when she was unwell.

When you ask her what was diagnosed, she says she has no idea what happened to her, but explains says that her elder sister-in-law too died in her in-laws house. Chainwati says, both her husband and elder brother in law have since married again.



## The Hat-Trick Woman!

The year 2005 has been a special one for Gita Rathod, the sarpanch (village council chief) of Jamunia Talab village, Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh (MP). Rathod, 45, a woman sarpanch from the other backward castes (OBC) in MP has been elected sarpanch for the third consecutive term. In fact, she won the last two elections defeating male contestants.

In 1997, Rathod's panchayat was awarded Rs 25,000 (1US\$=Rs 44) by the MP government for being a model panchayat; and in 2003, she was awarded the 'Outstanding Woman Panchayat Leader Award' by the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in Delhi. Recently, a Nepalese delegation visited Jamunia Talab to see how Panchayati Raj (local self governance) was working in MP. The honour was bestowed on her mainly because as a woman she had taken initiatives to improve basic facilities in her village - roads, access to clean drinking water, improvement of the primary school in the village to name a few.

In the first panchayat elections in 1995, Rathod, a Class 11 graduate, contested from a seat reserved for a woman. In 2000, she won against Amar Singh Prajapati, an OBC man. The year 2005 proved to be an acid test for Rathod as her opponent - Kesrilal Tyagi - was from the Bharatiya Janata Party, the most influential political party in the area. But Rathod won by 35 votes.

"This year, I really wanted someone else to contest in my place. But people in the village, especially women, urged me to contest again," she explains, adding that ever since she has been sarpanch of the village, the women have never hesitated to come to her with their problems.

Rathod says, "I feel very happy when I am able to facilitate somebody's work, if somebody gets a loan or access to some other scheme."

A firm believer in reaching out to the people, Rathod says, "If we sit at home, we never get to know anything. When



we go out, meet people, listen to them, we get to know about government schemes etc. My family has given me complete freedom to work. I have no problem if I have to go out into the village or to Bhopal, Delhi or to Jaipur, as I recently did. If there is a problem in the village - marital violence, rowdiness - I go out to assess the situation even at night."

When Rathod was first elected in 1995, she did not know much about what her role as an elected representative entailed. For instance, she was not aware that a sarpanch gets an honorarium. She acknowledges the role of NGO Samarathan in training and helping her learn the ropes. Under Samarathan's on-going Poorest Area Civil Society (PACS) programme, she is now a strong advocate of women's role in governance.

Rathod is a long-time Congress loyalist. Her one-room office-cum-living room has pictures of her with Congress President Sonia Gandhi, former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, and former MP chief minister Digvijay Singh.

But she rues the fact that despite being at the helm of affairs for so long, she has not been able to achieve all her goals. "I have to depend on panchayat funds. We get roughly Rs 40,000-50,000 every year. This is not enough for the village." For somebody who has been striving to make her village a City - she is struggling with a shoestring budget for road/drain construction, better sanitation facilities, education and health facilities, access to drinking water.

She has the odds against her mainly because the local MLA and the Member of Parliament from her district belong to



the BJP and she does not get the support she needs. "Where the sarpanch is also a BJP supporter, the MLA and the MP divert funds to the village," she explains.

Yet, Rathod has managed quite a bit in the last decade. "Apart from getting the basic work done - roads and hand-pumps - we have been able to check alcoholism and atrocities on women in the village," she says.

Rathod recalls the Gitabai case. Gita, a married woman with five children, was thrown out of her house by her alcoholic husband. After Rathod gave shelter to Gita and her children for one night, she both, counselled and threatened the husband, who agreed has since agreed to take Gita back. Since the police were finally called in to resolve the messy household dispute Rathod uses this example to warn other men in the village that she will spare no one if they misbehave with their women. The threats have been able to check alcoholism in the village. "What was once an open affair, men drinking and harassing women in the open has now been confined to homes," she says.

Rathod was recently embroiled in a controversy. She has been running the village ration shop for years and often, after people bought their rations on their cards, Rathod would distribute the rations among the poor. Sometimes, she would charge a nominal amount. Her opponents accused her of luring the poor for political reasons. But Rathod shrugs off such allegations: "They actually did me a favour. I have stopped giving rations to anyone without the ration card."

Samarthan's Shafiq Khan explains why Rathod has won for the third time. "As she has been interacting with a lot of people and helping them out, they prefer to have her as the head than elect a new person."

This year's victory has made her more determined. "I will work better. I want my village to be a city!"



## The Story Of Asha Bi:

## Fighting Poverty with Knowledge

It has been a long walk of life for Asha Bi of village Bhagwanpura in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. From a nobody who, barely a few years ago, could barely manage to make ends meet, to a somebody who is today supporting women in her village to negotiate the labyrinth called life, Asha Bi has truly arrived. Today, she is known - recognised - as the woman behind the group that successfully negotiated a bank loan and avoided defaulting. Like many like her, Asha Bi's life is not without travail and suffering. She remembers vividly how her today mirrored her yesterday: grinding poverty, land less, dependent on village Patels for work, and having to put up with any work wherever it took her was life as she knew it. But with a reminiscent smile, Asha Bi says that whenever there was a meeting in her village, be it on Government schemes, SHGs or health, she would be there. "I would attend these meetings, only because it gave me an opportunity to listen to other people."

When various social groups began moving into the village to work on education, form self help groups and generally motivate women to take the reins of their lives into their own hands, they found a very willing worker and learner in Asha Bi. Before she knew it, she found herself being pulled into the vortex called emancipation. There was opportunity knocking on the doors of her community like she had never known



before. But as she tentatively took the first steps towards discovering newer vistas and opportunities, it dawned on her that it would take a lot more time than even she had realised - and that created problems for her at home.

Ever the feisty woman, Asha Bi had not come so far only to turn back at the first roadblock. She spoke to women and kept them together in a loose group. While many women she knew had to go to work at the nearby distillery, Asha Bi's did not enjoy that liberty; her husband was against her going to work, and only went to work himself.

In 2000, Christian missionaries came to Bhagwanpura. After bringing all the women of the village together, they spoke to them about how they could help change their lives if all of them decided to work together. Asha Bi says that even then, she had not realised how they could work together as a group, though she continued to attend all meetings. But this time she wanted to take things a step further - she decided she would take up the repeated offer of the missionaries to join them as a health worker. Despite protests from home and the villagers, she took to her new role with gusto. She began going around her village and made inquiries about the villagers' health, which she dutifully report to her superiors during the two monthly meetings at the Shahadganj office of the missionaries.

Word about her work got around, and soon enough, Asha Bi's was



being approached by other organisations to work for them, too. Her natural flair for communicating with people made her a natural at her work, and various organisations were only too willing to co-opt her in their programme implementation in the village. In the meantime, Asha Bi had also got together 14 women who began saving Rs 5 every month. This group was christened by its members as the Adarsh group.

Around 2001, when teachers under Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission were given a target to form at least two groups in the village, Asha Bi and her Adarsh Samooh was the natural choice for the village teacher. This led to Adarsh Samooh coming into its own as a formal group. For a year, each of the 14 group members collected Rs 10 and went on to open a bank account at a local nationalised bank. Asha Bi has other things on her mind, though. She urged her members to push up their savings. "I felt that we could do more if we could save Rs 30 every month." The group members gladly obliged her. And, Asha Bi says, there were numerous occasions when some women could not pay their monthly installments and she or the others would chip in.

With the first revolving fund of Rs 25,000, the women divided Rs 15,000 amongst themselves and tried their hand in petty business. Some opted to sell everyday items, while others opted to invest in a hand-cart to sell vegetables. The women, together with the remaining money, took the village Patel's land on lease and began cultivating vegetables, which were sold in Bhopal. They then divided the expenses with the Patel and the profits amongst themselves.

Much to the surprise of the bank and the men in the village who had only a few months ago smirked at the idea, the group returned the money to the bank on time. But this was not enough to stop the smirks and the snide comments. Asha Bi recalls: "On several occasions, people in the village did not hesitate to tell me that the group go into debt and they (the women) would soon find themselves in jail." Chuckles Asha Bi: "I told them that if I went to the 'white room' (prison), I would take all of them with me!".

Now, as President of the successful Adarash Samoh, 55-year-old Asha Bi says: "We work all our lives. But we have never had any knowledge on how to do our work efficiently." Concurs group Secretary, Phoolwati: "No body in the village gives us information about anything."

After the grading, the status of their group based on the corpus and number of members (which consisted of Kamla Bai, who is the treasurer, Nafisa Bi, Munni Bi, Ramwati Bai, Gora Bai, Parvati Bai, Ganeshi Bai and Lata Bai, apart from Asha and Phoolwati) was supposed to be clarified by the village panchayat. However, after saving for a year, the group ran into trouble: the women realised that they had no idea about getting loans from banks. Unable to get correct information, the women went straight to their bank manager. He told them that the money came from the Collectorate and the village secretary would be able to give them all the information. The women made a (futile) visit to the Collectorate, where they were told that only the panchayat secretary or ADO, Santosh Sharma, would be able to give them the exact status of their group.

The question that went a-begging was how would they find the ADO? The group was by now very motivated and curious, and they did not leave any opportunity seeking the official who could help them. Finally, at a redressal camp, the women found the official they were seeking. On hearing the women, Sharma explained the situation to them and offered to help them in any way he could. He said that the group would have to incur a small expenditure to put their records in order. It was, however, a difficult time for the women since they not only had to forego the Rs 50,000 loan that their group was to have got, and they had to pay Rs 5,000 to get their paperwork in order!

But the move helped the group: people who had earlier laughed at them and said things like "Do you think any of you will be able to improve your lives and reach somewhere?" from family and friends alike, had to now eat their words. The group succeeded in negotiating a Rs. 3,00,000 loan!



Together, the women have taken on lease two acres of land and are returning the loan amount to the bank at the rate of Rs 5000 every month, with each member paying Rs 500 every month as her part of the repayment amount.

Till this report was filed, every day (in the season) the women were carting almost 60 kgs of bhindi (Lady's Fingers) to the market in Bhopal. For this, they rely on the men in their families - one man takes the vegetables and other produce to the market and returns the sale amount to them at the end of the day. The women share the cost of sending this person to the city. They have already been able to return Rs 1-lakh to the bank.

Ask Asha Bai how her life has changed and she says with a twinkle in her eye: "Earlier, just to carry out this task, we had to collect money from various people to pay the Patel for his land. Now, we don't have to take money from anyone. This saves us a lot of trouble and tension." She adds that from the days when they had no work to today, when they are able to save Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500 every month after recovering all costs, it has given them reason enough to be satisfied. She says her members also do not have to work the long hours they had to per force endure earlier. "Now, we work in the day and are at home before sun set."

"A few years ago, I had only one set of clothes; today I have the luxury of another set! I have been able to tile my roof, and buy a little extra oil in a month. More importantly, the family today has two square meals a day," says Asha Bi with a contented look.

What Asha Bi is really happy to talk about is how she has been able to help her son. "When we first took the revolving loan, I sold knick knacks like bangles and bindis. My son has continued doing even today, and sells his wares on his bicycle. This year, I was able to lease out 100 guava trees for him. And, after paying off the Patel and meeting expenses, my son was able to make a net profit of Rs 5,000!"

But, Asha Bi is not one to sit around on her laurels. When Aarambh came to her village as an implementing agency for the PACS programme,

Asha Bi, once again, heard the clarion call. The humble and illiterate - but accomplished woman - with a little nudge and push, was once again busy getting a woman to hospital in time, getting officials to act on a file, badgering the local PDS shop owner for more transparency and accountability, and making sure the children were looked after at the anganwadi. Because there's never a dull moment when Asha Bi is around! And there is little doubt in anyone's mind that there is plenty more to come from the energetic and resourceful Asha Bi.

The now-empowered women take decisions themselves. Today, confident of their status, Asha Bi says, "Recently, a woman in the village, Radhabai, was in labour for three days. When we finally got to hear of it and learnt that the dai had given up, we organised money to send her to hospital." The women in the group mourn the loss of the infant, but are happy that they were able to save Radhabai, who may never have survived without their intervention.

That is not all. Until recently, the ANM would not visit the village. Pressure from the women has begun to ensure that the erring ANM come to the village on stipulated days.

Armed with training under the State's RCH programme, women members ensure that pregnant women in the village receive vaccinations and immunisation for themselves and their children on time.

Now for their most recent success: Bhagwanpura, Chattarpura and Makoria come under a single panchayat, and the PDS shop is at Chilkod. After the 2005 panchayat elections, the shop was shifted to Makoria, and women had to trudge 5-kms through the jungle to collect rations. It soon became apparent to the women that they would have to let go of their rations - they were simply not able to muster the courage make the long trudge through the forest and carry the load back.

As more and more women began to make their problem heard aloud, it was apparent that the situation was fast getting out of hand. Ever the optimist, Asha Bi knew there had to be some way to tackle the situation.



She and some other women approached Aarambh's animators in the village. With a little help, they wrote out an application to the concerned Government official. For good measure, they also took up the issue at the village Sachivalaya (village secretariat, which is today no longer functional), and the Government redressal camps at Umraoganj. After sustained efforts, the PDS shop has finally been shifted back to Chiklod, and the women have breathed a collective sigh of relief!

When you nudge Asha bi why her group thought of pursuing the (PDS shop) issue, she hesitates for just a moment before answering. "Do you think we are not capable of knowing what is a problem for us and what is not. The women were faced with a major problem, and it had to be addressed, " she says glibly.

Prod her about her achievements and Asha Bi brushes off the question. She adds, though, that women in the village even today don't hesitate to cajole her into joining their group. "I cannot do that. I barely manage to run my group!" she laughs. Her most satisfying moment, she adds wistfully, is that she no longer has to answer the people who used once-upon-a-time laughed and taunted her and her group. And that, undeniably, is an accomplishment by any yardstick you judge Asha Bi. Her sly smile and the matter-of-fact look in her eye is answer enough!



## With Only an ounce of grit...

Till a few years ago, Tarawati Jatav of Dauraha Panchayat, Sehore district in Madhya Pradesh was leading a very routine married life in her village. Then came along the newfound interest in Panchayati Rai Institutions (PRI) and the way PRIs were changing the face of rural India. The rest, as they say, is history...

Born in 1974 in a village in Dupadiya Bhil Panchayat, Tarawati Jatav was brought up in a difficult socio-economic milieu by her parents. Her father, Girdhari Lal Jatav, had seven other children, and Tarawati was the eldest of them. This also meant that she had more than her share of domestic responsibility, whether it was looking after her siblings, lending a helping hand in the kitchen, or generally being around in the house taking care of odds and ends. To make matters worse, Tarawati's family belonged to the Scheduled Caste, and this meant an endless travail for her everyday of her life in the village.

Says Tarawati: "When I was studying in school, I used to go to the village well to fill water. But the women at the well never let me fill water from the well myself- one of them would pour water into my plastic bottle for me. I just had to swallow the humiliation. Even though I was young, I already understood the boundaries of the caste system in my village".

Despite trying circumstances, Tarawati tried to continue her education in her village as best as she could. However, she could not do so for long, and had to drop out of

school after completing her primary education. And following age-old tradition, Tarawati was married in 1992 to Babulal Gaur, resident of village Dauraha, at the age of eighteen. However, this is where her story- and her life- take a U-turn: while most women in rural Madhya Pradesh would have had to abandoned everything for the sake of their married life, Tarawati found she had an opportunity to build on the earlier foundation. She not only was able to pick up her education where she had had to abruptly end it, but found to her pleasant surprise that her husband was with her all the way in ensuring that she completed her schooling. She was eventually able to continue her education till class eighth.

When the Panchayat elections were announced in the year 2000, Tarawati stood for the elections from the Douraha Panchayat, despite the fact that she was under tremendous pressure to withdraw her nomination from some influential persons of the village. So much so that 6 persons were nominated to stand against Tarawati in the election. But this only made Tarawati more determined, and she eventually won the election by 160 votes.

But this was just the beginning of Tarawati's problems: firstly, her predecessor refused to hand over charge to Tarawati. She then had to approach the district administration for assistance in resolving the issue. With intervention of the district administration officials, the sarpanch was forced to hand over charge to Tarawati. But no sooner had this been resolved than the next problem cropped up: the ex-sarpanch, in a matter of days, had the Panchayat office locked up. Tarawati had to again seek the intervention of the district administration to have the lock broken and take charge of the office.

All this did not make Tarawati lose heart, nor did she refuse to cave in to the ex-sarpanch's insidious ways. She busied herself in developmental work for her village with the help of the community. Even though the ex-sarpanch did not let go and has been creating obstacles for her every now and then, the village has seen a spurt in development activity in her village. Krishak Sahyog



Sanstha (KSS), on their part, have been continuously supporting Tarawati through capacity building and awareness programmes aimed at making her- and the rest of the community- more aware of their rights and responsibilities under the Panchayati Raj Act. And the good work being done by her in her village continues, even after her husband was beaten up by the ex-sarpanch and his cronies, and they have been made the butt of many a joke.



## Ordinary People, Extra-Ordinary Lives



**Draupadi**

Little Sonam stops at the door of the Hatiakheda Bal-angan as coordinator, Kusum Jatav, busily settles the other 20-odd shrieking and milling children. "Please, may I come in?" asks Sonam in English. Kusum nods and Sonam makes some space to settle down amongst the other girls.

Situated forty-five kilometers from Bhopal, the Bal-angan at Hatiakheda village is a island of hectic activity, and is a proud Bal-angan being run by Aarambh's under its PACS programme.

Aarambh's chief functionary, Anoop Sahay explains the relevance of having Bal-angans, "Our mandate in the PACS programme is to work amongst the Haalis (bonded labourers), marginalised farmers and landless people. Since our organisation has been working with children, we did not want to leave the chil-

dren out of this programme. This programme thus integrates the needs of children with the mandate of the PACS programme".

Bal-angans in this PACS area comprise 15 villages and are the first bridge between underprivileged children and (giving them) access to education. "We encourage families to first send their children to the center before they join any school. Since many have never been to school before, we try to motivate them to appear for the Class V board examination." But the effort has not ended here just yet: once the children begin going to school, issues like retention and drop outs have to be consequently addressed by the organisation.

Says Bhagwanpura Bal-angan in-charge, Draupadi: "The situation of children in the village is very bad. Even today, there are 30-35 children in the village whose names are registered with the local Government school, but their parents are not able to keep their wards in school."

Given the economic situation of most families, parents, more often than not, prefer that their children contribute to the family kitty in the form of (child) labour than spend time in schools. Also, because of security reasons, many parents prefer to take them along with them to their place of work. "Parents are the biggest obstacle to a child's progress in school. Even parents who do not send their children to work are just not interested in sending their children to school either."

Draupadi says that because of this attitude amongst parents, she finds it difficult to discipline children and candidly admits that when she asks parents why they do not sending their children to school, they answer: 'What can we do if the children do not want to go to school themselves!'

Of the 40 children registered with her Bal-angan, Draupadi says almost 20-25 of them come regularly and from 4 pm to 6 pm, she helps them with their homework. "Often, these children wade through lessons like multiplication and addition, so in a play-way format, I try to help them understand the fundamentals."

In 19-year-old Kusum Jatav's Hatiakheda Bal-angan, most parents admits that their while their wards go to the local Government school, they also come to the centre between 4 pm-6 pm



**Children learning (and playing) in a Bal-angan**

'to play and study.'

For the last year and half that Kusum Jatav has been running the bal-angan, she has had roughly 25 children. The confidence of the children is engaging, as the children try and attempt their counting and multiplication lessons on their own. Anil Acharya, who studies in Class VII in the privately-run Guadawal Bal Vidya Mandir, says at the Centre: "I get help in all subjects."

Arti Malviya, who studies in Class VII, says: "I come here because nobody helps me with school work at home." When asked how far her parents have studied, she says her mother has studied up to Class V.

Amit Vijay, Neha and Ram Kali like coming to the centre for other reasons, namely because "our teacher plays with us".

Anita Malviya, who studies in Class VII in a private school in Umraoganj, says she likes studying Maths, and because she gets additional help here, she like coming to the centre.

Draupadi, who has been working because she is concerned that the children in her village have a better future, prides herself on having been able to inculcate cleanliness habits in her bal-angan brood. "In the eight months that I have been running the Bal-angan, children have begun to come to the centre clean and tidy. They cut their nails, comb their hair and generally make an attempt at remaining tidy and clean throughout.

They also enjoy studying in the play-way method".

Drupadi herself has studied up to Class VIII. She adds that the village she hails from is more 'advanced' than Bhagwanpura. "Initially, when I began work, my family members did not understand what I was doing. Now they help me so that I can take up extra work whenever I can."

"From an early age," says Drupadi, "I was interested in children. Few people in my village know much about children and children's issues, like health and education, and we did not learn much at school either. I try to encourage the kids to study and show them there are possibilities, if they work. I do some informal tutoring, to help them prepare, at a future date hopefully, for matric (school leaving examinations) and have a good life."