



Spreading Health Messages Through Rituals

Traditional customs and rituals are being turned around to spread the message of safe motherhood in villages of Madhya Pradesh. A *haldi-kumkum* ceremony becomes an occasion of a community endorsement to encourage women to follow safe practices during pregnancy and while nurturing newborns. A *Bai bhoj*, where the whole village celebrates a child's move to supplementary food, is transformed to an *annaprasthan* - to support families with infants learn how to deal with the infant's growing needs.

Twenty-four-year-old Baiga (tribal) Sunita Bai, mother of three-year-old Laxmi is seven months pregnant with her second child. Only till a few months ago she used to go to into the jungles with Laxmi in tow to collect firewood and other forest produce. She would leave home at 8 am and return by 4 pm.

However, unlike during her first pregnancy Sunita Bai has now registered, herself with the Anganwadi Centre, has kept

her immunization card safely, she is taking her IFA tablets, has prepared a birth plan and is keen to deliver the child in a hospital.

During her *godbhara* ceremony, Sunita says, "Women brought vegetables, dalia and rice. When I was expecting Laxmi, I did not take so much care." She has now begun to stay at home and not to do any heavy work. She also knows that after she has her iron table she should have tomatoes or lemon and two glasses of water so that she does not vomit out the tablet.

There are reasons for Sunita taking up these practices in earnest. Anganwadi worker Sheela Kumari Dhupe says she has enlisted Sunita in various maternity benefit schemes. "In all it will work out to be a support of Rs 1,700, when her baby arrives," says Dhupe.

The change is a result of work done by Community Development Centre Balagnat, with help Integrated Nutrition

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Sunita Bai, her Husband Shambhul and their three years old daughter Lakmi.

and Health Programme and the Poorest Areas Civil Society. Using project their animators to link with women from self-help groups anganwadi workers, ANMs, panchayat representatives - all of these groups have been roped in to reach out to expectant and lactating mothers and their newborns. They have done this, by creating awareness on nutrition and health by linking them to 'godbharai' and 'anaprashani' programmes.

Mahesh Telase a voluntary worker recalls that when they began work in the area, there was a resistance that they faced with the anganwadi workers, who first did not listen to what they had to say and who felt that voluntary organization were some sort of monitoring system which would be pressurizing them.

Sunita Bai's aunt-in-law Sukritibak's recalls that 20 years ago, such facilities were not available. "I had five children of whom only two are alive today," she says adding that she lost two children to fever when they were very young.

Apart from getting family and community to blessing the woman, the village dai too is introduced to the family. Meetings are also held between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to ensure that the woman gets two hours rest.

Immediate family and community coming together to support expectant mothers has its bonuses too. Recently Sunita was pushed in the chest by her angry brother-in-law and Dhrupe immediately took her to ANM, who fortunately confirmed that all was well.

For Sunita husband Shambhul, while all the attention that his wife has got over the last few months may not have much sense, he certainly appreciated the help during the spat with his brother. "We were unsure what to do. She had pain in her chest and we did not know what to do."

These combined efforts are paying off for children as well. Today, in Karwahi village, in Bakhar block 65 kms from Balagnat, data collected from Growth Monitoring Register of



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Ramkaili with her four daughters.

Anganwadi Centre Karwahi in September 2005 showed there were 23 children in normal nutrition grade, 10 children in the first grade, nine children in second grade, two children in third grade and none in the fourth grade.

During these months 'Annaprashan' was organised continuously and feedback to parents by the anganwadi workers and voluntary. Bringing people to one platform, they were told about the importance of cleanliness and personal hygiene, preparations to be made before delivery, family planning, nutritious food, giving solid food to infants after six months, breast feeding immediately after delivery, complete breastfeeding, not applying on the umbilical cord and importance of immunization.

From the Bal bhoj, where there would hardly be any contribution for the children, the annaprashan focus on how to make food for infants from locally available cereals - rice, dal, wheat and channa and the judicious use of vegetables. Also families are urged to feed children small amounts frequently.

After six months of the godhbari and annaprashan ceremonies, 28 children were in the normal grade, 12 were in first grade, five were in the second grade and one in the third grade. In September 2006, while there were 26 children were in the normal category, there were 12 in the first grade and three in the second grade and no children in the third or fourth grade.

For the Gond couple Chandrakala and Maniram, their second child Mohit was weak and malnourished and his card indicated he was between Grade I and II. After his annaprashan his parents were counseled to ensure proper feeding time and adequate quantity. In the last six months his growth has picked up and he is now in the normal category.

CDCs Project Coordinator Ameen Charles, says it has taken them three years to reach out to people. Most of what they have been able to do was not possible earlier because there were no linkages between the Health Department and government schools.

The interaction in the village with a population of 1,300, has had other spinoffs. Twenty-eight-year old Ramkaili was expecting her fourth child when her husband Tejraj opted for a NSVT - even though the couple had three daughters already. The fourth child was another girl. That did not trouble the couple as is evident as all four girls are healthy.

Interactions with panchayat representatives, organising special gramsabha meetings on health issues, creating awareness in the community through detailed discussions with self help groups at meetings from time to time has enabled villagers to access, the Transport for delivery and Janani Suraksha Yojana of the State Government. •

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