

Grassroots

A JOURNAL OF THE PRESS INSTITUTE OF INDIA PROMOTING REPORTAGE ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

Where drought casts a long, dark shadow

Farmers and farm workers are reduced to abject poverty by adverse weather conditions in the Bundelkhand Region of Uttar Pradesh. Journalists visiting the area witnessed a grim struggle for survival by villagers whose burdens are increased by official neglect and poor implementation of development and nutrition programmes

BHARAT DOGRA, Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh

The Bundelkhand Region of Uttar Pradesh has suffered three crop losses in quick succession. The previous *rabi* crop (sown in winter and harvested in spring) was destroyed by excessive untimely rains and hailstorms at the time of ripening. Then the *kharif* crop (harvested during the monsoon) was ruined by acute drought. Now, due to the continuing drought, the *rabi* crop has not even been sown in many areas, while in other places the yield is likely to be quite low. The region in UP is spread over seven districts – Jhansi, Banda, Chitrakut, Hamirpur, Mahoba, Jalaun and Lalitpur. It also covers a wide area of neighbouring Madhya Pradesh where the situation is very bad, too. Nature's wrath has been worsened by official neglect, apathy and corruption.

Recent visits to several villages in UP's Bundelkhand revealed a grim struggle for survival by villagers burdened as much by adverse weather

conditions (indicating climate change) as by official neglect and poor implementation of development and nutrition programmes. Neebi Village is located in Naraini Block of Banda District. At a time when many households have become entirely dependent on food from markets (rationed supplies for a few BPL households last only a week or so), a family needs about Rs 200 per day to keep away hunger while the average village wage has shrunk from Rs 100 to Rs 70 in some cases. Ram Dayal, a Dalit farmer-cum-farm-worker says, "I will starve but I will not work for the reduced wage of Rs 70."

ICDS nutrition packets are available only once in several days, while government-sponsored mid-day meals have not been served for several weeks in the hamlet. Even though the commissioner had adopted the village some years ago, a survey by interns working with Vidyadham Samiti, a voluntary organisation known for its dedicated work in the region, revealed that most children here were malnourished.

High and increasing indebtedness is another reality for the nearly 100 families of the Dalit hamlet. Parents are increasingly tense about marrying off their daughters, as the expenses are extremely difficult to meet. There is just one hand pump to provide water to about 100 families. Drinking water may be even more difficult to come by in the coming days. Dalits face discrimination in getting drinking water. In addition, animals are suffering greatly due to lack of fodder as well as water.

The farmers and farm workers, mostly Dalits, to whom we spoke, said they have no other option but to migrate to distant places in search of work, as guaranteed rural employment is

not available. Being a migrant labourer isn't easy either. The meagre earnings and inflation-driven expenses in cities such as Delhi make it impossible to save adequately. People work very hard and cut expenses so that they can save a little to take to their village after about six months. But even that is not without hurdles. One labourer, Gyani, lost all his savings to a pickpocket while travelling back home on a crowded train, and in addition was injured by the blade used by the thief. There are incidents also of migrant workers being given poisonous substances and robbed while on their way back home.

Several years ago, many of the families were supposed to receive land under land ceiling laws but this hasn't yet come through. Grain and fodder banks started by Vidyadham Samiti have provided some badly needed relief to people.

Mausingh ka Purva hamlet is located in Naugawan Panchayat, also in Naraini Block. This is a one-crop area, growing gram and wheat in the *rabi* season and *jowar* and *arhar* in summer. However nothing could be sown this *rabi* season while the *kharif* crop was lost entirely. In fact, even the *kharif* crop of 2014 was not good, as only 40 per cent of the normal crop yield could be obtained. Despite loss of three successive crops, very little work has been provided under MGNREGA during the year. Even when the work is provided, wages are delayed for several months. Villagers have lost faith in MGNREGA, although they say that if the scheme is implemented properly, it will be a big help. Also, very little compensation was received – none yet for the *kharif* crop loss of 2015.

Aside from around five families in the hamlet of about 35 households, others face hunger

and malnutrition problems – skipping breakfast and having two meals of just rotis and salt or chutney in a day. Many people are preparing to leave the village because, as Rani, a resident, says, "our *mandas* (grain storages) are empty now".

Oram Village is located in Bisanda Block of Banda District. In the village, a farmer, Mannu Lal, who had migrated in search of work, and came back disappointed, only to find that his crops had failed and enormous debts faced him, committed suicide by hanging himself in broad daylight on a tree right in front of his house. At the time several officials had rushed to the spot and made all kinds of promises, but several months on, his family has received no help and is living in great poverty.

The entire area is in the grip of a severe drought with cultivation confined to a few fields. Yet, work has not been provided under employment guarantee schemes. Small farmers to whom we spoke said very meagre compensation had been received. Manan, a share cropper, said, "No compensation is given to the likes of me who take land as *batai*. We are ruined by adverse weather. We invest our money and labour but get no compensation."

In the absence of employment opportunities, village youths agree to work in hazardous conditions in small factories. Two workers, Anshu and Budhvilan, died recently in an accident in a fire cracker unit. Anshu's mother Munni Devi said that the government provided no help at all. To check the fast-deteriorating situation in Bundelkhand before it is too late, the government should start MGNREGA and / or drought relief work on a large scale. ■

(This report was written under the Inclusive Media UNDP Fellowship 2015.)

INSIDE



Climate change – it all boils down to being happy 2



Why migrants willy-nilly choose to forego their right to vote 3



The arts help the marginalised express themselves 4

They drive immunisation with missionary zeal 5



High up in the Naga Hills, women discover collective strength 6

Where agriculturists take charge, show the way 7

Food fairs turn an eye-opener – malnutrition can be overcome 8



A film opens a window for special children 9

Playing a decisive role in safeguarding women's right to health 10



Photo: BD

Just one of many old persons who face acute hunger.

FOCUS

Climate change – doesn't it all boil down to being happy?

Isn't happiness what we aim for? Yes, we are concerned about climate change – rising sea levels, pollution, carbon emission and erosion – that brings about a degeneration in the quality of life, the components of which are health, basic needs (food, shelter), and peace (absence of insecurity). All of which add up to happiness. Ironically, at the grassroots, if the daily wage earning labourer or his children hankered for an air-conditioned car like the one their employer comes in, they would not be happy, but they seem to smile despite what we see as 'deprivation'. Contentment leads to less craving, less rapacity and exploitation of resources

SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN, Bengaluru



Photo: Internet

Labourers toil hard to eke out a living, but you will usually find them happy and content.

On the way from my house to my daughter's in north Bengaluru, a fancy multi-storied construction project is coming up. In the shadow of the concrete shell of the new building live the labourers working on the site, in shelters fashioned from bamboo sticks and a tarpaulin roof. What hits me every time I pass by, however, is not the contrast between their dwellings and the high-rise they are building; it is the contrast between what I see on the faces of the labourers and the contractor-developer

The children of the workers sit on piles of sand and cement bags, and I see them amusing themselves by pouring sand from one hand to the other, laughing delightedly over the 'game'. Their broad smiles and giggles, and eyes brimful of delight, are in sharp contrast to the expression on the face of the contractor. Sitting in his air-conditioned car with the windows raised shut, he is always on his cell phone, yelling at someone, his brow furrowed, and face contorted with stress and anger. Or, when

he is out of his car, yelling his head off at the workers, urging them to "get going", finding fault. He is very obviously well off – sparkling diamond rings on several fingers, a thick gold bracelet on his wrist, branded sunglasses, designer shoes, and dapper clothes. Not to mention the fancy imported car that would have cost a bomb.

I have never seen him happy. Or without a frown. Despite his riches. While those families of labourers, without a proper roof over their heads, nowhere even to lay their infants except on sand piles with construction dust swirling all round, are always smiling, joking, exchanging banter as they go about their work as if they didn't have a care in the world.

In all the esoteric discussions at the recent Paris global meet on Climate Change, the word happiness was not mentioned, not once. And yet, isn't that the bottom line, when we are concerned about rising sea levels, pollution, carbon emissions, and erosion? These are causes for concern because they add up

to a degeneration of the quality of life – and the components of the quality of the good life are health, basic needs (food, shelter), and peace (absence of insecurity). All of which add up to happiness – isn't that what we ultimately aim for?

Except that under the consumerist model of development that has come to be accepted globally as the 'only model', constant craving for material acquisitions, the obsession with 'having more' as the route to happiness, results in never seeking contentment with what one has, never being satisfied. There is always a better, newer model of car to aim for, more gadgets, more money in the bank, fancier places to go to for holidays that one can brag about to one's friends.

Happiness is automatically ruled out of such a frenzied pursuit of material possessions. If the daily wage earning labourer or his children hankered for an air-conditioned car like the one their employer comes in, they would not be happy, but they seem to smile despite what we see as 'deprivation'.

Of course, they are deprived, with not even basic needs. But is there a law prohibiting smiles unless and until one's needs are all met? I ask myself, every time I pass by the construction site, but don't have an answer yet. Those chubby children with sunlit smiles, wave to me each time I pass by. I saw the contractor's son one day, sitting in his car, an inhaler held to his mouth, gasping for breath and looking miserable.

I stopped briefly one day, watching two children chasing each other to pass the time and laughing uproariously, and their mother noticed me as she was stacking a pile of eight heavy bricks on to her head. She gave me a broad smile that lit up her face. I looked at her tattered skirt and faded blouse, dust-covered hands and matted hair, and impulsively asked her what she was smiling about. "Nothing,"

she said, flashing another broad smile. "Those are my children," she added with a touch of pride, then quickly pulled them to her and kissed them before she began climbing on the scaffolding. Her torn clothes and body ache did not matter, she found a treasure in her kids; and they with their smiles reminded me of the children in that superb film *Kakka Muttai*. The contractor was, as usual, on his cell phone, yelling at someone and slapping his forehead in frustration.

As I walked away, I remembered how Bhutan, a small country perched on inhospitable mountainous territory, is credited with having the highest 'happiness quotient' in the world, despite its low per capita incomes and lack of fancy amenities. And isn't happiness the ultimate aim, the reason for acquiring material goods – because they are supposed to make life more enjoyable? If in the process, of manufacturing and craving those possessions, we mess up the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land that gives us our food crops, what happens to happiness, which is what human life is supposed to aim for? If that rich contractor is heading for ulcers and a heart attack, and

perhaps a premature death, how is he any better than the wage earners who at least smile and get on with their work?

It is of course, unfair, immoral and unethical that a man who sits in a cool car protected from rain and sun, has more money than those who have to do back breaking work to feed their children gruel to still their hunger pangs. But it is a half-filled glass either way – money in the bank plus ulcers, or just basic needs (if that) and cheerfulness (adopted consciously, instead of cursing their lot). Who is better off? In what sense?

Again, and again, we keep returning to these basics, whether we are discussing climate change, global warming, or development, or Gandhian philosophy – ultimately material goods are only a means to happiness (if that), not an end in itself. No school or university, however, teaches contentment, or the art of being happy, as part of any curriculum. Contentment leads to less craving and, that in turn, to less rapacity and exploitation of the resources of Mother Earth. Which is what climate change is all about, in non-esoteric phrases... ■

'Education for all' is still a distant dream!

Annual
Subscription
Rs.180

Get to know the
real face of India.
Subscribe today!



Grassroots

RIND Premises Second Main Road, Taramani CPT Campus, Chennai 600 113
Ph: 044 2254 2344 Fax: 044 2254 2323 www.pressinstitute.in

Why migrants willy-nilly choose to forego their right to vote

It is ironical that while every Indian citizen is free to migrate around the country to secure a better life, for those people who are compelled to move from place to place only to keep their homes and hearths going, nothing has been done to secure even their most basic fundamental right to vote. Even otherwise, the top concern for the poor is being able to earn enough in order to provide two square meals daily to their children, as this story from impoverished parts of Odisha reveals

SARADA LAHANGIR, Bhubaneswar



Photos: SL/WFS

Sabita Sahoo (the lone woman in the picture), 35, a seasonal migrant, works in a brick kiln unit near Balianta in Khurda District of Odisha.

Sabita Sahoo, 35, a migrant labourer, works in a brick kiln unit near Balianta in Khurda District of Odisha. Severe poverty and debt, brought on by landlessness, force her family of five, including her children, to move out of their village in Bolangir District in search of suitable livelihood opportunities. This year has been no different. So much so, that while across the state, people were excited about casting their vote and waited eagerly for the day poll results would be declared, Sahoo's top concern, as always, has only been about being able to earn enough in order to provide

two square meals daily to her children.

Going back to the village to vote would have meant incurring a hefty expense and a loss of income that families like Sahoo's can ill afford. Remarked the hard working woman, "How can I go home to cast my vote? The trip alone will cost me Rs 500 – and it takes all five of us five days to earn that much money. Moreover, the brick kiln owner will definitely deduct our wages for the number of days we are absent from work. Anyway, what will the new government do for people like me? Nothing ever seems to change in our lives; we will be as impoverished

as we are today and our children will continue to be illiterate and without a future."

Gurubari Banchor, 43, who works in a brick kiln at Trisulia in Cuttack District, was in a quandary about whether or not to exercise her democratic right. She shared, "I am working at this unit along with 18 other families. There are another 30 families, around 120 people, employed in a kiln nearby. We came here in mid-October 2013 and are contracted to work till mid-June or July 2014. There is no way we can leave - even to vote." Like Sahoo and Banchor, millions of poor Dalit and tribal people, who pack their bags and step out of their homes in the hope of gaining some decent wage work, may have found themselves excluded from the democratic process that gives ordinary people the power to change their collective fate.

Official data reveals that every year 118451 people, engaged by recognised labour contractors, migrate from the Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput (KBK) Region. The government has given licences to 3046 contractors. However, estimates of the Migration Information and Resource Centre (MiRC), Aide et Action South Asia, a local non-

government organisation, put the number of migrant labourers at five lakh, mainly drawn from the southern and western districts of the state. As per MiRC, more than 60000 families, or two lakh people, from the districts of Bolangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Boudh, Sonepur and Bargarh go to Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Additionally, around 40000 to 50000 people find work at the 150 brick kiln units that are located within a 40-kilometre radius of the twin cities of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar.

If migration from all districts is taken into account, a very conservative estimation would put the number of eligible voters among them to around two lakh, including 40000 women. Unfortunately, most seasonal workers recruited by agents are no better than bonded labour and can't leave during their contract period, although some migrants, mainly from Ganjam District, who work in Surat, Gujarat, are strong enough to leverage their rights. Where the employers do consent to granting leave – mainly during emergencies – the womenfolk and children have to stay back and work till the men return. Sukanti Kuanr, 55, hasn't cast her vote for three consecutive elections. During the 2009 polls she had migrated to Andhra Pradesh to work in a brick kiln along with eight other families from her area. "Last time, our local political leader had sent his agent to take us back to vote. Initially, the employer didn't agree to give us leave but the agent had a talk with our *sardar* (as the middlemen are called) after which he consented to let only the men go. Women had to stay and work extra time to compensate for the losses," she recalled.

Of course, some attempts have been to facilitate women like Kuanr and Sahoo to vote. Based on the directive of the National Human Rights Commission, the Odisha State Election Commission did ask the district administrations to take necessary action this time. Odisha's chief electoral officer Mona Sharma, said, "We have told district collectors to motivate migrant labourers to come back

to exercise their democratic right to vote. However, the one problem we have found is that many of them have enrolled their names in two places. So it will be difficult for us to find out who will vote where."

But Umi Daniel, head of MiRC, has pointed out some key problems with this approach, "For one, most of these migrants fall under the debt migration system and are haboured illegally by the middlemen. Due to lack of policy or any systems in place, it won't be easy to track down a majority of these workers who are spread across different locations, from nearby Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra to the far-flung states of Delhi and Punjab. Another difficulty is that there is no list of the principle employers who engage this labour. So it would be a nightmare for the receiving states to identify, locate and then repatriate these people to vote."

It is ironical that while every Indian citizen is free to migrate around the country to secure a better life, for those people who are compelled to move from place to place only to keep their homes and hearths going, nothing has been done to secure even their most basic fundamental right to vote. While the facility of postal ballot is made available for government employees, police personnel on election duty and the armed forces, no such provision has yet been extended to the large numbers of poor migrant labourers.

"The 2014 elections may not have been able to usher in any change in this regard but we need to make sure that in the next five years some concrete measures are in place to secure their vote. For starters, the government can either not give contractors licences during an election year or fix some kind of accountability clause that will make sure that they bring these people back in time to vote," suggested Daniel. Women like Sabita Sahoo and Sukanti Kuanr may have missed their chance this time but they do hope to exercise their franchise in the future. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Gurubari Banchor, 43, who works in a brick kiln at Trisulia in Cuttack District, was in a quandary about whether or not to exercise her democratic right.

The arts help the marginalised express themselves

Women and people of minority genders need space and support to express themselves in the manner and place that they are comfortable with. Their stories must be told and heard, not only in order to create awareness, but because gender minorities should be encouraged to express themselves for their liberation, healing, joy, and the development of their talents. If such space isn't provided, significant critical narratives would be left untold and unheard

PUSPHA ACHANTA, Bengaluru

Women and people who are identified as gender minorities account for only a small number among performers - artistes, musicians, etc. And those who are in political theatre, resistance music and similar forms of performing arts are even fewer. This is an unfortunate state of affairs, as audience experience would, in fact, be richer if the people who belong to such minorities and experience the physical, emotional and other challenges that need to be highlighted participate in the performances. Their stories must be told and heard, not only in order to create awareness, but because gender minorities are keen to express themselves and must be encouraged to do that for their liberation, healing, joy, and the development of their talents.

Hence, it is heartening that plays such as *The Colour of Trans* (first staged in 2014) where Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit trans-woman who is a playwright and actor, Angel Glady, a trans-woman, and Gee Imaan Semmalar, a trans-man (all living in Chennai, Tamil Nadu) showcase incidents from their lives in a stirring way. After a powerful performance last year, the troupe has been denied permission to stage the play at some venues, as it includes scenes which could shock viewers. "But those incidents have occurred in our lives," Vidya points out. However, the trio continues to stage *The Colour of Trans*, as some of their friends and allies worldwide have been inviting them to perform.

Incidentally, a Kannada feature film based on 'I am Vidya', the autobiography of Smiley (as she is known), has won the national award for its lead male actor. Ironically, Vidya has not acted in that movie nor found it easy to obtain key roles in other works. And sadly, trans-persons are still depicted in a derogatory manner in many commercial films.

Baduku Bayalu, a Kannada play being performed since 2013 by A. Revathi, a trans-woman in her forties who hails from Namakkal District in Tamil Nadu, is a meaningful portrayal of her own life and that of people

who have undergone struggles like hers. A poet and author who has been a committed advocate for the dignity and human rights of women and gender minorities, she has survived extreme sexual violence. "The play, a first in Kannada on the transgender community, is based on my autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. I am grateful to Ganesh, the director of Ninasam who approached me to script and act in the play which has completed over a hundred shows," says Revathi.

Again, in *Hasivu Kanasu* (*Dreams of Hunger*) by Prakruthi Kala Thanda, a group of socio-economically marginalised women theatre artistes in Bangalore, has been enacting the stories of members' lives in a poignant and realistic manner. After their first show in December 2014, a member of the audience remarked, "It seemed as if these women were professional and experienced performers. I was not aware that this was their maiden appearance."

The mature acting can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the women who are a part of Prakruthi Kala Thandahad boldly and confidently earned their livelihood in public spaces at various times at great personal risk. Incidentally, the actors are part of a collective that works for the rights of women and other persons in sex work and also provides counseling and different types of assistance to them.

Kutti Revathi, a Dalit poet and author from Tamil Nadu, was ostracized for her beautiful poem *Mulaihal* (which translates as 'breasts' in Tamil). Speaking at the first edition of Lekhana, an annual literary festival in Bangalore, in 2012, she said, "From the time, my poetry was published, I have faced grave criticism and threats to my life because I dared to talk about my intimate feelings, the so-called private parts of my body. It has not stopped even a decade since it began." At the same event, Girish Karnad, well-known playwright and actor, pointed out that such adverse reactions could be one of the reasons why women rarely write about



Budhan Bai (centre) performs with Jurmil Morcha, a troupe of adivasi artists from Chattisgarh.

themselves, their desires and their sexuality.

Of course, women and people of other genders also recount tales of their families and of the struggles and successes of the communities with which they may identify by caste, class, faith, location, abilities, ethnicity, occupation, language and other parameters. For instance, Pandvani artist Budhan Bai from Chattisgarh talks about the challenges of the *adivasi* (tribal) community that she belongs to and also those of residents of remote villages like hers, through her songs and plays.

Rupali Jadhav and Jyothi Jagtap, a pair of feisty, young women who belong to



Chandini reads her poetry.

subordinate castes from Pune are members of Kabir Kala Manch (meaning Kabir Arts Forum) who highlight not just the struggles of Dalits but also those of the urban poor through their stirring music. "We have faced stiff opposition to our public events. Some of our comrades have been in jail for over two years now on false charges, because they criticised the government. However, that does not deter us from conveying our message openly," Rupali avers.

When women and gender minorities highlight social and community narratives through art, their perspective gets attention. This is a boon, as the viewpoints of women are often lost, hidden or suppressed deliberately. In this context, the volume of poetry by Chandini, a Dalit trans-woman in her thirties who lives in Bangalore, assumes special importance. It is the first book of verse to be published in Kannada by a trans-person and the poems talk about her life, hopes and desires. At the recent launch of the anthology, Chandini observed, "People from our community hardly get opportunities to express ourselves creatively. Many of us face discrimination and

harassment from the family, the state and society owing to our sexual orientation. Now, I am financially self-reliant as I have been working for the last six years at a private firm in Bangalore. Incidentally, I used to earn my living from begging and sex work around the same location, long back."

And then there is Christy Raj, a young trans-man in Bangalore, snippets of whose tough life have been captured in a unique format that combines audio and digital self-portraits. Also, there is Uma, a 35-year old trans-person who resides in Bangalore who is also using the audio-visual and print media to bring out the story of his life and that of others in his community. "I host Jeeva Diary, a weekly programme on Radio Active, a community radio station in Bangalore. Further, I edit a quarterly magazine that highlights the voices and issues of the LGBTIQ community. Through narration and poetry, I share anecdotes about how I have survived physical and sexual violence and ostracism to become an advocate for the dignity and acceptance of gender and sexual minorities," Uma said. ■

They drive immunisation, backed by missionary zeal

Many auto-rickshaw drivers have been roped in by the Odisha Government for its routine mother-and-child immunisation programme, thus developing an alternate vaccine supply chain that makes use of community-based organisations and volunteers to establish a strong system of delivery. The vaccines and supplies are carried from the block and sub-blocks stores by the personnel deployed every Wednesday and also returned the very same day. More than the lure of a guaranteed day's wage, it's a sense of duty to fulfill a mission that's driving them

ADITI BHADURI, Puri

It is not yet six in the morning but the summer sun is relentless, the sand-covered roads almost blinding the eyes. Dhruva Charan Rai, 46, is already up and ready with his auto rickshaw outside the community health centre (CHC) in Chandanpur Block of Puri District, in Odisha. This is a weekly ritual that he has been observing for the last four years and it has become an integral part of his routine. Every Wednesday, Rai wakes up at sunrise, gets ready and makes his way to the health centre instead of the auto stand. Here he waits patiently till his name is called out by the health worker. He then fills in a register, collects boxes of vaccines for the immunisation of children, loads them in his rickshaw and sets off on a mission.

Rai is one of the many auto-rickshaw drivers who have been roped in by the Odisha Government for its routine mother and child immunisation programme. Rai delivers vaccines to five immunisation centres in five different villages located within a radius of 25-50 kilometres from the CHC. Additionally, he collects the unused vaccines and takes them back to the Chandanpur centre before getting free by three in the afternoon.

What has been the rationale behind the state government's move to include auto drivers in the immunisation programme? The decision emanates from the need for developing an alternate vaccine supply chain that makes use of community-based organisations and volunteers like Rai to establish a strong system of delivery. The vaccines

and supplies are carried from the block and sub-blocks stores by the personnel deployed every Wednesday and also returned the very same day. Rai carries the vaccines to the last village on his route first and ensures that they are at the centre by 8.30 am when the immunisation session starts.

Auto-rickshaws are perfect vehicles for this kind of work because their size allows them to ply through the narrowest of alleyways and even where roads disappear on way to the remotest of villages. Moreover, this mode of transportation has proven to be far cheaper and the unused vaccines are easily ferried back the same day preventing any wastage.

Six kilometres from the Chandanpur CHC is the village of Alikia. At their nearby Mukteshwar sub-centre, Purna Chandra Saba, another auto-driver, is a familiar face. By the time he arrives with the vaccines picked up earlier in the morning from the block health centre, there is already a long queue of mothers, children and pregnant women ready to get their dose. As Saba goes about his work there is a sense of relief clearly visible on everyone's face. In a well-oiled drill now, the vaccines are offloaded and unpacked, the syringes are readied and the immunisation process starts off. Like Rai, for every Wednesday he dedicates to this task – he has been doing for the last three years – Saba is paid a standard honorarium of Rs 500. This amount includes the cost of fuel, which is around Rs 250.

What motivates these auto-rickshaw drivers, who, incidentally, were never vaccinated as children, to participate in the immunisation programme? And how did they hear about this volunteer service? A government notice announcing this initiative caught Saba's eye in 2010. Initially, it was the lure of a guaranteed day's wage every week that attracted him. When he applied he was accepted. Thereafter followed an orientation programme, where he was explained the significance of the vaccines and what he was

supposed to do. That's when he understood the importance of the activity he had signed up for. This was a turning point for him as well; he felt a sense of duty to fulfill the mission he had been chosen for. Once the actual trips to the immunisation centres began and Saba saw the long lines for vaccinations, he knew he had taken the right decision.

For Rai, the work has been an initiation into a larger mission. He ensured that his wife got her shots when she was expecting their third child. Additionally, he has helped recruit another driver while simultaneously spreading the message on the necessity of the immunisation programme. As someone who has a great deal of first-hand knowledge of the subject, Rai is now considered as something of an 'expert' on it in his community. "No one in my family had been immunised," he says, "Neither my wife nor I or our first two children. But once I came to know about the benefit and purpose of the programme, and the fact that the government is going to such lengths to deliver it free to people like us, I made sure that our youngest child availed of the benefits," he shares. He makes it a point to inform every newly married couple in his family, neighbourhood or amongst his friends circle.

Indeed, the Odisha Government has made its mark on the country's routine immunisation programme through the adoption of this method of vaccine delivery. This outsourcing model, which has been christened Teekakaran (vaccination) Express, has reduced the burden of delivery on the already hard-pressed health system and improved the cold chain maintenance, coverage and return of vaccines, besides generating employment opportunities. The programme that started in 2009, with the support of UNICEF, has yielded impressive results.

A study conducted in 2011, comparing the performance of the Alternative Vaccine Delivery System (AVDS) blocks with the non-AVDS blocks – the ADVS that ropes in community-based



One of the many auto drivers in Chandanpur Block of Puri District in Odisha who have been roped in by the state government to deliver vaccines to health centres in far-flung regions.

staff at the CHC store, doctors and nurses at the health centres in the village, and of course, scores of mothers and children," he says proudly.

"It's a huge responsibility," affirms Saba. He looks on affectionately at the children milling round the Mukteshwar sub-centre. They are unaware of the role this man is playing in their lives; maybe someone would tell them about it someday.

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

organisations and volunteers as stakeholders in healthcare delivery – revealed that the number of children vaccinated in AVDS blocks was significantly higher at 86 per cent, while the non-AVDS blocks only registered 61 per cent. In the AVDS blocks the entire stock of unused vaccines was returned to the health centre storage for later use, whereas in non-AVDS blocks the rate of return was 80 per cent, which meant that 20 per cent of the unused stock went waste.

Jambeshwar Mallik is another committed driver-volunteer for the Chandanpur CHC. Back at the centre by two in the afternoon to hand back the unused vaccines, he is happy to have successfully finished his work for the day. Having driven around for some 40 kilometres in 42 degrees Centigrade heat, he is tired but beaming. "The income is not much. For the rest of the week when I ply my auto for the public, I usually earn more. But being a part of this programme is my chance to do something for the community. It is an opportunity to do something beyond the mundane task of earning a living. I am helping in the progress and development of my people and my village, and that of other villages. It feels good. There are many auto drivers, but not many are helping the government achieve its goal of providing proper health services to rural areas. So many people depend on me: the

Photos: AB/WFS



A few of those driving the immunisation programme exchange thoughts.



OUR JOURNALS

VIDURA

A JOURNAL OF THE PRESS INSTITUTE OF INDIA

Grassroots

RIND Survey

For more stories, visit the website of the Press Institute of India

www.pressinstitute.in

Up in the Naga Hills, women discover collective strength

Located at the very edge of India, Tuensang, Nagaland's largest district, has quite literally been edged out of mainstream discourse. Poor connectivity and a difficult terrain have contributed to Tuensang's marginalisation. Added to this is the fact that it has been a site of conflict – whether it was the insurgency waged by the two factions of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), or inter-tribal tensions that have sometimes flared up into bloody confrontations. The burden of keeping families going in such circumstances invariably fell on the women and they rose to the challenge

PAMELA PHILIPOSE, Tuensang, Nagaland

Tuensang, Nagaland's largest district, wears its forest wealth proudly in the myriad shades of green that clad the undulating terrain of the Naga Hills, which stretch on and on, right up to the Burma/ Myanmar border. Like their ancestors, people here still largely depended on *jhum* farming for their livelihoods but pressure on the land because of the growing population and widespread soil erosion resulted in dwindling harvests and growing impoverishment.

The burden of keeping families going in such circumstances invariably fell on the women. Even a casual visitor to these parts is immediately made aware of the pivotal role they play – it is the women who seem to be doing the farming, ferrying water, hewing wood and even running small shops and tea houses. Extremely shy, they dive behind a tree or under a shop counter, quick as a flash, if a stranger attempts to draw them into a conversation. They do this with a smile, but those ready smiles hide many grim realities.

Their faces bear the ravages of the harsh sun and mountain winds, and their backs are weighed down by heavy loads of timber needed to keep home fires burning. But far more disturbing than these physical hardships is the age-old discrimination inscribed in community norms and practices. Traditionally, women don't inherit property or participate in community decision-making. To this day, women's political representation

in the Nagaland State Assembly is among the lowest in the country. Yet they keep going, these strong, resilient women, weaving their incredibly striking shawls on old looms and farming rice and corn on vertiginous hill slopes.

It is in such unlikely circumstances that the Tuensang-based NGO, the Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS), in partnership with ActionAid, the well known organisation working for social change, could make a difference to the lives of thousands of women in the 16 villages of the region that the programme adopted.

The ECS was set up in the early 1990s to help the Chang Tribe of Tuensang address the innumerable social adversities they experienced. Tuensang District was on the drug route, given its porous borders with Burma/ Myanmar, and drug addiction and HIV/AIDS was a huge challenge. It was also clear that many women were in dire straits.

Phutoli and Chingmak Kejong, founders of ECS, recalled how women would approach them for small loans of two or three rupees just to feed their children a meal. By the late 1990s, ECS had set up around 37 self-help groups (SHGs). Notes Chingmak Kejong, "Women of the Chang tribe had never been part of formal social structures and institutions. We sought to change this." This grassroots work was significantly scaled up when ActionAid forged a decade-long partnership with

the ECS in 2001. The SHG was re-conceptualised as an entity that would empower women not just financially but develop their abilities to fight for their rights. Slowly, through discussions with the community, the ECS-ActionAid programme came up with a strategy to combine microcredit interventions with social action. By the time the programme came to an end in 2010, there were no less than 240 SHGs in the region. Today, the number of SHGs has grown and their combined corpus is around Rs 5 crore, according to Kejong.

To understand the significance of such change, one only needs to meet women like Thonti Naro, a farmer in Chingmei Village, who informs me proudly that she had earned Rs 2000 within two hours by selling her farm produce just the day before. Her village has seven SHGs, each classified alphabetically, and Naro belongs to Group C. According to Naro, the best thing about being a SHG member is that the local women can do things together. "In the old days, I found it difficult to go to town by myself and interact with strangers, but now two of us go to the market," she reveals.

Toshila Chang of the ECS explains the thinking behind this strategy, "Two is an optimal number. Two women can help each other load and unload the wares. If more went on these trips, the money spent on bus fares would go up and cut into their earnings."

In the same village I caught up with Maro, Mongshai and Anti, who were part of a nine-member SHG that was set up in 2010. Each of the women in the group had invested Rs 2000, and their SHG now had a corpus of Rs 45000. Anti describes the group's evolution, "We began lending money within the group, charging only a nominal interest of two per cent. To people outside the group we charged an interest of three per cent. We then decided to go beyond merely lending and started investing in small items required by our village people for their daily requirements, which we would bring in from town and sell at a



One of many self-help group women who come to the town to sell fresh farm produce and maximise their income.

modest profit. We would take the early morning bus to Tuensang town – the district headquarters – buy our supplies and get home on the evening bus."

Later, the women grew more ambitious. They made better use of that trip to town by taking their farm produce, whether it was cabbages, ginger or chillies, to sell at higher rates. After selling their vegetables, they would buy the sugar, milk, tea leaves and clothes needed in the village and bus their shopping back. Earnings thus doubled. Of course, if there was money to be made, there was a price to be paid as well. "Although we are used to carrying loads, sometimes our necks and lower backs would hurt dreadfully," admits Anti.

What keeps these groups together? For one, all the women are from the Chang tribe. For another, they have internalised the spirit of collective functioning. "We knew that we would only gain if we stood together. Misunderstandings were quickly sorted out," Naro explains. They also discussed their experiences. This led them to demand better schooling for their children, fight for government entitlements, and articulate issues once considered too sensitive to discuss publicly, like alcoholism and wife beating.

This was ultimately about asserting agency. A middle-aged woman from Hakchang Village

in Tuensang related how her SHG involvement impacted her life. When she lived with her husband's family as a newly-married woman, she had to depend on her father-in-law for even some soap. Once she joined an SHG and began to earn for herself she could buy more than a bar of soap – she could get her children a better education and ensure they ate better. In time, the SHGs ushered in a transformation in local attitudes towards women. They were now treated with respect and their savings went into improving village infrastructure. The men who had once resented the time their wives spent outside their homes in SHG activities were less hostile as they saw the money coming in. They no longer complained if asked to load vegetables on to a bus!

Tuensang's SHGs constitute just a small step towards gender equality in a state where being a woman is still a disadvantage and where even the government mandated 33 per cent reservations for women in local bodies has hit a road block. But Chingmak Kejong believes that the SHGs have given Tuensang's women both money and agency and this will soon start talking. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



The Naga people still largely depend on jhum farming for their livelihoods.

Where women agriculturists take charge and show the way

Agriculture is hard work. And contrary to the general perception, women, rather than the men, do most of the farm work. In fact, their contribution to India's total agricultural production is about 60 per cent – from helping to prepare the land, to sowing and harvesting the crop, to looking into its processing and storage. Many women farmers are now coming forward and taking their place within farming organisations, participating in the discussions and voicing their concerns. They seem set to demand the right to take charge of decision-making

AJITHA MENON, Kolkata

Gouri Mondal, 45, of Pathar Pratima Village in South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal does all the work on her husband's two-bigha farm. What is more, she even takes care of the seed collection and preservation. But Mondal's role is not just limited to tilling and caring for the land; she is also making her presence felt as the recently-elected state committee member of the Kisan Swaraj Samity (KSS) in Bengal.

More and more women farmers like Mondal are now coming forward and taking their place within farming organisations, participating in the discussions and voicing their concerns.

Of the over 200 farmers from nine districts in West Bengal that participated in a meeting of the KSS held in Kolkata in May this year, 30 per cent were women cultivators. "Such meetings give us the opportunity to interact with other farmers and discuss our problems. We can identify common concerns and lobby for better policies to address them. For instance, at the KSS meeting it was found that improper or delayed seed distribution by the government was a major problem for all the farmers. It is our entitlement but most of us are deprived of good seeds at the right time due to poor management of the seed distribution process," states Sarbani Bera, 38, of Paharchan

Village in East Midnapore District.

Mondal and Bera are among those farmers who have gone back to using organic fertilisers with the guidance and support of non-government organisations that are working together under the Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (ASHA) network. "We were using inorganic fertilisers for our paddy crop but when soil fertility was destroyed due to floods some years ago, the land was rendered useless. I learnt to make and use organic fertiliser to restore soil fertility," shares Mondal.

The ASHA network supports the Kisan Swaraj policy based on economic sustainability of agriculture-based livelihoods, ecological sustainability to preserve the productive natural resources, people's control over agricultural resources including land, water, forest, seed and knowledge, and ensuring non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians, according to Chandrani Das of Development Research Communication and Services Centre (DRCSC), a participating non-government organisation.

Aparna Mondal, 36, of Paargumti Village in North 24 Parganas District points out that with the DRCSC's support she switched to organic seeds to ensure maximum production from her one-bigha land. "I

learnt how to collect the seeds and preserve them using organic preservatives like charcoal and neem leaves. Apart from that I am making my own organic fertiliser from cow dung," she says. The industrious farmer has a sustainable agriculture-based livelihood system in place, "I started off with integrated farming at a small scale, growing vegetables in the kitchen garden and cultivating fish in my pond. Today, I make an annual profit of Rs 10000 from fish cultivation alone. The home-grown vegetables provide nutritious food for the family and I sell the extras for cash."

Most women cultivators see the shortage of water as a major issue. "The rains have become undependable so we tap water from the local ponds when the monsoons fail us. We need the government to seriously look into the irrigation issues, rainwater harvesting and laying of canals to ensure steady water supply to the fields," says Poornima Sarkar, 34, from Basirhat in North 24 Parganas District.

Sarkar and her husband, Mangal, grow paddy on two bighas of leased land using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and only organic fertiliser. "My father-in-law used to grow paddy on a lot of leased land in early 2000s. But we realised that increased use of inorganic fertilisers was destroying soil fertility. So my husband and I took on another two bighas where we use only organic fertiliser and SRI as we were trained by the DRCSC. We are getting good yield now," she elaborates.

The lack of proper irrigation facilities comes up for discussion at all farmer meetings. "All of us are facing the same problem. Monsoons are increasingly becoming erratic making rain-fed agriculture unviable. Water from local ponds is often used for irrigating the paddy fields but that is always inadequate. We want the government to seriously look into finding long-term solutions for the irrigation of farm lands," says Meera Kar, 52, another member of the KSS from Moorakberia Village



Subhrajit Dutta Mallick/WFS

The role of several women in West Bengal is not just limited to tilling and caring for the land; they are also making their presence felt in the Kisan Swaraj Samity. What's more, women agriculturists today have an opinion that they are not afraid to voice out loud.

in Howrah District. According to Alpana Bhakta, 37, a KSS member from Paschimpotol Village in East Midnapore District, all district committees of the KSS are encouraged to prepare a list of local demands within the context of state and national demands simply because it recognises the fact that every region has its own requirements dependent on specific climatic conditions and availability of natural resources. With these inputs and in keeping with the Kisan Swaraj policies, the KSS has prepared a farmers' charter of demands.

One of the main demands is the need for government focus on bringing about economic sustainability in farming. Explains Gouri Mondal, "The government has to ensure income security for farmers and see to it that financial support systems like subsidies, credit and insurance, benefit a larger number of farmers. Small farmers like us often get marginalised in such systems."

The other significant demand is related to the pricing policies for crops like paddy. "Pricing should take into account the real costs of production like land and water use, management expenses, farm inputs such as composting and seeds as well as family labour. For farmers, too, the cost of living has been steadily rising. Health and education account for a major

chunk of the expenses. With declining government support in these areas, it has severely hit our domestic budget making tough to make ends meet," she adds.

Moina Khatun, 25, of North 24 Parganas, has enrolled for a master's degree in Political Science at the Rabindra Bharati University. Yet, she considers herself a farmer first, working alongside her mother Hasina Bibi on 12 cottahs (1 cottah = 720 sq ft) of leased land. "I want a kisan credit card and access and control over productive resources like water, land, seed and forest. We use them the most, so we should have the decision-making powers as well," she asserts, adding, "Issues related to pesticide poisoning and bio-safety measures in the context of genetically modified crops like Bt Brinjal need to be resolved quickly as well."

The women farmers who are part of the KSS – and participated in the meeting in Kolkata – actively back two proposals: one that takes into account the detrimental effects of Bangladesh's approval to limited trials of Bt Brinjal on Indian agriculture, and another that opposes the ushering in of a green revolution in Eastern India. Clearly, women agriculturists today have an opinion that they are not afraid to voice out loud.

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photo: Anirban Banerjee/WFS

More and more women farmers are coming forward and taking their place within farming organisations, participating in the discussions and voicing their concerns.

Food fairs turn an eye-opener – malnutrition can be overcome

Abject poverty, illiteracy and a low social status have contributed to the high number of malnourished children among the Dalits of Dewas in Madhya Pradesh. However, nutrition *melas* have proved to be a real eye-opener for mothers. They are learning to make children's meals tasty and rich in vitamins and nutrients with the food items that are already available in their homes. They also realise that malnutrition is not a contagious disease but something that can be bettered with proper food intake

SHURIAH NIAZI, Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

Photos: SN/WFS



Maya is happy that her daughter, Bhumika, has now regained her health after she learnt of better ways to cook nutritious meals with the locally available food items.

Maya, 22, of Chaubara Jagir Village in Sonkatch Block of Dewas District in Madhya Pradesh, had no concept of malnutrition. All she knew was that her 13-month-old baby girl, Bhumika, was underweight and that she was falling ill frequently. When that happened, on the advice of the elders at home, she would take her to a village medicine man, who was actually a quack. She was unable to break the vicious cycle. Then early last year, Jan Sahas, a non-government organisation working on the issues of hunger and livelihood in the region, organised a nutrition *mela* (fair) in her village. Though initially hesitant, when she did decide to go there, it proved to be a real eye-opener for this young mother. Not only did she realise that her child was suffering from severe malnourishment, she also learnt that there were certain crucial steps she could take to

ensure that Bhumika regained her health.

Armed with the right information Maya has been able to change the fate of her daughter. Unlike many Dalit children in Chaubara Jagir, she is an active toddler. Says Maya, who has had her second daughter, Palak, only a month back, "Bhumika was frail and there was never a time when she was not suffering from some ailment or another. I did not know that this was happening because she was malnourished. In fact, I had never even heard of malnutrition till I visited the nutrition *mela* where I got a lot of useful information on how to tackle the situation and also prevent it. Bhumika is two years old and absolutely fine and I am sure that Palak will never have to go through this phase because I now know the importance of providing the right nutrition."

Although making ends meet is a huge struggle for Maya and her husband – they own a small farmland that does not suffice, forcing them to seek additional work as agricultural labourers – they are happy that at least their misfortunes will not adversely affect their daughters' physical well being.

A visit to the nutrition *mela* changed Rekha's life as well. She used to spend sleepless nights worrying about the health of her 32-month-old daughter, who weighed around 12 kilos. Bringing her up on a staple diet of dal and rice and occasionally some vegetable was not providing the child with all the nutrients she needed for healthy growth. "I was in a real fix but going to the nutrition *mela* was

the best decision I took. We were taught ways to make our children's meal tasty and rich in vitamins and nutrients with the food items that are already available in our homes," she shares.

Abject poverty, illiteracy and a low social status have contributed to the high number of malnourished children among the Dalits of Dewas. In Chaubara Jagir, which has a Dalit population of 1200 out of a total of 2800, the problem has been acute. This is what prompted Jan Sahas to zero in on the impoverished hamlet to run a focused campaign on fighting hunger. "With support from Welthungerhilfe, a German developmental agency, we initiated the Fight Hunger First Initiative (FHFI) under which we have been doing some key activities to improve the nutritional status of local children. On account of severe poverty and ignorance, the Dalits in this region are not able to look after the physical or mental well-being of their children," states Rajendra Ahirwar, Jan Sahas coordinator.

The biggest challenge, according to Ahirwar, has been spreading awareness on the critical issue. Driven by hearsay and superstition they used to think that malnutrition was actually a contagious disease and not something that could be bettered with a proper food intake. Besides, who had the time or the means to get into these "insignificant problems" when they had the larger struggles of survival and employment at hand. A majority of the difficulties that the Dalit community is faced with is on account of the caste-based discrimination they encounter.

While the dominant castes don't mix with them socially – they are not allowed to participate in festivities with them or even enter their home – where livelihood is concerned, these people end up working on their lands as agricultural labour for a pittance as their own holdings are minuscule. In these parts, Dalits even collect *tendu* leaves from the forest areas to supplement their income. Customarily, the state forest

department auctions *tendu* leaf areas to contractors who employ tribals and Dalits to pluck leaves at paltry wages. This work, too, is available only for about 15 days in the year.

When the field activists of Jan Sahas understood this reality they decided to talk to the women and men about securing their rights and entitlements under various government schemes. For starters, they spread awareness on securing work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a scheme that promises 100 days of unskilled wage work to below poverty line families. In addition, they started to rope in a few vocal community members and train them as influencers and leaders.

Once their confidence was gained, the nutrition *melas* followed, to enable them to learn about the various ways in which they could boost the health of their children using locally available resources. Informs Ahirwar, "We started holding these fairs from 2012 in the villages where this campaign is currently underway. Each village has its own fair where women are asked to bring some seasonal vegetables, cereals, rice and jaggery that are readily available in their home. With these materials they are taught how to prepare good food with minimum fuss. They are also informed about cleanliness, vaccination and breastfeeding."

Each fair is held for the duration of 12 days and, thereafter, individual visits are conducted to the homes of the participants for the next six months to make sure that they put their learnings into practice. Till date, Jan Sahas has organised four fairs in each village they are implementing this campaign, including Chaubara Jagir.

Another positive outcome of the awareness generation drive has been the increased role that *anganwadis* (nurseries) have started to play in supporting the cause of eliminating malnutrition from this area. Today, an awakened community demands that the centres remain open every day and the health workers are reciprocating by distributing



Women came with seasonal vegetables, cereals, rice and jaggery to prepare good food with minimum fuss.

free nutritional supplements and providing them with regular updates on health schemes they can avail of.

Significantly, what has saved several severely malnourished children of Chaubara Jagir from a worse fate is their visit to the government-run Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) at Sonkatch Block. In the last two years, 43 children have been admitted to the NRC, where special medical care is provided for 14 days. After they are discharged they have to visit the NRC every 15 days for the next two months. Incidentally, from no other village in the region have so many children been sent to the NRC, which clearly reflects the commitment of the *anganwadi* workers here, as a child can be taken into the NRC only on their recommendation. Such has been the success of this concerted campaign that, according to rough estimates, the number of severely malnourished children in Chaubara Jagir has come down by nearly 65 per cent.

Finally, Kassu Bai, 60, puts things in greater perspective. She says, "Earlier, the *anganwadi* centre used to remain closed. But once the members of Dalit community became empowered they approached the panchayat to raise this issue. These days, women can walk into the *anganwadi* on any day. Moreover, where many of us had not even heard of the MGNREGA or that we were entitled to get job under the scheme, today, we get regular employment and our financial condition has improved. Things are changing around here for us."

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



The women of Chaubara Jagir gather for a nutrition mela organised in their village.

A film opens a window for special children

Black is Beautiful is a documentary film in progress that is fighting funding odds so as to be ready for screening in January 2016. The film features 11 visually impaired children of various ages. Deepak Sharma, a theatre person and documentary filmmaker who studied improvisational theatre, was inspired to train the youngsters and, seeing their eagerness to learn and perform, decided to self-fund the documentary

SHOMA A. CHATTERJI, Kolkata

“This documentary will open a new window for parents of visually challenged children. It will inspire more such people to dream, and believe that they can realise their dreams; I also hope it will change the perceptions of mainstream people and lead to positive change in social behaviour,” says film-maker Deepak Sharma.

Interactive Improvisational Theatre is a technique that can change the perceptions of a particular subject. The contribution of Improvisational Theatre, like Playback Theatre and Forum Theatre, is vital for bringing about a change in society and individuals. It has also proved successful in helping the actors to overcome their emotional handicaps.

“I trained in improvisation storytelling in Bangalore,” Deepak explains. He shifted to Delhi a while ago and met some children who were visually challenged. He found they were diffident, which made him feel that he should impart some of his training to them. “After having worked in this field for more than four years, I decided to teach this technique to these 11 children,” Deepak elaborates. **Black is Beautiful** is a docu-fiction which captures the journey of these children, who perform a unique style of interactive improvisational theater and prove that they can achieve everything a person with vision can.

What made Deepak name this film **Black is Beautiful**? “There is this notion among mainstream people that visually challenged boys and girls can experience only one colour and that is black, because the word ‘black’ is associated with darkness,” he explains. “This



Deepak Sharma, the director.

means that mainstream people with normal vision fill the worlds of these youngsters with darkness, which is a metaphor for ignoring and marginalizing them. Visually normal people do not even understand that visually challenged people can experience visuals through their other senses, such as touch, taste, smell and hearing. They have absolutely no issues about coping with the world they live in. I have named the film **Black is Beautiful** because I personally feel that the saying ‘black is beautiful’ applies to the world they live in.”

The 11 actors are visually challenged to differing degrees. Some are completely blind, some partially blind and some are severely challenged, but do have a little vision. Two of the children, Suraj and Durgesh, who have 10 per cent vision, were denied admission in a school. The authorities told their parents point blank that, “If the children cannot see the blackboard, we cannot give them admission.”

Deepak took on these children, treated them like normal kids, and while teaching and filming them, taught them to use words like ‘see’, ‘look’, etc. Consequently, they began to look at themselves differently. At first the children would stand holding hands and make sounds with their feet while walking to help them negotiate an unfamiliar path. But slowly, their fear and anxiety faded away and they learnt to stand by themselves, without the need to hold hands with others.

After some months of groping for the right form of performance, Deepak discovered through trial and error, a new format of theatre. The children performed in Delhi and the unique show was a grand success. “As we went through training, rehearsals and so on, we gathered bits and pieces of their lives and backgrounds and this led to the documentary film. It was entirely unplanned and spontaneous,” says Deepak.

And what do the young actors say about this programme and film? Chetna, 16, an actor and singer, said, “For one year, I was just soaking in the learning and



Photos: Deepak Sharma

Some of the actors in the film.

the training. Now, it is time for me to use this learning in my life. It has changed me and made me more responsible towards my parents who are also visually impaired. I now know how to react in various situations and can fight against all odds.”

“I could see a change in my body and my mind within a year of doing theatre. My way of interacting with people, the way I can infuse energy into my talk and behaviour, have made me confident in my day-to-day activities,” says Pankaj, another visually challenged actor.

Rekha interjects, “I always wanted to act when I heard about acting from others. Since I am from West Bengal, I have this deep fascination for art. This opportunity to act was much beyond my expectations. I thought I would be mugging the script and then acting, but this is pure improvisation on the spot, which has given us the confidence to speak in front of anyone on any topic. This has changed me completely as I learnt about surroundings and how a mind should think and react.”

Suraj says, “I came to know about this training program through a radio program and now I have learnt about theatre from Deepak Sir. This has had a positive impact on my body language and appearance. I lacked confidence and was shy because I come from a village. But now I feel much more confident and my body language has changed completely.” Theatre has given the children the power and strength to carry

on with their lives, but they still need financial support for education, health and other needs, to enable them to realise their dreams. They have talents which were hitherto latent. Some are gifted singers, some are really good actors and some wish to join the IAS and other civil services.

“This documentary will open a new window for parents of visually challenged children. It will inspire more such people to dream, and believe that they can realise their dreams; I also hope that it will change the perceptions of mainstream people and lead to positive change in social behaviour,” says Deepak. He also hopes that the government and policy makers are influenced enough by it to rethink their rehabilitation strategies and approaches to help the visually impaired. “Moreover, this project will help these children become better persons and set an example for the world,” he feels.

Black is Beautiful is mostly a self-funded project. Some support comes from the family and close friends of the filmmaker. The contribution of the crew is to charge only a token sum of Re 1 for their work. Deepak is seeking support from industry and film lovers to complete the effort and tell this beautiful story to the world. ■

Grassroots

A Journal of
Press Institute of India
Research Institute for Newspaper Development
Second Main Road, Taramani
CPT Campus, Chennai 600 113
Tel: 044-2254 2344 Telefax: 044-2254 2323
www.pressinstitute.in

Director & Editor
Sashi Nair
editorpiirind@gmail.com

Assistant Editor
Susan Philip

Assistant Manager
& Editorial Coordinator
R. Suseela
asst.edit@gmail.com

Design and Layout
Seetha Ramesh

Senior Manager - Accounts
& Administration
N. Subramanian
subbudu.n@gmail.com

Manager - Advertising,
Administration
& Library Services
R. Geetha
rindgeetha@gmail.com

Office Assistant
B. Rajendran

The Press Institute of India does not take responsibility for returning unsolicited material. It may not always be possible to reply to senders of unsolicited material. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or publisher.

Every effort has been taken to assure that the accuracy of information contained in this publication is based on reliable sources. All trademarks and trade names mentioned in this magazine belong to their respective owners. In case of error editor/publisher shall not be liable for any loss or prejudice caused to the reader. The publisher reserves the copyright of the materials published in the magazine. No part of the articles or photographs can be reproduced without the prior permission of the publisher. All disputes will be subjected to the jurisdiction of Chennai only.

Advertisement Tariff

Full Page: B&W: Rs. 5,000
Colour: Rs. 10,000

Half Page: B&W: Rs. 3,000
Colour: Rs. 5,000

Mechanical Details

Bleed : 254 mm x 355 mm

Material can be sent by email to
rindgeetha@gmail.com or by
CD to our address given above

Annual Subscription

12 Issues Rs. 180
36 Issues Rs. 500

Please note that the cheque or demand draft or at par cheque payable in Chennai, for the subscription amount should be drawn in the name of **Press Institute of India ONLY** and NOT in the name of the **Grassroots**.

Playing a decisive role in protecting their right to health



Photos: SA/WFS

Meera Devi, 48, a ward member from Loma Panchayat in Muzzaffarpur District's Gaighat Block, has emerged as a true champion of healthcare in her panchayat, which is highly flood-prone and largely inhabited by scheduled caste and other backward class communities.

Meera Devi, 48, a ward member from Loma Panchayat in Muzzaffarpur District's Gaighat Block, is one of several grassroots women elected representatives in Bihar. She has emerged as a true champion of healthcare in her panchayat, which is highly flood-prone and largely inhabited by scheduled caste and other backward class communities.

This is not a region where women, even those duly elected, move around freely – and, in the beginning, Meera followed this social diktat. While she did attend to the matters that were brought to her notice, effectively, it was a government-aided leadership training she participated in a few years ago that sparked her interest in matters of health and sanitation. Not only did she learn about the various related government schemes and benefits, including the availability of an untied fund by the National Rural Health Mission (NHM), but she also fully realised the critical need for having functional infrastructure and a motivated group of frontline health workers like the accredited social health activist (ASHA) and auxiliary

nurse midwife (ANM). “One day, a couple of years back, even though it was not quite advisable, I decided to visit our local health sub-centre. I wanted to see its existing condition and the kind of services available there. When I arrived after a considerable walk, to my utter surprise, I found it locked. So I called the ANM who told me that she was on her rounds in the village. Upon further inquiries with families nearby I came to know that the sub-centre was never open so people had stopped coming,” she recalls.

Instead of getting discouraged Meera got down to work. She already knew of the untied fund the panchayat could make use of to restart the operations so she spoke with the ANM to figure out a plan of action. “Every year, the NHM transfers Rs 10000 into a joint account held by the panchayat and the ANM. This is expressly for strengthening the working of the sub-centre. As the money can't be utilised without the approval of the village health sanitation nutrition committee (VHSNC) I approached them,” she elaborates.

In April 2013, Meera participated in a meeting called by the *mukhiya* (village head)

Whereas ‘the personal is political’ is one of those phrases that feminists bounce around a lot, several grassroots women elected representatives in Bihar have indeed made it their business to bring the so-called ‘personal problems’ of women and girls, especially those related to their health, into the political arena. They realise that instilling good hygiene practices will positively impact maternal and child health. Here are inspiring stories of Meera, Savitri and Manju

SAADIA AZIM, Muzzaffarpur, Bihar

where she vociferously spoke of the gaps in the village's health sub-centre (HSC). She shared details about how it lacked basic equipment such as an examination table, blood pressure measuring machine, weighing scale and furniture. “I suggested that we use the untied fund to purchase the things needed to make the HSC serviceable and my proposal was accepted. The ANM and I sourced everything and in a matter of weeks it was up and running. Every Monday, women and children queue up for check-ups,” she informs, with satisfaction and pride.

For Shukla Devi, 20, the HSC reopened at the perfect time – when she was expecting her first child. “Throughout my pregnancy, I was fortunate that I could walk over to the HSC to get my pre-natal check-ups and pick up vitamins and other medicines. The ASHA was very patient with me. Now that my baby has been born, the ANM and ASHA are taking due care of the child as well. It is weighed during every visit and the vaccinations are given on time,” she says.

Rakesh Kumar and his wife, too, are relieved that they don't have to travel to the primary health centre (PHC) eight kilometres away to get their newborn immunised. “Earlier, we did not even know that there could be a HSC here, let alone find one that actually works. For our child's monthly vaccines we do not have to spend money and time to go to the PHC,” says Rakesh.

Of course, ever since Meera has become alert to the health needs of her people she has been reaching out to other panchayats, talking to female members about the advantages of having a HSC close by. Consequently, there has been a ripple effect across Gaighat Block – 10 of the 23 HSCs in the region are fully operational and on an appointed day in the week provide critical services such as immunisation, distribution of multi-vitamins

and nutrition counselling apart from basic health check-ups. “It's not so difficult to set up an HSC. In our panchayat itself there are three such facilities now. All one needs to do is to rent a suitable place, source the necessary equipment and enlist the support of the ASHA or ANM. The monetary aspect is taken care of thanks to the untied fund,” says the diligent ward member.

Loma Panchayat's ANM, Rekha Kumari, is glad that elected women like Meera are focusing on the availability of quality healthcare. “Health workers like me find it easier to address problems by joining hands with women ward members. In Loma, we work together to keep a track of the medicines, encourage women to come to the HSC for check-ups, engage with teenage girls on maintaining hygiene during menstruation, and so on. Women are conscious and come of their own accord. I no longer have to go door-to-door to register pregnant women and newborns.”

Meera got an opportunity to learn to exercise her influence to improve health services after she went through a leadership programme initiated by the Center for Catalyzing Change (C3) and supported by the Bihar Institute of Public Administration and Rural Development (BIPARD). Explains Sandeep Ojha, state programme co-ordinator, C3, “We had initially planned to strengthen our state-level advocacy efforts on women's issues by involving elected women representatives (EWRs) through a pilot project that began in 2007. However, gradually, we understood that these women have tremendous potential to contribute to the smooth functioning of rural health services. Just by sharing information and focused knowledge they have achieved amazing results.”

If Meera Devi set in motion the revival of HSCs in her Gaighat Block then Manju Devi,

45, ward member of Madhuban Panchayat in Sitamarhi District's Dumra Block, is ensuring the wellness of adolescent girls because she is convinced that instilling good hygiene practices, including the use and disposal of sanitary napkins, as well as boosting their nutritional status by providing balanced midday meals in schools and timely distributing iron and folic acid supplements, will impact maternal and child health in her area.

She says, “I felt like a powerful leader the day I was able to compel the block education officer to have a meeting with me to discuss the availability of free sanitary napkins in schools. I know how girls are forced to drop out when they begin menstruating; at least this is one way it can be prevented.” Additionally, she has been keeping a close watch on the quality of mid-day meals.

Like Manju, Savitri Devi, elected member of Manar Panchayat in Aurangabad District's Daudnagar Block, is committed to bettering the lives teenage girls as well. She had made sure that the doors of the Manar HSC are open to those who need advice and assistance. “The girls are counselled on eating nutritious meals and maintaining hygiene in addition to telling them about the adverse consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy. This enables them to take a stand for their own well-being,” remarks Savitri.

In a state where only 34 per cent women receive ante-natal care and a mere 22 per cent go in for institutional delivery (National Family Health Survey III data), and where there is a dire need to shore up women's access to contraception, elected women like Meera, Savitri and Manju are playing a decisive role in safeguarding women's right to health. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Manju Devi (standing), ward member of Madhuban Panchayat in Sitamarhi District's Dumra Block, is working to boost maternal and child health in her area by instilling good hygiene practices in adolescent girls as well as to ensure balanced midday meals in schools and timely distribution of folic acid and supplements.