

Women can do it

RADHESHYAM JADHAV

Be it health, water, cleanliness or alcohol consumption, villages in rural Maharashtra are witnessing a silent movement in the last few years, thanks to the women sarpanches at the helm.

The Indian Constitution's 73rd Amendment Act in 1993 introduced a three-tier system of local governance ranging from the village to the district level. Through this, reservations for women were introduced at the gram panchayat level. This was the first step towards women's leadership at the grassroots-level. The legislation had the potential to enable women to transform the state structure. This proved crucial in enhancing the confidence of women in rural India. After taking the reins of villages as sarpanches, hundreds of untutored women in Maharashtra have led a silent revolution, which has brought a paradigm shift in rural development.

This shift has brought health and sanitation to the core of rural development. Women, who never even thought of opening their mouths in front of their men, are now talking about iodized salt, safe delivery, clean drinking water, exclusive breast-feeding, sanitation and even safer sex to avoid HIV infection. Water management, wastewater disposal, toilets, solid waste disposal, house and environment sanitation, personal hygiene, health education and communication, unconventional energy sources, family welfare activities, community participation and innovative programmes have become focal points on the agenda of the women sarpanches.

A Tale of Toilets

Steps taken by these women sarpanches have led to a liberation of thousands of rural women. Venubai Kadam is one such example. Venubai suffered from Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) for many years. UTI is an infection that occurs when micro-organisms, usually bacteria, cling to the opening of the urethra (the urinary passage) and begin to multiply.

Venubai told her family about her disease, but the family conveniently ignored it. It was not only her. Almost every woman in remote Borne Village in Satara district suffered from the same problem. When Sunita Lohar took over as sarpanch, she realised the gravity of the situation. "I am a woman myself. So, I could understand what they were going through," she says. The first thing Lohar did as the sarpanch was to construct toilets in the village.

"There was not a single toilet in our village. Even the wealthy families thought toilets were a waste of money. So, women had no option but to wait till late night or wee hours to answer nature's call. It was horrible, as we could not go for open defecation or urination in daylight since men were working in the fields," says Lohar.

As usual, men in the gram panchayat were not enthusiastic about toilets. Lohar, however, remained firm and women themselves developed and constructed low-cost toilets. Today, Borne is one of those villages in the state where every household has its own toilets.

Of 27,876 gram panchayat in the state, 8,531 panchayats are open defecation free, thanks to the initiative taken by rural women. Out of these, 2,367 panchayats have been awarded the Nirmal Gram award while 6,164 panchayats

are awaiting the formal approval for the award from the central government.

Water Woes

Popular participation of women, led by women sarpanches, have brought tremendous change in the face of rural Maharashtra. This amounts to involving the larger population in the decision making process and actual implementation.

When women sarpanches in Satara district started a defecation-free movement in their villages, men ridiculed them. But the women population backed their sarpanches. "In the last few years, the movement has gained momentum, thanks to the united force of the women," says Vijayanti Otari, an activist from Satara.

"You would not believe it, but 99 percent of the health problems were the result of lack of toilet facilities. Many suffered from stomach problems, digestive system problems and abdominal pains. With construction of toilets, these problems have been solved." Rutuja Jalgaonkar, former sarpanch of Jalgaon village in the Konkan region, says.

"Our men warned that toilets would need more water. When there is scarcity of drinking water, how could we afford to waste water in toilets, they asked," recalls Venubai. "We told our men that we fetch drinking water from wells some 2-3 kilometres away. We will fetch some more water for toilets as well."

Despite the state having maximum number of dams, only 16 percent of the land is under irrigation and thousands of villages suffer from water scarcity. "We have to fetch water from wherever it is available. Majority of us suffer from back and neck pains," complain women of Jalgaon. With the initiative taken by sarpanch Rutuja Jalgaonkar, today the village has 2 water schemes, 534 private and 8 public wells catering to their needs. The equitable water distribution system has been introduced so that each family gets adequate water. In villages like Pipri in Nagpur district, woman sarpanch Vanita Kirpan's consistent efforts have forced the government to launch a water scheme worth Rs. 2.88 lakhs. ...

Even in villages like Ankalkhop, where ample water is available, sarpanches like Sumantai Suryawanshi have conducted regular classes to educate women and children about the use of water. Basic things like washing hands with soap after defecation, using clean pots to store drinking water, brushing teeth twice a day and daily bath have been imbibed in the minds of the people by women sarpanches.

"The women sarpanches are self-motivated. They got a chance to do something for their village, and they grabbed the opportunity. The government machinery, zilla parishad and panchayat samitis played a secondary role in facilitating the movement," says Irshad Bagwan, Satara Zilla Parishad Information, Education and Communications Officer.

Cleanliness Claim

In 2000-2002, the state initiated the "Sant Gadge Baba Village Sanitation Campaign" (SGVSC). The state department of water Supply and Sanitation introduced a campaign for a 'clean village,' which triggered a phenomenal change in rural Maharashtra. It turned out to be the biggest campaign propagating environmental sanitation, personal hygiene and

health measures ever undertaken by the rural masses. According to estimates, in the first year itself, the total investment mobilised by communities was worth Rs 200 crore, with Rs. 6 crore as state investment.

The campaign proved to be a major boost to the efforts of the women sarpanches. Not surprisingly, majority of the villages that emerged winners were led by women sarpanches

A Different Spirit

In hundreds of villages, especially in Western Maharashtra, an anti-liquor campaign is going strong under the leadership of women sarpanches. Women are going to all imaginable lengths to protect their husbands and homes from the evils of the spirit, literally and figuratively.

In Masa Balewadi village in Kolhapur, former sarpanch Gita Killedar launched an anti-liquor campaign a couple of years ago. "We had no option but to take up the lathi," she says. Like her women sarpanches in remote parts of Sangli, Satara and Kolhapur are looking not to governmental or social organisations to curb the easy availability of alcohol, but to their own kind.

"Consumption of spurious liquor had led to many deaths in our region. But our men would not relent. Even the youth started drinking. We had to intervene to save their lives," say women from Satara. The SGVSC proved to be a boon. Women's participation was mandatory to join the cleanliness campaign. Every village that participated in the competition banned liquor shops.

"The campaign came as a divine intervention. We cannot tell you how our men became animals after drinking," recall women from Jainyal village. Hundreds of spurious liquor dens were destroyed. Shops were banned and drunkards were punished. In many villages, drunkards were taken in procession on donkeys.

Villages like Kambalwadi, led by sarpanch Bharati Shahji Redekar, not only became alcohol-free, but all addictive substances, including cigarettes, tobacco, gutkha and aerated drinks, were banned. Women's groups have now taken up campaigns on women's health issues such as ban on pre-natal sex determination.

Winds of Change

In Nidhal, sarpanch Savitribai Khuspe has led the campaign to build 105 soakage pits for disposal of wastewater. Sixty-seven metres of underground gutters and four hundred and fifty-one metres of open gutters have been constructed. Thirty-six families use wastewater for kitchen gardening. Every family is using unconventional energy sources.

In Kambalwadi, use of turmeric water is encouraged instead of chemical pesticides. In homes, biogas and gobar gas provide energy for cooking. Vermiculture compost pits, medicinal herb gardens and afforestation of the surrounding hills are some of the programmes initiated by the women.

Another visible change in the villages is the Primary Health Centres. Women sarpanches have ensured that the health centres are functional and medicines are available 24x7. Women member of Kavthepiran ensure that delivery of every woman takes place in hospitals.

"Now women are openly talking about their problems. They want to know what HIV is and how it spreads. Health consciousness of rural women is on the rise, thanks to the initiatives taken by our women sarpanches," says Ujjwala Kadam, a gram panchayat member from Satara. "Women Raj in villages has given new lease of life, not only to the

women but to every person in the village," she concludes. (This article, first published in *The Times of India* of April 8, 2008, was awarded the 8th Sarojini Naidu Prize for "best reporting on women and panchayati raj" in the English category. Dr. George Mathew heads the five-member jury. The Sarojini Naidu Prize carries Rs two lakh in cash and is given every year by The Hunger Project, New Delhi.)

Let Legislative Councils Represent Local Governments

M.R. KOLHATKAR

In my view, the answer to the conundrum about legislative council's role is provided by the existence of the third tier of federalism which was embedded in the Constitution through 73rd and 74th Constitution (Amendment) Acts adopted in 1992 and which came into force from April 24, 1993 and June 1, 1993, respectively. These constitutional amendments also added two new schedules viz. the Eleventh Schedule enumerating the powers of panchayats and the Twelfth Schedule enumerating the powers of the municipalities. The third tier of federalism in India is in glaring contrast e.g., to the US where the creation and abolition of counties squarely rests with the state governments. It is the author's contention that the third tier of federalism also solves the problem of the identity of the electoral college which had baffled the Constitution makers in 1949.

It is significant to note that Article 171(2) deals with the composition of the legislative council until parliament by law provides otherwise. It is no doubt true that Article 171 (3)(a) provides for a similar electorate viz. electorate comprising of municipalities, district boards and such other local authorities of the state. But there is a variety of statutory local bodies created by respective state legislatures which differ from state to state. The new element since 1993 is that we have a constitutional provision for creating panchayats and municipalities and moreover, we have an implicit constitutional mandate to provide that the Second Chamber at the state level be wholly drawn from district panchayats and urban municipalities.

It follows that Article 171 needs to be amended to provide for appropriate electorate in terms of Article 243 to 243ZG. The Constitution is required to provide that apart from a few nominees of the Governor as in the case of nominees of President in Rajya Sabha, the rest of the members of legislative councils should be entirely elected by the district panchayats and municipalities.

The widely accepted justification for Rajya Sabha as a second chamber at the union level is that India is a federal state. The justification for the legislative council as the second chamber at the state level would have to be that India is a three-tier federation and the legislative council is needed to reflect the third tier of federalism.

It follows that with the amendment of Article 171, Article 169 loses its *raison d'etre*. It needs to be deleted. Thus the legislative council will cease to be a creature of the legislative assembly. A fresh look at the powers of the legislative council in the matter of money bills and other legislation also would be necessary. It needs to be given a voice in regard to money bills which relate to subjects enumerated in the Eleventh Schedule and Twelfth Schedule of the Constitution. The proposed amendments would transform India into a truly three-tier federal polity.

□ Excerpts: Courtesy: *Janata* September 14, 2008