



THE
HUNGER
PROJECT

Women Leaders
in Village Panchayats

We are here to make a difference Vol. II

“To be a Panchayat leader means that I have been chosen by the people of my village, and entrusted by the Constitution to lead my community to achieve a healthy and productive life. A life where everyone’s basic rights are met. As a Panchayat leader, I promise to use this opportunity, power, and responsibility, to ensure the well-being of everyone in my village.”

- Oath taken by all elected women representatives
at the end of a Women’s Leadership Workshop

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FOREWORD

One hundred and eighteen elected women leaders have been profiled in the second volume of “Women Leaders in Village Panchayats Vol. II”

As we document these profiles and share them with you we continue to be amazed by the path breaking strides being taken by elected women representatives across the country. These profiles reiterate our faith and knowledge that women leaders are ensuring that children attend school, that their villages are equipped with adequate health facilities and that all sections of the population are aware of and can access government schemes. In short these profiles chronicle the dramatic transformation taking effect in villages governed by these dynamic women. Yet, this transformation is silent, as it goes largely unrecorded.

This compendium is an attempt to ensure that the trials and tribulations of elected women leaders are acknowledged, and their voices are heard. The need to do so is an urgent one, for it may change the destiny of India’s villages. Without the documentation of its processes and realities, future generations will never know how the women of rural India stood up and fought, through the institution of democracy, for their rights and for those of their children. These rights include the right to govern, but the right to be heard, the right to information, the right to vote for an able candidate and the right to become a good leader. Above all, they include the right to holistic, all-inclusive development goals. Women leaders ensure development for all, not just for the empowered and influential. Their worldview is true to the letter of democracy.

I am positive that you will join me in appreciating the work, dedication, and courage shown by the elected women representatives we have profiled here. These one hundred and eighteen voices are but a sample of the kind of work being done in the villages of India.



Rita Sarin

Country Director

THE HUNGER PROJECT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ASSAM	1
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	17
BIHAR	27
HIMACHAL PRADESH	41
JAMMU & KASHMIR	59
KARNATAKA.....	71
MADHYA PRADESH.....	103
MAHARASHTRA.....	125
ORISSA.....	153
RAJASTHAN.....	179
TAMIL NADU	207
UTTARAKHAND.....	227
GLOSSARY.....	247
INDEX.....	251

INTRODUCTION

This publication by The Hunger Project is a continuation of its earlier effort to profile the work done by elected women leaders of Panchayati Raj Institutions*. The need for this is two-fold.

Firstly, there is a need to document and archive the work of these pioneers – who are eagerly availing of the opportunity provided under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to contest and work for their communities as elected leaders. This collection of the profiles of one hundred and eighteen women leaders demonstrates that they are exercising their leadership skills across the country and are transforming themselves, their villages, and their communities. The profiles vary in length, structure, and content. This is deliberate, as women leaders themselves are not homogeneous. They are from different regions, castes, communities, and classes. Some are educated, some neo-literates, some barely literate and some have never been to school. Yet, across all the profiles, the problems they face are similar: an ineffective and indifferent bureaucracy, a patriarchal bias, a hostile work environment and over and above, the constant need to reiterate that they, as women leaders in Panchayat Institutions, are working towards holistic development.

As one reads the profiles, one realises that the elected women leaders are enthusiastic, eager to learn and proud of their achievements. All they need is support, guidance and training to help them realise their potential. It is definitely not their gender that holds them back but support which has been denied to them through their social conditioning. This is the major deterrent and not their ability to govern. This fact is what this collection effectively brings out. They are the first to admit that they have a lot to learn. Others would have weakened and given up, but not these women leaders. They are aware that they are under scrutiny, that there is a different yardstick used to measure their success, simply because of their gender. They are their own harshest critics and are surprisingly aware of their own shortcomings; some freely admit that they only contested because they were asked to by their male relatives. They admit that their husbands/brothers/sons help them with their work. They are equally candid about the fact that they had limited understanding about what they were taking on, what was expected of them, and how they would achieve what they wanted to. Most are first-time contestants who had never taken a step outside their homes before they filed their nomination papers.

* 'Women Leaders in Village Panchayats' was published in 2006, which profiled 51 elected women leaders achievements; 'No Short Cut to Leadership' by S. Jothimani published in 2007, an autobiography of a Tamilian elected women's struggle to bring water to her village.

The second reason is there are still critics who maintain that women leaders act only as proxies for their male relatives. If they resist, they are labelled ineffective and considered ill equipped to handle leadership. They are dismissed due to lack of experience in decision making/politics, lack of education, their gender, and the socio-cultural patriarchal framework of their reality. The women leaders have not been given a chance to prove otherwise – they have been condemned and hung even before a trial! It is a great pity that we do not recognise and acknowledge the millions of women leaders who are battling insupportable odds every day to bring about change in their villages.

Profile after profile - from states as diverse as Assam and Tamil Nadu, and Districts as far-flung as Jammu and Kashmir's Kargil and Madhya Pradesh's Satna – makes one aware that women leaders have far more than just their seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions at stake! The Hardass women's community of Kargil district in Ladakh, where Panchayat elections have not been held since 2001, have formed a group and effectively fought and secured water rights for themselves and their village, even in the absence of a Panchayat. They are now eagerly waiting for the State Government to announce the elections so that they can contest.

Through the Panchayat, women leaders become mobile, their voices are heard in public forums, they interact with a range of people, and they innovate. To do all this, they take help from whatever quarter they can, be it husbands or sons, as long as they can continue their work. They realise that this is an opportunity for them, perhaps for the first time, to openly exert some authority and participate fully in the crucial development of their communities.

The women leaders ensure that, unlike themselves, their children and particularly their girls, have access to education, healthcare, sanitation, better roads, etc. They are sensitive and inclusive of those who have been left out of the development agenda. They proudly list all that they have done for their communities and while reading these profiles; one is not just inspired, but also sometimes brought to tears because of their struggles. The time has come to acknowledge, honour and support women elected to village Panchayats - this compilation is testimony to this fact!

ASSAM

Anita Gogoi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Pub Sarigoan
Block: Dekagara
District: Jorhat

My ward consists of 450 households spread across three villages of Kasagaral Nawhalia, Nanhalia, and Humari Gaon in Assam. Having been involved in social work through my association with *Mahila* (Women's) Committees, I felt the need to address my concerns about the Ward's development through a wider platform. Though I was involved in the Mahila Committee and other cultural organizations before, I now have a respectable and more effective platform to undertake development projects in my Ward.

The villagers trust me and give me their support. We have never had any misunderstanding even though sometimes I am unable to give them – individual benefits from Social Welfare Schemes. I myself am not satisfied with this, as people had voted for me with the hope to get something in return.

After joining office, I facilitated the allotment of a building to the Mahila Committee giving them a permanent place for their meetings. I introduced various schemes such as the *Randhan Jyoti*, *Kutir Jyoti*, *Annapurna* and the *Antyodaya Scheme* for the *Below the Poverty Line* (BPL) families of the Ward. Apart from this, I also looked into other aspects of development of the Ward, such as the construction of roads and tube wells, and the cleaning of public tanks to ensure safe drinking water. I arranged benefits for people affected by leprosy, through the District Social Welfare Department.

I have organized trainings in making pickles, jams, and jelly for the village women. I have also initiated five *Self-Help Groups* (SHGs) among the women from my Ward.

I have attended training programs about different Government Schemes at the Block-level and have attended the Women's Leadership Workshop, conducted by The Hunger Project-NEST. In the initial phase of work, I faced several problems while dealing with Government offices, but after attending the workshop, I am more confident and am able to assert my rights as a representative of the people. I now know my rights very well. I strongly believe in the rights of women and feel that they should come forward in every aspect. To carry forward the work I have initiated in my Ward, I have decided to contest the next election as well.

Anjali Boruah
Ward Member
Panchayat: Chinapara
Block: Bargchong
District: Jorhat

My first tryst with village level politics was back in 1992 when I was elected as a Ward member. In my first tenure, I was not able to bring about many changes in the Panchayat. However, this second time, I have been far more confident and conscious of my rights, and being an active member of a political party has helped significantly. To begin with, I conducted a survey in the ward to determine the total number of households and list the BPL families, the unemployed, and the disabled. I mapped out resources like safe drinking water facilities and communication facilities in the village.

I have maintained good relationships with local political parties, MLAs, *Anchalik Samiti* Members (Block Panchayat), and *Zilla Parishad* (District Panchayat) Members. This has stood me in good stead as I have built a cremation ground, a Buddhist Temple, and a road in the village using the *Member of Parliament's* (MP) fund. I constructed a waiting shed, a public urinal, an Aanganwadi centre, a school, roads, tube wells etc., using the Panchayat fund. Forty BPL families benefited through the individual beneficiary selection that was initiated in the area. Issuing death and birth certificates, Panchayat resident certificates and annual income certificates facilitated the process of availing loans.

Apart from the work of distributing and administrating Panchayat Schemes a Panchayat representative should also think about the development of society. Keeping this in mind I took up women's issues in the Panchayat and whenever we received a complaint regarding dowry or any other form of violence against women, Panchayat meetings have been called and appropriate punishments meted out. I managed to stop the sale of local liquor in the area, with the cooperation of the Police and the Excise Department. I addressed specific needs of poor women through the Antodaya Scheme, Kutir Jyoti and provision of cooking gas connections. I also organized trainings for many women and young girls in nursing and other small industries.

I regularly organize cultural programs even in the Gram Sabha to make them more exciting and to bring in a sense of social cohesion. After attending the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-NEST, I brought about significant changes at the Panchayat level with more confidence and faith.

I plan to contest the next elections and I am keen to continue the process of development that I have initiated.

Dolly Saikia

President

Panchayat: Hensua

Block: Kathalguri

District: Golaghat

I am 35 years old and have studied up to Class X. I have two sons. I became the President of the Hensua Gram Panchayat after a no-confidence motion was passed against the previous (male) President, who had completed two years of his tenure. I was selected as President because I had read the Assam Panchayat Act thoroughly. I was the Panchayat Vice President earlier, and was an active member of Congress and Chief Secretary of the Local Mahila Committee. After being elected to the Panchayat, I underwent training held by the *District Rural Development Agency* (DRDA). I also attended the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-NEST. This workshop helped me gain confidence to carry forward my work as the Panchayat President.

Poverty, floods, transport and communication, poor electricity, safe drinking water and unemployment are some of the problems that the Panchayat faces. In order to solve these problems, I talked to the concerned Government Departments and the local Minister of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), to release funds allocated to the village under the various Schemes.

I see to it that Panchayat meetings are held regularly. While implementing various development schemes in the village, I give preference to women and BPL families. Till date, I have facilitated the construction of eight roads, two sub-centres, one library, two school boundary walls, two bus shelters, four public urinals, a cremation ground, two cultural halls, a temple, a playground and more. Two Lower Primary Schools and three *Namghars* (a community prayer hall) have been repaired. Other individual benefits, distributed under my supervision include 65 IAY houses, 100 latrine plates, 17 cooking gases, sanction of ten widow pensions, 40 medical grants, 87 BPL ration cards, distribution of yarn to 50 women, and ten beneficiaries for the *Kalpataru Scheme*, etc. I have also helped establish three women's SHGs.

I personally helped identify a group of 16 girls among the BPL families for training in nursing, without any government help. By levying taxes on the tea garden estate, I have managed to give salaries to the Ward Members.

During my short tenure in the Panchayat as President, I have been able to do a lot for my village, but still, I feel that there is a lot to be done. Therefore, I plan to contest the next elections.

Gunabati Das
Ward Member
Panchayat: Uttar Paschim
Sari Gaon
Block: Barghchong
District: Jorhat

My Panchayat, Uttar Pashim Sarigaon lies on the banks of the Kokila River. I have studied until Class VI and have had considerable political inspiration at home.

I participate in all the Panchayat meetings and ensure that the women of my ward are also allowed to actively participate in these meetings. After attending the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-NEST, my life has changed a lot. I am now conscious of my role, responsibilities, and rights as a representative of the people. I now realize that I have to negotiate with the President to demand facilities for my Ward and have now started doing just that.

I stress on equal distribution of facilities amongst all the wards and I do not mind confronting the Panchayat President or the Commissioner to get my work done. If deserving people do not get the facilities under Government Schemes, I complain to the Deputy Commissioner and fight for their rights. I brought several schemes like the IAY, old age pension, Kalpataru, Antodaya, Individual Beneficiaries Scheme (IBS) etc. to most of the BPL families of the Ward. After starting an SHG for the women in my Ward, I then advised them about the kinds of productive work that they could do.

Though education is necessary for all, it is not a prerequisite to be an effective leader. An effective and efficient leader must first have the trust and respect of the people, which is only possible through hard work and effecting positive change in one's constituencies. It is sometimes necessary for leaders to sacrifice their personal benefit for the development of society and the Country. I wish to contest the next elections and fulfill the needs of my people.

Mary Grace Tirky
President
Panchayat: Haldhi Bari
Lachit
Block: Sarupathar
District: Golaghat

Being the oldest daughter among four brothers and two sisters, I could not complete my graduation. I had to help my father, a farmer, to earn a livelihood for the family. After completing Class XII, I began teaching in 1987. I continued teaching in various schools till 2001 and nurtured my unfulfilled dream of gaining more knowledge. I did not want anybody around me to suffer due to a lack of education. I wanted to be the last victim of illiteracy due to poverty.

In the 2001 Panchayat elections, I was elected as the President of Haldhi Bari Lachit Gram Panchayat, a Panchayat with many forest villages, on the disputed border of Assam and Nagaland. All kinds of insurgent groups operate here, including the *National Socialist Council of Nagalim* (NSCN) and *United Liberation Front of Assam* (ULFA). Most of the recruits for the insurgent cadres are school dropouts, unemployed, frustrated and delinquent youths. I know that only a good education can be a permanent solution to bring the youth of my locality back onto the right path.

The major crisis in education today is the lack of adequate schools in proportion to the population. Secondly, the accessibility of schools from the Panchayat is so difficult that many parents make their children, especially girls, opt out of school. Thirdly, I feel that the curriculum followed in our schools is rigid and structured, making it difficult for different kinds of children to adapt and fit in.

After becoming the Panchayat President, I worked on improving the quality of the schools and education. With Panchayat funds, I facilitated the upgradation of three existing schools and set up six new schools, out of which five are Lower Primary Schools and one is a Middle School. I also successfully initiated the convergence of funds from the *Member of Legislative Assembly Local Area Development Scheme* (MLA-LADS), *Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme* (MPLADS) and funds from the *Oil & Natural Gas Cooperation* (ONGC) Ltd. to set up two more schools.

To cater to the needs of those children who did not have an opportunity to go to school and are now too old to start at the primary level, I started

some schools in the Panchayat called 'Amar Parashali', under the Education Guarantee Scheme, where children from all age groups could come to do a crash course. These children are then later integrated into the mainstream schools. I introduced nine such schools and appointed a teacher called *Shiksha Mitra* in each of them. Seven of the schools are still running effectively.

We managed to get government grants for three Primary Schools, where each school gets Rs. 24,000 per annum, and have ensured a Government Grant to one High School in the Panchayat. Safe drinking water and proper sanitation in each school was my concern, which was met with the help of the Public Health Engineering Department and Panchayat Funds.

I also facilitated the construction and renovation of the road transport facilities within the Panchayat. In the last five years, 28 roads (total length-more than 40 km) have been constructed in the Panchayat and out of these, two of the important roads were constructed with sand and gravel. To save the roads from damage (due to floods), I ensured proper drainage by making culverts in strategic places to stop flooding. More than 60 such culverts have been constructed.

I wish to contest elections in the next term for the post of a Block Level Ward Member.

Moni Prabha Neog
Ward Member
Panchayat: Borkali
Block: Narayanpur
District: Lakhimpur

I am 46 years old, from a family comprising four sisters. When I was eight years old, I lost my parents, but with my own effort, I passed the *High School Leaving Certificate* (HSLC) Examination. I earn a living by cultivating pineapples, bananas and chillies. My farming operations are on a large-scale and hence I am able to earn a substantial amount of money. I am also a weaver and am skilled in weaving Muga and Pat, both traditional silks of Assam. I augment my earnings from the sale of my woven products.

It was only after I became involved in campaigning for a political party, that people began to know me. When the elections were announced, they asked me to contest. My life changed completely after winning the Panchayat elections, I became busier, and suddenly, I was no longer thinking just about my family's welfare but of the entire Panchayat.

I learnt about the rights of women representatives, their roles, and responsibilities after attending the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-NEST. I updated myself with information about Government Schemes and the Assam Panchayat Act. I feel there is a strong need for devolution in all three areas of: funds, functions, and functionaries in Assam.

I always ensure that women attend and participate in the Gram Sabha and insist that the decisions taken in the Gram Sabhas not be changed at any cost, as I believe the people are the ultimate decision makers and the Gram Sabha represents their real need.

I have facilitated the construction of three school buildings, three wells, four roads, culverts, and 15 IAY houses. A Kutir Jyoti connection, widow pensions, and old age pensions have also been distributed under my guidance. I also helped in conducting surveys for the identification of BPL families, so that preference is given to them under the various Government Schemes.

I am an active member of the Mahila Committee and I have tried to encourage BPL families to start SHGs of their own, so that they can be economically independent. I have managed to train 90 women in the craft of Muga and Pat weaving, through a skill-building program being aired on Doordarshan. I have also prepared a proposal to train women in Muga and Pat weaving and have submitted this proposal to the Panchayat. I hope they sanction it soon.

Reema Gogoi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Rajahtati
Block: Dekargara
District: Jorhat

I am 37 years old and have passed High School. I was elected Ward Member in the Panchayat elections after defeating two other contestants by a margin of 31 votes. Earlier, I always used to stay at home under parental supervision, and had no idea about how a Panchayat works.

As a Panchayat representative, I have tried to provide opportunities for my electorate under various Government Schemes. I stand up to the Panchayat President and table issues in Panchayat meetings. I inspired the village women to start an SHG to help them become economically independent and attend all their meetings. I advise them to attend different trainings organized by the Government. I help them organize Bihu dance competitions, make snacks (pitha) for the local market, and organize local-handicraft exhibitions.

I have instituted an Inspection Committee in the Ward to ensure efficient implementation of all the Schemes and to see to it that the beneficiaries do not face any problems.

I facilitated the building of the Mahila Committee building, walls of a Namghar, Kalpataru, *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY) houses for - widows, repaired roads, built drains and have also given out old age pensions and widow pensions. I have sent more than 30 old women to visit different holy places, under the Dharmajyoti Scheme.

I participated in the Panchayat training conducted by the Block Office and the Women's Leadership Workshop organized by The Hunger Project-NEST for strengthening women's leadership. Deriving strength from the workshop, I was able to fight the corrupt practices of a Government Officer and now even the Panchayat President and the Secretary are afraid of me.

Ward Members are dependant on the President's will to bring about changes in the Panchayat and find it difficult to work independently. Therefore, I have decided to contest for the post of President in the next Panchayat elections.

Rekha Gogoi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Chauldhua
Block: Boginodi
District: Lakhimpur

I was married even before I turned 18. I could not even complete my schooling before marriage. However, my husband was supportive and I completed my matriculation after marriage, as a private candidate. I was the mother of a baby girl by then.

I do not have any political background as such but as I am the most educated person in my ward, the local President of the Block Congress approached me to contest the election when the ward of the Panchayat was reserved for women. My husband did not know how to react to the offer, but I was confident that I could bring about a change to the Ward and to the lives of the people.

I contested the election and became the Ward Member of the Tilakpur Ward of Chauldhua Panchayat. Lack of food security and yearly floods were the major problems faced in the villages of the ward. I found out that the school in Kathalguri village was shut for half the year, as the area surrounding the school would be submerged due to flooding of the area. Thus, I facilitated the construction of a link-road to the school with Rs. 1,00,000/- from the Panchayat fund. I also facilitated reinforcing the school building by adding some *Reinforced Cement Concrete* (RCC) posts to its structure. Now, no matter how bad the floods get, the school remains open.

The only College in the locality is situated in my Ward. The representatives of the Dibrugarh University visited the College a while back to assess the possibility of University accreditation and affiliation. The representatives had some reservation with regard to the College, as it lacked a playground and other infrastructural requirements. I assured them that all the required norms would be fulfilled in a short period. I ensured the Rs. 1,26,000 was sanctioned from Panchayat funds for land development, a playground as well as for the construction of two additional rooms. We also mobilized funds worth Rs. 2,00,000/- from the local Ward Member of the Boginadi Anchalik Panchayat for these works. Finally, I was able to ensure that the University recognized the College.

Bringing in an *Integrated Child Development Services* (ICDS) centre strengthened the Lower Primary School of Milanpur village. I had to

fight with the authorities to bring the Aanganwadi Centre to this village. I regularly visit the schools in the locality to monitor the functioning of the schoolteachers. I feel that the mid-day meal policy is very effective, as it provides the children with some degree of nutrition and also increases the attendance of the students. I regularly monitor the supplies for the Mid-Day Meal Schemes in the schools of the Ward.

Saleha Begum
President
Panchayat: Morongi
Block- Morongi
District: Golaghat

My Panchayat consists of 35 villages, which are divided into ten Wards. The voters can be divided into different categories - Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, the *Adivasi* (indigenous) Tea Laborer community, and people from the general castes.

I did not have even a vague idea about what the duties of a Panchayat President were as there had been no Panchayati Raj in Assam for the last eight-nine years. I did not even remember what the Panchayat members did or used to do in those days. At the same time, I was told that the new Panchayati Raj system would be different from what it was before. It will be more powerful, more responsible and more people centric.

In March 2001, I experienced community mobilisation for the first time, when I helped campaign for the local MLA. This experience became a strong basis for my candidature and campaign in the Panchayat elections. When the seat of the Panchayat President was reserved for women, I decided to contest the elections. I stood for the post and defeated 3 independent candidates and one *Asom Gana Parishad* (a Political Party) candidate in the elections. My cultural involvement during school and college days proved to be very helpful in my win, as I was quite well known as a singer in those days.

After being elected as the President, I did not know what I was supposed to do. I was not given any responsibility or work. The Panchayat Secretary and other bureaucrats would take the decision and sometimes here and there they would call me for some meetings or would just send me some papers and cheques to sign. However, my world changed after attending the Women's Leadership Workshop organized by The Hunger Project - NEST. I realized the ownership of governance. I understood that because of my ignorance, the officers were controlling me like a puppet. I refused to continue in such way and started doing my work on my own.

I then proceeded to ensure that 18 roads were constructed in the community under the *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SGSY). I also constructed

four community halls, renovated and extended the 100 years old Lower Primary School in the Panchayat, and provided it 200 saplings.

I facilitated the formation of 70 SHGs, out of which 40 groups got a revolving fund of Rs. 10,000/- and 20 groups got a loan worth Lakhs of rupees.

I got 117 persons listed for Government benefits under the *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY) and *Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana* (PMGY) to help up-grade their homes. I facilitated the provision of 132 Old Age Pensions (OAPs), 10 widow grants, and 15 tube wells to the marginalized in the community.

To protect the village community from attacks from wild elephant, I got a *Tongi-ghar* (a sort of watch tower made of Bamboo and thatch) constructed and I got two bus shelters made for bus passengers.

I am very concerned by the fact that women are not perceived as equals of men in society and to top it, women themselves accept such subjugation without any protest. Therefore, I have started working with various women groups for their empowerment and to impart education. I am also the President of the *Morongi Block Elected Women Representatives Forum* (BEWRF), a member of Milanjyoti SHG and advisor to *Sarawgaon Mahila Samiti* and local *National Students Union of India* (NSUI).

Tulu Bora

Ward Member

Panchayat: Saribahi

Block: Dhenkargora

District: Jorhat

I am 40 years old and live in a nuclear family. I prepare various indigenous breakfast items and earn a substantial amount of money. I also help my husband in his work and do the household shopping, pay electricity bills, maintain our bank accounts etc.

After being elected to the Panchayat, I realized that the most pressing problems that the Panchayat faced were those of unemployment, poverty, inadequate safe drinking water, alcohol, and drug-abuse. As one of the Ward Members, I took up the task of solving these problems. After discussing these issues at the Panchayat meetings, I got funds allocated by the Panchayat under various schemes to try to remove these problems from my ward. I organized awareness camps on alcohol and drug abuse, with the help of the Mahila Committee and the Youth Club in the village.

During my tenure, I helped construct two public tanks, six roads, 10 tube wells, one community hall, three IAY houses and had the school building repaired. I facilitated the provision of Old Age Pensions to 33 persons and Widow Pensions to two widows. I also helped issue 1 Annapurna Card and six cooking gas connections to the village members.

To make a difference in the society, a woman should be strong at home. To date, I have organized five Gram Sabhas, where the presence of women has outnumbered that of men. I also make sure that any work undertaken by the Panchayat is first discussed in the Gram Sabha.

I have tried to set up small industries, a Primary Health Centre (PHC), women's awareness corporations, and health camps. I have also started SHGs for the village women.

I have attended the training at the Block level and attended the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project - NEST. At the workshop, I came to know about the Right to Information Act (RTI), which gave me the confidence to demand all relevant information from the government offices needed to carry on my work. There is a lot more work that needs to be done. Hence, I want to contest the next election even though my seat will not be reserved for women.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH



Ibom Lollen
Ward Member
Panchayat: Panya Bogdo
Block: Along East
District: West Siang

I have studied up to the eighth standard after which I got married. I have three school going children. It was my own decision to stand for elections. However my husband gave me his full support. Had it not been for my husband's constant backing I could have not imagined juggling the roles of homemaker and Panchayat leader successfully. After the election, I found a new purpose in my life and feel very happy when I am able to help somebody. I would like to improve the level of literacy in my village and want to work towards it.

I have attended two Women's Leadership Workshops of The Hunger Project and found them very helpful. They have helped me hone my leadership skills. Moreover, in these workshops I have had the opportunity to interact with other Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) from other blocks and felt a deep sense of comradeship with them. I loved the format of the training sessions and found them interesting and informative. I have learnt a lot about the Government Schemes. I also learnt that the Block office could not withhold any information as I have the right to know about the schemes. All this made me feel empowered and I have been able to accomplish some work for the development of the village. I have procured Government Benefits for the Below the Poverty Line families of the village and have recently finished the construction of the Aanganwadi Centre building.

I want to do a lot more for the village and when this term gets over, I am planning to stand for re-election. The village people are satisfied with my work and feel that I have done quite well for a first-timer.

Karnya Lollen
Panchayat Samiti
Chairperson
Panchayat: Panya
Block: Along East
District: West Siang

My village is a large, with a population of about seven thousand people, the majority of which are farmers. I decided to stand as an *Anchal Samiti (Block Panchayat)* member as the seat was reserved for women. My husband had held the same post formerly. Once I was elected though, I found it very difficult to deal with the Government Officials, as they did not take me seriously or pay proper attention to what I had to say. I was very hesitant and tended to allow the officials to dominate over me. Then, I got the opportunity to attend the Women's Leadership Workshop and now I am for more confident in my dealings with the official machinery.

Since then I have implemented several benefit schemes in the Panchayat. A shed to house the Aanganwadi Centre, a bus stand, concrete steps built at two different locations in the village, one poultry and a fish farm have been started. I have also procured OAPs for the aged in the village. Still, several people have alleged that I have given these benefits to my husband's relatives, while others allege that I am just a rubber stamp and my husband, who was the earlier incumbent, does all the work.

However, some people have also expressed satisfaction with my performance and want to re-elect me to the post. My husband has merely acted as my advisor and with his experience; the contributions made by him are invaluable. I find it strange that people should object to his supporting me. I feel there is a definite conspiracy to discredit me and I am determined to thwart my detractors. Therefore, I am planning to stand for re-election to continue what I have started.

Khekap Longku
Ward Member
Panchayat: Kuttum
Block: Miao
District: Changlang

I live in Kuttum village, which is 52 kilometers away from the District headquarters of Changlang. There is no road to the village and the only way to reach Kuttum is by a *kuccha* (unleavened) path.

I have only studied up to the Primary level and was married at 14, though I have to admit that it was a love marriage. The people in the village nominated me as Ward Member and encouraged me to accept the position as they felt that with my experience in social activities I would be able to do justice to the post, and do some good work for the village. I have always been an active member of the community and am still involved in several community welfare groups. At first, I had no idea about my functions, role, and duty as a Panchayat representative or as a leader. However, after attending the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project, I now feel I am well versed in these matters. In addition, I now feel more confident and am filled with determination to serve my village and its people, who have placed so much trust in me. I have noticed that people have started looking up to me to help them avail Government assistance. However, at the same time I feel that the help the Government is providing to the rural poor, at present, is meager and simply not enough. In addition, I feel that there is very little that women representatives elected to village Panchayats can do in the face of the non-devolution of power by the State Government.

Kirpi Padu

Chairperson

Panchayat: Darkang

Block: Pubu-Yombu

District: West Siang

I am a matriculate and have been associated with the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society (APWWS), one of the most active civil society organizations in Arunachal Pradesh. I have been associated with them long before I even thought about standing for elections as a Panchayat leader.

I have always been keen to work for the poor and deprived in my village so when the chance presented itself in the form of reservations in Panchayat for women leaders, I decided to go for it. I received the full support from my family and friends and from the people in my village. Since my election, I put in a lot of hard work to procure Government Schemes for my village. Although the people in the village are satisfied with my work, I, myself, feel that much still needs to be done. I have ensured that Old Age and Widow Pensions are provided to the needy and have ensured that people have access to Schemes and benefits such as the SGSY, etc.

Even though I have to face many problems in my work, not to mention official bottlenecks, I am still committed to working for a better life for the people with the co-operation of my Panchayat colleagues.

I have attended the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project's Arunachal Pradesh chapter and have benefited enormously by the training. I feel that my confidence in my own abilities has grown a lot, as I am more sure footed in dealing with Government Officials.

The general opinion in the village about me is positive and many seem to think that my unmarried state has added to my qualities as a leader. Because I am unmarried I can constantly be at the beck and call of the needy without having to worry about unfulfilled household chores or a sick baby. I am free to go anywhere, anytime I feel like. The majority of the villagers want to re-elect me as their leader for the next term and I too believe that I can accomplish a lot for my village, provided they continue to back me. I also hope that organizations like The Hunger Project continue to guide novice leaders like me.

Ranboi Zongsam
Member Block Panchayat
Panchayat: Khuchep- I
Block: Changlang
District: West Siang

Khuchep- my village is 25 kilometres from Changlang town. The village is accessible by an unleavened road - the laying of the permanent road still lies incomplete.

I am unmarried and stay with my parents who are farmers. Being the eldest, of five, I decided to work and help my parents after successfully completing my class X exams. I took loan from the State Bank of India and started a shop.

My village people appreciated my work and nominated me for the seat reserved for women as they felt I was suitable as a leader. I then attended the Women's Leadership Workshop organized by The Hunger Project several times and found them to be very empowering. I did not know about the various schemes of the government for the development of the village poor earlier. After the attending the workshops I have implemented one of these schemes at my village under Swaran Jayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGRY) and have implemented the Manufacturers Investment Credit in the agricultural fields. I visit the Block Office regularly to collect information about the schemes and to find out about the new ones.

However, I am not satisfied with the work that I have done until now and I feel and see that so much more has yet to be done. I want the immediate devolution of power to Panchayat Institutions. I feel that this is the real bottleneck, which hampers the developmental progress in villages. Without real power, the Panchayats are helpless to accomplish anything substantial.

Tonyir Basar
Member Block Panchayat
Panchayat: Gori
Block: Basar
District: West Siang

I found the Women's Leadership Workshops conducted by The Hunger Project very beneficial. I learnt a lot about the power and functions as well as the role of a leader. Now I am very confident and convene meetings regularly in the village to discuss various issues relating to the village community. After attending these training, I have learnt what it means to be a leader. Now I do not worry as much even if I have to stay away of my home. My husband has full confidence in me.

I am more determined to carry forward the tasks entrusted to me for my village even if the government officials try to discourage me by not giving me their attention or trying to mislead me.

One of my abiding dreams is to instill confidence in the women of my village. I want them to believe in themselves and their own ability to accomplish anything. I also want to broaden the minds of the women as I feel due to centuries of oppression they have become weak and timid. I plan to stand for re-election if the people of the village back me.

Yomrik Lollen

President

Panchayat: Kamdi

Block: Along West

District: West Siang

I have had little formal education and was hesitant earlier about going to the Government offices but after attending The Hunger Project's Women's Leadership Workshop I feel confident to go to the Block office and ask for information regarding government schemes. I was considered a person with a philanthropic bent even before I was elected and the village people have benefited by a quality of mine in times of need. Now that I have entered the realm of governance, I approach the government agencies and make use of allocated funds for the benefit of the poor.

I want to stand for re-election so that I can continue to help the needy and poor people of my village and I am confident that the villagers would also like to have me for another term.

BIHAR

Amita Devi
President
Panchayat: Dadar Kolhua
Block: Kanti
District: Muzaffarpur

I am a former teacher and the people of my village asked me to contest for the post of Panchayat President in the 2006 elections. I won by 975 votes in a Panchayat of 11,000 voters. I contested from a seat reserved for women from the *Extremely Backward Caste* (EBC). I am 35 years old and have studied up to Class XII.

After attending the Women's Leadership Workshop (WLW) organized by The Hunger Project-Nirdesh, I became active in my role as a President. Subsequently I became a WLW trainer, learnt to use the computer and ride a bicycle.

After gaining confidence and energy from these workshops, I started criticizing the Panchayat Secretary openly. I complained to the Block Development Officer (BDO) about the Secretary for his autocracy and ill treatment of others. A special Gram Sabha was called in March 2007, where the Panchayat Secretary was criticized for removing the names of eligible families from the BPL list. A resolution was passed and was given to the District Magistrate (DM) after being signed by every member present in the Gram Sabha. I also called for a Panchayat Meeting to counter the autocracy of the Secretary. I have, on several occasions, put forward my views to the Panchayati Raj Director and State Election Commission without hesitation.

Within one year, I have regularly conducted Gram Sabhas and worked for the development of my Panchayat. I always bring different Schemes to the notice of the people in the Gram Sabha. Using the Gram Sabha as a platform, I have recruited an Aanganwadi *Sevika*, *Sahayika* and a *Siksha Mitra*. I used the *National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme* (NREGS) to construct roads and install seven solar lights. I got bank accounts opened for 34 people so that they can receive their dues under various Schemes, and have distributed scholarships for education giving priority to students belonging to EBC and Scheduled Castes (SC).

At present, I am fighting a big cause for my people. A lot of land of Kolhua Panchayat has been acquired by the Government for the construction for a

four-lane road affecting a large number of people. The compensation amount granted to them is much less than the actual cost of the land. In addition, it is necessary to have the correct *antecedents* to be able to claim the compensation. There are many families whose lands have been acquired but whose claims are not being considered. I have given an application to the DM to provide fair compensation and to keep the process of distribution very simple.

During the BPL survey, it was found that people did not reveal their true income. It was my biggest responsibility to ensure the right families were included in the list. During the process of selection of the Aanganwadi Sevika and Sahayika, a few people tried to disrupt the process but I did not allow that. I am also working for the empowerment of women.

I often spend my time looking after the development processes in the Panchayat. I am not only involved in the implementation of Schemes, but also work for the education of girls, women's rights, and against domestic violence. My biggest challenge is to maintain a balance between the Panchayat and my home. Due to work pressure and involvement outside the home, my family members have started complaining. However, I hope that everything will be fine with time and I will be able to continue working with their support.

Chandrawati Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Chandrapura
Block: Tilauthu
District: Rohtas

I contested the election on encouragement from my husband and the people of my community. I am 22 years old and belong to the Paasi caste (Scheduled Caste). I contested from a reserved seat and won by a margin of 167 votes. My husband runs a corner store and we have two children, a girl, and a boy. I am literate.

My Panchayat is in a Harijan dominated area but there are a few higher caste people in the community as well. I was told by my community to fight for the post of Ward Member and another woman from our community was asked to contest for the post of member (Nyaya Panchayat member). Though I knew I had support from the community, I went door-to-door campaigning. Fortunately, both of us won, considering we both contested against upper caste candidates.

After I was elected in June 2006, I participated in a WLW, where I learned to work in a team. I learnt about the different registers maintained, including one recording the proceedings of the Executive Committee Meetings (ECM) and learnt about the functions and the responsibilities of the same.

In my career of two and half years, I facilitated the provision of 105 BPL cards (out of 107 applications), ensured the sanction of one house under IAY, solar lights, filled 15 OAP forms, and recruited a Sevika and Sahayika for the Aanganwadi, both of whom are SCs.

I feel helpless when the President and Panchayat Secretary do not cooperate with me. I feel more handicapped when people of my own Ward bribe the President and the BDO to get their work done. The President promises to provide benefits to all the Wards in the ECM and thus gets the signatures of all the Ward Members in the register. However, in the end, he just provides most of the facilities to his own Ward. The other Ward Members do not cooperate with me. The President often throws parties to which he invites the other Ward Members and uses these gatherings to hold ECMs.

Once, on hearing that the President was asking for a bribe, I decided to investigate. I personally spoke to the people who had given him the bribe.

After that, I had a discussion with the President and the situation became quite tense and resulted in the President running away.

I feel a change in myself after attending the workshops and the training programs organized by The Hunger Project-Parivartan Vikas. Now, I am more open, vocal, and confident. I know how to express and present myself before others.

Daulat Devi
President
Panchayat: Hussainpur
Block: Rahika
District: Madhubani

I am a resident of Jhakhoran village in Hussainpur Panchayat of Rahika Block in Madhubani District. I belong to the Dhanki caste, which falls under the EBC category. I am forty years old and have four children.

I did not face any problem or challenge during the entire election campaign. Once I filed my nomination, my husband built the base for my victory. I was pitted against nine contestants and won by a margin of 62 votes. What greatly helped me in my victory was the goodwill built up by my husband. He has been involved in local politics for quite few years and has helped people to gain employment in the previous term by approaching the Panchayat and the Block Offices. Hence, he thought it better to have someone in the system that would provide him direct support. Therefore, when the Panchayat elections came up and the seat was reserved for women he asked me to contest.

I have not yet had to face any challenges with regard to the functioning of my Panchayat. Both the Panchayat as well as the Block Office co-operate with me to implement Schemes. Even though I am literate, my older son helps me manage the paper work, as I do not have the skills to fully comprehend and tackle all the paperwork. Though I take the help of my son in almost all activities, I feel that I have learnt to deal with the system and know about many Schemes, which will benefit the community in the near future.

I have focused on Social Security Schemes for women, IAY and OAP. I have facilitated the provision of IAY houses to 27 people. I have also facilitated the building of roads and streets in the area. I am now preparing to hold a Gram Sabha meeting. In the future, I plan to improve sanitation facilities of the Panchayat.

Gayatri Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Gamasra
Block: Madwan
District: Muzaffarpur

I am thirty-five, non-literate and contested from a seat reserved for women. I have five children - four daughters, and a son. We are from an EBC communitys

I have contested twice before but only won the election this time round. I was an SHG member before I won the election and remain as member until today. This time before I contested the election, I participated in the pre-election campaign organized by The Hunger Project-NIRDESH.

I filed my nomination against four other women candidates who all were from the upper caste community. I went door to door campaigning whereas those standing against me (who were Rajputs) distributed chicken and money to buy votes! In the end, I was declared the winner by 126 votes. After winning the election, I participated in the WLW and the Federation Building Meeting organized by The Hunger Project-NIRDESH.

I feel that I have worked very hard for my community and have achieved a lot in the last two and half years. I have asked the Block Development Officer to inspect and recheck the list of names for the *Mukhyamantri Aawas Yojana* (MAY). Earlier there were fewer families of my community in the BPL list. I personally conducted a survey and submitted the revised list to the Block office. Now more EBC families fall in the BPL category. I distributed flood rehabilitation materials (one quintal of cereal and Rs. 200 each) to the people who were most needy. Nine people benefited from the OAP and IAY, and five have been sanctioned money under the MAY.

I have planned to focus on housing, sanitation (toilets), OAP and NREGS for the rest of my tenure.

The greatest challenge that I face is that the concerned Departments do not share with me the different Schemes, which are available for my community.

Guriya Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Sahobigha
Block: Ghosi
District: Jehanabad

I am 25 years old and belong to the Rabani caste (OBC). I was born to a relatively well-to-do family, but had to struggle a lot. My father was a Sub-Inspector but unfortunately, he died when I was just 12 years old. As he was the sole earning member, the family lost its prosperity after his death.

I was married off when I was just 14 years old, and had only studied up to Class X. I had no knowledge about the implications of early marriage; and was in no position to resist.

I have worked with The *Baal Mazdur Abhiyan* (Children's Labour Campaign) and later with *Ekta Parishad* (a movement-based NGO). I used to help form Self Help Groups in different villages. Thanks to this work, I was exposed to and interacted with various people from different backgrounds.

The process of contesting the election is the result of my continuous effort to fight against the injustice prevalent in the society. The community already knew me due to my struggles and my work. The people in my own village and in neighbouring villages asked me to contest the election for the post of Ward Member. They assured me I would win. Even the officials of the local Police Station told me that they were getting feedback from the villagers that they wanted to see Guriya Devi as their representative! The whole election environment seemed to be in my favor. Though there were three contestants in the election, I was declared the winner by 25 votes.

Even after I became a Ward Member, I continued to struggle. In the fight for the post of Vice-President, one of the contestants came to me and asked me to vote for him. He also tried to bribe me, but when I refused, he threatened to kidnap me. I was not intimidated and along with other Ward Members decided to vote unanimously for the other candidate who we thought would be better at the job. With all our efforts, our candidate won the election.

I also had to struggle a lot with the President to get things on the right track. In one of the ECMs, when the newly elected Vice-President started questioning the President about his wrongdoings and unfair decisions, the President not only shouted at him but also asked him to leave the room. Seeing this unfair treatment, I appealed to the other members to boycott the meeting. After this incident, the President took a dislike to me.

The President filed a case against me, allegedly for a bribe of Rs. 50,000. Hearing of this, the other Ward Members advised me to contest the charge. Hence, I along with some of the other Ward Members went to the Police Station and filed a case of harassment against the President. The matter came to the attention of the DM who summoned to us his office. After discussing the matter over with the two of us, the magistrate was convinced of my case and assured me his full cooperation.

I have participated in different training programmes organized by The Hunger Project -Abhiyan. I attended the WLW in 2007, where I learned about my rights and the mechanisms to run the Panchayat.

After participating in different training programs, I have become more familiar with the different aspects of Panchayati Raj. I have gained confidence and become more aware of my rights. I am eager to attend such programmes. On one hand, I feel strong; but on the other hand, I am little worried, as the Ward Members in the Panchayat are not united. Some of them gang up with the President to get their work done by any means. This has created a gap among the Ward Members. I face non-cooperation from the President but I do not give up easily. The Panchayat Secretary has been supportive and has helped me facilitate the distribution of 300 ration cards, helped four people avail Rs.5000 each under the MAY, helped ten people build houses under the IAY, linked ten people to the OAP Scheme and campaigned for Pulse Polio. I have applied for providing certificates to the handicapped to avail of travel benefits and for the construction of drains & brick roads and installation of solar lights.

I have a mission - to help people access all the Schemes available for them. I want the marginalized communities to avail the maximum benefit from Government Schemes. I wish to reduce corruption in the bureaucracy. I have put up with lots of hardships, but do not mind facing them again for bettering the future of my people. Nevertheless, to do so, I need a helping hand, which would provide me that instrument to fight against inequality.

Lalmuni Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Chिताुलि
Block: Tilauthu
Dist: Rohtas

I am 32 years old and belong to the Razwar caste, which is a Scheduled Caste. I am non-literate and live with my husband who is a labourer and our three children. My husband is a labourer.

I am the Ward Member of Ward No 6, and along with my own Ward, I also look after Ward No 5. I filed the nomination to contest elections as my husband asked me to do so. I contested from a General Seat, standing against two others from my own Ward, one male and female. I appealed to people to cast their votes for me. I spent around Rs. 3000 in the whole process of campaigning.

After winning the election by 17 votes, I attended the WLW conducted by The Hunger Project-Parivartan Vikas. In the workshop, I learned about the technicalities of running a Panchayat and promised to help the poor and the needy.

I do not face a lot of difficulty in executing my work, as the President is cooperative. The President's son has proven to be a difficult person as he interferes and creates problems for the Ward Members. When any of us raise questions, he gets very irritated.

I, with the help of my husband, have been able to implement different Schemes successfully. Since I have been elected 600 families from Wards 5 and 6 have been added to the BPL list, eight IAY houses have been sanctioned and 105 Old Age Pensions (OAP) have been initiated.

I wish to facilitate the provision of shelters for the needy under IAY, as I feel that I have not done much on this front. I feel that I have gained confidence and knowledge after winning the election and attending various training programmes.

Naina Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Jagatpur
Block: Rahika
District: Madhubani

A political leader is a person who shares the joy and pain of her people and one who is kind-hearted to all. I am a simple woman from Jagatpur village. I believe I should respect those who have elected me as a Ward Member more than I do my own family. Keeping this definition of leadership in mind let me describe the agony suffered by my constituents during the floods in 2007.

The entire District of Madhubani was covered with water, including my village. I could see water flowing everywhere. People had nowhere to go; the poor specially, because they did not have enough food stored at home. Unlike other times, the 2007-floods also brought various sicknesses. Diarrhea was one of the devastating sicknesses, which spread in Jagatpur Panchayat. The sick were taken to the near by hospital and around 50 to 60 people needed saline water immediately. However, the doctors refused to take care of the patients. There was enough medicine in the hospital but they completely refused to give any to our patients. At that moment, I felt like crying and beating up the doctors. Instead, I confronted the doctors and got the medicine for the patients.

In 2006, I attended the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-Bihar Sewa Samiti. It provided me with a lot of information. Hence, when I got a chance to attend an issue- based training, I attended it with great enthusiasm. With this workshop, I got some ideas on how to take up issues and find solutions for them. In my Gram Panchayat, there is no Primary Health Centre. Due to this, people have to walk very long distance to access health care. Several times people have died because they could not reach the city hospital in time. I took the initiative to go to the Gram Sabha and put forward the issue of constructing a Health Centre for the villagers. Now the Government is constructing one! I am delighted.

I will always struggle for better health facilities for my Panchayat. Being a woman from a high Caste, my family opposed my involvement with the poor and lower Caste families. But I never gave up the struggle. The family did not allow me to go out from the house because of the so-called 'untouchables'. Even then, I frequently went out to meet with Muslim and Dalit families. I really want to break these old traditions. I believe that we are born alone, we

have not brought anything with us, and we will die without taking anything from this world. Therefore, we need to share our pain and joy with all in the community. I often sit together with the other Ward Members to discuss issues related to women and decide on strategies on how to handle the same.

I have been elected as the Secretary of the Women Panchayat Representative Federation. I have tried to mobilize rural women to strengthen their capacities. Recently, I called for a dharna, an *Aamran Anshan* (indefinite hunger strike) in Rahika block. The dharna focused on different rural problems of the community, such as discrepancies in the implementation of NREGS and in the drawing up of the BPL list. The job cards of the applicants under NREGS would lie with President. In addition, the BPL list was incorrect and the names of many eligible people were not included. Leaders from several Gram Panchayat Sanghs of the Block such as Bhauara, Saurath and Nazirpur etc, also participated and supported the demands. Finally, the 'Anshan' was discontinued after the BDO promised to review the BPL list and add new names after receiving fresh applications.

Rekha Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Jagvan Paschimi
Block: Bisfi
District: Madhubani

I was elected Ward Member for Jagvan Paschimi Panchayat in Madhubani District, along with five others.

Despite problems of poverty and the responsibility of a large family, I took a keen interest in social work right from the start. In the very first sitting of the Panchayat, the President made it clear to all the members that they should refrain from obstructing his work, or else face dire consequences. He announced - "You should just concern yourself with signing the register!" One day a male Ward Member arrived at my house with a blank register and demanded my signature. When I refused to sign, a truly enraged President sent for my husband, and told him that it would not do us good to go against his word.

In the meantime, I started to seek support from other Ward Members. I called a meeting of all the Ward Members to discuss the possible course of action. At the first opportunity, I also attended the WLW conducted by The Hunger Project-Bihar Sewa Samiti. The knowledge and the confidence that I gained from the workshop gave me the necessary strength to strategize.

The President hired local 'goondas' (goons) from the village to threaten and coerce the Ward Members to stay on his side. At the same time, I was campaigning hard against his malicious strategies. The President made many unsuccessful attempts to cajole, bribe and threaten me and finally accepted defeat when he realized that with my determination and leadership qualities I had garnered the support of the entire community. He is now respectful to the Gram Sabha members and cooperates in bringing about changes for the betterment of the community. This incident boosted my confidence. I won tremendous applause from the community for this act of courage and perseverance. Slowly as I learnt the Panchayat processes, I have started taking active participation in the Gram Sabha and hope that I am able to work diligently for my Panchayat.

HIMACHAL PRADESH _____

Ambari Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Pattanali
Block: Kasauli
District: Solan

I am 45 years old and have been elected to the Panchayat for the first time. I contested the elections from a non-reserved post and won against two men candidates. I have studied until Class VII and belong to a General Caste. No individual from my family, neither natal nor marital, has ever been involved in politics.

Everybody in my family is engaged in agriculture and this is our primary source of livelihood. I live with my husband, sons and daughter, daughters-in-law and grandsons. My sons have studied until Class XII and my daughter and daughters-in-law until Class X.

I did not intend to contest Panchayat elections. In fact, I had accompanied another woman who wanted to get her nomination-form filled. When people saw me there, they made me fill up a nomination-form saying that I do good work and am always a forerunner for any work that needs to be done in the village. Even though the community supported my nomination, my family did not, primarily, because they are not interested in politics nor do they know anything about politics.

I have participated in five training workshops organised by The Hunger Project-SUTRA on Panchayat Raj. We looked at issues of Panchayat; Raj Institutions (PRIs), domestic violence, *Nyaya* (Justice) Panchayats and so on in these workshops. These workshops have helped me enhance my role as an elected representative of the Panchayat. I am also a member of the State-level federation of women Ward Members.

A case of conflict between a husband and a wife came up in my Ward. This case took such a turn so that both parties were unwilling to live with each other. I put this case before the Panchayat and the Panchayat called them several times to resolve the conflict. The husband insisted that he would pay his wife maintenance but would not live with her. The role of the Panchayat is not merely to resolve a case but also to understand the issue and address it. I myself have been to their house a number of times to speak with them and now they have been living together for the past one-year.

I am also a member of the “Save the Girl Child” committee. This committee protects the rights of pregnant women against sex selective abortions. I have requested the Panchayat to organise health camps and regular visits by doctors to the Health Centre.

One has to struggle in elections especially when a woman is contesting against two men. Men will make efforts to exclude women from the institution of Panchayats and specifically when the woman gets no support from her family. However, I have faced these challenges. People have tested me by saying, “let us see how she wins”. I have won.

After being elected to the Panchayat, I do feel empowered. Being an elected women Ward Member, I have established an identity for myself, in my village and in my family. I have participated in Gram Sabhas as a representative of women and have raised issues of women’s concerns there. I am also a member of the ‘Panchayat Mandali’ and have worked on issues of women’s health, female foeticide, domestic violence, and the rights of single women.

Geeta Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Rukhri
Block: Nahan
District: Sirmaur

I am a Ward member in my Panchayat and this is the second consecutive term that I have been elected. This time I contested elections from a non-reserved seat and defeated five candidates: three men and two women. I was harassed for filing my nomination from a non-reserved category. The reason why I filed my nomination from a non-reserved category was that I had learnt a lot about being an elected representative in the last five years. I had also accomplished a lot of work in the previous term. Seeing this the women and men from my Ward encouraged me to file my nomination this time round as well.

I have studied until Class V. I live with my husband, two sons, and one daughter. I belong to a General Caste and am the only one in my family, immediate and extended, who is involved in politics.

I received enormous support from the 'Panchayat Mandali', women's SHGs and my family to contest the elections. People opposing my nomination openly said that this seat is reserved for men. Unable to tolerate their harassment, my husband sent me to my natal home and I only returned once I had won the elections. Soon after, I participated in a training workshop organised by the Government in which I received basic information on development Schemes. I also participated in five training workshops organised by The Hunger Project-SUTRA from which I gained an in-depth knowledge of the workings of PRIs. These workshops enhanced my understanding of women's issues. I learnt how Nyaya Panchayats work. Earlier, we used to relay decisions verbally, now we have started doing so in written form. I have also started to record people's issues in the *Up-Gram Sabha* (a Gram Sabha of Ward Members) and raise the same in the Gram Sabha. I have gained the support of the people in the process.

After being elected as a Ward Member, I have struggled to get a single woman her widow pension. I have been with this woman to the Revenue Inspector four times. We deposited the necessary papers after getting them sanctioned by the Panchayat and by the Revenue Inspector. However, the papers came back after two months. We got the papers confirmed again and deposited them. Finally, she started getting her pension from March 2008. Being a

Ward Member means that one has to struggle everyday. I struggle to leave the house. My family supported me when I filed my nomination but when I leave home for Panchayat-related work, which is often, my family, gets annoyed. Sometimes my neighbours also instigate my family saying, “Your wife goes out everyday”. I struggle against these challenges as well.

I have also undertaken other development initiatives especially for single women. In addition, I have facilitated the construction of a well for drinking water, facilitated the provision of housing for economically marginalised families, and of job cards and employment to economically marginalised families under NREGS: encouraging women and especially single women to work under NREGS; and so on.

This work has helped me overcome my fear and hesitation. I can tell the distinction between right and wrong now. I have gained the courage to raise my voice against discrimination and violence. I have the confidence to face challenges and move ahead.

Lakshmi Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Raudi
Block: Kasauli
District: Solan

I was elected unopposed. Initially there was another woman candidate in the fray but being from the same village as mine, she withdrew her nomination. This Ward was reserved for women and both of us belonged to the General caste.

I have studied until Class VI. I live with my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and two grandsons. Before stepping into politics, I was a farmer. My family only has seven-bighas of land, which we cultivate. My husband has been working with the Postal Department for the past thirty years. My son has a private job. I have two married daughters and my sons-in-law are employed with the Government. Not one of these people encouraged me to contest the Panchayat elections. It was my confidence and my courage that convinced me to contest elections. I am also the President of the *Mahila Mandal* (women's group). We work very closely with SUTRA and this is how I get my strength. My family made it clear how they felt, and should not involve them whether I won or lost.

Before the elections, the men in my village organised a meeting and did not invite my family. They collectively decided to nominate a woman candidate who they said would then win the elections unopposed. This candidate happened to be my sister-in-law. She has studied until Class X but is not a member of any group. It upset my family that they did not consult us in this matter. This helped me decide to contest elections and I filed my nomination that very evening. People tried to convince me to withdraw my nomination, but by then, I had made up my mind to contest no matter what.

People also suggested that there should be a toss between my sister-in-law and me and whoever won the toss would be elected unopposed. However, I made it clear that I was not there to play a match and this was a strategy to create conflict between us. This is politics, I said, and the candidate the public supports will win the election. When those opposing my candidature realised that I would not change my mind they withdrew my sister-in-law's nomination.

I have participated in five training workshops organised by The Hunger Project-SUTRA.

I have initiated several development projects including cleaning of the Ward; construction of roads; curbing jungle fires; setting up awareness camps on the declining sex ratio and so on. I have also facilitated the resolution of cases of domestic violence. One case involved conflict between a husband who used to physically abuse his wife. He was having an affair with another woman. One day, he shut the door of his house and began beating up his wife. The neighbours intervened but the husband ignored them. Eventually the police had to be called and it became a police case. Now, he has started giving his wife expenditure money and has stopped abusing her. The school, in its kitchen, now employs the wife.

In another case of domestic violence, which became a police case the man has stopped abusing his wife. The wife is now employed in a factory and the husband handles the work within the house.

I have gained in strength and courage since I have become an elected representative and learn something new from each of these experiences.

Lata Panwar
Ward Member
Panchayat: Nahri
Block: Kasauli
District: Solan

This is the first time I have entered politics. My Ward was reserved for an SC woman. Members of the 'Panchayat Mandali' (body) and SHGs encouraged me to contest. There was no other woman who contested against me. Nobody in my family has ever been in politics before. However, I had always felt the need to work for the community.

I have studied until Class XII. My husband is employed with the Government. We do not have any agricultural land and that is why I work within the house. I have participated in five training workshops organised by The Hunger Project-SUTRA and in addition have participated in meetings organised by SUTRA on Nyaya Panchayats.

The immediate result of participating in these workshops has been the strength I found in myself to speak out and the knowledge I gained working on Panchayat issues. I have also built my capacity to understand issues concerning the social fabric of our community, which has helped me in undertaking development work.

My village, Mashobra, would get very dirty in the rains with water collecting everywhere. Along with the Panchayat Mandali, I sanctioned a requisition to construct drains to allow the flowing out of dirty water. I have worked with National Cadet Corp (NCC) students of the Senior Secondary School to clean up the entire Ward and keep encouraging people of the village to clean the spaces around them.

I have initiated awareness meetings with women in the village on the significance of participating in Gram Sabhas. In addition, I have, along with members of the Panchayat Mandali, raised questions and discussions in the Gram Sabha on the declining sex ratio: explaining to people the negative implications of sex selective abortions. With the help of SUTRA, I have been able to put up a board outside the Panchayat Bhawan indicating the current sex ratio of the village.

I have also pushed a requisition to organise health camps in the village and have called doctors to speak to the people about reproductive health and

HIV-AIDS. After these camps, women have begun taking special care of their health.

I have also reached out to women of economically marginalised families to understand and apply for development Schemes that could help enhance their economic condition. I believe that if such women gain access to this information it will not be long before women race ahead of men.

Some of the challenges I have faced include regular obstruction of development work I have undertaken. People have openly commented saying that I take women with me to Gram Sabha but nothing ever happens there. I was once asked to sit in on a domestic violence case. When I supported the woman, the men got annoyed with me despite the fact that it was the fault of the husband. For the next hearing of the case, I asked members of the Panchayat Mandali to accompany me so that people and especially the survivor of abuse would be able to draw support from so many women. That woman was then able to express her feelings openly. The case was ruled in her favour.

Mukesh Lata
Ward Member
Panchayat: Koon
Block: Nahan
District: Sirmaur

This is the first time I have been elected to the Panchayat. This seat was reserved for an SC woman and two of us contested for it. I won.

I have studied until Class X. I live with my husband, two sons, and a daughter. My brother-in-law has been involved in politics for some time now. He has been elected as a Ward Member and then as a member of the Panchayat Samiti.

My family and the Panchayat Mandali encouraged me to contest the Panchayat elections. People in my village organised a meeting where they decided that I should be elected unopposed. My husband was not in the village at that time and when the people called to tell him their decision, he agreed. The next day, however, those opposing my candidature asked another woman to stand against me. This upset the dynamics in the village and an election became inevitable. The Panchayat Mandali and some others pushed me to file my nomination. There are 226 voters in my village and I won the election by eleven votes.

Soon after I won, I participated in a training workshop organised by the Government followed in quick succession by The Hunger Project-SUTRA wherein I received a lot of information and knowledge about PRIs. I realised the significance of my designation and soon after begun pushing for regular meetings of the Panchayat. I started organising Up-Gram Sabhas at the Ward-level.

In the early Gram Sabhas, the President and the Secretary used to write the report after the people and other Panchayat members would leave. They would delay the process of recording the requisitions and would later sit among themselves and record the requisitions. After the workshops, we took the male Ward Members into confidence and decided to fix the timings of the Gram Sabha before the President and the Secretary. We fixed the timing from 11 a.m. until 4 p.m. and said that proceedings would close after that. This enhanced our significance in the Panchayat. Because all the Panchayat members were united, there was a change in the behaviour of the President

and the Secretary. Today, we ask them about new development Schemes that have come for the Panchayat. We argue about the income and expenditure of the Panchayat.

I have had to struggle to include the name of a single woman in the BPL list. Her name had been included in the submitted list but when the final list came out her name was missing. I put a requisition before the Panchayat again and took this matter up to the BDO. After repeated attempts, her name was finally included in the list. She is now getting a house under the IAY Scheme.

I have also undertaken other development work such as spending one Lakh of rupees to construct drains in the village. Several unemployed people worked on this project. I managed its budget and accounts. I have also facilitated the construction of grates to block rainwater gushing into agricultural fields: with an eye on the economically marginalised farmers. People and especially women were employed under the NREGS to construct the crates. I have also collected data regarding problems related to reproductive health and have encouraged other Panchayat members to do the same. We then set up health camps at the Panchayat level where women were given free medicines.

This work has left me with a sense of empowerment where I have gained the courage to speak in the Panchayat without any hesitation and fear. I have sharpened my understanding of women's issues and have begun taking them up before the Panchayat. I have established my own identity and have gained confidence to move ahead. I want to contest the elections for the post of the President in the next elections.

Rita Garg
Vice-President
Panchayat: Goyla
Block: Kasauli
District: Solan

I was elected Ward Member and then the Vice-President of my Panchayat. I contested the Panchayat elections from a non-reserved seat and won against three men by eleven votes. I belong to the SC community and have studied until Class XII.

I live with my husband and parents-in-law. My father-in-law is a Government employee, and my husband works as a daily wage labourer. We primarily earn our livelihood through agriculture. My father-in-law first encouraged me to contest the elections. Thereafter people in the village asked me to contest because they saw me as educated and well spoken. I consulted the women of the Panchayat Mandali and most of them supported my candidature.

I have undergone five training workshops organised by The Hunger Project-SUTRA where I learned about the Panchayati Raj Act and about Nyaya Panchayats. I am also a member of the State-level federation of women Ward Members and I regularly participate in federation meetings along with the other women Ward Members of my Panchayat.

My biggest accomplishment is that I have been able to mobilise women for all kinds of work done in the Panchayat and my Panchayat Mandali has always supported me in my endeavours.

The first thing I did as an elected representative was to put in a requisition to organise health camps for women in the village. Everybody in the village supported me and the President volunteered to put this request before the health department. Five camps have been organised so far and fifty women have undergone treatment in the camps.

I also raised the issue of sex selective abortions before the Panchayat. This became an issue of priority in the Gram Sabha. I have set up a 'Save the Girl Child' committee in my Ward, which comprises members of the Panchayat Mandali, Aaganwadi and the *Auxillary Nurse Midwife* (ANM). This committee reaches out to pregnant women and gives them information on timely check ups; helps them register at the closest health centre; talks to them about the

implications of sex selective abortions and closely monitors their families in case they suspect any threat. The committee in my Ward has helped seven pregnant women, of whom, five have given birth to girls.

I have also facilitated access to Widow and Old Age Pension to some women in my village. I hope to work with and help such women in the future. I have really struggled to include names of three such women in the BPL list and have included them in the priority list for housing.

Even though cases of conflict over property, between neighbours and so on come up frequently in my village there have also been cases of domestic violence where women have suffered abuse by their husbands and daughters-in-law have suffered harassment by their in-laws. These cases have also been resolved through negotiation and counseling.

I have also undertaken other development works in my Ward in the past two and a half years. The first of this kind was to get Rs. 40,000/- sanctioned to repair the water tank and get iron pipes to deliver water in the agricultural fields. To get this done, I myself sent an estimate budget to the Junior Engineer, collected all the material, consolidated the bills, and prepared the muster roll and so on. Initially, I did not receive the full support of the people in my village but gradually they came on board.

The second development work was to make a link road for which I collected Rs. 90,000/- from the MLA fund. I had to put a requisition before the Panchayat and prepare an estimate budget approved by the Junior Engineer with which I approached the MLA. I kept waiting for the money to reach the Panchayat and it was only later that I realised that it had already reached and been used up by the President in his Ward. I had to visit the MLA again and he guaranteed an investigation. Neither the President nor the people, especially the men, complied with the investigation and they kept creating obstacles for me. It took me some time to learn the nature of this work, understand how to get the line departments involved and gradually get the work done.

I have also facilitated women's access to NREGS. It used to bother me that a woman can work at home but is not allowed to work outside the house and earn money. I faced resistance from the men in my village who often said, "you do not work at home and now you want to convert our women too". My parents-in-law also started taunting me saying that people were saying all kinds of things about me. They too started talking about how I do not work inside the house and roam about outside meaninglessly. Those who were standing against me in the elections took this opportunity to instigate rumours about me. My parents-in-law started prohibiting me from going out of the house. Although in my heart I knew that I was merely fulfilling my responsibilities as Panchayat Vice-President, I began to consider resigning from my post. My husband came in to support me at this time. He said that he did not have a problem with what I was doing, and that I had to learn to ignore people's comments. This is why I have continued to retain my post.

I spoke with my Panchayat Mandali and with SUTRA and they encouraged me to go on. Even though I faced all these hardships, my self-confidence has increased, as has my will to take decisions and my awareness on issues.

Tara Devi
President
Panchayat: Behri
Block: Ramshahar
District: Solan

I am President of Behri Gram Panchayat. This is my first time as Panchayat President. I was elected on November 22, 2005. I have studied until Class IV and belong to the Rajput caste. Nobody from my family has ever taken an interest in politics before. However, I have been the President of the Mahila Mandal for twelve years and of the Panchayat Mandali for three years and these experiences built up my an interest in politics.

I am a farmer. My husband is employed with the Government. I have two sons and one daughter. My elder son works in a school as a teacher. The younger son has finished his Class XII and has started his own business.

Winning the election was not easy. The woman contesting against me was the wife of the former President. I had to put in a lot of effort to keep the contest equal. If members of the Mahila Mandal and the Panchayat Mandali had not extended their support to me, I would not have been able to win. I gained knowledge and information about the Panchayat and the procedures of nomination from SUTRA. This enabled me to imagine myself as a leader who would take up issues of concern to women and help bring about social justice.

At the time when I was elected the President, the Government had begun its Cleanliness Campaign. I initiated village committees to carry forward this campaign in my village, and Behri won an award, coming second in the entire District.

In May 2007, I received the *Nirmal Gram Award* (Clean Village Award) in Delhi from Dr. Abdul Kalam. I used the award money to repair and construct roads and drainage in my village. I am the first one to have initiated work in the entire Block under NREGS. I still have to fulfill my vision for my Gram Panchayat.

I use the information and knowledge that I gain to bring justice to women and especially those women who belong to economically marginalised sections, by employing them under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, as water carriers and as

workers in schools. I work with women and that is why we were able to win the award. The Panchayat Mandali has supported me through every problem and challenge that has confronted me. Even today, they stand by me and that is why I am able to fulfill my responsibilities with utmost confidence. When I had filed my nomination, seven other women had also filed their nominations against me and six out of them withdrew their nominations. I had won the elections against the last candidate by 380 votes. I owe my win to the members of the Panchayat Mandali. This is the primary reason why I decided to work with women and on their issues and concerns. I give utmost importance to the Panchayat, sometimes even more than I do to my home.

JAMMU & KASHMIR



Village: Hardass

Block: Kargil

District: Kargil

Ladakh

Hardass, known as 'Apricot Valley' in Kargil, is located along the Line Of Control (LOC) at a distance of seven kilometres from the District headquarters. It has 206 households and a population of 1800 persons covering an area of 1.5 square kilometres. The economy of the village mostly depends on the production and sale of apricots. Land is limited and therefore other agricultural activities cannot be engaged in. The youth are largely unemployed and most are first generation literates. Government intervention in terms of development has not been significant. The education of children depends on a Government Middle School and on schools run by the Army through its Sadbhavna Project. The village comprises Muslim families and religious heads play an influential role.

The women, until recently, had no say in running the daily affairs of the village. Their role was limited to helping the men in the fields, collecting wood for fuel and bringing up children. Now there is a perceptible change in the roles played by the women of Hardass.

Hardass is one of the least developed villages of Kargil in terms of education, health, and other facilities. The most important reason for this is that its men are politically divided and are unable to collect on a common platform. This brought the women of the village to the forefront. They came together to participate in major decision-making processes. Scarcity of land and of water for agricultural purposes has been the major problem of this village and the men have been unable to address either of these issues. The women have been able to tackle the most important issue, that of water, through different initiatives. They organized themselves into a group and began having meetings to plan strategies to find a solution. They also had consultations with the *Lamberdar* (Village Head) and the ex-president.

First, they approached the Chief Executive Councillor, of the Ladakh Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Kargil. The Council promised to provide electricity to run water-lifting machines. They also approached the electricity Department in this regard. Unfortunately, nothing much happened. They waited for a few more days and eventually decided to hold a protest rally.

The following day, the women of the village blocked the national highway until the evening. Representatives of the District administration, not only met them and assured their full support, but also visited the canal site. From the next day, things started moving. Electricity and an additional water-lifting machine were provided to the village. Water was lifted from the adjacent river into the canal, the canal was functional, and the village was saved from complete drought. People in the village rejoiced. On seeing this, the others in the village came forward to support this women's group financially. The Lamberdar personally went to the leader of the women's group and handed over the money.

Scarcity of agricultural land is another major problem being faced by the villagers. The women, in this regard, have already approached the local Tehsildar and the Army Headquarters to get permission to use the Serthang Plateau, located close to the village, for agricultural purposes. If they can sustain the pressure, they might be able to get permission in the near future.

These two experiences have helped these women realize their potential, gain self-confidence, and in understanding the importance of participating in decision-making processes. This is quite evident when Hajia Roqiya (45) says "It is high time that we should come forward and participate in the next Panchayat elections and have women representatives in different bodies including the Hill Council." She also opines that women of Hardass need to get formally organized as SHGs.

This group of women are enthusiastic and optimistic. They believe that they need to continue fighting for the rights of the village in the days to come. Now nothing seems to stop them from achieving their goal of taking the village on the road to development.

Sonam Dolma
Ward Member
Village: Likir
District: Leh
Ladakh

I am the head of my family and one of the two women who were nominated for the post of Ward Member in my village, Likir. The other woman left the village after getting married but I continued as the only woman Member in the six-member Panchayat body of the village.

I am 47 years old and have three children. My husband passed away some years ago, and I was left to take care of my family in addition to fulfilling my responsibilities as a Panchayat representative. It was very difficult for me to take over this new role but I was determined to fight it out because of which I have been recognized and acknowledged as a community leader.

I have always stood my ground against corruption and have openly criticized it. I have taken up issues of women's rights and have motivated women to challenge oppression. My role as a Panch has made a difference in the development of the village despite there being a lack of funds. I was, along with the support of other women, able to get Rs. 50,000/- from the Councillor's fund to construct three toilets in the village. The Council agreed to construct the toilets and I used the money to organize Adult Education Programmes for six months in my village. I hired teachers and today most of the women in Likir are able to read and write in the local language. The Army has also played a significant role in ensuring that this initiative continues and more women gain access to education.

All these initiatives have brought the women of Likir together. The women have organized themselves and have successfully been able to put an end to regressive social practices like the exchange of bread during social occasions and alcoholism.

Apart from this, I actively take part in Panchayat meetings and speak out in the interest of the village. I pay from my pocket to travel in buses to attend meetings in Leh town. Members elected to the Panchayat, especially women who are nominated, do not receive any honorarium from the Government; we have to fend for ourselves.

Because I am actively involved in the Panchayat, I rarely get time for household work. A sudden invitation to a meeting makes me leave my work in the field halfway. It is sometimes difficult to balance the two, but one cannot be compromised for the other. It is important that sincere people are elected to the Panchayat. The Panchayat is like a Government at one's doorstep. Men are usually away from the village on work and women are left to handle the affairs within the village. I see women playing a significant role in decision making in the future.

Women know at what point the irrigation water channel needs to be repaired and they have even learnt strategies to manage conflicts arising over complex issues like land. It is important that people participate in the decision-making processes of the village. Elected or nominated representatives face many challenges but that is the story of every village. Instead of complaining, one must understand the importance of being elected and perform one's responsibilities sincerely and consistently in the hope that it will feed into the development of the village.

Over the years, as a Member, my level of confidence and my knowledge have increased. I have participated in some training workshops, which have helped crystallize my role as a Panchayat member. I was asked to give my inputs to the Vision Document for Ladakh and I focused on the need to have toilets for women in the village and a marketplace for village products, including vegetables.

The other issues that plague rural Leh are the reduced number of helping hands in the village since most parents accompany their children to private schools that are at a distance from the village. Add to this, the fact that most of the young people in the village have joined the Army, and you can see a real lack of human resources within the village. As a result, there are several fields left uncultivated. People have now moved away from their fields and have shown their preference for cheap ration supplies provided for by the Government. Even vegetable cash crops that some people have begun to cultivate do not easily find a market. Last year even the Army (a main buyer) refused to

purchase our vegetables for they needed variety. Taking the vegetables all the way to the Leh market is expensive.

Education has not helped address these issues. The educated youth are gradually pushing themselves away from traditional practices of sustainable farming and merely seek Government jobs.

I may differ in my opinion from other members but I believe that these are issues of significance and as a community leader; I need to ensure that they are addressed.

Sonam Dolma

Chairperson, Panchayat

Adalat

Panchayat: Pheh

District: Leh

Ladakh

I hail from Pheh, a small village in Leh District, Ladakh. In 2002, my village nominated me as Chairperson of the Panchayat Adalat. Being an educated woman, I always knew I wanted to work for the people. Once nominated from Pheh, I was taken to Spitu, the Panchayat headquarters. A meeting was held with representatives of the Block administration and I eventually became the Chairperson. This was the first time a woman had risen to such a post and though reluctant at first, I had gained strength from my education and the support of my family and the people around me.

The Panchayat Adalat is the legal wing of the Gram Panchayat and has seven members in Pheh, of which I am the only woman. Not a single case has come up for hearing yet, as the village is quite culturally integrated and sound. Conflicts usually go straight to the Lamberdar or get resolved automatically.

I firmly believe that if a woman can manage her home, she can just as easily work for the progress of her village and community, which is why I am also a member of various committees within Pheh.

As an active member of the Watershed Committee, I had also worked for the development of my region. Shortage of water for irrigation and a lack of water supply remain crucial problems for my village, to the extent that there are tussles with the neighbouring villages and the women often keep nightlong vigils for water. The committee constructed a water reservoir to meet our drinking-water needs but water for the fields is still scarce.

Fed up with the lack of water supply for irrigation, I declared one day that if water were not given soon, I would file a requisition and a letter of complaint with the Councillor. This declaration was enough for people to start preparing the soil for their fields! They have a lot of confidence in my leadership and are certain I will do something.

As recognition for my work in the Watershed Committee, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir sent me to Gujarat on an exposure visit, where I visited Anna Hazare's organisation.

I was also nominated to the Village Education Committee, along with two other women. I had improved the quality of teaching in schools by ensuring the teachers received proper training. Infrastructure was monitored closely and we initiated a pre-nursery school in the village.

In my life and work, I have never faced any resistance from my village. I became a member of the Panchayat Adalat due to reservations but rose to the post of Chairperson solely because of my own qualities and efficiency. Throughout my term in the Panchayat Adalat, however, the Government has given me no official training on the duties of my post or legal structures. I gathered knowledge by myself, by attending various workshops conducted by civil and social organisations. In August 2005, I had participated in the Training Of Trainers (TOT) organised by The Hunger Project, and was groomed as a trainer to conduct WLWs.

When elected women leaders from all over India were invited by THP for the Seventh Sarojini Naidu Prize ceremony (2007), they elected me as their spokesperson. I told an audience of more than 500 people about the problems my village faced regarding shortage of water for irrigation and the lack of water supply. I also spoke of the responsibilities of an elected woman leader and the importance of finding a balance between a woman's life and work.

My family supports me completely and when I visited Delhi, they looked after my two year-old child. The elders of my village told me to speak boldly and fearlessly, and encouraged me no end. I feel my people trust me and that is important, for I cannot get much accomplished alone. They have instilled in me a sense of self-confidence and determination, and with their support, I plan to stand for the upcoming Panchayat elections.

Zahira Bano

Village: Kannuar
(Trespone)

Block: Sanku

District: Kargil
Ladakh

The population of Kargil comprises mainly of peasants and masons, who are subservient, to the Shia clerics. Their social fabric, heavily influenced by religion, discourages women to participate in affairs outside their homes.

Bound by centuries of subjugation within the four walls of the domestic domain, it still takes a lot of courage and determination to break this silence. I was the first woman in the history of Ladakh to contest the recent local Hill Council elections despite all sorts of pressures and threats.

I stood against a powerful Agha (religious head of Shias) from a constituency, which is considered one of the most conservative in the region. I was born and brought up there and always saw women as oppressed by religion. When I stood for elections, I gave out a clear message saying that women should no longer be suppressed by men under the influence of “Mullahgiri”.

I overcame the fear that women are conditioned to succumb to. I remained steadfast against threats and pressures made by the community when I filed my nomination papers. Even my family put lot of pressure on me. They threatened to sever their relationship with me but I stood my ground. The pressure was so intense that it was almost impossible for my supporters to campaign for me. Even while I write this, my agent is being threatened to withdraw his support.

My objective was very clear when I decided to challenge male domination. I wanted to fight for women’s rights and address serious issues related to health, education, multiple marriages and so on. Women are left in the lurch without any social acceptance. I fought hard but lost the election. The mere 88 votes I won were hard earned, and mean a lot to me.

It was, in actual terms, a victory over orthodoxy. My contesting the elections has inspired many other women across the region of Ladakh. When I filed my nomination, I was invited by women from as many as five other areas to contest from their constituencies. Women from Baru, Kargil town, Khomeini Bagh, and so on came to me requesting me to stand on their behalf. The

reasons behind such overwhelming support were obvious. “We are relegated to household drudgery, toiling all the time like donkeys, which continues even during pregnancy” says Nargis, a supporter from Baru. In addition, during the week of child delivery, in hospital, women are fed on just *cha and taki* (tea and bread) and are not given any special attention like the women in Leh are given.

Even worse, there are cases of multiple marriages and many women are abandoned by their husbands and are left alone to take care of their young children. It has become almost fashionable for men to keep two to three wives, often leaving one woman for another with absolutely no support, whether or not there are children to take care of. A woman from Hardass village came crying to me seeking support so that she could feed her children. Her husband had left her and had married another woman. There are many such cases and almost 30 percent of women in Kargil go through such untold suffering.

I organised skill-based trainings for women with the support of an organisation called ‘Women Multipurpose Society and Women Welfare Committee’, Kargil. I saw this as an opportunity to empower women. As a result, many women like Nargis today are able to earn and have gained economic independence. She does kashidakari (embroidery) and manages to earn about 3000 rupees, money with which she can buy things like books and pencils for her children.

In the past, I had joined the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) - a new religious organisation that came into being in 1989. I worked as a volunteer during religious processions. However, I felt the need to do more and went on to work more forcefully as a member of ‘Women Multipurpose Society’. I was not fully satisfied there either, so I decided to join politics. I was aware of the fact that for a woman, joining politics needs a lot of courage. My decision to contest the Council elections was a first step in this direction and fortunately my husband stood with me through this.

My husband believes that I will bring about some change but he also has his own reasons for supporting this struggle. My husband and I are from the same

village and long ago his father was punished for doing something that did not conform to the orthodox set up of the village: his father was asked to leave the village because he sent his children to school to learn English. Since then, the family has been living in Kargil town, which is where I live with my husband and children now. My father-in-law's liberal attitude inspired me.

Much later, once again in the same village, parents stopped sending their daughters to school. This happened when a girl and boy eloped. After incessant efforts, I was able to convince the parents to send their girls to school, as a result today these girls are employed, and some are pursuing higher studies in colleges. I regret that I myself did not get an opportunity to study beyond my matriculation because that was not a priority and girls were married off at a young age. Parents would only send us to school when there was no work at home.

It has indeed been a long journey for me especially when I have not received the kind of support that would encourage me to take on more challenges. I lost the elections and that might leave a negative impression but I also know that I was brave and that my courage will leave a more long lasting impression on women's rights in Kargil.

KARNATAKA

Bayyamma
Ward Member
Panchayat: B. Bomm-
asandra
Block: Gowribidanur
District: Chikkaballapur

I am a married woman and a mother of four children- two sons and two daughters. My elder son is presently studying in class 10 and the younger one is undergoing survey training, while both the girls are married. I am 45 years old, a farmer by occupation and have studied up until Class X. In the 2005 Panchayat elections, I contested for a Panchayat member's post from a general seat. I had one male competitor, but ultimately the majority elected me. The training programs conducted by The Hunger Project have helped me a lot.

With the help of the Department of Women and Child Development, Gowribidanur, I provided the physically challenged persons (with walking difficulties) in the Panchayat with walking aids. I helped in constituting two Women Self-Help Groups in the village and told them about the savings and internal loan system. I have served as the Chairperson in the Basic Amenities Committee, Health, and Sanitation Committees in the Panchayat. My first task was to get the old village pre-primary school repaired, I approached the Block Educational Officer about it, a new building is coming up now, and the building work is still under progress. I tried to motivate the parents of children, especially girls who had dropped out of school, to admit their kids back in to school. In order to better the educational condition of the children belonging to the Dalits, I fought with the Gram Panchayat Secretary for their rights. I was successful and an amount issued for this was sanctioned out of the 20 percent reserved fund of the Panchayat. I also ensured that monetary help was given to others to help them pursue a technical course.

As part of the Independence Day celebration, we distributed books (free of cost) to the poor students of the village, by taking financial help from individuals and civil society organizations. I visit the village schools on a regular basis to check the proper distribution and implementation of the mid-day meals under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Along with the Aanganwadi teacher, I conducted a survey to find out who the dropout children were in our village and motivated their parents to send them back to school.

I organized a free eye check-up campaign in the village and supported few elderly people to undergo an eye operation (free of cost) in Bangalore. I also

actively participate in the Pulse Polio Vaccination Program every year in the village and we achieved a 100 percent success rate. A number of people in the Panchayat were suffering from Tuberculosis (TB), so I organized a health check-up and awareness campaign on the disease. I also conducted an AIDS Awareness Programme in the village.

The Panchayat Secretary on occasion has interfered in my work. He shifted some of the work, which had been sanctioned to our village to another village, but with great struggle, I was successful and managed to shift the work back to its sanctioned spot.

I involve myself in other welfare activities as well, like inviting NCC cadets for social service activities; I also provide them with free accommodation and food until the programme ends. As a part of the programme, the NCC students repaired the old temple and a school building. I have shown what an uneducated woman can achieve if there is a will to work.

Chinnamma
Ward Member
Panchayat: H. Hosakote
Block: Malur
District: Kolar

I belong to the Adhi Karnataka caste (a Scheduled Caste) and I have not received any formal education. My husband and I have three sons and an adopted daughter. My family is not economically well off when compared to others. We only have half an acre of dry land and which is dependant on rain-fed agriculture. Our primary source of income is through agricultural labor and we have two cows that act as a source of secondary income. I live in a joint family with my mother-in-law, father-in-law, and four brothers-in-law. My family and I have always tried to help those in need and therefore, the people of our village trust and respect us. When the 2005 Panchayat elections were declared and the seat was reserved for women, my ward people thought of choosing me as their ward member, but I was not eager to enter politics, I was scared of the money and power games involved. Ultimately, my well-wishers convinced my family members and myself, to stand for the post. Even though there were 10 other people who had filed their nominations initially, my ward people successfully influenced them to withdraw their applications and I was chosen a ward member unanimously.

After taking over the post, an issue was brought to my notice. A young man had promised marriage to a young woman named Ellamma, but when she got pregnant with his child, he refused to marry her. Ellamma's mother was mentally challenged and her father was psychologically disturbed. I decided to support the girl and with the help of the police, I got her married with the concerned man. The only expense that I had to incur was for the Mangalsuthra, which cost Rs. 3,000.

One day, when Ellamma's husband was out of town on work she began her labor late at night. I took her to the Primary Health Unit and sadly, only a nurse was present there, who advised me to take Ellamma to the hospital since the delivery was complicated. There was no transport facility available that night, so I went to the neighboring village, hired an auto and took her to the hospital. The doctors demanded Rs. 5000 delivering the baby. When I told them that I am a member of the Gram Panchayat and warned them that I would lodge a complaint to the higher authorities they withdrew their

demand. Later on, the villagers and I raised Rs.1500 for the cost of the medical expenses.

I wish to have a hospital in my Panchayat (with at least five beds), because even though the village is close to the Block headquarters (seven Kilometres), there are only two public buses, with a limited service twice a day. People have to walk a distance of three kilometres to catch the bus from the main road, due to which the aged, sick and pregnant woman suffer severely and many a times, it then leads to further complication.

The Panchayat auctioned the eucalyptus trees that were grown in the Panchayat land and I wanted to use the proceeds to fix sodium lights in the village. When I went to the shop to crosscheck the cost of the fittings, the shop owner told us that the cost of the bulb is Rs. 3500, and asked if I wanted a bill for Rs. 5000, as is the usual practice. I was horrified by the suggestion and as we were making a bulk purchase, I refused to pay Rs. 3500 and successfully negotiated with the seller and reduced the price further. There are now about 8 – 10 light fixtures in all the villages/wards of the Panchayat.

Our village faced an acute water shortage, as a Ward Member, I regularly monitored the work of the new bore-well which was being dug, followed up on it and raised the issue in front of the Secretary and other officials. The Panchayat has finally been able to get access to a continuous water supply to all the villages.

Geetha

Ward Member

Panchayat: Emmenatha

Block: Mulabagal

District: Kolar

I originally belong to Velluru, a village in Tamil Nadu. I have always been passionate to work for the society's development. I am 34 years old and have studied up until the third standard. I have been married for 18 years, my husband, Mr. Selvam K., and I have two children - our daughter was married this year and our son is presently studying in class eight. We belong to the Nayaka tribe (under the Scheduled Tribe category) and our family is not that well off economically. We own two cows and half an acre of land, my husband works as an agricultural labourer and in my free time, I roll beedis to supplement our family income. When the Gram Panchayat member's seat was reserved for the ST category in the Panchayat elections, the community leaders convinced me to stand for it, the leadership within me gave me the confidence to be involved in politics at the local level. There were three other candidates who had filed their nomination for the same post, but the villagers convinced them to back out. After being elected, I got a chance to take part in the training program organized by The Hunger Project-BWS. My first step after being elected was to work towards improving the village's literacy level. Even though, the community acknowledges me for my leadership qualities today, I regret the lack of formal education; therefore, my priority is to ensure literacy and education for every child in the Panchayat.

One of the issues that I worked on was the construction of an Aanganwadi in the Panchayat. Earlier, children had to walk 2 km in an area surrounded by rocks and hills to go to their school. The Panchayat worked on this and deputed a teacher to the Aanganwadi. However, there was no place to set it up; a rich villager had illegally acquired the Government land in the Panchayat and nobody dared to do anything about this. When I went to the police station and lodged a complaint, the police threatened me and asked me to withdraw the case. I politely refused and said that if that person had the wealth and money, I had the power. At present, the case is in court. However, the Aanganwadi classes are conducted in the school building and meals are provided at the school. The previous Aanganwadi teacher used to come twice or thrice in a week, so I talked to the officials and we appointed a woman of our own village for the job and the classes are going on regularly since then.

I observed that all the boys were spending a lot of their evening time by watching television. I talked to one of the boys, who seemed intelligent and gave him the responsibility to make all the boys study at a specified time and guide them through their studies. I pay the volunteer some money for his service.

Jnanamma
Ward Member
Panchayat: Melur
Block: Siddlaghatta
District: Chikkaballapur

I am 42 years old and have studied up to the class 10. I am married and mother to a son and a daughter. I am a Bajanthri by caste (OBC category) and I am engaged in the saree business.

I did not have any political background and was never interested in politics. As my husband is an alcoholic, it was very difficult for me to manage the family expenses alone. During the 2005 Gram Panchayat elections, two other people had stood for the elections, but I was elected as a Ward Member. The Panchayat nominated me as Chairman of *Sampurna Swachada Andolan Programme*. To undertake the responsibility of the programme in the Panchayat villages, I attended a three-day training programme because of which my husband beat me up and ordered me not to leave the village for Panchayat works. He did not let me enter the house for an entire day, but I did not let it affect me and continued to work. Due to the unhygienic conditions in the village, many people suffered from several diseases like jaundice, malaria, diarrhea etc. I succeeded in making people, especially women in the Kambada halli, Chowdasandra, Ganganahalli and Melur villages aware of the dangers of defecating in the open by making the health worker and the Aanganwadi worker in all the four villages visit every house in their respective one and motivate women to construct a sanitary latrine in their homes. Due to this drive, 95 percent households constructed latrines. It has reduced the health problems in all the four villages.

I visit the schools in the Panchayat and teach children about the importance of sanitation. We decided to construct community toilets to deal with the problem of shortage of space in some houses. Thanks to these efforts the Panchayat was selected a winner under the Total Sanitation Programme and received a prize of Rs. 5 Lakhs.

I am a member of Annapurna Self-Help Group, and the group distributes notebooks, pens, and instrument boxes to the students. We conducted a survey in the village, about the children, especially girls who dropped out of school, and motivated their parents to re-admit them to school. To encourage

children in their studies, the SHG has announced a cash prize for the student who scores the highest in class 10.

With my involvement, the Gram Panchayat is providing Mallika, a specially-abled girl with free computer training. I am fully involved in the Pulse Polio Programme and it is held twice a year in the Panchayat. We have told mothers about the importance of administering polio vaccine to children below five years of age by doing door-to-door canvassing. To maintain cleanliness and secure good health for villagers, we advised the farmers to transfer cow dung manure out of the village. We invited doctors to advise people to take precautionary measures to avoid diseases spread due to mosquitoes. I have also taken the initiative to provide a skill development Programmes for three others in tailoring and sewing machines have been sanctioned for each of them. They are all self-employed now.

I have worked hard with other members in the Panchayat to construct good roads, a drainage system, to provide streetlights, rural houses, and other facilities to the village people.

Kanthamma
Ward Member
Panchayat: Pitchaguntla
Hally
Block: Mulabagal
District: Kolar

I was a Member of the Gram Panchayat of my village from 2000 to 2005. At the International Women's Day celebration in Bangalore organized by The Hunger Project, on 8 March 2004, I brought to the notice of the then Secretary of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, the corrupt practices of the party politicians relating to the electoral lists. I observed that in the electoral list, often names are included or excluded by wily politicians according to what benefits them. However, the State, takes the electoral list as genuine, leading to exclusion of the actual beneficiaries from the Government Schemes.

At that time, the State Government was in the process of carrying out a family survey and revising the house tax norms based on the quality and type of house. This survey included a revision of the process of selecting beneficiaries under different schemes, like PDS, housing, health, education etc. To avoid manipulation in the list, I suggested that a photograph of the family member should be taken in front of their house, so that the quality and type of the house is visible. This document could then be considered important while selecting the beneficiaries for various Schemes.

Subsequently, and after hearing my concerns and ideas in detail, the Secretary passed a Government Order on 27 March 2004. Copies were sent to all the CEO's of Zilla Panchayats and to all District Planning Officers, as well as to all the election officers of Block Panchayats, to include photos in the survey, and my name was mentioned in the Order.

Kenchamma
President
Panchayat: Nerelekere
Block: Tarikere
District: Chickmagalur

I won my first Presidential seat in 1993, which I contested from the General Category. In my second term as President in 2003, I contested and won from the SC category. My constituency has five villages. The villagers first approached me to stand for elections because I had a reputation of being a quiet person, who never fought or indulged in gossip. I think they felt that I could be easily influenced and would not be an overly interfering President. I proved quite contrary to these expectations. Moreover, having seen and acknowledged the good I have done, there was absolutely no opposition from the people the second time. However, some Panchayat members continue to be impediments.

I was encouraged by my family to stand for elections. As far as the campaigning went it was mostly done by the villagers as I come from an extremely poor family, with no money to contribute to the campaign. I could not even offer coffee to the people who were supporting me. The campaign was vigorous and though my area is Ward No. 1, the villagers even got people from Ward No. 2 to vote for me. Before I entered politics, my ambit of experience was limited to the family, the home and daily coolie (labour) work.

The process by which I garnered the confidence of the people began before I was elected. As I felt I could not help financially with the campaign, I would try to be with the campaigners most of the time and see if I could help them in their homes with household duties. Thus, for example, while in their homes, I would sit with the women of the house and help them in cleaning rice: this helped in building a relationship of camaraderie and trust. Through these experiences, the women began to feel that they could relate to and share their thoughts and ideas better with a woman elected representative. Importantly, they felt convinced that the power that comes from being a President would not go to my head and that I would continue to be sensitive to their specific problems.

Matters like filing of my nomination etc., were taken care of by the villagers who had taken it upon themselves to get me elected. It was once I became President that the problems began. Other members of the Panchayat, namely the men, refused to attend meetings that I called, as I was a woman and an

SC to boot. I was very unsure of myself, and did not know the procedures and regulations of running a Panchayat. My insecurity also stemmed from the fact that I had only studied up to Class III, and felt I lacked the knowledge of what a President was meant to do. I felt that I would look foolish if I asked questions. I remember wondering why I had consented to doing this at all, and how I was going to survive the experience.

My decision to undertake training was crucial, as it provided me with the tools to be a productive and effective President. The training programme helped me in realizing the full powers of a President - powers that cannot be countermanded by others. I feel that knowledge is power and this realization has been critical for me. I subsequently felt confident enough to argue with the male Members and push my decisions through.

I learnt to read and write during my first term in office. In 1993, in the early days of my term, I had refused to sign a cheque of Rs. 20,000 since I had not seen the work for which the payment was due. After the training, I find myself in control. I keep abreast of all issues and am in control with regard to accounts and the budget. I was able to change five Secretaries on grounds of their being uncooperative in my first term; and have had two Secretaries changed since 2003. I did this by writing to the Zilla Panchayat on the matter.

When I was first elected, there was no office for the Panchayat, which subsequently I had built. I have facilitated the building of 30 houses for the Scheduled Caste community under the Ambedkar Scheme. I have sanctioned 20 percent of the Panchayats' revenue for the Scheduled Caste community, of this Rs. 50,000 has been used for repair work.

I have also had gutters and roads made; installed street lamps and arranged for drinking water facilities. I believe that education and knowledge are the key to empowerment hence I have arranged for books for school children, and made sure that every single child attends school. I have also ensured that there is no more bonded labour. The Panchayat has also contributed towards two Aanganwadis and Health Centres.

I feel that I have won the complete admiration and support of the people. They wish that the rotation system operational in Karnataka should not apply to me, as they want me to be the President for the full term. However, since the Government's Order now is that the previous President retains the post of Vice-President after the rotation, they feel I will be able to make my influence adequately felt. Despite the peoples' support, I feel there is still about 25 percent resistance to women elected representatives like me in the Panchayat.

I did not stand for elections for the five-year period in between my two terms as having gained courage and knowledge through my first experience I wished to give other women a chance. If women get the chance, they will work towards health, education, and family development. After five years were over, people requested me to stand for election again as they felt that not much work had been done in this period. This led to an awkward situation, as my sister-in-law was my opponent. She requested me to give her a chance this time but it appears the village did not want her. The villagers funded my campaign while my sister-in-law spent Rs. 20,000 from her own pocket.

I would consider contesting for the Block Panchayat, the District Panchayat, for the post of MLA and even MP. I believe women can and should be active in politics and after working at the grass-roots level, move higher up in the decision making process. I want to support other women to stand for election and do as much as possible to improve education standards. Education is the key. I have been helped also by the support of my husband who takes pride in my work. I feel he is understanding and is giving me the chance to empower others as I myself have been empowered.

Lakshmi

Ward Member

Panchayat: Palyakere

Block: Bagepalli

District: Chikkaballapur

Five years back, some local villagers kidnapped my daughter and slaughtered her near one temple (Balidan) as a sign of sacrifice to the almighty. I tried to get help from other people from the village to get the criminals punished, but nobody came forward to help me. When the police refused to do their job too, I filed a case in the court. The case is still in court and I hope to get justice someday.

I am 40 years old, mother to a son and I belong to the Vysya community. Usually the women in our community are not allowed to be a part of politics. I married a businessperson in the Palyakere village, but we are not that well off economically and hence have a low standard of living. Being a member of the SHG, the members selected me to contest the Gram Panchayat election. There was just one other woman candidate, who was also supported by the SHG members. I was however elected. Since then, I have been trying to solve the village problems, like improper sanitation, unhygienic condition of drainage system etc. Most of the girls were out of school (dropouts), due to a lack of awareness. I motivated and convinced the people and got more than 20 children readmitted to school. There is a continuity-learning centre in the village, but it was not functioning well earlier, I ensured that the centre operated regularly and now both men and women attend literacy classes there, I also try to motivate women to attend them.

With the help of an NRI who belongs to the Vysya community, stationary material like notebooks, pens, pencils, geometry boxes were distributed to students from classes 1 to 10 in the year 2006-07. Arya Vysya Mandali launched a similar programme, but in this case, we prefer to give the material to female students, to encourage them to attend school regularly. Steel plates were distributed to school students to eat food under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and water filters were provided in every school to supply pure drinking water to schoolchildren, using the Panchayat funds.

The students, especially girls were provided some amount to fund their further studies. I arranged the *Chinnara Angala Programme* in village schools to encourage those students who were weak in studies by making things simpler for them.

I tried to create awareness among the illiterate women, about social issues such as domestic violence, by involving the educated ones. I conducted a Health Education

Programme for the members of the Self-Help Group at Palyakere, people at the Government Primary School and invited resource persons from the Primary Health Centre, Chelur.

To address the health issues prevalent in the village, I have approached the MLA to sanction the Primary Health Unit (PHU), but it is yet to happen. I also collected Rs. 80,000/- for this purpose. Regular visits of the ANM to the village were organized, to take care of the pre-natal and postnatal care of the village women. Regular contact and dialogue with the Aanganwadi worker has led to 100percent security of women in respect to simple ailments like fever, Diarrhoea, headache etc, I personally distributed some tablets to the poor people for simpler ailments. Regular health camps for women are conducted in the village. I tried to ensure maximum response to the pulse polio vaccine program by getting some pamphlets printed and distributing them in the village to create awareness about Polio. We were successful and all the children below five years of age were immunized . In order to supply drinking water in places where there is a shortage, two new bore wells were dug.

I feel that my biggest achievement was to conduct Gram Sabhas in my village and in the Panchayat, even though it was thoroughly opposed by my fellow Panchayat members, including the Panchayat President and local leaders. I struggled through court and managed to get an interim order passed in the Panchayat to conduct Gram Sabhas in all the villages of the Panchayat.

I tried to organize and motivate the farmers to form a Farmers committee and to register it to avail government benefits under the Jala Samvardhane Yojna Programme.

I organized mass marriages in the Panchayat, in order to minimize the expenditure as well as the burden faced by the brides' parents. The training workshops organized and by The Hunger Project - ASEDA have made a huge difference to my working; I strongly believe that whatever work I have been able to do in the Panchayat was because of these trainings. I aspire to contest the next election and if I am elected, I will try my best to get all the girl children educated and healthcare services for all in the Gram Panchayat.

Lakshmiddevamma

Ward Member

Panchayat: Dodda Hasala

Block: Kolar

District: Kolar

I was born in a joint family and I am married to R. Narayana Swamy, a businessperson. I am 50 years old, am SSLC pass, and have been an Aanganwadi teacher for the last 15 years. I belong to the Kuruba caste and have three daughters - the first two are XIIth pass and married, while the youngest one is currently in class XIIth. I am the first person from my family to participate in politics. My first experience with politics was back in 1994, I contested the Panchayat elections and was selected as Ward Member of Dodda Hasala Gram Panchayat, and I was the Panchayat President for 3 years. In the next elections, due to the reservation rotation system, my ward was reserved for some other caste and hence I was unable to contest elections. The seat was again reserved for my caste in 2005 and my ward people unanimously selected me because of my work during my previous tenure. I am also a member convener of the Aanganwadi Workers Federation and work for their rights.

I attended the Women's Leadership Workshop organized by The Hunger Project. I am also involved in the Aanganwadi federation. Since I have an interest in theatre, I performed a street play along with the other Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) who took part in the WLW.

A physically challenged person did not send his daughter to school, since nobody was there to feed him lunch as his wife used to work as a labourer. I convinced him that I would take the teacher's consent for 10 minutes in the lunch break so that the girl could get him his lunch after having her own in the school, and after that he admitted his daughter to school. I am also trying to convince the parents of the children who dropped out of school. My vision is to provide education to all in the community and I am trying to convince people to get their children admitted to school. I personally started a night school and taught many people. My daughter is currently working as a prakash in Saksharatha School. A widowed woman was facing a financial crisis, I encouraged her to join a women's Self-Help Group and helped her purchase a milch animal.

Manjula

Ward Member

Panchayat: Muduvadi

Block: Kolar

District: Kolar

I am 29 years old and have studied up to Class X. I belong to the Nayaka Caste (Scheduled Tribe category) and am a mother of two children - a boy in Class IV and a girl who is in Class II. None of my family members has ever been involved in politics, but I decided to enter politics because of the influence of the villagers, especially the women in my Ward. I contested from the reserved seat in the 2005 Panchayat elections and won. My family's main occupation is sericulture, but we also grow Ragi (finger millet), when there is insufficient water in the bore well. We have two cows that support our income and two acres of land.

Initially when I started attending the Panchayat meetings, I faced communication problems. After taking part in the Women's Leadership Workshop, I understood the importance of communication and started going to the Panchayat every day. Being the Panchayat President, I had to talk to many officials, so I had to use the Secretary's mobile. I felt the need of telephones in the village, whenever I wished to seek guidance from the organization that organized the training program. I was also given an opportunity to attend the Sarojini Naidu Prize ceremony in New Delhi in 2005.

I have attended the follow up workshops, RTI workshops, federation orientations, and many other training programs related to the Gram Panchayat. If I was not a Panchayat member, even then, the work, which is necessary or is included in the schemes, would have been done by someone else with the post, but my concern is to give more importance to the social issues and problems that have existed since so many years. I wish to conduct a survey to find out about the number of physically challenged people in the Panchayat, to provide the Government Schemes and benefits to them. I have already mobilized the benefits that were within my reach for three physically challenged persons. I have also managed to mobilize funds for admitting a mute girl to a special job oriented school in Bengaluru and got her a job. The cook in the Aanganwadi is aged and hence he is unable to perform his duties properly, I am trying to post a young physically challenged girl in his post.

I involve myself in all the Panchayat activities and try to regularize all its activities as much as possible. I also actively participate in all the federation activities; take work responsibilities to the Block, and District level.

Netramma

Ward Member

Panchayat: Siddrahalli

Block: Tarikere

District: Chikmagalore

I always dreamed of doing my higher studies but due to my poor family background and the general bias against educating girls, I had to discontinue my education after completing Class III. I also dreamed of getting married into an economically well off family but that dream was not to be either. I married Rangappa of Siddarahalli village, is 12 kms from the Block headquarters and 52 kms from the District headquarters. I have two children and manage not only my family but also work for people who are in trouble.

I became member of Siddrahalli Gram Panchayat when the seat was reserved for a woman belonging to a Scheduled Tribe (ST). I did not have any experience of politics. After I was elected, I received a very effective training from The Hunger Project-VIKASANA as well as Satellite-based training from the Government.

One of the reasons that I was elected was due to my active role in mobilising eight women's SHGs, one of which I am also the President of. These SHGs were then federated into the Bhuvaneshwari Women Federation. The Federation is working effectively to date.

This Federation-platform has given me the strength to discuss many women issues in the Panchayat: including leadership, gender, political involvement, resource mobilization from the Government, etc. With the strength of the SHG women with me, I worked against excessive alcohol consumption in the village.

We fought to stop the vehicle which was supplying alcohol sachets to our village; this became a police case and a complaint was lodged against me and some other women by the alcohol contractor. We had to make many trips to the court to fight the charges against us. Recently with the intervention of the local MLA, these cases were settled and for some time there was a complete stop to the selling of the alcohol sachets in the villages of my Panchayat.

After some months through the influence of local political leaders, the selling of alcohol has started again. This time again with support of SHGs members

and other villages associations we went to the District Commissioner and discussed the issue in detail and succeeded in bringing an order banning the selling alcohol in the village.

This too was short lived, after some months, the selling of illegal alcohol in the villages started anew, and lead to a big quarrel; Once again, a case has been lodged against 13 women including me. This case is still in the Court. We are in the process of working out the next strategy to stop the selling of alcohol in the village.

Despite all this trouble and all these cases, my husband and other family members respect me a lot.

I am also actively involved in the child labour eradication programme, and have recently sent four working children from brick making units back to school.

Rajamani

Ward Member

Panchayat: Mudgol

Block: Srirangapatnam

District: Mysore

I won the election from a seat reserved for the Scheduled Tribes against a woman who had held the post for the previous term. The earlier Member had been powerful because of her influential husband and their connection with a certain political party. I found that although there had been no change in the village for the past 20 years, the election procedures were more stringent in 2005, and this enabled me to win as Ward Member. My Ward is spread over three villages.

I received the support of many villagers and was in fact approached by them to stand for election, which I did despite opposition from my family. The basis for the villagers' confidence in me was the fact that although I was a homemaker I had been active in and fulfilled various responsibilities in different organizations in the village. I started out with being active in the Co-operative, of which I was President. I was a member of the School Development Committee and the President of the Fair Price Depot shops. I feel that my work with these groups gave the villagers confidence in my ability to effect change through an elected post in the Gram Panchayat.

My Panchayat, comprises of ten men and seven women members. Of these, five women have trained with The Hunger Project. I face constant and obstinate opposition from the male and some female Members because I have been questioning the way in which the Panchayat operates and some of its activities, from the moment of my election. My natural sense of what I feel a Panchayat should be doing, combined now with my knowledge of what the procedures to be followed are, aids me in countering the male Members.

Working in the Panchayat has been a constant battle. I have been opposed on various grounds and on almost every issue. For example, at the very outset I was confronted by other Members for bringing up the issue of the Panchayat's responsibilities, for they felt I was creating complications. By substantiating my demands with the rules and regulations of a functioning Panchayat I have countered both physical threats to my life as well as emotional abuse, from the women Members mocking my supposed ineptitude in homemaking to male Members' asking me for 'my price' in order to get rid of me.

One of the first tasks undertaken by me was to rehabilitate three men – orphans who were mentally challenged, and who were being kept as bonded labourers in the homes of previous Panchayat Members. I saw to it that this practice was no longer continued and arranged for pensions for mentally challenged persons.

I filed for and received eight OAPs, ten Widow Pensions even though this is not an easy job as many letters, and recommendations from officials and superiors are required. Suffice to say, acquiring these documents is a long-winded process requiring much running back and forth. The money required for traveling to the Block Office was spent from my own pocket. In this case, as in several other instances, I found the Secretary unwilling to give me money to cover such costs using the fallacious excuse that the money belonged to the Government! I also arranged for five BPL cards for individuals who needed them, of which three belonged to the SC/ ST category.

My prime agenda has been to provide formal education to poor children. My village has a school until Class VI. However, most parents find it too expensive to send their children to the school in a neighbouring village to continue their studies. Hence, one of my main goals is the sanctioning of funds for extending the school to Middle School. In the meanwhile, the Panchayat had received funds, which were going to be used to set up a kitchen in the local temple, but I managed to get these funds instead for renovating the school hall.

As my term progresses however, I find no change in the attitude of my fellow Panchayat Members or the supporting bureaucracy. I continue to encounter opposition to all tasks I undertake. These range from very petty to larger issues. For example, people need letters from the President in order to apply for employment in the nearby factories. Often the President refuses to give these asking derisively why only 'my' village people should get these letters. Sometimes, when I know I am bringing up issues and questions, which are sure to elicit opposition, I take people from the village to sit outside the Panchayat to back me up. Their function, more importantly, ensures that I am

not physically harmed, a possibility I see as very real as I am seen as the creator of major problems.

I constantly fear for my life and dignity. I feel the need to ask my husband to accompany me at all times for this reason. Nevertheless, neither of us feel safe. This aside, I can identify a tangible sense of empowerment ever since I have taken office. The first person I shared all my new learnings' with was my husband, regarding the responsibilities of a Panchayat and how I could enforce these. My husband told me that he has become, "braver, as you are so brave". He has taught me to drive a scooter as he feels this will enable me to be even more independent. I find that now, my decisions hold more weight at home.

For me, development means a village with no violence and education for all. Although I cannot conceive of a casteless society, or development in the way that textbooks talk about it, I do see peaceful co-existence as a possibility. This emphatic desire for peace probably resonates from the everyday violence surrounding me as I go about my tasks as an elected representative. If I die doing this, then I die.

Renuka

President

Panchayat: Namagondlu

Block: Gowribidanur

District: Chikkaballapur

I come from a middle class family and was elected with the support of the women of my Panchayat in 2005. This has been my first experience of working within the Panchayat system, not having ever contested elections before. Since I have been elected, I have been exposed to the many problems that the people of my Panchayat face. In addition, since then, I have been working towards solving these issues.

The biggest problem in my Panchayat is the lack of drinking water and improper distribution of food-grains through the Fair Price Shop. Attempting to solve these two problems were the first tasks I undertook.

Apart from this, I concentrated on addressing issues of education and health. The rate of school dropouts for girls in my Panchayat is high. I identified the dropout children in my Panchayat and motivated their parents to re-admit them to school. Today, twenty dropout children have been enrolled back to school. The Panchayat also had an adult literacy program, which was not functioning properly. I took immediate steps to reopen the Centre and motivated the adults to join it. Some students who find it difficult to afford higher studies approached me for financial help. I arranged for them to continue their education with some financial support from Panchayat funds and the remainder through bank loans. The Panchayat Secretary helped arrange these with me.

When I took over, the Aanganwadi centre in the Panchayat was not functioning well and the rate of absenteeism was high. I motivated both the teachers and parents and now it has become a model for others to follow.

The health facilities available in my Panchayat are very poor. It is situated in a remote area and the ANM's visits are very infrequent. I spoke to the higher officials at the Primary Health Centre and ensured that she starts coming regularly. I have ensured that pregnant women have access to both pre and postnatal care through the various Government Schemes they are entitled to.

There are individuals in my Panchayat who are afflicted with different health problems for which I have been trying to get medical and financial assistance.

These include Rs. 5,000 from the MLA fund for the treatment for a cancer patient and Rs. 25,000 from the same fund for the treatment of Harish, a heart patient suffering from a serious cardiac problem. He has been treated and has resumed his normal life. Another case is that of Narayan, who met with an accident and fractured his leg. I helped him avail medical facilities under the Yashawini Yojna, now he is able to walk with with a crutch. Then there is Manjula, who developed complications at the time of her delivery. I immediately got her admitted to a private nursing home paying part of her treatment personally, which she later cleared by working in my field. I also assisted five people who were suffering from eye problems getting them financial aid for surgery. They are now able to lead a normal life.

There are no proper transportation facilities for commuters to and fro from the Panchayat, and this is a problem when seen from the point of view of children who go to school, or when the ill and the aged need to go to hospital for treatment. I approached a private bus owner and managed to get a bus to make two daily trips from the Panchayat. Alcohol is a problem in our area and I try discouraging men from drinking as it affects the women adversely. I am now concentrating on brining drinking water to each household in the Panchayat.

Rudramma
Ward Member
Panchayat: Kudlure
Block: Tarikere
District: Chikmagalore

Though I am not highly qualified, I have been working with people since childhood and marriage has only helped me understand the problems of people of different age groups and varied backgrounds better.

I belong to a Scheduled Tribe and am the fourth daughter in my family. My father found it difficult to support our education; although I completed High School I could not continue my education beyond that as it was proving to be a financial burden on the family. Subsequently, I got married and am a mother to two.

Panchayat politics never really interested me but when the seat in my Ward was declared as reserved for STs, I stood for elections and now I am working as a member of the Gram Panchayat. A major setback in this journey came with the sudden death of my husband. It was a big shock to me but I have not allowed this to come in the way of my involvement in politics or working for women.

Even before I was elected as a Panchayat member, I had been active in my village and have been mobilizing women to form SHGs. Sixteen such groups have been formed till date, and I was successful in mobilizing a revolving fund of Rs 1.5 Lakhs for them. I have also been training adolescent girls in tailoring to make them financially independent. I have also been trying to eradicate child labour from our Panchayat by talking about the issue with SHG members and at village meetings. I have identified working children and introduced them to bridge schools.

I feel education is a priority, and apart from ensuring educational support for my own children, I am working hard to get children enrolled to school with help from teachers and Aanganwadi workers. Nothing is more satisfying than seeing children one has helped to enter school, complete their studies. I worked hard to improve toilet facilities in our schools, supervise the quality of Mid-Day Meals, and ensure they have adequate and safe drinking water facilities.

I have now been working in the Panchayat for two years. The trainings I have undergone have enhanced my confidence and understanding of the functioning

of Panchayats as well as helped me in the planning and implementation of programs. I know the proceedings of general, special, and emergency meetings. I also work to raise resources from various Departments and institutions for the Panchayat.

I now actively participate in all Panchayat meetings. I realize that I can utilize my tenure to work for issues affecting women such as dowry and alcoholism. I try to ensure participation of all in decision-making processes like the preparation of the budget and action plan for the Panchayat.

After successfully finishing my term in the Panchayat, I plan to contest for either the Block or District Panchayat elections and continue to work for my people.

Saubhagya Nanjundaswami

Ward Member

Panchayat: Rangasamudra

Block: T. Narsipura

District: Mysore

I have studied up to Class X and am married with two children. With unflinching support from my husband, I am able to do what I feel is the responsibility of every leader specially those that have been elected to Gram Panchayats. Some of the notable things that I have facilitated during my tenure include the construction five toilets in my village and the fair distribution of food and food items at the Aanganwadi Center in Hunuganahalli, a village that falls under the purview of the Panchayat. In addition, to do this I had to threaten the Aanganwadi teacher and the helper with punitive action if they continued to be unfair and non-transparent in the distribution of food to the children. With this warning, the distribution of the Government-sponsored Mid-Day Meals has improved and now reaches every child.

I have also taken steps to stop corruption in my area. Under the Government sanctioned Bhagyalakshmi Baramma Scheme, BPL families are entitled to a sum of Rs. 10000 at the birth of a girl child, through the Aanganwadi. Two women who were entitled to this money were asked by the Aanganwadi teacher for a bribe of Rs. 1750/- and were asked to swear in the name of God that they would not speak of this to anyone. A SHG leader, Vombamma also went to Aanganwadi to avail of this scheme for her grand daughter. The teacher would not sanction the money and asked for various records. Lakshmi, one of the earlier beneficiaries informed Vombamma that the money would not be sanctioned unless she paid a bribe. She narrated her own experience. Vombamma came to the Gram Panchayat and informed me. I confronted the Aanganwadi teacher but she denied asking for money. When I brought forth others who testified otherwise, she was forced to admit to her wrong doings. I warned the teacher of severe action if this was repeated and gave her one-week to refund all the money she had taken.

In the Rangasamudra Government Primary Health Centre, the ANM charged money to distribute medicines to the people. This came my notice, I intervened and stopped this practice, and all the villagers appreciated my work.

I participated in all the trainings conducted by The Hunger Project. I have also attended the Sarojini Naidu Prize ceremony in Delhi. It is through the trainings that I have developed the courage to fight against injustice.

Suguna

President

Gram Panchayat: Urugili

Block Kolar

District: Kolar

I am 29 years old and I belong to the Kuruba caste. I have studied up to Class Xth. My husband, Mr. Devaraj is an auto driver and we have three children (girls) - Swathi (seven) is studying in the second standard, Mahalakshmi (five) and Srushti (is one and a half years old). We own two acres of dry land and have one milch animal. My grandfather was one of the five members in the old Panchayat system. With the support of my family members and the people of my ward, I contested for the President's post in the 2005 Panchayat elections. Jayalakshmi was the other candidate for the post, but ultimately the majority selected me as the President.

I regularly attended the Women's Leadership Workshop, the follow-up programmes, other meetings organized by BWS, and I am currently working as a facilitator in BWS.

One of my constituents and earlier my opponent, Jayalakshmi lost her husband and was in a helpless situation. Therefore, I facilitated her attaining her property and allotted her a house under the ASHRAYA scheme.

After attending the training at the Block Panchayat, I came to know about an apparel-training institute established in front of the Block Panchayat, to train the rural youth. I immediately got eight adolescent girls admitted at the institute and submitted 12 applications. In order to get admission in the institute, the applicant needs to be eighth pass, one of the girls did not fulfill this criterion as she had studied only till class seven, I motivated her family members and got her back to school. I often visit the school and monitor the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Aanganwadi, attendance of teachers etc.

One of the contractors constructing the Panchayat building sent a bill of Rs. 2 Lakhs after finishing the foundation work, so I refused to sign it. The topic is still being argued upon in the Panchayat. I want to provide good quality education to my children and work towards the village's development. I also wish to achieve the Swacha Grama Award for the village during my tenure.

Susheela

Ward Member

Panchayat: Gonibeedu

Block: Gonibeedu-

Mudigere

District: Chikmagalore

I am thirty-six years old and belong to a poor family. My father was small farmer who depended on a small rain-fed holding to support his family of seven members. Under these circumstances, I was unable to continue my education. My dream was to be able to work for the government but this dream has not come to fruition.

I married Nagraj of Gonibeedu of Mudigere Block and we have two children. Then, I joined VIKASANA, a local NGO as a community organizer to support my family. I worked hard with people for three years; and these years made me known to the people and gave me an understanding of the different village situations. I learned about organizing people, formation and strengthening of SHGs, conducting training, and approaching Government Officials to discuss the people's problems. I also learnt about reporting and documentation.

I began a Self Help Group of about 12 to 15 women members in my own village. I was trained and given information on how to manage the groups, keep the books, account maintenance, loan repayment, and interest rates etc. The success of this boosted my confidence and we then decided to form a federation of SHGs. I become the Secretary for this federation and it was here where I learnt about various aspects of leadership and decision-making.

As I had regular contact with the people, worked in the SHGs, and was a federation leader; people have suggested that I should join the Gram Panchayat and they elected me as member. I have been elected four times as member of Gonibeedu Gram Panchayat! I have earlier been the President of the Panchayat and am presently working as a Ward Member of the same Gram Panchayat.

After I become the member of Gonibeedu Gram Panchayat, I faced a number of problems yet I have managed to overcome them and achieved my goals. I have worked to identify the eligible BPL families. I have also tried to make the process easier and simpler for these families to obtain their benefits. The water sources like the village tanks and ponds have been cleaned and repaired, school infrastructures have been improved, and the quality of education

imparted is monitored. To achieve this, I have tried to provide Mid Day Meal programme in all the surrounding schools. I have also tried to provide educate the community to stop the discrimination against HIV/AIDS children.

In 2005, I joined VIKASANA as a Block coordinator for the Universal Birth Registration Programme and successfully carried out the roles and responsibilities of the project. I have also actively participated in THP supported Gram Panchayat elected women leaders strengthening programme. I also participated in the Sarojini Naidu Award ceremony held in New Delhi.

As I have good experience at the Gram Panchayat level of politics, I now intend to get into State Level Politics. I feel then that I will be able to work intensively against caste discrimination and help with the empowerment of poor communities.

MADHYA PRADESH



Dayawati Saket
President
Panchayat: Chibbora
Block: Rampur Baghelan
District: Satna

I come from Chibbora, a Dalit dominated village where the literacy rate for women is about 30 percent. The general caste composes about 20 percent of the village population. While girls from these families go to study, those from the Dalit families cannot. Of those that have studied, they have not studied beyond the Primary or the Middle level. A Middle School was set up in the village about 28 years ago. For further studies, the children have to go to other villages. While this is easy for boys, the girls do not have such opportunities. While I never had a chance to study, I will not allow this to be the case with other girls in my village and I have actively campaigned in the administration, sponsoring a 'school chalo' programme.

I am conscious about matters related to education and health for children especially the girl child and believe that while the daughter of a rich man is respected, the daughter of a poor man is not. I want girls from poor families to live a life of dignity as well.

Earlier two villages, Chibbora and Bela belonged to the same Panchayat. Due to the caste composition of the two villages, it always happened that any programme approved for Chibbora would go to Bela, which is situated only five kms away. Even the High School operational there was originally approved for Chibbora. The same goes for the community Health Centre. However, even though the two have now split and belong to different Panchayats, Bela has a Patel women representative who belongs to an influential family. Due to this, projects approved for Chibbora are still being carried out in Bela! Further, the Primary Health Centre meant for Chibbora was built in Bela without my approval or prior information. This is despite the fact that the people my villages are in dire need of a Health Centre. Many villagers have died due to lack of medical facilities in the vicinity. Many people cannot travel as far as Bela and even meetings with the District Collector have been futile.

Once the Health Centre was taken away, right from under our noses, many people asked me to do something. Consequently, a Gram Sabha was convened where it was decided the President would go and meet the Chief Minister (CM). Though I cannot read or write myself, with the help of the villagers, I

wrote a letter to the CM and soon got an invite from him. In an hour- long meeting with the CM, I complained about the transfer of the hospital to the adjoining village among other things. The CM promptly got in touch with the District Collector who explained that the hospital had to be shifted since there was not sufficient space in the village.

The CM then said that I should let the work for hospital continues, but if I wanted anything else for the village that could be arranged. I then requested for a Girls Hostel and Higher Secondary School for the village. On being asked why was I demanding these institutions I said that while boys can travel long distances to study, girls are not allowed to thus adversely affecting their higher education. The CM instantly ordered the work on the school to begin and even the District Collector assured that the work would begin soon. Three years have passed since then and yet no one from the administration has come to the village to undertake as little as a land survey.

Geeta Verma
President
Panchayat: Bihra No.1
Block: Rampur Baghelan
District: Satna

My Panchayat comprises of three villages- Kuriya, Bilhati and Bihra No. 1 and has a population of 5000 people. I am 36 years old and am a mother of two, my daughter is presently pursuing her graduation, and my son is in High School. My husband's uncle was a member of a Gram Panchayat and then its Vice-President for some time. My father-in-law is a retired Headmaster. My husband wanted to contest the Panchayat elections, but as the seat was reserved for women, he was unable to do so. Instead, he asked me to consider standing for the post. Initially, I was reluctant, because after marriage I had never stepped out of the house. If I took up the post, I would be required to go around the village and interact with others. Then I realized that it was a chance of a lifetime to do something different. I gathered a group of women to campaign for me and went to many people myself. I won the election by a margin of 80 votes, against three candidates.

I was a little scared and shy when I started my journey, talking to villagers and officials was a new experience. The training programs organized by The Hunger Project helped me shed my initial inhibitions. I can still recall my experiences of the trainings held in Satna, Hanumanganj and Amarvada, as they helped me understand the role and functions of a President and gave me information on government schemes, apart from boosting my confidence. I am the Secretary of a women's group, the 'Mahila Adhikaar Manch,' which has twenty-two members. During the monthly meetings, problems pertaining to the Panchayat are also discussed. This group provides me with support and inspiration to continue my work.

One of my major focus areas was to ensure that the benefits of social security schemes reach the needy, ensuring that eligible candidates got the benefits, under old age and other social security schemes. I ensured that those who were not eligible by the prescribed standards, but who were needy, were also included in the safety net.

As part of my agenda at the time of elections to provide safe drinking water, I got new hand pumps installed. At the time of installation, individuals kept pressurising me to install them in their backyards or near their houses. However,

I ensured that the hand pumps were placed at points where a maximum number of people could avail of the facility, working this out by consensus. At the time of road construction, encroachment was a major problem. When the encroachers refused to vacate the land, instead of tackling the issue head on, I called the Patwari, (the Officer in charge of maintaining land records) and verified and established the Panchayat's ownership.

After the Gram Sabha passed a resolution to increase the number of school buildings, I ensured that the Education Department sanctioned the construction. Now, there are additional buildings in each of the schools in the Panchayat and teacher's absenteeism has reduced. There are now five schools in the Panchayat, out of which four are Primary Schools and one is till Class X. Earlier, there were three schools, but none of them were functioning properly, due to a lack of infrastructure.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was in constructing a road using MLA funds. I managed to get funds sanctioned for the road, but did not realize that there is a double evaluation for these funds. The building materials were bought and kept at the construction site. The engineer in charge of the evaluation work, used to do things slowly and according to his will, and slowly problems started. The construction material started disappearing overnight. Then the other members complained and threatened to use Section 40 against me, I used my own money to replace the material and get the work finished. I underwent financial problems and mental agony due to all this. I have learnt that it was very important for me to keep an eye on the minutest details for all work that is undertaken, since my accountability to the villagers is paramount.

During the trainings, I had learnt the importance of Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings. Now I ensure that the Panchayat meetings take place regularly and the members of the Council are treated with dignity and parity. Unlike previous meetings, I ensured that everyone was given a chair to sit on during the meetings and for the Gram Sabha meetings good mats were bought for all to sit on – no chairs are used here!

There are all kinds of people in the Panchayat, some support me, and some do not. My emphasis has been to solve the Panchayat's problems by holding consultations within the village itself, and not to take the matter to the Court, since that leads to wastage of both time and money. I try to prioritize the problems faced by women from the Panchayat. Women are my most important partners when it comes to taking decisions on the education and health needs of the Panchayat.

Kusum Devi Khushwaha
President
Panchayat: Mahurach
Kandela
Block: Rampur Baghelan
District: Satna

Mahurach Kandela Gram Panchayat is situated at a little distance from the Satna-Rewa main road and has a population of 2500 persons. I have studied up to Class X and have been a Panchayat member earlier, so I had prior experience regarding the functioning and work of Panchayats. My experience and dedication made me a popular candidate for the post of President. When the President's seat was reserved for a woman belonging to the OBC category in the 2005 Panchayat elections, nine other candidates contested the election against me, but I won the election by a margin of 182 votes. After being chosen, I started working with the active cooperation of 19 ward members and the woman Secretary. Since I belong to the OBC category, I had to undergo a lot of discrimination and got ill treated by the villagers.

I undertook a lot of developmental work during my tenure: constructed roads, kitchen sheds, wells under Kapil Dhara Scheme etc. in the village. The money allocated under the 12th Finance Commission for the Panchayat was used for constructing roads. Under NREGS, 300 job-card holders were provided 100 full days of work, during which public wells were constructed, a plantation drive was held, and two village ponds were deepened.

I got the names of eligible families enlisted on the poverty list and with the support of the Gram Sabha members, struck the names of ineligible people from the same. On one hand, it improved the position of many people suffering from poverty, but on the other, it led to many influential and affluent people becoming my enemies.

While executing the deepening of one of the ponds under NREGS, my opponents (including the ex-Deputy President) alleged that a machine was used to do the work. They filed a complaint about it in the Sub Divisional Magistrate's (SDM) office. Consequently, the work was stopped before its completion, without any enquiry and any explanation. I was given a show-cause notice under Section 40 of the Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act. During the enquiry setup by the SDM's office, the Deputy Engineer evaluated that the expenses on the work was only Rs. 61,000/-, while the actual expenses were of Rs. 2.50 Lakhs. At that point, it was very clear that this manipulation

of facts happened on instigation of my opponents. After discussing the matter with other Panchayat members, I submitted an application to the Panchayat, inviting the SDM to visit the village. A special Gram Sabha meeting was convened to enable the SDM to talk with the beneficiaries and other villagers. Subsequently, the SDM enquired and investigated the matter himself and ordered the dismissal of the charges levied against me.

During the dissemination workshop held in Bhopal on a study by The Hunger Project, I shared my experience about how Section 40 used against me. This section should be immediately removed, since it affects women Presidents the most. I was again targeted by the new SDM and was again given a show cause notice alleging irregularities in my working. I am confident that I will be able to prove my innocence this time as well. Sadly, the SDM is not bothered about the village's development, if I spend all my time in responding to such matters, who will take care of all the work that needs to be done in the Panchayat?

Murti Pandey

President

Gram Panchayat: Devgaon

Block: Sirmore

District: Rewa

I am 40 years old and have studied up to Class VI. My husband was elected as the President of a cooperative society. When the post of President was reserved for women, I decided to contest the election with the support of my family and the villagers. I went door-to-door, asking for votes and promising the villagers better health facilities and transportation. In a close fight, I won by 28 votes, contending against 12 other candidates.

Devgaon is a Panchayat located in a hilly terrain, surrounded by hills full of bauxite. A contractor has been involved in bauxite mining in the Panchayat since the last 40-50 years. He holds the leasing rights of 72 acres of land in Devgaon and another 106 acres in a nearby Panchayat. When the lease expired in 2002, he renewed it for another 20 years. The Gram Sabha members were never happy with this mining arrangement. Every day, 40-50 trucks full of bauxite was dug out and sold at the open market at Rs. 1 Lakh per truck. Moreover, the plying of a huge number of trucks everyday took a toll on the roads. With the contractor depositing the lease amount and taxes to the mineral department, the Panchayat did not receive any share in the revenue generated. However, the roads had to be maintained by the Panchayat.

When I came to know about the rights of a Panchayat over its natural resources, through a training program I attended, I decided to get the revenue records of Devgaon checked to understand the terms of lease. I found that in contravention of rules, the lease did not show in the map of the Panchayat. Along with some of the Gram Sabha members, I complained to the Department of Panchayats and Minerals regarding the matter, but they ignored us. The relentless mining had rendered agricultural lands of a vast number of farmers in the village infertile. Rocks and mining residue would be deposited in the fields due to rain and erosion and hence, the farmers were unable to grow crops. In all, 50-60 acres of land belonging to 20-25 owners got affected. The last straw was when a plot adjacent to the mining point was identified for making a new pond under NREGS. It was supposed to benefit the villagers by providing employment, as well as solve the problem of water shortage faced by the farmers of Devgaon. However, when the work of the pond was almost finished, the contractor intervened and filed a case in Court against the work,

stating that the plot was under his lease agreement. I spoke to villagers to provide support to stop the mining and discussed the issue with the Mahila Mandal (Women's Group).

To register our protest, we blocked the road to the mining site and the trucks were unable to reach the site. For two days, 80 members of the women's group, Self-Help Group, affected farmers, members of the Panchayat and I sat on a 'Truck Roko Abhiyaan' (Stop the Trucks Campaign). We camped at the site and did not allow any trucks to pass, when the police tried to remove us, I stopped them, and we continued our 'sit-in'. Our demand was to stop the mining immediately. However, we also stated that if the mining continued, a part of the revenue should be given as tax to the Panchayat, so that the money could be utilized for the Panchayat's development and to take care of the damage done by the trucks to the roads. We also demanded compensation for the farmers affected by the mining. The Court decided on a stay on both construction work of the pond as well as on the mining at the disputed site. We followed the Court's order and are still waiting for the judgment to arrive, but the contractor did not follow the Court's order and continues to mine at the site. On behalf of the Panchayat, I filed a fresh complaint to the Court, to inform them of the current situation. A few years ago, I could not have thought of leading a protest of this magnitude.

The Panchayat has an old tradition of migration that we tried to solve with the help of NREGS. We made 500 job cards, started road construction work, and pond deepening under NREGS. The population of Devgaon, spread over five villages, needs to travel far for medical help. We are currently trying to establish a Health Centre in the Panchayat. I keep vigil with the help of the Self-Help Group members and women group members on the two schools, a Primary School, and one till Class X, to ensure the regularity of the teachers and proper implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

When I began my journey as the President, I was a veiled daughter-in-law of the village. I seldom spoke in front of outsiders. With the help of the training programs conducted by The Hunger Project, I lead a new life now.

It all started with the first WLW held in the Satna District headquarters, where I learnt the basic details of self-development, the area I live in, the constitutional post of President etc. I went for subsequent trainings and exposure visits to Bhopal, Rampur, and Katni. In one of the exposure visits to Jaipur, I learnt that the Presidents there get an honorarium of Rs. 500. However, in my Panchayat, although there was a prescribed amount of Rs. 150, nothing comes to the President. After coming back, I applied to the Block Office for the release of my honorarium.

Radhiya Adivasi

President

Panchayat:

Block: Rampur Baghelan

District: Satna

Last year, when only two children passed their school exams, both of which were girls, I was immensely disturbed. After some deliberation, I decided to call a special Gram Sabha. This Gram Sabha, held in June last year, was convened with much fanfare. Around 150 people were called, of which one-third were women. The falling standards of education was on top of the agenda and resolutions on getting better teachers for the village, getting them to attend classes on time and to relieve them of their non-teaching responsibilities were passed. To inspire other children to study hard the two girls that did manage to pass were felicitated and awarded in the Gram Sabha. Their teacher, the only woman graduate in the village was also felicitated during this ceremony.

However, the issue did not end here. At the beginning of the new academic session, I went to the local schools to check the attendance register. I asked to see the attendance register, the teachers refused to show it to me. They told me that only their superiors were authorized to see the files. I did not lose heart and organized a rally, which included around 50 women along with children and a few other Panchayat representatives, and took it to the school. We then demanded to see the relevant files and discovered that quite often the teachers themselves were absent. However, this absence had not been recorded. I insisted that this be rectified and their absences be noted in the register as well. After this incident, the teachers were found to be more regular. Consequently, I formed a women's association that undertook the responsibility of monitoring the activities of the school from time to time.

I took it upon myself to personally overlook the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and the functioning of the ICDS-Aanganwadi. The result of all this was that of the 66 children who were in class VIII, 17 passed - seven girls and ten boys.

I am very excited by this and am now going to everyone in the village to ask them to send their children to school. The bigger problem is a high dropout rate and for this I have been talking to the parents. I have been quite successful in sending some children back to school. However, I lament the absence of a High School in the village, which impedes further studies of the

children. Only a few students are able to travel the required distance to study further and I am in the process of drafting a resolution for the Gram Sabha demanding a Higher Secondary School in the village. If I succeed in getting a Higher Secondary School, the problem of higher studies would be resolved not only for my village but also for several other adjoining villages. I envision the construction of a Girls' Hostel so that sufficient attention can be given to the issue of girl's education.

I belong to a family of agricultural labourers and the marginal landholding that they do have has been mortgaged. In spite of the economic hardships that my family and I have to suffer, I am fully devoted to ensuring education for my village.

Samni Adivasi

Ward Member

Panchayat: Karrabayebhaip

Block: Rampur Baghelan

District: Satna

Karrabayebhaip Panchayat is located among the small hills and forests of Rampur Baghelan block of Satna district. The Panchayat is inhabited in hamlets, those of Kothar, Lidra, and Karriyabhaip, with a total population of approximately 3000, of which 1200 are voters. There is only one school till Class VIII.

I am 40 years old and I belong to a Scheduled Tribe. I am not literate and have never been to school. I live with my husband and am the mother to two sons; the elder one has studied up to Class VIII, while the younger one left his studies mid-way after being scolded by his schoolteacher once. My husband and I own a pair of bullocks that we use to cultivate the land that originally belongs to a rich farmer. We have taken the land on lease and practice share farming. We are able to get 5 kg of grains per day through it. Due to my honesty and hard work, I was the natural choice for Ward Member. Though I was a bit hesitant initially, the people from the Ward convinced me to stand for the post. I got elected unopposed.

I learnt a lot during the training programs of The Hunger Project. I learnt to monitor Government Schemes and norms of implementation. The nutrition levels of the children in my Ward were a problem. In the absence of an Aanganwadi, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme became very important. Though cereal and grain would be cooked for the children, green vegetables were a rarity. When I went to check the food with the other women, I found that the quantity was insufficient. I told the cook about the Government rules and by regularly monitoring the meals; I ensured that the cooking was as per the set standards and that the children got their share of green vegetables.

There is no Health Centre in the Panchayat, so in case of a medical emergency, one has to go to Amaarpattan or Satna, both of which are 22 kms away from the village. The nearest Aanganwadi is situated three kilometres away from the Ward, so I informed the other Ward Members that as per Government rules, an Aanganwadi should be present in each Ward. I raised the issue in the Gram Sabha and filed a resolution demanding the setting up of an Aanganwadi in my Ward. I am committed to opening a Health Centre in the Panchayat.

In the PDS shop, I faced a problem when I went to get my share of grains. Initially the supplier refused to give it, saying that the supply had not arrived. When I protested, stating Government rules, he offered me a deal: telling me to help him mislead others by telling them that the supplies were short, in return he said, I would get my full share. I refused the offer and made it clear that he would have to provide the right amount to everyone that came to his shop. After constant checks and arguments with the supplier, the PDS shop now gives out essential commodities regularly and proportionately.

My life has changed a lot after being elected. I still work in the fields, but often when I have to report for meetings and other Panchayat-related work, my husband plays a supportive role by handling my share of work too. Earlier, the men of my Ward used to ask me for money to buy alcohol, but I always refused.

After attending training programs, I have gained more confidence. I am connected to the villagers, especially women and I have taught them the basics of monitoring. Earlier, women were a little skeptical, but now they listen to me because they know that I have valuable information to share. I have a group of women always supporting my initiatives. I take special interest in providing the people of my Ward with information about Schemes, their implementation, new Government rules, and notifications for the Panchayat. Everyone knows me as the 'doer' now, quite different from the 'laborer' tag that I earlier used to carry. The women villagers fondly address me as 'officer'. I even give them the example of my husband who has been so supportive, and I tell them to talk with their own husbands to allow them to come for meetings. For me, NREGS has best worked as a strategy to solve the problem of migration. I have myself been able to get a constant supply of livelihood opportunity through it. I wish to contest the elections for the post of President in future.

Samota Bai
Ward Member
Gram Panchayat: Charuva
Block: Khirkiya
District: Khandwa

I originally belong to Dharkali village of Varmalai Panchayat in Khandwa District. As a consequence of the river Narmada dam, the village was likely to submerge; the Government paid my family Rs. 2.50 lakhs as compensation to shift somewhere else. My family, my husband, our six children, and I settled in Charuva Panchayat in 2001 and bought a plot of land. I worked on our 1.25 acres of agricultural land and as a daily wage laborer in different places to earn between Rs.50-Rs.150 per day, depending on the work required. The Panchayat elections were announced around that time. One of my neighbors wanted to file her nomination for the post of Ward Member, so she asked me to accompany her to the Panchayat office. Later on, she decided to not contest the elections as she had to take care of her child and she felt that she would be unable to regularly attend meetings and devote so much time to the village. She along with others from our Ward then urged me to file my nomination instead. Initially I was hesitant, but I went ahead. A lot of my hesitation was because I was the sole earning member in the family, but I saw this as an opportunity to become a part of the village. I had seen my husband working as a Ward Member earlier, so I had a brief idea of the work involved. There was just one more contender for the post, but the election was a tough fight and I won by a small margin of three votes.

During my tenure, I got roads and wells constructed in the Ward, which provided employment to 42 persons for 98 person-days each. I got the names of two eligible candidates under the OAP and three candidates got benefits under the Widow Pension Scheme. I have submitted an application for the inclusion of 32 eligible families in the BPL list. Earlier, the school in the ward was only till Class X, so I tried to expedite the process of expanding the school till Class XII, so that the village children, especially girls could study within the village itself. The Education Department has sanctioned the extension and made provisions for construction of additional school buildings.

Whatever work I have been able to do would not have been possible without the trainings and inputs I have received. I remember my initial experiences

at trainings where I even dreaded the trainer's questions. I learnt writing my name, how to read maps of my village, District and State, how the Panchayat works and how to make budgets.

I faced many challenges. Once, I had gone to the Panchayat office to check the names of the beneficiaries in the Public Distribution System (PDS) list. A clerk scolded me and told me to go away, but I told him that I was there to check if the people of my Ward were included in the list. When he came to know that I was a Ward Member, I was treated with dignity and was offered a chair immediately. Being the only earning member of my family, I plan my days strategically in case of trainings and Panchayat duties. I wake up early to finish my household chores, work in the fields, and then go for other work.

When a local NGO awarded me a fellowship of Rs.25, 000 for a period of six months for the village, I took up the issue of PDS. I feel that every villager needs to have a ration card. I have been negotiating for the rights of those families in the Ward who were displaced from another Districts. All of them own land in the Panchayat and have been living here for the past five years, but they had been denied the benefits of PDS since they were denied ration cards. I took up the issue in the Gram Sabha and the President asked me to file a petition at the Block-level. When I did that, the BDO told me to conduct a survey to find out the eligible families and submit it to the Panchayat Secretary. Based on that survey, the District Office issued orders to the Gram Panchayat for a survey on their part. In a special camp organized to table the findings of the survey, the Chief Executive Officer found out that the survey was not conducted, he asked the Panchayat Secretary to do it at the earliest. I am now constantly following up to ensure that the survey is conducted and the families get their due benefits.

Sunita Adivasi

President

Panchayat: Tighra

Block: Simariya

District: Rewa

Tighra is situated in a big village with a total population of 1900 of which there are 1000 voters. The Panchayat has one school till Class X. The Panchayat has no Health Centre, the nearest Primary Health Centre, is located seven kilometres away. We do not own any cultivable land and are dependent on the 1.5 acres of land that we take on 'adhiya' (lease of land for cultivation on the basis of sharing half its produce with the land owner). Besides this, I work as a wage labourer at the rate of Rs.40 per day on the lands of other farmers.

I am 26 years old and have studied till Class V. When the Panchayat elections were announced in January 2005 and the President's seat was reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Tribe, some of the villagers asked me to file my candidature.

I went to each household in the village to campaign, accompanied by my younger sister-in-law and some women supporters. Initially, people scoffed at me when I asked them to vote for me. They said I was a mere daughter-in-law of the village; married only for three years, and never visited any of the houses in the Panchayat. They wondered how I could possibly work as a President. I used to tell them that if I won, I would show them, how I would work for the development of the village. The men asked me for alcohol and money when I went to them for votes. On the last day for filing nominations, one of my family elders also filed her papers, but I was determined not to give in without a fight. I won by a narrow margin of three votes. Immediately after the poll results were declared, a fight broke out between the opposition factions, and they beat my brother-in-law in retaliation to my victory.

The problems increased after joining office. Due to internal feuds in the past term, there was no Panchayat Secretary for the first two years of work. I was unable to withdraw any money from the Panchayat account and no work could be done in the absence of the Secretary, as he was the co-signatory. Around that time, I got in touch with The Hunger Project's partner organisation Anupama Education Society. In the first WLW, the local Chief Executive Officer of the Block Panchayat came to address the participants. When I told him about the problem in my Panchayat, he assured me that my financial powers will be

reinstated and I will be able to start work in the Panchayat. It was only after this meeting that orders were passed to this effect and I began my work.

Absence of good roads and lack of drinking water were the two major problems of Tighra Panchayat. I started by getting 12 hand pumps repaired, got 25 sanitation points constructed, installed four 100 ft capacity hand pumps under 'Jal Abhishek' (a water conservation program), lobbied and got approval for construction of school buildings under 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan' (Campaign for Universalization of Education) and also undertook the expansion of motorable roads. In order to solve the problem of migration and to ensure employment to the fellow villagers, I got 288 job cards made, 25 of them were for women, and ensured 100 days work for all under NREGS. I also facilitated construction of two public wells under NREGS as well as the deepening of the village pond. I got a 'chaupal' (open seating cemented space) constructed, where villagers could sit, talk, share, and relax. A 'Pravesh Dwaar' was also built- a big open gate which proudly says-'Sunita Adivasi, President, welcomes you to Tighra Panchayat'. Under the Sanitation Project of the Government, I have accepted a project for 50 households, which will be totally sanitized by building toilets

I attended many training programs including the WLW and a follow-up after the workshop and have participated in the State-level women's conference held in Bhopal twice. On an exposure visit to Panchayats in Rampur Baghelan in Satna District, I learnt the process of maintaining accounts. I was among the select few to receive training along with the Panchayat Secretary, to understand the functioning of the Panchayat system, nuances of preparation of budgets and maintaining records. This training benefited me the most as it broke many 'invisible' barriers between the Panchayat Secretary, and me and has translated in better work at the ground level.

The biggest challenge that I faced was from a dominant high caste family which wanted me to put my thumb impression on Panchayat papers and to leave the rest to them. I protested against this decree and told them that as I was the President, I was the one who had to evaluate and understand the needs of my Panchayat. They then threatened me and said that they would tear the

Panchayat register apart and will not let me work. I complained to the local police station, the police recorded my testimony, but did not lodge an FIR. They left the accused with a warning.

Within two months of my getting financial powers as the President, complaints started pouring in to the SDM's Office against me. The main complainants, the Deputy President, and the Panchayat members wanted me to give them half the Panchayat money. I told them to get the orders from above in order to get the money. Based on their complaints, a case was registered against me. I issued a show-cause notice in which I was accused of indulging in financial irregularities. I was scared at first and went to the local MLA for help. He assured me that he would talk to the SDM, but when no help came forth, I mustered up courage and appeared for the first hearing in the Court. Later, I employed a lawyer, for Rs.4000 to fight my case. I went to the Court 20 times in a span of one and half years. When the Panchayat Inspector came for an enquiry, I showed him our records and he was satisfied. However, I used to be regularly bullied by the complainants at the hearings and they threatened to destroy all the Panchayats' records.

On 26 January 2008, I received a death threat. However, I continued, undeterred. When a new SDM took charge of the Block, he came to inspect the ongoing construction work under NREGA without any prior notice. The SDM summoned the main complainant on the spot, while I explained to him that the complainants were only coercing me for a bribe. The SDM ran a thorough enquiry into all points of allegations against me and asked the beneficiaries of various Schemes if they were receiving their benefits. After being satisfied with the response, he immediately ordered the opening of the Panchayat Bhawan, which had been sealed for two years - this was a big victory for me.

I benefited a lot from the various training programs I received. I did not know anything about the outside world except for labour work. Earlier, I did not know anything about the Gram Sabha and I had not even seen any other women going to it either. I now ensure that when a Gram Sabha is held, at

least 100-150 women come for it. I am more confident now and am used to travelling independently to places outside my Panchayat and my District. I can understand and speak in other dialects by interacting with fellow Presidents and Members from other areas and with trainers coming from diverse backgrounds. I have formed my own peer group of seven women Presidents from nearby areas. I met them in the various training programs that I attended.

I wish to contest the next elections as well, since I feel that I have become a leader in the true sense of the term.

MAHARASHTRA



Archana Yelawe
President
Panchayat: Gimhavane
Block: Dapoli
District: Ratnagiri

I am President of Gimhavane Gram Panchayat, which includes two villages, Gimhavane and Vanand. I belong to the Baudha (Buddhist) community. Baudha values have always been a part of my identity.

I have studied till Class X at which point I was married off and began to live with a big joint family in Gimhavane village. My in laws are supportive and so I was able to complete Class XI after marriage. I was also able to learn typing and computer skills after my marriage. My husband is an educated and works as a clerk.

I am very social by nature and am an activist for the Republican Party of India. Because of this background, I have developed an interest in politics and social activities. When the seat in my Panchayat was reserved for women (General Category), I filled the nomination form and was subsequently elected from my Ward. A woman from the Maratha caste and I were both eligible for the post of President. It was decided that a child would pick a chit to select the President. It was my name, which was selected; I think that my strong desire to be President was behind this good luck.

After being elected as President, I achieved complete sanitation in my village. I tried to construct toilets for all houses in the Baudhawadi hamlet and was successful. As a member of the same community, I knew the needs of the hamlet and the work needed for the betterment of the most backward classes in my village. I met the goal of the construction of drainage canals throughout the village. These canals will help keep the village clean during the rains and disease free.

When I came to know about Parivartan, I decided to attend the training to learn as much as possible. During this time, I faced many troubles due to my Gram Sevak (Panchayat Secretary). He was very corrupt and hardly responded to his duties in a timely manner. I discussed this matter in length at the meeting called by THP-Parivartan. I scheduled a follow-up meeting with the C.E.O. of the Zilla Parishad, Ratnagiri and got orders for Gram Sevak's transfer.

During the WLW, I was further exposed to issues of women's social status and the laws that protected women. It surprised me that despite several protective laws, numerous women in the village live a life of humiliation. I decided to spread this legal information to all the women in the villages. In another training program, we discussed the provision of 10 percent of the Gram Panchayat's Budget for women and child development. I made the Gram Sevak call a Mahila Gram Sabha. In this Gram Sabha, we made and passed a resolution to spend the allocated 10percent on arranging a women's meeting in the village. A woman lawyer was invited as a resource person and she discussed existing legal provisions that were in place to safeguard a woman's dignity.

I am very keen on making the women in my village confident and self-reliant. I make it a point to convey the information from the trainings I attend, to all women. Women's needs are a big priority for me. I repaired all the water sources in my village to reduce the problems that women face due to water scarcity. Most of the women in Vanand work in Gimhavane as waged labourers, so one of our priorities was to construct a road that would connect Vanand to Gimhavane.

I encountered some incidents of corruption during my tenure as a President. The biggest problem concerned a Gram Sabha, which had been called to discuss the construction of a new Gram Panchayat Office and a well under the Yashawant Gramsamrudhi Scheme. During this meeting, a resolution was passed and a proposal with signatures of 40 percent of the voters was forwarded. People who opposed the meeting claimed that the proposal was fake. The issue circulated at the District level and was highlighted in the media. They began to demand the resignation of the President. I went through great embarrassment due to all this. However, my reputation did not suffer. I faced everything with great courage and this was a great learning experience for me. I have become very tough because of all this. Earlier I hesitated while speaking publicly, but now I have developed confidence and I feel more attached to my village.

I belong to the Baudha community, which is considered one of the most

backward communities here. I have experienced my community's troubles; poverty, lack of education, and low sanitation standards. These troubles show the difference between this caste and other communities. Hence, I first opened a sanitation campaign on Baudhawadi in my village. If I am not elected as a representative again, I will humbly accept that, but I will continue to work for the betterment of my village, women, and community.

Asmita Ankush Nate

President

Panchayat: Bhingloli

Block: Mandangad

District: Ratnagiri

I am the homemaker of an average family in Bhingaloli village of Mandangad district. I was born in Mumbai and have studied till Class VII. My husband is a clerk in Ratnagiri, and I had to adjust to looking after household chores and agricultural activities. Having been brought up in a place like Mumbai, I hardly knew anything about rural life and especially about agricultural activities. However, I learned these things and started handling all responsibilities very efficiently. I have two daughters and a son. I have been very concerned for their education since their childhood. Today my son is a computer engineer, my elder daughter is pursuing a Masters of Science, and my youngest is doing her secondary education.

My family is not political but is very social in nature. I belong to the Gawali community. I am an active member of a women's collective in my village and my husband is the Secretary of the Gawali community. My father in law is the Police Patil of the village and is well known as a social worker. Because of this background, villagers insisted that I contest elections.

I contested three times but it was only in the third attempt that I was elected. During the submission of my nomination form, I was pressurized not to submit the form by the opposite party members. Nevertheless, I went ahead and they tried to defeat me by casting fake votes. I very wisely remained present at the booth and discouraged the fake voting by individuals whose names were not on the voters' lists. After crossing all these hurdles, I was elected and was offered the post of President.

I have headed Bhingloli Gram Panchayat for the last two and a half years. Now I am a GP member. When I was nominated for the post of President, which was reserved as 'a general women seat,' there was another woman, Sandipa, who was also from the same category. Hence, it was decided by the body that I we would share the post.

Initially, I felt it a burden to handle this new responsibility along with my household chores. I constantly felt that I lacked the exposure and information to effectively serve as President. In spite of this when I was invited to attend

a training organized by THP-Parivartan, I initially ignored them. However, after they made consistent requests, I made up my mind to attend the training. When I attended the trainings and other workshops, I came to know valuable information about running the Gram Panchayat and about local governance. When I attended the Women's Leadership Workshop, I felt very much at home, and my childhood spirit returned to me. I learned as I played, I danced and sang; this workshop will remain one of my fondest memories.

From training to training, I became more energetic. The training convinced me of the need to establish a relationship with villagers and other GP members. I began to attend the Gram Panchayat office every day. This proved very convenient to villagers as they could find the President at the office whenever they needed me. The other benefit was that I could go through the records every day. During this time, I would read about the Gram Panchayat. I read files of Government Resolutions and the Gram Panchayat Act. If I had any doubts, I would visit the Parivartan Office and get my doubts clarified. I would regularly visit the entire hamlet. I established a very strong relationship with the villagers because of this, and soon I became a favorite President. At the Gram Panchayat level, I never differentiated between GP members on political party or caste lines. Whenever I had to make or implement any decision, I worked with all the Members. This reduced any internal resistance, often faced by many Presidents, and I fared better and better everyday.

As a President, I prioritized the issue of water scarcity. I discussed this in the Gram Sabha. There, I came to know that an earlier body had made a proposal for a water supply schemes. I decided to implement this proposal to save time. Before I could do this, the proposal was withdrawn due to a political tussle. I made another proposal. This was also refused as the Scheme had closed down. However, I was very determined; I prepared the proposal under 'Vishesh Ghatak Yojana.' I made follow-up visits and got the proposal sanctioned. Then, the real tensions began. Some of the ex-Panchayat members did not want me to complete this task. So they convinced the landowners not to give their land for the venture. I took the whole body in confidence, arranged meetings with the landholders, and convinced them that water was an issue of

priority. I tackled this development task in an efficient way. Whenever I had a meeting with landowners, I did not insist that the landowners donate the land. I was sensitive to the fact that the livelihood of the farmer is dependent upon the land and that not every family can afford to simply hand over their land, even though it may be for public good. There was another proposal pending (for the past ten years), that of constructing a day care center, this too was stalled due to the unavailability of land. Since no one was ready to donate the land, so, I contacted C.E.O. of the Zilla Parishad, and got land sanctioned from the Panchayat Samiti.

Most of the time tribal people are excluded from village affairs. When I thought about constructing houses for them, I faced strong opposition. Nevertheless, I was concerned about them, and determined, so I constructed seven houses for the tribal people in my village.

During my tenure, I worked on issues of sanitation. We won the Nirmal Gram Puraskar for the Panchayat. Now, it is time for me to dedicate myself to the 'Sanvadini Mahila Sangh', of which I am a President. THP-Parivartan made me into a leader. I can now complete the desired development projects, with their backing. Today my dreams have moved a notch up and I have the confidence to make them come true.

Bhavika Bhiku Bobale

President

Panchayat: Umroli

Block: Mandangad

District: Ratnagiri

I am the President of Umroli Gram Panchayat in Mandangad Block. Umroli comprises 4 villages: Umroli, Veral Tarphe Veswi, Gudheghar and Shipole Bandar. The Panchayat, located along a creek, fits the definition of picturesque. The key livelihood activity of the village is agriculture. I was born into an agricultural family in Umroli. I have always been outgoing, mature, and helpful. I was married to a man from my own village and because of this, I have developed a very intense allegiance to my village, Umroli. I have always felt a strong desire to work for the betterment of the village.

My husband works in Mumbai, because agricultural income cannot support all our family needs. I stay in Umroli with my in-laws and two sons. Since my husband is not around, I manage all the household and agricultural responsibilities.

Though I had wanted my village to develop and prosper, I had never thought of contesting elections. However, when elections were declared and the post of President was reserved for a woman, the villagers insisted that I contest the election. Initially I rejected the thought, but with the increasing demand from the village, I agreed to contest. My husband and in-laws were supportive of my decision. This made it easier for me to enter this new phase in life. This is how I started my political journey.

The seat was reserved for an OBC woman; I belong to the Tiloni Kunabhi caste. Hence, I was eligible for the seat. However, due to political difference between the villagers, another woman candidate of the same caste competed against me. Nevertheless, the majority of the village supported me and I won the election on August 12, 2005. After being elected from the Ward, the rest of the ten GP members elected me as their new President.

During the first six months of assuming my new responsibility, my limited knowledge and experience made me self-conscious. However, I slowly learned through experience, and through interaction with THP-Parivartan's programs. I started attending their trainings, I came to know about the Government Schemes, Gram Sabhas, and other Governance related formalities &

responsibilities. After attending the Women's Leadership Workshops, I became keener to spread my knowledge to the other women in the village. I noticed that the average women should also know about the importance of the Gram Sabha, and about their rights and their share in village governance. However, I was not able to do this, there was no common platform through which I could communicate with the women. Therefore, with the help of Parivartan's activists I organized four women SHGs. Because of the SHGs, women became more social; they started coming together every month for a meeting. These meetings proved an important medium for the exchange of thoughts and ideas. All the women were excited to have this confidence boosting activity. Through these SHG meetings, I was able to secure women's regular participation in the Gram Sabhas.

I initiated smaller developmental tasks, as well, such as the construction of pathways, water supply schemes, and repairing the water sources. I put issues of sanitation on the development agenda, convinced, and helped villagers to construct public as well as private toilets.

The women were very excited to have a woman President, and I was excited at the chance to get to know and work with all the women. They bring their complaints to me in the hope that I will help find a solution. One day, a woman came to me and complained about the village revenue employee. I went to Talathi Saza (village revenue office) to verify her complaint, and found that a woman was at the office; she had Rs. 100 in her hands. I asked her why she was carrying this money and she said that the Talathi had demanded Rs.100 for releasing a compensation check of Rs. 500. This was to compensate for the loss of her mango crop. I confronted the Talathi about this at once. He remained silent.

I then went to the GP office and called a Gram Sabha on the issue. I personally spoke to all the women through SHG meetings and ensured that the Gram Sabha would meet the required quorum. In the presence of many women from the village, the Talathi was questioned about his irresponsible and corrupt actions. All the women supported me and we passed a resolution that

demanded his transfer. This increased the morale of our group and the fervor of my supporters. Similarly, I arranged dialogues between the village community and the electric wireman, the agricultural supervisor, with teachers, with the PHC Doctor and A.N.M.s through the Gram Sabha. This ensured that the people were informed about their duties and the Government employees' functions were monitored.

My next move was to improve the educational status in the village. I initiated a system of regular teacher-parent meetings. I discussed students' progress during the meetings, and found measures to address any gaps in their progress. I organized to immediately fill the empty post of the Headmaster in the Primary School. I encouraged school students to participate in various competitions and even made sure that poor as well as orphan children get the opportunity to earn scholarships to continue their education.

I handled villager's problems and complaints in an effective manner. I am very happy that I have this opportunity to lead my village. In the beginning, I was not so willing to take on this new responsibility. However, once I was elected, I handled every responsibility sincerely and energetically. I used to be tense and afraid, but trainings have made me informed and confident. Now, I am eager to continue this work though I may not be a President tomorrow. I know that by acting as an aware and responsible citizen and leader, I can contribute to development of my village.

Fatima B Shaikh

President

Panchayat: Raimoha

Block: Shirur (Kasar)

District: Beed

I come from a family of six brothers and sisters. I was married at the age of 14, and have never been to school. Till now my story could be one of the many women of Maharashtra leading our lives in anonymity. However, there is a slight difference now, my story is being written down. This is because I am the President of my village.

My husband is a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist. Before me, he had unsuccessfully contested elections, for the post of the President. I did not even campaign for him when he stood for elections. I used to work for the Mahatma Phule Samajik Sanshodhan Sanstha to augment the family income and I was immediately made to look after women- related projects like savings, domestic violence, right to earn etc. I was happy with my work and was never keen on entering the domain of political life.

Once the seat was announced as being reserved for women, my husband pressurised me to contest. However, after seeing him loose I was not interested in contesting. However, despite my protests, my husband forcibly filed my nomination papers and before I knew what was happening I was contesting the elections. My husband played a big role in campaigning for me for I was oblivious of how things had to be done. None of this was enough however, and I lost the elections by three votes. I was disappointed but I went back to work without losing much sleep every my loss. However, something in me had changed, I was determined to contest again, working harder at it the next time round. After all, the first contest had been close and had given me hope.

I used the interim time until the next election to build up my support base, taking up projects even in neighbouring villages. I used my credit and savings work as a tool to organize the women and get them to fight for their rights collectively. As the next election approached the women from the savings program pushed me to file my nominations. I did not disappoint them. My husband left the decision entirely upon me. The women from my savings program handled the entire election process and I won the elections defeating six candidates. Those who had up until now traditionally held power were resentful of my win. However, I knew that this time I was in the majority. Six of the eleven ward members from my Panchayat were women and we all took

an oath not to allow the men from our households or village to interfere in our work. We resolved not to let our husbands enter our allotted cabins and that we would handle the affairs of the village on our own.

I understood the politics of exclusion. I knew exactly how the earlier leaders had restricted power and participation amongst themselves. Meetings were never held regularly, notices were not put up, and if they were there was no time to prepare for them. I demanded that the agenda for the monthly meeting be declared a week in advance, that the meetings be held in the Panchayat Office as per schedule and that women be allowed to participate in these meetings. My active participation after the elections, invited many problems for me also from the orthodox within the Muslim community. However, my husband stood by me. From my earlier trainings, I knew exactly which were the issues that I ought to address. I undertook the work on road- construction, sanitation, and installed a water pipeline from a nearby pond. I forced a new survey for the distribution of BPL once I realized that two of the beneficiaries on the old list actually belonged to affluent families.

I am aware of the huge empowering abilities of affirmative action like reservation for women since I have lived it and can see the transformations within myself. I have also realized that Governance is a big responsibility that can be ably handled by women with proper training and a little exposure. I believe that since a woman is a mother as well, it is in her character to be selfless and work for the benefits of others, a quality that men usually lack.

I know my job is not done yet and I am committed to the idea of developing my village. However, my idea of development is a little different from how it is conventionally viewed. For me true development stands for a process that debilitates all institutions and mechanisms of exploitation, apart from the proper implementation of policies and Schemes. I know that my words have more meaning today and my voice has a greater importance. However, there remains an unfulfilled task, that of taking governance to every woman and in turn getting women who are truly empowered and capable of governance into power. Until that is achieved, I will continue to fight.

Gitanjali Mahipat Kadam
President
Panchayat: Pimpali Khurd
Block: Chiplun
District: Ratnagiri

I have studied up to Class X and am 38 years old. I run a small tailoring business from home. My husband is a retailer and we own a small shop in the village. Ours is a small family of five members, a son, a daughter, my husband, and my mother in law. I belong to the Maratha caste, which comes under the General category. My husband met with an accident, which resulted in a broken backbone. The total treatment cost was Rs.1,40,000. The State Transport Corporation granted Rs. 40,000/- as compensation. I disputed the compensation and filed a case, winning an amount of Rs. 2,25,000 which paid all the hospital bills. It is while my husband had been bedridden, that I had started accepting tailoring work to support the family. My husband's illness and subsequent long-term disability completely altered the structure of our family and day-to-day expenses were difficult to meet.

I have never been connected with politics, yet from childhood I have always felt an attraction towards it. I wished to help people with their problems and had a strong desire to exercise my leadership. Presently, I am the Secretary of Mahila Sangh, Chiplun. When the 2005 Panchayat elections were announced in my village, I willingly decided to contest. I was elected unopposed from my Ward, while the other Wards had elections. After the elections, it was decided that Sunanda, another EWR in my Panchayat and I would share the President's post. Therefore, for the first two and a half years I was the President.

I attended the Women's Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project-Parivartan, in which I learnt about keeping records for the Gram Panchayat office, about budget, audits etc. I also learnt about the Mahila Gram Sabha and support structures.

After I returned to my village, I organized seven SHGs and this helped me turn the Mahila Gram Sabhas into a successful reality. I disseminated information on Government programmes & Schemes to the members of the SHGs. I also motivated them to help the needy women and the elderly. A village level Sangh of about 200 women was also formed in the village.

I monitored the accuracy of various documents and certificates required by the villagers for various purposes. I also kept a close watch and ensured that the villagers were not charged more than the set rate for these. In addition I ensured that everyone (especially the women) knew the charges & rates for the preparation for different documents and the time frame involved to do a piece of work. Along with implementing pension schemes, I facilitated a widow to work as a helper in the Primary Health Centre as well as another woman from a BPL family get a sewing machine at a subsidised rate. It gives me great satisfaction that my efforts have enabled these women to gain an independent income.

Several developmental works were also undertaken during my tenure, namely construction of public toilets at Baudhawadi (a backward class hamlet) under the Sampurna Grameen Rozagar Yojana; completion of water conservation activities, construction of pathways in all the hamlets, and establishment of a funeral shed for the village.

My village was awarded the Nirmal Gram Puraskar. I tried to prioritize the village's sanitation needs during my term. Construction of drainage canals, public toilets, and the carrying out of sanitation campaigns were the key points of my development agenda. I also made it a point to know the needs of school children and the school. A toilet was constructed and a pipeline for water supply was constructed for the school as well. I proposed the construction of a cabin at the Gram Panchayat hall and after the approval of all the members; a new look was given to the GP office.

I feel that dealing with unemployment in the village was also a critical requirement for me. I tried to help the unemployed youth by helping draw up loan-proposals for entrepreneurship. I noticed that the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation's industries in my village were not employing the local youth. Therefore, I gathered the youth together, led them to the factory, and spoke to the management there. They promised me that they would consider job applications of the locals and they eventually fulfilled it. Through another dialogue with a similar industry, I made them offer scholarships and other aid to bright students of the Panchayat.

Whatever work I was able to do in my tenure was possible due to the support shown by the villagers. I did face a lot of trouble while carrying out so many construction works, sometimes people objected on meaningless issues, while some landowners refused to give up their land. I used to speak to them personally and try to find a way out. I am extremely satisfied with my work and have no qualms about anything. Communication has been my greatest strength and confidence to communicate was gained through various workshops organized by THP-Parivartan. I could remain active also due to the strength of the Mahila Sangh. I have set my as my goal the post of Panchayat Samiti Member in the future, and I am very sure that I will be able to achieve it. On a personal level, I am very attached to my daughter and I will try my best to make her an alert and responsible citizen.

Mangala Valavi
Member
Village: Vasalai
Block: Nandurbar
District: Nadurbar

I have passed Class XII and although I wished to study further, I could not due to the economic condition of my family. I am married and have two children. We belong to the Scheduled Tribe category. In the 2007 Panchayat elections, I was elected member of my Gram Panchayat. Initially, I was very apprehensive to work as part of a team, that I know nothing about, but then I thought that I could do as well as any of the others, since I was at least passionate about the work.

A thief had once stolen a water pipe in the village, a villager who saw it instantly informed me about it. After receiving the information, I immediately went to the spot, but the thief had run away. I went to the Police Station, but the Police Officials refused to register the case. Therefore, I went to Forest Department and they suggested I go to the Irrigation Department. I explained all the details to the Officials in the Irrigation Department and they started an enquiry soon after. In a few days time, the thief was arrested and punished by the Court.

After the case was over, the Officials handling the case on behalf of the Irrigation Department asked me how I had so much confidence and courage; I told them that the “Panchayat Sakhi” training program that was responsible for my bravery and confidence.

Ratnabai Shivaji Patil

President

Village: Patharad

Block: Bhadgaon

District: Jalgaon

I have studied up to Class IV and my family is quite well off. I never wished to be a part of the political sphere, but my family members wanted me to contest the 2007 Panchayat elections. The seat was reserved for women and I was elected as the President. After I joined office, I faced many problems since I was unaware about my role and responsibilities as a President.

Shive Prerna, an organization, which works in the village, is implementing the “Panchayat Sakhi” project. As a part of the project, a three-day training program was organized and I was invited for it, I gained knowledge about the Gram Panchayat and my role as a President. When I came back to the village after the training program, I tried to mobilize the village women and create awareness among them about their rights and the importance of Gram Sabhas. In the first all-women Gram Sabha of the village, we discussed the problem of transportation and everyone decided to write a letter to the Government Transport office. We then went to the Transport office and made a demand for bus services to our village. The Government Transport Department approved the proposal and because of the involvement of women, a major problem was solved.

The male members of the village have also appreciated my work and contribution. I will always work for the village development and will try to ensure participation from the village women.

Sarita Shivaji Nigade
President
Panchayat: Kolakewadi
Block: Chiplun
District: Ratnagiri

I am 40 years old and have been educated till Class VII. I was elected in August 2005. My husband is a Government employee. My father-in-law was the Police Patil for the village, but he resigned from his job so that he had time to look after his agricultural activities. I have two children. My son is pursuing his Diploma in Electronics and my younger daughter is in Class XII.

I was not involved politics before I became President. I was an ordinary homemaker, and even after being elected as President, I continue to perform all household responsibilities. I cook food for my family, wash clothes, clean utensils, and work hard at the paddy fields, doing all the things that I used to do the years before. Kolakewadi is a big Panchayat and we have many responsibilities, so the additional responsibility is tough on me, but I think we are doing well.

Contesting elections was not a part of any political aspiration, but it was proposed by my hamlet that I should go for it. Due to my family's backing, I made up my mind to take active part in the elections. I was elected among the new Gram Panchayat (GP) body of 11 members. I had no clue that I would be elected as the President by the new body, as there was no reservation for the post of President. It was an open post and anyone could have been President, but I was suggested for the post. When my name was suggested, another group nominated another woman, but I finally managed to secure huge support, win the election, and accept responsibilities of the President. I was very proud at that moment. I was the first member in my family to enter the GP, as well as the first lady in my village to become the President.

After I was appointed as the President, I received a congratulatory letter from Parivartan, and was invited to a training conducted by THP-Parivartan. I attended the first training and decided to attend it regularly, since the first one helped me understand the terms that I had always wanted to learn.

After realising the importance of Mahila Gram Sabhas in the training, I also organised the same trainings in my village. This was the first time that a woman led and attended. Gram Sabha took place in my village. I met women

of every hamlet and received a huge attendance of 147 women at the Gram Sabha. I also organized 150 women into 6 Self Help Groups. Now there are regular Mahila Gram Sabhas and women have started involving themselves in village governance.

Earlier, the villagers did not attend the Gram Sabha though it was expected of them. Only when some controversial subject was to be discussed, was there some amount of participation. I tried to alter this tendency and there has been a positive response. Since the village is very large and scattered, most of the people never attended Gram Sabhas, as they did not wish to walk long distances to attend the Panchayat. I decided to walk to every house in every hamlet to communicate with the villagers. After this, there was a change in their attitudes, they began to appreciate my hard work, and they must have reasoned that if their President could walk up to all the villages regularly, then even they could travel to the Panchayat for the Gram Sabhas.

The training helped me to learn more about gathering funds for the Gram Sabha, the 12th Finance Commission, and other Schemes. I ensured help to the needy families and made them secure benefits from the personal benefit schemes. The BPL families from poorer hamlets were able to save 50 percent of the amount required for electricity meters after I helped them with the relevant information.

A Government power project has acquired land in Kolakewadi. For years, villagers were only listening to the promises of rehabilitation. I made a strong follow-up and arranged the rehabilitation of two hamlets. I repaired a water supply schemes in three hamlets under using nearly Rs. 4,50,000. For the other three hamlets, I constructed bus stops at each hamlet.

My village has many hamlets but limited funds, this used to raise the disputes on how to spend the GP funds. I arrived at a solution- to work for one hamlet every year from the GP fund. All the villagers happily approved this.

I also worked for sanitation and constructed drainage canals. I managed to secure a huge sum, that of Rs. 9,00,000 under the Yashawant Gramsamrudhi

Yojana. I facilitated the construction of eight public toilets for my village and have applied for the Nirmal Gram Purskar. Another big job I helped with was the construction of a School. I had to face lot of troubles due to party politics while completing the school. A group, who had other stakes, alleged the measurements were incorrect and began to force us to reconstruct the base. I took a very neutral and wise stand. I got the school checked and certified by the engineer from Panchayat Samiti in the presence of villagers and continued the work. After this, I was deliberately kept away from the inauguration of the school building, but the village apologized to me. Now I have approved a grant for an additional classroom and have constructed a pathway leading to school.

I held activities like an agro-fair and held health camps for my village. I have successfully handled many political matters and controversies in the village. The trainings I received have had a bid role to play in shaping the way my personality is today. It is because of the strength of knowledge gained from these trainings that I could cross check the corrupt bill submitted to my Gram Panchayat and refuse to sign it. I learnt to act diplomatically. Diplomacy is most essential to the managing of a vast village and a heavily populated Gram Panchayat.

Smita Sachin Thore
President
Panchayat: Valote
Block: Mandangad
District: Ratnagiri

I come from a poor Kunabi family in Burondi Village of Dapoli Block. During my childhood, I experienced many adversities. I lost my father when I still a young girl, but because I was the eldest in my family, I had to take on the major responsibility of the family. I had to discontinue my education after Class X. I took a job and supported my family and younger siblings' education. Because of this work experience, I became responsible and mature at a very young age. After eight years, I was married and came of live in Valote. My husband works as an assistant Librarian in Savitribai Phule College, Mandanagad. I live in a big family with my mother and father in law, brother in law and two children.

Life was moving at a fast speed, and one day I had an option unlike any other: an offer to contest the elections. I was surprised, but not too excited about it. Finally, my family's support encouraged me to contest elections. Another woman from the same Ward, belonging to the same category, filed her nomination as well. Both the groups did a lot of campaigning until the final day. It was tough but the competition was straight and clean. The day after the votes were cast, I was declared the winner. I was very happy about this opportunity. I had gained this chance at leadership without any prior political or social expertise. I was the first in my family to contest and win the elections.

The post of President was reserved for the OBC category, so I was unanimously accepted as the President. I took charge on 22 February 2004.

I was aware that as the first woman President of the village, I was sure to face lots of scrutiny. I knew that I needed to rise above the expectations of my village in order to prove that I was a good President. What I did not know was what to do in order to be a good President!

I had still not heard about Parivartan, and when I was invited to the THP-Parivartan training, I did not show much willingness to attend. My husband insisted that I attend. Now I realize that it would have been one of the biggest mistakes of my life if I had not attended the trainings. As an immediate impact

of the trainings, I became more confident in my own abilities to interact with villagers as well as with Block-level officers. I became confident, because I gained in both information and skills through the trainings. Earlier, I had many doubts, which I would always keep to myself, thinking about what other would say if I should ask. However, after joining the trainings, I could raise any number of doubts without feeling shy or insecure.

In Valote, there are seven hamlets and I attended to the developmental needs of all the hamlets step by step. The Baudhawadi is the most remote part of the village. Most of the women living there work as house help or as wage labourers during the agricultural season. Considering this, I completed the construction of pathways from the Baudhwadi to other hamlets in the village. Additionally, I constructed internal tar roads throughout the village. In order to meet the demand of water supply at village, I began water conservation activities from the funds in the 12th Finance Commission.

I organised meetings in every hamlet. I personally visited every family and convinced them of the needs and benefits of sanitation. The villagers on their part responded to my efforts. We received a prize of Rs. 1,00,000/- through the Nirmal Gram Puraskar. We utilized this amount for the betterment of the backward hamlets in the village.

Education was an issue on my development agenda for the village. Valote has a school but it only upto Class VII. The school building is old and the building is in a delapidated condition. When the weather worsens, the students have no choice but to study in a building with leaky roofs and poorly maintained walls.

From the very beginning of my tenure, I struggled with this issue. After trying many things, I finally found enough land for a school. The property owner was old and had nobody to look after her so she was paid Rs.15, 000/- by the Mumbai Mandal of the village. A contractor was given the contract in a village meeting. With the consent of the Gram Panchayat body, we paid him Rs.1,50,000. However, he acted irresponsibly with the money and abandoned

the task. The villagers held me responsible for this. I was frustrated to be held accountable for something outside my control. Then another contractor was paid Rs.15, 000/- but he too left the job incomplete. Nevertheless, I accepted the responsibility. No contractor was ready to accept the contract. Almost half the funds had been squandered. The situation became grave so my brother in law and I accepted the challenge to complete the school building. I borrowed money by lending my gold jewelry to others. My effort did not waste. We have completed the construction of the school building complete with a garden. I also succeeded in getting funds sanctioned for an additional classroom. Now I am trying to hire a school teacher to give better attention to the students in the school.

While doing all this, I was offered bribes; but I never accepted them. On the contrary, I had to spend money from my own pocket for traveling, hospitality of guests who visited the Panchayat and of course, I have no regrets. After facing so many difficulties, I have become very attached to my village and I dream and hope that the best should come our way, and I will always work for that.

Sushama Ramachandra

Raikar

President

Panchayat: Shivane

Block: Guhagar

District: Ratnagiri

I belong to the Hindu Kunabi caste and am originally from Rai village in Ratnagiri District. I have studied up to Class VII and am 39 years old. My husband came to Shivane on work. We have two children, a girl, and a boy. Initially our financial condition was not very good. Since we did not belong to the village, we had no agricultural land. I pursued tailoring to supplement the family income. Meanwhile, a teacher asked me to run a canteen for him; I accepted the job to earn some extra money to meet our daily needs. Then I got a job in a school to cook daily meals for the students. My husband and I asked for a loan and we have built our own house in Shivane. We have permanently settled in Shivane and we are as attached to it as our native village.

My family and I have never had any connection with politics whatsoever. When the President's post was reserved for women in the 2005 elections, no woman in our village was ready to stand for it. However, people from my hamlet insisted that I contest the election; they wanted to see me as their 'President'. Initially I was not ready for this, but then I accepted it as an opportunity to work for the betterment of my village. I made up my mind to work for all those things that have always annoyed me as a common rural homemaker. My family has been supportive of me.

Even though I was not that active in the Panchayat before, I used to attend all the Gram Sabhas in our village. The previous President was not disciplined at all, he used to remain absent from most of the Gram Sabhas and stay in Mumbai half the time attending to his personal affairs. Therefore, at the start of my tenure itself, I decided to regularly hold and attend Gram Panchayat meetings and carefully listen to the demands of the villagers.

Meeting The Hunger Project-Parivartan activists for the first time instilled a new enthusiasm in me, I felt as if I had found an easy way to complete my goals for the Panchayat. However, I was a little cautious in attending the first training alone, so I requested another GP member to accompany me. After I attended the first program on the roles and responsibilities of a President', I made sure not to miss any future training programs. Attending

the training so soon after being elected was a golden coincidence; the Women's Leadership Workshop and other trainings brought back memories of school days. It gave me an opportunity to interact with other EWRs in my Block. Ravina, the President of Kajurli Gram Panchayat did not attend the program earlier, and having realized the importance of it as a woman and a President, I helped the organisation's activists in giving her the confidence to join the program.

During the training, we were explained the details about the Gram Panchayat budget, which would have otherwise remained unclear, probably even after I would have completed my tenure. In the workshop on Gram Sabhas, we were taught some innovative measures to enhance participation in them and when I followed these, I saw an overwhelming response in our Gram Sabha too. I have tried to increase women's participation in matters of Governance. Parivartan even organized a 'Mahila Gram Sabha' campaign in my village upon my insistence. We now have regular Mahila Gram Sabhas before every general Gram Sabha. Women's participation in the Gram Sabha has increased so much that they alone complete its quorum! I also organized the women in my hamlet to form an SHG.

I came to know that the village revenue office should display a fee-chart, so after coming back to my village, a resolution was passed in one of the Gram Sabhas about this. To make the sanitation campaign a success, I went to each house in the village and convinced the people to follow all the criteria of the campaign. Our village was awarded the Nirmal Gram Puraskar (an award instituted by the State Government for achieving set sanitation standards); it is a very nice feeling to lead a Nirmal Gram.

The project of constructing a connecting road between Shivane and Bhatgoan (costing nearly Rs. 1 Crore) was successfully completed, and funds for another internal road connecting a remote hamlet to our village has been sanctioned. Apart from this, pathways for the hamlets, a water supply scheme for Teliwadi, construction of a Primary School building and water conservation activities have also been carried out.

A woman once complained to me, about the malpractices taking place in the PDS. When I went to the ration shop to check on her complaint, the owner said that he received a lower quota than required. Then I went to Kajurli and Abaloli, to confirm whether they faced the same problem or not, but I found out that such an issue did not exist at all. Therefore, I enquired with the Revenue Office and received a written response from them. Ultimately, a resolution to change the ration shop holder was passed at the Gram Sabha.

I would surely like to have one more term as the President, since there is a lot more that needs to be done. The village's school needs to provide a better standard of education; and a Primary Health Centre is required at the village. However, the most important task is to conserve the harmonious atmosphere of the village.

Aliva Sahoo
Vice President
Panchayat: Kanjara
Block: Banarpal
District: Angul

I was elected as Vice President at the age of twenty-nine for the second time in a row and have been lucky to have a family who are supportive of my activities outside the home. We live with eleven members in a joint family and my husband, a small businessperson in Kanjara, is the eldest son and has to shoulder all responsibilities for the entire family.

Before I stood for election, I helped in my husband's business as well as looked after our only son. The little time that I had left after all this, however, was spent in tending to the needs of our neighbors and others in the village. This interest in the general welfare finally saw me entering public service in 2002, when the Kanjara seat was reserved for women.

During my first stint at office, I had successfully fulfilled strongly felt demands for providing social support to the poor and underprivileged by bringing many of them under the protection of State Welfare Schemes. Many people who had benefited from these, subsequently paved the way for my continuation in the same post, for the second time in 2007. Acquiescing to requests from my community, I entered the fray and won by twenty votes. There have been long standing demands in my area for drinking water facilities, roads and drainage systems, construction of a school building, pond renovation, fishery and irrigation facilities apart from other developmental activities. I have started fulfilling these demands and have raised these issues in the Panchayat meetings, with Block Officials etc.

I have had tube wells and a road sanctioned during the past year, and am undertaking an evaluation of works carried out under NREGS in my area. I also plan to ensure that all eligible people have job cards and apply for work under NREGS. Though I am only educated up to Class VIII, I personally execute all documentation, proposals, and correspondence relating to GP activities myself. Not having a political background has not been a problem for me. This is something I try to impress upon other women in my area while I discharge my duties as a representative of my Panchayat. I organize and motivate them to participate actively in all events and activities in the Panchayat and have succeeded in enlisting their support for all my endeavors towards the progress of our area.

ORISSA



Asanti Behera
Ward Member
Panchayat: Jarasingha
Block: Sadar
District: Angul

I am 48 years old and a widow with three children. My husband passed away 10 years back. Although I have no political background people encouraged me to stand as a Ward Member. This is the second time that I have successfully stood for elections. It was a change for me to mingle with the people. I am not very educated, just seventh classes pass, and belong to a poor family. My husband was a daily labourer. After my husband's death, I was fraught with financial difficulties, which included bringing up my son and daughter. However, even with such hardship, I was motivated to work for the development of my area, since economic up-liftment alone can help mitigate some of the sufferings of the rural poor.

I believe women's empowerment and self-employment are the keys to the rise in the community's fortunes. Therefore, I got involved with a women's SHG in our locality and motivated other women to join our group and work towards financial security. Local people understand my mission and vision and greatly appreciated the fact that in spite of my personal troubles, I was giving time for them. They selected me to contest the election in 2002. Two other contestants were fully equipped with men, money, and muscle. The other two competitors initially laughed off my challenge, and tried their level best to discourage me. Nevertheless, my group members stood united and extended their full support, as it became a prestige issue for them. The contest subsequently boiled down to an autocracy vs. democracy fight. Though I belong to the OBC category, I contested from the unreserved women's seat on the insistence of my supporters. During the election, I campaigned with my SHG group women whose presence helped mobilize and influence many voters.

I won the election easily. It gave me great pleasure that now I had a wider scope to study the problems of women, especially from the BPL families and other deprived sections in our village. Before my second term as Ward Member in 2007, I had gained a lot of knowledge in working for the public as well as with different people. It enriched my self-confidence and enabled to me talk frankly with people and government officials about the developmental works, project plans, roads, sanitation, health, and PDS. I also worked to

harness public support and help for my work as without the cooperation of people, nothing can be accomplished. Being a Ward representative has helped me to carry on various developmental programmes for my Ward. In order to improve my capacity and skills as an effective leader, I underwent training by THP- NSS to develop my leadership qualities and other skills. This training greatly benefited and inspired me and paved the path for a stint of successful management of my ward development activities.

Apart from a lack of infrastructure, my area also faces many social evils like child marriage, child labour, adolescent marriage, dowry, etc. I raise my voice against such evils in meetings and exhort people to dispel these from their lives. The training I received has really helped me to learn about many things about our society and nation, which I intend to, not only apply in my work, but also inform others in my area to follow. Awareness and the right information are very important for progress, I tell them.

Banabasi Pradhan
Ward Member
Panchayat: Kadamasing
Block: R.Udayagiri
District: Gajapati

I am the Ward Member of Anagha village of Kadamasing Gram Panchayat in R. Udayagiri Block in Gajapati District. I was elected in 2007. Soon after the newly elected representatives assumed office, I attended a training programme for women representatives, where we learnt about the powers, functions, and roles of different posts in the Panchayat. From here, we learnt of the role of a Ward Member, and as one, I realized that I had to play an important role in the working of the Panchayat. The biggest positive of the training was that now I know that no work on part of the Panchayat and no work in the Ward can be carried out without the approval of the Palli Sabha (ward meetings), of which I am the head.

As per the provisions of the Forest Right Act, a Forest Right committee needs to be set up in every village. To assist in its formation the BDO sent a school teacher to my Ward. The teacher was in favour of merely getting the signatures of all the members of the Ward and then constituting the committee. However, I realized that by doing so she would not only be going against the rules and regulations but also shirking her responsibility. Accordingly, I decided to call for a Palli Sabha and then got into the act of mobilising people for the meeting. Many people and a heartening number of women turned up for the meeting, during which the provision of the Act was explained and the Forest Right Committee set up.

In another instance, a road was being constructed to my village, but I had no knowledge of it. I immediately asked the work to be halted and asked the Panchayat as to why the Palli Sabha and I not been consulted. The issue was also taken up in the Palli Sabha.

My active use of Palli Sabha has been a revelation to the other Ward Members who have not realized the full potential and importance of the Sabha. The Panchayat often overshadows the work of Palli Sabha, as it is the lowest rung of the ladder in the Panchayat structure. However, it is the Palli Sabha, which brings people together at the local level and identifies local problems. It is a forum, which can be effectively used for political empowerment of the people, can help them play a greater role in the Gram Sabha. My success lies in realizing the importance and potential of Palli Sabha and making maximum use of it.

Bijayalaxmi Dehury

President

Panchayat: Tulasipal

Block: Banarpal

District: Anugul

I have, from a very young age had a wish to help the poor. I always dreamt about working for the distressed in society, yet I hadn't had time to pursue this passion as I had to move from place to place with my Government employee husband, who had a transferable job. It was only after my husband retired, and when we finally came back to our village of Gadarkhai, which falls under Tulasipur G.P, did I find time to devote myself fully to social work. Having a yen for community service, I could easily gauge the problems affecting the village generally, and women particularly. In private I used to discuss with other women the need for them to be aware of their rights and find ways to be independent along with being conscious of their duties and responsibilities towards the village and Panchayat. Publicly, the opportunity arose in 2007 for me to avail of a greater platform from which I could help my community.

I won the election for the post of President from the reserved seat of Tulasipur. It was an easy victory and soon I set about finding ways to help the needy. Migrant workers, daily-wage labours, marginal, and landless farmers, the aged, and the very poor were the first to be enlisted by me under various Government welfare schemes. Striving to make my Panchayat a model one, my first task was towards improving the state of health care and education in my area. I requested the Block Office to sanction an additional Primary Health Centre to provide proper health facilities and anti-natal care for women. I keep in regular touch with the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and the Aanganwadi staff to ensure they carry out their duties properly. I also visit people personally to encourage them to send their children regularly to school and ensure that no child misses school even for a day. Since my Panchayat lies near the National Aluminium Corporation Limited (NALCO), a Public Sector Unit (PSU), I succeeded in linking my Panchayat to the peripheral support activities of NALCO.

Under my initiative, people of my village passed a resolution for the provision of drinking water, repair of school buildings and connecting roads from villages to the Panchayat headquarters. This resolution has been approved and NALCO has sanctioned Rs. 4,50,000 for this. This has resulted in my esteem

rising greatly among the people and strengthened my resolve to continue serving my community.

I also have plans for the youth of my area, both girls and boys. I plan to organise vocational training for them, create avenues where farmers can avail of improved skills and inputs to increase agricultural production, and engage the youth in various income generating activities so that a process of economic well-being can be set in motion, helping keep hunger and poverty at bay. In addition, I plan to keep on working for the development of the region irrespective of whether I remain in power or not. This has become not just an aim, but also a passion for me.

Debaki Sethi
President
Panchayat: Tarbod
Block: Komna
District: Naupada

I live with my husband at Tarbod, two kilometers away from our village of Gohirapadar. My only daughter and her family also live with us. We all depend upon the income of my husband, Badrinarayan, who is an employee in the Horticulture Department. We own 2 acres of agricultural land, which helps support the family's sustenance to a certain extent. My father, who is a resident in nearby Chhatisgarh State, was elected as President twice in his life. Even my grand father was a freedom fighter. Hence, inspired by them, from early childhood, I had an inner desire to join the local governance process. My desire was fulfilled when Tarbod GP was reserved for SC (W) in the PRI elections held in 2007. I contested with four other candidates and defeated my nearest rival by 360 votes. I was given immense support from women groups in my village, as I am myself a member of a SHG.

However, it was my inner desire to be a President. However, initially I lacked essential information in managing the day-to-day affairs of the Panchayat. I had to depend upon the secretary and other officials or local people to guide me. Even though I felt exploited and faced other difficulties, I had no other option. Fortunately, FARR, a local NGO organized a 5 days training workshop on leadership building. Seizing this opportunity, I attended all 5 days of the workshop and was able to increase my knowledge, skills and capabilities.

In July 2008, when the Chief Minister of Orissa declared that under the Public Distribution System (PDS) rice would be sold for Rs.2/- a Kilo both for BPL and APL households of the Kalahandi, Balangir, Koraput (KBK) region, great political pressure was put upon me, as Tarbod is a highly politically sensitive area. Official orders to my Panchayat were to select only 180 above poverty line households, whereas the demand was much higher than that. Selecting the right beneficiaries became a rather daunting task! I therefore decided to involve the people of the entire Panchayat in the selection of the actual beneficiaries. Therefore, the selection process was started from the Palli Sabha held in each village and only then; a list of 180 beneficiaries was finalized at the Gram Sabha. Selecting these primary beneficiaries was a very difficult task as pressure from influential groups gradually increased. In an effort to

browbeat me, some people even came with wooden sticks lathis and tried to attack me. Nevertheless, through sheer determination I ensured the selection of only the right beneficiaries, with the consultation of all Ward Members. Now I have also given a second list of an additional 200 names to the BDO (Block Development Officer) to incorporate in the beneficiaries list.

Dipanjali Majhi
President
Panchayat: Rupra Road
Block: Narla
District: Kalahandi

I am 28 years old and belong to a Scheduled Tribe. I contested for the post of President of Rupra Road Gram Panchayat from a General seat and defeated all seven male candidates, by a margin of 240 votes. People in my Panchayat thought that women can contest only from the seats reserved for them, while the rest of the seats were reserved for men. When I tried to break this notion and filed my nomination, I had to face a great deal of opposition. One ex-President, a rich 'Sundhi' (liquor vendor) subjected me to threats, abusive language trying to compel me to withdraw my application. However, as a local daughter and daughter-in-law of the village, a group of educated youth supported my candidature and I won the election partly due to their support.

My husband did not wish to be involved in any entanglement of this sort. Some people of my village summoned him from home and said, "Your father used to carry loads of earth on his frail shoulder for your upkeep. Now that you have an educated wife, she is out to be the President of the Panchayat. Aren't you left with an iota of shame?" They insulted him a lot. Even after I have won the election, they continue to put obstacles, but I am not going to let anyone influence my commitment to my Panchayat, and I will work towards the development of my village. I will prove myself with my deeds, that is why I regularly call Panchayat Meetings and maintain cordial relations with my Ward Member colleagues; and the activities of my Panchayat are going on quite effectively.

My experiences taught me a few lessons. The position of women is rather low in our society; concrete steps need to be taken to redress this imbalance. And the first step towards this is the economic self-reliance of women themselves. I believe an increase in their worth and self-esteem will gradually lead to better economic and social status and greater acceptance of their worth.

I gave priority to women SHGs in the auctioning of ponds, for pisciculture and encouraged women to come forward and register under the NREGS programme. Many eligible people (many of them women) had been left out of various schemes like BPL, Annapurna, Antyodaya, Madhubabu Pension

Scheme etc. As a norm, this list of beneficiaries, once made, is fixed for 5 years; therefore, I have begun drawing up a list of the really deserving to be included in the existing list. The problem of availing clean drinking water affects our women the most. Therefore, I have, at the Block Office, brought this up, and got tube wells sanctioned for my Panchayat. However, nothing is accomplished without the help of the community. Therefore, I have always tried to get at least the women of my area to cooperate with me in my activities. I am glad to say that now women are coming in great numbers to the Panchayat and other meetings and participating in various community activities meant for development of their area. Now women are coming forward to demand roads to their villages and raising issues relating to monitoring and evaluation of NREGS works, setting up a nursery for fishery in Rupra Road, repairing of school buildings, etc. I have also raised questions about the types of works enlisted under the NREGS scheme, so that the people can avail of the maximum benefit. I also take up these issues regularly with the Block Officials and undertake monitoring and evaluation of developmental works personally.

However, nothing is done easily in our State. Those opposed to me still try to disrupt my work and create mischief to discourage me. They came in an inebriated state to the Panchayat office, threatened, and abused me several times. I have now put up a notice on the Panchayat office wall banning the entry of anyone who is drunk. I have also gathered women to fight against the setting up, selling, and distilling of liquor in their vicinity. My struggle continues, but I am confident of meeting any challenge that might come my way, and shall try to live up to the faith that my people have reposed in me.

Diptirani Rout
President
Panchayat: Balarampur
Block: Odapada
District: Denkanal

I am a graduate, and before being elected to the Panchayat, I was a Supervisor in a non-formal school. As a teacher, I had pursued the cause of education and succeeded in enrolling many children, both boys and girls, into school. This is my second stint in office, the first time I contested from a reserved seat; and the second time from a General seat.

My husband, who is a clerk with NIC (National Insurance Corporation), was associated with a local club and was involved in garnering support for me in the village. But unfortunately, the villagers didn't appreciate it, and they opposed my candidature as I was from a different village. I also faced a lot of opposition from the village elders who had reservations about a daughter-in-law entering politics. However, I still won the elections with a majority of votes from the educated sections of the Gram Panchayat, but for two years, there was a lot of resistance to me in the Panchayat meetings and lack of cooperation, especially from the elders.

But I took it as a challenge and went on to build a High School, concrete roads, ponds, gave eight IAY houses to the needy, identified and provided nine Annapurna cards, nine Antyodaya beneficiaries, built tube wells and also a water harvesting structure in the local school. The Total Sanitation Campaign, under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Scheme was carried out amidst constraints but was completed with separate toilets for teachers, boys and girls, respectively. The Executive Officer and Secretary are helpful and provide me the necessary help.

Apart from continuing with activities that I had started during my first term, I have also started some new projects. Under the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), loans have been given to women for goat and sheep farming. Around 638 job cards have been distributed under the NREGS out of which 200 have managed to obtain employment. Being a woman myself, I have always given the foremost priority to issues, which concern and affect women. Therefore, women feel reassured to come to me with their problems and stand by me whenever the occasion so demands. Around 770 BPL cards, 13 physically handicapped allowances; IAY houses to three visually impaired,

157 widow pensions, and 40 old-age pensions have been disbursed during my tenure.

During the past year the Gram Sabha was convened four times and the Palli Sabha twice. I try to involve everyone in the planning process by ensuring maximum participation of women in the meetings. The Panchayat plans to take up the provision of piped water supply, digging of wells for irrigation purposes, provide seeds and fertilizers at concessional rates and enlist more beneficiaries under BPL, NREGS, IAY etc. in the near future. We hold health camps, veterinary camps for cattle, supervise the Mid-Day Meal Schemes and Aanganwadi attendance regularly. Whenever required, we respond immediately to crises, carrying out relief, rehabilitation, and other disaster mitigation activities.

G Sachala Karjee

President

Panchayat: Ramgiri

Block: R. Udayagiri

District: Gajapati

I am 45 year old but feel and look much older. Part of the reason for this is the burden of responsibility on my shoulders, which weighs down heavily on me. Entering public life on the inspiration and request of the legendary leader late Biju Patnaik in 1992, I first became a Member, Panchayat Samiti and since then have embarked on a journey of service to my neglected community. Seeing my acumen, I was soon chosen as the Block Vice-Chairman. However, no sooner had I begun to execute my powers than certain vested interests, in connivance with local Government officials, began to gang up against me. Belittling my abilities because I was a woman, they tried every trick to browbeat me into following their dictates. However, proving them wrong, I carried on in my duties with a missionary zeal and won my peoples' trust. I persevered to reach every needy person in my area by availing of the various Welfare Schemes available in the Block. Due to this, I was elected President of my Panchayat in 1997, which gave me a chance to continue service for another 5 years. The 2002 PRI election saw the Ramgiri seat being reserved for ST, so I opted out of the race; but the 2007 elections again saw me back in the saddle.

I have proved to be to be quite a handful for those with vested interests in the area. From the beginning, I encountered several obstacles to my leadership. Apart from my political rivals, even the Government Officials created difficulties for me. They taunted me for being a woman who dared to take on the mantle of power. They had not expected me to rise up to the challenge and deliver against all odds. However, the combined might of the unscrupulous officials sometimes prove too much for a lone woman crusader, who also has to answer to her electorate. The officers adopt a hostile attitude towards me and withhold important information about Panchayat matters, allocation, and utilization of funds for various projects. On the other hand, not being able to account for the work done in the Panchayat lands me in embarrassing situations. Similarly, the actual beneficiaries are often left out of various welfare schemes like, Kissan (farmers) cards, BPL, IAY, Annapurna, Antyodaya etc., due to faulty identification. In spite of repeated pleas and representations to the BDO, nothing materializes. Rather he asks me to "show" full utilization of funds even when no development work has

been undertaken; further saying that more funds may not be allocated if I do not show full utilization. I of course do not agree to this and so this causes animosity between officials and me.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the odds, I strive to serve all sections of my community. After attending a couple of Women's Leadership Workshops held by THP-IWD, I have gained a clear vision of the ways and means of effective governance. I am determined to incorporate them into my functioning. Ranging from securing IAY, BPL, Annapurna, Antyodaya, Kissan cards, OAPs, widow pension, handicapped allowances, to granting loans and assistance to farmers for the purchase of agricultural implements, seeds and fertilizers (agriculture is a major occupation in my area), I strive to be of service to my people.

Concerned about the interests of the people, I have embarked on the mission of bringing economic prosperity to my area by enlisting the help of Cooperative Banks. The generally difficult terrain of the area has contributed to official apathy resulting in a lack of infrastructure. However, I hope to overcome this by initiating developmental activities in the area, and light the path for others, literally, by bringing electricity to this remote place.

Golap Gadnayak
Ward Member
Panchayat: Bauligarh
Block: Banarpal
District: Anugul

I am a 46-year-old married woman and am a Ward Member of Bauligarh Gram Panchayat, falling under Banarpal Panchyat Samiti of Anugul District. This is my second term as a Ward Member. After my first term as a Ward Member, when people requested me to contest the election again, I accepted. Although I did not have much time to spend in community works, as I have to earn a living, I attended all the necessary community-level meetings at the time of election. I contested from the Bauligarh General seat and had to face two opponents. I was elected defeating my nearest rival by a margin of twenty votes.

As my natal family was very poor, I could not read beyond Class VII. Then I dropped out of school on my parents' insistence. Life went on and in due course, I married and have five children now. My husband is a daily labourer on whose daily earnings my family of five depends. All my four daughters and one son all go to school. Apart from looking after the needs of the family, I have always given part of my time to others in the village. I believe that for helping others, one does not always need to have money. Kindness and empathy, coupled with a genuine desire to help others are also necessary in ample measure. Maybe the people in my village recognized this, and they requested me to take on a more challenging, and official, position. I thought I would have no time to come into politics because I had to take care of my children's education. However, on the insistence of my community members, I made up my mind and found time to campaign in the election. This was in 2002, and I attracted the voters by visiting them personally, listening to their problems with patience, and assuring them of all help that I can extend, legally.

However, life is never smooth. In spite of a majority of people being with me, certain other did not digest the fact that a woman could be given so much respect and attention. Some moneyed and upper caste people vented their ire at a mere woman trying to step into an 'official' position. They tried their best to defeat me and created all kinds of trouble for me during and after my campaign. However, as some respectable elders of our Ward supported me, the rest also followed suit. Being poor, I could not 'buy' any

votes, nor did I need to. Those men who were opposing me tried all types of tricks to scare away the voters, and even tried to entice them, but ultimately failed. The villagers reprimanded them for creating trouble unnecessarily and so they were finally subdued.

The levels of awareness and education in our community is particularly low, so people suffer a lot as they lack basic amenities and also the information required to avail them. Even I was ignorant about the rules and regulations of Panchayats; my roles and responsibilities as a representative and of the various Schemes and welfare programmes instituted by the Government for the benefit of the people. After attending the training with THP-NSS, I have learnt how to serve my people better and am trying my best to learn the ropes of administration as quickly as possible.

Latika Parida
Ward Member
Panchayat: Baliana
Block: Baliana
District: Khurdha

Entering the public arena for the first time in 2007, I was elected uncontested as a Ward Member. On election, the people in my Ward gave a proposal to build a road and dig a tube well in the Ward. However, the present President, wife of the previous President (as the seat was reserved for women in 2007) did not heed the requests, opinions, or proposals of us Ward members. She acts as a proxy of her husband and is more interested in pursuing the agenda set by him. As I was new to official matters, at first I was a silent observer at the Panchayat meetings. Nevertheless, after attending the WLW organized by THP-People's Cultural Centre (PECUC), I learnt about the practical details of the PRI system and the roles and responsibilities of Panchayat representatives. It helped me immensely and I was emboldened and began to voice my opinions freely in the subsequent Panchayat meetings.

I gathered the support of the other Ward Members, and together we demanded the construction of the road and tube-well. However, the President ignored our proposal and passed a separate proposal for the construction of a Kalyan Mandap (community hall) with Panchayat funds. This hall was to be built on land owned by the President, which adjoined a portion of Government land. We believed that this site was chosen because later she could claim the government property as her own and use it for personal gain. Opposing this, all Ward Members, male and female, decided not to go to the Panchayat meetings and organized a separate meeting. We presented a memorandum to the President that the more essential works in each Ward should be completed before the building of the Kalyan Mandap. The President had to give in to our demands and got the proposal passed. The construction of the road has started now.

I realize that it was my silence and ignorance, which led the President to exploit me. Now that I am suitably informed, nothing can stop me from ensuring development of my area. As people in the coastal areas of Orissa are rather conservative, not many elected women representatives have the courage to join public life and voice their opinions. THP's Leadership Workshops have helped in making us women representatives realize the importance of our roles in local self-governance.

Martha Badaraita

President

Panchayat: Bada Kalapat

Block: Gumma

District: Gajapati

My second stint as an elected women representative began when I was elected as the President of Bada Kalapat Gram Panchayat of Gumma Block in Gajapati District. In my earlier stint as a representative, I was the Ward Member from my village as well as the Vice President of the Panchayat. When I assumed office as President in 2007, the NREGS had just been introduced and it was the biggest welfare scheme to be implemented by the Panchayat. THP-Institute for Women's Development also conducted training for elected representatives on NREGS: its functioning and the critical role of the Panchayat in its success. I realized the obvious merits of the Scheme and its potential to change the rural scenario forever. It was a Scheme, combining food security, meaningful employment, and gender equality and which resulted in the creation of social assets.

Paying special attention to the Scheme, I have ensured that all the families in the Panchayat have been given job cards, and I have been able to implement work for Rs.52 lakhs under it. This is a record of sorts, as not many other Panchayats in the District have able to implement works for even half that amount! The works under the Scheme include the terracing of more than 100 acres of land, construction of roads, deepening of an irrigation channel, building and strengthening of check dams and plantation works. Many people have immensely benefited from this Scheme and many have received work for more than the stipulated 100 days of work. Self-motivation and a desire for serving the people have helped me in implementing the Scheme on such a large scale. I also feel that I have benefited from the cooperation of the people, Ward Members, and Government Officials. The results of the success of NREGS are there for all to see: migration in the region has fallen drastically due to the availability of work at home. However, I have some reservations about the speed at which things move in the system, as often people are not paid within fifteen days of work. To counter this, I have proposed to the BDO to release the payment in advance so that people can be paid before the amount of the work done is measured.

My actions have helped in improving the functioning of the Residential School in my Panchayat specially built for Adivasi children. The teachers of

the school were not staying there because of which the quality of the school suffered. I requested them to fulfill their duties but they would not budge. I realized that enough was enough and brought it to the notice of the District Collector who immediately ordered the transfer of 5 teachers. The Collector has also agreed to improve the infrastructure of the school and has released funds for the building of new classrooms and hostels.

Though I relish the challenges of the job, I feel that the allowance of Rs.300 per month is sometimes not enough to meet my travel costs. I am a woman of few words. I feel that actions should always speak louder than words, after all in the future; it will be my actions, which will be judged not my words!

Padmini Barik
Panchayat: Gandamer
Block: Komna
District: Nuapada

I live with my parents and other family members in Kantapali village, Gram Panchayat of Gandamer, which is twenty five kilometres away from the block headquarters of Komna. I have studied up to the 9th standard and am 24 years old. My father is a Sanparda artist (a local folk art using both song and dance with music) subsisting on an artist pension from the state government. We belong to the barber community are still carrying on with our traditional occupation. In the elections, February 2007, our ward was reserved for OBC (W). Inspired by my elder sister, who was the Ward Member of our Ward from 2002 to 2007, I contested for the post along with two other candidates and won by a margin of ninety votes. The good deeds of my elder sister helped me win the election.

After I came to the post I realized my lack of knowledge about the Panchayati Raj system and found it difficult going to the Gram Panchayat's office to raise issues of my Ward. It was my good fortune that I got three days training by THP-FARR from The knowledge that I gained in the workshop boosted my confidence and now am able to raise issues concerning my village in general and protesting against Panchayat irregularities in particular. This is reflected in my deeds.

A Gram Sabha was organized at the Gandamer Gram Panchayat office on 25 July '08 and was attended by the male President, all 11-ward members along with four EWRs, the GP secretary, and around 250 villagers (of which 30-40 were women). At the onset of the sabha, the President asked all ward members to give in writing, the issues they wanted to discuss or the activities they wanted to implement in their Ward. When all had handed over their notes, they were asked to sign upon the register. When it came to my turn, I found to my shock that nothing I had wanted was in the register! Rather some other activities were mentioned there. I immediately brought this matter to the notice of the Vice-President. We, then jointly raised this issue, and opposed it. We asked the President to cancel the current resolution copy and enter our demands in another resolution, but this was turned down. I raised my voice and crossed out the entries in the resolution copy in the register itself. The President and Panchayat Secretary were angered by this and started to quarrel and even used

abusive language. However, others in the Sabha, including the Vice-President and the villagers stood in my favour and argued with the wrongdoers. It was finally decided to organize the Gram Sabha again.

In vindication of my strong stand against this malpractice, the second Gram Sabha was duly organized and this time round approximately 400 villagers - with about 50-60 women attended. We were successful and all the original demands were properly incorporated.

Prasanti Behera
President
Panchayat: Tube
Block: Banarpal
District: Anugul

I studied until the X Standard before getting married. My brother had an extremely active public life and was a member of the Panchayat Samiti, and was later elected President. He inspired me and I ventured into income generation by forming SHGs, which involved other village women as well. I was soon elected the President of a group of 15 SHGs. After I lost my husband to cerebral malaria, I had to earn a living for my young son and myself, so I continued to work as before. I am thankful to my in-laws for their valuable and unfaltering support of all my activities.

When the Tube Gram Panchayat seat was reserved for women for the first time in 2007, people persuaded me to contest for the post. I agreed. The 4 other candidates had some powerful (moneyed) groups backing them. In spite of public support for me, my rivals' male relatives and supporters tried to pressure me. They offered me Rs.1 Lakh to withdraw; but when I did not, they resorted to physical and psychological harassment. They taunted me by saying, "Who do you think you are? Don't you know that you are a widow? What can you do without a man by your side?" I realized then that I needed immense strength and resolve to face the travails of public life. I told them that I have confidence in my abilities and will do everything for the development of my Panchayat, and said that they could not stop me with their money. This resulted in threats to my life and even an attempt to kidnap my son during the run-up to the elections! However, I won by a margin of 750 votes out of 5000.

Due to pressure exerted by different vested interests in the village, the Executive Officer cum Secretary did not cooperate with me in Panchayat matters. Even the BDO hid information and tried to force me to sign blank papers. When I refused, demanding relevant information, and insisted on putting forth the demands of the Panchayat, they said, "Do as you wish, but we will find ways to achieve our ends; let's see what you can do". They tried to wean away my supporters in the Panchayat by bringing a no-confidence motion against me.

I noticed that the long-standing Secretary, who was in charge of disbursing rice under the Antyodaya Scheme, was giving 34 kg of rice for Rs.110/-, instead

of 35 kg for Rs. 105/- as per the rules. When I told the BDO about it, after failing to persuade the Secretary to discontinue this corrupt practice, he chose to side with him by saying, “how can you complain against a Secretary from your own village? These are village matters and shouldn’t be brought to the Block Office.” I then went to the Collector who deputed a 3-member team of officers from the Supply Department. On questioning, the Secretary confessed and returned the extra money taken from the villagers. A new Secretary has been appointed since.

I discuss matters of importance of our village with the people, and with their help I have been able to identify rightful beneficiaries of various Schemes and have also learnt about various problems of the village. To this effect, I initiated a Palli (Ward) Sabha that was attended by 700 people, a majority of whom were women. Until date, we have provided ten IAY houses, and are in the process of giving 17 more. We have registered about 1200 people under the NREGS, of which 600-700 have already been given jobs. Over 110 beneficiaries have been identified under the Antyodaya and Annapurna Schemes, 150 OAPs have been given, 15 disabled pensions have been benefited, and eight more people have been identified for OAP as per the recommendation of the Palli Sabha. The construction of a small dispensary, which had been under construction since years, has now been speeded up.

I plan to have latrines in the village, as there are hardly any latrines in the village, as well as complete pending road works. Electrification and digging of tube wells are another priority area, as there are only about 50 tube wells at present for a population of 5000.

Because I was new and ignorant of many things, some people tried to take advantage of me. Now I feel confident to take up any challenge that arises in the course of my work.

Saroj Agrawal

President

Panchayat: Boden

Block: Boden

District: Nuapada

Boden is the biggest Gram Panchayat of the block, comprising 17 wards and 5 villages. I am 42 years old and have studied upto Class VII. I live with my husband and 2 children, and we own some shops in the village. I belong to a conservative family, but my interest and my family's support motivated me to contest the Panchayat elections and subsequently I was elected as the President. My term has been far from easy and I have had to face several challenges only within months of joining office. People of various disciplines like politicians, contractors, Government Officials and some other powerful people have some expectations from the village, which is also the Block Headquarters when compared to other Gram Panchayats (GPs). In such circumstances, I ensure that no male relative of elected women representatives officiate on their behalf in Panchayat meetings. I am also against the unnecessary interference of some contractors & local politicians in activities of the GP.

I was the first one to oppose the supply faulty supply of rice packets (under the Public Distribution System) to my GP, and consequently, my family and I had to undergo several problems. Under the instructions of a local contractor and the then Supply Inspector, some anti-social elements came to my house, shouted slogans against me and abused me. When I complained to the Supply Inspector, he applied more pressure and even threatened to wipe out my entire family. He seized my brother-in-law's tractor on a false charge of using kerosene to run it. I complained to the administration but no action was taken. Later on, I attended the District Convention of PRI members of Nuapada district, organized by AYAUSKAM and its partner NGOs, and put forward my problems to the gathering. Everyone supported and empathized with me, especially the PRI members. The Vice-Chairperson of Nuapada Zilla Parishad, was also present in the meeting and he assured me that action would be taken against the Boden Supply Inspector. Through his efforts, the Supply Inspector was finally transferred from Boden and a new person was posted. The old stock was replaced with new full-weight rice packets and regular checks are carried out to ensure the quality and quantity of the stocks supplied.

When the Supply Inspector was posted in another block, Sinapali, the PRI members vehemently opposed his posting due to his bad reputation and he

was again transferred to a place out of Nuapada. My brother-in-law's tractor has been released from the false case. After this first battle of principle, I am now determined to face any adversity and will continue to work for the betterment of the people.

RAJASTHAN



Anokhi

President

Panchayat: Kotkhawada

Block: Chaksu

District: Jaipur

Like many of my colleagues, I was a reluctant politician. In my initial years as President, I played a very passive role and left most of my responsibilities to my husband and other male Ward Members to fulfill. Three years on, much has changed. Trainings by THP have transformed me in to a capable leader. However, the power equation between me and my husband and other male colleagues has been relatively slower to transform. My husband still attends Panchayat meetings and my male colleagues take most of the crucial decisions. The importance of my experience is that it demonstrates the positive effects that capacity-building efforts have on women's capabilities as Panchayat members.

As I have said at the beginning, I was a reluctant politician. I had never interacted with Panchayats before I stood for election. I did not really know much about politics or what was expected of a Panchayat member. When asked if I had ever been to a Gram Sabha, I giggled and said "never". My husband, himself a former Ward Member and minor Congress party activist, pushed me into politics. My husband had hoped to become a President in the 2005 elections. During his term as Ward Member, he had mobilized the necessary support to push his candidature in the President elections. Unfortunately, for him, the President position was declared reserved under the women's quota. Therefore, he decided to field me. I protested strongly but he went ahead and filed my nomination papers. The campaign was a tough one. Kathkhavdaon is a political hot bed and many BJP and Congress hopefuls had 'put up' their candidates for the election. There were ten women in the fray and their entire households campaigned ferociously. To ensure my win, my husband hired a car the night before voting and went all the way to Jaipur to ferry voters who had migrated out of Kathkhavdaon. His efforts paid off and I won the election.

My first Panchayat meeting as President was a nerve-racking experience. I had to cut the ceremonial ribbon. At first, I did not know what to do and walked straight in to the room. Everyone laughed and pointed to the ribbon. I was so nervous...my hands were shaking as I cut the ribbon. The former President was a close relative who cracked a few jokes with me as he handed over the

Panchayat seal. This helped calm my nerves and simultaneously instilled in me a sense of confidence in my newfound status. He joked and said he would only give me the Panchayat seal if I paid him Rs. 500. I told him it did not matter and said that after all I am the President irrespective of whether you give me the seal or not. For me, this was the first time that a male member of my family had spoken to me as an equal (or almost an equal). Although this newfound respect helped me gain some self-confidence, I played a very passive role in my first few years as President. I hardly ever spoke in Panchayat meetings preferred my husband to sit next to the Panchayat Secretary and take charge. I kept my face covered at all public meetings and if I had a view, I would voice it to my fellow female Ward Members rather than to the Panchayat Secretary.

Then, in August 2005, I attended a training session in Udaipur. First, I refused to go because I was scared. I had not spent a night away from my husband or my village ever since I had got married. Even when I acquiesced, the fear did not subside. I cried all the way from Jaipur to Udaipur. However, a few days on things changed dramatically. What marked the occasion was that I made friends with women who were not from my village and I began to realize that my fears were baseless. On our way back, I remarked to the field worker from the organisation, which had co-coordinated the training that from now on she could take me anywhere and I would happily go! Since then I have made several trips to Jaipur and Delhi.

The trainings and exposure also equipped me with the necessary skills to manage my Panchayat. I learnt to ask the Panchayat Secretary to read documents out loud to me before agreeing to put my signature on them, I learnt what a quorum was, I learnt about the Gram Sabha, I learnt about processes required to push widow pension forms through the system. However, most of all, I acquired an understanding of the role I could play as President of my Panchayat.

Over time, I gathered the courage to raise my veil. When I was first elected, my opponents used to taunt me. They would look at me and ask – what can an illiterate woman who wears a veil like you do for us. It took two years

of training, multiple trips to Jaipur, and other parts of the country before I gathered the courage to respond to these taunts. I still have not removed my veil entirely especially when village elders are around but it has been raised.

In the last year, I have taken charge of my Panchayat. My main tasks include submitting forms for widow pensions, handicapped pensions, requisitions for hand pumps, requisitions for inclusion on the BPL Lists to the Panchayat Secretary. I am proudest of the fact that I identified and allocated land for building a girl's school in the village. I now am such an active President that I have all the information related to my Panchayat's budgets and expenditures ready on my fingertips!

For example on March 5, 2008, my Gram Panchayat Bhavan was buzzing with activity. The reason: the bi-monthly Gram Panchayat meeting had brought all of Kathkhavdaon's 17 Ward Members together for the day. On the agenda was a discussion on what process should be followed in order to photograph the people listed for employment under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme; the allocation of land for a children's playground; and the submission of forms for access to widow pension schemes and BPL lists. I was chairing the meeting as Kathkhavdaon's President. My veil was partially lifted; I sat next to the Panchayat secretary interrupting him on many occasions and confidently presenting my views to the Panchayat. In one instance, I protested loudly against a decision the male Ward Members were about to take on the process of taking photographs for the NREGS. Sitting on my right were my fellow, female Ward Members. The women Members huddled together to discuss the options and presented their opinions to me, which I then passed on to my Panchayat Secretary and other male Members. My transformation is so complete that I now have taken on the role of mediating between the men and women members of my Panchayat.

Despite this transition, my task remains a difficult one. My new found confidence has certainly enabled me to take charge of my Panchayat's day-to-day affairs but it has not helped break traditional patriarchal structures that severely constrain my ability to function effectively. For me, it is all about

compromise. My husband supports my transition; I have carved a space for myself that allows me to work beside my husband. This in itself is no mean achievement. To be able to earn the respect and develop the self-confidence to work side by side with my husband and my male colleagues is half the battle won. I am aware however that there remains a long and hard war to be fought.

Asiyat

President

Panchayat: Marudi

Block: Barmer

District: Barmer

When I got up for the first time for speaking in the Panchayat, I became almost tongue-tied because of shyness. I was not able to think of what to say. I was scared that if I said something wrong, the audience would make fun of me. However, now I do not feel any hesitation even when talking to the Collector.

After becoming the President, during the three years of my tenure, I got roads, personal and public water tanks, and a community center constructed. I got the NREGS implemented in all the 3 villages of the Panchayat. Being a physically challenged person, my husband would not let me go out of the house. However, now I cannot stay confined to one single place.

I went out of the village for the first time, after becoming the President, to Jaipur for training. After that, I went twice more. I saw the world; got lots of information. We learnt that we could approach the Collector, the BDO, and the Tehsildar. I learnt that I have to know how to talk to them to get one's problems solved and how one can make the Gram Sevak do his work. Now, I feel no fear or hesitation in talking to anyone.

Earlier, there was just one muster roll for the digging of the pond. We felt it was not enough and approached the collector. Then we got four muster rolls for the same work. Similarly, I approached the BDO about twenty times. There are 5 women Ward Members in Marudi Panchayat. Because they have an active woman President, all 5 of them come regularly to Panchayat meetings and participate actively. I have received cooperation from my husband, family, Panchayat, and the village community.

As most of the earlier Presidents have been from the General category not one, of them had constructed tanks in the settlements of the potters, the Bhils and the Meghwals. Moreover, no one paid any heed to us. I did that and even got water pipes laid. I deeply regret that I am illiterate. I have to seek the help my elder brother-in-law's son for getting proposals read or something written. Now no one can dare to take my thumb impression on a fraudulent document.

If someone does something wrong, I would smear his face black. Earlier, when I went somewhere, people would say that I belong to the potter community. Now they say the President has come. Now I enjoy more respect. People invite me to their marriage ceremonies. Whether I become President twice, thrice, or never again, I deeply wish that, some woman becomes the next President. At least she would get an opportunity to go out of her house; see the world; otherwise women remain shrouded behind their veils.

Hodri Bai

Ward Member

Panchayat: Santpur

Block: Abu Road

District: Sirohi

I am a simple, cheerful, and active person. Other than the problems in my own Ward, I look to the problems in the whole village and other Wards as well. Not only that, I look after the village development works and keep a check on the Schemes, like Mid-Day Meal in schools. I am never afraid of raising my voice against any one at a higher post.

One day my son came to me saying he will not go to school because the teacher beat him up. Therefore, the next day I went to meet the teacher and told her that she should be more sensitive towards children. Then, some students came to me and told me that the teacher asks them to bring Rs. 50 but they do not have the money. Therefore, I inquired why is this money being collected. To this the teacher turned around and asked me who I was to be asking her these questions. I told her that I am the elected representative of people in the village. We had an argument and I went to complaint to the Anchal Samiti Chairperson and told him that if he does not take any action then I will go to the Zilla Parishad. Then, the Assistant Education Officer came to speak to the teacher. I told her that if she will not provide receipts for the money she takes no one will believe her even if she is using it for the benefit of the School and the students.

I had also taken another educated Ward Chairperson called Nena with me; she is also a member of the Education Committee. She told me that whenever such decision as collecting money is taken it has to be passed in the Committee and a proper register has to be maintained for that. After hearing this, the teacher and the officer went inside the room. Then after some time me and Nena went inside the room where we saw that both of them were filling the register. Therefore, I created an outcry; I said it has to be filled in the presence of the whole Committee. At the end of all of this, a sum of Rs.5950 was returned to all 119 girls from whom the money was collected. There were 450 students in the school, so I checked a fraud involving Rs. 22,500.

Kamala Devi Meena

Ward Member

Panchayat: Niwai

Block: Niwai

District: Tonk

My political career began in 2000 when I was elected, uncontested on a reserved seat, to represent Ward no. 4 of Navai Gram Panchayat. My elevation to politics was a consequence of political alliance amongst the leaders of the Brahman, Bhairva (SC) and Meena (ST) castes in my Ward. All 3 are Congress party supporters who formed an alliance for the 2000 election. I emerged as their consensus candidate. I was known in my village to be a strong and articulate woman. As my husband is a simple man, he pays little attention to the household. He is a goatherd and often disappears for days to graze his goats. From a very young age, I was forced to take charge of the household. I had to learn to be strong. This strength caught the attention of the local leaders who approached me and asked me to stand as their candidate for my Ward. On being asked, I readily agreed.

Once elected, I busied myself with implementing small-scale development works in my village. I was grateful to the SC community for supporting me and ensured that benefits from local development funds reached the community. During my first term as a Ward Member, I installed hand pumps in the SC areas, I got a CC road constructed in the Ward, and submitted forms for widow pensions to the President. The President was elected because of the same political alliance and actively supported my work.

My ability to perform as a Ward Member was also greatly enhanced by my interaction with THP-CECODECON. I participated in Panchayat trainings, which taught me to speak in public, write petitions, and ask the right questions at Panchayat meetings. I learnt about health and education programs, about widow pensions and other Government Schemes. Most of all it made me aware of the role I could play in the development of my village. Although I have only studied up to Class III, I soon became Vice President of the Village Development Committee (VDC). I also mobilized 18 women in my Ward to set up a SHG. I was elected President of the SHG.

My hard work paid off in 2005, when the President seat in Navai Panchayat was declared reserved under the ST- women's quota. My supporters mobilized

around me and suggested that I contest the President's election. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

I come from a politically active family. Both my brothers-in-law were opposed to my 2000 nomination. One of them, himself a Congress politician, had been Ward Member for over 25 years. When the seat in my Ward was declared reserved, he was all set to prop his daughter in law as the Ward Member candidate. However, he was not able to gather support from the other local political players who preferred to support me. During my first term as Ward Member, I often challenged my brother in law's efforts to misuse the Panchayat. Things came to a head when he approached the President to fiddle with land ownership papers and allocate a community owned drinking water well to one of his henchmen. I was strongly opposed to this and informed all the neighbors who used the community well and with their collective might did not allow the transfer.

Consequently, when I was offered the opportunity to stand for the President elections, my family was strongly against it. There were regular quarrels in my home. My brothers in law threatened me and tried to mobilize the locals against me. They pushed to nominate their own candidate- another woman from within our family. Wary of the effect this row was having on my family and particularly my children, I agreed to withdraw my candidature. Instead, I pledged my support to another candidate that the ST community leaders had identified. I worked behind the scenes to ensure that this candidate won the election.

Meanwhile, my constituents, especially my friends in the SHG group and VDC quietly offered me their support if I were to stand for elections in their Ward. Other local leaders also offered to work with me and mobilize Ward constituents. Encouraged by these pledges of support, I gathered the strength to stand for re-election in my Ward. Naturally, this irked the brothers-in-law who in turn put up their own candidate against me. The 2-day lead up to the election was a bitter fight. My opponents threatened my supporters and stood outside my house with Lathi's (sticks) to prevent them from interacting

with me. This meant that all my supporters came to meet me in the dead of night to pledge their commitment. Eventually, I won the Ward Member election by thirty votes. The other side gave people alcohol and organised a feast the night before the elections but I won despite that. For me it was a double victory. With my support, my chosen candidate beat them to win the President election.

I first came to Navai as a child bride at the age of 13. Forty years on, I am Navai's busiest Ward Member. My mobile phone rings constantly with calls from local politicians. I have been elected Ward Member twice over. I know all the local *netas* (politicians) and Government Officials. People in my Ward call me whenever they need to get things done. I am their guardian. I am a little battle-weary now though, and am ready to step back. I will not stand a third time round. I will, however, ensure that another woman is elected. The greatest lesson I have learnt over the years is that 'Women can do it'.

Kaushalya Devi Meena

President

Panchayat: Nimodiya

Block: Chaksu

District: Jaipur

I am an educated woman, having completed Middle School, who has successfully drawn on my position as President to undertake a number of developmental activities in my village. My case illustrates the range of opportunities that entry in to the Panchayat system offers to enterprising women.

I am 23 years old, a Class VIII graduate from Jaipur. Since becoming President in 2005, I have sanctioned over Rs. 30 Lakhs for the construction of wells and hand pumps. By April 2008, all the Wards in my Panchayat will have access to safe drinking water. As a member of the Village Education Committee (VEC), I regularly inspect the quality of food that the local schools provide to children under the mid-day meal Scheme. When the VEC discovered that food grains were being pilfered, I spearheaded a campaign to petition the BDO and ensured that the BDO dealt with the matter. In the last three years, I have sanctioned and overseen the construction of five roads in my Panchayat. I have also been responsible for the construction of an annicut (a small dam made to alter/regulate the flow of small streams and rivulets for irrigation purposes) worth Rs. 5 Lakhs. This has resulted in significantly raising the water table in my region. Under the NREGS, I have sanctioned the construction of CC roads, a bridge, and a number of water storage tanks.

I have also been proactive in mobilising my constituents and fellow elected women leaders to lobby at the Block, District and on a few occasions at the State levels. In 2006, I mobilized my constituents and went with them to meet the State Irrigation Minister to request access to an irrigation Scheme. As President of the Chaksu women's federation, I have given shape and direction to the federation. The federation is now actively involved in protecting the rights of elected women leaders. In 2007, I mobilised federation members to speak to the Chaksu BDO and pressurised him to apologise for harassing a fellow woman President- Gulaab Devi. In the same year, I persuaded the federation to join hands with the Chaksu Kisan Shakti Sangathan to take on a long pending rape case in the area. The case is now pending in the Jaipur High Court.

My emergence as a successful Panchayat leader has not been easy. My first challenge came from my Panchayat Secretary who had supported the candidate

from the opposition party during the election. So when I became President, he tried every trick in the book to undermine me. He spoke rudely to me, withheld information, and worse tried to lobby against me with the other Ward Members. My deputy President supported the Secretary in this game. He, too, tried to antagonize and bully me, by talking down to me and making fun of everything, I said. My gender made me especially vulnerable to their games. On one occasion the Deputy President tried to stop me from speaking by saying, you are a woman. Do not get ahead of yourself.

However, I am an educated and self-confident woman. This gave me the courage to stand up to my detractors. During my campaign, I spent a lot of my time reading about problems faced by women Presidents and Members in the local newspapers and was determined not to let these problems get the better of me. Using my own enterprise, I approached the local School Headmaster and sought his support; he helped me understand my roles and responsibilities as a President. He also provided me with information about different Government Schemes and programs that I could access for my Panchayat. This information proved to be a useful weapon for me. I used this newfound knowledge to challenge my adversaries. As I began implementing, development works in my village and taking a leadership role in the Panchayat meetings, I earned the respect of my Ward Member colleagues. Soon, my adversaries lost the support of the Ward Members and had to give up.

Balancing family with my duties as a President was another challenge- one that I face until today. My family pushed me in to politics and supported me in becoming a proactive President. My husband has never interfered in my work. Yet, they were uncomfortable with the fact that I had to travel outside the village and tried to restrict my movements. In 2005, soon after my election, I was asked to participate in Panchayat leadership trainings. My family refused to let me go. I had a one-month-old daughter when I first became President and my family did not allow me to leave my daughter and attend trainings. Moreover, they were uncomfortable with the idea that I would be leaving my village and traveling unescorted. Over the next few months, the local village level functionaries of CECODECON spent a lot of time interacting with my

family. This helped in convincing them. I fought hard as well and convinced my husband to support me in my endeavor. My husband is an educated, progressive man. He is currently completing a B. Ed degree in Jaipur. His own exposure and interest in local politics and development made it easier for me to convince him to support me. I am now a regular at THP-CECODECON meetings. I am also an active member of the Mahila Panchayat Samiti (Elected Women Leaders Federation) in Chaksu.

These trainings and exposure contributed greatly to my evolution as a leader. It was only after I attended the training sessions that I fully understood my role as President and realized the potential role I could play in the development of the Panchayat. Most of all, the trainings, and exposure strengthened my confidence. I campaigned for the elections in my ghonghat (veil). Now, after having seen the world and interacted with so many different people, I have gained the confidence to remove it!

For me becoming a President has been a life changing experience. My aspirations have grown. I will definitely stand for President elections again. However, I also hope to become an MLA. Over the years, I have met and interacted with countless officials, politicians, and Ministers. Yet, I still have to break in to the local political space. I have had to contend with challenges from the local MLA (whose vote bank belongs to those who opposed my candidature) and have dealt with them with great fortitude. Yet, I have not been able to break the barriers to enter in to mainstream party politics. I vote for the BJP, even though my husband and his family support the Congress. I have a mind of my own. However, I has never campaigned for the party or interacted with the local BJP activist's wing. Despite my education, confidence, and achievements as President, if I want to realize my political ambitions, I know I have a long hard battle ahead of me. In the meanwhile, politics remains a man's job.

Krishna Devi
President
Panchayat: Dhudharia
Block: Bahrur
District: Alwar

From the very beginning, I have had a deep desire to challenge traditions and fossilized customs. However, I always found myself helpless. Because of gender discrimination in my childhood, I had to leave my studies in the middle of Class X. I was married off when I turned 15.

When the Panchayat elections were officially announced in 2005 in my village the entire village was talking about should be elected the President of the Panchayat this time. All the villagers gathered in the chaupal (square). A committee comprising eleven villagers was formed unanimously, and they were looking to select a woman candidate who would be both able and acceptable. The committee decided that I would be the most appropriate candidate. At that juncture, my family had no knowledge of the decision; hence, there were no advance preparations for the election. The decision had been taken primarily for the reason that my family and I had always actively contributed to village development activities.

One month before the elections, another woman of the village, Santosh, defied the decision and announced that she too would file her nomination for the post of President. In the end, four candidates contested in the election. I got 1449 votes against Vimala Devi for whom 1250 votes were polled. Thus, I won by a margin of 199 votes.

After being elected, the additional responsibility of Panchayat work came onto my shoulders apart from my usual domestic chores and agricultural work. Initially, I could not participate actively in Panchayat work, as I had no knowledge of what was required of me. My husband used to accompany me to Panchayat meetings, as I would not go alone and could not work independently. However, since I was eager and interested I learnt the ropes. I also attended various trainings and programmes and with this experience, I now participate and chair all the meetings of the Panchayat. Now there is no interference from my husband in my Panchayat work. I now take the decisions in the Panchayat meetings and take decisions myself regarding development works in the village.

Today I am overjoyed to receive a cheque of Rs. 80,000. There is a saga of struggle behind this cheque. Even today, the words are resounding in my ears- if you dare to stop the jal rath yatra, (water chariot march) you will go to jail. Kaliahoda village, which falls in my Panchayat, was facing an acute shortage of drinking water. Despite my numerous reminders to the Department about the problem, it did not pay any heed. I could not see any way to solve the problem. In this situation, I resolved to confront the Administration, and announced that I would stop the Jal Chetna Rath Abhiyan. Repeated threats from the Administration could not shake my resolve and finally before the Jal Chetna Rath Abhiyan, brought happy news for the villagers of the whole Panchayat- that the Administration had capitulated!

My tenure as the Panchayat President has been development oriented. Until now, I have succeeded in carrying out works worth Rs. 13 Lakhs and 95 thousand rupees in my Panchayat. Moreover, I have made it a priority that the poor families, the divorcees, and the widows of the village get the benefits of as many Schemes as possible. I regularly go to various centers to monitor the quality of various facilities provided by the Government.

Mathri Devi
Ward Member
Panchayat: Balera
Block: Barmer
District: Barmer

I belong to the farming community. The voyage from farming to politics is not an easy one, but I could make it possible with the support of my co-villagers. The people of my settlement themselves insisted I be elected the Member. They said this way they would at least have a say in the Panchayat. After becoming the Member, I have got several personal and public tanks constructed in my settlement as well as houses for 6 BPL families under the IAY.

I got out of my village for the first time when I went to Barmer for training. I received lots of new information during the training. They taught me how to submit proposals. As I am illiterate, my son helps me to write and read proposals. The President of the Panchayat is a man and there are 5 other women Ward Members. If I need detailed information or want to convey something in detail, I seek the help of the Gram Sevak. I go to all the meetings. Initially, I hesitated in articulating anything in the Panchayat, but not now. I still draw a veil over my face, but I do not keep silent. Though veiled, yet I speak.

After becoming the Ward Member, my mental horizon has widened significantly. I would have been more comfortable to speak out if the President had been a woman. I dream of becoming the President, but only if my co-villagers extend their support.

However, I have to climb several more rungs for acquiring adequate confidence and shedding all my hesitation.

Nasiba

President

Panchayat: Kantal ka Par

Block: Barmer

District Barmer

Though I am sixty years old, I am an active President of a Panchayat comprising 5 villages. I came to know that the post of President was reserved for women when I overheard the villagers discussing it. A thought came to my mind; I have lived so long, let me also see what it is like to be a President. There were two other women candidates but I won by a margin of 250 votes.

Because of my age and experience, I do not hesitate when it comes to speaking my mind and I do not wear a burqa, nor draw a veil. I was informed about some of the duties of a President from the Gram Sevak but came to know the rest through a three-day workshop in Gagaria. There are 3 women Ward Members in my Panchayat and I invariably get their support. With the support of the Gram Sabha and Panchayat members, I have succeeded in getting 20-25 houses constructed under the IAY, tanks, and roads constructed. Road construction in Bitda and Pabusaria villages is in my future task list.

My son helps me with reading and writing. However, I take all the decisions. How can anyone else do my work? I am the President. Before I left the village only to cast my vote in Gagaria; but now I have to go out at least once a week. After I became a President, I am seeing life and newer things. Earlier, I enjoyed respect only in my home, now I am respected even outside.

A woman can better represent the aspirations of people than a man can. If a man is a President, he will keep wandering outside. When a woman becomes a President, she also enquires about home affairs; talks to women as well as men. A male President would talk to a woman only under the pressure of some compulsion or necessity, while a woman enquires about the well being of everybody. During the three years of my tenure, neither have I faced any difficulty in getting my work done nor have I felt any fear. Why should I fear when I have the post of the President?

Nirmala Devi
President
Panchayat: Bardod
Block Bahrer
District Alwar

My life story proves that illiteracy might make achieving one's goals difficult; but if we make proper use of our capacities and keep our resolve firm, we will definitely succeed.

I am thirty-one year old and was born in Tijara town. My father was the Chairperson of the Municipality. We were six brothers and sisters. The family atmosphere was good, but I could not go to school despite my father being the Chairperson of the Municipality as my grandfather opposed it. He thought that educating girls was futile as they were meant to be homemakers after marriage. Another big reason for my remaining illiterate was that my house was at a distance of one kilometer from the town-making going to school for a girl. Even though I aspired to study it could not happen. I could not go to school like others. Consequently, I grew up to be non-literate.

I was married off to a trader in marriage, who was a resident of Bahrer. My father-in-law has served as the President of the village for three tenures. Thus, even after marriage I lived in a political environment. As I was growing up, I used to hear my father and others talking about various political issues. Since then, I have had an interest in listening and participating in both political debate as well as the process.

Thus, when the post of the President in my Panchayat was declared as reserved for women, the villagers expressed their wish to have me as their candidate. They appreciated my father-in-law's contribution towards the development of the village during his three tenures as President. When my father-in-law asked, whether I was willing; at first, I refused and said that I knew nothing about the workings of the Panchayat. Secondly, I felt that being illiterate I would not be able to understand people. I could not arrive at a final decision because of this fear and conflict. Finally, I consented after encouragement from my husband.

There were 13 other women contenders in the electoral fray against me. This was a very tense phase and I could not sleep properly. I went door to door seeking the support and votes of the villagers. It was the first time that I had

stepped outside my home. Eventually, I won by a margin of 1144 votes. I was immensely happy and was very proud of myself. Initially, I would not go to village Panchayat meetings and other programmes and would not speak. Then with the encouragement of my husband and after coming into contact with The Hunger Project, I began going to every meeting regularly and addressing public meetings. However, I am non-literate I get every proposal and paper read before putting my signature on them.

Recently, Bahrer village, which falls in my Panchayat, was grappling with a drinking water and electricity problem. The villagers launched an agitation and wanted this problem solved. Around 300 women, along with me were in the forefront of this agitation. Yet, our efforts did not yield any fruit. We then decided to jam the road and demonstrate our anger by breaking empty pitchers of water on the road. Because of this, we faced police batons, but did not lose our courage. We finally succeeded in getting our demands fulfilled. This demonstration was the first of its kind led by the women in our area. It was also during my tenure that the cement concrete (CC) road and a playground were constructed; village drains were repaired and sanitation work became regular.

I want hand pumps to be installed in all public places in the Panchayat as well as a sewing center to be opened for the girls so that they can become self-reliant. Had I been educated, I would have performed better. I have been given support by my family and husband and it is because of the encouragement given by them that I have finally overcome my sense of inadequacy; yet I feel that had I been educated then like other men, I too would have been able to do all the work and would have even been a better homemaker. I have proved that illiteracy might make achieving one's goals difficult; but if we make proper use of our capacities and keep our resolve firm, we will definitely succeed.

Radha Devi
President
Panchayat: Nand
Block: Barmer
District Barmer

During my tenure, I did several things no other President had done earlier. Earlier, the Aanganwadi was housed in a mud hut. We passed a proposal and a centre made of cement was constructed. This is a first. I also met the MLA and got the Middle School upgraded to Class VIII.

Before becoming the President, I had no knowledge about the Panchayat. Who are its members? What do they do? However, after becoming the President, I am proud to do my duties as a public representative. There are six villages in my Panchayat. Before becoming the President, I had no idea where and when Gram Sabha meetings are held, so I had never ever attended any of them. Now every one, the whole village is with me. I have a say.

I have never before deeply regretted the fact that I am illiterate as deeply as I do since I have been elected President. I seek the help of my sister's son in reading and writing. Earlier, I hesitated in saying or doing something for the simple reason that I was illiterate. I feared I might make a mistake. Sometimes people too would warn me not to sign some fake paper. I would retort that the person who makes me do something wrong would also be brought to book. Now, I sign only after understanding any document fully. I seek no one's help now. I have learnt to sign my name after becoming the President.

Training workshops have helped immensely in ridding me of the hesitation born out of my illiteracy. I went to Barmer for a meeting for the first time. Then I went to Jaipur as well. It was there that I came to know I had the power to get cement Aanganwadi center built; that I could meet the collector and the BDO; I could speak my mind even though I am illiterate. Using this information, I approached the Collector one day. There were only 4 teachers in the village school, I told him, while the number of students was high. I felt more teachers were required. I went to the collector with 20 people including 3 women Ward Members. We made our demand together. The work was done in one go! Two new teachers have now joined.

Earlier, I would go out of the village only to attend a marriage ceremony, now I go out for getting Panchayat work done. I have a long list of the tasks

I want to accomplish in the coming one and half years including proposals for constructing a boundary around the School and residential quarters for the ANM. I have firm faith in the labor and the will of women. I feel women Presidents work better, while men only indulge in futile politics. A woman President works after consulting other women. A man President would never consult a woman in Panchayat work. Therefore, a woman President is better.

Radha Devi Bhairva
Ward Member
Panchayat: Rupadikala
Block: Barmer
District: Barmer

On being elected Ward Member, I found that my President (whose husband took charge of all Panchayat affairs) in connivance with the Panchayat Secretary and BDO had been misusing the Offices of the Panchayat. With my husband's encouragement and active participation, I initiated a campaign against the President and her husband. I have been partially successful in this struggle. The elected women's federation active in the area encouraged and supported me in my fight.

I come from a political family. My father in law had been Ward Member for many years handing over the reins to his son in 2000. After serving a five-year term as Ward Member, he had to give up his seat when it was declared reserved under the woman's quota in 2005. I was asked to replace him and stand instead for the election that year. I have studied until Class V and am from Delhi. I was delighted at the opportunity. However, I was pregnant at the time and my father-in-law put his foot down at the proposal. As a result, the seat was given up to a Gujjar woman who was elected uncontested.

However, politics was clearly in written in my stars. In 2007, the sitting Ward Member passed away and a new opportunity opened up for me to stand for election. I belong to the Bhairva (SC) community. My proposed candidature ignited a caste war in my Ward. The former Member's Gujjar husband was determined to prop his candidate- another Gujjar as Ward Member. When he realized that I too was in the fray, he threatened my husband and tried to intimidate him to get me to withdraw my candidature. Undeterred, we decided to go ahead. As luck would have it, I won the election by a mere five votes.

Once elected, my husband informed me that I had to start going to the Panchayat meetings. Therefore, accompanied by my husband, I went to my first meeting where I noticed that my female President's husband had taken charge of proceedings. However, what irked me most was that after this first meeting, the Panchayat went defunct. There were no further meetings. Through conversations with other Ward Members, I learnt that the husband of the President, the Panchayat Secretary and two other Ward

Members had started a practice of organizing ‘fake’ Panchayat meetings where they would fill the Panchayat register with false information and hand it over the BDO.

My husband is a ‘social activist at heart’, and he encouraged me to take up the matter in the Panchayat. He himself tried to mobilize other male Ward Members to resolve this problem. I was given the task of mobilising my female colleagues. I successfully roped in one of my two colleagues. In the meanwhile, I was approached by the local NGO -CECODECON to participate in Panchayat trainings. The training sessions gave me the space to air my grievances and seek the support and advice of my colleagues.

Frustrated, the Ward Members, led by me, decided to call a Gram Sabha to take out a no - confidence vote against the President. When the BDO got wind of this move, he arrived at the Gram Sabha and spoke in favour of the President and the Panchayat Secretary. He dissolved the Gram Sabha and threatened us dissenting Ward Members. In response, the Ward Members put a lock on the Panchayat Bhawan to register their protest. On my part, I reported the matter to CECODECON and requested them to speak with the BDO. At the various trainings and meetings that followed the event, I continuously spoke of my Panchayat’s problems. Fellow EWRs offered suggestions on strategy. Kaushalya Devi Meena, president of the women’s federation even spoke with the BDO about my Panchayat, in the hope that I could use the federation’s strength to force the BDO into action. This support and encouragement was important for me as I went along pushing to keep up the fight.

Matters came to a head in early August 2007, when I was appointed a core committee member of the EWR federation. The husband of my President was mad that his wife was not the one who was receiving the honors. Angry and insulted, he threatened to kill my husband and me. The BDO was called in to pressurize him to offer an apology. This pressure put an end to his threats but it did not result in his holding Panchayat meetings or reinvigorating the Panchayat.

Undeterred by threats and encouraged by the support from everyone including the federation, I feel my most courageous move came at the August 15 Gram Sabha when the President arrived accompanied by her sons but not her husband. Seizing the moment, I gave my President a talking too. I asked her why she did not hold Panchayat meetings in front of the entire Gram Sabha. I also asked her why she allowed her husband to take over the Panchayat and why she did not speak up. The President's sons tried to stand up for their mother but I stood up to them as well.

The matter was resolved, in September 2007, when a new BDO was appointed to Chaksu Block. On discovering the problems in Rupadikala Panchayat, he immediately intervened and pressured the President (and her husband) into holding regular Panchayat meetings.

I get the courage to stand up to my President, her husband, and the other Ward Members at the Gram Sabha because of my husband's encouragement. When I was elected Ward Member, my husband told me I must not hesitate to speak in the Panchayat meetings. He encouraged me to go to meetings and did not try to stop me even after receiving threats to my life. Family support makes all the difference between a capable EWR and a weak one. My President does not speak in meetings because her husband does not let her speak... in fact after all the drama, she has now entirely stopped coming to meetings.

Sidhu

President

Panchayat: Panthi ka Par

Block: Barmer

District Barmer

Earlier, I would not even sit on a cot in front of anyone; now I sit on a chair in front of people of all castes with my face unveiled. If I do not sit, they will wonder what sort of a President I am.

I now realise the importance of my work and the post I hold. I was elected the President of a Panchayat comprising of 7 villages, unopposed. I have accomplished some tasks during the last three years including the construction of houses for seven BPL families, tanks, roads under NREGS, a cemented kitchen in the school and up-gradation of the school to the Middle level.

My unique work, which no President has done before, is in the Meghwal and Bhil settlements. I constructed tanks for them, while past Presidents only did that for influential people of the village and that too stealthily. I did it all openly.

I had to face problems more than once during these three years. An ex-President started a campaign against me regarding the site of a proposed tank. I approached the Collector and the BDO, but to no avail. I am illiterate; so my son helps me with reading and writing. Yet, I have enough confidence. During the five-day training held in Barmer, we were told in writing on a board how to make a budget and how to use Panchayat funds. We were told if a seat is reserved for a Dalit woman, we should use the opportunity. Earlier, I would not speak in Panchayat meetings. I was told in the training that if I did not speak in meetings there would be no use in my having becoming the President. Now, I feel no hesitation in public speaking.

Now, the process of articulating the thoughts in my mind has started. I have a clear picture in my mind about how to finish the remaining Panchayat tasks in my tenure. I have to get houses constructed for BPL families, to procure loans for BPL families on low interest for their self-employment; to get tanks constructed and many other things as well. The keenness for doing something for the village has so captured my heart that I have lost my peace. Earlier, I would sleep longer. Now I keep worrying about the tasks I have to do. I am so conscious of my responsibility that I keep a sharp eye on

everything. Earlier, there was a joint ration system for Gangria and Pandhika Par Panchayats. Meeting the Collector, I succeeded in getting a separate PDS shop for my Panchayat.

Though I am satisfied with my work, I feel a man can work better as a President as he has greater mobility. A woman has to do house work and cannot move around so much. However, I go out of the village at least once a month to do Panchayat work. I want to be the President again if given an opportunity.

TAMIL NADU



B. Rani Devaraj
President
Panchayat: Jakkanarai
Block: Kotagiri
District: The Nilgiris

I was on the Board of Directors in a Cooperative Society before I stood for election. I am a first time contestant and the seat I contested from was reserved for women. There were four contestants for this seat and out of 3,300 I obtained 2,500 votes. I am educated up to Class XI and decided to stand for elections because I wanted to improve the health and sanitation of the people and Panchayat area, try to solve the drinking water problem and ensure that community had electrified houses, and the street lights in village were functional and well maintained.

I would like to enumerate my achievements in the past one and a half years in office as president of the Panchayat.

The Panchayat has a population of 12,000 with a male population of 7,000 and female population of 5,000. The break up of the Panchayat is: 10,000 OBCs, 1,000 SCs and another 1,000 ST. I give preference to the SC and ST population because the OBC community is not economically backward. I give importance to education and educational institutes in my Panchayat. Moreover, my preference is for health and women's development.

I have concentrated on the infrastructure development of educational institutions because I feel that the children in a hilly region should learn in a safe and enriching environment. With that aim in mind, I facilitated the allotment of funds for the following infrastructural development: Rs 1,00,000 for the playground in the Government High School, Rs.2,00,000 for building a retaining wall in the Government Primary School; Rs.7,00,000 for providing drinking water to the Government High School, Rs 2,50,000 for the laying of a volley ball court in the Government Middle school; and roof repair of 2 middle schools for Rs. 2 Lakhs. The provision of games and sports materials cost Rs. 25,000 and the establishment of a Community Library cost Rs.3,00,000. The Panchayat also provides educational assistance to 100 poor children every year.

As a woman, I attach importance to the health and dignity of women and the girl child and believe if their health is looked after the community's health

will be maintained. Accordingly, I have obtained funds for the construction of community latrines for the women and girl children. Construction of two sanitary campuses for women cost the Panchayat Rs. 5,50,000 and one community toilet cost of Rs. 2 Lakhs. Provision of safe drinking water has been made in nine villages at the cost of Rs. 45 Lakhs. The cost for the provision of water pipes cost Rs. 5.94 Lakhs.

In addition to all this, I have implemented various development schemes for the welfare of the community in my Panchayat. I have constructed 74 new houses under a Group Housing Scheme for Rs. 25,16,000 and repaired 48 old houses for Rs. 5,35,000; facilitated the provision of 68 new street lamps, provided free electricity to 83 families, fitted 23 Sodium Gas Lamps and distributed 2000 colour TV sets. Under the SGRY a total of Rs. 1.65 Crore has been spent.

I raise resources for the Panchayat through taxes under various heads such as the collection of rent from shops built by the Panchayat, as well as income generated from 10 acres of tea-plantation land.

I face problems mainly with of drinking water and streetlights. However, I have almost solved these issues by giving more attention to these and spending a good portion of the funds for the development of the same. The other elected representatives have been very cooperative, especially the women who took part in the WLW held by THP-Island Trust. The training told us a lot about the Panchayat. The leadership skills I learnt at the workshop have helped me manage all these issues.

I have dedicated my time and energy to the development of the people who, by electing me President, placed their confidence in me. I am happy to say these words after nearly two years of my service as President of the Panchayat: There is no scarcity of resources in our country. There is scarcity only in the minds and hearts of the people. Every one wants to get everything only for themselves. If only they thought of others' needs, we would have been a rich country by now!

Baby Rajaramani
President
Panchayat: Berigai
Block: Soolagiri
District: Krishnagiri

Berigai is a small Panchayat with a population of 7,500. The majority of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. However, farming yields a meagre income, a large number of families are not able to meet their needs, and so they turn to their children to augment the family income.

When I was elected President of the Panchayat for the first time, I decided to ensure that no child in the Panchayat was deprived of education. To meet this objective, we passed a resolution in the Gram Sabha to eradicate child labour from the Panchayat and re-enroll all the children in school. After the resolution, we formed a Committee consisting of school headmasters and village administrative officers, with the President of the Panchayat as its Head. This committee inspects all hotels and shops in the vicinity once a month to ensure that no child is employed as Labour. If any child is found working there, the shopkeepers are issued with a warning, and the parents of the child are contacted. We then enroll these children in the National Child Labour School or any of the four schools in the Panchayat. Students enrolled in the National Child Labour School are gradually shifted to regular schools. So far, 41 of the 60 children admitted to the National Child Labour School have joined regular schools.

I have also tried to persuade the District Collector at the District level meetings to issue an order to the concerned officials to distribute rations only on the condition that families with children have to prove that their children have a minimum of 75 percent attendance in school.

To ensure holistic development of my Panchayat, I have been working to address the sanitation needs of the Panchayat. I have been encouraging each household in the Panchayat to avail of the Government sponsored sanitation schemes. We also organize street plays and cultural programmes to spread awareness. I visit each household to inspect the construction of toilets and permission to build a home is granted on the condition that it will be built with a toilet. I am proud to say that due to all these efforts, on May 4 2007, the Panchayat received the prestigious Nirmal Gram Award.

Kumari Kaliyaperumal
President
Panchayat: Vanagiri
Block: Sirkazhi
District: Nagapattinam

I am 54 years old and a mother of three daughters, all of whom are currently pursuing their higher studies. I was elected the President in the 2006 Panchayat elections. I belong to the fishing community and we have our own traditional Panchayats. It was earlier an all-male affair and women were not even allowed to attend meetings. Therefore, being accepted as the Panchayat President was an accomplishment in itself.

I regularly visit each ward in the Panchayat so that I am able to identify the needs of all the people in my Panchayat. I conduct each Gram Sabha, and I can say with confidence, that there has been a marked improvement in the attendance of the meetings.

My primary focus as a President has been on education, particularly for the girl child. After the Tsunami, the Panchayat saw a number of school dropouts. The school fee was high and many parents were unable to afford it. Even though the Central Government has a provision to support these children through a monthly grant of Rs. 300, procedures complicated. The students need a certificate from the Village Administrative Officer stating their eligibility for the Scheme (besides a certificate that they were Tsunami affected) and they need to have a bank account.

I approached the Block office and the Government's education department for funding the children's school fees under "The Prime Minister Tsunami Relief Fund" I was successful, and the required funds were released. Today, all the children are back in school. We have brought all the earlier dropouts back to school as well. The Primary School now has 68 girl children and Middle School has 138 girl children out of 520, all of them funded by The Prime Minister Tsunami Relief Fund. After witnessing this success, the neighbouring Panchayats have also started approaching the Government for the grant.

According to me, education is the best way to bridge the gender divide. The girl child deserves special attention since boys are able to get education without much of struggle. I will ensure that no child in my Panchayat drops out of school.

I have also taken steps to provide water to a Dalit hamlet that has been struggling for the past fifteen years. After I intervened, the hamlet was provided with water under the State sponsored Anaithu Grama Anna Marumalarchi Thittam (AGAMT) Scheme. Despite severe resistance from my community, I have successfully formed the first SHG of women in the Panchayat after the Tsunami, to draw women out of the confines of their homes. At present, over hundred such groups are flourishing in my Panchayat.

P. Krishna Veni
President
Panchayat: Thalayoothu
Block: Manur
District: Tirunelveli

I am the President of Thalayoothu Panchayat, Tirunelveli District and belong to the Scheduled Caste Arunthathiyar Community. I contested and won the elections in 2006 with the support of the people. My community pressurized me to contest; they believed I would be able to solve a long-standing water problem in our hamlet.

In my area, the Muslims and Pallars (another Scheduled Caste) predominate. When I was elected and went to office, the problems started from day one. The Vice-President, a rich and powerful man from the Muslim community never allowed me to come to the Panchayat office. He said directly to me “you stay in your home and your duty is only to sign the cheques which we will send”.

When I refused, they started threatening me. They said if you do not obey us we will kill you and remove your husband from his job. I complained to the police but it was of no use.

The Arumbugal Trust, an NGO working in my District, encouraged me to pursue my case. I then complained to the District Collector in Tirunelveli and he personally came to the spot and asked the Members to cooperate with me. Then the Vice-President played a new trick. He refused to sign the cheques and would not allow any of the resolutions to be passed. He then started canvassing with the other Panchayat members. They were all together and never allowed me to implement any of the schemes. He then informed the community that I was unfit and unable to do my work. Despite this, the local people were with me and gave me their support in the Gram Sabha.

I again met with the District Collector and he asked another Panchayat official to intervene immediately. Yet the Vice President with his group of members refused to cooperate. Therefore, the District administration suspended the Vice President and the 12 members who supported him. The District administration gave the signing authority to me and now finally the work has begun. Initially I was purely a homemaker. I gained confidence with the support of our District administration, to which I am thankful. The moral

support by the District administration and support from the NGO Arumbugal Trust made me a real president. Only my continuous fighting spirit enabled me to withstand hardship, face the issues, and carry on with my job.

The training from The Hunger Project - Arumbugal was a real revelation for me. I met the other women Presidents and discovered that I was not alone - all of us were in the same boat as me. The Sannelan for elected women representatives and the exposure visit to other areas has made me more courageous. The people elected me and I will work for them. We now have a federation for elected women representatives and, certainly, the darkness outside will be removed. Unity and awareness are the only solutions.

However, I still have some questions which are still unanswered. Is it a crime to be born woman in a downtrodden Dalit family? When will this harassment end? Similarly, how many, other women are suffering like I am?

Prema Chandran

President

Panchayat: Singarapettai

Block: Uthangarai

District: Krishnagiri

My Panchayat falls under Uthangarai Block of Krishnagiri District located at the border of Thiruvannamalai District. There are nine medium and eight small villages in this Panchayat and 300 households live in the Panchayat. The population of the Panchayat is about 9,500. The literacy rate of the Panchayat is about 65 percent. There are two Higher Secondary, one Middle School, and three Elementary Schools here. The majority of the residents derive their livelihood from agriculture and allied activities.

I belong to the Adi Dravidhar caste (SC Category) and I have studied until Class III. My husband is a retired Government school teacher and was awarded the Ambedkar Award by the State Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister in 2005. We have two sons and a daughter and all of them are high school graduates. My eldest son is working in the private sector while my daughter is married and my younger son is still looking for a job. My family and I have been victims of poverty and untouchability. When the seat of the Panchayat President was reserved for an SC woman in the 2006 elections, I took the opportunity to work for the education of children and the Panchayat. I won the election defeating four competitors. I faced many challenges in performing my Panchayat duties due to the inherent gender and caste prejudices that prevail in my area.

There was a special National Child Labour School in the Panchayat until 2006-07. When the school closed in 2007, thirty-two SC/ST children were denied their School Transfer Certificates (TCs) and hence could not join a regular school. I talked to the headmaster of the Middle School and explained the situation to him. The children have now been given admission to their respective grades. The Panchayat provided them with school bags, uniforms and notebooks, so that they could continue their studies. I personally visit all the schools once a month and monitor the execution of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. My Panchayat is taking steps to re-enroll all school dropouts below 14 years of age. On June 1, 2007, the Panchayat meeting passed a resolution to conduct a public rally to generate awareness among all households of the consequences of Child Labour and the importance of children's education.

I have also implemented some other important steps in the Panchayat to ensure an improvement in the health and sanitation situation. The Panchayat

organized two garbage trucks at its own expense. With the help of these mechanized garbage trucks, we successfully managed to remove 15 years of garbage; the tractor took 600 rounds to take the garbage away from the region.

In addition, every Tuesday, 50 to 70 pregnant women are provided with nutritious food at the Government Health Centre (where they come for their regular check-ups), and the cost is covered through sponsorship.

Puneetha Ramadoss

President

Panchayat: Manikapangu

Block: Sembanarkoil

District: Nagapattinam

When the Manikapangu Panchayat was reserved for women in 2006, I contested the elections for the first time and was elected President. My husband had contested twice earlier, but had never been elected. I have been married for 11 years now, ten of which I have spent in handling household responsibilities. After I got elected, many thought that my husband would be de facto President and I would just be a rubber stamp. However, I proved them wrong. I attend meetings and trainings, I spoke up at the District-level meetings, and people come to me as their President and demanded things. I now leave home in the morning and return only at night. My husband has been supportive, while I perform my duty towards the Panchayat; he takes care of the children and the home.

I have worked hard to identify and meet the needs of the community. Ours is a Tsunami affected area, where four villages were completely washed out and over 900 families affected. Therefore, my priority was to ensure the completion of the rehabilitation process. I noticed that 120 SC families were left out of the rehabilitation because they did not belong to the fishing community. However, these families were affected nonetheless and required housing. Therefore, after collaborating with an NGO, all these families were provided with homes. Permanent shelters that had been constructed after the Tsunami were far and did not have any water supply, so I went with other Panchayat members to the District Collector and got funds sanctioned which would ensure that water would be provided to the shelters.

I wish to stress the importance of education in the Panchayat. For this purpose, I approached a private company (it had set up a gas plant in the area) to provide free books and uniforms for school going children of the Panchayat. At present, the company is sponsoring books and uniforms for over 700 students, along with funds for the infrastructure development of the schools. I am also using the funds allocated under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to meet the needs of these schools. I see to it that PTA meetings are held monthly and I attend them myself as well. The Panchayat has achieved nearly full school enrollment of its children.

The families that were under the BPL were being excluded from the BPL list because they had been allocated pucca (permanent) housing under the Tsunami rehabilitation process. I got them enlisted back on the list and they once again avail of the funds due to them. I ensure that health camps are regularly organized and see to it that pregnant women avail of all the schemes meant for them. I have assisted SHGs in obtaining credit from banks to pursue their livelihood activities. After we approached the nearby factory owners several families have secured employment in the factories.

Since the Panchayat is a Tsunami affected one, there is utmost need to secure it against future disasters. Therefore, in collaboration with different NGO's in the area, plans for disaster preparedness are being drafted and I am trying to create awareness about them. After the Tsunami, inland water sources have become saline and the availability of clean drinking water has become a major issue for the Panchayat. I want to provide water to every home of the Panchayat I am constantly strive towards fulfilling this dream.

R. Chinnappa
President
Panchayat:
Pachiganapalli
Block: Krishnagiri
District: Krishnagiri

I am an agricultural labourer who works for a daily wage. My husband is a mason. We have five children, three boys, and two girls. The boys are in Primary School and the girls go to a Middle School.

I was a reluctant candidate to Panchayati Raj. My husband said he would take care of all the Panchayats' responsibilities, like any other Panchayat Pati! This changed only when I attended the capacity building programme organized by THP-ARCOD for women elected representatives like me, in 2007. I was an attentive trainee absorbing all that was discussed and taught. After this, I attended all the workshops organized by ARCOD-THP such as the Follow up Workshop, Media Workshop and Micro Planning Workshop. Apart from this, I was sent for a training programme to KILA, Kerala and for a training programme in EKTA, Madurai. I attended all the programs and today I am like a role model and resource person, who is an inspiration for the community both as a woman as well as as an elected woman leader.

The first hurdle I had to face once I started to assert myself was my own family. I handled this judiciously, and promised them that I would not compromise on my familial responsibilities in spite of my official duties. I have tried to do this by striking a balance between both the worlds. My family has no regrets and is now supportive.

I have been very active and have taken a keen interest in my duties and in the welfare of my people. I was very interested in bringing dropouts back into the academic stream. I passed a resolution to this effect in the Gram Sabha meeting and am working hand in hand with the staff of the local school to re-enroll the many dropouts.

During the course of my duties I found that children belonging to the nomadic 'Irular' community played truant and did not attend school. I negotiated with their parents and persuaded 13 of their children to attend school regularly and continue their education. I personally ensured that they were provided with things like uniforms, books, stationary, etc. A solar lamp was installed to help them study at night.

When some Irular families were displaced due to the Krishnagiri Reservoir Project (KRP), to ensure their children continued their education I facilitated the provision of temporary shelters for them. I then allotted land for them and now permanent houses have been built. Their colony now boasts good drinking water, solar lighting, and sanitation facilities. Their livelihood was taken care of by the NREGS.

I am happy and proud to see these 13 children smart in their uniforms, going to school assured of a bright future. I feel if somebody had taken interest in me while I was growing up, I would have been an educated person today. It is my good fortune that god has given me the opportunity to help the needy.

My mission has not ended yet. I continue to ensure that all school going age children in my Panchayat are going to school.

Radhamani Mahalingam
President
Panchayat: Vilunthamavadi
Block: Keelaiyur
District: Nagapattinam

In 2006, when the Vilunthamavadi Panchayat was declared reserved for women, I decided to stand for elections. My husband campaigned for me and the people supported my candidature, because of which I was elected the President of the Panchayat. I won by a margin of nearly 500 votes, defeating four other contestants. Initially it was difficult to get the support of the male Ward Members, but today the situation is different. They have understood my intention and cooperate with me in all my work.

When I took over as President, one of the first things I learnt was that my Panchayat owed the Electricity Board Rs.1,30,000. My husband gave me the confidence to go on, and said “with your effective and transparent administrative skills and support from the people, you will make the Panchayat a successful one, don’t worry about it, you have the skills, go ahead with confidence.” To overcome the debt, I replaced tube lights in the Panchayat with low voltage bulbs, which consume less electricity, thereby reducing the monthly electric bill of the Panchayat. This helped the Panchayat to repay the debt over a period, as it was adjusted in the monthly usage charges. As a result, today Vilunthamavadi is debt free.

Since my election, I have taken up issues critical to women which address their livelihood needs. Over a hundred SHGs in the panchayat are active and engage. I have also been encouraging women to obtain loans for their livelihood activities.

Alcoholism is a huge problem in our Panchayat area. I work against it, as it directly affects women and children. I have mobilized the women in my Panchayat to fight against alcoholism, and I have even brought up the issue in the Gram Sabha. On October 2 last year, we had proposed to curb illicit liquor, and all the women wholeheartedly supported this move. We have formed a committee to eradicate illicit liquor from the Panchayat. This did lead to many threats, and people warned me not to proceed with the plan. However, I was determined to not let anything come in my way, and along with the support of the other women, we have successfully managed to close the illicit liquor shop in the Panchayat.

After becoming President, I made use of micro-plans facilitated by The Hunger Project. We have identified land in the Panchayat which had been encroached upon illegally. I have fought against various influential individuals to reclaim the Panchayat land and have successfully re-claimed over 15 acres. This land is now used to generate income for the Panchayat.

Since it is a Tsunami affected area, there is a need to secure the Panchayat against possible disasters in the future. Therefore, with the support of local organizations, I have been working to ensure disaster preparedness in the Panchayat.

The only thing that I am not satisfied with is that I am unable to spend time with my family and I get to see my children once in a month, as they are living in a hostel. However, this has made me more approachable and people value my commitment even more.

Rajeswari Devadoss
President
Panchayat: Beratty
Block: Coonoor
District: The Nilgiris

I believe that service to humanity is akin to service to god. Therefore, I chose to contest the Panchayat elections. Before I stood for elections, I did extension work as a teacher in Child Development and Family Relationships. I am fifty-eight years old and a Masters in Science and also hold a Bachelor's in Education. This is the first time I have contested. My constituency was reserved for women and there were seven contestants in total. The total number of votes, cast, were 920, out of which I obtained 532, my nearest contestant obtained 300. This is the first time in our Panchayat that there has been such a big margin between the first and second place.

The total population in my Panchayat area is 3,265. The break up according to gender is 1662: 1603. The majority of the population belongs to the Scheduled Caste.

Coming from the field of education, it is not surprising that my priority area is education. I personally visit the three Primary Schools in my Panchayat and motivate the teachers and students to ensure quality education. I emphasize the practical way of learning (Leaning by Doing) in these schools. I ask the teachers to go beyond the formal way of teaching and help the children to think for themselves. I speak to the children and stress the need to have self-confidence, patriotism, truth, love, justice, good habits, personal hygiene, and environmental protection etc.

I insist that the schools hold monthly parent-teacher meetings to discuss ways of improving the school and the education imparted thereof. I made the children and teachers to take up an education awareness campaign during their holidays to enrollment of all the children in schools.

I ensure health camp in all the schools to take care of the health of the children. Toilets have also been provided in these schools.

I have facilitated the cementing of the road from Kamarajapuram to Beratty, so that the children can walk safely to school. I have ensured that the children studying in Government Schools do not feel discriminated against and have

facilitated their access to uniforms similar to ones worn by those in private institutions. In each Gram Sabha, I talk of the importance of education and request the parents not to deter their children from studying. To encourage the students a special monetary prize has been instituted for students of Class X and XII who score more than 450 marks in the former and 1,000 marks in the latter. The prizes are worth Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,000 respectively. I encourage the schools to hold sporting events and quizzes and competitions to help develop the children's skills and award prizes on my own. Children are also included in all the Government functions and take part in the cultural programmes organized by the Panchayat. In addition, three primary schools and three Aanganwades have been provided with clean drinking water, electricity, and sanitary latrines.

In addition to the work done by me in the schools, I have also arranged funds for the construction of individual sanitary latrines in each house. Fumigation is done to control mosquitoes. Bleaching powder is also applied in important places like schools and health centers.

Every month a Medical Camp is held in one designated area in the Panchayat. More than 300 people attended the Varumun Kappom (Health Camp) for a thorough health check up. My family members who are doctors have been encouraged to extend medical services to the poor in my villages. I have also made arrangements with the local hospitals to extend free medical services to the poor in the Panchayat. I have facilitated funds so that monetary assistance can be extended to cancer patients who need to undergo chemotherapy treatment.

To ensure a healthy living environment, garbage is removed daily from each street and a campaign against the use of plastics has successfully discouraged the use of plastic. Along with the campaign, users and suppliers of plastics are also levied a fine, which results in an income for the Panchayat.

Nearly 66 Lakhs have been obtained from the SGRY fund for 78 group houses. Twenty-five sodium gas lamps and three solar power lamps have been

installed, in addition to the 60 fluorescent lamps, which had earlier existed in the Panchayat. We have also had a 100 percent success in the collection of taxes in our Panchayat.

Rupees eight Lakhs have been spent on the provision for safe drinking water. I obtained special permission from the Cordite Ammunition Factory (a Central Government concern) to construct a check dam bordering their property, This will provide water to Beratty village.

I have also facilitated the provision for 180 people to avail of land deeds, 306 families have been provided free colour TV sets, and 126 aged persons have avail of OAPs.

My ambition is to make this Panchayat a Model Panchayat in Tamil Nadu and in India. I am ready to sacrifice my whole life to this. I am a widow and have committed my whole self to the betterment of marginalized groups.

UTTARAKHAND



Gayatri Bhatt
President
Panchayat: Sitabpur
Block: Dugadda
District: Pauri

My village received the 'Nirmal Gram Award' while I was the President of the Panchayat. At present, I am full of energy and confidence and have made up my mind to serve society in the best way possible.

Before I was President, I was a homemaker, however I was actively involved in helping the community. I gained the confidence of the people by hard work and determination.

I fought the election against eight candidates and won by 150 votes. After I was elected President, I did all the work despite problems. Earlier I was a member of the Gram Sabha and there was a group of three Gram Sabhas in the Panchayat. Due to this, my village was deprived of development initiatives and various other schemes. Therefore, I along with other villagers strongly opposed this, got our Gram Sabha separated from the group and I was elected the first President of my village. The land mafia illegally wanted to sell off the Gram Sabha land. I filed a case against the mafia, which is pending, and I am hopeful of winning despite the odds.

The Panchayat was given the 'Nirmal Gram Award' because I worked to ensure proper sanitation facilities and have built many toilets for the minority communities. Today, there is a toilet in each house in my village.

I have also worked to promote SHGs, made people aware of environmental degradation caused by polythene and its impact on the surrounding ecology. With this awareness, I was able to minimize the use of polythene in my village.

I have also worked for the eradication of dowry. I have also helped poor women and provided them with the means for their livelihood. I have tried my best to provide employment to the poor.

I ardently feel that the youth must come forward and contribute to the development and growth of the village as well as the country and whatever they do they choose to must do with honesty and integrity.

Janaki Devi
President
Village: Chapret
Block: Rekhnikhal
District: Pauri

I have been the Secretary of the Mahila Mangal Dal (Women's Group). We mobilized the village women to form the group, as several men were mercilessly beating their wives after drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumption became a serious concern and our group took several steps to address it. The ultimate solution was to stop the production of liquor in the village. Under my leadership, the villagers themselves prohibition alcohol. For example, the women picketed the illegal liquor shops operating in the villages and forced them to close down.

I was a voluntary member of the Literacy Campaign which spread awareness amongst the villagers about their rights, and supported education for all, with a greater emphasis on women's education. During my tenure as the Panchayat President, I have undertaken several activities, like the construction of roads, Panchayat Ghar etc. Being a woman President, I have faced innumerable difficulties. The Vice-President of the village tries to undermine my authority, manipulate the villagers and he misuses the Panchayat funds.

Various infrastructural problems like lack of communication facilities and difficult terrain have not deterred me from fulfilling my responsibilities. Two women accompany me while touring the villages, when have to stay for more than a day and travel on foot for at least 22 km. I have tried to put in my best to address the grievances and make the village women, who are living in pitiable conditions aware of their rights. I have requested women of all villages to form committees and have greater unity.

The Aanganwadi meetings are held regularly and provide me with the required information and the problems faced by the village women. I have tried to support the female teachers during their tenure and am paying special attention to adolescent girls. I am grateful to RLEK, who inspired me to serve the people and especially strengthen women.

Kamala Rawat
President
Panchayat: Patharkot
Block: Hawalbagh
District: Almora

When I married, I never thought that I had a future with the Panchayat. I knew that my father-in-law was a Panchayat Member and that people respected him, but I did not consider it for myself.

However, when I was selected to stand for the post, people said that I was the most educated out of all the women. The old President, who had ruled for the last 15 years, however, did not want to give up power. He used to keep people in the dark and was very corrupt. He would ask villagers to donate their labour for public works, but then he would keep all their wages for himself. The villagers never realized that the wages were their own. Even though people knew the extent of his corruption, no one challenged him, because he was dominating and powerful. He pitted another woman against me during the election, but all the women campaigned for me and I won the election by 70 votes.

After my victory, however, I was not able to do any work in the Panchayat, because I did not understand a thing. Everything was completely new. At first, my husband looked after matters and when people came to my house to ask questions about the Panchayat, they would ask for my father-in-law, even when I was home. Then with time, I learned new things through trainings and workshops, organized by many organizations. My husband withdrew his supporting hand and encouraged me to take charge and even my father-in-law would direct people to me saying, “She is your President go to her.” With the full support from the woman BDO, who went beyond her official role and the support from all the other women’s groups and from my family, I was effectively guided into the functioning of the Panchayat and the village. I persuaded other women to participate in the affairs of the village by visiting and speaking to them personally there are more women than there are men in the Panchayat.

Earlier, women understanding of how a Panchayat worked. People had a limited understanding of budgets and programmes. But after I have joined, I have made sure that people not only know where the money goes but also have a say in how we use that money. I put up the entire budget before the people. Now people take decisions on how to manage the Panchayat’s money.

I have been working hard to fulfill all the needs and wants of the community. I have worked on the construction of irrigation waterways, wells, toilets, footpaths, etc. Nevertheless, I am most passionate and interested in helping women. I encourage women to accompany me to the training programmes so that they gain confidence in their own powers. I feel that it is because of these training programmes that I have found a new confidence to work. In the past, I was aware that I had power, but I did not know how to use that power. The trainings worked like a key for me: eventually something catches. The knowledge I gained made me confident and energetic. It also has guided me to use my already existing powers in a just manner.

Now people ask for me, and say, “Where is the President?” I am treated with respect. Women in my village want to earn their own money through their own work. Even the young girls want to learn stitching and weaving. They say, “we do not know what will happen to us once we get married to another villager, but for now, we want to learn new things”. In addition, as a President of the village, I want to do my best for all the women.

Madhu Bisht
Block President
Panchayat: Dhumakot
Block: Nainidanda
District: Pauri Garhwal

I feel that reservation for women has given us an excellent opportunity to prove ourselves and do something for the community. If I work for the well being of the people, I will be remembered forever.

I am 38 years old and I have done my Bachelors in Education and Masters in Economics. I studied in Dehradun and decided to work for the marginalized in my mother's village Nainidanda; a remote and extremely under-developed area. I worked as a volunteer for two years (without any salary) and was successful in starting the first school for deprived girls.

I was a strong supporter of the Uttarakhand movement and took an active part in intensifying it. I was elected as a Zilla Panchayat Member in 1996, a Kshetra Panchayat Member from an unreserved seat in 2003 and am a nominated member in the Uttarakhand Panchayati Raj Advisory Committee and Chairperson of the Agricultural Advisory Committee.

I am constantly struggling to strengthen the Panchayats trans system. I registered 45 Mahila Mangal Dals under the Kshetra Panchayat of Nainidanda and instrumentalised an awareness campaign for various programmes. The women of the Mahila Mangal Dals performed various cultural shows and won an award in the Cultural Program Competition at the District-level for two consecutive years.

Chulasia Gram Panchayat in my Block was presented the Nirmal Gram Award. I organized the rural population, especially women through SHGs and connected them to income generating activities like mushroom cultivation, to enable their economic independence. I also constructed a guest house and a dormitory in the area, to generate revenue for the Panchayat.

The Mahila Milan Kendra actively holds meetings and programmes and the members jointly extend any kind of community help required. I have implemented the Gramin Rozgar Yojna, provided potable water, constructed roads and organized sanitation and cleanliness campaigns in the Panchayat.

It is very important to jointly work with a good understanding in order to ensure the village's development and to focus on women's needs.

Maya Bajeli
President
Panchayat: Bajeli
Block: Takula
District: Almora

Though I have been the President of my village for the last ten years, I continue to face new challenges. I not only look after village development and Panchayat administration but also I work as a community leader and organizer. I am always ready to deal with all kinds of crises.

For example, in one crisis, a villager was drowning in the river. Other individuals gathered on the banks to watch the poor woman struggling against the tide. No one helped the woman or called for help. When I heard about this, I ran to the spot and followed the woman from the riverside. Seeing thus, others rushed to help and together, we saved the woman's life.

In 1996, when my brother-in-law asked me to stand for election, I did not know what a Panchayat was. I was the widow of an army man with six daughters to look after. I only had a small pension, some agricultural land, and some animals. My brother-in-law is a powerful man in the village and I was dependent on him for support. But I soon realized that he along with the Village Development Officer (VDO) was misusing power in my name. Therefore, I asserted and confronted him.

I went to the VDO and questioned him about his abuse of power. My brother-in-law protested and said that I was poor old woman who knew nothing and that he was there to help me. At this, I told him that I work hard like a donkey to feed and raise my children. I told him that I never fall back from hard work, and that I would never be dependent on anyone running the Panchayat, for anything else not from now on. At this the VDO said, "She is not a woman, she is a man," to my brother-in-law and promised to provide me with support. Since that day, my brother-in-law has refused to speak to me. He has been over heard saying, "I made her, and now I will destroy her." I took his words as a challenge and stood for election a second time. I campaigned door to door, alone, late into the night. The hard work was worth it. I won.

As President, I formed the first women's group in the village called the Mahila Mandal Dal with 110 women. This women's group actively protested against forest degradation. We also developed income-generating activities like

weaving and knitting. Now women participate fully in Panchayat meetings. Before this, there was little concern for women's needs. Once, when I had helped with the cement flooring of the schools, many people protested that they wanted roads to be constructed first. I argued that, it is women who have to wash dirty uniforms and stitch them when they get torn on the rough floor of the schools. Then, I saw that women carry cow dung and manure, take animals, and collect firewood, and the footpath they use is very thin and rough. It becomes slippery during the rains. Women fall and suffer injuries. We decided to do something about this and constructed a 'pukka' cement footpath through the village. Again, people protested but, as I am blessed with a good tongue, I said, "because of the condition of the footpath it is women suffer the most. The women of this village will use this road. This is a chance for women to get something better, you men never bother about her. It is a loss for the entire family if something happens to her." Until now whenever I meet women in the fields, they thank me, saying that the cement footpath has helped them and that it is the best thing that I have done.

It is difficult to build support among the people, but if you have a good rationale then you can progress. Otherwise, people will come together against you and they will question your judgment. There are endless stories of my struggle. I do not know where to start and where to end. I am thankful that various trainings have prepared me to work in the Panchayat and to fight against injustice. When I first joined, I was not aware of the 73rd Amendment and did not know about women's rights. Now, I am full of confidence. One day, some people questioned me and said, "how can you consider yourself a leader, you don't have enough to feed yourself, you don't have any power and money to run a village," I replied in one line, "I have the good luck to have the 73rd Amendment Act with me."

Maya Bhakuni
President
Panchayat: Chanauda
Block: Takula
District: Almora

My father-in-law is known for all kinds of welfare activities in the village and he has been a member of the traditional Panchayat. My husband is also a member of the Panchayat. When the seat was reserved for women, the traditional Panchayat, decided to field me as the President, I contested elections against another woman from the village.

The first challenge that I faced as President was that my village is divided into two areas; each area is settled around two hills and separated from the other by almost a kilometre. Due to the distance between both villages and the hilly terrain, I find it difficult to attend common meetings or the Gram Sabhas. I have to run from one village to another to pass a message and to keep the village together. My block is 14 kilometres away from my village. It is fine when my husband accompanies me on my visits. Otherwise, I have to trek alone.

I am very fortunate to have supportive villagers, who are ready to help and understand. As people trusted my father in law, I was able to bring about many changes in the village. The most important area of my work has been water management in the village. Our life revolves around water, and women know this, though men do not. Therefore, I diverted funds for the construction of a small water canal of 15,000 meters and many other mini check-dams for the irrigation of fields. I also convinced people to stop sand mining, which was making holes in the riverbed and causing an irregularity in the water flow. Another issue I have taken up, closely related to water conservation, is forest management. Through various awareness programmes and workshops, I have started to understand that the survival of the village depends on the welfare of its surrounding environment. I have brought other women and men to workshops on this issue and invited people from organisations to my village to raise awareness.

I managed to organize and convince people to work on forest management. I called a Gram Sabha on the issue and unanimously everyone agreed on new laws demanding that people not cut live trees from the forest. Instead, it was decided that each family would adopt a tree; from which they could collect

firewood by cutting only the dry branches. During some ceremonies such as a marriage, the family would have access to one extra tree. At first, we struggled to protect the forest from nearby villagers, who would sneak into our forest and steal wood. Therefore, all the women decided to form a small committee and was assigned the task of guarding the forests trans to four women, who take turns monthly. These women keep guard on our forests and alarm people if an outsider steals wood or does anything without prior permission. These women know each nook and cranny of the forest, because it is the women who are always in the forest.

Villages from near and far became aware of this mission. They were also trans inspired and started the mission of forest and water conservation in their villages. This has reduced the trespassing in villages as more and more villages joined the effort.

On January 1 2007, various organisations that work with forest and natural resources organised a 15-day rally over the distance of 300 kilometres. I took the an active part in the rally. At first, 700-800 people from various villages participated. The rally over time engaged more and more people and raised awareness for environmental issues in other ways. We visited village after village, giving talks, organising plays on forest protection, and teaching village groups on how to draft work plans.

I do not want to stand for the post next time. Why would I? I have gained all the experience and learning that I wanted and now I want to give this chance to other women. There are many other potential women leaders in my group. I want them to come up and I want to give them my support and guidance. We have the greenest forest, it was not like this before, but maybe it will be the way it was, sometime again soon.

Radha Bangari

President

Panchayat: Sarkar Ki Aali

Block: Hawalbagh

District: Almora

I have studied until Class VIII, in my time this was like getting a Bachelors Degree. After my marriage, instead of being consumed by domestic life, I continued to develop my leadership skills. I became very proactive in the village affairs and mobilized other women to join me in the fight against corruption in our community. These women became members of a small co-operative group. We all were very concerned for the village's welfare. I was disappointed with the President and even with the officials and politicians in the village. I realised that they were not moving towards progress.

One day, during the Panchayat elections, without telling my husband, I filled out three nomination forms. When my husband came to know about this, he asked, "What are you up to?" However, that year I lost the election in all the posts, as there was fake voting and illegal activities. Nevertheless, I was not disheartened, and I continued my work with the women. People, who were also interested in the well being of our community, began to appreciate me.

No one could come out openly with their support for me, because they were afraid of the present leaders of the village. In the previous election, I again filled out my nomination form and people secretly supported me. I fearlessly campaigned until 10 o'clock at night. I had to work hard, because the other opponents, who were supported by the earlier leaders, were using all kinds of illegal means to win the election. While I was using my inner strength and hard work, they were spending thousands and using threats. I was determined to campaign fairly. I spent only Rs. 500 for the entire campaign. In addition, when the day for casting the votes arrived, this time, I was alert. As soon as I realized that fake votes were being submitted, I called the police and they arrested the people involved. I finally came out victorious by defeating seven other contestants.

In 2006, my Panchayat received the Nirmal Gram Puraskar award. I was also honoured at the Mahila Manch in Dehradun. I was awarded and recognized for my work to empower other women in my community for a variety of initiatives.

I worked with the most marginalized groups in the community such as the Schedule Castes in the village. They needed help first. I also demanded that all wasteland of the Panchayat should be put to use in effort to prevent the land mafias from looting it. In the process, we confronted a very well known advocate, who is the National Secretary of a political party. I decided to construct a Panchayat Bhavan on the disputed land to prevent the advocate from taking it over. It was a direct challenge to such a powerful person, but I was not afraid, though people threatened. I went ahead and filed a case in the court against the illegal occupation of the Panchayat land. The other party eventually had to give way and I started the construction. When the budget for the building fell short, I sold my daughter-in-laws gold jewelry to complete the work.

My village is close to the town. All the party politics and fights that happen in the town affect my village. I am not apolitical, but I believe that politics should work beyond the party system, so that honesty, not corruption, guides the political process and schemes for the villages development.

One day, I discovered that a certain document had my stamp and signature. I had not signed this document. I retraced the document when I found the person responsible, I reported him to the police. Eventually, the person who had faked the document was arrested.

No one protests against me, because I am not corrupt. Inside peoples' hearts, they know who is right and who is wrong. Though I am not literate, I am gifted with a very good brain and with courage. These skills have helped me in my Panchayat work. I have been given un-stinted support from my village and family, and most importantly, from women. The training programmes have really brought about a change in my life. To know that I am not alone, that there are people who understand my cause and support me, deepens my inner strength and willingness to fight for what is right. Knowing about the Right To Information (RTI) was like being given a new weapon.

I formed 22 of women's groups, which carry out different kinds of income

generation activities such as masala making, weaving, knitting, making food, etc. These groups sell the goods to markets and to different organisations. The women's groups also advocate in the villages in support of women's rights. I am planning to form my own organisation and register it so that there is a better way to reach out to other women.

In the future, I want to explore other areas as well. I am not afraid of hard work. If it is fruitful, I will put all my energy into it. Every day, I collect materials from women and sell the material in the market. I always take other women with me; so that they learn about the business process. Every woman is capable of amazing work. One just needs a little direction and encouragement. I, for one, am full the urge to learn increasingly.

Roshni Devi
President
Panchayat: Tashipur
Block: Rourkee
District: Haridwar

I am 51 years old and the President of Tashipur village Panchayat. I have maintained good public relations with the villagers and my family has been supportive of my Panchayat work.

The first time I contested the elections, I was elected, but I lost the second time. I did not give up; I fought again and won the election the third time round. I had to face stiff resistance from a fraction of villagers opposing me on the issues of women. I also had to struggle to get funds to carry out welfare programmes.

I am dedicated to my work and the area's development and I am happy that the village members appreciate me for this. I tried for the 'optimum utilization of limited resources' and have achieved considerable success.

I constructed new roads, renovated the old ones, provided irrigation facilities to the villagers, and introduced various welfare programmes run by the Central and State Governments, which was earlier untouched by the Panchayat.

Once, while I was attending a meeting in a village the villagers recognized me, but not their own Gram President! This was a boost for me and I took charge of running the Panchayat in an efficient manner.

The Central and State Governments have done a lot for women's empowerment. The only drawback is a lack of awareness and inefficient implementation.

If a woman has made up her mind to do something, she is capable of achieving immense success. Appalled by the level of corruption, immorality, amorality and arrogance prevailing in the political and social systems today, I daringly stood for elections and this is my second tenure in the Panchayat, once as a Block President and now the second time as the Chairperson District Panchayat. I strongly believe that it is time for women to enter politics seriously, because they are not prone to corruption in the way that men are.

Coming from a joint family of twenty members, I received full support from my husband for further studies and have completed my M.A, and later he encouraged me to participate in the welfare of the people in my area. I believe that, 'God helps those who help themselves.'

I have made a remarkable difference in my area, initiating work by teaching the less fortunate village women stitching and embroidery, instilling them with self-confidence and awareness of various issues. Through the medium of Special Help Groups, I integrated BPL members so that eventually they can rise above the poverty line.

My Mahila Milan Kendra informs women on issues that can help them discuss and find solutions to problems such as alcohol consumption by men etc. Every three months, the Zilla Panchayat holds meetings to address past and new issues, assess the drawbacks and the improvements that have taken place. I try to ensure that the government funds are being used effectively, and the benefits of the various government schemes have accrued to the concerned.

My campaign against gender biases is ongoing. I encourage NGOs to take interest and find solutions to women's problems and to do so in a sustainable manner that is reflected by reformed laws and procedures and an improved human rights situation in their areas. To keep the future economy of the village in mind, women must make optimum use of natural resources, vegetable and fruit processing, and add to the economic empowerment of the community.

I work towards improvement in all aspects of human dignity: social, political, and economical. If the individuals of my area are not satisfied with their station in life, what impact will it have on the community?

Sunita

President

Panchayat: Sukholi Talli

Block: Jaiharikhal

District: Pauri

I was elected as the President of my Gram Panchayat in March 2003. I have studied until Class VIII. I am a widow and take care not only of my three children, my father, and mother-in-law but also of the Panchayat work.

My strong will for the development of the village inspired me to contest the election. After a long struggle, my dream of having a school in the village is in the process of being fulfilled. I raised the need for our village to establish a co-educational school, as already in the village there are two boys school. I was not at all discouraged by the repeated non-cooperation from certain individuals within the community and my widowhood. Despite these obstacles, I took the Gram Sabha in the right direction.

Through regular trainings on leadership, I became more focused and gained in self-esteem and the will power to work more efficiently for the development of the village. Before, I used to hesitate to leave my home but through the training programmes, I have participated in programmes organized in Delhi as well as attended many National workshops organized for the EWRs. Gradually, I developed the skills as a leader and gained the knowledge of my own rights. Now I stand as a great example and have motivated others in the village by sharing my experience with the Panchayat members.

I travel long distances to collect information regarding Government Schemes and to contact local people. I have taken a keen interest in the activities of the Panchayat and have fought my own self-doubts and those of my community about my abilities to lead. In all instances, I try hard to keep the members of the Gram Panchayat involved in the activities of the Panchayat so that they know their own contribution to the development of the village, which though outside the four walls of their houses, influences their lives in many ways.

In the up-coming election, I am again, planning to contest for the post of President.

Sunita Devi

President

Panchayat: Kashirampur

Block: Dugadda

District: Pauri

I am 35 years old and am a graduate. I belong to Schedule Caste of Kashirampur village. I contested the Panchayat elections on a general seat and was elected for the post by defeating 11 other candidates. I am very confident of myself and I am able to present my views strongly in an articulate manner. I strive hard for my Panchayat and have managed to undertake several activities like the construction of roads, schools, up-gradation of the BPL list, formation of SHGs, establishing linkages with the DRDA, banks etc.

The Panchayat faced a problem of potable water, as the water supply in the village was contaminated. In order to resolve this matter, I gave away my land and constructed a tube-well on it for the Panchayat. The other major hurdle which I encountered was the decline in the number of students in the village's only Primary School, due to the railway crossing besides the school premises. I undertook the responsibility of motivating people and I was successful in convincing them about education being a primary needs, one which should not be denied to anyone. I also helped construct toilets and rooms in the schools, in order to make the School more welcoming for children.

Besides societal pressures, a major problem is the non-availability of funds for the proposals related to the various developmental works. Despite hindrances, I am determined to continue my endeavors with support from the villagers.

Vidya Devi
President
Panchayat: Dikhet
Block: Dwarikhal
District: Pauri

I am 49 years old, have studied up to Class VIII and I married to an army man. Ours is an all women Panchayat and along with the five women members, I am addressing the issues of our Panchayat. I feel that, the more women participate in Panchayats, the better the potential for socio-economic stability at the grass root level; awareness needs to come from within. This may sound unreal to many, but our small group of women Panchayat Leaders have broken the patriarchal glass ceiling and stand proud as Elected Representatives of a remote hill Panchayat which can only be reached after a two hours trek from the road head.

The Panchayat has seen more women participation in the Jawahar Yojna-constructing water reservoirs, planting 25,000 saplings under the Hariyali Yojna, this has increased the forest cover in the area. The village has also seen work being done related to the environment, education, conservation, sanitation, and other development-connected works. I have constructed a Panchayat Bhawan as well as a school and people have benefited under the Widow, Old Age, and Disabled Pension Schemes.

Along with the other women Panchayat representatives, I decided that without prior information, no interference of the Patwari will be allowed in the Panchayat. We also decided to resolve the conflicts at our own level. I make it a point to consult and take the assent of the Gram Sabha members about allocating funds towards the Village Development programmes. Our strength lies in unity, since all the women feel very proud and empowered when they participate in any development work of the Gram Panchayat.

Being all-women Panchayat, we have had to face various challenges from the men. They wanted me and the other women members as a mere titular heads, while they would pursue their own agenda. However, it did not deter us from delivering good governance.

The Panchayat has tried to give the village women their due importance, and employment. The money earned by women does not go to the liquor shop but reaches the education, health, and other amenities of her home and hearth.

A firm foundation for gender equity can be laid in our democracy. If we all get organized and start working for the development of our villages, we would be able to transform it into a place equivalent to heaven.

GLOSSARY

Aanganwadi	Pre-school and the focal point for the ICDS
BDO	Block Development Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CC	Cement Concrete (road)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DM	District Magistrate
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
EBC	Extremely Backward Caste
EWR	Elected Women Representative
Gram Sabha	General Body meeting of the Voters
Gram Sevak/Talathi Saza	Panchayat Secretary
IAY	Indira Awas Yojana
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
Kalapataru	Scheme launched by the State Government of Assam to assist families under the Below Poverty Line to take up income generation at the micro-level
Mahila Committee/Samiti/ Mandal/Mangal Dal	Women's Group
Mahila Gram Sabha	Women's Gram Sabha (exclusive)
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MLALADS	Member of Legislative Assembly Local Area Development Scheme
MP	Member of Parliament
MPLADS	Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme
Nirmal Gram Puruskar	A Scheme
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
OAP	Old Age Pension

OBC	Other Backward Caste
Palli Sabha/Ward Sabha	Ward-level Meetings
PDS	Public Distribution System
PMGY	Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
RCC	Reinforced Cement Concrete (road)
SC	Scheduled Caste
SGSY	Swaranajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana
SHG	Self Help Group
SHO	Station Head Officer (Police)
ST	Scheduled Tribe
THP	The Hunger Project
WLW	Women's Leadership Workshop

INDEX



S. No.	Name of EWR	State
1	Aliva Sahoo	Orissa
2	Ambari Devi	Himachal Pradesh
3	Amita Devi	Bihar
4	Anita Devi	Bihar
5	Anita Gogoi	Assam
6	Anjali Boruah	Assam
7	Anokhi	Rajasthan
8	Archana Yelawe	Maharashtra
9	Asanti Behera	Orissa
10	Asiyat	Rajasthan
11	Asmita Ankush Nate	Maharashtra
12	B. Rani Devaraj	Tamil Nadu
13	Baby Rajaramani	Tamil Nadu
14	Banabasi Pradhan	Orissa
15	Bayyamma	Karnataka
16	Bhavika Bhiku Bobale	Maharashtra
17	Bijayalaxmi Dehury	Orissa
18	Chandrawati Devi	Bihar
19	Chinnamma	Karnataka
20	Daulat Devi	Bihar
21	Dayawati Saket	Madhya Pradesh
22	Debaki Sethi	Orissa
23	Dipanjali Majhi	Orissa

24	Diptirani Rout	Orissa
25	Dolly Saikia	Assam
26	Fatima	Maharashtra
27	G Sachala Karjee	Orissa
28	Gayatri Bhatt	Uttarakhand
29	Gayatri Devi	Bihar
30	Geeta Devi	Himachal Pradesh
31	Geeta Verma	Madhya Pradesh
32	Geetha	Karnataka
33	Gitanjali Mahipat Kadam	Maharashtra
34	Golap Gadnayak	Orissa
35	Gunabati Das	Assam
36	Guriya Devi	Bihar
37	Hardass Village	Jammu & Kashmir
38	Hodri Bai	Rajasthan
39	Ibom Lollen	Arunachal Pradesh
40	Janaki Devi	Uttarakhand
41	Jnanamma	Karnataka
42	Kamala Devi Meena	Rajasthan
43	Kamala Ravat	Uttarakhand
44	Kanthamma	Karnataka
45	Karnya Lollen	Arunachal Pradesh
46	Kaushalya Devi Meena	Rajasthan
47	Kenchamma	Karnataka

48	Khekap Longku	Arunachal Pradesh
49	Kirpi Padu	Arunachal Pradesh
50	Krishna Devi	Rajasthan
51	Kumari Kaliyaperumal	Tamil Nadu
52	Kusum Devi Khushwaha	Madhya Pradesh
53	Lakshmi	Karnataka
54	Lakshmi Devi	Himachal Pradesh
55	Lakshmiddevamma	Karnataka
56	Lalmuni Devi	Bihar
57	Lata Panwar	Himachal Pradesh
58	Latika Parida	Orissa
59	Madhu Bisht	Uttarakhand
60	Mangala Valavi	Maharashtra
61	Manjula	Karnataka
62	Mary Grace Tirky	Assam
63	Martha Badaraita	Orissa
64	Mathri Devi	Rajasthan
65	Maya Bajeli	Uttarakhand
66	Maya Bhakuni	Uttarakhand
67	Moni Prabha Neog	Assam
68	Mukesh Lata	Himachal Pradesh
69	Murti Pandey	Madhya Pradesh
70	Naina Devi	Bihar
71	Nasiba	Rajasthan

72	Netramma	Karnataka
73	Nirmala Devi	Rajasthan
74	P.Krishna Veni	Tamil Nadu
75	Padmini Barik	Orissa
76	Prasanti Behera	Orissa
77	Prema Chandran	Tamil Nadu
78	Puneetha Ramadoss	Tamil Nadu
79	R. Chinnappa	Tamil Nadu
80	Radha Bangari	Uttarakhand
81	Radha Devi	Rajasthan
82	Radha Devi Bhairva	Rajasthan
83	Radhamani Mahalingam	Tamil Nadu
84	Radhiya Adivasi	Madhya Pradesh
85	Rajamani	Karnataka
86	Rajeswari Devadoss	Tamil Nadu
87	Ranboi Zongsam	Arunachal Pradesh
88	Ratnabai Shivaji Patil	Maharashtra
89	Reema Gogoi	Assam
90	Rekha Devi	Bihar
91	Rekha Gogoi	Assam
92	Renuka	Karnataka
93	Rita Garg	Himachal Pradesh
94	Roshni Devi	Uttarakhand
95	Rudramma	Karnataka

96	Saleha Begum	Assam
97	Samni Adivasi	Madhya Pradesh
98	Samota Bai	Madhya Pradesh
99	Sarita Shivaji Nigade	Maharashtra
100	Saroj Agrawal	Orissa
101	Sarojini Kainthura	Uttarakhand
102	Saubhagya Nanjundaswami	Karnataka
103	Sidhu	Rajasthan
104	Smita Sachin Thore	Maharashtra
105	Sonam Dolma (Likir)	Jammu & Kashmir
106	Sonam Dolma (Pheh)	Jammu & Kashmir
107	Suguna	Karnataka
108	Sunita	Uttarakhand
109	Sunita Adivasi	Madhya Pradesh
110	Sunita Devi	Uttarakhand
111	Sushama Ramachandra Raikar	Maharashtra
112	Susheela	Karnataka
113	Tara Devi	Himachal Pradesh
114	Tonyir Basar	Arunachal Pradesh
115	Tulu Bora	Assam
116	Vidya Devi	Uttarakhand
117	Yomrik Lollen	Arunachal Pradesh
118	Zahira Bano	Jammu & Kashmir

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