

Women Sarpanch – changing today's rural India

"Before I became a Sarpanch¹, women in my village faced a lot of problems," states Tapaswini Sahu, a tall and confident woman who is now the village chief of Kesapalli in Sambalpur, Orissa. The women greet her with respect and feel proud to be in her group, *"People now listen to me and even pay heed to the matters that matter to women too,"* says Tapaswini.

Tapaswini was trained as a voluntary village health worker (VHW) by Skillshare International doctors, who designed special courses for women in remote villages. She felt that there was no platform for women to be heard, especially during the village meetings. *"The Panchayat² used to be man's domain and the only decision makers were the men."* Women in the village suffered a high level of domestic violence but had nowhere to take their grievances. *"The Sarpanch would never listen to our women woes and we had nowhere to go with our problems,"* she recalls.

Skillshare International supports a local NGO called Manav Adhikar Seva Samiti (MASS), which works with Tribals who are deprived of their livelihood and often lured into bonded debt. MASS has an integrated approach to addressing socio-economic, cultural and ecological problems. They worked with the community to introduce self help groups (SHG) and started community health projects and micro-credit groups.

Tapaswini is just one of the 3,500 women being trained to set up a cooperative to manage their community health programme. These self help groups have taught women like Tapaswini about economic rights and health issues. When the group was first established, most of the women in the village faced barriers from their husbands but slowly, as they began to earn a living for themselves, it became clear to the men to that they were helping the family, which often lived below poverty line. Sitting through these SHG and VHW groups, discussing issues such as family planning, educating the girl child and widows' rights, Tapaswini realised that women like her faced a lot of problems which needed to be discussed with the men together.

The Panchayat elections approached and Tulsi Ballabh Das, a MASS social worker and trainer remembers thinking *"it would be easier if some one from the women in the SHG could stand for the Panchayat elections... It would help women fight for their rights."* In 2005, 8 people stood for election; among them was Tapaswini Sahu who emerged a clear winner. After she became the Sarpanch, many women found the confidence to approach her with their problems.

Despite opposition from the contractors and villagers, she eventually received 100,000 rupees from the Government to build a high school in Kesapalli. Tapaswini has changed the attitude of men in her village towards women and their work for the better.

¹ A sarpanch is the elected representative to a panchayat

² A panchayat is an administrative committee governing several villages