FIVE WOMEN SARPANCH LEADERS SHOWING INDIA THE WAY FORWARD

Abstract:

The mention of the word 'Sarpanch' generally brings to mind an image of an elderly grey haired man, probably with a turban and a big moustache, holding in his hands a stick and in his gaze the fear filled respect of an entire village. Rarely does the image of a woman ever come to mind. Inspite of prejudice against women taking the onus of public administration, these five women sarpanches are rocking rural India and how. We bring to you stories from the heartland of five inspiring women sarpanch leaders. Arati Devi, sarpanch at Ganjam district in Orissa, which is also her hometown. Meena Behen, the first woman sarpanch from a village in Gujarat, Chaavi Rajawat, sarpanch of Soda village in Rajasthan, Sushma Bhadu, sarpanch from three villages in Harayana. Radha Devi is sarpanch of a village in Rajasthan.

Arati Devi

Former investment banker and MBA holder Arati Devi already made news a few months back when she was invited to speak at an International Leadership Programme in the US. She spoke about state government functions, government transparency and accountability.

She is the sarpanch at Ganjam district in Orissa, which is also her hometown.

She was also nominated for the Rajiv Gandhi Leadership Award 2014.

She has introduced the benefits of Public Distribution System to her village, which wasn’t known to most people. Now they avail wheat, kerosene and other items at subsidised prices.

She also started a major literacy campaign for women in the panchayat where only signatures would be recorded for official applications, instead of thumb impressions. She has been known to revive traditional folk art in Ganjam.

She has stated that she wishes to spend the rest of her life in service of the rural folk.
MeenaBehen

MeenaBehen, the first woman sarpanch from a village in Gujarat, seen here in pink saree.

In the small village in the district Vyara in Gujarat, MeenaBehen is the first woman Sarpanch her village has seen. After 65 years, their village has their own Panchayat board, and that too an all-women Panchayat board.

In a patriarchal society, getting this far hasn't been easy. Women were never allowed outside their houses. They were not even allowed to talk in front of men or in their presence.

"Women are the tails in a society. They can never be leaders," was the reaction of many people in Meena's village.

"The saddest thing is that a lot of women too pointed fingers at us and constantly put us down," says MeenaBehen. "But I guess that would always be there…that is what kept us going and challenged us to do better everytime," she says.

Meena and her friends attribute all their leadership skills to the self-help group (SHG) that World Vision India helped form. "All the meetings and programmes that World Vision India conducted gave us this much confidence to stand up as leaders in our village. Otherwise our homes were the only world we ever knew."

Being an all-woman Panchayat board, the issues that women and children face come out easily in the open now. "Women open up to us with their problems with more ease now."

Recently they built a road because the accessibility to the village was very bad. Pregnant women found it really difficult to go to the hospital and even the ambulance vehicle couldn’t come into the village because of this. Now the accessibility is much better.

Many were unaware of important government schemes. The all-women Panchayat took cognizance of that and ensured that Government schemes were utilized by people of the village. This year alone, under a Government scheme that provides housing for the poor, they have built over 30 houses in their village.

Next on their agenda is building a Government hospital in their village.
ChaaviRajawat

Times of India has heralded her as the woman that is changing the face of rural Rajasthan. With innovative projects, she has brought better water, solar power, paved roads, toilets and a bank to her ancestral village named Soda. Not letting the bureaucracy come in her way, she has single-handedly enabled many projects in her village. She has also addressed a poverty conference at the United Nations in New York, US. The glamorous jeans-clad MBA sarpanch is an inspiration to many and is the face of the young and modern India yearning for change.

SushmaBhadu

SushmaBhadu, (in blue sweater, second from right) is a sarpanch from three villages in Harayana.

SushmaBhadu has to her credit improving the dwindling education and sex ratio levels of her villages.

But she is more popular for the "unveiling" of her 'ghunghat'.

"With the backing of my mother-in-law and husband, I went against the grain and lifted my ghunghat amid 2,000 people from 25 neighbouring villages in June, 2012," Sushma said.

Fighting centuries old patriarchal and controlling norms of her society, she has earned the respect and admiration of her villages. She is elected sarpanch of three villages - Salam Khera, Chablamori and DhaniMiyan Khan.

The literacy rate stands at 69.10% in the 2011 census against 58% in 2001.

The sex ratio also now stands at 903 per 1,000 men in 2011 census as against 884 in 2001.

Defying the trend in the state, DhaniMiyan Khan has a zero dropout rate at the village's only school. She also makes sure that every child in the village attends school.

Taking a cue from Sushma, 30-year-old Kamla Devi, an anganwadi worker, not only gave up the ghunghat but also married off her two sons without taking dowry.
Shaking hands with women and folding them in front of men, the unveiled sarpanch has no objection to her daughters wearing western outfits, which she admits she is also fond of.

**Radha Devi**

Radha Devi (in yellow saree) is the lady sarpanch of a village in Rajasthan.

Despite the Right to Education Act, 1000s of children across Rajasthan do not make it to school. Women sarpanch leaders stepped in to ensure that this trend reverses and girls attend school.

Taking the help of local NGOs and self-help groups, Radha Devi confronted the school authorities in her village and persuaded parents into sending their kids back to schools.

*Source – WSF, Hindustan Times, Deccan Chronicle.*