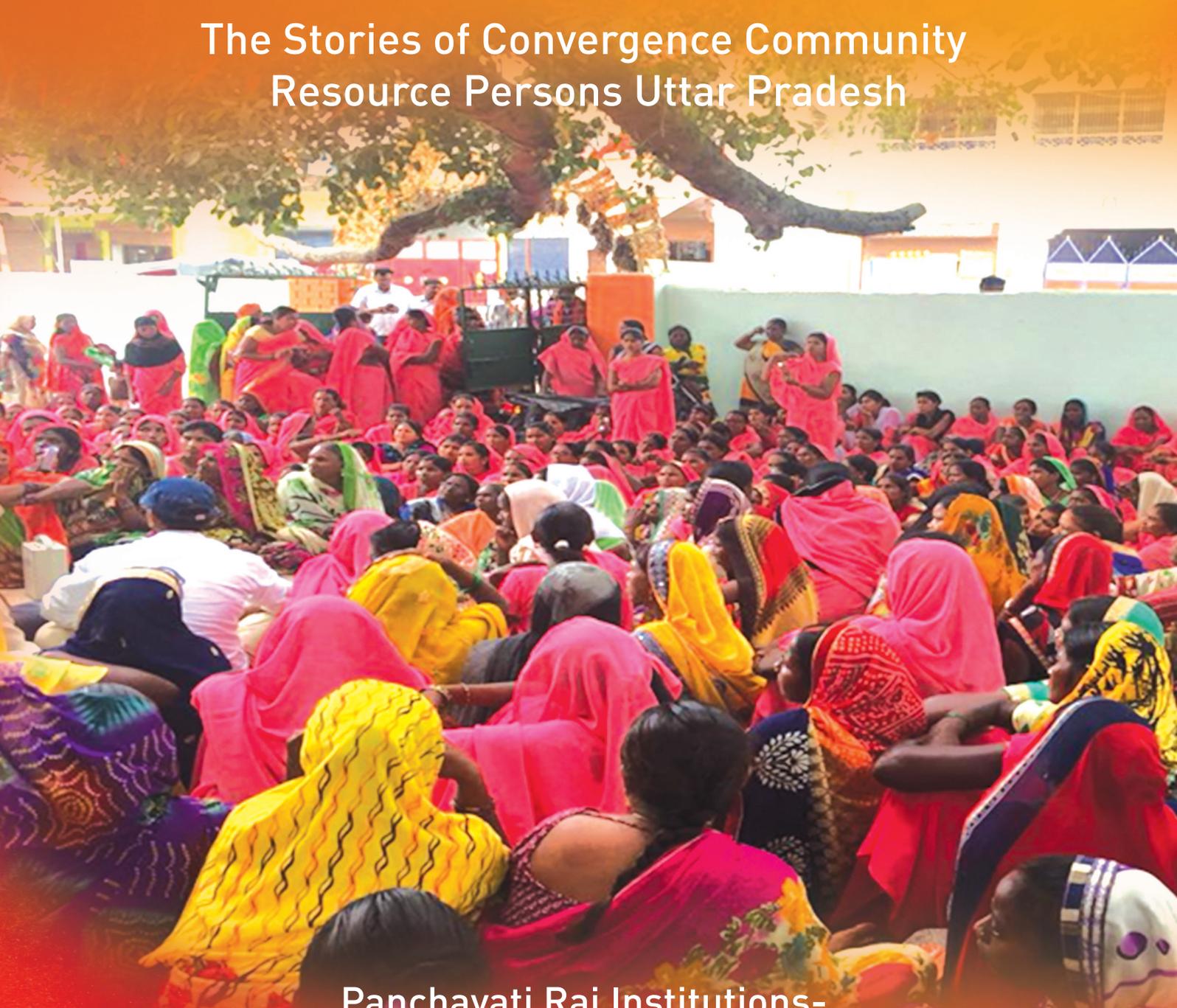


AAGHAAZ

The Stories of Convergence Community
Resource Persons Uttar Pradesh



Panchayati Raj Institutions-
Community Based Organizations Convergence Project



Aajeevika
National Rural Livelihoods Mission
Government of India



Kudumbashree
Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission
Government of Kerala

Kudumbashree-National Resource Organisation

This document is a product of the efforts of Subha Kawatra, Madhulika Joshi, Kajal Tiwari, Raj Singh, Vibhav Sonker, Shreyas Kumar Rai, Aishwarya -NRO professionals.

In addition, the document would not have been possible without the back breaking work done by the Mentor Resource Persons (MRPs), Community Members and our very own Community Cadre- CCRP Didis, to whom this is dedicated

Editorial & Design inputs from Padmini Ramesh

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Foreword



P. I. Sreevidya IAS

Executive Director Kudumbashree

Panchayati Raj Institutions got constitutional legitimacy in 1993 through the 73rd constitutional amendment with the mandate of addressing rural poverty and ensuring social justice. The Self Help Group (SHG) network that has emerged alongside has been an immense social capital for the Gram Panchayat to work with in order to facilitate rural development. Recognizing the need for an effective functional relationship between PRIs, especially Gram Panchayat and the SHGs and Village Organizations (VO), also known as Community Based Organization or CBOs, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Ministry of Panchayat Raj (MoPR) issued guidelines in the year 2013, for increasing convergence between the institutions of local government and the organizations of the poor.

Kudumbashree NRO with the experience of converging Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) with the SHG network in Kerala was mandated to support interested states in implementing the model through the PRI-CBO Convergence project. It was based on the premise that a synergy between both these institutions (Viz. Panchayati Raj Institutions and Community Based Organizations) can be mutually beneficial in addressing the issue of poverty for the larger goal of socio-economic development of the village. Since 2013, the PRI-CBO Convergence project has been piloted in partner States in western, central, northern and north-eastern India such as Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Chattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh etc.

The Uttar Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (UPSRLM) had partnered with the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission, Kudumbashree - NRO for implementing the Panchayati Raj Institutions - Community Based Organization (PRI - CBO) Convergence Project in UP. The Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership was signed by the two Missions in September 2018. The Kudumbashree National Resource Organization (NRO) provided technical and implementation support to UPSRLM for the pilot project. Convergence project was implemented in 100 pilot GPs of ten blocks across ten districts.

A crucial component of the project had been the development of local community cadres called the Convergence Community Resource Persons. Today, these women, through constant hand holding and mentoring undertaken by experienced women of the Kudumbashree network, have gone onto become women with an identity of their own, with increased access to public spaces and sphere and most importantly, with an increased stake and socio-political affairs of their Gram Panchayats. It is now a common sight to find these women, along with other Self Help Group women, fearlessly approaching the Panchayat, Block and District functionaries as well as spearheading discussions in the Gram Sabhas of their villages.

These Convergence Community Resource Persons (CCRPs) have also acted as a crucial bridge between the PRI and the CBO and have even gone on to contest local body elections in several districts. This document serves as a useful and powerful reminder of the trials and tribulations these women have had to undergo while working with their Panchayats in the rural hinterlands of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, dominated by feudalism and patriarchy and their own journeys in becoming CCRPs.



Women at Leisure
A Village Organisation Member at Matehikala, Bahraich

“अगर हमारे संघर्ष को कोई लड़ाई समझता है तो फिर लड़ाई सही, ये लड़ाई अब तब तक चलेगी जब तक गाँव के हर एक व्यक्ति के पास वो सभी बुनियादी सुविधाएँ नहीं पहुँच जाती जिसके लिए हमारी सरकार आजादी के समय से प्रयासरत है”

Kiran Didi, Convergence Community Resource Person,
PRI-CBO Convergence Project

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Background

The Uttar Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (UPSRLM) had partnered with the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission, Kudumbashree - NRO for implementing the Panchayati Raj Institutions - Community Based Organization (PRI - CBO) Convergence Project in UP. The Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership was signed by the two Missions in September 2018. The Kudumbashree National Resource Organization (NRO) provided technical and implementation support to UPSRLM for the pilot project. Convergence project was implemented in 100 pilot GPs of ten blocks across ten districts.

The PRI-CBO Convergence approach is based on the premise that if institutions of the poor such as Community Based Organisations (CBO)/ the Self Help Group (SHG) network and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) collaborate with each other to work for the development of the village, they can significantly enhance the livelihood and social security of the vulnerable and poor.

Activities started in the field in the month of September, 2018 and culminated in the month of March, 2021. One of the major focuses of the project during the course of its implementation in Uttar Pradesh was an extensive process-based capacity building of various stakeholders in the field (Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Self Help Groups (SHGs) and the community cadre). Community Cadre- also known as the Convergence Community Resource Persons (CCRP) is a set of grass roots community members developed as part of this project who spearheaded the implementation of the project in their respective Gram Panchayats. All 100 of them.

The idea of developing a community cadre was as strategic as needs based. It emerged from an understanding that no one can gauge the local issues of their village better than the community itself and implied that to roll out a project focusing on local self governance, the involvement of the community as grass roots workers and field level implementers was absolutely essential. Hence, the project selected a pool of Convergence Community Resource Persons from within the community who were handheld, supported and mentored by the Mentor Resource Persons (MRPs) of Kerala - women with enormous experience coming from the Kudumbashree network itself. The Convergence Community Resource Persons (CCRPs henceforth) undertook and spearheaded a range of activities in their Gram Panchayats- ranging from health camps to weekly markets, to undertaking pain-staking negotiations with the Panchayat President (Pradhan) along with the community and were the main driving force in carrying out the field activities.

Over the span of two years, not only did they help achieve the deliverables of the project, improve entitlement and livelihood access and opportunities of the community, but also- more importantly they helped change the mindset of the people of their villages- this ranged from the quintessential- feudal, patriarchal Pradhan Pati in UP paving way for his wife (the actual Pradhan/ GP President) in development and administrative matters to SHG women undertaking labour work as part of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for the first time ever in their life. Each "small-win" became a big one when the sheer effort of these CCRPs led to transformation - of the stakeholders as well as of themselves. Didis were

forced to question their own beliefs and mindsets in the process. Through the work the CCRPs undertook, they became someone else- someone with a different identity- not known anymore as Ram Chand's Wife/ Shamser Singh's daughter, but as **Sangeeta, Kiran, Aarti, Sheeba, Urmila, Santoshi, Sanju, Hosila and Roshni.**

Be it Banda, Basti, Fatehpur, Bahraich, Gorakhpur, Sultanpur or Varanasi, Mirzapur, Chandauli, Sonbhadra - each district's block has brought to light the story of each Didi (Sister)- who has literally fought against all odds to occupy public spaces, work for the welfare of her people and her Gram Panchayat and assume an identity of her own- "**CCRP Didi of the PRI-CBO Convergence Project**". These stories also highlight the need to focus not only on what our country can do for its women, important as it may be, but also on what our women can do for the country. Indeed, our experience shows that women participating in public forums and becoming part of the public sphere means that their agency increases, that health and education inevitably end up becoming the core issues for the community as a whole.

Abbreviations

AAP	Annual Action Plan
UPSRLM	Uttar Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission
BIRD	Basic Infrastructure and Resource Development
BLPFT	Block Level Planning and Facilitation Team
BMMU	Block Mission Management Unit
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CLF	Cluster Level Federation
DMMU	District Mission Management Unit
DRDA	District Rural development Agency
GP	Gram Panchayat
GPC	Gram Panchayat Coordinator
GPDP	Gram Panchayat Development Plan
GPPFT	Gram Panchayat Planning and Facilitation Team
GS	Gram Sabha
CCRP	Convergence Community Resource Person
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
SBM	Swacch Bharat Mission
NRLM	National Rural Livelihood Mission
NRO	National Resource Organisation
PHC	Primary Health Centre
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
RTE	Right to Education
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SHG	Self Help Group
VO	Village Organisation
SERP	Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty
RGMVP	Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana

About KS-NRO in the Backdrop of NRLM

In 2012, the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India recognized Kudumbashree's potential to support other States by anointing it as a National Resource Organisation (NRO) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). As a NRO, Kudumbashree holds the mandate to partner with interested State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs) and provide them with technical and implementation support. The NRO became functional from May 2013 onwards. As an integral part of Kudumbashree Mission, KS-NRO provides technical support to partner-SRLMs in the following areas:

Working together of women's institutions with local governments to enhance governance – **Panchayati Raj Institutions – Community Based Organisations (PRI-CBO) Convergence Domain**

Micro Enterprise Development and scalable enterprises approach through community based support system – **Enterprises Domain**

- Convergence under NRLM Framework

Under DAY – NRLM, several initiatives for convergence of activities of SHGs and their federations under NRLM and the Gram Panchayats have been attempted so that SHGs may be able to avail the benefits of local economic development programmes led by the Gram Panchayats.

Panchayati Raj was given a constitutional mandate in 1992 and around the same time SHGs of women, mostly supported by NABARD, also started emerging. However, there hasn't been much synergy between the institutions of local government and the institutions of the poor. As panchayats have been assigned the twin functions of economic development and social justice, performing these functions requires a partnership with community based organisations, particularly of the poor. With the focus on participatory planning through GPDP (Gram Panchayat Development Plan), it is necessary to bring in the SHG networks to ensure that the poor are included in local development. The partnership is envisaged to be mutually beneficial and needs to be proactively facilitated.

- About roll out of NRLM in the state

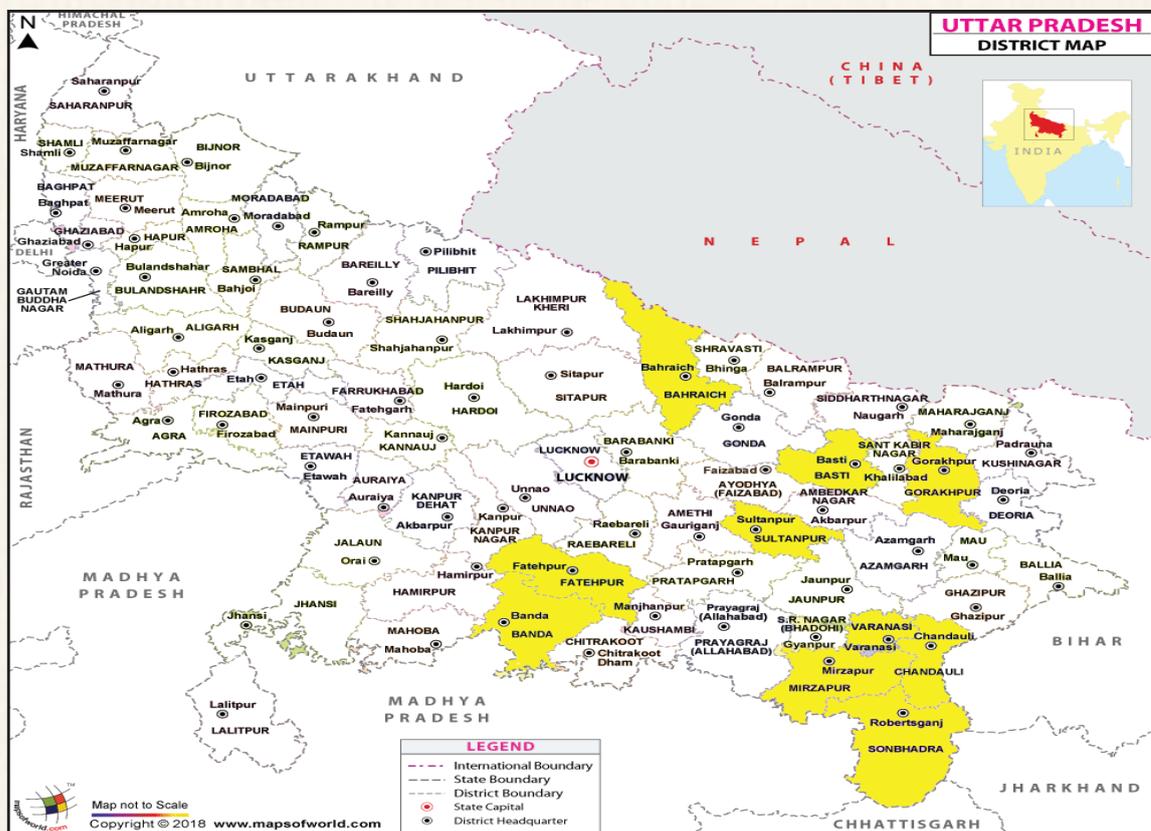
NRLM is being implemented in Uttar Pradesh by Uttar Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (UPSRLM) with the objectives laid by NRLM for enhancing the social and economic empowerment of the rural poor of Uttar Pradesh through development of their self-sustained and community managed institutions.

UPSRLM is implementing NRLM in 31 districts across the State. Out of these 31 districts, 26 districts are being assisted by the International Development Association/ World Bank under the National Rural Livelihoods Project (NRLP) and 5 districts are being assisted by the Government of India under the NRLM. Blocks within 7 districts of the above mentioned 26 districts have been developed as resource blocks in association with Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), blocks within the other 10 districts of the 26 districts have been developed as resource blocks in association with Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS) and blocks within the rest 9 districts of the 26 districts have been developed as resource blocks in association with Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP).

UPSRLM is currently engaged in programs like Social Mobilization, Financial Inclusion, Livelihood Promotion and Capacity Building to realise the objectives of NRLM.

- PRI – CBO Convergence Project: Rationale, Process envisaged and Expected Outcome

Involvement of the local community in the development process is the most crucial aspect of the sustainable development agenda. Self Help Groups (SHG) as the collectives of the poor can be the key drivers in any local development initiative. Qualitative changes can be achieved through the effective engagement of such citizen collectives with the constitutionally mandated local governance system, which also represents the 'Government of the poor'. The concept of PRI-CBO Convergence envisions that increased articulation of the demand from the community through proper capacity building mechanisms will improve the ability for service delivery of various institutions. The continuous interaction that CBO has with the public system can be facilitated through participatory assessment and planning tools supported by a dedicated community cadre. In the long run the organic working together of CBO and PRI helps in developing a strong democratic understanding at the grassroots level. It is based on Kerala's experience of NHG-ADS-CDS working closely with the Gram Panchayats. The pilots implemented in various states have helped develop a 'Proof of Concept' for universal implementation of this programme under NRLM.



The map of Uttar Pradesh highlighting the 10 intervention districts of the PRI-CBO Convergence Project

Basic Information about the Pilot Locations

Profile of the Pilot Locations

Uttar Pradesh has been divided into two main regions; Western UP and Eastern UP. The ten districts chosen for the implementation of the project were from Eastern UP

S. No	Intervention District	Intervention Block	District population	District Literacy Rate	District Sex Ratio
1.	Bahraich	Mihinpurwa	34,87,731	49.32%	891
2.	Banda	B. Khurd	17,99,410	66.67%	863
3.	Basti	Kudraha	26,46,464	67.22%	963
4.	Chandauli	Chakia	19,52,756	60.2%	913
5.	Fatehpur	Malwan	26,32,733	67.43%	901
6.	Gorakhpur	Sardarnagar	44,40,895	70.83%	944
7.	Mirzapur	Nagarcity	2,496,970	68.48%	903
8.	Sonbhadra	Chopan	18,62,559	64.03%	918
9.	Sultanpur	Lambhua	37,97,117	58.3%	983
10.	Varanasi	Arajiline	2,496,970	79.27%	887

Basic information about the 10 intervention districts selected from Uttar Pradesh

The districts, which have been selected for the PRI-CBO convergence pilot, have a high percentage of rural population. Antyodaya Gram Panchayats were chosen as pilot Gram Panchayats.

CBO system in the state and especially in pilot locations

UPSRLM had entered into a partnership with various agencies and organizations -Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Manch, Bihar Jeevika and SERP- Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (Andhra Pradesh SRLM) to provide technical assistance in institution building for SRLM and nurture SHGs and its federations.

UPSRLM is promoting the CBOs as per the guidelines of NRLM. It is a three-tier structure with SHGs federating into VO (Village Organizations) and VOs federating into CLF (Cluster Level Federations).



The basic unit of the community based organizational set up, which can accommodate 10 to 20 women from economically poor families and abide by certain rules and regulations is called an SHG/ a Self Help group. At least one member from each poor household is to be brought under the SHG network. Special efforts are made to identify and include vulnerable and marginalized households – SCs/STs, single women and women headed households, disabled, landless, migrant labourers, isolated communities and communities living in remote, hilly and disturbed areas. In our pilot locations, a total of 1925 SHGs are functioning.

The middle tier of the three tier organisation set up in a village level is called Village Organization (VO). It has been set up to strengthen the capacity of the poor women in socio- economic development. The apex body of the SRLM three tier community based organisational set up is the cluster level federation (CLF) which is a group of VOs from different panchayats coming together at the cluster level.

As mentioned above, the Since Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Uttar Pradesh were formed by different agencies. This has led to a lack of uniform objective behind the formation of SHGs. We found that at some places the SHGs were so weak, that members were not even aware of their office bearers, the name of their SHG/VO and the reasons for which they joined the SHG network. Oftentimes, it was found that the SHGs weren't aware of the Panchasutra mandated by NRLM and that there were more than one member from the same household in the Self Help Group network. Other issues involved more than one member being a part of the SHGs and women from different Panchayats belonging to the same Self Help Group.

It was also noticed that VO subcommittees formed during the formation of the VO weren't aware of the roles and responsibility to be taken up by them, and that the participation of the VO members in General Body and Executive body meetings was quite subject to their availability, with not much distinction in both the meetings. The weekly and bi-monthly meetings had been quite irregular, even before COVID-19. Ensuring proper CBO election would be helpful in strengthening the network.

Despite all these limitations, pilot locations under the PRI-CBO Convergence Project, during the phase of the project witnessed a sea-change. Systematic capacity building of the community based federations by the community cadre/ CCRPs- through initiatives such as *VO Empowerment Melaa, Haq ka Daba, Weekly Markets, Health Camps, Adult literacy programmes, Animal Vaccination drives, Participatory Assessment of Entitlements and the roll out of the Village Poverty Reduction Plan* led to an increased capacity of the Self help group members in general and VO members in particular. All of this was facilitated by the community cadre - CCRPs.

Name of the District	Number of GPs	No. of SHGs as on March 2021	No. of VOs as on March 2021	No. of CCRPs
Bahraich	10	388	42	40
Banda	10	138	16	18
Basti	10	168	18	22
Chandauli	10	125	13	20
Fatehpur	10	121	16	19
Gorakhpur	10	300	25	29
Mirzapur	10	191	18	22
Sonbhadra	10	374	33	36
Sultanpur	10	110	11	16
Varanasi	10	118	10	20
Total	100	2033	202	242

PRI system in the state

Uttar Pradesh has a three tier Panchayati Raj System. It consists of the Gram Panchayat at the village level, Kshettra Panchayat at the block level and the Zila Panchayat at the district level.

Gram Panchayat:

It is the lowermost tier of the Local Self Government Institution in Uttar Pradesh. The Gram Panchayat constitutes a Sarpanch/ Pradhan and Panches or Ward Members (ranging from nine to fifteen). The number of ward members to be elected is based on the population of the Panchayat area.

Population	Panches/ Ward Members
Upto 1000	Nine
Exceeding 1000 but less than 2000	Eleven
Exceeding 2000 but less than 3000	Thirteen
Exceeding 3000	Fifteen

The ward members of the Gram Panchayat are elected directly from the territorial constituencies in a Gram Panchayat. Each territorial constituency is represented by a ward member. The Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat is also directly elected through persons registered in the electoral rolls for the territorial constituencies of a Panchayat area. The Up-Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat is, however, elected by the ward members of the Gram Panchayat from amongst themselves. There is 33% reservation for women in Gram Panchayats.



**CCRP typing their name on the laptop for the first time
Bahraich**

STORIES OF CCRPs
(Convergence Community Resource Persons)



What do these stories mean ?

What does it mean for women to occupy public spaces, especially in the rural hinterlands of Eastern Uttar Pradesh? What does it mean for, say, Kiran from Chandauli, who got married when she was only 17 and never ventured out of her house's Angan - to actually go to Kerala and expose herself to the system of local governance in that state? Or, for that matter, what does it mean for Aarti, a 32 year old scheduled caste woman in Mudiyari Gram Panchayat, Basti to spearhead convergence between the Self Help Group Network and the local Panchayat in her village despite the 3 fold discrimination faced by her on the lines of caste, gender and region?

For some of the women talked about here, it means freedom, while for some others, it means a foray of possibilities they never even knew existed - but for almost all of the women in the 9 stories written below- it means having an identity of their own. Naila Kabeer, a famous academic working on gender and development, talks about how 'empowerment' is rooted in how people see themselves- their sense of self-worth. This in turn is critically bound up with how they are seen by those around them and their society. A thread that binds all the 9 stories together is precisely this- a change in the self-worth of these women which led to a change in the way the Panchayat and Block functionaries and the community as a whole began to perceive them. This wasn't easy of course. All battles begin at home, as they say, and the same was the case with these women. The most resistance actually came from the family, even as questions were raised by the society about the 'character' of these women when they began going and negotiating with Panchayat members- such as in the case of Roshni from Bundelkhand.

For Urmila, 41 years old, from Belahi Gram Panchayat, Sultanpur District life took a 360 degree turn when she shifted from Varanasi city to Belahi GP in Sultanpur. From being able to exercise agency in her choices and mobility, she became bound by the 4 walls of her home. The project gave her a new lease of life- what kept her going was a thirst to prove herself and a passion for working for the community. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, Urmila had taken hers with the choice of becoming a Convergence Community Resource Person.

In almost all the cases, the reader will observe how there was a change in the world view of these women- how in an attempt to change the community around them, they had to begin by changing themselves. It wasn't easy. Steeped in prejudices of casteism, islamophobia, patriarchy and other forms of social markers, these women, in their journey of transformation, had to challenge many of their belief systems. CCRPs who belonged to two different religions and castes began working with each other, sitting with each other, dining with other, laughing with other and living with other- much to the angst of the community and the Panchayat. Returning to the question we started with- What does it mean for women to occupy public spaces- especially in a feudal, patriarchal, casteist set-up like that of Uttar Pradesh. It means resistance. It means struggle. It means disruption. The stories of these 9 women are as much the stories of love, hope and tenacity as they are of trials and tribulations. By encouraging women to loiter and linger and to simply occupy the public sphere, one disrupts the lines of order and purpose that make women feel out-of-place in a public space, and makes a foray towards laying claim as full citizens to the village's roads, public institutions and Gram Sabhas- grassroots democracy in praxis.

The Pradhan Pati finally had to bend as scores of women were seen marching towards his house in Urna, Bahraich. The Gram Rozgar Sevak in Gopiyan, Bahraich had to give in when he realized that he couldn't merely laugh away the prospect of women engaging in MGNREGS labour. Same is the case with many other figures of authority who had to cede and gave spaces to women collectives. These stories are a testament to the power of collectives. Behind each one is the labour of so many women who just decided that they couldn't continue living the way they did. We hope you enjoy reading these as much as we enjoyed writing these.

‘Contagious Courage, Relentless Efforts, Impactful Results’

The Story of Kiran from Mainpur, Chandauli

Like many other girls in her village, Kiran had dropped out of school after her family decided to discontinue her education. She had just completed eighth standard, when her elder brother, who was in charge of the family, did not want her to go out of the house and restricted her movement within the family and immediate neighbourhood. She got used to the daily routine of the household, taking care of the family and cooking for them. In a few years, she was married in a village 5-6 kms from her native village, named Mainpur in Chandauli District, Uttar Pradesh. Kiran was only 17 when she got married.

After marriage, her routine remained the same, where she spent most of the day within the household, like other women in her husband’s family. Around five years ago, SHGs were being formed in her panchayat and her husband was supportive and encouraged her to join an SHG. Kiran registered herself in the SHG and also encouraged women from her neighborhood to join the SHG. As she could read and write, she had the basic knowledge to maintain the books. She says that the working of SHGs were limited to thrift and credit in the initial years and though her husband did not restrict her from going out, she was hesitant to do anything beyond what other women in the household did.

When the PRI – CBO Convergence project started two years ago, she got to know that there were vacancies for Convergence-Community Resource Persons (CCRP) from the Kudumbashree NRO Mentor Resource Persons (MRPs). With much hesitation, she signed up for it and she believes that this decision was life changing for her. The major difference for her has been in terms of mobility. From being someone who spent most of the time within the household, to being familiar with most of the roads in her Panchayat and block and also being able to travel to Kerala as a part of the project, the transformation has truly been magical. She cherishes her time in Kerala and the exposure she had there in terms of witnessing the infrastructure as well as the activities of Panchayats and SHG women. Coming back to her village, she was keen on working on different rights and entitlements for people in her village. Through her efforts and with support from fellow CCRPs, she has been able to fulfil demands for 100 new Ration cards. They also ensured that the Civil Supplies department cancelled some of the BPL (Below Poverty Line) ration cards of the rich and influential from her villages. In order for the authorities to take action on the issue and build pressure on them, she even called the media. She thinks that if the system is corrupt it is her responsibility, as a citizen, to correct it in ways she can.

Her journey within the SHG network and as a CCRP with the PRI CBO Convergence Project has been socially empowering for her. She is delighted as people in the Block/ Tehsil recognize her now and she has her own identity. Her involvement in the SHG and the project has provided her with a stable income and an accessible credit source. With loans from the SHG, she was able to purchase an auto rickshaw for her husband in Mumbai, to run the family, with this income. After repayment of the first loan, she took another loan and purchased a second vehicle, providing an additional income to the family. Moreover, during the pandemic and nationwide lockdown, it was her income and savings that sustained the family.

Kiran has faced difficulties in working with the Panchayat and other government departments. She recalls an incident when during a conflict with the Pradhan (President) of the panchayat, an FIR (First information Report) was filed against her and her husband along with other CCRPs.

“We (CCRPs) have worked hard to make effective mechanisms for the people in our panchayat, to bridge the gap in availing government schemes and services such as Pension, Job Cards, Ration Cards etc. Eligible beneficiaries have benefited from our efforts. But some people in the panchayat and Pradhan of the Panchayat think that the work the Pradhan was resistant to do in the past 4-5 years of his tenure, has been done by these women in just a few months. There have been incidents in which the Pradhan’s supporters/men have pelted stones at our houses. We were threatened, taunted while walking in the

village in daylight. However, since this incident the fear that was instilled in us from childhood has disappeared. I don't think that now anyone can make me fearful of what I am doing. The good thing that has happened is that now women of my village look up to me and my fellow CCRPs. They come to us for everything, be it personal or a community based issue that requires collective effort. Now, other women too have gathered courage to approach the Pradhan and talk bluntly about anything and everything that concerns them."

Kiran is well aware that it is not going to be an easy journey for her and her fellow CCRPs but despite the everyday struggle and hurdles of working with the Panchayat, she is satisfied with the fact that she receives respect and has her own identity now, at the very least. More than supporting her family, she is delighted that her work is able to bring an impact in others' lives. From being someone who had to drop out of high school and was restricted to the household, Kiran now has greater hopes of visiting different places and even being the Pradhan of her own panchayat.

सबका साथ सबका विकास

समस्त ग्रामवासियों को महाशिवरात्रि, होली, चैत नवरात्रि एवं अम्बेडकर जयंती की हार्दिक शुभकामनायें-

ग्राम सभा मैनपुर से

प्रधान पद हेतु

कर्मठ, ईमानदार एवं सघर्षशील महिला प्रत्याशी

पत्नी **किरण सिंह**

सुरजन सिंह

निवेदक-समस्त सम्मानित ग्रामवासी एवं मतदातागण ।

चन्दना आर्ट पलेबस धिन्दस 8318003199

Kiran Didi went on to contest elections in her Gram Panchayat Mainpur, Chandauli



Ani Chechi, Mentor Resource Person
Enjoying a bonfire get-together during chilly winter evenings in Gorakhpur

'Ek Koshish'

The Story of Santoshi from Sai, Fatehpur



Santoshi from Fatehpur

Santoshi Chowdhary, 38 years old, is a Self Help Group member and a resident of Sai GP, Fatehpur district. Her family includes her husband who is currently unemployed, her children, two daughters and a son. She is the sole breadwinner of her family and works at a nearby factory to earn a living. Santoshi has always been committed to social causes which is what made her join the PRI-CBO Convergence Project in 2018 as a Convergence Community Resource Person (CCRP). The reason she says she got attracted to the project was that it allowed her to follow her passion of helping people.

Her commitment to helping people can be seen from a small instance that took place in her village- Once an SHG member reached out to Santoshi explaining to her the urgent need of money to get her daughter married. Almost overnight, she helped mobilise funds for the wedding and went out of her way to explain the need and urgency of the money to the Village Organization members and get the approval for the loan. Santoshi's go-getter attitude and helpful nature made her a favourite among community members.

With time, the project helped Santoshi understand the power of women collectives - the SHG federation and social unity. The kind of dedication and compassion she showed towards improving the lives of her people was a major reason for her selection in the exposure visit to Kerala. The visit further deepened her belief in working together.

Her journey post the visit not only enhanced her understanding of the SHG network and Panchayat but brought forth personal transformation as well. She gave up on her habit of chewing tobacco. After coming back to her village from Kerala, the first initiative she took was to conduct a joint meeting of Panchayat representatives, SHG members and frontline workers – Anganwadi teacher, school teachers and ASHAs to share her learnings on the functioning of the panchayats in Kerala in convergence with SHG network and line departments. Santoshi states that, *“she took the initiative of the meeting so that conversations could get started on how they all could work together for the development of their village.”*

This was the beginning of her voyage for change in her village. With her passion to bring change in her village, Santoshi motivated members of the Jai Santoshi Maa Village organisation (VO) to initiate discussions on social issues persisting in the Gram Panchayat.

She suggested that they organise a literacy campaign for SHG women who have aspirations to read and write. She was happy to see the VO leaders taking the lead in identifying resource persons. Furthermore, her proposal for the formation of Balsabha- a children’s group participating in issues of concern to them- was happily accepted by the VO and they also took the responsibility to monitor the group and even allocated a small fund for the children’s use. During the time of COVID – 19 pandemic, she extended her support in providing food relief to people in her village who were struggling and motivated others to contribute items for the community kitchen being run for the migrants. She has selflessly worked for her community and vows to do that throughout her life. On being asked how she does it ? She says with a smile, *“Mein kisi ko bhi bhookha ya dukhi nahi dekh sakti, jo ban padta hain vo karti hun.”* Through the PRI- CBO convergence project women like Santoshi have gained a platform to push their boundaries and spread their wings.

Breaking Barriers

The Story of Aarti from Mudiyari, Basti

Aarti, 32 years old from Thanwa Mudiyari Gram panchayat, in Basti district, was a homemaker. She could not complete her education due to her family's financial condition and like many other girls in her village, she got married at a young age. She belongs to a vulnerable community and lives in a Kacha house with her two children and in-laws. Her husband was the only earning member in the family and migrated to Punjab in search of better work opportunities.

Aarti became a part of the SHG network in 2016, she attended meetings and actively participated in SHG proceedings. She was not educated but was always vocal about her thoughts and ideas, being a SHG member increased her mobility and gave her the platform to put forward her thoughts and interact with people. Within a few months, she was elected as SHG and VO office bearer. Later, in 2018 she was elected as CLF office bearer. The position of CLF office bearer opened doors for new opportunities and experiences. She got a chance to attend different training and meetings in various districts. This further helped her grow personally. Even though she experienced personal growth, her social and economic status remained the same. In 2018, during the commencement of the PRI CBO Convergence Project in Kudraha block, Aarti was selected as a Convergence Community Resource Person (CCRP), the position of being a CCRP changed her life in many ways.

The role of a CCRP required Aarti to work closely and engage with SHG/VO members, Panchayat members, line departments and block officials. The initial days were very difficult for her due to the apathy of government officials and behaviour of people from her panchayat, who often ridiculed her and did not believe in SHG women working together with the Panchayat. Aarti's caste identity made things more difficult as she received discriminatory treatment from upper caste SHG women. In one such incident, she was treated differently by her fellow CCRP's mother, during a VO meeting. These experiences made her realise that she needs to work harder to change the mindset of people around her.

Aarti, at first, was reluctant to speak with block officials. As she continued working, she gained knowledge about different stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities. Increased knowledge built her confidence and she began interacting and working closely with the Panchayat members, Secretary, front line workers and other stakeholders. The role of CCRP and the various training received over the course of the Project further helped in building her capacity and confidence. Now, she has been actively involved and working hard to fulfil various demands and needs of the people in her panchayat. With the support of the Panchayat President and VO members, Aarti played an important role in mobilising and setting up a weekly market in her panchayat. People now acknowledge her efforts and ability to be able to help them. She shares a good relationship with people in her panchayat and people resort to her for any kind of help. She guides them and motivates them to talk about their issues to the Panchayat President.

Aarti says that people from her community are treated differently. Despite this social disadvantage, she has worked hard and brought small but important changes in her panchayat. Aarti understands that people treat her differently due to her caste identity but she understands her responsibility of working for the overall well-being of the panchayat and changing people's perceptions in this process. She is also now capable of adding to the household income and taking care of household expenses. Her hard earned income supported her family during the pandemic and her family is grateful for that. They feel that her work brings respect and pride to other members of the family in her house.

Aarti aims to create awareness among people from her community about their rights and responsibilities. Her Panchayat does not have a public school because upper caste people have captured the panchayat's land. In this scenario, people from vulnerable households are at a loss as they cannot afford to send their children to private schools and are forced to send their children to other far off panchayats to educate them. Aarti hopes that someday she will be capable enough to collectivise people and encourage them to voice their opinions and take action against such oppression. She understands that it is going to be a difficult journey to fight against people from privileged communities because, in her words, 'Bagh bagh hota hai aur billi billi hoti hai'

At the same time, she says, '*Jaise apni zindagi hai waise bacho ki zindagi nahi honi chahiye*' and in order to lift their social status they need to educate their children. Aarti thus hopes to create awareness and strengthen people from her panchayat to voice their opinions and take charge of their lives.



Inauguration of Literacy classes by women elected representatives in Mudiyari, Basti .

Aarti is the one draped in yellow saree.

Traversing the path of Development with Perseverance

The Story of Sangeeta Devi and Sanju Kumari from Chandauli

*“Being a woman and spending 24*7 within the four boundaries of the house with taunts, despite investing everything in your family is something that only a woman would understand. It’s not that I don’t want to do something and live my life to the fullest, but it is that the responsibilities of a woman never end. Before marriage I was a daughter and a sister, after marriage I am someone’s wife and a mother. Who I am as an individual? This was never asked to me. Only after working as a CCRP, I feel I have gained an identity of my own. Today not only am I widely known and recognised as an individual rather than any family member’s (male) wife/ sister/ daughter but also contribute more in household expenses and decision making”. - Sangeeta Devi*

Following the Faded Dream...

Achievements matter for individuals based on the privileges they have experienced in their lives. For Sangeeta Devi, stepping out of her home all alone and talking to the Pradhan (Village Head) for the first time was a big achievement in her life, whereas for Sanju Kumari, having a meeting with Panchayat Secretary and Medical Officer In-charge (MoIC) for organizing a health camp in her village was a motivating factor to look forward to pursue her faded dream. Both the women hail from different social backgrounds- yet have faced similar circumstances because of being married at a very young age.

Sangeeta Devi, a 33 year old woman who once had a dream to be a teacher someday, completed her education till 5th class and got married at a very young due to financial problems at her home, *“Hamaare yahan ladkiyon ki shaadi itni jaldi kar di jaati hai kyunki ladkiyan ghar ki bojh hain aur jitni jaldi shaadi hogi utna jaldi ladki ke baap ke sir se bojh utrega”* Sangeeta Devi explains. Sanju Kumari, who is 27 years old, was married at the age of twenty and became a part of the SHG network in 2017. She holds a Master’s degree in Hindi from Banaras Hindu University. She believes that even though the Government tries to reach out to people through different schemes in order to eliminate the disparity in the society, it becomes impossible to achieve it due to lack of effective mechanisms and efficient institutions. Sanju Kumari adds that *“Until we as an individual try to be considerate towards others and true to ourselves, we can’t change the society as the society is run by individuals.”*

Both these women have different skills but similar enthusiasm towards their work. Sangeeta Devi, is a good community mobilizer and a fine orator with a polite nature, ensures participation from different hamlets, communities and genders, whereas, Sanju Kumari, is good at articulation, writing, negotiation and makes sure that every process and meeting with officials is noted and conducted formally. Both of them form a great team and work together to facilitate the project activities in their Panchayat.

Sangeeta Devi, was always hesitant to talk to any member of the Panchayat especially male members. She joined her SHG in 2015 and it was then that for the first time, that she came out of her home and was exposed to other women members in her neighbourhood. However, she expresses that despite becoming a SHG member, she would go to SHG meetings weekly, just give her savings and return back home.

“Only in 2018 when I became a CCRP as part of the PRI-CBO Convergence Project, I started going outside frequently. Earlier, I couldn’t get the time to think about what I wanted in life but now after working with

the project, with the help of Kudumbashree NRO Mentor and Sanju Didi (Co-CCRP) I have been able to understand what I want and I am trying to work towards it; living a life inside the house, just cooking and cleaning is not what I want to do in life. I want to go out, talk to people and live a life like people do or should in general."

Sangeet devi and Sanju Kumari work as CCRPs in Shikarganj Gram Panchayat, Chandauli district in Uttar Pradesh. It was very difficult for them when they started their work as a CCRP. *"People used to continuously taunt and criticise us for roaming around in village (for work)- we were called characterless, Ghumakkad and many other things that disregarded our hard work and dignity but gradually after one and a half years of work, when people started getting benefits and Pradhan of the Panchayat started recognizing our presence, people now give respect. Continuous engagement with village people has given us the identity of 'CCRP Didi', which we feel that we have earned on our own and nobody now calls us by our Husband's name."* Further Sangeet devi adds, *"I have redefined my lost identity and whenever I walk through the streets, the same people who once taunted me for work now come to me to seek information to avail the schemes."*

Recently, an anti alcoholism campaign was started in the Panchayat where both the CCRPs with the help Pradhan and Village Organization (VO), conducted a rally and street play to create awareness among the people in the Panchayat. Sangeeta devi, with her strong mobilisation skills and Sanju Kumari with her negotiation power made the perfect team. This marked the first women led campaign in the Panchayat. For both the CCRPs, it was a proud moment as they were able to ensure inclusive participation from all and work towards a major issue of the Panchayat.



Sangeeta Devi and Sanju Kumari holding the banner during rally for 'anti alcohol campaign' along with the Panchayat Pradhan and members of the Panchayat

After becoming a CCRP and working with the project, both Sangeeta and Sanju decided to follow their unfulfilled dreams. Experiencing difficulties and working for the development of their panchayat, they realized that they can break the imposed social norms, which they had accepted earlier in the name of fate and Sangeeta started taking classes for adolescent girls where she conducts classes to educate them on health, hygiene, with support from the Pradhan, health department and other front-line workers. Similarly, Sanju looks forward to pursuing her interest and continuing education.



PGSRD (Public Goods Services and Resource Development) mapping in Dumri Khas GP, Sardarnagar Block, Gorakhpur

Three of the CCRPs recollected that when the SHGs had started, they used to discuss the mandate of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and Pancha Sutra. "It was only after the intervention of Kudumbashree NRO that we started discussing the issues that we were facing in their community." Initially they felt that there was no use doing the work of a CCRP because like other work this too would have little money and uncertain payment. But gradually they found a reason to work notwithstanding these reasons.

"Earlier we didn't know how to deal with the issues that were there in the SHGs and VO. Once the mentors came to the panchayat, they shared their experiences with the members and discussed the possible way forward with them and us. We now know about the different schemes, how to collect the necessary data for these and make demands to the Panchayat."

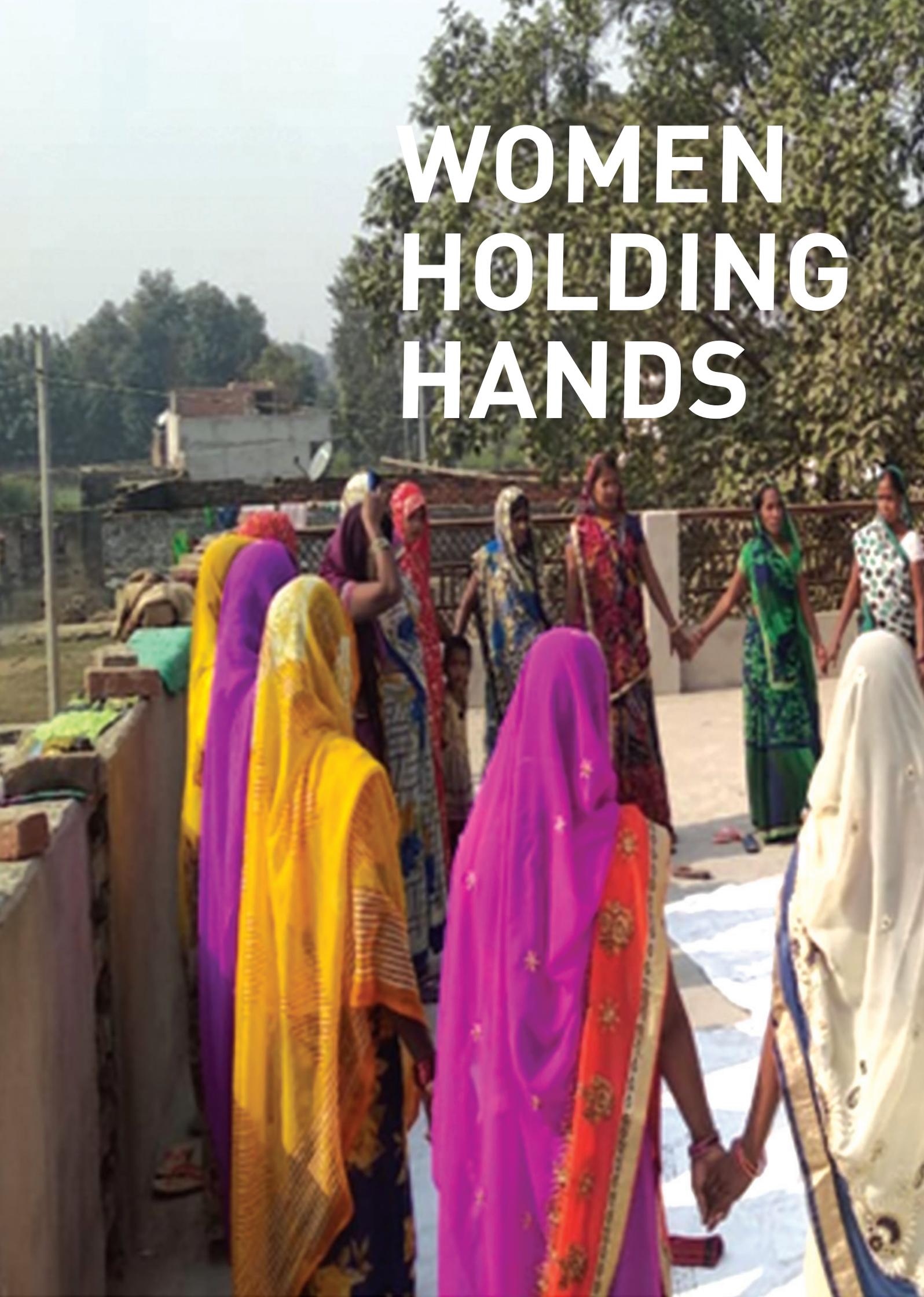
As women who never ventured out of their homes alone, being able to approach the panchayat and discuss their issues with them was a huge achievement, which came with an increased sense of self confidence. Slowly, we learned and made progress with the help of our mentor. After sometime we were handed over big responsibilities such as arranging a collective wedding at the block level.

On 14th November 2019, a collective wedding function was successfully held and 23 couples were identified and provided with all the necessary support and resources. Although it is a very general idea to have such a function, the important thing here was that the two of the couples who got married were identified and helped by the CCRPs of Gajapur panchayat. *"There are more than hundred panchayats in a block and a lot of applications were submitted. It was a challenge for us to not only identify the poorest family from the Panchayat but also a suitable groom for the bride. However, with the help of other SHG members and VO leaders, we succeeded in doing so. Of course, a mentor from Kudumbashree (NRO) was always available for providing any necessary handholding support."*



A still from the collective wedding that Sangeetha Devi helped organize in Arajiline, Varanasi

WOMEN HOLDING HANDS





Varanasi

Continued...

Mentor Resource Person Padmini got the information from the Assistant Development Officer at the block office and shared it with the CCRPs, they further discussed the issue with the community members and the VO. This resulted in the marriage of two poorest couples with the help of other Government departments. The marriage ceremony took place in the Arajiline Block office hall in the presence of MLA (Sevapuri), MLA (Rohaniya), Block Panchayat President, BDO (Block Development Officer), ADO (Assistant Development Officer) and other block officials. Apart from these officials, there were hundreds of the couple's relatives and other public gathered to see this one of a kind function. A place that only had male members and officials in attendance previously, now had women too. From the very beginning of the function to the end the CCRPs made sure that all the 23 couples were well provided for. All the couples were provided essential items for completion of the wedding. The Uttar Pradesh government had gifted dresses for couples, an anklet (Padasaram), fan, pressure cooker, wooden stand, utensils, mobile phone, Rs. 35,000 along with other small gifts.

This instance brought to light that if women are provided with little support and motivation, they can be made capable to strategically plan anything for their community and the panchayat for that matter. As Sangeetha Devi, Urmila Patel, Hosila Devi put it, *"We were very nervous when Padmini didi (mentor) asked us to identify the couple and prioritise them as there were only two couples allowed from our Panchayat. However, with the help of other SHG members and community people we paid attention to every little concern they had and finally narrowed down to two of the poorest families. We have never been given such an opportunity to go out and work in our Panchayat and this task was full of challenges and hurdles (within our own family and in the Panchayat too) but we liked it as it helped us explore what kind of problems one may have in fixing the wedding of their son and daughters. We were taunted by the people for going to someone's house. Men and women accused us of getting money (brokerage) from the whole thing but we knew that what we were doing was important as it was a matter of two souls. Also, at every step, our mentor was available on call. At the end, ADO sir and secretary sir applauded us for facilitating the function in such a way. This was possible all because of our BMMU team and mentor Padmini didi"*. Talking about their relationship with the Panchayat, CCRPs mark out the change in approach that was initiated with the intervention of Kudumbashree NRO. *"We have never felt so excited and nervous at the same time. However, it was for sure a moment to take a pause for ourselves and give a thought about the life we were living."*

The story of these CCRPs makes us believe that if women are given freedom and opportunities, they can ensure social benefits for their families and their community including awareness on existing social problems and the way to go about these problems. Under the guidance of these CCRPs, Gajapur Panchayat's VOs are doing quite well and holding proper meetings within the mandate of NRLM.

Roshni; A Ray of Hope

The Story of Roshni Devi from Banda

Under the hot sun, stands a young woman waiting outside the bank to get an Aadhar card made for two young children of an SHG member to enable the children to avail the benefits of scholarship. Looking at the sun setting, she hurriedly glances at the watch; it's already 5o' clock. She requests the staff to fasten the process to reach home on time and save herself from his anger.

This young girl is 23 years old Roshni Devi hailing from Bundelkhand region in Eastern Uttar Pradesh; who got married while completing her B.A second year. After coming to her husband's place, for the next 2-3 years her in-law's did not let her go out anywhere nor did they give her any money for essentials. She could not pursue her education after that. However, during that time Self- Help Groups (SHGs) were getting formed by the National Rural Livelihood Mission in her Panchayat. So these women led groups became her excuse to start going out of the house. Being the most educated, Roshni was asked by the Village Organization; the second tier of the SHG federation, to become the VO accountant. Since the payment was inconsistent she was asked by her husband to leave everything and sit at home.

When one door closed for her, another opened up with a new opportunity. A new project called Panchayati Raj Institutions- Community Based Organization Convergence came, as part of which she got the chance to work as a convergence- community resource person. Roshni acted as a link between the Panchayat and SHG members. The work entailed bringing the two institutions together for the development of the village and involving the SHGs in helping the Gram Panchayats in implementation of schemes and other development works. Roshni also assisted the SHG members in accessing their entitlements like pension, ration card, job card etc. For this, Roshni was required to coordinate and liaison with the Panchayat Pradhan, lekhpal (book keeper), secretary and other village elders. However, this journey of bringing change in her village was not easy and came at a personal cost where she has faced challenges not just with the work but with dealing with people's judgemental mindset as well.

This one incident is an example of her struggle and the challenges she has had to face. *"Just a few days back I was applying for an old age pension for an old amma who doesn't have any children. The newly appointed lekhpal made the income certificate of Rs 50,000. However, to be able to get benefits of the pension the eligibility criterion is such that the income should be Rs 46,000 or less than that. Hence, I met the lekhpal couple of times requesting him to make changes in the income certificate. While visiting the Panchayat, the lekhpal asked for my whereabouts from a few village elders. The next day, my father in law was informed by the village elders and Kotedar that the lekhpal was looking for his daughter in law. The same was conveyed in a malicious way to point fingers at my character. The news was then passed on to my husband who asked me to stop working and stay at home to take care of the family,"* Roshni recounts.

Roshni is not the first woman facing this kind of situation at home. There are thousands of women struggling to carve a space for themselves in their respective homes and society. Like in Roshni's case, this seed of doubt was actually implanted by the people within the society whose mindset was embedded in deep patriarchal values.

Uttar Pradesh, State Rural Livelihood Mission - Block Mission Manager, Badokhar Khurd block, Banda district, Rakesh Mishra shares his experience: *"I have tried to give a chance to young women to come forward and become a community resource person. However, the people in the village don't let them come forward. Constant poking and taunting really affects the women's morale; Phalane ki bahu phone pe baat karti rehti hain, sara time gaon mein ghoomti hain (XYZ's daughter-in-law does no work and keeps roaming around). Listening to all this really impacts the woman and her family resulting in drop outs. There are so many educated and talented women in rural areas who are sitting at home because of*



Roshni Devi from Banda, smiling ear to ear

society's fear. We need to change the perception so that more young women come forward." In society there is a constant urge to control the agency of women as it is felt that if they are not kept in control then "haath se nikal jayengi ya havi ho jayengi." Women like Roshni who try to push themselves to achieve their dreams are often ridiculed and reduced to mere gossip. Fearing such humiliation and insult many women tend to leave their dreams and get stuck within the four walls. But with constant encouragement from the Mentor Resource Person (Sangeeta) and the exposure visit to Kerala for which she fought and went- Roshni has found the courage to continue her dream of helping the people of her village and try to bring a change in the attitude of people within the village towards women. It is young women like Roshni- who are relentlessly pushing their boundaries and realising their potential- who end up changing the society.

Reclaiming Identity And Spaces

The Story of Sheeba Devi from Bahraich

“Hum aapse yeh nahi keh rahe hai ki aap apni jeb se kuch dijiye. Lekin jo kagaz aapke paas jama hai uspar aap kuch karyavahi toh kar sakte hai. Aur usi hak se hum aapse yeh jankari bhi le sakte hai ki jo avedan aapko diye the uska kya hua.”

“We are not demanding any money from you but the least you can do is to launch an enquiry into the documents that have been submitted to you. And it is with this right that we are asking for information from you on the status of the application we submitted to you.”



Sheeba presenting her village's map to the team

These were the words of Sheeba Parveen, a Convergence Community Resource Person (CCRP), who is frequently seen at the Block office navigating her ways to get bureaucratic work done, whether it is getting a list of pension beneficiaries or getting job cards issued.

Sheeba is 30 years old and is the second youngest amongst 9 siblings. She was born and brought up in Gopia Panchayat, Bahraich with her Abbu (Dad) being the breadwinner and taking up the responsibility of the family.

Facing hardships at home, she completed her bachelors staying with her aunt in Bahraich. Recounting the reasons for not continuing her studies further, she shares, *“Humne BA tak hi padhai kiya. Pata hi nahi tha ki naukari karna padega. Achey-achey padhe likhe hai unke naukari nahi mili toh humne socha hume kaha naukari milegi, humko naukari milna bhi mushkil tha.”*

She found her inspiration working for her village from her Appi (elder sister), who used to teach women and children in the village. Sheeba always felt a void as she couldn't step out of the house even after completing her graduation. It was in the year 2017 that she got introduced to the SHG collectives formed as part of the Uttar Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission. A close relative sought her help for bookkeeping in SHG and later, in 2018, she joined one of the SHGs.

“Padh likh kar ghar me baith jao toh koi faida nahi hai. Humne bhi socha ki thoda bahar niklenge, jankari hogi toh acha hoga. Aur bahar nikelnge tabhi toh agey bhadenge”

She meticulously worked as a Samuh Sakhi for 5 months but couldn't continue because of irregular payment and people's judgement. Wearing a hijab would make people assume that she won't be able to work outside the realm of her house. *“Humare Ghar me parda hota hai. Aur humare Abbu Silai karte the. Humari Appi padhati bhi thi aur Silai bhi karti thi. Abbu nahi rahe toh hum silai se apney ghar ka kharcha chalte the – Din raat humari machine chalti thi. Abhi bhi hum din me kaam karte hai aur raat me silai karte hai. Humari 2 behne ghar se bahar nahi nikalti thi. Jab hum CCRP baney toh hum apni behen ko bhi bahar saath lekar jaane lage. Voh 2-3 baar humare saath meeting me bhi aayi hai.”*

She got to know about the work of Convergence Community Resource Person (CCRP) after selection was completed in her Panchayat. It was only after one CCRP out of the four selected dropped out that she came in contact with the mentor and then started working as a CCRP. She participated in all the meetings

where she learnt about the Panchayat, the role of women's collectives in development of the Panchayat. As part of the adult literacy classes initiative in her GP, she started teaching women to read and write, it also included women who weren't part of regular SHG meetings. She recounts how the attitude of women changed towards her. In earlier days, the attitude of women was indifferent towards her, she also had to face abuses from the office-bearer of a defunct VO as she tried motivating the women to conduct regular meetings. According to the Kudumbashree NRO Mentor Resource Person, Sato didi, Sheeba focused on attending and ensuring that SHG meetings took place regularly.

"Pehle hum Block bas doctor ko dikhane jatey the. Phir hum block ke afsar ke pass avedan lekar janey lagey. Phir Samuh se judey toh block bhi jana pada aur PRI CBO Convergence Project se judey toh Pradhan aur Secretary ko bhi janney lagey aur block pe jaane lage."

("Earlier we used to go to the block just to visit the doctor for illness, then we gradually started going to the hospital taking applications for Ayushman Bharat. Then when we got associated with the SHG network and the PRI-CBO Convergence project, not only did we start visiting the blocks for other official purposes, but also started talking to the Panchayat President and Secretary")

During lockdown in 2020, due to the pandemic, Sheeba, along with 2 other CCRPs collected and placed



demands for work under MGNREGA. On 14th May, 150 people started working under MGNREGA, out of which 78 were women. She feels that this achievement was the result of the demand raised by them earlier that year.

“Gao ke Aadmiyo ko lagta tha ki agar mahilao ke kaam par hasenge toh voh chup hokar baith jayengi. Mahilao ko kaam aur sammaan dono mila aur MGNREGS ke tahat humari didi ne Rs 6000 tak kamaya.”

(“Earlier, men of the village used to think that if they laughed at the work women did as part of MGNREGS, the women would sit silently not doing any work. But now, not only do the work of MGNREGS, but they also gain respect and recognition for it, in addition to earning upto Rs 6000.”)

Taking her learning ahead, she wants to work outside her Panchayat and believes that she has gained the trust of her Ammi (Mom) while working as CCRP. She is confident and now feels that there are countless opportunities for her to move forward in life. Her journey as a CCRP has given her the strength to take up challenges and to explore and experience life outside her Panchayat as well.

“Hum padhe likhe the par humhe Gram Sabha ke barey me nahi pata tha kyunki gaon me hota hi nahi tha toh pata kaise hota. Hume Yojnao ke bare me pata chala toh hum SHG ke bahar ki mahilao ke saath bhi charcha kar paye.”



Living Dreams, Long Lost

The Story of Urmila, CCRP, Belahi GP, Sultanpur



Urmila, CCRP (Belahi GP, Sultanpur)

Urmila, 41 years old, from Belahi Gram Panchayat, Sultanpur District was born and brought up in the city of Varanasi. She was the eldest child from among 6 siblings. She completed her education till class 8 and was married off at the age of 15. Her father tried and resisted her grandmother's decision of getting Urmila married, he wanted her to study further but he failed and had to get her married. Life in Varanasi was very different, she could make choices for herself but things had changed after marriage. In the first year of marriage, she gave birth to her first child and in the next few years other three kids were born. She got busy raising kids and looking after the family. She forgot about her dreams and what she wanted in life.

In her early 20s she was offered the role of ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) in the health centre of her Panchayat, as she was educated. She saw this as an opportunity to move out of the four walls and work and build her identity. Everyone in the Panchayat recommended her name but her mother in law refused and said " *The position of ANM will require her to help women in deliveries and clean blood, it is a menial job and will ruin the family's image.*" During days when making ends meet was difficult, her mother in law would ask her to go to another person's farm and work as a daily wage worker but she was not allowed to interact with others. Around 15 years ago she joined a SHG formed by an NGO (Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojina) but was not an active member.

A big change came in her life in 2018, as she became a part of another SHG (Hari Om SHG) formed by NRLM. Since she was educated, she was elected as the president of the SHG. She started attending SHG and VO meetings. During this period, her family was struggling financially and she was able to support them through loans taken from SHG. On the one hand, her in-laws and children were not very supportive of her and on the other hand she was often ridiculed in SHG meetings due to her caste position. Despite this, Urmila did not remain quiet and took up the issue in VO meetings and now she feels that with time things have changed for the better. *“Earlier people would not agree to conduct meetings in my house but now things have changed.”*

In 2018, Urmila got to know that three women from her Panchayat were attending training as part of the PRI CBO Convergence Project. She was intrigued and decided to go along with them the next day. She attended the second last day of the 6 days training and was fascinated by the discussions going on in the training. She requested the Mentor, if she could join as a CCRP and was selected later. In Urmila’s words, *“Didi was very impressed with my enthusiasm and gave me the opportunity to work and since that day I have never looked back, I am happily working today, the three other CCRPs from my village resigned. I also struggled during the initial days but I always wanted to do something on my own, I kept trying hard and now I see myself growing. When I joined as a CCRP I could not even write well but today I support other CCRPs in writing reports.”*

During the 2018 GPDP Gram sabha, Urmila had met with an accident and had broken her leg. This was the time when they had to mobilize people for Gram sabha and also handover VPRP to the Gram Panchayat President in the Gram Sabha. Other CCRPs were not very confident to stand in front of the crowd and discuss the plan. So the onus of mobilizing people and attending the Gram Sabha fell on Urmila. She did it with a plaster on her leg. She was also scared at first as it was her first Gram Sabha but she knew she had to speak for herself and her people. She recalls the time when she was not allowed to speak to anyone but today she speaks confidently to the GP President, she interacts on a daily basis with the Panchayat secretary and also does not hesitate to raise concerns about her Panchayat with the Block development officer (BDO).

Urmila feels that working as a CCRP in the Panchayat not only gives her the joy of working for the people but also brings respect both in personal and community space. Women and people in the village approach her with their needs and demands. She motivates them to raise their voice for themselves. With her efforts and support from others, she was able to initiate a weekly market in her village. A lot of people were sceptical at first and said that nothing in the village would ever change but through her continuous efforts and dedication she was able to make small changes and shift people’s thoughts and ideas. She successfully initiated the weekly market which has been running for more than 45 days.

To Urmila, the most important thing is that she could step out of her house at her age and improve her life, and beyond that, she could also contribute to the process of improving many other lives. She enjoys her part in the process and says she never wants to stop. She says that *“I, along with others, will ensure that people’s voices are heard and Gram sabhas take place in our village every year.”* She believes that life has planned better things for her and she will keep working hard for it.

You are never too small to become the change maker

The Story of Sunita Devi, Aghault GP, Mirzapur District

Previous Life

Sunita Devi belongs to the Bind Basti of Aghauli Gram Panchayat (the population about 3,297) is 3 km away from Nagarcity Block of Mirzapur District. She and her husband were landless labourers (who work on other lands). They both worked hard to earn their daily bread. At times when there was no work, her husband used to go out to Mirzapur city and work as a construction worker and Sunita Devi stayed in the village to take care of her family. Her life struggles had taken shape after 2008 due to the sudden death of her husband- leaving a daughter and a son behind. After his death, she became the sole breadwinner of her family. Since her husband expired only a few years after the marriage, her community started passing comments like “*She had eaten up her husband at such a young age*”.

Even after she was surrounded by financial crisis and social stigma, she never lost hope and worked harder to fulfil the needs of her family. Along with working as a laborer in a farm, she also started stitching clothes in a tailoring shop.

Silver Lining

In the year 2016, UPSRLM were forming the SHG groups under the guidelines of NRLM to empower the women financially and socially. Sunita Devi also joined and became the member of *Shankar Prerna Mahila Samuh* which was under a VO called *Lakshya Mahila Prerna Gram Sangathan*.

As she didn't get the support from other family members, the SHG members helped her out by arranging for a vacancy in the school for a watchmen cum sweeper so that a stable source of income could be fixed for her. Along with that, she also continued working as a tailor. Since she had studied till 5th standard, she knew how to read and write and helped her SHG members with book-keeping and other document related work.

Knowledge is Power - Commencement of Convergence Project

For the CCRP selection, a General Body Meeting was called by the mentor in the year 2018, as part of which the mentor oriented them about the project and also discussed the roles and responsibilities of the CCRP. Owing to her active participation, the VO members suggested her name for the selection process.

After the trainings, department visits and meetings with different officials like Panchayati Raj ADO (Assistant Development Officer) for SBM (Swachh Bharat Mission), Samaj Kalyan ADO for Pension, Gramin Rozgar Sewak for Job Card (MGNREGA), Anganwadi Center (ICDS)'s officer at the block level, she became well aware of various schemes and the democratic processes in a Panchayat. Sunita Devi along with members of her VO decided to meet PRI members to ask about the date of the Gram Sabha for GPDP (Gram Panchayat's Development Plan) but the PRI members refused to mention the date citing that it was the business of the male ward members and not that of females. Despite this, the women were determined that they wanted to be the part of the Gram Sabha and submit their demands. So, under the guidance of the Mentor Resource Person/ mentor, she called for a general body meeting in which they collected some data like entitlement demands - MGNREGA, PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), SBM, Pension (Old age and Widow) and for public goods and resource development - hand Pump, drainage, roads and VO office, and prepared a demand plan. This time they first went to BDO (Block Development Officer) with the application from both VOs addressing that the Panchayat didn't accept their demand. The

BDO then ordered the PRI body to organise the Gram Sabha by issuing an official letter. As per the order, a Gram Sabha was organised in the presence of Pradhan, Secretary, Gramin Rozgar Sewak, ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists), VO members, CCRPs and SHG women. 170 people participated out of which 150 were women.

The biggest achievement for the GP that year was that due to the project, CCRP and VO members became well informed about the relevance of Gram Sabha and could spread awareness to families on various entitlements. This also resulted in a shift in the mentality of the community who started seeing leadership in women and started to acknowledge their right to demand in Gram Sabhas. Through this, the women of Aghauli Gram Panchayat had proved that "Knowledge is the power". In the beginning of the year 2019, the entitlement demand plans of the community members submitted in the GPDP Gram Sabha saw some major achievements like that of job cards (98), old age pensions (12), widow pensions (2) and SBM toilets (75). For the first time, Sunita Devi's hard work was appreciated by VO members and a sense of belief and confidence in her work was established in the community. This hard work also exposed her to some negative demeaning comments by a few others.

Later that year, during one of the VO meetings, a major issue was highlighted by two VOs. This issue was of the common road which connected the GP to the marketplace. This road was pointed out as an unsafe road for women since there were very few streetlights and many groups of men used to frequently gamble and even tease school girls there. Even though women knew about this, no initiative had been taken till then to address the issue. Sunita Devi decided to raise this issue and work on it with the collective strength of all the members of the VO.

To begin with, the issue was discussed among the CCRP team under the guidance of the mentors/ Mentor Resource Person. A conclusion was reached and it was decided that a letter would be prepared by the group to submit in the police station so that a procedure could be followed in the case. After the request was made, a group of police men and women did several rounds of the area for a month which resulted in a decrease in the number of eve teasing and gambling cases. Today, after continuous intervention by women with departmental support, most of such incidents have ended, providing a great sense of relief in the community.

In addition, during the Village Poverty Reduction Plan preparation- a demand plan generated by the Self Help Group network- for 2020-2021, two VOs prepared a common letter requesting the GP for the formation of a monitoring committee called *Mahila Commando* which would include the Pradhan, three village elderly, Police men and all SHG members.

Sunita Devi, the breadwinner of her family, who had only studied till 5th standard became the voice of the women in this committee and in her community.

"Perna ne mujhe aarthik roop se sashakt kara toh wahi PRI CBO Convergence Project ne mera samaaj mai naam dilaane mai. Pehle mujhe log mere pati ke naam se jante the, lekin abhi mujhe log mere naam se jante hai aur izzat bhi dete hai, yahi mere liye bahut hai."



Community led literacy initiative in Varanasi



Aajeevika
National Rural Livelihoods Mission
Government of India



Kudumbashree
Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission
Government of Kerala

Kudumbashree-National Resource Organisation