

ORDINARY WOMEN | EXTRA ORDINARY

Stories



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Preface

Kudumbashree (Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission) started its interventions in the area of women empowerment by bringing neighbourhood groups to the focus of dialogue on local development. Through its years of work, the focus has been on strengthening relations between community based organisations and local self governments to strengthen local democracy. Kudumbashree's work took a centre stage when it was recognised as a National Resource Organisation (NRO) by Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India in 2012 to share best experiences of participatory governance and livelihood promotion. Inspired from the demonstration of democratic decentralisation and participatory governance in Kerala, the Panchayati Raj Institutions - Community Based Organisations (PRI-CBO) Convergence project was conceived in 2013 and has been implemented in 11 states of Assam, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh.

One of the most crucial strategies of Kudumbashree NRO has been in building a pool of community practitioners from the existing community leaders who provide the support in project implementation across partner states. **Known as Mentors**, these women are former chairpersons of their community federations in Kerala who have represented vast community of women and have worked towards their development. Working in unfamiliar landscapes, these women have struggled and excelled in empowering women from different socio-cultural background. The project's success has not only been in establishing an active community participation at the grassroot level but also in creating an internal resource pool for the State Rural Livelihoods Missions. This internal resource pool represents the cream of community foot soldiers who are trained to take higher responsibility in the scaled up areas. **Known as Internal Mentors**, these women have been instrumental in creating an impact on thousands of women who are today active participants in the local democracy.

The book, '**Ordinary Women Extraordinary Stories**' talks about journey of 25 such women who have worked in different states of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh. The stories talk about their journey of climbing up the ladder from a Self Help Group member to a community leader and now as a project Mentor. The book is an accolade of experiences and learnings of these women who were once confined to four walls but today are breaking all boundaries.

Executive Director
Shri. S. Harikishore

TRIPURA

TRIPURA



MENTORING CHANGE AGENTS FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

The satisfaction I derive out of this work is something I can never explain in words - Bindu Sanoj

The story of Bindu Sanoj offers life lessons for many aspiring young women who dream of a successful career. In the year 1998, Bindu joined an 'Ayalkootam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in her village. She soon became an active participant in the SHG activities. In the year 2005, she got selected as the chairperson of the Community Development Society (CDS) in Thidanadu Panchayat of Kottayam district and continued to work for ten years.

In the year 2015, Bindu was posted as a Mentor in Odisha to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI - CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. Till then, Bindu had no exposure to the world outside Kerala. It took a while for her to understand the challenges faced by communities in the backward tribal villages of Odisha. She recollects, 'Those were challenging times. I worked with communities who lived in abject poverty. Women knew nothing about the Gram Panchayat. However, I took it upon myself to work for the development of tribal women.'

During the initial days, Bindu attended several SHG meetings to help women understand the importance of female participation in the Gram Sabhas. As Bindu couldn't speak Hindi, she would conduct activities to motivate women. Bindu recollects, 'Women used to think that the panchayat is only meant for men. I told them that anyone above the age of 18 years, irrespective of their gender can attend a Gram Sabha. I made them understand that women need to speak

up about their problems.' Bindu is glad that today women in Odisha raise their voices to claim their entitlements. The panchayat and the SHG women work in tandem towards the development of villages. An articulate Bindu says, 'The purpose of any SHG is to empower women and alleviate poverty. I have realised, when women unitedly speak up about their problems, the panchayat officials pay attention.'

With the experience she gained in Odisha, Bindu was all set to work as a Mentor under the same project in Tripura (in the year 2017). She soon realised that people in the Northeast are very enthusiastic and supportive. She says, 'While we were doing Resource Mapping (of the villages), even the MLA of the constituency joined us.'

“Mahilaon ko ye sikhana zaroori hai ki apas mein ekta chahiye. Saat milke kiya toh koi bhi kam ho sakta hai”

(It is important to teach women to stay united. Things happen when women stay together)

Other political figures were also interested in our work. I have not seen this in any other place. People here are very interested in the development of their

villages.' In Tripura, the challenge was to travel across the vast lonely stretches to reach villages. Bindu yet again took up this challenge in her stride and visited villages and motivated women to become active participants in the Gram Panchayat activities.

Despite women in the Northeast being very outgoing and proactive, Bindu recollects she still had to face some initial resistance from families in letting them come out and work. 'Initially, the family members had many inhibitions. For instance, one of the LRG members' husband was unwilling to send his wife to work as he felt the villagers would talk ill of her. In another instance, a mother-in-law was worried as to who would look after the child if her daughter-in-law leaves for work. In such situations, I would talk about my journey from Kerala to Tripura. I could gain their trust by sharing my personal experiences. Towards the end of such conversations, the family members were happy to send their women to work. It is extremely gratifying to be the reason for someone's smile.'

Owing to family responsibilities, Bindu had to discontinue her education after getting married. So, despite her busy work routine, Bindu is now pursuing a Post Graduate degree in Social Work through distance education. She says, 'I want to learn more. I want to keep myself well-informed about the development sector.'

'I have gathered many beautiful memories in this journey. Being part of Kudumbashree is an enriching experience. I have realised that it is important to be sensitive towards other people's culture. The satisfaction I derive out of this work is something I can never explain in words.'

BINDU SANOJ
*Mentor Resource Person
Satchand R.D. Block
South Tripura District
Tripura*

**“Jo gyaan mai ne paya hai,
usko dusro se share karna
bohut accha anubhav raha
hai”**

**(It has been extremely
gratifying to share the
knowledge I have gained
with others)**



FACILITATING ROLE MODELS OF EMPOWERMENT

HIRAN MALA CHAKMA
*Internal Mentor
Durgachowmuhani Block
Dhalai District
Tripura*



“Agar hum log humara haq khud nahi mangenge, toh kaun mangega?”

(If we women do not demand our rights, who else would do that for us?)

Before becoming an LRG member, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in my life. While working with the Mentors, I realised that I want to work for people - Hiran Mala Chakma

Her troubled financial background did not stop Hiran Mala Chakma in helping fellow women realise their rights. Hiran Mala joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in her village in the year 2015 under Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM). Today, a young and energetic Hiran Mala is an inspiration to many girls in Tripura. While working as an SHG member, she was well-known for her ability to explain complex concepts in a lucid manner. Owing to Hiran Mala's strong communication skills, in the year 2016, she was selected as a Local Group Resource (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI –CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO.

During her tenure as an LRG member which lasted for more than a year, Hiran Mala gained knowledge about various government schemes for local development. She also gained hands-on experience in working with different government departments. Hiran Mala attributes her success to the Mentors. She recollects, 'My sister used to give tuitions and my mother used to take care of household chores. I paid close attention to whatever the Mentors taught me during our training period and followed their instructions carefully.' While working as an LRG member Hiran Mala used to visit each and every household of the SHG members and explain that the Gram Panchayat is meant for the community's well-being and that women should learn to speak for themselves. These conversations instantly sparked curiosity among the women. With Hiran Mala's consistent efforts, the SHG members have become active

participants in the village development activities.

In the year 2017, Hiran Mala was posted as an Internal Mentor. She currently works with SHG women across two GPs and mentors seven LRG members. When LRG members feel demotivated and discouraged, Hiran Mala quotes experiences from her personal life to motivate them. She says, 'I tell them that just like the way I managed to overcome the language barrier to work with different ethnic groups, they too can overcome their fears and obstacles. Now, these women come back and tell me that they are confident and happy to come out and work.' While working as an LRG member, Hiran Mala was constantly supported by the Mentors in the decision-making process. However, Hiran Mala now feels that being an Internal Mentor helps her make spontaneous decisions while working in the field.

'My motivation comes from the Mentors who have trained me. If they can come from far off states and work towards the development of our villages, I feel that it is my responsibility to work for the development of my state.' Working for the PRI-CBO Convergence project is a dream come true for Hiran Mala. She wants to continue working for the project and be in a position to take care of her parents. From being a shy and reserved girl to being an independent woman who manages to work with more than 100 SHG women, Hiran Mala's life is an extraordinary example of a woman's contribution to the development of the society.



“Dusron ko sikhaane keliye hamare paas knowledge ke saath experience bhi hona chahiye”

(In order to teach someone, apart from knowledge (theoretical), one also needs to have field experience)



“Baahar aake kaam karne se
maine bahut kuch seekha”

(I learned a lot after stepping
outside and working).

DEFYING ODDS

A STORY OF METTLE FROM TRIPURA

**I get to learn a lot from this work and I teach
whatever I have learnt. The learning is mutual
– Pooja Sinha**

For Pooja Sinha, being part of the Panchayati Raj Institution–Community Based Organisation (PRI- CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO offered a fresh lease of life. Though she was initially unwilling to join the local Self-Help Group (SHG), her husband's constant encouragement motivated Pooja to join an SHG in the year 2017 under Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM). After her husband's sudden death, a depressed Pooja was in no position to continue working in the SHG. However, defying all the ‘saas-bahu’ stereotypes, Pooja's mother-in-law assured her that she would take care of the child and encouraged Pooja to step out and work with fellow women.

Pooja was soon selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member in her village under the PRI-CBO Convergence project. Before becoming an LRG member, Pooja had no exposure to the panchayat functionalities or the development schemes meant for women. She claims that it is during the training offered by the Mentors, she diligently learnt

the know-how of government functionalities and harnessed her communication skills. She learnt to work with large groups of women while coordinating with the Gram Panchayat members. It is after conducting the Participatory Assessment for Entitlement (PAE) activity in various SHGs that Pooja realised the gamut of problems faced by the women in her village. She says, ‘Despite many government schemes available, women do not claim their entitlements due to lack of awareness.’ She visited every household of the SHG members and explained the availability of various schemes and few benefits exclusively meant for women. These conversations motivated many women to raise their voices to claim their entitlements. Today, women are proactive in the development activities of the village and also take an active part in Gram Panchayat (GP) meetings.

After having worked as an LRG member for almost a year, Pooja was selected as an Internal Mentor in the year 2018. Currently, she works with women across three GPs. In many villages the SHGs were formed long ago. However, they struggle to survive pertaining to a lot of reasons. Pooja has spent a significant amount of time to make sure women understood the

importance of an SHG and the advantages of being part of one. She says, ‘While working as an LRG member, I have learnt to work with large groups of women. I am more confident now when I go out in the field and work with women from various backgrounds.’ A hardworking Pooja adds, ‘I want my block to be the best performing block.’

When asked what her motivation to work is, she says, ‘My mother-in-law encouraged me to take up this work. My mentors have been a constant source of support to me. Before I began working, I used to spend all my time wallowing in sorrow. I was scared to leave my child to go out and work. However, after I have started interacting with various groups of people, I feel my mental health has improved a lot. My SHG members took good care of me. The mentors are very supportive. They counselled me and helped me gather enough mental strength to work.’

An emotional Pooja concludes, ‘Because of the PRI-CBO Convergence project, many women have started actively participating in their SHG meetings and have also become vocal about their rights and entitlements. I am in a happier and more secure space today.’

POOJA SINHA
Internal Mentor
Matabari R.D. Block
Udaipur District
Tripura







MURSHIDA BEGUM
Internal Mentor
Rajnagar Block
South Tripura District
Tripura

VOICING THE UNHEARD

A STORY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

“Parivar ko aurat pe bharosa rakhna chahiye. Tabhi who khud ki, parivar ki, aur baki logon ki unnati ke liye kam kar payegi”

(A family has to trust its women. Then she can develop herself, her family and also the community)

“Aadmi aur aurat ko ek hi nazar se dekhna chahiye. Sath kaam karne se hi vikas hoga”

(Men and women should be treated equally. Only when we work together can we achieve development)

I was earlier known either as someone's daughter or wife. Now, people recognize me by my name - Murshida Begum

'I want to be an inspiration to fellow women from minority communities. This work has allowed me to reach out to the poor,' says a young Murshida Begum who currently works in Rajnagar Block in Tripura. Murshida joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in 2015 under Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM) a year after her marriage and actively took part in various SHG activities for two years. In the year 2017, Murshida got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. During her initial days in the field, villagers wouldn't understand how someone (Murshida) who is not part of the government would be able to help them access government benefits. In such situations, Murshida meticulously explained the need for community participation in the identification of beneficiaries and the need to raise voices to claim their rights.

After working as an LRG member for over a year,

Murshida got selected as an Internal Mentor in 2018; she currently works for four Gram Panchayats (GP). As an Internal Mentor, one of the most challenging problems faced by Murshida has been the lack of motivation among the selected LRG members to work. She realised that once the LRG members reach home after a day's work, they become busy with their household chores. They would lose interest to come back to work. Murshida says, 'When the LRG members are demotivated, I narrate my journey; I tell them how I convinced my family to allow me to work. I also tell them about the support I received from Mentors during those times and how it motivated me to continue working as an LRG member.'

Many-a-times, these conversations have sparked an interest among women to work. Murshida accompanied women to the Gram Sabhas and Village Organisation (VO) meetings until they became proactive. In situations where the LRG members were not allowed to go out and work, Murshida would also meet the respective LRG member's family and convince them.

Murshida says, 'I always tell them that it is important

to trust a woman. When a family places its trust in the woman, she can develop herself and also help develop the family and community.'

Inherently a quiet person, Murshida learnt the art of long conversations while working in the field. She recollects, 'During my initial conversations with SHG women and LRG members, they would ask me how I will be able to help them get their entitlements as I was not part of panchayat or any Government department.' She feels it is important that a Mentor answers these questions patiently to reassure women. 'I explained to them the need for proactive participation of SHG members in identifying the problems faced by the villagers. I told them that the panchayat officials cannot reach every doorstep. So, it becomes important that women participate in the Gram Sabhas to voice their concerns.'

'Hailing from a Muslim family, I must say it was not easy for me to come out and work. However, I could do it with consistent efforts. I will be immensely happy if other women find inspiration from my story.'



EMPOWERING THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

FROM THE FASCINATING TRIPURA

While working with these women, I have also gained a lot of knowledge. I can identify myself with these women – Vaiklaisori Molsmon

A life of hardships didn't let down Vaiklasori Molsmon to pursue her dream of mentoring fellow women. Vaiklaisori joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in the year 2015 under Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission (TRLM). After working as an active SHG member for one year, she got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI - CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO.

During her tenure as an LRG member that lasted for two years, Vaiklasori gained knowledge about functionalities of different Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and different development schemes meant for the poor. She mobilised women to take part in the Gram Sabhas and bring their problems to the notice of panchayat. While Vaiklaisori actively worked in the field with women, she had to fight the cultural stigma attached to working mothers. She recollects, 'Those were challenging times. People around me said that women who leave their children to go out and work are of bad character.' During such tough times, the Mentors motivated her and encouraged

her to continue working. She says, 'They taught me that it is important to walk the path we choose with great confidence. No matter how tough the situations are, it is important to stay confident.'

After working as an LRG member for two years, in the year 2018, Vaiklasori was selected as an Internal Mentor. She currently works in Dumburnagar Block which has some of the most interior villages of Tripura. The villages are predominantly Scheduled Tribe dominated. The majority of population in the tribal villages of Tripura live a secluded life. Vaiklaisori's job is to bring awareness among these people about the existence and importance of local-government institutions and various development schemes. While working in the field, Vaiklaisori observed that one of the major problems faced by the people of Dumburnagar Block is the high prevalence rates of malnourishment among children. Since people had to cross dense forests to access health facilities, villagers would opt out from visiting healthcare centres. The problem of inaccessibility of healthcare centres coupled with a lack of awareness about the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) made the situation worse for children. When Vaiklasori, with the help of LRG members conducted the ribbon exercise of 'Participatory Assessment of Entitlements (PAE)', villagers became aware of various government

schemes meant for their well-being. Slowly, with the help of active participation of SHGs and Village Organisations (VOs), she conducted health camps, education awareness programs, Bala Sabhas, hygiene awareness programs and also literacy camps. She says, 'Many villagers benefited from these camps because of their proactive participation. The ICDS is functional now. I am glad about the change I see in these villages.'

Vaiklasori feels that it is important that information is provided to people at the right time. She says, 'Before becoming an LRG member, I was a homemaker with no knowledge about government. While working with these women, I have also gained a lot of knowledge. I can identify with these women. I was like them before joining work.'

Vaiklaisori's life offers an inspiring story of struggle. After studying till 12th standard, she moved to Mizoram to work as a household maidservant. Following this, she also worked in a restaurant. Vaiklasori says 'After joining the PRI-CBO Convergence project, I could educate my children and also feel empowered because of the knowledge I have gained. I feel that all my hard work and determination has paid off!'

VAIKLAISORI MOLSMON
*Internal Mentor
Dumburnagar R.D Block
Dhalai District
Tripura*

“Paristhiti kitna bhi kathin ho, humko confident rehna chahiye”

(No matter how tough the situation is, it is important for us to stay confident)



“Gaon wale aise sochte the ki bachon ko ghar pe chorkar baahar kaam pe jane wali aurat achchi nahi hai”

(People in the villages think that women who leave their children at home to go out and work are of bad character)





“Jaise mai ne socha, usse behtar kaam ho raha hai. Mujhe bahut accha lag raha hai.”

(This is much better than what I had imagined. I feel good working)

SHAPING A HAPPIER TOMORROW

A STORY OF INSPIRATION

I have always wanted to do something meaningful in my life, this is a dream come true for me – Dipti Jamatia

Growing up in the interior villages of Tripura, Dipti Jamatia was always interested to work towards the well-being of people around her. In 2017, a meeting organized by the Mentor Resource Persons on the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI- CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO triggered interest in her. A confident Dipti recalls, ‘I followed my instinct and became part of the PRI-CBO Convergence project. I have always wanted to do something meaningful in my life. An opportunity to work with communities allowed me to pursue that dream!’

Having been an active participant in the local Self-Help Group (SHG) activities for almost four years, Dipti got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member. The following year, Dipti worked with larger groups of women. She quickly realized that many women were not aware of the panchayat and Village Organisation (VO) functionalities. She recalls, ‘People in the villages believe that Gram Panchayat is only meant for the ruling political party people.’ Dipti explained to the SHG members and also the villagers that any individual who is 18 years and above has the right to be part of a Gram Sabha.

With remarkable determination, Dipti thrived to bring about change at the grass-root level. When Dipti had to spend long hours with the villagers, she carried her child to the field. Dipti realized that she had to keep herself up-to-date about government schemes and other related information if she had to educate fellow women. She recalls, ‘Before becoming an LRG member, I was not aware of anything. I was a busy homemaker. I have learned not to feel ashamed to ask questions. I ask my mentors when I don’t know anything. I also try to gather as much information as possible from government and panchayat officials.’

After becoming an Internal Mentor in the year 2018, Dipti observed that after women form the SHGs, many of them get consumed with household chores. Dipti realised the importance of constant motivation and encouragement that women require to come out of their homes and be proactive in conducting weekly meetings. Now, whenever a new SHG is formed, Dipti makes sure to attend the meetings to ensure women receive necessary motivation at the formative stages of the SHG. She says, ‘Women feel demotivated when people speak negative things about the project. While working in the field, I have realised that for any VO or a panchayat to function properly, it is extremely important to strengthen the SHG structure. I could do my work efficiently because I had my mentors support

me constantly. I believe that I should extend the same support to LRG and SHG members.’

While working across the villages, Dipti came to realise that the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Programme was functioning inadequately. The anganwadis remained closed in most of the villages. Dipti trained the LRG members about the importance of early childhood nutrition. She ensured that the LRG members informed SHG women and the villagers about the importance of early childhood nutrition and access to proper healthcare facilities. Dipti also assisted active SHG members along with the LRG members to form a committee to improve the ICDS functionalities. She is glad that with the active participation of LRG members, the anganwadis are open now and under the ICDS program, regular health camps are organised for women. a cheerful Dipti says, ‘The villagers are extremely happy that the LRG and SHG members have helped them in the development of their villages.’

A happy Dipti concludes, ‘I am extremely happy with the holistic development that has taken place across the villages of Tripura because of the PRI-CBO Convergence project. I feel grateful to be part of it. I would never want to stop working!’



DIPTI JAMATIA
Internal Mentor
Amarpur Block
Gomati District
Tripura

“Sabhi states mein LRG members aur Internal Mentors hona chahiye. Unko gaon ke baare meim zyada jankari hoga aur samudaay mein zyada pahunch.”

(All the states should have LRG members and Internal Mentors. Local people are well versed with the local situation and have better access to the community)



MIZORAM



MIZORAM

UPLIFTING THE DOWNTRODDEN

A STORY OF TRIUMPH

Before joining Kudumbashree, I was scared to step out of my home. Now, I can travel across the country in any vehicle – Beena Kuriakose

Beena Kuriakose firmly believes that strength comes from doing things we thought we couldn't. Hailing from Ernakulam district of Kerala, Beena joined an 'Ayalkootam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in her neighbourhood in 2007 at the age of 32. Within no time she went on to become the Chairperson of Community Development Society (CDS). During the 5 years which followed, she actively conducted various welfare programs and worked with large groups of people.

Upon completing her tenure as the CDS Chairperson, in 2015, Beena was posted as a Mentor to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRI- CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO in Odisha. She says that working in Odisha offered her some of the most challenging experiences. Beena worked in a Gram Panchayat that was predominantly Scheduled Tribe (ST) populated. People lived amidst extreme poverty. She was supposed to work with seven Local Resource Group (LRG) members. However, only two of them used to turn up for work as the rest used to work as daily wage labourers. Beena recalls, 'One cannot imagine the poverty experienced by those people. Women would cut one saree into two as they wouldn't even have proper clothes to wear.'

Beena spent most of her time talking to the SHG women to make them understand the importance of female participation in the Gram Panchayat activities. Beena firmly believes that one needs to be emotionally sensitive in order to work with communities. Most of the tribal communities in Odisha are victims of abject poverty. While mentoring the SHG women, Beena offered them the necessary emotional and mental support. She would often visit their homes and lend a listening ear to their problems. As most women struggled to meet even their basic needs, Beena would offer clothes and groceries whenever she could to help them overcome tough situations. Small relief like this also gave many women the required bandwidth to focus on things Beena was trying to teach them. They soon started participating in the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayat activities. She is happy that the tribal women (SHG members) of Odisha today work in collaboration with the Gram Panchayat. In spite of their busy routine, these women make it a point to keep in touch with Beena. A beaming Beena says, 'Last year, they even arranged a surprise birthday party for me!'

“Odisha ke Malkangiri jille ke sudoor gaon mein rah rahe pichde tabke jis garibi mein jee rahe hai uski hum kalpana bhi nahi kar sakte hai”

(One cannot imagine the poverty experienced by backward communities in the interior villages of Malkangiri district in odisha)

After working for more than a year in Odisha, Beena worked in Chhattisgarh for one and a half years, following which she was posted in the North Eastern state of Mizoram. In Mizoram, apart from the hectic and long travel schedules, unfamiliarity with the local language was a challenge. Only one of the LRG members knew English. However, by initiating conversations with the villagers in their mother tongue, Beena gradually managed to pick up the local language. She says, 'When I meet the LRG members, I try to speak in their mother tongue and learn to pick up the local language as soon as possible. Communities tend to trust us when we speak the local language.' With consistent efforts, the SHG women in Mizoram now work in tandem with the local village authorities. They are well aware of their rights and entitlements.

Beena is extremely happy with the experience she has gained over the years in her association with Kudumbashree. She is proud of her journey – from a simple homemaker in a small town to a development professional who mentored many aspiring women across the country. She says, 'Initially, I was very scared to work. My husband encouraged me to take up this work and I'm glad I did. I have experienced India's rich cultural diversity because of this job. I would love to continue working!'



BEENA KURIAKOSE
Mentor Resource Person
Serchhip Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

BREAKING PERSONAL LIMITS

A STORY OF EXCELLENCE

MINI VARGHESE
Mentor Resource Person
East Lungdar Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

If I get another place to go and work, I would love to do that! I know I'll get to learn more! – Mini Varghese

A cheerful conversation with Mini Varghese is a gentle reminder of the fact that age is indeed no limit for learning. Coming from a troubled family background, Mini proved hard work and perseverance can keep up the learning spirit of an individual.

When Kudumbashree started its operations in Kerala in the year 1998, Mini joined an 'Ayalkoottam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in her village. It is this decision to join Kudumbashree that changed Mini's course of life forever. She used to carry her younger child to the SHG meetings as she had no one to look after the kid. She put her heart and soul into the SHG activities and was quick to learn the know-how of government functionalities. She initially got elected as the Secretary of Area Development Society (ADS) and then as the Chairperson of Community Development Society (CDS).

Mini's commitment to work got her immense popularity within the community. In the year 2010, she won the local body elections with a thumping majority and became the ward member. Subsequently, Mini became the vice-president of the Gram Panchayat. In five years' time, she learned the functionalities of the

panchayat in atomic detail.

After continuing to work for Kudumbashree in Kerala for another 5 years, in 2015, Mini got selected as a Mentor for the state of Rajasthan to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. She worked with women in four Gram Panchayats of Udaipur district and spent many of her working hours encouraging and motivating women to step out and become aware of their rights and entitlements. Given her robust understanding of the government functionalities, in the year 2018, Mini was posted in the North-Eastern Indian state of Mizoram.

Mizoram was unlike any other place that Mini had worked earlier. Difficulties with transport facilities coupled with the language barrier did not stop Mini from mobilising the local community to work in tandem with the Village Councils (VC). Mini emphasises that it is important to pick up the local language to work in different places. 'When we speak in their local language, people trust us and also become eager to listen to us,' says Mini.

While many LRGs could read and write English alphabets, Mini found it very difficult to communicate because most of them could not speak the language

fluently. In order to address this issue, she would carry a laptop to the field and request the LRGs to type down whenever they had something to say. She would do the same when she wanted to convey something. This small but efficient innovation helped her overcome the language barrier and communicate with the LRGs effectively.

From an intense struggle to pursue her education to working in the remote corners of North Eastern India, Mini has come a long way. Being an avid reader of history and language, Mini feels education and literacy have helped her in developing a holistic perspective towards her work.

An excited Mini recalls, 'Initially, I was very scared to travel alone. Now I go alone anywhere. I even travel alone changing three flights when going to Kerala from Mizoram.' Before marriage, Mini says her family wouldn't allow her to step out of the house. However, she feels it's her husband's progressive mentality that helped her step out of her comfort zone to realise her dreams.

A cheerful Mini says, 'If I get another place to go and work, I would love to do that! I know I'll get to learn more!'

"Agar mujhe doosri kuch jagah kam karne ke liye bheja toh, mai khushi se jaungi, kuch naya seekhne ke liye milega"

(If I get a chance to go to another place and work, I would love to do that! I know I'll get to learn more)!







SUMA S DHARAN
Mentor Resource Person
Serchhip Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

“Mai bhi ek gareeb parivaar se hu, ek
gareeb parivar ki takleef kya hoti hai,
yeh mai acchi tarah janti hoon”

(I too come from a poor family; I know
the hardships of poor families)

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

A STORY OF DILIGENCE FROM ALLEPPEY

It is important for men to understand why a female wants to step out of her home and work – Suma S Dharan

‘When I work in the field now, the poverty and vulnerability of people reminds me of my childhood,’ recalls Suma S Dharan. Having worked across many Indian states, she is acutely aware of her roots and is unafraid to expand her horizons.

Early years of marriage were extremely challenging for Suma. Her husband’s meagre earnings were insufficient to run the family. To make ends meet, she used to work day and night. Suma describes this phase of her life as the most challenging and painful.

Suma joined an ‘Ayalkoottam’, a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in her village in Alleppey district of Kerala in the year 1996. Subsequently, after the formation of Kudumbashree network in 1998, she worked her way up to become the president of the Area Development Society (ADS). In the year 2014, Suma was posted as a Mentor in the state of Maharashtra to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRO-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO . As there was no one to take care of her children at home, Suma convinced her elder daughter to take care of the family. ‘I pushed myself hard and decided to leave,’ recalls an emotional Suma.

Suma had worked in many states including Maharashtra, Sikkim, Goa, Jharkhand & Chhattisgarh. Her initial years in the field (Maharashtra) shaped her as a strong and independent woman. She succeeded to learn and communicate in Marathi. She managed to mobilize women to become active participants in SHG activities and the village welfare programs. She recalls, ‘It is important for men to understand why a female wants to step out of her home and work. They (men) should know more about our work.’ While working in the villages, Suma would often talk to men to create awareness around the idea of women empowerment. She also encouraged men to be part of the SHG meetings. She proudly says, ‘Slowly their tendency has changed and they have become sensitive towards the idea of women coming out of their homes to work.’

Suma began working in Mizoram in the year 2018. She visited each and every household in the villages to invite women for the SHG meetings. Since women were busy working during the day, Suma had to mentor the meetings during night. She recalls, ‘Women felt that if I have come all alone from Kerala to their village to work, it is important they turn up for the meetings and listen to what I had to say.’ Owing to the consistent efforts of Suma, women in Mizoram now are far more aware of their rights and entitlements and are actively working towards achieving them.

Suma says, ‘Being a Mentor I feel we should also do things that benefit the village community. For instance, I have sponsored an orphan child’s education in Jharkhand. Apart from sponsoring the education of such children, I also make it a point to educate the school staff and teachers to be sensitive and attentive towards children coming from underprivileged sections of society. I am grateful that Kudumbashree has allowed me to serve the communities in ways that I can.’

Today Suma is proud that her work allowed her to become educated and aware of her surroundings. It has also helped groom her personality. She recalls, ‘Back in Kerala, people are obsessed with gold. If we have to attend any kind of gathering, we will dress up in gaudy gold ornaments. However, after working across the country and having met women from various backgrounds, I have realised that it is not gold ornaments that make a woman look beautiful, but the confidence to be comfortable in her skin that makes her beautiful. I must confess my taste and habits back then were gaudy,’ she giggles.

Suma’s children are now educated and well settled. For her, joining the Mentoring programme of Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation (NRO) is the best decision she has ever made.



MANIPUR



MANIPUR



BRIDGING SOCIAL BARRIERS

A STORY OF COURAGE

“Hum sab mahilayein hai, jati ke aadhar par bhed-bhav nahi hona chahiye, hum sabko milke kaam karna hai”

(We are all women, there should not be any caste-based discrimination. We should all work together)

Women in North-East India are very strong and self-motivated – Preeti Haridas

Preeti Haridas joined Kudumbashree during the monsoons of the year 2000. An interest in social work prompted her to join a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State poverty Eradication Mission in Perinjanam Panchayat of Thrissur district in Kerala. Having worked for 20 years in Kudumbashree, Preeti feels that working outside has taught her a lot and opened her up to new possibilities.

Owing to her robust knowledge base, in the year 2015, Preeti was selected as a Mentor to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO for the state of Rajasthan. She was posted in Gujarat for a brief period for an induction. With no knowledge of Hindi, Preeti worked hard to improve her communication skills while working in the field.

At the end of her induction, Preeti was posted as a Mentor in the state of Rajasthan. She recollects, ‘People would enquire about a person’s caste when they ask for their name. This is something I had never experienced in Kerala. In the SHG meetings, women would form groups based on their respective castes.’ Preeti spoke to the women and explained the need to stay united to work towards the development of their village. ‘For instance, during the SHG meetings women from upper castes wouldn’t drink water from the glass used by women from particular castes. We, Mentors, used to drink water from the same glass and tried to demonstrate that there cannot be caste-based discrimination,’ says Preeti.

Preeti extensively spoke about the Kerala model and her journey from being an SHG member to being a Mentor. This inspired women to open up. Soon there was a consistent increase in the number of women who attended the Gram Sabhas. At a particular point, when the then State Health Minister visited their village, Preeti along with other women put forward an application to set up a health centre. ‘Now there is a health centre set up in that village. I came to know about it after I reached Manipur,’ says a proud Preeti.

In the year 2018, Preeti started working as a Mentor in Manipur. Being a hilly terrain, issues with mobile connectivity was one of the major problems.

She travelled across the villages to mobilize women. Helping women to set up a marketplace was one of Preeti’s biggest achievements in Manipur. ‘We identified sellers in each village and designed the market plan accordingly. We then conducted sellers’ meetings with various stakeholders and have set up the marketplace,’ explains Preeti.

When asked if she could sum up the experience of her association with Kudumbashree, she smiles and says, ‘Firstly, I learned languages. I saw different places. I can now travel alone on trains and also flights. I met so many kinds of people.

I now have friends across the country. I have also experienced different kinds of climate. This has been a great journey.’

Preeti confidently says that she could do all that she did because of support from her husband and family. ‘I am thinking of going home. It now strikes me that am getting old,’ laughs Preeti.

PREETI HARIDAS
Mentor Resource Person
Machi Block
Chandel District
Manipur





“Pehle hum panchayat office ke andar bhi nahi jaate they, humari bhasha sunke woh log haste the”

(During our initial days, we were shy to even enter a panchayat office because people used to laugh at our Hindi)

CREATING A CULTURE OF LEADERS

THE ART OF EMPOWERMENT

My footprint has to be good. Even now, back in Kerala, my panchayat is the top performer - Girija

With support from her mother and mother-in-law, Girija joined Kudumbashree as an SHG member in the year 2002. In no time she gained huge popularity amongst the village community. Eventually, she went on to become the president of the Area Development Society (ADS).

Girija's first assignment as a Mentor under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO was in Rajasthan in the year 2015. She was supposed to identify and train women as resource persons. 'Before going to Rajasthan, we were told that it's a hot place and not knowing Hindi would be a big problem,' laughs Girija. However, upon reaching Rajasthan, women folk in the villages gave her a warm welcome. She recollects, 'I have learned a lot while working in Rajasthan.' Although Girija didn't know Hindi, she was quick to pick up the language and learned effective communication skills.

Girija worked with 8 panchayats in Rajasthan where women were uneducated and were unwilling to step out. With cooperation from the Field Coordinators (Field Coordinators (FCs) are responsible for coordination of the work done by the NRO in partner-States, at the block, district and / or state levels as appropriate) and local women, she managed to motivate women to realise their rights and entitlements. With consistent efforts, a considerable section of women became active participants in the Gram Sabhas. She soon saw the narrowing gap between the SHGs and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). A humble Girija credits FCs and SHG women for this positive change.

Following her tenure in Rajasthan, Girija was posted as a Mentor in Manipur in 2018. She noticed that women in the North East were outgoing and fairly empowered. Men encouraged women to go out and work. Girija recollects, 'When we tried to identify gaps in community participation in local governance, we realised women were very energetic but needed a sense of direction to utilise their skills.'



GIRIJA N.
*Mentor Resource Person
Keiro Block
Imphal (E) District
Manipur*

Activities like livelihood mapping and dream village mapping inspired not just women but also the panchayat members to become active participants in the development activities.

Knowledge gained through Kudumbashree's healthy work culture helped Girija develop spontaneous strategies. For instance, while working in Rajasthan, Girija and her fellow Mentors struggled with the language barrier and took a long time to start working with the Panchayat officials. However, in Manipur, she quickly found ways to work with panchayat officials at the very beginning. This, according to Girija is one of her biggest achievements. She feels language is never a barrier to communication. According to her it is important to be compassionate towards fellow humans and understand their limitations to help them grow.

When asked what inspires her to work in faraway places while being away from family, Girija confidently replies, 'I have worked towards empowerment of women in my village. I feel blessed that I got the opportunity to help women living in other places as well. This is a blessing. Had I not got this opportunity, I might have just stayed in my village.'

A go-getter by nature, Girija says, 'Panchayats cannot function without Kudumbashree in Kerala. There has to be a friendly relationship between Kudumbashree and panchayat institutions for the development of villages.' Girija's story tells us that with support from family and with the right kind of training, there are no limits to what women can accomplish.

“Yahan ka (Manipur) ladki logo mein bahut energy hai, par sahi raasta dikhana zaroori tha”

(Women here in the North East are very energetic. However, they needed a sense of direction)

A JOURNEY TOWARDS PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

If given a chance, I want to give my 100 percent to make rural women realise their rights and entitlements – Rath

When Rath joined an ‘Ayalkoottam’, a Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in her village in 2004, she didn’t imagine herself being part of a project that empowers women across the country.

An inquisitive person by nature, Rath worked across various positions in Kudumbashree before being placed as a Mentor in Rajasthan in 2015 to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. She recollects, ‘It was my dream to travel. I was happy that I could share the knowledge I have gained in Kerala with other women.’ She worked in five Gram Panchayats (GPs) in Rajasthan for two years.

‘Bharat mein Swayam Sahayata Samuh ke banne se mahilaon ki stithi samuhik aur rajnitik roop se majboot hui hai, jo ki bahut mahatwapoorn hai’.

(After the introduction of SHGs in India, the situation of women has improved socially and politically, which is very important.)

One of the toughest challenges she faced in Rajasthan was to engage Gram Panchayat officials. Working closely with the Local Resource Group (LRG) members was a way she found to break this roadblock. She motivated LRG members to attend the Gram Sabha meetings and visit the panchayat office regularly to bring issues to the notice of the officials. Rath made sure that these LRG members came back to their respective villages and shared their experiences with other women in the community. ‘We could approach the panchayat only through the LRG members. Wherever we conducted awareness programs, people became close to us. This kind of change is possible only through regular communication,’ says Rath. As the activity around the panchayat office increased, more people became aware of the panchayat functionalities and started approaching the panchayat for help. A proud Rath says, ‘After consistently working along with the village community and LRG members, panchayat officials listened to people and started addressing their issues. This is the actual result of the Convergence project.’

In 2018, after the successful completion of her work in Rajasthan, Rath was posted as the Mentor in Manipur. After a brief induction program, Rath along with other Mentors visited as many as 38 villages in 3 months. This helped her understand the local governance systems better. She recollects, ‘Travelling in the hilly terrain was a bit of a problem. We travelled in local transport and many times walked long distances to reach the villages.

Once we could get to these villages, the LRG members were quite cooperative in taking us around.’

Upon reaching Manipur, Rath realised that the SHGs were facing problems in conducting their meetings and women were not aware of their rights and entitlements. She says, ‘The work is the same as that of Rajasthan. However, we had to find the appropriate way to do it.’ By motivating the SHG women and the LRG members, Rath managed to convince the Village Authority (VA) officials that they could consider inputs and ideas put forward by the women while making plans. Due to her persistent efforts, the VA officials, SHG members and the LRG members now work closely with each other.

A postgraduate in Political Science, Rath says, ‘In my observation, women are generally not part of the decision-making processes. They should be supported to be part of decision-making bodies. Being a Mentor, I always try to understand the possible factors that stop women from being proactive. They are active listeners and tend to follow others. It is important for women to realise their strengths. I firmly believe that increase in female representation paves a path for progressive politics.’

When asked how she manages to find time for her daughter being a single parent, she smiles and says ‘I listen to her very carefully every day over phone. I discuss my work with her. I have a very supportive daughter.’

RATHI M.R.
Mentor Resource Person
Machi Block
Chandel District
Manipur





PURSuing PASSION AGAINST ODDS

A STORY OF ENDURANCE

I am glad that I can contribute my bit towards empowering Indian women – Raji Krishnankutty

Raji Krishnankutty has been part of Kudumbashree for almost two decades now. She started her career by joining an 'Ayalkoottam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in the year 2001. As an SHG member, Raji was an active participant in various welfare activities. She also worked as the chairperson of the Community Development Society (CDS) for six years in Thalikulam Panchayat of Thrissur district.

Following her tenure as a CDS chairperson in Kerala, in the year 2015, Raji was posted as a Mentor in Rajasthan to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence Project of Kudumbashree NRO. Upon reaching Rajasthan, Raji was exposed to rigid power structures in the villages. She recollects, 'Women in the villages don the 'ghunghat' (headscarf or head covering worn by women) at the behest of men. It was unimaginable for these women to come out and take a proactive part in village panchayat activities.' However, Raji created awareness amongst these women about their rights and entitlements. Raji says, 'Whenever I think of my experience in Rajasthan, I feel extremely

happy. There is a lot of change in the way the Gram Panchayats function. We know there is a lot more that needs to be done. But I know they (the women) have come a long way!'

After working for two years in Rajasthan, Raji was posted as the Mentor in Manipur. Speaking of her work experience in Manipur, she says, 'Villagers in Manipur wouldn't get the allocated 100 days of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Instead, they used to get a maximum of 50 days of work.' While interacting with the villagers, Raji explained that it is important to work hard to get more work. She spent quality time with the Local Resource Group members (LRG) and SHG members and identified problems like the lack of roads, water supply and drainage facilities. A proud Raji says, 'The villagers now receive 70 days of work. We could do this because of the identification of pending development projects. People also work hard to make sure they get more work. Initially, the Pradhan was sceptical about our intervention. However today, he admires our work and is also very cooperative. I am very happy with this positive change.'

When asked what was her best experience till date, she says, 'Back in Kerala, I was part of the team who used to work for Ashraya beneficiaries (an integrated program of Kudumbashree aimed at identification and rehabilitation of destitute women). At that time, I mobilised SHG women and ensured they secured funds to build homes. I also helped them set up small restaurants and laundry units.' Raji says that these women like many other people she had worked with, remain close to her heart. An emotional Raji says, 'Even today, these women want me to come back to Kerala. Such warmth is priceless!'

Even though Raji has done exemplary work as a CDS chairperson in Kerala and as a Mentor in partner states, the journey has not been so simple. She says, 'My husband has never liked me working. I have always lacked that personal support from him.' However, her personal struggle has never stopped her from pursuing her passion to empower others.

She concludes, 'My daughter is married and stays at her in-laws' place. My husband stays alone at home. I don't know what the future has in store for me. But, given a chance, I would love to continue working. I would not want to stop working.'

"Jab field mein zyada kaam hone se shyam ko ghar jane mein thodi der hoti thi toh mere pati mujhe ghar ke andar nahi aane dete the."

(On days when I got late to get home after work, my husband wouldn't let me in).

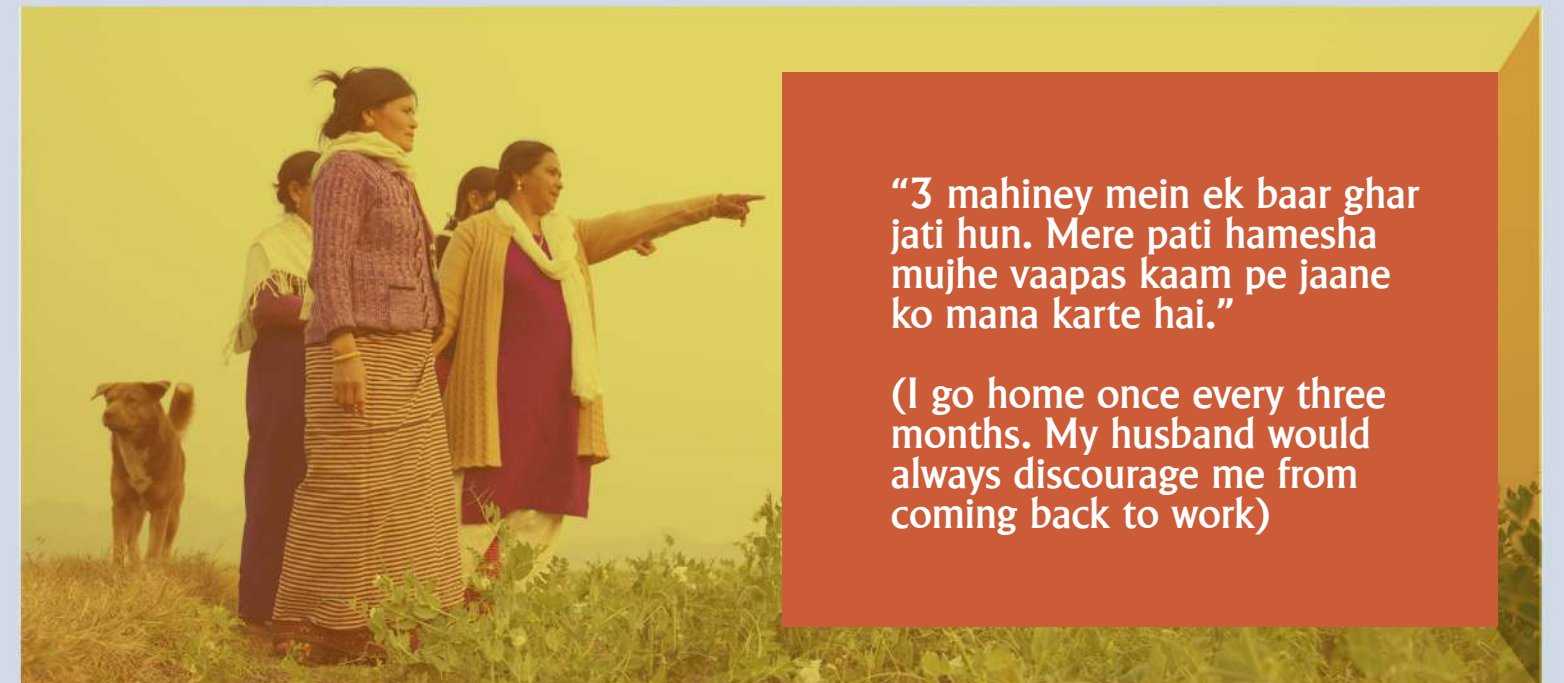
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RAJI KRISHNANKUTTY
Mentor Resource Person
Keiro Block
Imphal (E) District
Manipur



"3 mahiney mein ek baar ghar jati hun. Mere pati hamesha mujhe vaapas kaam pe jaane ko mana karte hai."

(I go home once every three months. My husband would always discourage me from coming back to work)



UTTAR PRADESH

UTTAR PRADHESH





“Mai apne ghar pe haath par haath rakh kar baitna nahi chahti thi, apne gaon ke liye kuch na kuch karna chahti thi”

(I didn't want to sit idle at home, I wanted to do something for my village)

REACHING THE UNREACHED

A STORY OF HOPE FROM PATHANAMTHITTA

If I can handle issues in different states, I can take care of my home from wherever I am - Anni Viswanathan

Meeting Anni Viswanathan, a native of the hilly Pathanamthitta district in Kerala leaves one with an affirmation that 'change is possible, if one is determined to'.

Anni used to live with her two daughters and mother-in-law in the village while her husband worked abroad. She joined an 'Ayalkoottam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in the year 2003. After working consistently for over 6 years in Kudumbashree's various cadres, she became a successful resource person for several government programs. Starting her journey from the Southern part of India to now working in North India, Anni's journey leaves one with a sense of empowerment.

In the year 2014, through a competitive selection process, Anni got selected for the role of a Mentor to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. She was supposed to identify and train rural women like her from various Gram Panchayats (GP). Her first challenge was to train women in the rural districts of Maharashtra.

Anni arrived in Maharashtra in June'14. She was quick in picking up Marathi from the women while working and eventually became comfortable with Hindi. It is during her days in the field, Anni learnt the most valuable lesson

that stayed with her forever - 'Language is indeed no barrier to communication and that it is one's confidence that speaks.' She also believes that to work within a community, it is extremely important that the villagers feel comfortable with the person and should consider him/her as one among them and not an outsider.

Initially, when Anni set out to work, both the community and the panchayat officials showed little interest in the project. By working closely with the GP members, ASHA workers and other villagers, she succeeded in sparking interest amongst the women. For instance, through the 'Participatory Assessment of Entitlement' (PAE) a participatory ribbon exercise to impart awareness on government schemes, the SHG women were encouraged to share their experiences amongst themselves. For example, under schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), they discussed issues pertaining to GP functionalities, issue of job cards, demanding work etc. This approach, according to Anni enhanced a sense of ownership among the women.

What was initially a one man show in the village was replaced with a robust decentralised system. Each and every problem was brought to the notice of Gram Panchayat. With twinkle in her eyes, she excitedly recollects, 'I was selected in the interview on the 13th of June 2014 and was off to Maharashtra on the 29th of June. I had no time for any kind of preparation. There was no scope for any mental comfort.' A sense of adventure and willingness to work out of her comfort zone made Anni an achiever.



ANNI VISWANATHAN
Mentor Resource Person
Sardarnagar Block
Gorakhpur District
Uttar Pradesh

Anni has worked in many Indian states which include Maharashtra, Goa, Uttar Pradesh and Sikkim. With determination, she could bring out the best of SHGs in Sikkim, a state with meagre resources.

Anni's daughters are being taken care of by her mother-in-law in Pathanamthitta while her husband continues to work abroad. She proudly says, 'If I can handle issues of people in a foreign land, I am quite confident that I can manage my home from wherever I am'. She finds it extremely gratifying to train and mentor women from poor regions across the country.

A gleeful Anni says, 'I love my work and would never want to stop working!'

“Samvad ke liye bhasha ki zaroorat nahi hai”

(We don't need to know a language to communicate)



MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

FROM THE TRIBAL LAND OF CHHATTISGARH

If I have to do something meaningful in life, I need to be educated – Dhaneswari Chandravanshi

‘You must dream to achieve something great in life’, says an exuberant Dhaneswari Chandravanshi when asked what is her piece of advice to the rural women she works with. Dhaneswari hails from a tiny tribal hamlet which consists of 100 households in the state of Chhattisgarh.

A few years into her marriage, pregnant Dhaneswari separated from her husband. She already had a daughter by then. She returned to her maternal home and struggled to find ways to make ends meet. Having studied only till 8th standard, she quickly realised the importance of education and enrolled for 10th class board examinations and cleared it, while she was still pregnant.

In 2013, when Dhaneswari wanted to join one of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in her village, members of the that group initially discouraged her from doing so as she had two little children to take care of. However, a smart Dhaneswari managed to rope in her maternal aunts and impressed the SHG members which paved her way into the SHG network as a bookkeeper.

“Zindagi mein kuch karne ke liye sapne dekhna zaroori hai”

(You must dream to achieve something great in life)

From then on, Dhaneswari managed to rise through ranks. Apart from being an active SHG member, she also worked as a master trainer and gender trainer for various programs under Bihan (State Rural Livelihood Mission under NRLM) across Chhattisgarh. Being the only Adivasi woman in her village who studied till 12th standard and with her good track record at work, she got selected as a Convergence Cluster Coordinator (CCC) in 2016. With hard work and perseverance, Dhaneswari succeeded in making her Village Organisation (VO) the topmost performing VO in Chhattisgarh. Later, through continued efforts, she bagged the position of Mentor for the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

“Mujhe pata tha ki saare pareshaniya mujhe hi jhelni hongi, mere saath na hi mere chacha, ya papa ya bhai khade honge, jo kuch karna tha mujhe hi karna tha”

(I knew that whatever difficulties arise (in my life), I had to face it myself. No one including my uncle, father or brother would be there for me).

Upon reaching Uttar Pradesh as a Mentor in November 2018, Dhaneswari had to quickly adjust herself to an entirely new set up. Back in Chhattisgarh, women in SHGs were proactive and things were much more organised. Whereas, in UP the toughest challenge was to bring women out of their homes and motivate them to participate in SHG and VO activities and meetings. While some Secretaries of the Gram Panchayats (GPs) were cooperative, some were absolutely against the idea of working along with women in the village. Dhaneswari had to spend long hours visiting women at their homes to motivate them to be active participants in SHG and Gram Panchayat activities. After several months of continuous effort, she could finally see some light at the end of the tunnel.

DHANESWARI CHANDRAVANSHI
*Mentor Resource Person
Chakiya Block
Chandauli District
Uttar Pradesh*

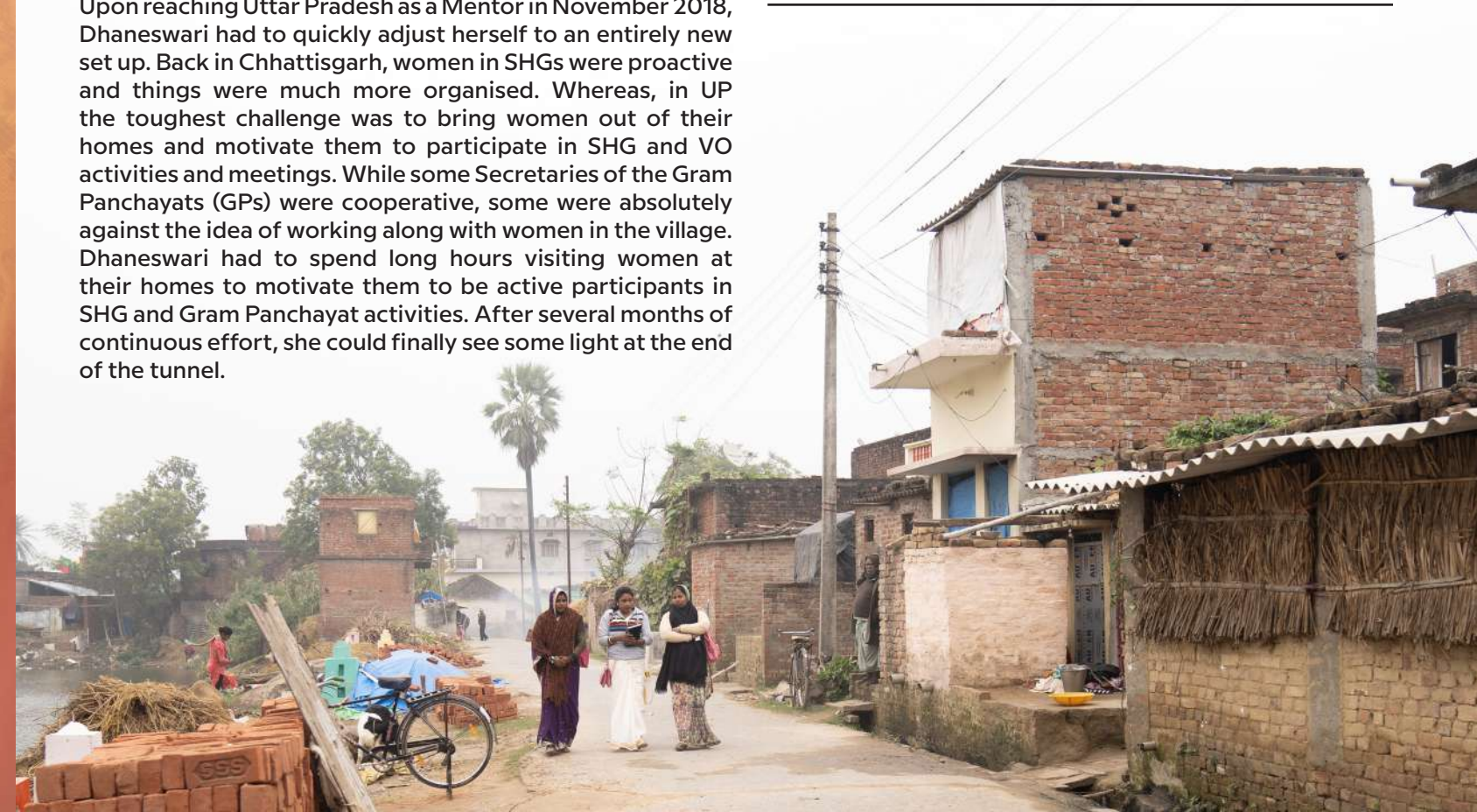


Dhaneswari currently works with 26 women resource persons in 10 GPs. Initially, women wouldn't come for Gram Sabha meetings. After working closely with these women for a year now, a proud Dhaneswari says, ‘Now we have around 600 to 700 women who attend Gram Sabhas.’

When asked if she misses her girls, she says, ‘Of course I do. I miss them a lot. We keep in touch over phone.’ A determined Dhaneswari adds, ‘I have seen families benefit when information is passed on to the right person. This is the power of information!’

After Dhaneswari got selected as a Mentor for the PRI-CBO Convergence project, the male members of her family said, ‘Uttar Pradesh stands high in terms of criminal record and we wouldn't want you to go there.’ Today Dhaneswari says, ‘I knew for a fact that none of the male members in my family would stand up for me and it's me who needs to take care of my children. Hence I made the choice to leave Chhattisgarh to come here and work.’

From being an SHG member in her village to being a Mentor now, Dhaneswari feels it is work that shaped and groomed her as an individual. Beaming with joy, she says, ‘I would never stop working. I love what I do!’



UNITY IS STRENGTH

A STORY OF TOGETHERNESS FROM CHHATTISGARH



“Samooch ek parivar hai, sabko saath leke chalna hai”

(SHG is like a family, we should take everybody along)

I used to manage 32 Gram Panchayats and 54 villages all by myself – Punanti Chandravanshi

The story of Punanti Chandravanshi is one of grit and perseverance. Coming from Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh, it is Punanti's passion and conviction that motivated her to reach out to women in underdeveloped villages.

It all started in 2005 when Punanti got married and became part of a huge family. She quickly had to learn the do's and don'ts of the eldest daughter-in-law and adjusted herself to the new reality. As time passed by, she felt bogged down by the pressures of household rigour. Being a commerce graduate, Punanti always felt that there is so much more she could do if she was allowed to step out of the house.

It was during that time, Punanti got the opportunity to work as a bookkeeper in a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in Badgaon village under Bihan (Chhattisgarh State Rural Livelihood Mission). Owing to her sharp communication skills and hardworking nature, Punanti slowly became an active participant in the SHGs.

She conducted training sessions and worked with SHG women to make them understand their rights and create awareness around the idea of local governance. After working for 10 years with SHGs, Punanti got selected for the position of Convergence Cluster Coordinator (CCC) in 2015, from amongst the SHG members of 54 GPs. Apart from managing family and household work, Punanti also had to handle various activities involving the SHG women of 32 Gram Panchayats and 54 villages in Chhattisgarh.

Punanti strongly believes that women are great problem solvers and that they should just be reminded of it. During the SHG meetings, when women complained of alcoholism and eve-teasing that plagued the town, Punanti managed to secure the support of police officials and mobilised local women to form a vigilance committee (a midnight patrol service) which is now called 'Mahila Commando'. 'Mahila Commando' is an inspiring example of how women, when offered right guidance and support could even solve deep-rooted social problems like alcoholism and eve-teasing.

With her impeccable track record at work, Punanti was offered the challenging task of working as a Mentor for the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO in the state of Uttar Pradesh. She was supposed to identify and train women in the SHGs to work in tandem with the respective Gram Panchayats. While Punanti's husband was completely against the proposition, her mother-in-law encouraged her to leave for work.

Upon reaching Uttar Pradesh in November 2018, Punanti was exposed to the harsh realities of rigid patriarchal structures. To work efficiently as a Mentor, she also had to understand the deep-rooted caste dynamics in the villages. Punanti was supposed to work in ten Gram Panchayats (GPs) of the Mirzapur district. Women would never step out of their homes.



“Itna padhne ke baad bhi main ghar ke kam mein phas gayi thi”

(I am an educated woman, but was unable to do anything. I felt stuck in household chores)

Punanti was quick in noticing that there is a huge gap between SHGs and the GP. She was determined to bridge this gap. She would visit homes of women and spend hours trying to make them understand their rights and also functionalities of a GP. Eventually, she was successful in motivating women to step out.

Many a times, Punanti was surprised to see women approach relatives of panchayat officials to access their entitlements or register grievances because they were either not aware whom to contact in the panchayat or were too scared to approach the Pradhan or secretary directly. Punanti would educate women to identify the right office bearers and approach them directly. She made the SHG members aware that it is important to stay united and help one another achieve their goals. After relentlessly working with women for one year now, Punanti is proud that the gap between GP officials and the SHG members is slowly decreasing.

It is Punanti's hard work, perseverance and sharp communication skills that helped her motivate women not just within her state but also in Uttar Pradesh. Her husband now visits often and her mother-in-law takes care of the children. Punanti is content that she is able to make best use of her education by empowering fellow women.



PUNANTI CHANDRAVANSHI
Mentor Resource Person
Nagarcity Block
Mirzapur District
Uttar Pradesh

THRIVING TO CREATE A DIFFERENCE

A STORY OF GRIT



SATO SAHO
Mentor Resource Person
Mihinpurva Block
Bahraich District
Uttar Pradesh

“Kuch seekhna hai toh mujhe bahar nikalna tha”
(If (I) had to learn something, I had to step out!)

Even when women are ready to step out and work, men do not allow them to venture out – Sato Saho

With minimal educational background and exposure to the outside world, Sato Saho's determination and perseverance to outgrow her limitations have scripted a remarkable story.

Sato comes from a joint family in the Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh. Apart from her inherent zeal to thrive and learn new things, Sato's troubling financial situation and her son's ill health prompted her to take up the job of a bookkeeper in a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in 2012 under Bihan (Chhattisgarh State Rural Livelihood Mission). Working in this position for over five years and interacting with women from various SHGs, Sato became an active participant in SHG activities. As a recognition to her work, she was selected as a Convergence Cluster Coordinator (CCC) in 2017.

While actively working on the field, Sato was exposed to the society's stigmas and disbelieves towards working women. She rebelled against her in-laws to step out of the house. In the villages, Sato had to organise meetings at night as women were occupied with household chores during the day time. She recollects, 'Men used to call me names and harass me. But I was determined to step out of my comfort zone and learn new things.' When everyone around Sato discouraged her that she would not get any money out of this work, she said, 'I don't go out to just make money, but to learn something meaningful.'

Uttar Pradesh was nothing like what Sato had seen before when she was posted to Bahraich as a Kudumbashree NRO Mentor in 2018 under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. SHGs were struggling to survive. Women refused to step out of their homes. Lack of family support coupled with poor transport facilities demotivated women to venture out. Sato motivated women to come out of their homes by talking to them about their rights and entitlements. Once the women started attending SHG meetings, Sato observed that it is important to instil a sense of equality amongst women. She says, 'Some are quick learners, while some are not. Some are articulate, while some are not. We must treat all the women equally.' She shares her personal experiences with the Convergence Community Resource Persons (CCRP) and other women to make sure that they see her as their equal and not as someone superior to them.

One of the most challenging problems Sato had to address was the harassment women faced while working on the field. She had to spend quality time with women trying to explain the importance of education and empowerment. She would tell women that it is crucial to face fears and emerge as a strong person to bring about change and development. For many women, these discussions have sparked interest in education. Sato says, 'Women sometimes easily crumble being unable to tolerate the harassment by men. It is crucial to offer necessary psychological support at such low points to help them march forward.'



Sato currently works in five Gram Panchayats (GPs) coordinating between various stakeholders and is hopeful that change has begun at the grassroots level. She recalls, 'Initially everything was very tough. Now, they treat me like their family. This makes me feel good.' Apart from being a Mentor, Sato also extends support to the SHG community by working on issues like eradication of alcoholism, child labour, child marriage and excessive usage of plastic in the assigned Gram Panchayats. She has also created and conducted awareness campaigns in the villages encouraging women to claim their rights. Sato tells them, 'I am here only to show you the path, it is your right to claim the entitlements!'

One year has passed by for Sato now as a Mentor. Her family respects her and reaches out to her in case of any difficulty.

Her father-in-law is proud to introduce her to others as a 'strong independent woman'. Sato now is not just financially independent but has reached a position wherein she can extend help and support to the others in need. Sato's story is a gentle reminder of the fact – the secret ingredient of success is hard work and persistence!

“Hume padai shuru kami hai, bahar bhi nikalna hai”

(We want to get educated, we want to go out and work!)- SHG women



ASSAM

A woman in a yellow and red sari is sitting on the floor in a dimly lit room. She is looking down at a large black pot that has a small flame inside it. The room has a green wall and a woven basket hanging on it. The word "ASSAM" is written in white capital letters across the bottom of the image.

ASSAM



SARAMMA JOHNSON
Mentor Resource Person
Tittabor, North West Jorhat & Ujjain Blocks
Jorhat & Majuli Districts
Assam

LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE TOUCHING LIVES

It is extremely gratifying to be able to help fellow women realise their true potential – Saramma Johnson

Twenty years back, Saramma lived in the hilly Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. Since she knew sewing, setting up a tailoring shop was the only livelihood option she could think of. Today, Saramma is glad that she took the road less travelled.

Saramma joined Kudumbashree in the year 2001 as a member of a local neighbourhood group. After working for over 12 years across its various domains, she was really excited to travel outside Kerala when she got placed as a Mentor in Jharkhand in 2014 under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. While she continued working with women in various Gram Panchayats (GP) of Jharkhand, Saramma also learned about government functionalities, cultural backgrounds of people and their livelihood choices.

Saramma designed capacity building modules and implemented them to motivate women to be proactive in the SHG activities. Initially, women were resistant to come out of their homes. She recollects, ‘They would sometimes shut their house doors when we tried to talk to them. We had to make repeated attempts to make sure the women are convinced to come out and work.’ Saramma also conducted training sessions for Local Resource Group (LRG) members to work in tandem with the GPs. She recollects, ‘One of the LRG members could read the reports but could not write. She is a very knowledgeable person, however was not confident that she could pick up writing.’ Saramma made sure that this LRG member picked up writing skills. ‘She now writes reports with unmatched precision. I am proud of her.’

Saramma started working in the state of Assam under the same project in the year 2017. ‘Women in the Northeast are quite outgoing. This is a contrast to what I have experienced in Jharkhand,’ explains Saramma. For her, working in the Northeast offered a different set of challenges. There were issues with mobile connectivity. According to Saramma distances between villages is one of the toughest problems in the Northeast. ‘In places like these, it is extremely important that one learns time management to work efficiently. Else, one

might lose all the time in traveling from one place to another. I can confidently say that after coming here, I have become good at time management,’ she explains. Despite these challenges, she handles a total of three blocks spread across the two districts of Jorhat and Ujjain with ease.

When asked what her motivation is to continue working in different places while staying away from her family, she says, ‘It is extremely gratifying to be able to help fellow women realise their true potential. Training offered by Kudumbashree NRO gave me enough strength to face any kind of situation. I have developed the ability to understand the dynamics of a new place to design and implement the NRO activities accordingly.’

‘I met with an accident in the year 2018. I thought I will not be able to continue working. However, with the support of my family and everyone in the field, I continued working. I have studied till 12th standard. I could make use of this education because of Kudumbashree and NRO. I know I am a confident person now!’

“Pehle jo kaam ek saal mein karte the, abhi do mahine mein karte hai. Situation ke hisab se abhi kaam kar rahe hai”

(The amount of work we used to deliver in one year, we could now deliver in 2 months. I have learned to work according to the situation)



“Un logon ko sikhaate sikhaate hum bhi bahut kuch seekh gaye”

(Teaching these women also helped me learn a lot)



AN ODE TO FEARLESS WOMEN

FROM THE BEAUTIFUL TINSUKIA

After I came here, I found it difficult to adjust. I took it up as a challenge to develop this place - Radha

In the year 2002, two years after Radha's husband passed away, she joined an 'Ayalkootam' – a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in her village. Today she feels that's the best decision she has ever made in her life. Working in Kudumbashree not just helped her earn a living, but also groomed her into a fearless independent woman. Her journey from a remote village in Kerala to the Tinsukia district of Assam serves as an inspiration to many struggling women in this country.

After joining the SHG, Radha quickly became an active participant in its various activities. She worked as the Chairperson of a Community Development Society from 2005 to 2014. It was during these years Radha learnt the art of working with a community. She worked with large groups of women who come from various economic, social and cultural backgrounds. She terms this phase of her life as the most important one as it built the foundation for her long- standing career. In the year 2014, she was posted as a Mentor in Assam to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. Despite the stark cultural differences, Radha could quickly adjust herself to the new reality. She explains, 'We do not have fixed working hours. Whenever the community members are available, we reach out to them. This is something I make sure all the Local Resource Group (LRG) members get to understand.'

Radha recollects, 'Initially we used to talk in sign language. But now I am familiar with Assamese and other local languages. I have

indeed learnt that one can communicate with others even if she/he does not know the language. One just needs to possess a strong intent to drive the point.' One of the major challenges to work in the remote villages of Assam includes long distances that she had to travel. Many-a-times the only way to reach the villages is to walk as there were no other means of transport available. Radha says, 'Apart from the distances, another major challenge is to understand the various cultural backgrounds of the people in the field. There is a mixed community here. There are Bengalis, Nepalis, Bora people and many more. We need to be aware of the cultural differences while working with them'.

Radha is a very confident person when it comes to working with the community and claims it to be her biggest strength. She says, 'When the Participatory Assessment of Entitlement (PAE) activity is conducted, the SHG members share a lot of information. The information includes aspects of individual entitlements, health, livelihoods, education, infrastructure, and availability of resources (within the villages). The information must be sorted and presented to the panchayat officials. This data is not just used in formulating the village development plan, but also helps people receive the entitled benefits. Since it is the LRG members who segregate this information, they must be trained effectively to make sure that the collected data reaches the panchayat officials.'

Radha is proud that apart from the village development activities, she also helped women set up microenterprises. She also mentored and trained the SHG women to conduct various social benefit programs like health camps, eye camps, legal counselling, enrolment of school dropouts etc. By being active participants in the Bala Sabha, the children in these villages also proactively

take part in the development programs. She says, 'For instance, children now raise their voices when they have issues like lack of teachers or poorly maintained toilets in the local government schools.'

Radha is extremely happy with the experience she has gained through her association with Kudumbashree. She says, 'When I work in the field, I can relate to their (women) problems. I had gone through hell when I had to get my widow pension. So, I know what a vulnerable woman has to go through to access her entitlements and benefits. I am glad that I have the opportunity to help them. Even the most vulnerable women emerge successful with the right kind of guidance and support.'

“Pehle mahila bilkul bahar nahi nikalte the, bahut samjhane ke baad hi woh bahar nikalna shuru kiya”

(Initially, women wouldn't step out of their homes, it took lot of time and effort to get them out!)



RADHA
Mentor Resource Person
Sadiya Guijan & Kakopathar Blocks
Tinsukia District
Assam

A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

FROM THE LAND OF WEAVING

I want to see the women of Assam inspired and empowered – Simi Bora

‘I learned a lot while working as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO,’ says young Simi Bora who now works as an Internal Mentor in Jorhat district of Assam. Simi joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) under the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) in the year 2013. On a quiet winter evening, a conversation with Simi offers an inspiring story for many young women.

While staying at her mother’s place, like all the other women in her village, Simi used to work on the looms and also rear cattle. After completing her 10th standard, Simi offered tuitions for children at her home. Joining the SHG and becoming an LRG member (2014) is what changed her life. During her work as an LRG member, she improved her communication skills which helped her become a confident person. Simi recollects, ‘Initially SHGs were just lending loans to women. Now, they are no longer about lending loans. Women in SHGs are involved in progressive activities like conducting health and maternity camps.’ After working as an LRG member for two years, Simi wanted to share the

knowledge with more women across Assam. In the year 2017 Simi started working as an Internal Mentor for two Gram Panchayats. Initially, it was tough for her as she had to take care of her 9-month-old child. Later on, with support from her family and the Mentors, Simi could focus more on her work. In the beginning, there was no cooperation from either the Village Organisation (VO) or the Gram Panchayat (GP). After consistently working for two years, Simi is now happy that the VO and the GP officials are very cooperative. While working in the field, she had to find new ways to bring women out of their homes. For instance, to work with women from the local Muslim community, Simi had to talk to men in their respective families to ensure that women get support from their families.

She has special mention about the Field Coordinators (Field Coordinators (FCs) are responsible for coordination of the work done by the NRO in partner-states, at the block, district and or state levels as appropriate) and the Mentors who helped her emerge successful through this journey. ‘Initially, I was scared to talk, but after becoming an Internal Mentor, I had no option. My job was to help others raise their voice. With help from Mentors and FCs, I could overcome my fears. Now I am very articulate.’ Simi is now confident that she can communicate with people of various statures.

“Pehle mujhe government office aur kaam ke baare mein itni jaankaari nahi thi, ab kaafi jaankaari hai”

(Earlier I used to know nothing about government functionalities, now I am better aware)

Simi emphasises that not every woman has the same set of abilities. Some women are quick to learn, while some take time. She says that it’s important to keep women motivated and use different techniques to train them of different learning capabilities. For instance, during the training sessions, Simi encourages vocal women participants to spend time with other less vocal women in the group. She also realised that it’s important to listen to women while they talk. ‘Women often might not explicitly talk about their problems. However, if one listens to them carefully, one can identify the problems and address them accordingly,’ says Simi.

Simi stays away from her husband and maternal family to work in the Titabor block of Jorhat district in Assam. She says, ‘I miss my daughter; my mother takes care of her. It is very satisfying to see Assam develop. My village is developed now. I wish to see the same change in other parts of Assam. That’s my biggest driving force.’

“Pehle agar kuch batana hota, toh mai kewal likh kar bata sakti thi, bol kar apni baat nahi rakh sakti thi”

(Earlier if I had to communicate, I only used to write, I couldn’t talk at all)

SIMI BORA
Internal Mentor
Titabor Block
Jorhat District
Assam







“Mahilaon ko apne samasya ke baare mein khud hi bolna hoga”

(Women will have to voice their opinions themselves)

CREATING A TRIBE OF EMPOWERED WOMEN

A STORY OF DILIGENCE

When poor women come together and raise their voice, villages get developed – Chitramani Bora

Chitramani, a hard-working person by nature, used to be a busy homemaker before joining the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM). Apart from the household chores, she also used to rear cattle and work in the field. Being part of ASRLM’s community network has changed life for Chitramani in ways she could only dream of.

Chitramani was an active Self-Help Group (SHG) member in her village before she got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member in the year 2017 under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. She also worked as the Secretary of the local SHG. After working for two years as an LRG member, she got selected as an Internal Mentor through the process of a written examination. Chitramani recollects, ‘The knowledge I gained while working as an LRG member has helped me work efficiently as an Internal Mentor. For instance, while working as an LRG member, I understood ways in which various government departments function. I also became aware of development schemes meant for women. I could communicate with women about their

rights and entitlements in an effective manner.’

When she came to work in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam in the year 2019, Chitramani knew only Assamese. The place had a mix of many ethnicities. However, she managed to learn the local languages while working with the women in the field. With the help of LRG members who are well-versed with Assamese and also local languages, Chitramani could work with SHG members in the villages. The biggest challenge for her was to educate women about their rights and entitlements. Chitramani worked day and night to make sure women in the villages understood their rights and entitlements. Apart from visiting homes and educating women about their rights, Chitramani also conducted sessions to mobilise women to participate in Gram Sabhas. She says, ‘Women are not aware of the importance of political participation. The LRG members have to make sure that SHG members are made aware of its importance.’

Chitramani strongly believes that, ‘for a house to run well, economic development alone is not sufficient. One needs water, road and transport facilities and also educational institutions. There has to be holistic development. When all the women who share similar problems come together and raise their voices, families

benefit. And it is this kind of development that helps a village progress.’ Apart from the training and support she receives from the Mentors in the field, Chitramani feels, unity amongst the Internal Mentors also helps her design strategies to address problems that arise in the field. ‘We, Internal Mentors despite our religious and geographical differences work in unity,’ she smiles.

Chitramani firmly believes that women should learn to articulate their problems and not wait for someone to speak on their behalf. She says, ‘After the introduction of PRI-CBO Convergence project, we (women) have become politically aware and I have seen my village develop.’ She feels being part of the project has groomed her and made her an independent woman.

Chitramani who spends most of her waking hours working, loves to listen to music during her free time. She says, ‘Initially I was not aware of my rights and entitlements. I became aware of my rights after I got selected as an LRG member.’

‘I want to work further and reach new heights. If I get a chance to go to other places and work, I would love to do that too.’



CHITRAMANI BORA
Internal Mentor
Lumbajong Block
Karbi Anglong District
Assam



“Jin mahila logon ko laabh milna hai usko agar who nahi mil raha hai toh mujhe bahut dukh hota hai”

(It hurts me when I see women don’t get their entitled benefits).

NUMI BORA
Internal Mentor
Pub Chaiduar Block
Biswanath District
Assam

CONQUERING ADVERSITIES

STORY OF CHANGE FROM TINSUKIA

Motivating women to claim their rights and entitlements gives me immense satisfaction – Numi Bora

26-year-old Numi Bora works relentlessly towards the upliftment of women in the interior villages of Biswanath district. After having worked in a local Self-Help Group (SHG) under the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) for a brief period, in the year 2014, Numi got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumashree NRO. Earlier, a shy and quiet Numi was neither aware of the government’s functionalities nor the community dynamics. While working as an LRG member she learnt about different development schemes and excelled in working with large groups of women.

In the year 2017, after working as an LRG member for three years, Numi got selected as an Internal Mentor and was posted in Dhekiajuli block of Sonitpur district. She was supposed to work with women across 4 Panchayats. Numi recollects, ‘Women were initially sceptical about an outsider trying to talk to them about their problems.’ However, she gained people’s trust by spending time with women and explaining to them about different government schemes and benefits. Numi strongly feels that with the introduction of PRI-CBO Convergence project, there is an increased awareness about the importance of Gram Panchayat (GP) among the women.

Numi strongly believes that access to the right kind of information would empower women. While working as an Internal Mentor, Numi realised that none of the women were aware of the government benefits meant for weavers. She helped weavers secure loans at subsidised rates by providing information about different government schemes available for women. A proud Numi says, ‘Now they (women weavers) work on weaving machines that help them produce large quantities of fabric. Apart from the local market consumption, they also get to sell the woven fabric at various outside marketplaces. Women are now aware that they can approach government when they need help in terms of marketing their produce. Being a weaver myself, it makes me extremely happy to see women run successful weaving enterprises.’

One of the challenges Numi faced while working in some of panchayats in her block is the lack of conveyance facilities. Many-a-times, she walked long distances to reach interior villages. She made it a point to visit every household to interact with women and motivate them to be proactive and dynamic. In some situations, the family members were unwilling to send their women out to work. Many married women were often not allowed to step out of their homes. Numi would then, with great patience, explain her personal experiences of having worked with Mentors who have come from far away states. She remembers, ‘One of the Internal Mentors in Assam used to carry her child while working in the field. When I quoted this instance, many women were inspired to come out

and work.’

An emotional Numi says, ‘It is heart-breaking for me when I see women who are in need and those who are eligible do not get the entitled benefits. I want to make women aware of their rights and entitlements. It gives me great happiness when I assist women to claim their benefits.’ Many villagers find Numi very approachable and often reach up to her. ‘People walk up to my mother and say that they are grateful for the assistance they received from me. This gives me immense satisfaction. People recognise me as someone who goes out of her comfort zone to help women realise their rights,’ smiles Numi.

Women in the villages now take part in the panchayat activities more proactively. They make it a point to attend the Gram Sabha and raise their voice. Numi is happy that she could contribute her bit in this change that is taking place across the villages of Assam. After working in Sonitpur for two years Numi was posted in Pub Chaiduar Block of Biswanath district in 2019 where she looks after 4 panchayats. She feels, being associated with PRI-CBO Convergence project has been a very enriching experience for her. ‘I have now learned how various government departments function and able to find my way while working in the field. I am now confident to even start a business on my own from my experience of working with the weavers. The PRI-CBO Convergence project has definitely made me an independent woman,’ smiles Numi.

“Accha lagta hai jab log humain pehchante hai”

(It feels good when people start recognising you)





RINA KARKETTA
Internal Mentor
Raha Block
Nagaon District
Assam

PAVING PATHS TO SUCCESS

A STORY OF COURAGE FROM THE NORTHEAST

The only way to win over the evil is by doing good – Rina Karketta

Growing up in a dysfunctional family amidst acute financial crisis did not stop Rina to choose victory over hardships. After getting married in the year 2009, Rina joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in the year 2011 under the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM). She gradually became more active in various activities of the SHG and after working for over 5 years was selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) Member in 2017 under the Panchayati Raj Institution - Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO.

As an LRG member, Rina had to work all through the day and sometimes during the night to reach out to the women in the SHG groups. An emotional Rina recalls, 'Sometimes, when I used to return home from work during night-time, people used to call me names. I kept quiet and continued to work hoping that my work would speak for itself.' It is Rina's undeterred determination to work for the empowerment of women that kept her going in those challenging times. During her initial days as an LRG member, apart from

these personal challenges, it was also difficult to make the panchayat and VO officials understand the importance of community involvement in village development activities. It took a great deal of patience and pursuit to convince them that it is important to work in collaboration with the SHG groups. Rina says, 'Although I have been an active SHG member, I have realised the importance of SHGs only after I became an LRG member.' Today, she is proud to say that in many Gram Panchayats, CBOs and government bodies work in tandem with each other.

“Mai khush hu ki is project ke zariye main dusron ko aage badne ka rasta dikha sakti hoon”

(I am able to guide people on the path of progress)

After working as an LRG member for two years under the project, in the year 2019, Rina got selected as an Internal Mentor for Raha block where she looks after 10 VOs and 148 SHGs in two Gram Panchayats (GPs)- Sahari and Dighaliati. While working with government departments, Rina realised that the weavers in Assam have a special provision from the government that allows them to purchase raw material at a discount of 30%. Back in the villages, none of the panchayat officials were aware of the scheme. Rina discussed this with other Internal Mentors and mobilised women to start the documentation process for claiming the entitled benefits. She says, 'Many women are not aware of the benefits that they are entitled to. It is important to make them aware of their rights and entitlements and show them the path to claim the benefits. I do this by spending quality time with LRG members, SHG members and my fellow Internal Mentors to make sure the word reaches the women in the villages.'

Rina encourages women to take up economic activities like kitchen gardening and mushroom cultivation that instil a sense of entrepreneurship. She says, 'With the right kind of support systems in place, women are enthusiastic to take up enterprising activities.' She also encourages the SHG women to see themselves as one family and discuss personal problems to overcome fears. She believes that for women to overcome hurdles and to come out and work, it is important that

they talk to each other to derive necessary strength and support.

Rina concludes, 'I am extremely proud to be part of this project. Here I am not recognised by my face, my qualification or my background. It is centred around one's willingness to work for the development of society. I feel that my prayers have been answered. This work gave me an identity and I love what I do!'

“Mai jab bhi kaam karne ghar se bahar nikalti thi to peeth peeche log tarah tarah ki baatein banate the. Tabi maine soch liya tha ki ek din swayam mera kaam bolega”.

(When I used to step out for work, people used to talk behind my back. I told myself that one day my work will speak for itself).



EMPOWERING ETHNIC MINORITIES

A STORY OF OPTIMISM



MAFIDA BEGUM
*Internal Mentor
Lumbajong Block
Karbi Anglong District
Assam*

I feel glad that I have learnt to help others – Mafida Begum

A candid conversation with Mafida offers the story of a woman's struggle to reach out to women in need.

'Having come from a minority community, I know the difficulties women go through when they have to come out to work,' begins Mafida Begum. When she joined a local Self-Help Group (SHG) under the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), her family members were unhappy with her choice. Mafida, apart from being an active SHG member, also worked as the President of her Village Organisation (VO). In 2014, she got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. During her tenure, Mafida learned to work with women from different ethnic groups. She says, 'Initially I was only concerned about my life and was not aware of the problems faced by other women in the society. After becoming an LRG member, I started understanding others' problems. This also helped me deal with my own problems better.' Following her term as an LRG member, Mafida got selected as an Internal Mentor in the year 2017.

Mafida currently works in the beautiful Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Karbi Anglong is predominantly a Scheduled Tribe (ST) dominated area and a Sixth Schedule district (Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution consists of provisions for administration of tribal areas in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram through autonomous councils). Since there is no single platform like that of a panchayat body in this district, Mafida had to make sure all problems are brought to the notice of Village Development Councils (VDCs) and then taken up to the respective government departments, with

active participation of the community. Mafida would engage the villagers in interactive sessions and help them map the resources to identify problems in the village.

Mafida says, 'I come from a minority community. I know the difficulties these women (ST) go through when they have to come out and work. When I work with different communities, I am well aware of their cultural background. I try to understand their perspective to identify the shortcomings. Only then I can motivate them.' Mafida strongly feels that being an Internal Mentor helped her become sensitive towards others in the community. Initially, when Mafida wasn't confident of her communication skills, she would stand in front of the mirror and practice. She recollects, 'When I started working with people, I didn't know what to say. I learnt by talking and also by observing others. Now I work with people from various ethnic groups. I don't understand much, but I can make sense of what they say.'

The villages of Karbi Anglong are located amidst dense forests. Some of the villages are so remote that one can only reach these places by foot. Because of the PRI-CBO Convergence project, Mafida feels that villagers have become aware of the need for education even in the most interior places. She says, 'Many people who had dropped out from schools have enrolled themselves in schools to continue education. I believe that this will be a very developed place because people are proactive.'

'While working as an LRG member I just had to work in my village. However, after becoming an Internal Mentor, I had to stay away from my family to work. With practice, I have learnt the art of balancing work and family!,' a cheerful Mafida concludes.



“Internal Mentor banne se
pehle mai ghar se door ek din
bhi nahi rukti thi”

(Before becoming an Internal
Mentor, I have never stayed
away from my family)



BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF STRONG WOMEN

A STORY OF AMBITION

I knew in my heart that I always wanted to help people in need – Rezia Sultana

Growing up in a broken family, Rezia Sultana spent most of her growing years in search of livelihood while staying away from her parents and siblings. The struggle helped her become sensitive to the sufferings of society. With the intention of working for the wellbeing of others, Rezia became a member of a local Self-help Group (SHG) under the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM). Subsequently, she was also elected as the President of the Village Organisation (VO).

With hard work and determination, Rezia got selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member in the year 2014 under the Panchayati Raj Institution-Community Based Organisation (PRI-CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. While working on various issues in the village, Rezia picked up novel ways of mobilizing huge groups of women. When she conducted the Participatory Assessment of Entitlements (PAE) exercise in the villages, Rezia realised the problems faced by women. She recollects, 'We made a list of beneficiaries depending on the priority and submitted the list to the panchayat officials. We (Rezia and the local SHG members) worked in collaboration with panchayat members and ensured that people received pensions and job cards.'

Rezia is also quite vocal and has fought against social evils that prevail in villages she works. In one instance, when a girl child's parents tried to get the girl married, Rezia intervened and educated the parents about the ill effects of child marriage. With

Rezia's intervention, the parents realised their mistake and eventually called off the wedding. While working as an LRG member, Rezia actively formulated village committees for addressing social problems. She explains, 'While addressing the issue of child marriage, I came to realise the need for social welfare committee. Similarly, along with the SHG members, we have created livelihood committees and healthcare committees.' This systematic approach helped the SHG members identify issues faced by villagers and allowed them to bring the problems to the notice of panchayats. This also triggered enthusiasm in women, thereby motivating them to be proactive participants in the Gram Sabhas.

After working as an LRG member for three years, Rezia has been working as an Internal Mentor across various Gram Panchayats of Assam from 2018 onwards. Rezia actively trains LRG members to identify different problems faced by the villagers. She also trains the LRG and SHG members to conduct innovative activities around the ideas of social service and community development. In one instance, when many villagers developed eye disorders, Rezia contacted an Ophthalmologist and made sure the villagers received treatment. She also ensured that the poor received medicines for free. Rezia believes that financial independency empowers women. She encourages enterprising women to take up initiatives like Mushroom cultivation and kitchen gardening. A sincere social worker at heart, Rezia says, 'I want to work towards poverty alleviation of people. Even before I became an LRG member, back in my village, I was always willing to help others.'



“Meri iccha hai ki mai samuh mein garibi hatane keliye kaam karti rahu”

(It's my wish to continue working with SHGs to eradicate poverty)

“Yahan ke gaon mein literacy rates bahut kam hai. Aage badhne keliye aurat ko padhna chahiye.”

(The literacy rate in these villages are very low. Women have to get educated to move forward in life).



REZIA SULTANA
Internal Mentor
Raha Block
Nagaon District
Assam

EXPLORING NEWER HORIZONS

BEING THE CHANGE ONE WANTS TO SEE

Women need to be proactive to come out of their homes and explore the world of opportunities awaiting them – Raseena

Raseena joined an ‘Ayalkoottam’ – a local Self-Help Group (SHG) promoted under Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in the year 2002. Having grown up with a single mother, a quiet and reserved Raseena was initially scared to step out of her home. She recollects, ‘Since my parents were separated, we (my mother and elder sister) were dependant on our maternal family.’ All through her initial years of work, Raseena had to constantly deal with her family’s unwillingness to send her out to work. ‘I was allowed to attend official meetings of the ‘Ayalkoottam’ only after my mother was sure that there are other women accompanying me. It was extremely tough to convince her,’ recollects Raseena.

Gradually, with the support and guidance of other women in the group, a shy 16-year-old Raseena gained confidence and learned the functioning of SHG groups and various government departments. In the year 2006, after having worked with various SHG groups, Raseena got selected as the Chairperson of Community Development Society (CDS). An emotional Raseena recollects, ‘Even when I became

the CDS chairperson, I had to struggle a lot to get the consent of my family to attend the training program. Those were very testing times!’ After the marriage of her elder sister, Raseena and her mother ended up with a huge debt to clear. She realised that stepping out of home could no longer be seen as a challenge if she had to clear her debts and stand up for her family. It is this self-motivation that gave Raseena the strength and confidence to face newer challenges.

With persistence, Raseena became more proactive in her work. ‘Being part of Kudumbashree gave me the opportunity to meet women from various backgrounds. While working with them I also realised that many women had an inherent sense of entrepreneurship in them which I thought needed to be nourished.’ She became instrumental in helping the SHG women set up small scale enterprises like paper-making units and tailoring shops. These enterprises in turn offered sustainable livelihood solutions to women.

In the year 2014, Raseena was posted as a Mentor in Assam to work under the Panchayati Raj Institution – Community Based Organisation (PRI - CBO) Convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO. Upon reaching Assam, she quickly realised that most women

were unwilling to step out of their homes. During the initial few weeks, Raseena struggled to pick up Hindi. She recollects, ‘For the first one week or so, one of my fellow Kudumbashree Mentor accompanied me to field visits. This helped me get familiar with the place, people and the language.’ Raseena soon started working with women in various Gram Panchayats (GP) encouraging them to take part in village development activities.

In Bajigaon GP of Assam, when Raseena managed to bring together women villagers to attend the Gram Sabha, she realised that the meeting was presided over by the elected President’s husband and not the President herself. At this point, Raseena put her foot down firmly and said that the President (female) needs to preside over the meeting. She recollects, ‘After some time, the President attended the meeting. She was glad as it was her first time to preside over a Gram Sabha. Before that incident, she was never allowed to take part in any village meetings.’ Raseena spent most of her time with women in the villages. She constantly encouraged them to take active part in various development activities. Many inspired women started frequenting Gram Sabhas. During this process, Raseena even had to face the wrath of the male members of the society. But a strong and vocal Raseena continued encouraging women to step out and work. She says, ‘I am very happy with the changes I have witnessed in Assam. While working with these women, I have become a stronger person. Many Local Resource Group (LRG) members, who were once terrified to leave their homes (even for few hours), now work as Internal Mentors across various districts of Assam. Women in all the villages now take an active part in Gram Sabhas and other welfare activities.’

For a brief period of two years, from 2016 to 2018, Raseena also worked in Lakshadweep as a trainer. She was part of the effort that mobilised marginal women to into Self Help Groups. She currently continues to work as a Mentor in the state of Assam. An emotional Raseena says, ‘I didn’t study much. However, being part of Kudumbashree taught me everything. Kudumbashree is my University. I would love to continue working with women across India.’

Her piece of advice to all struggling women out there is, ‘Having come from a conservative Muslim family, if I have learned to be independent and strong, I strongly feel that every woman out there can be independent. It’s important to take a chance and step out of the comfort zone.’

“Jo kam hum kar rahe hai uska
aanand lena zaroori hai. Har samay
chintit rahne ka koi faida nahi hai”

(I have learned that it is important to
enjoy what you do. There is no point
being worried all the time)



RASEENA
Mentor Resource Person
Dhalongghat,
Raha & Khagorijan Blocks
Nagaon District
Assam



Aajeevika
National Rural Livelihoods Mission
Government of India



Kudumbashree
Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission
Government of Kerala

Kudumbashree-National Resource Organisation