

Women's Power!

The tribal village of Khajuripadar is situated in the Koraput district of Odisha – an area where there is a high level of Left Wing Extremist (LWE) activity. As a result, the police are very suspicious about any activity associated with uniting the people and it is a difficult place to mobilise communities. However, this has not stopped PACS and partner SPREAD from working there and they have successfully supported the dynamic Malati Nayak – the leader of a women's Self Help Group – to bring about many changes in the village and surrounding area.



Recognising potential

Back in 2002, the Maa Tareni Self-Help Group (SHG) in Khajuripada was set up. However, it failed to function and remained inactive until SPREAD started working there in 2011 as part of the PACS programme.

Tasked with working through Community Based Organisations, when SPREAD staff met Malati (in pink, above), they immediately recognised her potential as a leader and nominated her for various training and capacity building programmes through PACS.

With her newly developed leadership skills, Malati took up the role of President and, under her wing, the dormant Maa Tareni SHG came to life...

A first success

The group began with the simple task of collecting 2 rupees from each member and depositing the proceeds in the bank. The symbolic gesture aimed to increase the membership and instill a sense of ownership and unity among them. They would meet on market days – a day when all women would be visiting the village centre.

During their initial meetings, the women (many of whom are from Scheduled Tribes and live in isolated dwellings) discussed the difficulty that those living in remote areas faced in travelling to get their monthly rations from the distant Public Distribution System (PDS) centre – a government scheme that provides food rations to Below Poverty Line families.

Their first intervention was therefore to highlight this problem at the district and block offices and, as a result, people living deep inside the forests received rations to their doorsteps. This episode marked the beginning of a new chapter for Maa Tareni SHG, raising their stature in the eyes of the community.

“The incident definitely enhanced our reputation,” recalls Malati. **“People started recognising our group and women from other SHG groups came to our village for advice. Gradually our membership increased and now we have 500 members in Maa Gupteswari Mahila Sangathan – a Women’s Self Help Group collective from the Gram Panchayat [local area].”**



Members of the Maa Tareni Women's Self Help Group sit at a meeting.

An innovative campaign for clean water

One of the next issues that Malati and her group tackled was sanitation.

“People used to drink muddy water from nearest stream or river because we did not have any tube wells,” explains Malati.

To advocate for clean drinking water, she and the SHG came up with an innovative campaigning strategy: **“We handed over bottles of muddy water collected from the river to the Block Development Officer, Junior Engineer and the District Collector and asked them to drink it if they felt that our demands were unreasonable.”**

Their campaign worked and 18 tube wells were constructed in the respective villages.

Continued advocacy successes

Malati and her SHG have continued to advocate on a range of issues. For example, the Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC) in the area wasn't functioning and Malati informed the Chief District Medical Officer (CDMO) about it. However, when he didn't respond to her request, she called together the women from SHGs in the area and 500 SHG members turned up his office!

The CDMO was forced to appoint a doctor but cited the dilapidated condition of the PHC as reason for his not joining immediately. In response, the group directly set to work and renovated both the health centre and the doctor's quarters. The doctor had no excuse for delay and is now a regular feature at the centre.

The group has also facilitated the creation of Anganwadi Centres under the **Integrated Child Development Services scheme**, appointed Auxiliary Nurse Midwives and made sure that the Janani Express was available to transport pregnant women (from all the villages of the Gram Panchayat) to hospital under the government's **Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** maternal health scheme.

In addition, the women have taken on tree smugglers, alcohol vendors and cockfight organisers in the area. They've been so successful that even the police and the Divisional Forest Officers work in tandem with them.



Malati (in pink) and some of the SHG members make a monitoring visit to the Primary Healthcare Centre that they helped to renovate.

Working to empower women

Early marriages are a common occurrence in tribal communities in the district. If a tribal boy likes a girl in the community he can seize her and carry her home where she is considered his bride.

The group has stood up to many such customs and has succeeded in putting a stop to them. **“We are determined to fight against all forms of violence against women,”** says Malati. **“We earn our respect by our continuous effort and hope women in other areas are also able to assert themselves.”**

Indeed, Malati herself is an inspiration to other women. Her success has led her to twice be elected as Sarpanch (Head) of the Gram Panchayat and, through her example, she has empowered other women to also stand for election as Sarpanches in their respective areas.

But, she says, it is a team effort: **“We take pride in working for our people but cannot take all the credit for the achievements. It is the continuous support we have received from SPREAD at district, block and Gram Panchayat level that has enabled us to achieve so much in such a short time.”**

Source: http://www.pacsindia.org/case_studies/womens-power