Steely determination helps them overcome adversity

These women from the lower strata of society, who have been pushed to fend for themselves by an indifferent administration and an uncaring public, have taken steps to educate themselves about their rights and privileges, and are helping not only themselves but others too to secure a better life. A significant factor common to the women described here is their grit and determination in the face of adverse situations.

PUSHPA ACHANTA, Bengaluru

Women who are graduates and homemakers from middle-income households that are headed by men (who may be progressive in their attitudes towards women) are not necessarily aware of government benefits and how to avail of them, or even of relevant laws, policies or rules. This is often because such women are not entrusted with, or take up responsibilities of knowing about them. On the other hand, there are some women who know their basic rights and entitlements, especially if they are on their own – irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, or literacy.

Kannamma, an unlettered but determined Dalit woman who earns her living as a domestic worker, is a good example of this latter group. The septuagenarian lives in a tiny house in a low-income neighbourhood in Salem, a city in south Tamil Nadu. She is knowledgeable about various government schemes and social entitlements and informs others how to avail of them. “I have been staying by myself for a few years now in this house which I obtained with a lot of difficulty. Although some of my young relatives stay close by, I do not depend on them for anything. I am supposed to receive a pension from the government meant for poor widows but I have discovered that my age is listed with a lot of difficulty. Although some of my young relatives stay close by, I do not depend on them for anything. I am supposed to receive a pension from the government meant for poor widows but I have discovered that my age is listed as 54 years. I have to follow up to get that error rectified so that I can receive my monetary benefit,” says Kannamma. She can talk about a variety of topics and keeps herself and others informed about news on a number of fronts, including rise in prices of essential goods, socio-political developments and how and where to secure a ration card.

Similar to Kannamma in some ways is 62-year-old Renukamma, the leader of a self-help group (SHG) for women in Gadag District of northern Karnataka. Barely literate, this dignified woman was previously employed as a cook in a middle school run by the government. “Some of us local, socio-economic community members decided to form a group to save small amounts of money so that we can rotate it amongst ourselves as per the needs of individuals,” she says. “We have regular meetings where we discuss operational and financial matters. In addition to that we deliberate on how to handle social and personal matters related to our gender, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, education of girls, reproductive rights and other health matters,” she adds.

As the leader of the SHG, the group’s activities took up considerable time, because of which Renukamma decided to resign her job. “My family slowly began to appreciate my work and provide all the support that I need. I travel to other parts of Karnataka to provide awareness on starting and running SHGs, the importance of women in leadership, political governance structures, etc,” she adds.

Palaniamma, age 36, who has studied up to Class VII, has a different tale to tell. She was employed in an exploitative garment factory in Tirupur near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, for some years, but courageously managed to quit the job. She now works as an independent seamstress and supplies her products to textile manufacturers. Palaniamma has a daughter who is in her early twenties and has completed her graduation because of the encouragement and help by her mother. The younger woman works as a tailor and lives with her husband in a town in the northern region of Karnataka.

In Chikballapur, also in Karnataka, is Muniratnamma, age 27. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Humanities. “Ever since I completed my graduation, I have been trying for a job in a government institution as per my entitlement under the quota for physically challenged persons. That has been denied me under one pretext or the other. For the last few months, I have been a human rights advocacy volunteer at Karnataka Vikalchetanara Sangha, a collective for the advancement of people with disabilities. I am also following up with government officials regarding my job opportunities under the guidance of Kiran, the feisty founder of the organisation who is a wheelchair user of my age. I hope to get a job, as I need to complement the income of my daily wage labourer husband, particularly for the sake of our children.”

Kiran is a transgender who hails from an adivasi (tribal) community in Telangana. He relocated to Bangalore a few years ago with his partner after their families refused to accept their gender identity. He is an inspiring individual who has faced different types of discrimination with courage and confidence.

Thirty-eight-year-old Chaya is a domestic worker who migrated to Mumbai as a child with her parents from Mahboobnagar, an arid district in Telangana. Forced to drop out of school to look after her younger siblings after
FOCUS

An unsung visionary and a philanthropist

This year marks the centenary of an institution founded by a remarkable man who, from straitened beginnings, went on to combine best of processes from Ayurveda with modern facilities and a strong ethical base, and set in motion an endeavour which is both profitable and socially relevant. Not only did B. V. Pundit help resurrect and propagate Ayurveda as an alternative to modern allopathic medicine, he also used his earnings for charitable community work, giving generously for deserving causes.

SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN, Bengaluru

B.V. Venkatesha Murthy with his book, Medicinal Plants of Arogyashram.

The centenary of Mahatma Gandhi’s return to India was observed last month; there are so many other anniversaries of pioneering Indians who contributed significantly to national resurgence through exemplary lifestyles that do not always get the public acknowledgements they deserve. One such is the birthday on February 23, of B.V. Pundit, a visionary who began with a humble effort to eke out a living, and went on to build a famous vaidyashala (school and arogyashram (health centre) that have set benchmarks for the resurgence of indigenous medicine. What is more, he returned vast portions of his profits to the community as a philanthropist.

The Sadvaidyashala of Nanjangud (an hour’s drive from Mysuru in Karnataka) that he set up, has just celebrated its centenary. Senior citizens may recall a bright pink Nanjangud tooth powder sold in small paper pouches that made the name of this small town in Karnataka famous all over the south. “That tooth powder used to be so tasty, I used to eat it,” recalls Sheila Iyer, while M.K. Murthy remembers alighting at Madurai Railway Station early in the morning, buying a pouch of tooth powder for four annas (25 paisa) and cleaning his teeth at the tap on the platform before having breakfast. Behind that widely popular tooth powder (which was selling 36000 packets per day in the early 1970s), and continues to sell 100000 packets a month in Karnataka alone, despite the spread of fancy, modern tooth pastes (lies the story of B.V. Pundit (1887-1975) who manufactured it.

Born as a posthumous child, his mother, a young widow, could only afford to send him to a school that transgressed Ayurveda in Ayurveda. There, he picked up knowledge about herbal preparations. His mother would send him to nearby hills to collect medicinal leaves and roots which she turned into herbal preparations. He helped her in selling these, beginning with the tooth powder. Soon, he moved on to other curative preparations, after training at an Ayurvedic college which offered scholarships and concessions for needy students.

Pundit set up the Sadvaidyashala at Nanjangud as a small commercial unit, with a staff of four (himself, his mother, his wife, and his manager Narayana Rau) and a capital of Rs 300 which he had borrowed. Out of these modest beginnings grew a large facility for research, manufacture and marketing of a wide range of Ayurvedic formulations worth lakhs that made B.V. Pundit a household name. The train by which tooth powder packets were sent from Nanjangud to Mysuru came to be known as Tooth Powder Express. And to think that initially Pundit used to cycle to Mysuru on alternate days to sell the medicines prepared by his mother and wife!

Among the touching details of his life is the fact that Pundit and his widowed mother lived in a small room paying a rent of one rupee per month while he was a student; he earned three rupees a month giving tuitions to students while he was himself a teenager, graduating to a monthly salary of Rs 10 as an apprentice to an Ayurvedic expert. The modest house, Dhanvantari Vilas (named after the deity of medicine) that he subsequently built for himself, still stands, next to the sprawling new Sadvaidyashala factory with over 60 employees who carefully measure, mix and grind ingredients drawn mainly from the private herbal garden containing over 324 varieties of medicinal trees, plants and bushes. Several ingredients come from the Himalayas and from far off states like Rajasthan.

The vaidyashala today combines the best of processes from a 4000-year-old tradition (the oldest among medical systems practiced today) with modern facilities and a strong ethical base, treating its products not as profit generators (although shareholders do get regular double digit dividends) but as a sacred social endeavour. A testing lab strictly monitors quality control.

One of the decisions made when the Sadvaidyashala was set up, was to provide medicines free to poor patients. Building on the popularity of the brand, a clinic, pharmacy and arogyashram were added in 1960, and now draws Rs 300 from as far away as Germany for treatment of obesity, stress and other ailments. Even the ambience of the clinic and treatment concave, in the midst of the herbal garden, suffuses the visitor with a sense of peace and rejuvenation (the municipality is considering acquiring a part of the herb garden to widen the road in the face of growing traffic, but the loss of valuable heritage will not make up for reduced travel time).

Such was the phenomenal reputation of the Ayurvedic initiative that the Maharaja of Mysore and Dewan Mirza Ismail visited the facility and paid tribute to Pundit’s work. The road where the vaidyashala is situated, known earlier as 13th Cross, is now named B.V. Pundit Road. As one walks through the different units of the vaidyashala today, the fragrance of cinnamon, cloves, ginger and various other spices fill the air. Of the 100-odd preparations that the vaidyashala puts out, musicians in particular swear by the efficacy of the delicious Kofex (liquor) and Amodini (pills) while the Bhavana Shunti, a very tasty digestive made from sun dried ginger steeped in special salt, is a perennial favourite with children and adults alike.

The original pink tooth powder has now made way to a paste, but the recipes remain faithful to the ancient texts that testify to the advanced medical knowledge that our ancestors had, explains doctors Rajesh Sreenivasan and N.B. Ramgopal, who now oversee the production processes at the factory, as the third generation of descendants of the patriarch. Of Pundit’s children, one son, B.V. Pundit started in a humble way to eke out a living.

Dr Krishnamurthy went on to become a respected economist, while another, Professor B.V. Srikantan, retired as director of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai and is now associated with the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bengaluru.

The meteoric success that B.V. Pundit saw in life, going from straitened circumstances to fame and wealth, did not affect his philosophical bent or compassion for others at the grassroots. Not only did Pundit help resuscitate and propagate Ayurveda as an alternative to modern allopathic medicine (which often causes adverse side effects) he also used his earnings for charitable community work, giving generously for deserving causes— including donations to build a children’s ward and a girls school, and guest houses for tourists and pilgrims visiting the Srikanteswara Temple that the town is famous for. His ethics prompted immense loyalty from his employees. The story goes that an orphan whom his mother had brought up and who subsequently joined Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar’s palace kitchen and became the ruler’s favourite cook, left the job because he was not given leave to attend Pundit’s 60th birthday celebrations.

Pundit’s son, B.V. Venkatesha Murthy, who is now a consulting physician and technical advisor at the Sadvaidyashala, is a recipient of the Rajiv Gandhi Shriomani Award, and has catalogued the collection of medicinal plants that the factory’s campus is home to, describing their healing powers in a detailed volume of 338 pages, complete with their scientific names, native equivalents in different languages, habitats and properties. Three generations of this Pundit family, all highly qualified specialists, have upheld standards and ethical norms through a hundred years of dedicated service to the nation’s health.
Where kitchen gardens do more than just feed the family

Small farmers in remote villages of Odisha are finding that, with a little help, they can turn their kitchen gardens into profitable endeavour. In the rain-fed and drought-prone regions of Nuapada and Kalahandi Districts of Odisha, vegetable gardening is among the main means of maintaining family nutrition and a medium to enhance a farmer’s economic status through marketing of surplus produce.

AJIT PANDA, Kalahandi, Odisha

Vidura

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Documenting the voice of people who remain unheard and unseen

A group of like-minded people try and increase the involvement of adivasis in the world of art and literature, with the help of documentary films focused on their struggles, problems and issues associated with their lives and work

SHOMA A. CHATTERJI, Kolkata

“They wanted to bury us. They did not know we were seeds.” (Mexican proverb)

Bijoo Toppo is one of the first adivasis (belonging to a tribal group) filmmakers to effectively use the medium of cinema to counter the misrepresentation of his community by mainstream media. His films have bagged national awards and international recognition. Meghnath is an activist working in Jharkhand for the past 30 years. He has been a part of the people’s struggle against destructive development. As a filmmaker, he has tried to document the voice of the section of people who remain unheard and also unseen. He makes films with Bijoo and also teaches in the Mass Communication Department of St Xavier’s College, Ranchi. Together, they founded an organisation in the 1990s, along with some committed youngsters. They called it Akhra.

Akhra or Akhara signifies a ‘group without attachment’. Originally, it denoted a Hindu religious denomination said to belong to the Vaishnava sampradaya headed by Mahant Bhaskar Das. But Meghnath begins to differ. “Traditionally, an akhara was an open space in the village for community meetings and entertainment. Historically, it was a seat of learning. Unlike the traditional ashrama system where the master could choose his disciples, an akhara was accessible to all. But today, for us, akhara means a group of committed people, comprising mainly youth from indigenous population groups working in the field of culture, communication and human rights issues of the indigenous (tribal) people of India in general and Jharkhand in particular,” he says.

“In the 1990s, we, along with a group of young people, put our heads together to evaluate the development in adivasi society. The common feeling that came across is that though adivasis had advanced to some extent in the field of government service and in sports, they did not have much of a presence in the fields of literature and journalism. This led to the formation of a group of like-minded people to try and fill this gap, perhaps with the help of documentary films focused on the struggles, problems and issues involving the lives and work of adivasis. Akhara was born in 1996,” says Meghnath.

Over the past 20 years, Akhara has made around a dozen documentary films on various issues directly linked to adivasis in various pockets of Jharkhand. Some of them have won national awards. Akhara also makes communication films to spread information, education and awareness among the adivasis. One of its films, Loha Garam Hai (The Iron is Hot), won the Best Environmental Film Award from IDPA (Indian Documentary Producers Association) Mumbai, in 2009. It is the story of people involved in the sponge iron industry. Beginning with figures and estimates about the industry that generates very high emissions of toxic fumes, the film goes on to capture the lives of people working in these factories through interviews with local adivasis, ordinary men and women. Pictures of the smoke from the factories engulfing the surrounding area offer a graphic image of the damage to environment and to people.

Ek Ropa Dhan is a 26-minute film by Akhara that won a prize at the Chicago Film Festival a few years ago. Set in the fields of Bihar, it explains and promotes a new technology in paddy cultivation, which locals call ropa dhan. It takes a look at the basic problem of food and shows how the system of rice intensification (SRI) method can resolve it. The technique needs less fertilizer, seeds, insecticides, labour and, most importantly, much less water than normal modes of cultivation.

One of the farmers interviewed says that most farmers produce less than subsistence levels and can barely live for three months on what they normally produce. But the SRI method has bettered their lives in a significant way. Such farming method was introduced by a Catholic priest, Father Henri de Lavalin, in Madagascar, around 25 years ago. One striking feature is the woman’s voice heard through the camera and proudly recounts how numerous farmers followed her example to adopt the SRI method and got very good results. There are dozens of rural women who not only look after their own farms but also spread the message.

It is more important to spread the message. Our films have been screened by universities in Germany and Denmark.” Meghnath says, but adds regretfully, “Ranchi University did not bother.

Another Akhra film, Taking Sides, is a tribute to the memory of Sister Valsa John of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary (SCJM) Order, who decided to work among the Santal Tribes of Jharkhand fighting for their rights over land, water and forest. She joined the Rajmahal Pahar Bachao Andolan and worked with them for 15 years till she was brutally murdered on 15th November 2011 in the struggle against the Panem Coal Mines in Pachuwara Village. She was beaten to death by a gang of around 40 people who stormed into her home. She was the fourth social activist to have been killed in India that year.

Steely determination helps...

(Continued from page 1)

Chaya, 38, a domestic worker in Mumbai.

‘It is not more important to spread the message. Our films have been screened by universities in Germany and Denmark.” Meghnath says, but adds regretfully, “Ranchi University did not bother. Another Akhra film, Taking Sides, is a tribute to the memory of Sister Valsa John of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary (SCJM) Order, who decided to work among the Santal Tribes of Jharkhand fighting for their rights over land, water and forest. She joined the Rajmahal Pahar Bachao Andolan and worked with them for 15 years till she was brutally murdered on 15th November 2011 in the struggle against the Panem Coal Mines in Pachuwara Village. She was beaten to death by a gang of around 40 people who stormed into her home. She was the fourth social activist to have been killed in India that year.

For her late daughter, a victim of domestic violence. Shabana is also raising her two school-going grandchildren. Vijayalkakshmi is a visually challenged street vendor who did not let anything come in the way of educating daughter Rupa, who is a college student. And Julie, once a sex worker, is now a part of a local women’s collective that counsels women who earn their living from various trades on the streets braving sexual harassment and oral and physical abuse from ruffians and the police. Incidentally, her daughter, an adolescent, is training to be a professional hairdresser.

Photo: provided by SCJM Order

Iron Is Hot
Produced by
Akhra
Director
Bijoo Toppo Meghnath

Iron Is Hot
Produced by
Akhra
Director
Bijoo Toppo Meghnath
Becoming a landowner brings far-reaching positive outcomes

Empowering women in the workforce is critical to the success of India’s growth story. With six out of ten people engaged in farming, the agriculture sector is the largest. Women, who constitute the majority here, are neither legally nor socially recognised as farmers. Lack of access and control over land is pushing them deep into a poverty trap. For the poor, a land title is the fastest way to a secure future. In Odisha, owning legal documents to their property has brought about amazing motivation and socio-economic transformation.

MANIPADMA JENA, Bhubaneswar

What is stopping India from becoming one of the third largest economies in the world? Several factors. Agriculture and land rights are key. What is happening till women farmers are not recognised and given their due. According to noted agriculturist-economist, Prof M.S. Swaminathan, “Women and youth farmers will determine the future of Indian agrarian and rural economy. But even though more women are taking to farming - with men migrating to urban areas for work - they do not have land titles.”

According to the Landesa/ RDI, an international non-profit working on securing land rights for the poorest in states such as Odisha, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, among others, an estimated 20 million Indian families are both poor and landless, while many more do not have secure legal rights to the land they occupy and farm. This lack of security in the possession of one’s land pushes families, especially women, deep into a poverty trap with no way out of it.

Of course, there is enough evidence today to demonstrate that when women are given ownership of land there are far-reaching positive outcomes, not just for them and their families but even the community at large. According to Sanjoy Patnaik, director of Landesa/ RDI Odisha, “We have seen that even small plots of titled land can enhance a family’s food security, nutrition and health; increase access to government programmes, augment existing income and result in better social capital.”

That’s exactly what has happened for a few families in the Kharibandh hamlet of Ganjam, a coastal district in Odisha. Getting ownership of land to live and grow food has turned the tide for a way of changing experience for the tribal community here, which had struggled for livelihood and food security for three generations having no legal rights to the land on which they made a precarious rice through share cropping.

Three years ago, facilitated by Landesa/ RDI, 13 households of the Sabar Tribe received titles to 400 square metres each (0.1 acres) of government homestead land under the state’s Vasundhara Scheme. In 2003, the Government of Odisha had conducted an enumeration that established that there were more than 250,000 landless families in the state. Based on this, a homestead plot allocation programme was launched in 2005-06.

In 2010, when the select Sabar families got their patras (proof of land ownership), the women formed a self-help group (SHG) and converted the allotted land into flourishing vegetable gardens.

Rabibari Sabar, a 52-year-old widow, is a happy woman today. In her plot of land - that she irrigates with the help of a collectively owned foot pump that pipes pond water into it - she cultivates seasonal vegetables interspersed with lush coconut and papaya trees. While she uses the proceeds of the produce for the family, last year Rabibari also managed to put aside Rs 15000 by selling tubers and spinach at the local haat (village market).

For the poor, a land title is the fastest way to a secure future. Almost everything, from collateral for bank credit, legal proof of caste, income, residence, eligibility for government housing schemes, admission to schools and colleges, and even for applying for bail in an imprisoned relative or friend, is dependent on this status. Therefore, simply owning legal documents to their property has brought about amazing motivation and socio-economic transformation. The Sabar women farmers also have access to other government benefits. Elaborates a state revenue official.

“With a title to their land, former female sharecroppers now get cash compensation of Rs 8000 to 10000 for each seasonal crop loss - a crucial benefit they could not access previously.”

Like Kharibandh and Chilipoi, another village in Ganjam, is better off ever since people there became landowners. For instance, though the village suffers from chronic water shortages, thanks to the land ownership papers that the women farmers here possess, they are eligible for a 50 per cent government subsidy on a bore well. In addition, a third of Chilipoi’s households have already moved from mud huts into safer concrete homes, which they are entitled to as landowners under a federal housing scheme for the rural poor.

Unfortunately, Kharibandh and Chilipoi are small islands of progress in women’s land entitlement in India. The larger reality is quite disturbing. According to the National Advisory Council (NAC) member N.C. Saxena, “The women’s struggle for securing land rights is not a faraway reality today. Political leaders deem it as a major impetus to the women’s land rights movement. This too is becoming increasingly evident that supported by local collectives, women are summoning the courage to demand their land rights from immediate male family members.”

Presently, even though they are responsible for 60 to 80 per cent of India’s total food production, only 9 per cent of rural women and overall 2 per cent women actually hold the ownership title of the land they so painstakingly till. Hopefully, the future will see more of women landowners like Rabibari Sabar ushering in good times for themselves and their communities.

(Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)
How a helpline has empowered hundreds of poor families

The LifeLines Agriculture Service, launched in 2006, reaches out to farmers in more than 2000 villages across five districts in Uttar Pradesh. It provides critical agri-advice and livelihood information to farmers over landlines and mobile phones. All that the farmer had to do is to dial his/her designated LifeLines number and record questions with the help of an interactive voice response system. Responses are given within 24 hours. Many families across Uttar Pradesh have benefited from the service.

As Sunita Tiwari looks at the gooseberries growing on her 10-bigha farm in Hatkila Village in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, she smiles to herself with satisfaction. She is happy because all her hard work has paid off — after all, ever since her husband went to Haryana to work, managing the home and farm single-handedly has not been easy for her. Even her children are grown up now and have moved to a nearby town for their education.

Just a few years ago, things were very different for the family. Successive years of poor yields compelled Sunita’s husband to migrate in search of better paying work. When everything, including running the farm, was left in her care she didn’t think she had it in her to turn things around. But she has succeeded in doing just that.

What helped transform this quiet housewife into a prospersour farmer? It was an intervention known as the LifeLines Agriculture Service. Launched in 2006 under the LifeLines India project, it provided critical agri-advice and livelihood information to farmers over landlines and mobile phones. British Telecom, Cisco Systems and OneWorld jointly partnered with British Telecom, Cisco Systems and OneWorld jointly partnered with the service. According to the 2001 census, around 2.6 million people have migrated from the state in search of work. These are small landowners, who often find agriculture to be an uneconomical livelihood.

They go away to cities such as Delhi and Mumbai in search of skilled, semi-skilled or un-skilled employment and send remittances home. Their wives who are left behind have the double burden of not only taking care of the elders and children in the family, but also tending to the fields and livestock. 

Sunita Tiwari

Agriculture Service reaches out to over 150000 farmers across 2000 villages in Uttar Pradesh. Here’s how it works.

In the last six years, the LifeLines Agriculture Service has grown to become a handy and reliable source of reference for more than 150000 farmers. It receives over 350 queries every day and more than 95 per cent of these are addressed within 24 hours.

Soni Gupta from Sultanpur may be all of 18 but in the absence of her father, who is working in Kolkata, she is managing their 5-bigha farmland and taking care of four cows. Soni has been discharging her responsibilities well with a little bit of guidance from experts to whom she accessed through the LifeLines service.

Helping women like Sunita, Soni and others access the service is a challenge not just to bear the double burden of not only taking care of the elders and children in the family, but also tending to the fields and livestock.

Soni registered my query to the system on the phone. He is happy to report that many women farmers can now comfortably use the service.

Vidyavati from Hatkila in Amethi, whose husband works in Delhi, owns five bighas of land. Vidyavati recalls how she increased the milk production from her cows. She also sought a remedy for the diseases that plagued her crop of urad (black gram) and dhania (coriander). 

Profitable in new farm practices, the women are aware of better crop varieties, disease control, integrated pest management and even animal husbandry. They are now better acquainted with government schemes and market trends. And, yes, they have also picked up some easy farming tips: cowdung and buttermilk, for instance, make good pesticides.

(Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)
Making a big difference to rural communities

A few years ago, Sangeeta Devi was like other women in her village in Mewat District, Haryana. Her face behind a purdah, she could not speak to men of her village. When she realised that women in MGNREGA activities were not being paid their due, she spoke up for the first time. And then there was no looking back.

B. JAYASHREE, Chennai

A few years ago, Sangeeta Devi was like other women in her village in Mewat District, Haryana. Her face behind a purdah, she could not speak to men of her village. When she realised that women in MGNREGA activities were not being paid their due, she spoke up for the first time. The government machinery took action against the erring official based on Sangeeta’s complaint. That was the trigger that made her decide to do something for the village, especially women.

Sangeeta emerged from behind the purdah, roping in women who had basic education and thus the Sakshar Mahila Sangh (Group of Literate Women) was born. Over years, the group helped resolve issues from education to water to health, livelihood and public distribution to name a few. Sangeeta also pursued higher education, completing graduation and helped in training for government health and nutrition programmes.

Sangeeta’s inspiring story was one of many celebrated at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) Jamsjet Tata National Virtual Academy Convocation recently, when Sangeeta and 228 other rural crusaders were awarded the ‘fellowship’ of the academy, a recognition for making a difference to rural communities.

The two-day event on Information Communication Technology for Rural Development focused on hunger and sustainable development, besides launch of the Fisher Friend mobile application. Digital India, ICT and Rural Entrepreneurship being current national priorities, the event helped share knowledge for bringing development.

Hitaite Aikue Aung from Nyangyong, Myanmar, one of the international fellows, spoke about efforts she is taking to provide open source technology besides linking community and service providers. Ko Ko Ye from Myanmar runs an initiative called ‘fimsystreet’, building engagement between civil groups and the government in their region. “We have been listening to many stories and it is great that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel and can look for ICT-based but simple technology that grassroots people can use.”

R. V. Printers

Sangeeta Devi, a community worker from Haryana, receiving the NVA Fellowship from Prof M.S. Swaminathan.

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Pollution of marine environment a matter of serious concern

A ‘hazard line’ for the coastal regions of India must be prepared at the earliest to ensure that economic and urban development plans were implemented without affecting the environment or coastal to health, says an expert of the end of a two-day consultation at MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Chennai. The hazard line is one at which natural hazards such as adverse weather incidents and storms are likely to impact people and livelihoods. According to the CRZ (Coastal Regulation Zone) notification of economic and urban development activities must take the line into consideration.

Sukumar Devotta, former director, National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, and vice-president, Society for Protection of River and Marine Environment, said “The capacity of the industry as well as government agencies that implement coastal regulation zone notification needs to be enhanced in terms of mapping, planning and monitoring so that the coastal regulation can gradually evolve into coastal management.”

Experts at the consultation also expressed concern at livelihood issues. Prof M.S. Swaminathan observed, “We talk about the economic value of the coast, but we also need to think about the social dimensions and occupational hazards of the people working there. The issue of salt workers, for instance, who face so many health issues, has now been noticed by the Tamil Nadu Government thanks to our intervention and they have been brought under the Chief Minister’s Health Insurance scheme.”

Participants said, the most pressing need in the context of increased awareness over clean India, was concern about the pollution levels along the coast and its effect on the marine environment, specifically with regard to waste disposal. The two-day meeting brought together stakeholders on one platform to outline current status of coastal zone management and document their suggestions and recommendations for future developmental planning for coastal areas, the recommendations of which would be forwarded to the ministry and relevant government departments.

The consultation was organised by Society for Protection of River and Marine Environment, National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, Indian Forest Service, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Society for Integrated Coastal Management, and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute.

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अगली पीढ़ी को बचपन से ही मिले
स्वच्छता की शिक्षा

स्वच्छता के महायज्ज में
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