



पेयजल एवं स्वच्छता विभाग
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DEPARTMENT OF DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION
MINISTRY OF JAL SHAKTI
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

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Ripples of change

Gender-transformative
rural **WASH** programmes
in India



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rural WASH programmes
in India**

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Message

Since 2014 India has embarked on a transformative journey in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, pioneering some of the most ambitious and inclusive programmes in the world. The Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission have not only revolutionized access to water, sanitation and hygiene services but have also redefined the role of women and communities in driving sustainable change.

Recognizing that ensuring access to safe sanitation and clean drinking water is not merely an infrastructural necessity but a social imperative that directly impacts gender equality, education, and economic opportunities, these missions were designed to empower women as key stakeholders in these initiatives.

This progress has been possible due to the unwavering leadership and vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, who has been a champion, supporter, and driving force behind these flagship programmes. Under his leadership, the government has placed sanitation and water security at the heart of national development, ensuring that these critical issues receive the attention and resources they deserve. His steadfast commitment has also inspired global recognition of India's water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives as models of large-scale transformation.

The documentation titled "Ripples of Change: Gender-transformative rural WASH programmes in India", is a testimony to this remarkable transformation that is happening at the grassroot level. Through the scientific collection of inspiring case studies, it captures the journeys of women leaders who have turned challenges into opportunities, reshaping their communities with resilience and determination. These narratives reflect not just individual triumphs but also systemic shifts in gender and social norms. It offers valuable insights into how gender-transformative water, sanitation and hygiene policies can catalyse social change, ensuring that women are not just recipients of services but active decision-makers in shaping water, sanitation and hygiene governance.

I congratulate the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation for commencing this study in collaboration with UNICEF India. Let "Ripples of Change" serve as a guiding light for policymakers, practitioners, and communities striving to create a future where access to water, sanitation and hygiene services translates into true empowerment and dignity for all, an outcome that aligns closely with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a Swachh, Samridh and Viksit/Bharat.




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Foreword

Over the past decade, India has witnessed significant progress in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, with flagship programmes Swachh Bharat Mission (2014-2024) and Jal Jeevan Mission (2019-2024) playing pivotal roles in improving the lives of hundreds of Indians. Recognizing that women and girls often bear the disproportionate burden of collecting water, managing sanitation facilities, and ensuring hygiene in their home, severely limiting their opportunities for education, employment, and political participation, gender considerations have been paramount in both the flagship programmes. The water, sanitation and hygiene policies and programming in the past decade has aimed not only to providing access to essential services but also enabling women to take active leadership roles in decision-making processes and enabling them in shaping and managing these infrastructure and services for their communities.

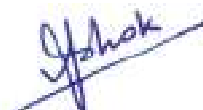
The objective of this documentation is to understand the impact of these flagships on gender and social norms, roles, and power relations. This documentation is a step towards building a body of evidence on how water, sanitation and hygiene policy and programmes when approached with a gender-transformative lens, can serve as a catalyst for women's leadership and long-term social change for the better. Through the journey of the women leaders, effort has been made to understand if the flagships have been able to shift harmful gender and social norms through and alongside water, sanitation, and hygiene policies and interventions. Using case study methodology, the enabling environment created by Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission for gender transformation was understood at multiple layers- policy and institutional environment, community, family and individual levels.

"Ripples of Change" presents 10 inspiring case studies of women who have emerged as change-makers, sharing their tales, straight from their hearts. It highlights the efforts of female leaders at the grassroots level who are driving initiatives in water, sanitation and hygiene from being a frontline worker to leading local governance which goes beyond water, sanitation and hygiene. With the essence of more than 50 key informant interviews across 10 districts in 7 States covering family, peers, officials and community leaders, these narratives demonstrate how gender-transformative water, sanitation and hygiene approaches contribute to bringing about change and fostering a more inclusive society.

The case studies of resilience presented in these pages are not just individual successes but blueprints for systemic change. They show how gender-transformative policy frameworks, community engagement, and capacity-building initiatives can create enabling environments for women to exercise their rights, influence governance and bring about changes in attitudes towards gender equality within communities. A key pillar, in ensuring that water, sanitation and hygiene interventions are accepted, owned, and sustained at the grassroots level, has been the role of Village Water and Sanitation Committees. These committees have served as a critical platform for community participation, empowering local leadership especially women to take ownership of water, sanitation and hygiene services and ensure their long-term sustainability.

As we look ahead, these efforts will continue in water, sanitation and hygiene flagship schemes and inspire other sectors to also integrate gender-transformative approaches. The lessons drawn from India's experience will offer valuable insights for global water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives, reinforcing the need to prioritize gender in sustainable development goals.

I appreciate UNICEF India for initiating this study and commend Paulos Workneh, Chief of WASH, Shalini Prasad, Social and Behaviour Change Specialist, and Gender teams for leading the development of this document. Let the insights captured in this documentation on Gender Transformative WASH Programmes in India be a stepping stone to future strides in addressing gender disparities through WASH and beyond


(Ashok K.K. Meena)

Introduction

Background

Improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene are vital for everyone's well-being, but they are particularly significant for women and girls. The connections between gender¹ and water, sanitation and hygiene are deep-rooted, with many aspects of water, sanitation and hygiene being strongly gendered. Social and gender norms often lead to "imprisonment by daylight" and place the burden of water collection, cooking, cleaning and hygiene of the family on women and girls, taking them away from educational and economic opportunities. They face unique water, sanitation and hygiene challenges

during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause, which impact their health, education, safety and overall quality of life.

Initially, the focus on water and sanitation programmes was on providing technical solutions. However, there is growing recognition that addressing both practical gender needs (such as access to toilets/ water) and strategic gender interests (such as changes in power dynamics and roles) is essential for achieving transformative changes. Evidence shows that gender-focused water, sanitation and hygiene programming is effective in achieving programme sustainability, economic gains, and

improved and economic outcomes (Fisher et al. 2017). A recent review conducted by UNICEF NYHQ PG-WASH (2023)² exploring the shift from gender-responsive to gender-transformative approaches emphasized the need for integrating gender-transformative strategies within water, sanitation and hygiene programme and research.

There is no single definition for the term "gender-transformative", which is often viewed as a process or approach to development rather than a set of clearly defined outcomes. In the development sector, gender-transformative approaches focus on changing the gender norms,

¹ Gender is a social construct which governs society's perspective of masculinity and femininity. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. The focus of this documentation is on women and girls based on the unique water, sanitation and hygiene challenges, both biological and social, faced by them.

² Stocktaking and gap analysis on the use of UNICEF Gender Responsive WASH Guidance: Key elements for effective WASH programming and recommendations to move to a transformative approach. Brief Report 2024

dynamics and structures that sustain inequalities. According to UNICEF,³ these approaches address root causes to achieve lasting change. They aim to tackle the structural and social root causes of gender inequality, promoting more equitable outcomes for children in all their diversity.

Water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes in India (2014–2025)

The Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen and the Jal Jeevan Mission, launched by the Government of India in 2014 and 2019 respectively, aim to improve water, sanitation and hygiene services in the country and have had significant impact – both intended and unintended – on gender norms, roles and power relations. Recognizing that women and girls often bear the

disproportionate burden of collecting water, managing sanitation facilities and ensuring hygiene in their home severely limiting their opportunities for education, employment and political participation, gender considerations have been paramount in both the flagship programmes. Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen was the first flagship programme of the Government of India in recent years that published a dedicated set of Gender Guidelines for Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen and Swachh Bharat Mission–Urban. Jal Jeevan Mission has integrated gender aspects directly into its operational guidelines.

The Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase I Guidelines (2017) stated that “requirements and sensitivities related to gender, including dignity and safety issues, are to be taken into account at all stages of sanitation programmes

from planning to post-implementation.” The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation released the guidelines, recognizing the gender dimensions of sanitation in India. It emphasized not only the need for women’s participation in the planning and implementation of sanitation interventions but also “their leadership in Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen committees and institutions”. The Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Guidelines (Para 8.7, Operational Guidelines 2020), states that 50 per cent of members of Village Water and Sanitation Committees should be women. Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen witnessed an increasing leadership of women in local governance, wherein many reports of women’s increased participation, empowerment and livelihood are documented.

³ Background Paper Series, UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan 2022–2025, Gender Transformative Programming

The Jal Jeevan Mission envisioned providing safe and adequate drinking water through individual household tap connections by 2024 to all rural households in India. Launched in 2019, the Jal Jeevan Mission mandates 50 per cent women membership in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (Para 5.4, Operational Guidelines). Jal Jeevan Mission drives women's participation by focusing on their priorities in decisions concerning new water supply schemes. The Mission has positioned women at the centre of India's water supply planning, with a strong focus on their meaningful engagement and involvement in decision-making.

Women have been the driving force behind these missions, serving as members of self-help groups working on water, sanitation and hygiene, *swachhagrahis*, *rani mistris*, *jai sahiyas*

pani samiti members or *sarpanches*. There are multifaceted ways in which these programmes have transformed the lives of women and girls.

Objectives of this documentation

There is a consensus that water, sanitation and hygiene programme can and should influence gender norms, dynamics and structures. To foster this transformative culture and programming, it is essential that water, sanitation and hygiene efforts are informed by lived experiences. This ensures that policies and interventions are developed to create pathways for a meaningful change.

The overall objective of this documentation is to build a body of evidence-based diverse experiences of the gender-transformative changes

brought about since the inception of these programmes. The specific objective is to understand if the flagships have been able to shift/change harmful gender and social norms through and alongside water, sanitation and hygiene policies and interventions.

The process primarily delves into three levels of change related to policy and institutional environment, women and girls themselves, and the engagement of family and communities. However, gender transformation needs to be understood in the context of multiple hierarchies of class, caste, religion, age, power dynamics and others, which are continuously reinforced by deeply entrenched attitudes and social and gender norms. Therefore, change may occur at different intersections of the gender continuum—sensitive, responsive and transformative.

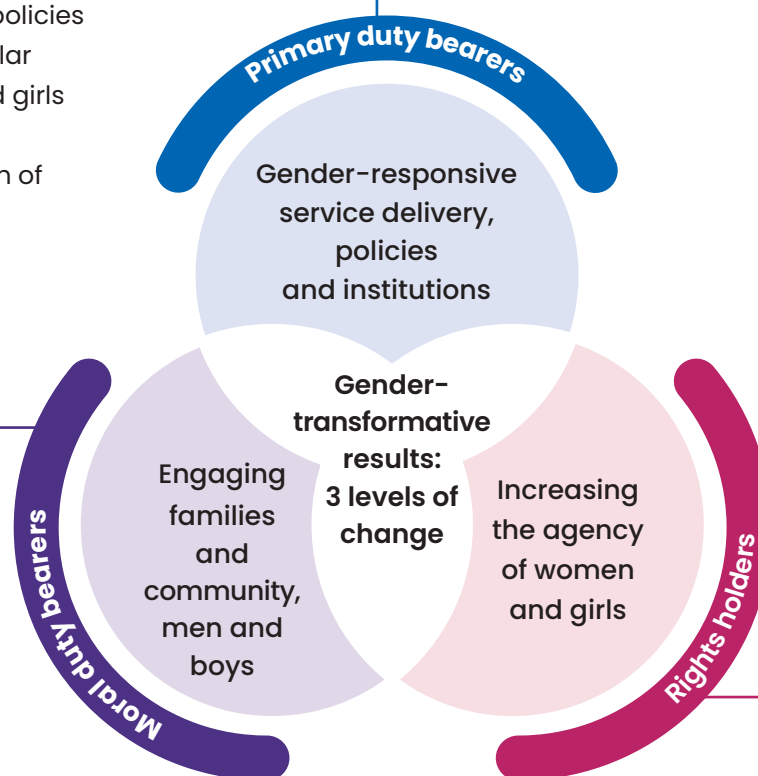
Gender-transformative approaches

Policy and institutional environment

Change the way decisions and policies are made by addressing particular challenges faced by women and girls (use of data, gender analysis, evidence, voice and participation of women and girls).

Family and community

Men's engagement is critical given the rigid gender norms and patriarchal gender barriers. Addressing root causes and family/ community barriers that impact potential of women and girls.



Women and girls themselves

Increase the agency/ empowerment of women and girls across dimensions such as access to and control over resources; decision-making and participation across spheres (household, community and institutions beyond numerical values), gender equitable distribution of roles. This means changes in the condition and position of women and girls where they become critical stakeholders and agents of change engaged at family, community and national levels.

This documentation is for policy makers and practitioners showcasing pathways for adoption of gender transformative thinking and programming.

Methodology

Recognizing the various ways change can occur, a gender-transformative approach requires a broad and comprehensive strategy. These interventions need to engage with dynamic societies influenced by diverse actors, institutions and worldviews. Gender-transformative change is shaped by shared values, norms, beliefs and traditions within society, as well as by the capabilities and opportunities available to women, individually and collectively. Therefore, creating change requires an understanding and the ability to influence all elements and institutions

at multiple levels (household, community, organizations, groups, market and government) within the system and their interconnections.

A case study methodology was employed to understand how key Indian water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes, such as Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission, have created an enabling environment for gender transformation to gain concrete, contextual and in-depth knowledge of the core elements working at multiple levels to drive change. Based on selection criteria, 10 strong water, sanitation and hygiene gender-transformative case studies were selected from UNICEF-supported states. These case studies focused on women, exploring key characteristics of gender-transformative approaches

and their implications for individuals and communities at large within specific local contexts.

Key informant interviews were conducted to gather information from a wide range of stakeholders, including the main protagonists, community members, government officials of rural water supply and rural sanitation, elected representatives, UNICEF staff and consultants. This approach provided first-hand knowledge about the on-ground changes resulting directly or indirectly from the water, sanitation and hygiene programmes. Interview tools with open-ended questions were developed to guide each discussion. For each case study, at least five key stakeholders were interviewed covering family, peers, officials and community leaders. Overall, more than 50 key informant

interviews across 10 districts in 7 states were conducted. The data collected was analysed and integrated with the existing knowledge about the programmes, culminating in the 10 case studies presented in this documentation.

Given the complexity of gender-transformative change and

interconnected constituents, it is essential to recognize that gender-sensitive, responsive and transformative approaches lead to a gender equal future through continuously evolving strategies.

This document must be viewed keeping in mind the limitations related

to self-reporting and subjective interpretations of the findings. Since there is minimal external validation and gender norms have layered and dynamic implications within social, economic and political spaces, the concept of gender transformation and complexity of identifying relevant cases is also marked with limitations.

Case study 01

Emerging from the shadows

Poonam Devi

Poonam Devi stepped into a new world when she became the Master Jal Sahiya of Mahapari, Bokaro, Jharkhand. Initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission led her into a space where she could learn technical, interpersonal and financial skills, which empowered her and other women to participate actively in local governance of water, sanitation and hygiene services. Her leadership has significantly transformed water management in her village, and she has used her newfound learning and self-confidence to spark excitement for tap water among households in her panchayat. Interestingly, women, who traditionally have limited roles in household decision-making, are leading conversations within their families and advocating for the uptake of water connections. Poonam's recognition at the 'Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman' ceremony by the President of India in 2023 underscores her impact. She and her team serve as role models for women across Jharkhand, demonstrating that they can challenge societal norms and expand their roles beyond traditional boundaries, thus fostering a culture of empowerment and social change.



A new day, a new challenge

Each morning, Poonam Devi rises with a profound sense of purpose and responsibility in her village of Maraphari, nestled within the industrial coal belt of Bokaro district in Jharkhand. She ensures that 11,295 households across 10 *gram panchayats* receive an uninterrupted daily water supply for at least two hours. As the *Adhyaksh Jal Sahiya*, she oversees the daily operations of the Multi-Village Heisavatu Water Supply Scheme, established under Jal Jeevan Mission in the district. Her key responsibilities include digital collection of user fees and bookkeeping, decision-making on the levy of new water connections, water quality testing, management of repairs by contacting and coordinating plumbers and electricians and complaint resolution as the primary liaison with the District Water and Sanitation Department.

Poonam's appointment as a *jal sahiya* in 2012 marked a significant turning point in her life. For the first time, the



state of Jharkhand created a special position for women, giving them a voice in local governance through the management of water, sanitation and hygiene services. To encourage women's involvement in water and sanitation issues at the *panchayat* level, each *gram panchayat* was required to nominate one *jal sahiya* at a *gram panchayat* meeting democratically. At the time, the village *mukhiya* recognized Poonam's educational qualifications and potential and proposed her name for the role. The *Gram Sabha* ratified the nomination at one of their meetings, and her husband and in-laws encouraged her to step into this critical position. Thus began Poonam's journey as a *jal sahiya*.

Poonam was no stranger to financial constraints and responsibility. She lived in a joint family that included her five unmarried sisters-in-law, and was

dependent on her father-in-law's pension and the meagre Rs. 5000–6000 that her husband earned as a daily wage labourer. As the daughter-in-law, she had to manage and run the kitchen and home frugally. She even sold her jewellery to ensure her two sons could enrol in a private school. Poonam's desire to improve her family's situation was strong, as was her desire to make a meaningful contribution to her community. Hence, even though the post of *jal sahiya* carried no financial remuneration to ease the financial burden of a joint family household, it resonated deeply with her, presenting an opportunity to connect with the government system and giving her the power to impact the lives of the people of her village in a meaningful way. As Poonam said, *"I was not earning, but I never wanted to leave."*

Poonam's journey ran parallel to significant initiatives in water,

sanitation and hygiene programmes, including both Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission, all of which shaped her growth as an individual, transforming her into a community leader who spearheaded change at different levels.

In the initial years (2012–2015), Poonam's role as a *jal sahiya* involved ensuring the upkeep of hand pumps. She communicated with the District Water and Sanitation Department about necessary repairs and helped construct soak pits to prevent water logging around the hand pumps. The state government initiated trainings for *jal sahiyas* in hand pump repair and maintenance, which marked the beginning of a gradual shift in the perception of women's capabilities, not only in the household and community but also in the women's perception of themselves. Poonam excitedly recalled her first learning experience, *"We were*

taught how to repair hand pumps and provided with the tools needed for our work. I was incredulous when they said we no longer needed to depend on plumbers! Now, women could do this work on their own! When I first opened a hand pump for repair, I was surprised at myself and so happy to have done a job that, earlier, everyone believed only men could do. I came home filled with pride and told my husband, 'Women can do everything!'"

The role of *jal sahiya* placed women at the forefront of water, sanitation and hygiene service delivery, enabling them to address the challenges faced by their communities directly.

Poonam's role was far more than a title. It opened new avenues for women to advocate for what they wanted from

the government and to participate in its decision making. It offered Poonam and her peers a platform to address long-standing challenges of privacy, safety and dignity often compromised during open defecation and water collection. The role of *jal sahiya* placed women at the forefront of water, sanitation and hygiene service delivery, enabling them to directly address the challenges faced by their communities – particularly the women and girls who bore the brunt of inadequate toilet facilities and the burden of water collection.

Realizing her potential

The real catalyst for change in Poonam's journey came when Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase I was launched in her *panchayat*. Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation built capacities on interpersonal communication techniques and mobilized water frontline workers to assist in community awareness and behaviour change activities, including door-to-door visits to promote toilet



usage and construction. During Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase I, a series of trainings commenced, laying the groundwork for their effective capacity building.

UNICEF partnered with the government to provide technical support for skill-building and behaviour change initiatives. These training programmes emphasized the administrative push to ensure equal participation from women candidates. Poonam said, *“The State team along with UNICEF supported us in the field whenever we faced technical difficulties or challenges in dealing with the community. Their trainings on community engagement, mobilization and interpersonal communication taught us how to motivate people.”*

Poonam was selected for block-level technical training as a master trainer, where she learned to construct twin pit toilets, manage installation and ensure

the quality of construction. This opportunity marked a significant milestone in her journey as she and her peers acquired skills in masonry – a field traditionally dominated by men. The rise of *rani mistris* became an inspirational movement for women in Jharkhand.

The rise of *rani mistris* became an inspirational movement for women in Jharkhand.

As Poonam laid bricks, put down pipelines and grasped the intricacies of constructing a twin pit toilet, she started to understand her capabilities in an entirely new light. With each new skill she learned, her confidence grew beyond the technical knowledge she had received, and Poonam realized she could tackle challenges that were once beyond her reach.

Engaging in hands-on training alongside other women fostered camaraderie and enabled Poonam to forge strong bonds. The women shared laughter, frustrations and triumphs as they navigated the learning process. This sense of belonging was crucial for the women; it transformed the training from mere skilling sessions to opportunities for personal growth and a gradual shift in perceptions about women in their community. Poonam cherished these moments as they reinforced the idea that women could support one another and, at the same time, improve the quality of life in their communities.

As Poonam travelled to different villages for training sessions and workshops, she felt she had been given wings for the first time. Stepping beyond the familiar boundaries of her home, she ventured into new territories,

experiencing freedom and excitement that she had never felt before. She was stepping into a role that allowed her to connect with others, share ideas and learn from different experiences. The relationships she built along the way became bridges. Each new acquaintance sparked opportunities, and the stories shared by fellow *jal sahiyas* opened her horizons of thought.

In time, the financial benefits of her work also began to manifest. For the first time, Poonam had an income of her own, earned through her own skill and hard work, as the government had introduced an incentive scheme under which she received financial incentives of Rs. 75 for each toilet constructed. Reminiscing about her first earning, she said, *"In 2017, when I got money from Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, I was elated. I felt as if all my efforts had culminated in this income that I had earned."*

The extra income brought new opportunities for Poonam and her family, easing some of the financial strain they had faced for years. As an earning member of the family and one with experience beyond the four walls of her home, she found she had a voice and was increasingly involved in major household decisions that affected and shaped her family's future.

Challenges of water availability and quality

While Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase I provided toilets in Maraphari, the ongoing challenge of water access continued to pose significant difficulties. Water quality issues further compounded the problem. The burden of high medical expenses further stressed the already vulnerable economic conditions of all

households. Reliance on deteriorating water resources created a seemingly never-ending cycle of struggle. Women frequently rose before dawn. As they stood waiting in queues at the hand pump, the struggle to access water for cooking, cleaning and personal use for the entire household weighed heavily on them. Lakshmi Devi, another *jal sahiya*, reflected on the exhausting routine, *"We would go to the hand pump at 2 or 3 a.m. We hardly slept. When the hand pumps stopped working in the summer, we had to travel even farther to fetch water from wells."* When these women returned home fatigued by this daily arduous chore, they still had to handle a mountain of household chores and family demands. This left them mentally and emotionally drained. Poonam's peer Madhu Devi expressed the deep despair many felt, stating, *"We thought we would die unknown*

Water availability and quality were a challenge for women who still faced the struggle of water collection from remote and often meagre sources. Poor water quality also led to frequent illnesses. These were the challenges that Poonam and other *jal sahiyas* were tasked to solve.

and unnoticed, just doing household chores and arranging for water every day!”

Unfortunately, the village-level institutional mechanisms meant to address water-related issues, such as the Village Water and Sanitation Committee, were non-functional. Neither the community nor the women in it were aware of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee's existence or role, nor was the Committee active within the

*panchayat. Despite government directives requiring 50 per cent of women members in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee, women (including those in key roles like *jal sahiya*) were largely unaware of these structures or their effective utilization. Madhu Devi shared, “Understanding the importance of *jal sahiyas* for effective implementation of the programme was gradually understood and accepted by everyone, including officials.”*

In Poonam's *panchayat*, *Mukhiya* Vasuki and *jal sahiyas* emerged as flag bearers, driving

meaningful participation of women in the *Gram Sabha*. Women united to reiterate and discuss the pressing issues of perpetual water crisis and daily drudgery. After one of the *Gram Sabha* meetings, the *mukhiya* and *jal sahiyas* collectively decided to stage a *jal satyagraha*, a peaceful protest to draw administrative attention to the water crisis. Through their collective



efforts, Poonam and her peers began to pave the way for lasting change, ultimately elevating women's voices and advocating for fulfilling their needs. Poonam's husband, Ajay, echoed this shift in perspective, noting, *"In our village, women are elected to hold important posts, including the mukhiya. Their decisions are respected and accepted by all of us."*

Jal sahiyas emerged as flag bearers and beacons of hope, driving meaningful participation of women in the Gram Sabha.

Madhu Devi echoed the aspirations of countless women who envisioned a future where access to clean water was not just a dream but a reality, when she said, *"In my whole life, I dreamed that someday I would have*

a tap in my house, in my backyard, with running water that I could enjoy to my heart's content!"

Driving change

Jal Jeevan Mission recognized the essential role that women could play in managing water resources and created meaningful opportunities for them to engage and participate in problem-solving in their community. In Jharkhand, this vision translated into action through the pre-existing dedicated *panchayat*-level cadre of *jal sahiyas*. This alignment of national policies with



state-level initiatives created a context where Poonam and her peers came

In Jharkhand, the vision of Jal Jeevan Mission translated into action through the pre-existing dedicated *panchayat*-level cadre of *jal sahiyas*.

together to work collaboratively and unite to advocate for changes they wanted to see in their lives in relation to water provisioning.

The District Water and Sanitation Department organized multi-village meetings covering the 10 *gram panchayats* in the Multi-Village Heisavatu Water Supply Scheme. The first step was to reactivate the Village Water and Sanitation Committee and form *pani samiti* that would be responsible for the community handover of water assets for operation

and maintenance. The 20-member *pani samiti* for the Heisavatu Water Supply Scheme comprised 17 women (10 *jal sahiyas* from each of the covered *gram panchayats*, along with 7 other women members) and 3 men. The *mukhiya*, vice-*mukhiya* and assistant *mukhiya* of Maraphari *gram panchayat* were all women leaders.

As a *jal sahiya*, Poonam was strategically positioned to influence change in her community. The foundational skills learned during Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase I had given her an understanding of the water, sanitation and hygiene ecosystem, which served her well in assuming responsibilities under Jal Jeevan Mission. Additionally, her interpersonal skills, knowledge of the local terrain, and a keen awareness of community needs and relationship

dynamics made her an invaluable source of information as the Public Health Engineering Department began planning for the water supply project in 2020.

Poonam's local insights during sessions on community-led approaches ensured inclusivity, guaranteeing that even the last-mile households and the poorest of the poor were considered in the preparation of the detailed project reports during the design phase. She effectively helped map requirements for functional household tap connections, pinpointing the areas that needed attention. Mohan Kumar, the District Coordinator for Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission in Bokaro, affectionately referred to her as "*our foot soldier*," underscoring her dedication and critical role in the

mission. He acknowledged her hard work during the initial planning phase, saying, *"Poonam prepared a full profile of the panchayat. She mapped all water sources in the village and identified how many households already had water connections. She supported the department by completing relevant paper work."*

As the implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission progressed, Poonam's role evolved. She frequently went from door-to-door, sharing the benefits of the new initiatives and ensuring everyone felt included in the process. Her knack for engaging with families was a significant asset during this time, enabling her to build trust and rapport with all stakeholders. However, the real test of her skills came during the installation of new water pipelines and taps. When Poonam faced reluctance from some households, she approached each challenge with

creativity and determination. *"If a household resisted, I would shift focus to another willing neighbour,"* she explained, *"Once they saw their neighbours enjoying the benefits of consistent water access, they often came around and asked us to start the work at their homes."* Her negotiating strategies and convincing tactics allowed the project to stay on track and gain momentum.

During the construction phase, the Village Water and Sanitation Committee also sprang to life. Regular meetings were held, with Poonam facilitating discussions and ensuring everyone's voice was heard. These meetings helped women to actively apply their problem-solving skills in addressing concerns and fast-tracking project implementation so

that water could reach their homes as quickly as possible. For instance, conflict regarding the location for constructing a water tank was resolved through mutual community talks at a Village Water and Sanitation Committee meeting. Once the construction was complete and pipelines were laid, the *jal sahiyas* began collecting a one-time connection fee for the taps. Under Jal Jeevan Mission, for the first time, they had the opportunity to earn a regular stream of income for their work and effort, with 10 per cent allocation of the user fee they collected. This provided them a fixed incentive of Rs. 75 per connection they had installed. Poonam reflected on her past, *"Before, it was difficult to ask for money; I felt scared and hesitant. But with my own earnings, I can do what I always wanted and fulfil my little wishes."* She shared with pride, *"My husband and I*

manage our household together, and I earn more. I have funded my sons' education – my elder son is a mechanical engineer, and my younger son has completed his matriculation." Her husband, Ajay, proudly acknowledged, *"She can handle so much! She quickly solves matters by talking to people. She has such awareness and information. I trust her more than I even trust myself. We depend on her decisions, and whenever she needs support, I am there for her."*

Jal Jeevan Mission has created space for women's participation in governance and infrastructure development and provided women like Poonam the chance to earn for themselves, which has become a key turning point in their lives.

Individual and community wins

Poonam's economic independence was not easily achieved; it was the result of a great deal of hard work and determination. *"In the first month, only 50 out of 2,600 households paid their connection fees,"* she recalled. But instead of feeling discouraged, day after day, she tirelessly braved the

elements – whether in the scorching sun or pouring rain – to go door-to-door, explaining the importance of water connection fees and how these contributions would ensure reliable access to clean water for their families.

Poonam's approach was not just about collecting payments; it was about building trust. She applied her training in water quality testing and vividly illustrated the quality of water



being consumed by households using field testing kits. This ignited interest and conversations about household water connections, particularly among women who advocated for paying the connection fees. Poonam's tireless efforts bore fruit as more families paid the one-time connection fee of Rs. 310 per functional household tap connection. The District Water and Sanitation Department linked this connection fee to an incentive for *jal sahiyas*. Poonam received Rs. 75 for each connection registered, motivating her to achieve 100 per cent coverage. The scheme became fully functional in 2021.

Poonam's approach was not merely functional. She helped people understand the importance of water quality and built their trust by demonstrating the use of field testing kits, which made it easy to check the water quality in each household. Her approach sparked household conversations and heightened interest in the programme.

In the same year, the *pani samiti* and *gram panchayat* proposed a user fee of Rs. 75 per functional household tap connection in the *Gram Sabha*. It took Poonam one year of tireless convincing and by 2022, nearly 1,800 households (out of 2,600) started to pay user fees regularly. By 2023, this number reached approximately 2,400 households in Poonam's Maraphari *gram panchayat*, which denoted nearly 85 per cent coverage in user fee collection. Today, Poonam and her fellow *jal sahiyas* earn between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 18,000 monthly, depending on the number of households in their respective *panchayats* and the user fees collected.

Poonam's commitment to ensuring reliable water supply has significantly impacted the community, fostering an environment of appreciation and trust. As she walks through her neighbourhood daily, villagers greet her with smiles and nods of acknowledgement – a testament to their respect and recognition. Her work resonates deeply with the community because they depend on her for an essential service: water provision. Her presence now carries weight, and villagers often seek her advice, knowing she possesses the knowledge and expertise necessary to address their concerns. Whether it is about water management or sanitation issues, they look up to her as a reliable source of guidance. With this trust from the community, Poonam now has a strong sense of self and belief in her capabilities, reinforcing her role as a leader and a crucial pillar of support in the community.

Leading by example

Poonam's journey did not stop with her personal transformation; she has also played a vital role in uplifting other women. The Multi-Village Heisavatu Water Supply Scheme spans 10 *gram*

panchayats, each with its own *jal sahiya*. Poonam now plays the proud role of Master *Jal Sahiya* and leads a team of nine *jal sahiyas*. She coordinates their efforts, ensuring that each team member is well-equipped to effectively manage the local water supply. Under her guidance, she has

created a support network, and women have begun to see themselves as capable contributors. She also trains *jal sahiyas* across several districts of Jharkhand. By uplifting each other, these *jal sahiyas* are driving development in their villages and reshaping the narrative around women's capabilities.



Poonam's peers give her accolades for her timeliness, hard work and inspiring leadership qualities. They said she was always the first to show up if there was a problem or an issue and that she had unique problem-solving skills. Her modus operandi was first to gather all the information, assess the situation and

then look for possible solutions. Lakshmi Devi said, *"While the rest of us were thinking and wondering what to do, she would find ways to get the job done."*

Poonam was recognized as a water, sanitation and hygiene champion by the Hon'ble President of India in 2023.

Honoured at the 'Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman' ceremony, which was held by the Ministry of Jal Shakti on International Women's Day in Delhi, an annual celebration of the exceptional work by women as catalysts of positive societal change, Poonam said, *"I will never forget the day when I met the President of India."*



The ‘Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman’ ceremony, held by the Ministry of Jal Shakti on International Women’s Day, recognizes and celebrates women grassroots leaders who are bringing change and enabling the well-being of their communities.

Mohan Kumar, District Coordinator for Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission in Bokaro, said, *“Poonam is idolized in Bokaro. She is a local celebrity. Many women look up to her as a role model.”*

Poonam is the mascot and icon for Bokaro’s District Water and Sanitation Department and has been called to several Village Water and Sanitation Committee meetings in other districts to speak to women and share her work. Her journey has motivated

women to take on leadership roles in six additional Multi-Village Heisavatu Water Supply Scheme initiatives within the region. *Panchayat* heads and *jal sahiyas* in districts of Girdih, Ramgarh, Palamu and Ghadwa have been inspired to adopt her approach and view her as an exemplar to emulate. As more women look up to her, Poonam feels an added sense of responsibility, which drives her to explore more and continually expand her vision and aspirations.

Gaining financial acumen

The *jal sahiyas* are getting increasingly adept at bookkeeping and learning to navigate online banking platforms easily. They manage the monthly user fee collections, their Village Water and Sanitation Committee bank account deposits, and decision-making on

utilizing these funds for operation and maintenance. Through strengthened bank linkages, improved financial management and digital literacy, Poonam and her fellow *jal sahiyas* are setting an example for women in their villages to pursue financial and banking literacy. Inspired by their success, more and more women are joining the movement to gain the knowledge and skills essential for financial independence.

When women saw Poonam earn respect in the role of a *jal sahiya*, it opened avenues of aspiration and instilled the belief that change is possible.

As women engage more frequently in official meetings, training, scheme implementation and transactions, they are becoming more informed about

government initiatives and their rights regarding social protection mechanisms. This enhanced awareness and understanding of scheme linkages has created a ripple effect of transformation and empowerment in the community.

With extensive training and handholding support, the *jal sahiyas* have become a vital resource in water, sanitation and hygiene efforts at the grassroots level. This dedicated sectoral human resource base was still absent at the last rung of governance.

The position of *jal sahiyas* also provided opportunities for women with limited literacy to gain power, respect and economic independence. When women saw an average and ordinary woman like

themselves assume power and earn respect in the said role, it opened avenues for aspiration. It instilled the belief that change is possible.

Jal sahiyas are now taking the lead in advancing future government programmes as a trained cadre at the grassroots level. Poonam has expanded her role to contribute to Solid and Liquid Waste Management initiatives under Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II. She received technical training in various essential areas, including vermicomposting, menstrual hygiene management, soak pit construction and greywater management. By constantly expanding her knowledge base,

she is spreading awareness and valuable information to other women in her community. Her mission is to help transform their *panchayats* into model *gram panchayats* soon.

Poonam's case study is a testament to Jharkhand's innovative approach to empowering *jal sahiyas* and providing strong evidence for encouraging women's employment in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. Her journey exemplifies how women's involvement in water, sanitation and hygiene programmes and governance has far-reaching effects on individual, family and community life, transforming long held social and gender norms.





Poonam Devi stands tall with her 'Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman' award, presented by the President of India in 2023.

Case study 02

Sowing seeds of change

Babita Kumari

Mukhiya Babita Kumari of Bishanpur Baghnagari gram panchayat in Bihar catalysed a profound societal transformation by leveraging water, sanitation and hygiene programmes as instruments of change. Her leadership propelled the panchayat to achieve the distinction of being a model gram panchayat under Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II and sparked a shift in attitudes towards gender roles, environmental sustainability and community participation. Through targeted initiatives such as 100 per cent household waste collection, menstrual hygiene management programmes and fair employment practices for sanitation workers, Babita has created an ecosystem that prioritizes equity and inclusion. Women, once confined to traditional roles, now actively contribute to waste management, sanitation entrepreneurship and decision-making. The enhanced participation of women in Gram Sabhas has empowered them to voice their concerns, while comprehensive health and safety measures for sanitation workers have fostered dignity and respect in the community.

These changes reflect a broader societal transformation, environmental awareness and a collective commitment to sustainability. Babita's work underscores how water, sanitation and hygiene programmes, designed with a gender-transformative lens, can serve as a catalyst for reshaping societal structures, fostering resilience and ensuring long-term community well-being.



A woman leader with a difference

On 26 January 2023, Bishanpur Baghnagari made history by becoming the first *gram panchayat* in Muzaffarpur district to be declared a model *gram panchayat* under Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II.

Behind this remarkable achievement stood Babita Kumari, a leader who brought significant change to her village while reshaping perceptions of traditional roles for women and paving the way for new opportunities.

Babita emerged as a shining example of what women leaders can achieve when given the opportunity to participate in local governance.

What sets her case study apart is the strong support she has received from her husband. Despite



harbouring his own political aspirations since childhood, he chose to step aside, recognizing that Babita's leadership as *mukhiya* could help them both achieve their dreams. Their partnership became a powerful example of male engagement in women's empowerment.

When Babita Kumari became the *mukhiya* of Bishanpur Baghnagari in 2021, she entered a role that was being shaped by the progressive changes in governance occurring throughout Bihar. The state's commitment to women's participation in the water, sanitation and hygiene space had created an enabling environment through various measures. As she assumed office, her vision aligned perfectly with the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II roll-out. Taking the opportunity to utilize this national initiative, Babita made the sanitation programme her top priority,

determined to implement effective sanitation practices in Bishanpur Baghnagari.

Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II prioritized providing specialized human resource support through the District Water and Sanitation Committee. This committee focused on capacity building at all levels of governance, while UNICEF strengthened this initiative by facilitating the recruitment of district and block-level coordinators for sanitation programmes. These collaborative efforts aimed to establish a robust support system that nurtured and empowered women and local leaders, providing Babita with the perfect springboard to move ahead and enhance the well-being of her village.

Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II prioritized providing specialized human resource support through District Water and Sanitation Committee.

Babita's leadership further developed during a pivotal period in Muzaffarpur district when the Deputy Development Commissioner, Ashutosh Dwivedi, actively championed natural leaders at the *panchayat* level, fostering an inclusive approach to governance. This alignment of factors – an enabling environment, focused capacity building, proactive administrative support and the presence of a dedicated leader – proved pivotal in advancing Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen initiatives and, at the same time, challenged deep-rooted societal perceptions about women's roles. It showcased the strength and effectiveness of women-led governance in shaping community progress. Ashutosh Dwivedi said,

"We wanted to push women-led panchayats and create examples."

The District Water and Sanitation Committee provided support to make Bishanpur Baghnagari an "island of success", showcasing it as a model *gram panchayat* and starting a chain reaction of change in the district. The support from District Water and Sanitation Committee helped Babita understand and implement the fine print of the mission guidelines.

From challenges to change

Determined to tackle the existing challenges of ensuring payments to sanitation workers, Babita worked closely with the District Water and Sanitation Committee. She facilitated the release of the 15th Finance Commission funds to ensure timely payments, reinvigorating the workforce

to implement the sanitation agenda. Her next challenge was to address the open dumping of waste. However, in her quest for solutions, Babita encountered a critical barrier: the availability of land for the Waste Processing Unit. Initially, she found no government land accessible within the village. Undeterred, she conducted thorough research at the *tehsil* office and other revenue departments, sifting through records and old maps. Determined to reclaim this land for the benefit of the community, Babita approached this complex and sensitive issue with rigorous efforts. Her relentless follow-ups with the *tehsil* office and district

administration paid dividends, and 4.5 acres of land was successfully reclaimed. Babita turned to the district administration for guidance on the multiple challenges she faced during the construction of the Waste Processing Unit. The administration provided valuable guidance on managing opposition and resolving conflicts effectively. This significant



achievement marked Babita's first major impact as a powerful and effective leader, clearly demonstrating her commitment to transparency in local governance.

Babita was a confident leader who did not hesitate to turn to the district administration for guidance. Working with the district administration strengthened her knowledge and ability, enabling her to implement water, sanitation and hygiene schemes more effectively.

Babita was a confident leader who did not hesitate to turn to the district administration for guidance. Working with the district administration strengthened her knowledge and ability, enabling her to implement water, sanitation and hygiene schemes more effectively.

Building safeguards for sanitation workers

A motivated workforce that takes pride in its work is the backbone of any system, and Babita was determined to build a strong ecosystem for sanitation and other development initiatives in her *panchayat*. The Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen programme had created pathways for entrepreneurship and leadership, particularly for women. Under Babita's guidance, women took on roles as sanitation workers, community mobilizers and maintenance staff, breaking gender barriers in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. She ensured that each sanitation worker has a health card, health insurance and access to monthly health check-ups. She also established a vital linkage with the primary health centre, allowing quick

responses to any health concerns that the workers may face.

Her next challenge was to ensure that the expense of creating Waste Processing Unit infrastructure would be matched by 100 per cent household coverage and collection. Babita deployed several strategies to step up waste collection and increase user charge revenue. Intensive community engagement to explain the benefits of waste management and its linkage to health benefits activities was undertaken. These included ward-level meetings, door-to-door visits, evening community meets (called *sandhya chaupal*), street plays and several other community engagement activities with the help of the non-governmental organizations working with District Water and Sanitation Department. Babita said that door-to-door meetings were an incredibly useful method for getting a buy-in for

the programme. It helped mothers understand the linkage between their sick child and the dirty environment, and many women came on board for the initiative.

Waste collection gradually increased, and as the system's benefits were internalized, user-charge collection also increased. Since they paid for a service, demand also increased. This led to a remarkable uptake in household waste collection and general awareness of cleanliness. *Swachhata Mitra* Rekha Devi said, "Now even the kids know what to put in which bin."

Babita worked hard to ensure that the entire waste management cycle ran efficiently, and her efforts were well rewarded. Efficient collection of user fees and optimal household are complemented by well-kept waste management assets and efficient

Under Babita's guidance, women took on roles as sanitation workers, community mobilizers and maintenance staff, breaking gender barriers in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector.

service provisioning. The e-rickshaws, which run between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. as per a prescribed route chart, are made of wood so that any outage due to repair and maintenance needs can be handled locally and swiftly. The *swachhata mitras* work at the Waste Processing Unit from 10–11 a.m. for waste handling. Under Babita's leadership, by mid-2024, 1,900 of the 2,190 households in the *panchayat* were paying user charges of Rs. 30 per month, generating an

income of more than Rs. 50,000 per month for the *gram panchayat*. She also introduced an additional charge of Rs. 100 for marriage and festivities, and compensation for the *swachhata mitras* for the extra work.

Babita also opened a separate bank account, 'Solid and Liquid Waste Management *Gram Panchayat* Implementation Committee,' for sanitation-related income, which fostered transparent tracking of user-charge collection funds. As a result, income from waste



management became specifically and visibly reallocated to further improve sanitation activities.

One success led to another, and with nearly 100 per cent waste management coverage, Babita led the *panchayat* to take up composting as a method of revenue generation. Supported by District Water and Sanitation Department, local innovation was encouraged, resulting in the establishment of nine types of composting models adapted to

local needs. These models were demonstrated at the Waste Processing Unit site, allowing households to observe, learn and adopt the practice most suited to their situations. This greatly benefited the community as well since they received easy access to quality compost.

Local innovation was encouraged, resulting in the establishment of nine types of composting models adapted to local needs.

Compost sales generate revenue of around Rs. 18,000–20,000 per month, depending on the agricultural season. Seeing the increasing demand, the *gram panchayat* has now introduced proper branding and packaging for its compost and has revised the compost rate from Rs. 8 per kg to Rs. 15 per kg.

Changing the lives of women

Babita's initiatives are directly aligned with the water, sanitation and hygiene flagship strategies to engage and promote women's participation in programme implementation. Just as the state mandated women's participation in Ward Implementation and Management Committees, Babita ensured women's representation across all sanitation initiatives in her *panchayat*. The social recognition these women received through their participation in Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen changed the power dynamics within their households and elevated their status in the community.

As a woman *mukhiya*, Babita had an intrinsic keenness to create more space and opportunities for women. On 26 January 2022, when she



conducted her first *Gram Sabha*, women's participation was negligible. She addressed the village elders and men: "*When you chose a woman mukhiya, why can't your wives and daughters-in-law then participate in the Gram Sabha too?*" To help women find their voice, she instituted an innovative mechanism of conducting a women's *Gram Sabha* a day before the formal *Gram Sabha*. Here, women had a platform where their voices and concerns were heard and incorporated into village governance. They were also informed of government schemes and benefits, leading to a substantial increase in their awareness. This also gave women the confidence to participate in the general *Gram Sabha*, and their attendance started to increase. Babita hoped that the need to conduct a separate women's *Gram Sabha* would soon fade. Under Babita's leadership, the *Gram Sabha* had

become a vibrant and active platform for community immersion in guiding village development, and *panchayat* oversight and accountability.

To help women find their voice, Babita instituted an innovative mechanism of conducting a women's *Gram Sabha* a day before the formal *Gram Sabha*. This is a stepping stone to encourage their participation in regular *Gram Sabha* meetings.

Babita had a clear vision regarding women's empowerment in her village, as she saw empowerment being closely related to the ability to earn. "*Every woman should have employment so that she is no longer dependent on her husband or family. I tell women that when you earn, you have a different confidence and self-respect*", she said.

With this focus, she found multiple ways to facilitate earning for women through various mechanisms, and she believed that the deployment of women in waste management had a profound impact on helping them get out of the house, earn and improve their lives. For example, 6 of the 13 *swachhata mitras* are women, and many are first-time earners. In addition to the Rs. 3,000 they earned as salary every month, Babita was helping these women diversify their income by providing training on making products like *diyas* and pots from waste. The sale of these products enabled them to earn an additional Rs. 2,000–3,000 per month. As *Swachhata Mitra* Rekha Devi said, "*I no longer need to depend on anyone for even Rs. 5! My in-laws also involve me in household decisions. I feel that as a woman, I am capable of so much. I am learning new things every day. I can take better care of my children now, and I am determined*

to educate my daughter so that she can stand on her own feet and earn like me."

Babita also noted that village women are actively coming forward to seek work, especially for *panchayat*-related jobs. She said, *"Earlier, the panchayat did not have opportunities for women. But now it does, which benefits the women as they don't have to go far to do panchayat work. In fact, they now approach me with ideas about work they can do!"*

Babita's *modus operandi* was to integrate women's empowerment into all her work while maintaining simplicity and replicability. Babita believed that, *"Simple, easy and cost-efficient solutions lead to far-reaching impact and sustainable initiatives"*. Hence, as she attempted to make Bishanpur Baghnagari a plastic-free

gram panchayat, another core component of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II, she encouraged women to collect and sell their household plastic waste to the Block Plastic Waste Management Unit. This had the double benefit of putting a small amount of money in women's hands while simultaneously resolving the problem of plastic waste. Another innovation Babita introduced was the replacement of plastic disposables with bamboo bottles and cups, especially during marriages and festivals. Women are increasingly involved in developing these products through collective entrepreneurship.

Babita's *modus operandi* was to integrate women's empowerment into all her work while maintaining simplicity and replicability.

Toilet Clinic: A novel approach

Babita believed that as a leader, she must constantly learn and improve herself to be able to help others. She said, *"Till now, I have attended 10–11 trainings. I never miss any training and I try to apply what I learn in my panchayat"*. The capacity building initiatives supported by UNICEF not only improved her skills but also provided her with essential information about ongoing and new developments in government schemes, technological advancements and programme shifts, which she, in turn, uses to improve the lives of those in her *panchayat*.

Babita learned of the novel Toilet Clinic initiative, supported by UNICEF in early 2024. *"Toilet Clinic aimed to provide paid masonry and janitorial services, sanitary products and access to water,*

sanitation and hygiene credit through trained women masons and janitors”, according to Ontari Sudhakar Reddy, WASH Officer, UNICEF Bihar. The Clinic was also run and manned by women through Cluster Level Federations – clusters of self-help groups formed under the Jeevika Livelihoods Mission.

Babita immediately realized this was an ideal solution for Bishanpur Baghnagari, where poorer households could not afford toilet repairs and many toilets were defunct. The Toilet Clinic, where women masons were available to provide two-hour services at affordable rates, filled this gap, perfectly aligning the supply and demand channels. In addition to the nominal fees, consumable costs were charged based on the actual consumption, making the process economically feasible for the households. There was a social

dimension to this as well. Babita emphasized the importance of having women masons, noting, *“Masonry is generally seen as a male profession, so I wanted to promote it for people to accept women in non-traditional roles.”* The retrofitting process was swiftly initiated, and nearly 15 toilets were repaired. Babita’s long-standing

commitment to generating economic opportunities for her panchayat found a good fit in the Toilet Clinic initiative.

Another focus area for Babita was improving the water supply. The *Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal (Mukyamantri Gramin Payjal Nischay Yojana)* was launched in 2016, but in Bishanpur Baghnagari,



progress was stalled at 60 per cent coverage in 2022. Babita started initiatives to prioritize and extend coverage to the poorest of poor neighbourhoods where Scheduled Caste communities resided.

In the Toilet Clinic, women masons were available to provide two-hour services at affordable rates, filling the gap of the limited pool of masons and perfectly aligning the supply and demand channels.

Recognizing the need for effective water source management, Babita also focused on the rejuvenation of open wells, many of which had dried up. She included the restoration of these wells in the *Gram Panchayat* Development Plan, targeting the revival of 27 such wells. By 2024, 17 wells were successfully revived,

providing vital water resources for the community.

Leveraging national programmes, making history

Babita wisely used national events, such the annual fortnight of *Swachhata Hi Seva*,⁴ to conduct several community-level activities such as candlelight marches, mass-sanitation oaths, *shramdaan* for village cleanliness drives, waste segregation drives, etc., and raise awareness and community consciousness for water, sanitation and hygiene.

On 26 January 2023, Bishanpur Baghnagari made history by becoming the first *gram panchayat* in Muzaffarpur district to be declared a model *gram panchayat*, a recognition attributed to the stellar leadership of Babita.

Her list of accolades and awards is diverse as she marched her way from a sanitation champion to an inspirational leader. On 2 October 2022, she won the President's Award for *Swachhata Hi Seva* for her efforts and her ability to create behaviour change by propagating the belief that cleanliness or sanitation is not just a government programme but a culture to be inculcated in everyone's daily life.

On 15 August 2023, she was awarded the '*Prashasti Patra*' by the Minister-in-charge, Shri Jitendra Kumar Rai. This recognition underscored her dedication to improving sanitation and community welfare.

In May 2023, she was also awarded the '*Yashasvi Mukhiya*' award by Ultratech Cement, while the Aga Khan Foundation sees her as an example of empowerment and often invites her to share her journey with other women.

⁴ For more information on Swachhata Hi Seva visit – <https://swachhatahiseva.com>

A guiding light

Seeing how Babita has worn the mantle of leadership and taken her panchayat to new heights has been an inspiration for other women leaders. Babita's rise as a woman leader encouraged these women to step forward and assume the real power and responsibility of a *mukhiya*, with some even dreaming of achieving the same awards as her. Vinay Kumar said, *"They call us to ask what steps they should take such that they can also reach the same pedestal as her"*. This rise in aspirations is showing women the way towards transformative leadership.

Seeing how Babita has worn the mantle of leadership and taken her panchayat to new heights has been an inspiration for other women leaders.

Commenting on her inspirational leadership, the Deputy Development Commissioner, said, *"We have not found such dedication in several seasoned local politicians who have been mukhiyas for several years. Babita is inspiring women mukhiyas to come forward and, at the same time, motivating male mukhiyas to perform better. Ultimately, Babita should be recognized not only as a woman who is doing good work, but as a mukhiya with exceptional leadership skills and acumen. It should be agnostic of gender."*

Currently, 184 out of the 373 *gram panchayats* in Muzaffarpur district are replicating the example of Bishanpur Baghnagari, and its reputation is spreading fast across India. Other states are coming to learn too. The Central Government sent 11 IAS officers from Kerala to see this panchayat as a best practice, and 12 *gram pradhans*

from Uttar Pradesh came for an exposure visit, eager to understand Babita's approach to leadership.

Driven by her commitment to uplift her village, Babita undertook a holistic approach to overall development, with interventions planned across multiple sectors. In addition to her work around Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II, she also focused on education, water supply, street lighting, electricity, safety for women and overall community welfare. These were all issues she had known and pre-identified through her interactions with the village women before assuming her post.

Babita has her ear to the ground and builds her decisions on community needs and feedback, addressing pressing issues systematically.

She has been instrumental in providing linkages to government schemes to the most vulnerable in her community. From helping village folk get ration cards to ensuring housing schemes in the *Mahadalit Basti* and dealing with domestic abuse cases with sternness and maturity, Babita has been the go-to solution finder for all the problems faced daily by her community members. As she said, *“This work requires a lot of clerical labour, paperwork and rigorous to and fro between offices at block and district levels. But I do it on my own. People come at any hour for all kinds of work, small or big – to seek medical advice, to recommend a doctor, for domestic fight resolution, etc. I also like to deal with their issues – even if*

light and frivolous, with empathy and understanding. After all, they have placed their trust in me.”

Babita’s governance style exemplifies inclusivity, empathy and a commitment to empowering others. She has fostered a participative environment where every voice is heard by identifying the needs of the most vulnerable in her community and ensuring their access to essential

services. Her resourcefulness and determination to create sustainable change for all in her *panchayat* have led her to implement initiatives that are weaving together a tapestry of progress in Bishanpur Baghnagari.

Babita’s success reflects the transformative potential of women’s leadership in rural governance. Her pragmatic approach, focusing on simple, replicable solutions in water, sanitation and hygiene programmes, has created a model that other *gram panchayats* can easily adopt. Most importantly, her leadership style has helped reshape perceptions about women’s capabilities, proving that when women are given opportunities and support, they can drive meaningful change that benefits the entire community.





Babita Kumari holds the President's Award for Swachhata Hi Seva for inspiring behaviour change and promoting cleanliness as a way of life.

Case study 03

Breaking the mould

Sunita Devi

In the tribal village of Jalimkhurd, Latehar, Jharkhand, Sunita Devi's leadership exemplifies the power of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen in making positive changes within communities. Once constrained by social norms and personal hardships, Sunita harnessed Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen's resources to unlock her potential, becoming a pioneering force for women's empowerment and social change. Rising from poverty and gender discrimination, her journey shows how she established her independent identity, was accepted by society for her role as Rani Mistri, and empowered other women to expand their horizons. Through her leadership, Sunita mobilized women to break stereotypes by constructing toilets, promoting sanitation and driving behavioural change. Sunita won accolades and honours right up to the national level, receiving an award from the President of India and being mentioned in the Prime Minister's 'Mann ki Baat' address. Sunita's journey continues with her role extending to governance as she has been elected as a sarpanch and will surely leave her mark on the community she represents.



Breaking the glass ceiling

In the remote tribal village of Jalimkhurd, nestled in lush forests in the heart of Latehar, Jharkhand, *Sarpanch* Sunita Devi took initiatives to improve sanitation, water, education, health care and sustainable agriculture. Her efforts are taking root and bringing change to a land often overlooked by the outside world. Deeply attuned to the people's hopes and aspirations, she nurtures their dreams as her own, and her leadership guides the community towards progress while honouring their rich tribal traditions that have thrived in harmony with nature for centuries.

Sunita Devi's impressive journey found impetus in the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen. Although she was a natural leader and solution finder, the

traditions and rhythm of life provided her with no opportunities to shine. However, all this changed when the sanitation mission, Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, came to her village and provided her with the resources to learn new skills and hone her innate talents. The opportunities that she received allowed her to effectively harness her qualities. The flagship programme created an ecosystem

Although she was a natural leader and solution finder, the traditions and rhythm of life provided her with no opportunities to shine, but all this changed with the advent of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen in her village.

where her leadership skills blossomed, empowering her to carve her niche in institutional governance and create pathways for social change.



Triumphing over adversity

Sunita's hard childhood forced her to face challenges with resilience and strength at an early age. Growing up in the shadow of a bedridden father and a mother who left home early to work as a daily labourer, she faced abject poverty and hunger. Added to this were the societal constraints on a young girl in a community rife with deep-seated gender stereotypes. Through it all, her father was her anchor, steadfast in his belief that education could shape his daughter's future. Sunita reminisced about the time spent with her father as a young girl, saying, *"My father would teach me at home despite being bedridden. Eventually, he realized I needed to go to school, but everyone objected to a girl pursuing an education. I am the first girl in my family to be educated."*

Schooling brought its own challenges. Each morning, Sunita completed all the household chores, from cleaning the home to cooking meals, providing drinking water and washing clothes before walking 8 km to school with her brothers, only to return home to more drudgery in the



evening. The onset of puberty in sixth grade brought renewed familial and societal objections to her continued education. Her father, unwavering in his support, fiercely advocated for her right to go to school. Sunita began working in a coal mine after school to further support her education, loading coal trucks and selling any extra coal she could gather for migrant families for a meagre Rs. 5–10, all to meet her school fees. Despite her challenges, she found the strength to give free tuition to other girls in the village, ensuring they also had the opportunity to learn.

In Grade X, her family faced another devastating blow when her brother was diagnosed with a chronic heart condition. This plunged the family into financial ruin as they struggled to cover medical expenses. By the time Sunita completed her matric exams, she felt emotionally, mentally and

physically drained, questioning whether she could continue on her path to education and empowerment. But when despair began to creep in, her father kept her afloat, not just providing motivation but also reminding her of the resilience they had built together. He encouraged her to dig deep and recognize the inner strength she possessed – strength that had carried her through many obstacles.

Post-marriage in 2010, Sunita continued her education but found herself bound by the same struggles she had faced before. Daily chores, farming, gathering wood for cooking and fetching water occupied her time. Just one and half years into her marriage, she welcomed motherhood while striving to pursue her graduation – a challenging endeavour that pushed her limits but never extinguished her determination.

Triggering change

In 2012, Sunita, armed with her education and a renewed sense of purpose, began assisting a women's collective with their bookkeeping. As she stepped into this role, she recognized an opportunity to make a significant impact. Gradually, she reorganized and expanded the group, revitalizing the self-help group under the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society. Through her natural leadership skills, she collectivized various self-help groups. She established a village-level organization known as *Deep Jyoti Ajeevika Mahila Sangathan*, where she took on the role of the president.

Sunita's influence grew, and in 2016–17, she was appointed as a district-level master trainer for self-help groups. In this capacity, she imparted crucial

knowledge on securing loans, assessing interest rates and effectively utilizing self-help group funds. Sunita recognized the importance of financial literacy for women's empowerment and used her position to raise awareness about women's rights and entitlements. With a vision of women's

emancipation through financial independence, she sought to instil in them the belief that they, too, could become agents of change.

Sunita's work with the village-level organization coincided with the launch of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen

Sunita recognized the importance of financial literacy for women's empowerment and used her position to raise awareness about women's rights and entitlements.



Phase I in Latehar by the District Water and Sanitation Department. As a vital state initiative, the District Water and Sanitation Department, in collaboration with UNICEF and Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society, developed a strategy to mobilize self-help groups. The focus was on building their capacities in community engagement and behaviour change to raise demand for toilet usage and construction. By deploying this direct implementation approach for Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, the District Water and

Sanitation Department was able to connect with women as critical local human resources and a channel for fund mobilization. Sunita, as a self-help group member and the President of a village-level organization, was quick to perceive the opportunity that the programme was providing for sanitation and in giving women a voice in local affairs.

With the help of self-help group members, Sunita initiated a data-collection process within village households to estimate toilet construction. She compiled a comprehensive list of beneficiaries, including their *AADHAR* card numbers, bank passbooks, photographs and contact numbers. This list was submitted to the District Coordinator of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen. Once approved, the District Water and

Sanitation Department transferred the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen incentive of Rs. 12,000 per toilet into the village-level organization's bank account. The village-level organization was now officially responsible for toilet construction in their catchment.

However, a new challenge emerged: finding a mason to construct the toilets. The existing masons (males) declined the job for two reasons: the low rates offered for the work and their perception that toilet construction was unimportant, preferring instead to focus on house-building projects. Shailendra Kumar, the District Coordinator of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, noted that when the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen toilet construction work started, "Even male masons lacked the skills to build toilets correctly."

Finding a mason was a challenge. As a result, Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen funds lay idle for six frustrating months until the training of women masons was initiated. The training programme was a pathbreaking and bold initiative, as women breached what had previously been an exclusively male domain.

Due to an initial delay in finding masons, the pace of work was slow and Sunita faced reprimands from senior officials due to under-utilization of funds. In a moment of desperation during one such meeting, she boldly suggested, "*You teach us women how to make the toilets.*" Shalini Prasad, Social and Behavioural Change Specialist, UNICEF, reflected, "*Engaging women in non-traditional skilling on*

masonry for toilet construction sparked the beginning of a movement for Rani Mistris." UNICEF supported the mason training, starting with women in Latehar and subsequently scaling up to several other districts of Jharkhand.

After completing the training, Sunita and several other women raised support in villages and motivated their peers. Understanding the power of

education in shaping young minds, Sunita initiated interactive sessions on hygiene and sanitation in local schools, where they discussed the importance of clean surroundings, personal hygiene and the need for and use of toilets. The students eagerly absorbed the information and became ambassadors of change. A 'cleanliness club' was formed in schools, and students started taking responsibility

for maintaining cleanliness within their school premises. Inspired by their zeal, Sunita introduced a competition among schools on sanitation practices. The competitive spirit drew parents' attention to the issue of sanitation.

A significant milestone came when Sunita organized a grand village-level event called '*Swachhata Pakhwada*'. This initiative included a rally with



students and teachers, showcasing vibrant banners and catchy slogans about sanitation, the hazards of open defecation and the benefits of using toilets. Following the rally, she held evening meetings known as *ratri chaupal*, utilizing these informal gatherings to foster discussions about toilets and dispel myths and doubts surrounding the issue. Sunita and her team embarked on door-to-door visits, encouraging each household to take advantage of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen while promoting a behavioural shift for toilet use. She also taught villagers how to construct cost-effective toilets using locally sourced materials.

The training taught Sunita and other women technical skills. It transformed them into confident communicators who could approach people in their own and surrounding villages and mobilize them towards toilet construction and use.

The momentum was slow but Sunita, accompanied by other women, began construction in some self-help group members' houses. When she left her house in the morning with her masonry tools in her hands, community ostracization and derisive comments from villagers followed her. Detractors made comments like, *"Now she will do a man's job."* Despite the ridicule, Sunita remained undeterred. Although her family was supportive, the social ridicule and disrespect of their family name unsettled the men in her household, and she was asked *"not to pick up tools"*.

Her rhetoric and self-confidence were strong, and Sunita broke the glass

ceiling of what constituted a woman's work in the village, standing firmly for women's rights. She was able to silence the resistance at home, but the social stigma continued. Husbands of other women working with her blamed her for *"tainting their wives"*.

When she completed her first toilet, village men vandalized it, claiming *"women cannot construct"*. Not one to be intimidated, Sunita fought back, and with much fanfare, two good quality toilets were successfully built in the homes of courageous self-help group women, who stood their ground and supported Sunita. When these toilets were completed, the male masons were curious and came to see the toilets. Impressed by what they saw, they told the community that the *rani mistris* were building them correctly. This silenced all opposition to a certain extent, and Sunita could continue working, completing the construction of 40 toilets in six months.

When Sunita constructed her first toilet, village men vandalized it. Undaunted, she continued and found ways to fulfil her mission.

During this time of initial learning and experimentation, Sunita continually strived to improve her skill and construction quality. Support was available in three forms: construction funds that were directly credited to the self-help group account, training for upskilling, and behaviour change communication materials that helped mobilize the community and create an enabling environment for toilet construction. The Executive Engineer of District Water and Sanitation Department, District Coordinator of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and a *swachhata prerak* monitored Sunita's work, providing supportive

supervision and guidance. Showcasing proactiveness and foresight, Sunita kept the phone numbers of the trainers and officials handy and did not hesitate to call them to clear any technical doubts. By 2017, she had completed 100 per cent toilet construction in her village.

Despite social resistance and opprobrium, Sunita's ability to stand fast and succeed in her mission earned her recognition and reward from the District Collector. This further opened doors of opportunities for her as well as her peers. In 2018, Sunita was selected from Latehar district as the representative for state-level master trainer training in Ranchi and became a certified *Rani Mistri*. This marked the beginning of a new phase of empowerment. Over the next 12 months, she provided training in nearly every village in Latehar, transforming the lives

of approximately 1,500 women and helping them to become *rani mistris*.

Sunita's mobility and exposure to the outside world increased as she attended more trainings. With every 3-day training she conducted across villages, she discovered unexplored skills within herself, which enhanced her self-worth. The respect she gained from the community for her life-altering work brought her immense satisfaction and pride. She says, "*I am now like a toilet engineer. I know every technical detail of toilet construction*"



and the different ways to adapt it to various scenarios – whether it's a house a nearby water source, limited space, or the need for proper wall design to ensure adequate oxygenation for composting."

With every 3-day training she conducted across villages, she discovered unexplored skills in herself, which enhanced her self-worth.

Sunita's acumen and ability to mobilize the community were inspirational. Savita Devi, her peer, talked about her unique style of community engagement at the 3-day in-village trainings, saying, *"She would weave a whole dream around a toilet! She promoted toilets as a source of income with the retrieval of "gold*

compost" that they could either sell or use for farming to increase their crop produce." Sunita kindled hope in women, making them believe they had the power to change their own lives, just as she had done.

With an observant eye, Sunita identified natural leaders among the trainees and empowered and guided these women to learn toilet construction. Sunita also replicated the *ratri chaupal* strategy in other villages, employing creative tactics for behaviour change. By utilizing infotainment – showing films featuring women who had taken the lead in toilet construction – she helped village women relate to the narratives and see the potential for similar initiatives in their own lives, creating an encouraging environment for change.

Financial incentives propelled women to step forward and train as *rani mistris*.

They also received Rs. 400 per toilet as an encouragement allowance.

A route to economic empowerment for women opened with this new employable skill. Sunita spoke glowingly about the financial independence she gained as a *Rani Mistri*, *"Earlier, as a self-help group leader, I was getting Rs. 1,500 per month. After Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, I started earning nearly Rs. 12,000–13,000 monthly. This further increased to Rs. 15,000 per month when I became a master trainer. I no longer had to depend on my husband to fulfil my aspirations. I could decide what to purchase and when."*

A route to economic empowerment for women opened with the new employable skill of masonry.

Deepak Choudhary, former District Coordinator of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen in Latehar, echoes Sunita's sentiments, emphasizing how Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen helped women recognize their potential. He says, *"Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen helped them understand, acknowledge and embrace the fact that they can do a lot. Their value of themselves changed. They no longer wanted to be dependent. They wanted to do something on their own."*

Describing the motivation that propelled high female participation in Jharkhand, Kumar Premchand, WASH Specialist, UNICEF Jharkhand, reflects, *"Women thought they would save money if they made their own toilets. And because they made it themselves, they had a sense of attachment to it... they knew that whatever they made*

was good... this kept them confident and moving forward from one toilet to another. There was a time in 2018 when 15 million self-help group women made 0.17 million toilets in just 20 days

across Jharkhand." By the end of 2018, Latehar district was declared Open Defecation Free, with Sunita playing a noteworthy role as a *Rani Mistri*, woman leader and powerful motivator.



Emerging strong

As Sunita's list of achievements broadened, she emerged as a formidable change leader and role model. With the advancement of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, she scaled new heights as a woman leader, gaining access to significant platforms that enabled her to be part of a catalytic change in her community. In 2018, she was the sole woman representative selected from Jharkhand to attend the National Workshop on Open Defecation Free Sustainability held in Udaipur, Rajasthan. This was the first time she stepped outside of Jharkhand alone, and it was a journey filled with discoveries and new challenges.

Overwhelmed by fear and inhibition, Sunita recounted her initial impression, *"When I saw an airport for the first time, it was a new world. I followed Sir like a*

child. Suddenly, from being a famous Rani Mistri in my village, I felt like a fool who knew nothing! I saw a big hotel for the first time and did not even know what a 'reception' is!" But she was undeterred. Her strong sense of agency, self-worth and risk-taking ability as a leader prompted her to volunteer as a speaker to share her experience on the national-level platform. Her insights on the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and the mass mobilization of women masons were met with thunderous applause from the audience, which included senior government officials. The experience of Jharkhand's women's participation and their transformative journey towards empowerment became a national best practice, inspiring others to follow suit.

In 2019, on International Women's Day, Sunita was conferred the 'Nari Shakti Samman' by the President of India in

recognition of her contributions towards women's empowerment. In addition to the immense honour she received, her interactions with fellow awardees also offered her an enriching experience, revealing a tapestry of struggles and triumphs.

Among 44 other women awardees, she was the youngest and had the least formal education. Yet, her powerful journey of change found a place in the Hon'ble Prime Minister's famous radio programme titled '*Mann Ki Baat*', where she had a conversation with the Prime Minister and confidently spoke of her story as a changemaker. Her return to her village and community was met with respect and awe. Her father-in-law, Siyu Bacchan Bhagat, proudly said, *"She is fearless and can take care of herself. I feel proud. Our family's respect in society has increased because of her. Now when I go out, her name comes up many times in social conversations."*

Among 44 other women awardees, she was the youngest and had the least formal education. Yet her powerful journey of transformation found a place in the Hon'ble Prime Minister's radio programme titled '*Mann Ki Baat*'.

With her characteristic humility, Sunita reflects, *"I never did work for recognition. I worked only with the intent to change women's lives, empower them and make them realize their potential and power. I just want to leave an imprint on people's lives."*

Building the future

In 2021, Sunita submitted her nomination for the *panchayat* elections. Her victory as *sarpanch* in 2022 marked the beginning of her new journey in governance. As Sunita



embraced her new role, she not only charted a new course for herself but also paved the way for numerous other women. She organized training programmes for *rani mistris*, and as the women she trained saw their lives transformed, they became valuable assets in administrative roles, taking on positions as Accredited Social Health Activist and Anganwadi workers.

Vimla Devi, now an Accredited Social Health Activist worker trained by Sunita, spoke of the change in gender dynamics and decision-making at the household level after she started earning. *"Now my husband thanks Sunita for giving me the opportunity to earn. His views have changed so much that now he feels both husband and wife can run the household together"*

on an equal footing. The money we got from Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen made the biggest difference, even if we worked for it as part of social work. I feel that even for social work, economic backing is important," she says.

Rani Mistri Geeta Devi, narrated the change in perceptions towards women and how children began accepting a changed gender landscape, "Now children in the village know that mummy has to go for work. Husbands also know we have to leave for work in the morning as they do. Even if my husband is not there, I do things on my own. Dependence has reduced and self-confidence has increased. Now, we feel more equal. We also feel that we have worth and importance."

Deepak Kumar Mahto, Executive Engineer, District Water and Sanitation Department, also said

that the biggest success of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen was bringing women into governance, "Rani mistris became future leaders, which catapulted into women-led governance. They found political empowerment in the process. Gram

panchayats led by women are also being given priority in government schemes. Accelerated development has fuelled the enabling environment for women to come forward in positions of power. It is like a chain reaction."



Sunita's leadership as *panchayat* head saw several noteworthy successes:

- Implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission with 100 per cent coverage of household taps
- Revitalization of Village Water and Sanitation Committee through active participation of women
- Launch of waste management and Open Defecation Free Plus activities
- Initiation of plastic waste segregation in her *gram panchayat*, with the *panchayat* office being used as the plastic collection centre

Additionally, impressive improvements have been made in school sanitation. Segregated toilets for boys and girls are now in place, but even more significant is the focus on menstrual hygiene management, helping to reduce the dropout rate among girls.

Due to Sunita's awareness of new and upcoming schemes and eagerness to implement them in her *panchayat*, she actively liaised with the district administration to promote her *panchayat's* welfare. Hence, Jharkhand's first *Gobardhan Yojana* was sanctioned to her *gram panchayat*, and her problem-solving ability helped mitigate community resistance and shortlist a location for the plant, which has now been successfully established and is ready for operations.

Reflecting on her journey, Sunita says, *"Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen gave me the platform to become who I am today. A woman is known by her father or husband's name. I am no longer known as someone's daughter, wife or mother. I am known by my own name and own identity."*

Through her resilience and transformative leadership, Sunita continues to pave the way for women's empowerment in her community, ensuring that the changes she has championed will have lasting impacts for generations to come. Her evolution from a woman swamped by adversity to a leader in a position of authority exemplifies the significant role women can play in driving sustainable change.

Her journey underscores the transformative power of water, sanitation and hygiene programmes and women-led governance in addressing community needs with a spirit of resilience. Her case study especially underscores the catalytic impact of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen in empowering women to transform not only their own lives but the entire community.

*Sunita Devi
receives the
prestigious
award from the
President of India
for her leadership
in empowering
women and
promoting
sanitation.*



Case study 04

Rewriting conventional roles

Sitabai Jadhav

In the village of Jhalariya, Madhya Pradesh, Sitabai's journey from labourer to pump operator marks a remarkable change fuelled by Jal Jeevan Mission. Her appointment as the first woman pump operator in the village shattered gender stereotypes, showcasing her determination to learn technical skills and become the go-to person for the entire village. In fact, so admirable was her work that she was recognized by the Hon'ble Prime Minister in 2023 for her contribution in the water programme. As she gained confidence and stepped into village affairs, she found innovative solutions to strengthen women's participation and solve water-related problems. Her efforts in mobilizing women through self-help groups inspired collective action and fostered a sense of ownership in water management. Beyond operating the pump, Sitabai's advocacy for user charges secured sustainable water supply maintenance, while her leadership inspired other women to take up roles in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. Sitabai symbolizes empowerment, economic independence and a brighter future for women, changing not just her own life but the social fabric of her village.



A new dawn

A resident of Jhalariya, a quaint village in the Depalpur block, Indore district of Madhya Pradesh, Sitabai, as the pump operator for her panchayat, makes a major contribution to managing the village water supply, ensuring that every household under her pumphouse receives adequate quantity of water on time every day. The winds of change began to sweep through Jhalariya and Sitabai's life when Public Health Engineering Department started their work for Jal Jeevan Mission. Reflecting on the opportunity to become a pump operator, Sitabai said, *"The thought of being a pump operator was not just distant but incomprehensible. It belonged to the realm of men. With my little education and lack of exposure to technical as well as technological know-how, I never imagined taking up such a job."* As the only woman in the village equipped and trained in this valuable skill, she embraces her role with a blend of pride and modesty, navigating her responsibilities with an unassuming grace that quietly hides her inner strength.



Her village successfully implemented Jal Jeevan Mission in 2021, ensuring that all 284 households had tap connections. Sitabai plays a vital role in its sustainability, collecting monthly user charges, which has allowed her to deposit Rs. 1.79 lakhs into the Village Water and Sanitation Committee bank account since the commissioning of the water supply scheme in 2021.

Before piped water arrived, hand pumps and limited access to water dictated a cycle of drudgery and hardship that formed their daily lives. Reflecting on her earlier routine, Sitabai said, *"I would wake up at 4 a.m. daily to do household chores and fetch water, which was a 2-km walk one way. After this, I had to leave for work. I could not be late for attendance at the construction site where I was a labourer."* By providing water at their doorstep, the time women spent

collecting water could now be better utilized for leisure, rest, hobbies, learning and education, socialization or economic activities. As Reena Jadhav, a young woman *sarpanch*, shared, *"With water at our doorsteps, women can now earn wages working in the nearby factory or through farming. We have more time to focus on our children. We also attend self-help group meetings more regularly. Life has truly changed since water came to our house."*

As Jal Jeevan Mission provided water at their doorsteps, women's time spent in water collection could now be better utilized for leisure, rest, pursuing a hobby, learning and education, socialization or economic activities.

To ensure tap water supply for each household, Public Health Engineering Department representatives developed a detailed blueprint for the area to be covered and also engaged with the community in developing the plan. Through the process, the importance of community involvement in planning and implementing the water supply scheme and taking its handover as active owners was consistently highlighted. A series of community meetings were held to create a Village Action Plan outlining strategies and steps to address the water needs of the villagers. During this critical phase, a 14-member Village Water and Sanitation Committee was formed, comprising of 10 women, including Sitabai. In every meeting, the Public Health Engineering Department encouraged women to step forward as key participants in managing their community's water resources through

the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. This consistent reinforcement and backing by officials built confidence among women taking on these vital albeit non-traditional roles. UNICEF supported the activation and strengthening of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. Pankaj Mathur, WASH Specialist, UNICEF Madhya Pradesh says, “The aim was to enhance women involvement making water, sanitation and hygiene implementation more local and contextualized in nature and, in the process, engaging natural leaders, building their capacities and laying ground for leadership roles.”

Initially apprehensive, Sitabai and her fellow Village Water and Sanitation Committee members grappled with the unfamiliar terrain of technology and infrastructure, approaching their new responsibilities with a mix of uncertainty and eagerness. Sitabai,

however, was a quick learner and rapidly grew into her new role. For example, when the implementing support agencies were tasked to identify where taps and pipelines were required through a participatory rural appraisal exercise, they faced a roadblock in getting women to



participate. Sitabai found an innovative solution to this. Understanding that many women hesitated to leave their homes, she suggested holding smaller meetings within neighbourhoods. Initially, women observed the meetings, staying tucked behind the doors or windows of their homes. However, the discussions about improvements in water supply drew them out, as solutions to their overwhelming daily burden were being discussed.

Sitabai, also a member of the local self-help group, knew the power of women collectives and quickly leveraged the self-help group platform to mobilize and inspire women. The women's hesitation transformed into active participation as Sitabai shared detailed information about the scheme and the importance of women's roles in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. Sitabai mobilized her sisterhood, and a silent

movement of change began to take root. Women who had once felt powerless and voiceless started connecting over a shared goal of water security and safety. They participated in the participatory rural appraisal and helped detail the geography of their houses so that plans could be made for the pipe network. As a result of this participation, the planning process was highly effective, being both contextual and needs-based.

Women who had once felt powerless and voiceless started connecting over a shared goal of water security and safety.

Sitabai and her husband, Champalal, played an instrumental role in providing information on village terrain, slopes, physical issues and, most importantly, social dynamics.

Panchayat Secretary Bharat Kumar informed that *gram panchayat* and ward-level meetings were conducted to seek support during the laying of the pipeline. However, problems still arose regarding the order of connections, fears that the pipelines would damage houses, etc. He said, *“Sitabai tactfully addressed concerns via the women in self-help group meetings or by talking to them separately. She gave them the correct information, cleared their doubts and helped them think of the consequences if water did not reach them or the water scheme was delayed. These women then carried the message home!”*

As the overhead water tank construction phase commenced, excitement rippled through Jhalariya. The site for the water tank was just steps away from Sitabai’s house, and she was at the heart of the action from the very first break of ground for the

water supply scheme. Both Sitabai and her husband, Champalal, rolled up their sleeves and contributed as labourers, carrying bricks and mixing cement to help build this vital asset for their village. Each brick laid was not just a building block for the tank but a testament to Sitabai’s commitment to the project.

Bharat Kumar said, *“Sitabai and Champalal were always forthcoming and helpful. I would ask them about the ongoing construction work if I could not visit the site. They were like an extension of the panchayat and supervised everything.”*

Sitabai, with her natural inclination for leadership, stepped into a supervisory role, working closely with the contractors, managing day-to-day operations and ensuring that the construction crew adhered to timelines and quality standards. This also gave

the villagers confidence that they had one of their own overseeing the work. As Sarpanch Reena Jadhav said, *“Sita didi would stand for hours when construction was going on. She could do ‘management’, a skill we did not have.”* As the tank began to take shape, the excitement in the air was palpable. Families gathered to witness the development, each day drawing closer to when clean, accessible water would become a reality for their homes.

Taking the lead

Sitabai learned the operations from her husband to take over the role of pump operator. He walked her through the mechanics of the pump, demonstrated how to ensure smooth operations and showed her how to engage with the community when they called her for any distress in the water supply. Champalal added, *“She did not hesitate to do a difficult technical job.”*

Initially, the village community was not comfortable with a woman manning infrastructure as critical as their daily water supply.

However, her transition to this new role had some initial hiccups. Initially, the village community was not comfortable with a woman manning infrastructure as critical as their daily water supply. Reena Jadhav recalled people saying, *“How will she know how to connect wires? How will she turn the valve? It is heavy work and requires strength!”*

Under community pressure, the job was given to a man from the village, but he could not sustain it for even four days. The village had a water crisis on the fifth day and the morning operations were interrupted. Sitabai operated the valve in front of the

panchayat and the matter was settled. The Public Health Engineering Department and block-level officials supported the decision of Sitabai’s appointment as a pump operator.

In Sitabai’s eyes, taking on this role was an opportunity to demonstrate to others that women could indeed step into unconventional roles, breaking barriers along the way and quietening the criticism and opposition she faced. *“It was not just about managing the pump,”* she asserted. *“It was about showing our community that women can take charge.”* As she acquired these skills, Sitabai’s confidence blossomed and a deep sense of pride and self-worth emerged. Watching her efficiently handle tasks and solve problems on the job, the attitude of the community started to shift, giving her the respect and recognition she deserved.

In Sitabai's eyes, taking on the role of pump operator was an opportunity to demonstrate to others that women could indeed step into unconventional roles, breaking barriers along the way and quietening the criticism and opposition that she was facing.

Sitabai participated in various trainings and skill-building workshops provided by the Public Health Engineering Department, covering topics like pump operations and maintenance, water quality management, automation and water conservation. These opportunities broadened her understanding of water management and deepened her technical know-how. With this came an increased understanding of the importance of water quality.

Sitabai said, *"Previously, we drank whatever water was available and knew nothing about water quality. Now, we know its importance, and we women ensure that the water our families drink is safe"*. The block coordinator for Jal Jeevan Mission



affirmed that water quality testing is now being conducted entirely by Village Water and Sanitation Committee women members, underscoring a significant shift in women's roles in community development.

Water quality testing is now conducted entirely by Village Water and Sanitation Committee women members, underscoring a significant shift in women's roles in community development.

Manju Bhuralal, responsible for water testing in the village, said, *"Seeing Sitabai, I learned that despite being a woman, I can do every job a man does. I volunteered for the water quality training and learned about it. Everyone was surprised when I did the test for the first time!"*

The *panchayat* secretary encouraged Sitabai to attend programmes outside the village. He said, *"She went to Depalpur block, Pipiliya and travelled as far as Indore and Bhopal, all on her own. She is always willing and eager. It is so good to see her do things independently."*

Interactions with other Village Water and Sanitation Committee women members also revealed the changes they saw within themselves from the training exposure. Manju Bhuralal said, *"We are able to report on our work and respond to officials if they ask us questions."* Leela Bai expressed the pride that accompanied their achievements, *"We felt a sense of achievement as we received our training certificates. The village elders, who once castigated us for going out of our homes for training, appreciate and respect us and our knowledge."*

When pump operations were automated in 2022, Sitabai enthusiastically embraced the challenge of learning a new technology. She said, *"I was not scared. I learned it. Even when I went to Delhi to receive my award, I sat and operated the pumps from afar on my phone."*

Sitabai became a catalyst for change in Jhalariya, inspiring countless other women to seize opportunities. The sarpanch said, *"Seeing Sitabai and other Village Water and Sanitation Committee women members going for training sparked new enthusiasm among the village women to know and learn what these particular women were learning"*. This has created an aspirational yearning to be like these women and seek similar growth opportunities. Many women now want to be a part of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee in the future.

Sustaining the water supply scheme

Water availability at the household level brought remarkable changes in the lives of the community, but sustaining the water supply scheme required a user fee. In 2021, when the Public Health Engineering Department completely handed over operations to the panchayat, the responsibility for maintenance and repairs of the water supply infrastructure fell squarely on the panchayat's shoulders. This meant that Sitabai and Village Water and Sanitation Committee needed to ensure that the monthly water user charges were introduced and collected consistently to fund repairs and ongoing operational costs.

Resistance began to surface once again. For the first six months, no one

paid. Sitabai, as the salaried pump operator, was expected to re-enact the magic she had wielded during the connection fee collection to ensure that every household paid their user fee.

Determined to get the community on board, she conducted door-to-door visits, patiently explaining the benefits of paying the user fee. She reminded the community of the Public Health Engineering Department Officer's words during meetings at the start of the programme when he said, *"The government will give us this scheme, but they will not run it for us."*

She also mitigated fears around funds and reassured people that the money would be used for their own welfare. "The money will stay within the village, allowing us to decide how to spend it. It will be deposited in the panchayat bank account for repairs and maintenance." While women and

self-help group members were quickly convinced to make the payments, Sitabai faced significant challenges from the village elders and affluent families who resisted the idea of paying for water. Many questioned the legitimacy of the fees, insisting that water should be a free resource.

Despite this, Sitabai remained steadfast, aware that building consensus among the entire community would take time and effort. She started making headway through her persistent advocacy, relatable explanations and tactical approach.

Sitabai's approach emphasized the importance of solidarity in encouraging a collective commitment to the sustainability of the scheme, growing collections from a mere 70 paying households in 2022 to approximately 150 households (of the total 284).

Sitabai's approach emphasized the importance of solidarity in encouraging a collective commitment to the sustainability of the water supply scheme.



Soaring high: Honoured at the Red Fort

For her stellar contributions in managing the in-village water supply scheme under Jal Jeevan Mission and setting a precedent in the women's empowerment movement, Sitabai was a special invitee to the Independence Day celebrations at Red Fort, New Delhi, on 15 August 2023. A euphoric Champalal said, *"I feel proud that my wife was recognized by the Prime Minister. My respect in the community has increased so much because of her. Through her achievements, we have now seen the Red Fort in Delhi."*

Sitabai felt a profoundly satisfying sense of accomplishment and validation as she received this recognition. *"The entire village was overjoyed that I was going to Delhi for*

my work!" she said, her eyes shining with pride. In addition to the award she received from the government, Sitabai was also awarded for her contribution to her village's water supply scheme by WaterAid.

Sitabai's impact extended beyond her immediate community. The Public Health Engineering Department shares her example in several other villages to encourage women to come forward in water supply management. Sitabai has conducted training sessions on pump operations for around 30–40 women from neighbouring villages. Block Coordinator Pradeep Mansore said, *"She took on a role that carried high technical responsibility, which, in rural settings, was traditionally associated with men. Many men from affluent households that had their own hand pumps faced water shortages in summers and came to her for help!"* This is slowly changing the social fabric

of the village towards a more equitable footing in terms of gender.

Several other cascading community-level impacts have emerged due to the changed water dynamic. Women feel safer as they no longer have to scourge for water at odd hours. As people are becoming aware of their right to access water and with its availability in the village, the daily conflicts over this scarce and unregulated resource have greatly reduced, resulting in a greater community cohesion for participative development. Improved personal hygiene, toilet maintenance and school attendance are other by-products. Women are engaging in economic activities to enhance household earnings on account of time saved due to accessible water supply. They are becoming increasingly independent and confident, initiating their own decisions

and participating in community affairs. The panchayat secretary noted, *"The panchayat has seen more women's participation after the Village Water and Sanitation Committees became active and is better equipped to address women's issues better."* The panchayat constructed 10 shops along the highway to bolster local revenue sources. These shops were allotted through a lottery system held by the Gram Sabha, specifically for self-help group women. In a ground-breaking move, the land entitlement was granted in the name of the women, ensuring their ownership and independence in business ventures.

With her newfound recognition and confidence, Sitabai's life has progressed socially and economically. She has embraced her ability to make independent purchasing decisions, recently buying furniture for her home using her own salary as a pump operator. The shop allotted by the

panchayat in her name was another reward for her selfless service to the community. Sitabai now manages her own bank account, giving her a sense of control over her own and her family's economic future. Champalal light-heartedly shared, *"She is the key decision-maker in our house. Recently, with the shop's earnings, we bought a vehicle to provide our son with a means of earning. The truth is that my wife's empowerment has helped empower our whole family. Our economic and social standing has improved remarkably."* While enjoying her newfound economic independence, Sitabai emphasized that her primary gain after learning technical skills and becoming a Village Water and Sanitation Committee member was the recognition and respect she earned in her community. The feeling of community responsibility further empowered her to step into a leadership role. Sitabai's journey has not only transformed her life but has

also catalysed broader societal changes, empowering women in Jhalariya to take control of their futures and become active participants in their community's governance and economic development.

 ग्राम जल एवं स्वच्छता समिति ग्राम पंचायत झलारिया				
क्र.	जल समिति के सदस्यों के नाम	पद	वर्ग	मोबाइल नं.
1	सीताबाई	अध्यक्ष	सामान्य	6268103071
2	भरत कुमार बैरागी	सचिव	पि. वर्ग	9424012373
3	सीताबाई चम्पालाल	सदस्य	अ. जाति	9907052472
4	राधेराम	सदस्य	पि. वर्ग	8959646436
5	पवित्रा बाई-महेश	सदस्य	अ. जाति	6263966922
6	सोहन बाई प्रेमचन्द्र	सदस्य	अ. जाति	87...
7	मनीबाई नाथ	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
8	लीला बाई नाथ	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
9	शोभा बारोड़	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
10	मन्जु भुरालाल	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
11	रेखा शर्मा	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
12	शेखर शर्मा	सदस्य पंच	अ. जाति	
13	शारदा बाई सरवन	सदस्य	अ. जाति	
14	विनोद यादव	सदस्य	अ. जाति	



Sitabai gets recognized for her leadership in water supply management and empowerment of women across villages.

Case study 05

Lifting the veil of secrecy

Shraddha Tiwari

Shraddha Tiwari's inspiring journey from being a shy teenager from Uttar Pradesh to becoming a fearless advocate for menstrual health showcases a remarkable change in attitudes, practices and openness surrounding menstruation. Growing up in an environment where menstruation was shrouded in silence and stigma, Shraddha faced confusion and shame during her early experiences. However, the Swachh Garima Vidyalyaya initiative in her school and her teacher's groundbreaking discussions ignited a desire to challenge taboos.

Shraddha has led innovative initiatives to foster dialogue among students, including boys, teachers and parents. Her efforts included pad-making workshops and awareness sessions that normalized discussions on menstruation, empowered peers and dismantled long-standing myths. Powering an outreach that included not just girls but also boys, mothers, male family members and teachers, Shraddha is becoming a revered peer educator and menstrual health advocate, impacting hundreds of lives. Her efforts have catalysed a community-wide shift towards acceptance and understanding of menstruation. Shraddha is shaping a generation that views menstruation as a natural, manageable part of life, free from stigma by promoting openness and sustainable practices.



The driving force

Every Saturday afternoon during a club meeting, the school's dusty blackboard transforms into a vibrant canvas of ideas where Shraddha and her fellow club members gather to discuss menstrual hygiene and create informative and innovative communication materials on the topic.

Sixteen-year-old Shraddha Tiwari, leads this club in her Government High School, Kanakpur Shikva in the Dhanpatganj block of Sultanpur district, Uttar Pradesh. As president of the Menstrual Hygiene Management Club, Shraddha's mission is to challenge long-standing myths and taboos surrounding menstruation.

Under her leadership, the club is becoming a driving force behind school and community initiatives related to menstrual health. As a peer

educator, Shraddha conducts numerous awareness sessions in both her school and nearby institutions, impacting hundreds of young minds. As she ignites a desire for change, she encourages her peers to speak confidently about their experiences related to menstruation.

Determined that no girl should experience the embarrassment and confusion she had, Shraddha introduces essential information about menstruation to junior students as well, preparing them for their initiation into puberty.

Realizing that change does not come in isolation, Shraddha's efforts are extending to the wider community. In a daring move, she has involved boys in discussions about menstruation, giving them a greater understanding of the

challenges faced by girls and women. The teachers, who had previously hesitated to address menstruation in the classroom, now find themselves discussing it with their students, both boys and girls.

Sixteen-year-old Shraddha is the driving force behind the Menstrual Hygiene Management Club, determined to change attitudes and dispel myths about menstruation.

The veil of silence

Growing up in a traditional family with two older married sisters and one younger sister, Shraddha was no stranger to the challenges of

menstruation. Her mother and elder sisters had been a part of the silence, often whispering about periods in hushed tones, masking their own struggles and discomfort. *"I noticed there were days when my sisters did not use their bicycles,"* she recalled. Maya Devi, Shraddha's mother said, *"For the longest time, my daughters did not know that their mother also menstruates. I was always secretive about such things."*

When Shraddha entered eighth grade, she faced her own initiation into puberty. The confusion and awkwardness were overwhelming. *"My mother handed me a piece of cloth and said, 'Do not talk about this to anyone.' Along with that, she provided a long list of 'don'ts,' such as not washing my hair, not touching pickles, not going to the temple and so on."* Shraddha felt a whirlwind of emotions: confusion, fear and isolation. The lack of open discussion made it difficult for her to understand what was happening to her body. *"I became sad and reserved. There was always a lingering fear that I might get a stain and someone would see it. I became aloof and stopped enjoying family evenings with my father,"* she said.



This experience is not unique to Shraddha; it reflects the experiences of most girls in her community. Ragini Gupta, one of Shraddha's friends and a fellow club member, recounted her own daunting experience at the onset of menstruation: *"I thought I had caught some disease! My mother couldn't explain what was happening. All she told me was to stay indoors and avoid certain activities. I stopped doing PT and playing outdoors."*

Roshni, Shraddha's peer, regularly missed a week of school each month. *"My mother told me I couldn't go to school because I wouldn't be able to manage the situation. She just gave me a cloth to use and instructed me to throw it in the bushes where no one would see."*

Swati, another peer, shared, "I got my period on Diwali while we were making

diyas and hosting guests. I didn't know what to do! I was in so much pain."

The impact of this silence does not affect girls alone; it also affects boys in their familial and social spheres. Anukalp Singh, a 12-year-old ninth grader, noticed the emotional toll these unspoken rules had on his older sister. "She'd often seem sad and withdrawn. If I tried to talk to her, she'd get irritable and angry. It made me sad that we could no longer play together."

Then, in 2022, the first winds of change began to blow and reverberate through the lives of Shraddha and her peers.

The onset of puberty was a time of shame and confusion for Shraddha and other young girls like her.

The winds of change

"Swachh Garima Vidyalaya" is an approach to make schools adolescent-friendly by providing facilities and services required for effective management of menstruation health and hygiene. This is an innovative initiative being implemented by *Samagra Shiksha (Madhyamik)* in secondary schools of Uttar Pradesh with technical support from UNICEF. It aims to ensure dignity, safety, health and hygiene of adolescents, especially girls, by creating an enabling environment in schools. The goals include breaking the silence, promoting behaviour change and generating demand for WASH services. As part of this initiative, 75 nodal teachers in each of the 75 districts were trained on the sustainability of water, sanitation and

hygiene facilities; menstrual health and hygiene management in schools; menstrual hygiene-compliant toilets and safe disposal of sanitary waste; behaviour change activities; and formation of student peer groups.

These nodal teachers also received support post training and were encouraged to share good practices and solutions to local problems through online meetings and WhatsApp groups. Media coverage of the initiative played a role in generating interest throughout the state. Resources for water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and services were leveraged through Project *Alankaar*. This included funding for new constructions as well as repairing and retrofitting existing toilets to make them menstrual hygiene management-compliant. School grants and unused funds from *gram panchayats* were commandeered for the operation and maintenance of

school toilet facilities and the implementation of behaviour change programmes for adolescents.

Shraddha's school was one of the first to sign up for the *Swachh Garima Vidyalaya* programme. Ms. Sangeeta Gupta, headteacher of the school, was passionately committed to the cause and underwent training on menstrual



hygiene and health, eventually becoming the District Nodal Officer under *Swachh Garima Vidyalaya*.

Shraddha reflected on the day that changed her life, *"Until eighth grade, I was shy and reluctant to talk to boys. Sangeeta Ma'am started teaching us Home Science and English. One day she wrote 'menstruation' on the blackboard. We didn't even know this word, and we looked at each other. She explained, 'This is a normal body function, not a curse.' That day sparked a fire within me."*

Inspired by Ms. Gupta's efforts to bring clarity to a topic shrouded in secrecy and misunderstanding, Shraddha vowed to become a voice for the many girls trapped under layers of confusion and fear about menstruation.

Under her teacher's mentorship, Shraddha was able to develop her confidence and leadership qualities.

Shraddha found inspiration when her teacher promoted conversations around menstruation, transforming whispers of secrecy into empowering dialogues.

Subsequently, this student-teacher partnership became a driving force, cultivating an atmosphere of openness within the school.

In April 2023, Ms. Gupta initiated biweekly sessions that brought together both boys and girls to explore topics such as the physical and emotional changes that occur during adolescence, menstrual health and hygiene, nutrition and the importance of dispelling myths around menstruation. This initiative marked a significant turning point in the discourse surrounding menstrual health at Shraddha's school.

Shraddha vividly recalled the profound change in the atmosphere: *"When Sangeeta Ma'am introduced the word 'menstruation,' there was a collective gasp in the room. It was the first time we were encouraged to discuss something that had long remained a secret."* From that moment, timid exchanges turned into vibrant discussions, and Shraddha felt a renewed sense of purpose.

"I realized that educating my peers could empower them," Shraddha said. *"I overcame my hesitancy and I began leading the discussions."* This breakthrough inspired her to become a peer educator, sharing essential information about menstrual health with everyone in the room. Aman Prajapati, a 15-year-old student from tenth grade, recognized the impact of Shraddha's leadership. *"Sangeeta ma'am made it clear that neither boys nor girls should feel uncomfortable*

discussing these topics. It was Shraddha's willingness to speak openly that helped us embrace these conversations."

Shraddha started encouraging fellow students to share their personal experiences and the challenges they faced at home. Roshni, one of her classmates, voiced her curiosity: *"No one knew why we couldn't wash our hair, touch pickles or enter the kitchen! We wanted to understand if these were mere age-old traditions or if there was scientific reason behind them."*

Determined to find answers, Shraddha, with the guidance of her teacher, dedicated her evenings to research. Her willingness to seek knowledge quickly established her as the go-to person for menstrual health inquiries among her classmates.

"I remember the first time someone asked me about how to deal with

cramps,” Shraddha reflected. “I spent hours researching different remedies and strategies. I learnt that popping pain-killers is harmful and there are several safer ways to deal with pain.”

Shraddha began creating simple handouts and summaries of the key information she gathered on menstruation. She became adept at breaking down complex information into useful tips that her classmates could follow to take care of themselves.

Shraddha found her voice and purpose – soon she was being looked up to by her peers as the go-to person for menstrual-related queries.

The Menstrual Hygiene Management Club was established and it soon grew into a credible platform for information

exchange in the school. Under Shraddha’s leadership, the club became a cornerstone of menstrual health education, providing a safe space for students to explore multiple topics. What started as shy murmurs and hesitant exchanges blossomed into vibrant dialogues every Saturday afternoon. Club members began to share their insights and personal experiences and ask pressing questions in a judgment-free environment.

With her encouragement, Sharadha’s peers began contributing to meaningful projects that reflected their growing understanding of the subject. Aman Prajapati proudly shared his chart titled “FAQ,” addressing common questions surrounding menstruation. Ambar Singh created a poster called “What to Do During Periods.” Narender Kumar designed ‘The Ultimate Period Kit’, outlining essential items that girls

should carry in their bags during menstruation.

As students brought their projects home, it sparked conversations with their parents and elderly family members. Some embraced the initiative and offered useful suggestions. Others remained hesitant, perceiving a discussion on menstruation as taboo or a distraction from academic studies. For Shraddha, her father turned out to be her biggest supporter, encouraging her pursuits and celebrating her advocacy efforts. “He has never been hesitant around me when I am making these charts. Rather, he says that he is proud of me!”

As students brought their projects home, it sparked conversations with their parents and elderly family members.

From taboo to open discussions

One of the most impactful initiatives of the platform has been the introduction of cloth pad-making workshops, spearheaded by Shraddha and guided by Ms. Gupta. This initiative empowers students with practical skills while providing them with the freedom to choose how they manage their menstrual hygiene.

"Each Saturday, I lead the sessions to ensure everyone learns how to properly make their own cloth pads. We create a welcoming environment where all questions are encouraged. Even boys make pads with us," said Shraddha. This proactive and inclusive approach is another step towards ensuring that no girl feels uncomfortable or confused about menstrual hygiene management.

Swati, a workshop participant, said, "I learned that only muslin cloth should be used. Before this, my mother would tear cloth from anything – even terrycloth and synthetic fabrics. This would often lead to rashes and itching." Her friend, Ragini, added, "Before, I felt dependent on what my

mother provided. Now, I can make my own pads!"

Kumar Bikram, WASH Officer, Uttar Pradesh reflects, "This case study exemplifies the core essence of Swachh Garima Vidyalaya: empowering young girls to seek



accurate information, challenge myths and misconceptions, exercise their right to choose suitable products, develop skills to create absorbents for personal use, and uplift their families and communities through informed knowledge and reasoning on proper menstrual hygiene and health practices.”

Boys are actively involved as well, which helps dismantle traditional gender barriers. Shraddha also makes sure to highlight the variety of menstrual health products available besides pads, such as tampons, menstrual cups and more.

For many girls, pad-making workshops have been an exhilarating exercise in freedom of choice, allowing them to manage menstruation in a manner that suits their needs.

The proper disposal of menstrual products has also been an area of focus for the club. Previously, used pads were wrapped in newspapers or discarded carelessly in the bushes. However, armed with knowledge and resources from multiple sessions held at the club, students have begun embracing more hygienic disposal processes. The issue of pain management has also been a major point of discussion. Shraddha observed that many girls previously accepted menstrual discomfort as an inevitable part of their cycles, often enduring pain in silence. She encouraged students to seek medical guidance. Additionally, involvement of boys in the discussion on pain management instils a sense of empathy and sensitivity. Anukalp Singh remarked, *“We understood what girls were going through. One day when we become husbands and fathers, our wives and daughters can comfortably*

talk to us.” Together, these efforts are cultivating a more informed and compassionate community.

Shraddha has begun to take her advocacy efforts beyond the walls of her school. Encouraged by her mentor, Ms. Gupta, Shraddha has been engaging actively with neighbouring schools through workshops and interactive sessions to explore the topic of menstruation with openness and honesty. By sharing personal stories and insights, she is creating an environment where students can ask questions and voice their uncertainties without fear of judgment.

Shraddha’s first independent session was at the neighbouring Government Junior School in Padri. Ms. Gupta recalls that the male teacher from Padri called Shraddha after her session to praise the awareness initiative and appreciate her confidence.

Shraddha and her fellow club members began visiting more schools, honing and refining their presentation skills. *“Every time I spoke, I saw a light go on in someone’s eyes,”* she added. Such moments ignite and fuel her passion for advocacy, and strengthen her mission to enlighten an entire generation in her community on menstrual hygiene.

A multi-pronged approach

Shraddha adopts a multifaceted approach: she conducts workshops, delivers presentations and facilitates open discussions with students of all ages. Ragini, who accompanies her to various school sessions, spoke of her impact as an orator: *“We went to a junior school in Shukulpur. The science teacher was shocked at the boldness with which Shraddha explained the reproductive system and menstrual*

hygiene. The teacher said that from now onwards he too would explain like Shraddha. She is leading the way for teachers too, breaking through their hesitation.”

In her outreach, Shraddha encountered stark realities, often finding young girls completely unaware about menstruation. This presented a crucial opportunity for education, preparing these girls to face their menstrual health challenges in the future with confidence.

In some instances, girls experiencing irregular periods or heavy bleeding lasting for days had never discussed these issues, even with their mothers. Through her outreach, she emphasized the importance of seeking medical attention, instilling a sense of urgency about the need for proper care and guidance regarding menstrual health.

Through her outreach, she emphasized the importance of seeking medical attention, instilling a sense of urgency about the need for proper care and guidance regarding menstrual health.

Through her initiatives, Shraddha is building a network of informed advocates dedicated to changing the narrative around menstruation. Students who once felt ashamed or confused are now becoming champions of menstrual health. Her efforts are shaping a generation that understands menstruation as a natural part of life.

Her peers look up to her as a role model. Here’s what some of her peers have to say about Shraddha:

Aman Prajapati: *“She explains everything very well and lucidly. At first, I would giggle when she presented certain topics, but she was never offended. She continued to explain despite my immature approach.”*

Swati Tiwari: *“She kept me motivated by reminding me that people will keep criticizing, but we need to look forward and keep moving ahead. Her words inspire me every day.”*

Ragini Gupta: *“When we see her speaking, we learn, and we try to imitate her when we conduct sessions. Shraddha makes us feel like our voices matter and instils confidence in us.”*

Roshni: *“By now, she has probably spoken to more than 2,000 people about menstrual hygiene and health. She travels to many schools and villages for*

awareness generation. We all want to talk like her – fearlessly.”

Shraddha’s personal transformation and conviction inspired an army of menstrual health champions, determined to effect change.



Shraddha’s influence extends well beyond her peers as it was not just students who struggled with the stigma surrounding this often-ignored topic; even senior biology teachers felt apprehensive about teaching menstruation with conviction. Her willingness to address menstruation openly is changing how this critical subject is taught in classrooms. Teachers who once hesitated to engage with the topic have found inspiration in Shraddha’s resolve.

Reflecting on her own experience, Shraddha recalled, *“Whenever the chapter on biological functions and menstruation came up, our science teacher would skim over it. We were simply instructed to read more as homework. The boys would laugh, and the girls felt embarrassed, while the teacher appeared reluctant.”*

Mr. Ram Teerath Rajak, the Headteacher of Government Junior School, affirmed, *"As a male teacher, I found it challenging to address menstruation in front of female students. So, seeing Shraddha speak openly about such a sensitive topic was an eye-opener. After her first session, boys began approaching me for information on the subject. Now I discuss it openly with my students."*

Through her fearless advocacy, Shraddha is reshaping classroom dynamics and bridging the gap between students and educators by lifting the veil of silence surrounding menstruation. Ms. Gupta observed, *"Shraddha is an agent of change not only for her classmates but also for us educators. Her willingness to speak openly about menstruation significantly transformed our teaching*

environment." As a result, educators have begun to incorporate comprehensive discussions about menstruation into their lesson plans. This shift has led to meaningful dialogues about health and well-being.

Thanks to Shraddha's fearlessness, teachers recognize the need to address menstruation openly and in a way that resonates with students' real-life experiences.

Understanding the profound influence mothers have on their daughters, Shraddha recognized the need to break the inter-generational cycle of silence surrounding menstruation. In

May 2024, she initiated community-level interactions with mothers, fully aware that educating them was crucial, as they serve as the first point of contact for information and guidance to adolescent girls.

Starting small, Shraddha began by reaching out to a few mothers in her neighbourhood, individuals she knew



personally and felt comfortable approaching. *“Some were hesitant at first, but as I shared my story and the information we discussed at school, I could see their walls starting to come down,”* she said.

Shraddha slowly expanded her circle, reaching out to more and more mothers. She introduced topics such as menstrual hygiene, the importance of proper disposal and the misconceptions surrounding periods. *“I was amazed by how eager the mothers were to learn,”* Shraddha said. *“Some admitted they had never spoken about menstruation with their daughters, nor had they received accurate information themselves.”* It dawned on Shraddha that her outreach was not only beneficial for the girls but crucial for mothers who were equally unaware, helpless and needed support to understand the topic for themselves and their daughters.

Shraddha realized that her outreach was not only beneficial for the girls but crucial for mothers who were equally unaware, helpless and needed support to understand the topic for themselves and for their daughters.

She uncovered alarming gaps in their knowledge. Many mothers still used various types of cloth unsuitable for menstrual hygiene. Shraddha pointed out the common ailments that could result from this, such as itching and boils, and highlighted the need for proper menstrual health practices.

As a result of such collective efforts, the role of the Accredited Social Health Activist workers in the community also expanded. They began visiting schools regularly to conduct awareness sessions with girls, building on the

foundation of knowledge and support that Shraddha had worked so hard to create.

Shraddha Tiwari’s work on menstrual hygiene set off a powerful wave of change that will have a cascading impact on schools, communities and individuals within her area of influence.

Not just a girls’ issue

Shraddha’s championship is significantly increasing parental involvement in discussions on menstrual health, particularly among fathers, brothers, uncles and grandfathers. In May 2024, Ms. Sangeeta Gupta organized a pivotal meeting with parents, during which she sought permission from male family members to distribute free pads at school, allowing fathers to hand them directly to their daughters. The

enthusiastic support for this initiative fundamentally transformed family dynamics surrounding menstruation. Ms. Gupta proudly noted, *"Now, girls no longer fear asking their fathers or brothers for menstrual products."*

Recent menstrual hygiene initiatives and the pad dispensation drive have enhanced parental involvement. Parents are now becoming proactive participants, engaging in discussions and endorsing the school's efforts.



Shraddha has felt the effects of this shift in her own life. *"I now see my father, uncles and their friends talking among themselves on the topic,"* she observed. Her father especially plays a supportive role, advising her to *"teach as if you are a mother caring for a daughter"*.

Through interactions in promoting her mission, Shraddha has blossomed into a confident young woman. *"Wherever I go, I receive so much respect. They call me 'ma'am' and see me as a teacher."* Her relatives have witnessed her being praised for her accomplishments. When she posts educational videos over WhatsApp, responses flood in, validating her

impact on the community. With each step she takes, Shraddha is empowering future generations to approach menstruation with understanding and respect, ensuring that no girl feels the burden of silence any longer.

Shraddha and her peers have become advocates for a new narrative surrounding menstruation – one that emphasizes knowledge, understanding and empowerment. Together with their mothers, they are actively erasing the stigma that once held them captive, paving the way for future generations to approach menstruation with confidence and pride.

Reflecting on the changes in her own life, Shraddha said, *"If you had asked me in eighth grade, I had no ambition and was unsure about my future. But now, I aspire to become a doctor or a teacher. I feel nothing is impossible for*

me. I no longer doubt my ability to take on any challenge. I believe I can achieve everything I set my mind on". Her transformation from a diffident girl to a confident advocate exemplifies the profound effects of education, mentorship and community support.

Shraddha's transformation from a diffident girl to a confident advocate exemplifies the profound effects of education, mentorship and community support.

Once a reticent teenager plagued with embarrassment about puberty, Shraddha has become a fearless champion of menstrual health, inspiring wide-ranging awareness, dialogue and transformation. Her case study is a testament to the power of youth-led advocacy, once a spark is lit.





*Shraddha stands as a beacon of change,
proudly advocating for menstrual health
and awareness.*

Case study 06

Wings of change

Sapna Evne

Sapna Evne's inspiring journey as a grassroots leader showcases the impactful changes in community perspectives and practices enabled by the sanitation programme, Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen. Hailing from an Adivasi community in Betul, Madhya Pradesh, Sapna had a passion for community development, which led to her emergence as a leader, championing sanitation and women's empowerment. Through specialized training programmes supported by UNICEF and the district administration, Sapna developed into a masterful community mobilizer. She provided a platform for women to discuss challenges, access government benefits and assert their independence. Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen's focus on female participation complemented Sapna's inclusive approach, fostering a supportive environment where women could defy stereotypes, gain respect within families and assume leadership roles. Her growth from a swachhata prerak to a swachhagrahi was marked by innovative community engagement strategies and strong administrative trust, culminating in an award from the Chief Minister of the state. Today, as an elected block member, Sapna continues to inspire, showing how initiatives like Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen reshape communities and futures.





The springboard for Sapna

Sitting in her block panchayat office of Chicholi, Sapna fondly remembers Independence Day, 15 August 2022. This was the day the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh recognized Sapna's significant work with Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen. *"There was a 1 km walk of pride in the village,"* her elder brother, Dilip Evne, recalled. *"She was all over the media. Headlines celebrated her achievements: 'Farmer's daughter awarded by Chief Minister!'; 'Swachhata showed the path to success'; 'An Adivasi girl makes them proud.' The entire village celebrated her success throughout the night!"*

In the heart of Betul, Madhya Pradesh, within the small tribal community of Hardu village, 34-year-old Sapna Evne stands as a pillar of unwavering resolve. Her work with Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen fortified her leadership skills and catalysed her ascent to higher levels of governance.

Before the launch of Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen in 2014–15, Sapna worked as a teacher in an adult literacy programme. Here, too, her energy and passion for community development stood out. Unlike others who limited themselves to their proscribed roles, she used her position as a teacher to connect to the district-level administrative machinery. This allowed her quick access to information about ongoing and upcoming schemes and facilitated her involvement in community development efforts.

In 2014, Sapna was selected to participate in a block-level training that focused on social and behaviour change communication and community-led approaches to sanitation. The training modules, “Community Approaches to Sanitation”, were developed by UNICEF for the Government and was rolled out across

the country by state/UT governments. These trainings equipped frontline workers with interpersonal communication and community mobilization skills. They also provided them with triggering tools which could be contextualized according to local conditions. Alongside *panchayat* heads and *gram rozgar sahayak*, Sapna was part of a specially selected group of frontline workers trained by the district administration as *swachhata preraks* – under the Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen.

Following this initial training, the block administration further shortlisted candidates from the same pool for master trainers training, and Sapna was selected for this prestigious opportunity. This programme equipped her with advanced skills to lead sanitation initiatives more effectively.

With the support and motivation of block-level officials, the master trainers

conducted village-level meetings, identifying natural leaders within the community who were then nominated as *swachhata preraks*. Demonstrating her initiative, Sapna sifted through the list of existing education coordinators in the block who had become inactive. She organized a meeting to reactivate this pool of trained human resources, enlisting them as *swachhata preraks* alongside active youth and local community leaders from the *gram panchayat*.

As the process unfolded, the Chicholi block administration successfully formed a team of 40 *swachhata preraks*, 70 per cent of whom were women. This was aligned with the state-level guidelines, which recognized that women’s participation was essential for driving the mission’s success and therefore emphasized the engagement of women *swachhata preraks*.

Kaushal Chand Shikhar, a fellow *swachhata prerak* who has been working with Sapna from the beginning of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, spoke of why it was important to have women as *swachhata preraks* during the initial groundbreaking period, “As males, we used to face problems in talking to women when we entered villages. We could not approach them, and even women hesitated to talk to us. Women *swachhata preraks* helped us reach women of the households.” Sapna, who was the lead in guiding community mobilization and triggering efforts, had a keen understanding of the social and cultural dynamics in the village. Being an incisive problem solver, she made the decision to facilitate these interactions by ensuring that each team was comprised of both male and women *swachhata preraks*. “Sapna always sent a team of two – one male and one female – for this reason!”

Emergence of a leader

Recognizing that she could better manage the programme by diversifying her efforts, Sapna strategically assigned *swachhata preraks* to her home village of Hardu. This allowed her to channel her focus on field management and coordination. With a clear vision, she formed teams and designated villages for each team to ensure accountability and progress. Each team was tasked with accomplishing a series of objectives outlined in their training, including community mobilization, participatory rural appraisal, morning follow-ups, afternoon *chaupals*, evening updates and night follow-ups.

Sapna’s organizational skills shone as she developed a detailed delegation plan that accounted for the distances between each *swachhata prerak*’s residence and their intervention villages. She conducted regular follow-ups with each team, addressing their questions and concerns, motivating them for the tasks ahead and providing updates on activity achievements to the block administration.

Having established a solid foundation through team building and effective organization, Sapna now faced the critical next phase of triggering. This stage was essential for mobilizing the community towards accepting sanitation practices and generating demand for toilet construction.

Sapna’s organizational skills shone as she developed a detailed delegation plan that accounted for the distances between each *swachhata prerak*’s residence and their intervention villages.

Working in an Adivasi area, Sapna leveraged her tribal identity to establish a strong connection with the community. She used the local Gondi language to converse with them. This created an instant community connection, and the community members recognized her as one of their own, facilitating trust and openness. This cultural connection enabled her to gain acceptance and

be welcomed into their homes, making them more receptive to her messages.

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Sapna used and spread several original and home-grown triggering ideas. The impact of Sapna's leadership did not go unnoticed by her peers. Birbal Rawat, who has been working with Sapna since 2017, praised her passion and leadership style, *"Her activist attitude and originality to find triggers and speak on the spot stirred people. We would hesitate to hold the toilet seat, but she was fearless! Her depth of explanation and connection with women was of a different level. We used to learn and replicate the same. She was like an unofficial master trainer."*

Sapna's approach emphasized collaboration and effective communication. Additionally, her coordination skills, diplomacy and "can do" attitude helped her make inroads in hard-to-break communities.

The strategic transition from team organization to community triggering to social negotiation marked a significant step in Sapna's journey as a leader.

Empowerment was a key theme of Sapna's approach as she navigated the complexities of community involvement in Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen implementation. After the triggering phase, aware of the challenge of attrition, she strategically selected 3–4 individuals, primarily women, to serve on the Village-Level Monitoring Committees, commonly known as *Nigrani Samitis*. Many women initially showed enthusiasm but faced various social, familial and personal hurdles that forced them to leave the campaign.

To counter this challenge, Sapna embraced an inclusive approach, ensuring that every woman had the

opportunity to participate. During meetings, when an uneducated woman demonstrated natural leadership abilities, she did not hesitate to welcome her into the team. This strategy helped set a positive example for others, demonstrating that formal education was not a barrier to leadership. As a result, many women with limited schooling felt empowered and motivated to join the initiative, realizing they could make a difference despite their lack of formal schooling. *"One success of a woman who joined the Nigrani Samiti made many women regret losing the opportunity,"* Sapna observed, highlighting the ripple effect.

As a result of Sapna's strategy, many women felt empowered and motivated to join the initiative, realizing they could make a difference despite their lack of formal schooling.

However, encouraging women's participation was fraught with sociocultural barriers and pre-conceived roles of women in the community psyche. She faced resistance from families who questioned why Sapna was taking their daughters/daughters-in-law without permission and demanded to know what benefits they would receive in return. Concerns about who would handle household chores if the women left home and participated in her campaign also acted as significant social barriers. Despite many women being ready to participate in *Nigrani Samitis*, their stereotypical role in the family often hindered their involvement.

Sapna adeptly navigated these hurdles by establishing trust and providing unwavering support to her female peers. *"I assured them that if they stepped outside their homes to support me, I would stand beside*

them against any sociocultural obstacles they faced,” she affirmed. This reassurance fostered a sense of solidarity, among women who began to feel that they had someone fighting for their rights.

As the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen progressed, village-level meetings became a regular and vital platform for women to discuss not only sanitation issues but also personal challenges. These gatherings quickly evolved into a supportive space where women could seek advice and build a network of solidarity. To further solidify this community, Sapna established a *mahila mandali* that met every 15 days at the block-level, promoting collective strength and awareness.

Village-level meetings became a regular and vital platform for women to discuss sanitation issues and personal challenges.

Sapna informs, “There were instances when initially some women had to face a lot of opposition from their families to even attend this meeting!” However, their understanding of government schemes expanded as they visited the block office and interacted with officials. They learned about their eligibility for various benefits and how to enrol in opportunities that could change their lives. Many of them even started resolving paperwork issues that had previously delayed fund releases. Sapna recalled, “Many times, they used to carry the missing IDs and paperwork in the next meeting to kick-start the release of stalled funds or to avail a new scheme.”

As these women navigated administrative challenges and began to secure financial benefits for their households, the dynamics within their families began to shift. Families started recognizing the value of women’s contributions, relying on them to handle paperwork and administrative tasks related to government schemes – a historically male-dominated domain. This transition enhanced the women’s mobility and confidence and increased their respect within their families, leading to deeper trust and



recognition. Sapna remarked, *"The same women who had been marginalized and abused emerged as achievers in the eyes of their families, and acceptance from their households began to grow."*

Through her concerted efforts to uplift others, Sapna created lasting change in the lives of many women. Suman Guhare, a peer and self-help group President, highlighted this impact, sharing how Sapna's support and encouragement bolstered her confidence to stand up to her in-laws when they threatened to send her back to her father's house for pursuing her participation in Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen activities. "I told my in-laws that I would go! In the process of triggering others, we women also realized that we should have the freedom to do things we like. After that, there were times when I even returned home as late as midnight," she said.

Through her concerted efforts to uplift others, Sapna created lasting change in the lives of many women.

Suman Guhare said that her husband recently bought a property in her name. This was a huge step and sets precedence in the realm of women's access to resources.

Throughout the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen implementation, Sapna benefited from the logistical support and administrative backing of district and block officials. They often provided her with police protection for night-time village meetings, allowing her to continue her work without fear. For Sapna, these officials were just a phone call away, ready to assist her with any urgent matters, regardless of the hour.

She extended the net of this protection to her female peers as she recognized that they, too, faced the same barriers as she did. To help mitigate the resistance from family members who were hesitant to allow their daughters and daughters-in-law to work in the field, Sapna created a WhatsApp group that included all women *swachhata preraks* and one family member of each participant, along with the district coordinator, block officials, CEO of the block panchayat, engineers, gram rozgar sahayak and panchayat members. Regular updates and photos of the women's activities were shared in the group, keeping their families informed about their whereabouts and efforts. The visibility and backing from officials validated the women's work and fostered trust, allowing them greater freedom to perform their duties. Through this initiative, Sapna cultivated an enabling environment that encouraged increased female participation.

Sapna created a WhatsApp group that included all women *swachhata preraks*, one family member of each participant, and the officials involved. In this way, families were always aware of the women's activities. This fostered trust and enabled female participation.

Manisha Ueke, a *gram rozgar sahayak* and childhood friend of Sapna, praised her leadership style, stating, *"She always put other people's needs first, even before her own. She would stay with us until the end of the day's work and never leave hurriedly or halfway."*

The administration trusted Sapna and gave her autonomy to exercise and experiment with her home-grown style of leadership and community mobilization. This level of administrative support was instrumental in helping Sapna navigate the challenges she

encountered and administer her strategies fearlessly. Her liaison with block officials strengthened her network of contacts and gave her power, authority and respect.

Building a legacy

Despite this support, Sapna recalled her initial experiences in the field and the challenges of introducing the concept of toilets to the tribal community, a notion previously unfamiliar to them. During the toilet construction phase, Sapna encountered another distinct set of challenges. The prevalent mindset among the community members was to receive government funds upfront, making it challenging to introduce the concept of post-construction incentives. Also, the region's poor economy posed genuine

financial challenges for households to make the seed investment in purchasing the materials for toilet construction. The lack of skilled masons in toilet construction technology was another impediment.



When the toilet construction began, Sapna initiated the work from her own house to instil trust in the community and show that funds are released into the individual's account after construction is complete. This helped abate the inhibition and fears around post-construction incentives as a new concept in government schemes.

To address the human resource gap in technically trained masons for toilet construction, the block administration arranged specialized trainings. Sapna facilitated the building of demonstration toilets in a few households, though she faced difficulties in dealing with masons as a women leader. *"Often, the masons or male construction workers fought with me to show their supremacy and assert that they knew more than I did! Initially, I used to cry! But the training gave me knowledge and confidence. Gradually, even the masons started trusting me and seeking my approval,"* she said.

The on-ground technical support provided by UNICEF helped in finding customized solutions to unique problems that emerged in different villages. Sapna spoke of the motivation and strength it gave her and the team, *"They were our support to go and work fearlessly. We knew they would deal with any problem."*

Sapna's position was elevated from *swachhata prerak* to *swachhagrahi*. Her performance-based incentives also increased to Rs. 3,000–4,000 per month. With her rigorous efforts and teamwork, Chicholi block was the first block in Betul district to be declared Open Defecation Free in 2017–18.

She was selected by the state to be a part of the *swachhagrahi* team that was sent to Bihar to participate in the 'Satyagraha se Swachhagrahi' Campaign from 3–10 April 2018. More than 10,000 *swachhagrahis* from different parts of the country converged

with 10,000 *swachhagrahis* from Bihar to trigger behaviour change across 38 districts of the state and build momentum for a *jan andolan*. This culminated in a mega-event where the Prime Minister addressed 20,000 *swachhagrahis* in Champaran district and recognized them for their contributions as the foot soldiers of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen.

Her personal struggles

In 2019, just six months after her marriage, Sapna's union disintegrated, largely due to her in-laws' disapproval of her professional life. However, Sapna chose to assert her identity and leave a marriage that disrespectfully overlooked her professional achievements and personal attributes. Her decision to step away was not easy; it took profound strength to defy societal expectations and walk away

from an emotionally taxing relationship.

Following her courageous decision, Sapna received immense support from her family – her parents, three brothers and eight sisters. This familial backing was pivotal to her recovery and determination to pursue her goals. Sapna's father, a staunch advocate for girls' education and women's empowerment, had always prioritized his daughters' education. *"My girls have always performed better than my boys. They are very educated,"* he proudly asserted. *"They have all set such good examples as teachers and in various respectable jobs."*

Growing up in an educated household, Sapna was surrounded by sisters who held respected positions in

teaching and salaried employment. The environment in her father's house encouraged collaborative decision-making and shared responsibilities, actively countering traditional gender roles and expectations.

Furthermore, Sapna was bolstered by a supportive community of colleagues and a team she had meticulously built and nurtured during Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen implementation.



She also cultivated a rich network of relationships with officers across various departments. For Sapna, being a *swachhagrahi* transcended mere job responsibilities; it was a profound passion and a means to bring transformative change in many lives – a vision and motto she lived by daily.

Neeta, the District Coordinator for Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen in Betul, spoke of the multifaceted impact of Sapna's journey on women in the region. *"Sapna's struggles with her marriage and how she overcame them to continue as a swachhagrahi linked Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen to broader gender issues, breaking the silence around abuse and violence in many forms. When women lift the veil of silence, they can uplift one another."*

Creating cascading change

Recognition further fuelled Sapna's zeal, and she emerged as an icon in her community.

The introduction of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II in 2019 expanded initiatives to include waste management alongside maintaining the Open Defecation Free status. For Sapna, this led to an expanded mandate. Narendra Chauhan, WASH Officer, UNICEF, Madhya Pradesh, commented, *"Sapna's contribution has increased multifold in the second phase of the programme as she is now also involved in advocating with elected representatives at the block level as well as planning and mobilizing the cadre of frontline workers to implement communication drives and campaigns."*

She helped the administration connect with and mobilize self-help group members for the operation and maintenance of the Solid and Liquid Waste Management systems developed in the Open Defecation Free Plus *gram panchayats*. No work was too much for Sapna. She redoubled her energies, working at multiple levels, planning and mobilizing the cadre of frontline workers to implement communication drives and campaigns. Sapna seized the opportunity offered by Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II to drive further change in her village. She immediately set her sights on transforming her *gram panchayat* into an Open Defecation Free Model Village. To enhance awareness, Sapna organized community meetings where informative films about waste segregation and its benefits were screened. She introduced solutions proposed under Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II for

greywater management, such as constructing leach pits and kitchen gardens. Clusters of 4–5 houses were strategically grouped, which not only improved sanitation but also fostered a cleaner environment.

Moreover, after the far-reaching impact of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase I, which made women's participation a culture, Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II brought about some evident changes. Women transitioned from passive recipients to active participants and leaders in the mission, reflecting a significant shift in mindset and practice. Mitthan Evne, Sapna's mother, said, *"Women now speak and participate without fear in Gram Sabhas."* With Sapna as their role model, several women *sarpanches* in Chicholi block, whose husbands used to officiate and behave as 'acting *sarpanch*', have now taken charge of governance and emerged as strong leaders.

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Another notable impact of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen has been the increasing recognition among men of the importance of sanitation infrastructure. Sapna saw a marked change in the number of applications from men requesting new toilets when constructing new homes or separating from joint family setups.

In her journey through both Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase I and Phase II, Sapna has emerged not only as an implementer of essential sanitation initiatives but also as a powerful example of how persistent and dedicated action can lead to profound changes within individuals and their communities.

Ascending to new heights

With the encouragement of her family, colleagues and the supportive community she built through her work, Sapna's ongoing association with the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen nurtured her into a formidable leader, expanding her horizons and enabling her to take on greater responsibilities in governance. In 2022, she confidently contested the elections for block member in the Chicholi block panchayat and emerged victorious.

Sapna's commitment to public service shows how women can rise above their circumstances, inspire pride and ignite change in their communities. By addressing the critical issue of sanitation, Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen has paved the way for broader social and economic changes, leaving a generational footprint on gender transformation processes within society.



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a brown shawl with a decorative blue and red border, is shown in profile, looking out over a misty, mountainous landscape. The background is a soft-focus view of green hills and a body of water under a hazy sky.

Sapna Evne stands proudly, showing her journey from an Adivasi community member to a respected leader under the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Case study 07

Rising with resilience

Archana Tripathy

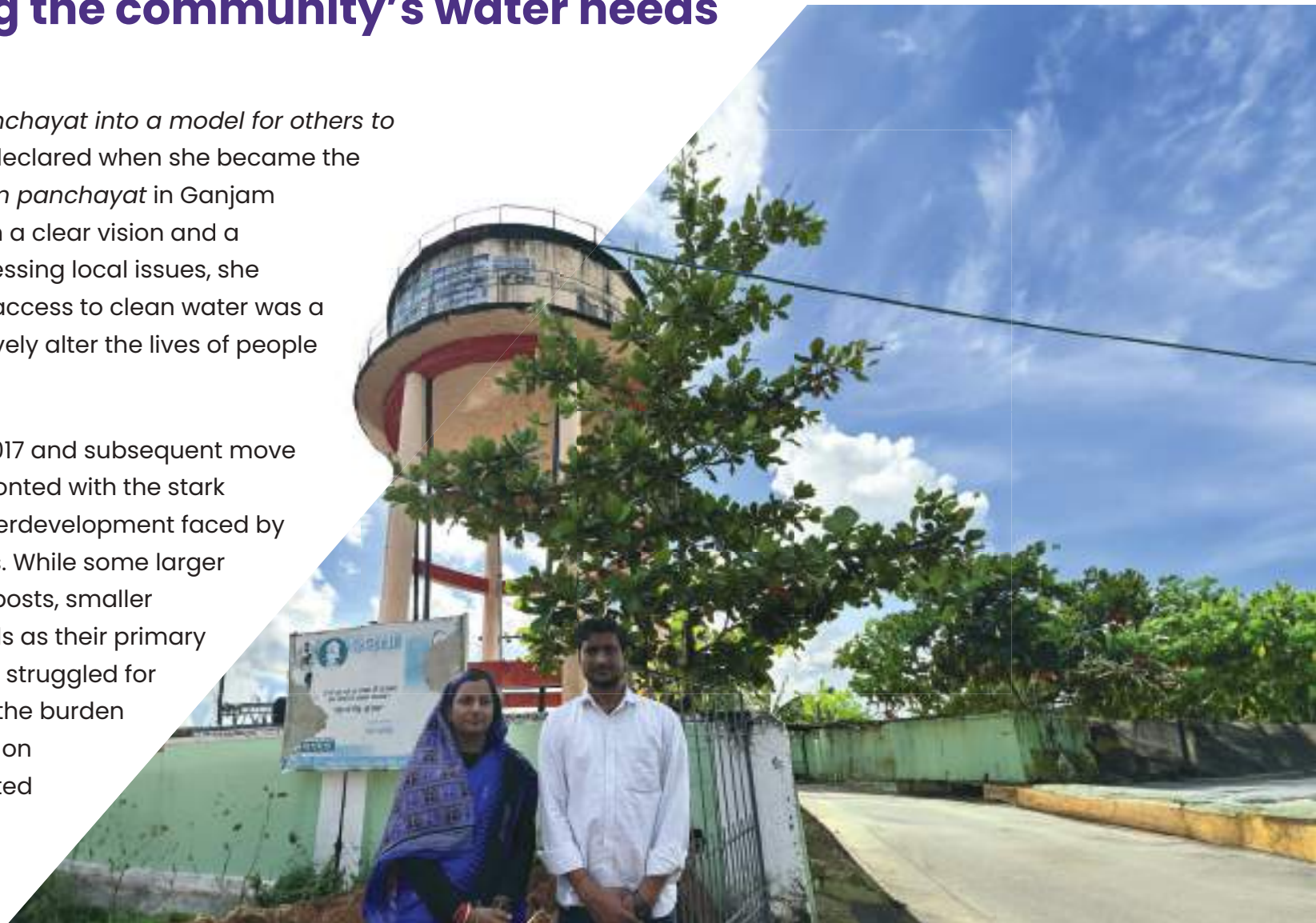
When Archana Tripathy stepped into her role as the Sarpanch of Kalimeghi gram panchayat in Ganjam, Odisha, she faced some daunting challenges: widespread water scarcity, entrenched gender inequities, and a community sceptical of women in leadership positions. Jal Jeevan Mission provided her with not just the tools to address these issues, but also a platform to emerge as a leader. The Jal Jeevan Mission training sessions equipped Archana with the technical knowledge and administrative confidence necessary to implement large-scale infrastructure projects in her panchayat. She learned to navigate government systems, engage with public officials and advocate for her community's needs effectively. Women, who bore the brunt of the water crisis, became pivotal to the programme's success under Archana's guidance. Her collaborative approach fostered inclusivity and trust, particularly among marginalized tribal groups. For the first time, these communities saw governance working for them. By October 2023, she had achieved 100 per cent household tap water connections across 22 villages – a feat that redefined the panchayat's identity. Beyond the technical achievements, Jal Jeevan Mission became a symbol of what could be accomplished through women-led leadership and community participation.



Understanding the community's water needs

"I want to transform my panchayat into a model for others to admire," Archana Tripathy declared when she became the *Sarpanch* of Kalimeghi *gram panchayat* in Ganjam district, Odisha, in 2022. With a clear vision and a commitment to address pressing local issues, she recognized that enhanced access to clean water was a fundamental need to positively alter the lives of people in her *gram panchayat*.

Following her marriage in 2017 and subsequent move to Kalimeghi, she was confronted with the stark realities of poverty and underdevelopment faced by the local tribal communities. While some larger revenue villages had standposts, smaller hamlets depended on ponds as their primary water source. Many families struggled for access to clean water, and the burden often fell disproportionately on women and girls, who devoted hours each day to fetching water from distant sources.



Magi Maharana, an elderly tribal woman who has seen water woes of women from her mother to herself and her daughters, highlighted the plight, *“We get water but do not have the right to use the water as we wish. First, the needs of everyone else in the house are met and then the woman gets what is left. I used to get 20 pots of water for 18 family members daily. My husband would bathe, eat and go to work. My share of water was limited to a few glasses of drinking water. I had to go to the pond to bathe every day. It was worst on menstruation days!”*

Ankita and Sai, two adolescent girls from Kalimeghi Jagalipadara High School, also spoke of their concerns, *“We skipped many school days when we got late in the queues to fetch water with our mothers.”*

Aadya, another student from the same school added, *“I have 10 members in*

my family. Often, we did not even have adequate water to drink, limiting ourselves to one or two glasses of water in a day! On days when food was cooked using pond water, we would often get stomach ache. Skin infections were also common from bathing in the pond.”

Motivated by the desire to create meaningful change, Archana entered the political arena to gain the tools necessary for transformative governance. Encouraged by her husband, she launched her campaign for *sarpanch*, focusing on the dire need for improved water access. She undertook extensive canvassing, personally visiting every village within the *panchayat*, listening closely to the concerns of community members, particularly regarding the impact of inadequate water supply on their daily lives and overall health.

Navigating the odds

Archana got the opportunity to attend a district-level training of *sarpanches*, organized by the State Department of Panchayati Raj, where various department heads provided insights on ongoing schemes that could benefit the *panchayats*. It was during this training that she learned about Jal Jeevan Mission, the programme that could help transform the water situation in Kalimeghi.

Inspired by the potential unveiled during her training, Archana resolved to leverage Jal Jeevan Mission to secure sustainable water solutions for her community. She also understood that implementing a scheme as ambitious as Jal Jeevan Mission would be both technically and socially

challenging, but she was committed to taking a decisive action with support from the state government.

Archana wasted no time in mobilizing resources and support for Jal Jeevan Mission. She initiated dialogues with the block development office, Public Health Engineering Department, the district collector and other relevant authorities, advocating for infrastructure development to support water access.

While she had the support of government officials, she had to face stereotypical attitudes of the community towards a woman sarpanch.

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sarpanch. Panchayat Executive Officer Sudam Pradhan shared his own initial apprehensions when Archana assumed office, “When she got elected, I was uncertain about how a young and inexperienced individual would navigate panchayat politics. In the initial weeks, I found myself consulting her husband, Bishwamitra, on key decisions. However, she quickly proved me wrong and has made me her biggest supporter.” Archana also reflected on her early days as sarpanch, recalling, “I felt unprepared. However the training sessions organized under Jal Jeevan Mission were pivotal in shaping my vision. They introduced the technical aspects of water infrastructure and the importance of community mobilization. This knowledge also helped in identifying key stakeholders and building alliances to address the water challenges”.

Archana faced many hurdles in reclaiming land for the creation of Jal Jeevan Mission infrastructure. The Public Health Engineering Department Junior Engineer assessed the village’s water needs and initiated a tendering process for constructing water tanks. However, the selected site in Kalimeghi, the largest village, was encroached upon by residents. Efforts to reclaim the land were met with significant resistance from the community, complicating the initiative. She said, “I knew I could not manage this part alone. I needed community support. I needed community backing so that social pressure could be built on individuals to leave the encroached land.”

Recognizing that water is a deeply personal and essential issue, especially for women, Archana mobilized the local women’s self-help group. She reached out to the self-help

group members, explaining the importance of the Jal Jeevan Mission project for the entire community. Together, they organized a village meeting, drawing in both men and women from the local community. After successfully resolving the land dispute for tank construction, Archana faced a new wave of resistance when the time came to lay the pipelines for water distribution. Although Jal Jeevan Mission aimed to bring water to every household, many residents resisted the pipeline work, unwilling to allow it to run through their properties. Compounding this resistance was a sense of complacency within the community; many residents had become accustomed to fetching water from distant sources and were reluctant to seek a better solution. This mindset made it even more challenging for Archana to break through the barriers of resistance.

From land disputes to inertia, bringing everyone on board for the laying of Jal Jeevan Mission pipelines involved skillfully navigating village dynamics.

Archana's work on the programme strengthened her ability to handle social dynamics. While resistance from villagers to land reclamation and pipeline installation was a significant challenge, Jal Jeevan Mission's emphasis on community involvement encouraged Archana to reach out to self-help groups and local leaders to foster trust and create consensus. This approach empowered her to mediate disputes effectively and rally the community around a shared vision.

To mobilize support and address the community's resistance, Archana engaged with the Master Bookkeeper



and Head of *Mission Shakti* – Rashmita Palai. In turn, the Master Bookkeeper urged all the self-help group presidents to communicate that the Jal Jeevan Mission programme commitment was not only to ensure tap connections at the household level but also to provide adequate quantity and good quality of water on time. This promise represented a new standard of convenience for the village. A domino effect of communication began, with each president passing on the message to their members. Self-help group members embarked on a door-to-door campaign to engage their neighbours in conversations about the benefits of Jal Jeevan Mission. This outreach addressed concerns and alleviated doubts surrounding the project. This network-based communication approach changed the entire dynamic of the pipeline project, particularly in a *panchayat* as large and socially complex as

Kalimeghi where diverse castes and communities held differing opinions. The self-help groups became Archana's bridge to every household, dismantling the resistance and building trust in her promise to improve lives through Jal Jeevan Mission.

Archana reflected, *"Working on the programme led to the development of my critical skills in conflict resolution and resource mobilization. It increased my ability to interact with diverse stakeholders, including government engineers, community leaders and tribal representatives, and convince them to work towards a shared goal."*

The unity and influence of the self-help group network proved invaluable, especially when it came to reaching the more remote and traditionally isolated tribal hamlets. These communities, accustomed to being overlooked and having limited access

to resources, had even higher coping mechanism and little motivation to seek changes. Self-help group teams reached out to these remote hamlets, explaining the project's benefits and encouraging them to participate. They emphasized that the Jal Jeevan Mission was especially for the benefit of women, who would no longer need to spend hours walking for water.

The self-help groups became Archana's bridge to every household, including those in the most remote hamlets.

The ward members also played an active role. Ward Member Reena Maharana stated, *"As a ward member, I identified which household has water and what their needs are. I ensured that the pipeline reaches every household of my ward. When people were out for*

work, I supervised the pipeline work in their house so that the work did not stop. Under Jal Jeevan Mission, for the first time, the work happened as per what the women of the house wanted. The women were asked about their needs for the first time.”

Simultaneously, the water quality management team was also trained by the state department in using field testing kits. The trained team conducted demonstrations that vividly highlighted the poor quality of water being consumed from sources such as ponds and unprotected wells. Through these demonstrations, they tested samples of the water collected from various local sources, revealing alarmingly high levels of contaminants and impurities. The visuals of these tests were eye-opening for many members in the community. For the first time, many residents began to grasp the concept of water quality and

its critical importance to their health and well-being. This newfound awareness became a powerful catalyst to galvanize community support for pipeline installation.

For the first time, residents began to grasp the concept of water quality and its critical importance to their health and well-being. This galvanized the community to support installation of the pipeline.

Archana, in partnership with the self-help groups, leveraged active community engagement to create strong momentum for the Jal Jeevan Mission work. This approach ensured that each community member had a voice in the decision-making process, making it truly administered by the community. At the same time, Archana, as the sarpanch, maintained constant

dialogue with the Public Health Engineering Department, which supported her in balancing the technical requirements and aspirations of the villagers.

Reflecting on the initiative, Rashmita, the Master Bookkeeper, stated, *“The water supply project was aligned to the needs of each household. Some wanted the pipeline in their backyard, while others preferred it in the front. This was not just an engineering exercise; it was a social initiative that respected and integrated the aspirations of each household.”*

A new dawn with “water for all”

On 22 August 2023, for the first time, water reached the households in the biggest village of Kalimeghi. There was euphoria in the village. This heightened

the anticipation among the communities of other villages. They, too, were eager to see the day when water would be available in their homes. By October 2023, 100 per cent tap water supply across the 22 villages of the *gram panchayat* was achieved.

What sets the water supply system in Kalimeghi *gram panchayat* apart is that out of the 22 village-level schemes, 19 are powered by solar energy, allowing them to operate 24/7 without the need for a pump operator. Only the three schemes serving the largest villages in the *gram panchayat* rely on electricity-based pump operations, for which a dedicated pump operator is required. This innovative approach in Kalimeghi highlights a commitment to sustainable and efficient water management.

This achievement also bridged the gap between tribal communities and the

governance system, fostering newfound trust in the *panchayat*'s commitment to serve all residents. Reena Maharana, a ward member, recalled, *"There was a wave of happiness. There was so much excitement!"* Villagers recognized Archana as the *sarpanch* who honoured her promises and understood their struggles, and their confidence in her deepened. Archana attributed her success to the support provided through the Jal Jeevan Mission implementation framework. *"So many women thanked me as I walked the lanes to supervise the pressure in functional household tap connections on the first day. I felt so proud. The self-help group members also felt proud of their role in their entire project,"* she added.

Rashmita acknowledged how Archana has developed her leadership skills and her role as a facilitator during this

period, *"She was the lynch-pin for all coordination and brought together all parties – engineers, panchayat members, ward members, community leaders, tribal leaders and women. Never before had work been done like this in the panchayat. Everyone was involved and respected. Archana has developed a unique quality to take everyone along."*

Post 2023, after household water supply was regularized, the three villages with pump operation had to ensure cost recovery with the levy of user charges, such as that of operation and maintenance. The Village Water and Sanitation Committee was set up as a democratically established community institution under Jal Jeevan Mission, providing a common platform to address community concerns. It facilitated discussions among leaders who could genuinely represent the needs, sentiments and

consent of the larger community while also acting as delegates for informed decision-making. The Committee became a training ground for Archana to practise inclusive governance. By involving diverse groups – women, tribal representatives, frontline workers and youth – in decisions like user charges, she demonstrated the value of collective ownership.

Through multiple meetings where the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members discussed the rationale behind implementing user charges for water supply, Archana gave them the opportunity to discuss and choose what would best align with their community's priorities. The Village Water and Sanitation Committee members reached a consensus and agreed to implement a fee of Rs 100 per month per household for operations and maintenance of the water supply system in the two

villages. This collaborative approach not only ensured a sustainable model for financing but also instilled a sense of ownership and accountability among community members, reinforcing trust in the collective management of their water resources.

Transforming the social fabric

Implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission did not just enhance Archana's capabilities; it reshaped her *panchayat's* social dynamics. The



programme brought marginalized groups, particularly women, into decision-making processes. By mobilizing self-help groups, Archana ensured that women had a voice in governance, creating a ripple effect of empowerment across the community. Women-led self-help groups became the backbone of Jal Jeevan Mission's implementation. Their involvement in mobilizing households, resolving disputes and spreading awareness elevated their status within the community.

Panchayat meetings have experienced a notable increase in attendance, with women's participation reaching new heights. Residents are now more engaged and invested in the proceedings. "Earlier, people would come for a while and leave midway," one villager noted, "but now they stay and are eager to hear what Archana has to say." Bhaskar Padhi, a village elder and pump operator since 2009

said, "Never before did I see women in *Gram Sabhas*. Now they are attending and speaking."

Archana's success inspired young girls to take up leadership roles. Pratibha, a grade IX student from Kalimeghi Jagalipadara High School said, "When I see Archana didi as *sarpanch*, I feel confident that I can also become a district collector one day."

Archana's approach of empowering ward members has enabled them to address issues directly, fostering a collaborative and open environment. Ward members act as close connectors between the community and leadership, which helps in quickly identifying and resolving issues. This reach deepens governance, making it more immediate and relevant, as decisions and solutions now reflect the community's real-time needs and insights. Furthermore, ward members feel valued and trusted, which helps

them make more proactive decisions, ultimately boosting public trust in local governance.

True to the promise made during her campaign, Archana engaged with the Rural Development Department to advocate for road connectivity to the tribal hamlets that had been left out of development plans. She is focusing on accelerating the sanction of houses under *Indira Awas Yojana*.

Archana has been able to achieve a lot in a mere two years as *sarpanch*. She genuinely wants to resolve issues, find solutions and work for the betterment of the people in her *panchayat*.

Archana reflected on her remarkable personal transformation since becoming *sarpanch*: "Earlier, people just knew me as Bishwamitra's wife or by my father's name. Now, they call me the Kalimeghi *Sarpanch*. I've created an identity of my own, and

people know and respect me for who I am.”

Her husband, Bishwamitra, remarked: “The Archana I knew in 2017 was shy and reserved. In the early days of her tenure, she was hesitant to speak on stage so I would write her speeches. But after one or two speeches, I saw her confidently speaking on her own, delivering impactful messages without relying on any written words. Archana, today, is bold, articulate and inspiring. Jal Jeevan Mission gave her the platform to realize her potential.”

Through her journey, Archana has not only transformed on a personal level but also set a new standard in her professional life. She has emerged as a powerful role model within her community. Her endeavours in Jal Jeevan Mission implementation have strongly illustrated that community participation and collaborative efforts in water, sanitation and hygiene service delivery can inspire collective change.





*Archana Tripathy gets recognized
for leading Kalimeghi Panchayat
to 100% tap water coverage
through the Jal Jeevan Mission.*

Case study 08

Transforming traditions

Niharika Verma

Breaking societal norms that often relegate women leaders to symbolic roles, Niharika established herself as an empowered, proactive leader. Her leadership journey was catalysed by Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II, which equipped her with technical knowledge and governance skills, enabling her to address long-standing issues such as sanitation and waste management in her village. Focusing on Solid and Liquid Waste Management, Niharika turned systemic challenges into opportunities for growth, transforming Basai Mohammadpur into an Open Defecation Free Plus Model Village in a short period of three years. Through inclusive strategies, she engaged directly with women, breaking taboos and fostering open communication. Women, once silent, now view her as an accessible and relatable role model, reinforcing the belief that women's leadership can bring tangible change. Niharika's journey demonstrates how Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen enabled her to navigate societal barriers, implement innovative solutions like waste-to-income initiatives, and empower women to envision broader roles for themselves. Her tenure has redefined women's leadership, leaving a lasting impact on the social fabric of her community.



Breaking the mould

Niharika Verma, a 34-year-old teacher, achieved a resounding victory in her very first election, becoming the *Gram Pradhan* of Basai Mohammadpur *gram panchayat* in Firozabad district, Uttar Pradesh. In a political landscape where the 50 per cent reservation for women in *panchayat* leadership often resulted in their husbands assuming de facto control – earning them the label “*sarpanchpati*” – Niharika stood out as a true leader. She defied this norm, taking charge and breaking the silence that often surrounds women in governance. Her decisive triumph over well-established, powerful and resourceful male contenders marked a historic moment for the village. The entire community, particularly the women, celebrated her victory with a jubilant mile-long procession and widespread festivities, making it a triumph to remember.

On the day of her oath, Niharika stood out as the only elected women *pradhan* present in the block *panchayat* office. Her presence sparked astonishment among her male counterparts, while also garnering admiration from the administration. Dhanraj Kumar, Additional District *Panchayati Raj* Officer said, “*People here think, ‘let the woman contest and then the husband is the pradhan!’ But Niharika was different. She is one woman pradhan in our district who takes charge and leads from the front.*”

The previous *pradhan* of Basai Mohammadpur was also a woman. However, it was common for family dynamics to influence leadership styles, and her husband often took the lead in *panchayat* governance. This

tradition of collaborative leadership was so deeply rooted that many villagers anticipated that Niharika’s husband, Ramdas, would step into a prominent role following her election. Niharika recounted her own experience on the matter: “*Initially, village men and other community members would contact my husband, Ramdas ji, for panchayat-related work. They would bypass me, assuming that, despite my official position, he would lead as the sarpanchpati.*” However, Ramdas consistently and politely redirected these calls, advising, “*Please contact Niharika; she will assist you.*” Over time, as people’s concerns were resolved, they began to place their trust in her capabilities as a leader. In return, she reinforced this trust with effective governance.

Equipping for change

Pradhan Niharika's term coincided with the launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II in the district, providing her with a unique opportunity to hone her leadership skills and introduce people-centred and inclusive governance approaches.

Basai Mohammadpur, a settlement situated beside the Yamuna River on an undulating terrain, had been grappling with severe issues related to drainage, waterlogging and waste management for years. Rakesh, a ward member recounted the struggles of the village, *"Waterlogging was to the extent that the water came till our chest. The walls still have those water marks"*.

Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II, with its focus on Solid and Liquid Waste Management, offered a structured programmatic approach to address these pressing challenges. The flagship programme's goal aligned perfectly with the urgent needs of the community, providing



Niharika the chance to learn the art of leveraging programmatic support of ongoing government schemes effectively for her community. Orientation from district and block officials on the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II initiatives helped her gain technical know-how and information about key support contacts to facilitate her plans. Regular interactions with the District *Panchayat Raj* Officer provided information on funds allocated to *panchayats* for Solid and Liquid Waste Management, and the various components covered by the funding, including waste segregation, building a Resource Recovery Centre vermicomposting, drainage improvements, etc. Advice from the District *Panchayat Raj* Officer on aligning Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen funds with the 15th Finance Commission funds paved the way for her initiatives to materialize.

Niharika maintained extensive notes from her campaigning days, capturing the various problem areas and potential repairs needed in the village. She recalled, *“I know the village and its people like the back of my hand. I had even noted each household’s daily preferences, work habits, key challenges, and their relationship networks within the community...it was very detailed.”* This comprehensive data proved invaluable when she began working on Solid and Liquid Waste Management, helping her to prioritize the issues that needed immediate attention. Foresightedness and meticulous preparation allowed her to execute projects with precision and efficacy, building her confidence with every step.

To assist the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II, the Uttar Pradesh Panchayati Raj Department organized periodic

district-level training sessions for Panchayati Raj Institution functionaries. The objective was to build capacities of *gram pradhans*, *panchayat* secretaries, *panchayat sahayaks* and *safai karamcharis*. The opportunity to participate in these trainings provided Niharika with a vast learning ground. The sessions combined theoretical teachings on village development plans and Solid and Liquid Waste Management with on-field demonstrations, introducing her to key techniques and innovations that showed how waste could be a source of revenue generation.

The state-level innovations in programme implementation further supported the *panchayats* by introducing an initiative to recruit consulting engineers in each district. Unlike junior engineers, typically assigned to block-level developmental works under the block development



officer, these consulting engineers were dedicated techno-engineering personnel for *gram panchayat*-related infrastructure projects working closely with the *pradhan*. Niharika collaborated with Sachin Sharma, consulting engineer, to plan and develop a comprehensive village sanitation plan.

Together, they undertook transect walks to identify areas prone to

waterlogging, mapped dump yards with improperly discarded waste, and determined locations where soak pits were required. Further, to ensure inclusivity and relevance to local needs, Niharika conducted meetings with ward members, ration dealers and village elders to discuss locality-level Solid and Liquid Waste Management issues. Her endeavour was focused on creating an engaging

and contextualized approach to sanitation that addressed the community's specific requirements.

The state government's initiative to increase the credit limits for Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II funds to *panchayats* placed Niharika as the key decision maker to take progressive steps for solid waste segregation and management, grey water management, vermicomposting and public sanitary infrastructure.

Facing challenges at every step

Given the previous experiences in *panchayat*-level governance and lack of initiative and intent, the villagers were not forthcoming to endorse Niharika's Solid and Liquid Waste Management plans or the construction of the Resource Recovery Centre. They accused Niharika of embezzlement

and using substandard materials, and raised alarms about women leadership on such technical issues. However, she tackled these allegations with strength and determination. To build trust within the community she requested intervention from district administration to conduct a technical assessment and audit by a senior officer. The Resource Recovery Centre construction was duly approved by the senior officer, and the construction commenced after all doubts of the community were dispelled.

Upon completion of the Resource Recovery Centre, e-rickshaws were purchased for waste collection and initiating door-to-door

collection of household waste. However, there was neither enthusiasm nor participation from the community. To increase participation and ownership, Niharika started organizing ward-level meetings and engaging directly with women to explain the benefits of waste segregation and



management systems. Panchayat Secretary Hemlata, recalling the change in the attitude of villagers, shared, *"I also see four other panchayats, but it is here that a vehicle goes to each house singing the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen sanitation song in the morning. Villagers now take pride that their village is turning into a city-like environment and boast to their relatives in other villages about the improvements."*

To sustain the culture of waste segregation in the village, a *pathshala* was initiated in the Resource Recovery Centre compound itself where villagers assembled and discussed about waste segregation, collection, disposal, vermicompost and its use as bio-fertilizer, and other benefits of Solid and Liquid Waste Management including income generation for households through resource recovery.

In March 2023, five cemented dustbins, called *kachra patra* for dry and wet waste were made at hotspots across the *gram panchayat* with the help of Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen funds. Additionally, plastic banks were installed in different wards to facilitate plastic waste management. By March 2024, the *gram panchayat* earned Rs. 5,600 from selling recycled materials like metal, glass and paper, in addition to Rs. 3,000 collected as user charges from households for waste collection services. This marked the beginning of a promising trend towards waste-to-income initiatives.

Implementing Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II provided Niharika the platform to strengthen her administrative skills and initiate innovations. As an administrator, she was able to aggregate various government schemes and funnel funds effectively towards a common vision ensuring that resources were

utilized efficiently and cohesively to achieve the desired outcomes.

Implementing Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen Phase II provided Niharika the platform to strengthen her administrative skills and initiate innovations.

Careful always to study each initiative, she often conducted small pilot tests of the technologies. When Niharika first learnt about the vermicomposting technology during a government training at Bulandshahar, she experimented with it at her farm. This helped her learn, fixed technical glitches and enabled her to confidently share it with the community thereafter. She was proud of her little achievements and rejoiced in her growth. She excitedly reminisced about her first batch of compost, *“It was like tea leaves and no stench! We then used this compost on a vegetable*



patch at our own farm and the results were noteworthy. The yield was higher, and the quality, colour and taste of vegetables was much enhanced.” After proving these results, she began working on community-level vermicomposting initiatives.

To enhance vermicomposting efforts and have continuous supply of raw material, Niharika took an initiative to establish a *gaushala* under the state-funded *Nirashrit Asthai Gaushala Scheme*. This facility acted as a rehabilitation centre for medically unfit and stray cattle, ensuring their care and allowing their dung to be utilized for vermicomposting. The *panchayat* received Rs. 50 per day per animal for maintenance under the scheme.

Visible changes are now taking place. Farmers are increasingly adopting and experimenting with vermicomposting techniques, and there is a rising acceptance for shifting to organic farming. The local availability of vermicompost at competitive rates has facilitated this shift, reinforcing sustainable agricultural development. Niharika noted, *"In one year, nearly 15 farmers have shifted to organic compost. Initially we produced 3.5 kg, but this year we extracted 3 quintal of*

compost. I feel sufficiently informed about vermicomposting now and can train people!" In March 2023, the Basai Mohammadpur *gram panchayat* received Rs. 26,000 in its augmented own source revenue account, of which Rs. 18,000 was from selling vermicompost. Rajeev Kumar Verma, block coordinator says, *"Niharika ji is famous in our area for providing the worms for vermicomposting in our block"*.

Niharika's journey took another significant step forward as she focused on addressing the urgent issues of waterlogging and grey water management in Basai Mohammadpur. Sachin Sharma, the consulting engineer, describes the onset of drainage initiatives as a bold experiment in the village, *"We were just starting Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II and this was a village where many experiments happened. This panchayat was our lab"*.

To support innovations in Basai Mohammadpur, UNICEF conducted a demonstration training by master trainers, showcasing how to build essential sanitation structures such as soak pits, silt catchers, filter chambers and vermicomposting pits. About 2,000 participants from five districts were introduced to Solid and Liquid Waste Management initiatives through 32 training batches. This exposure and the opportunity to host such an event significantly boosted Niharika's confidence and enhanced her credibility as a leader dedicated to improving Solid and Liquid Waste Management in her village.

Subsequently the existing drainage network was retrofitted, repaired and is now in use. The drains were covered with grills to enable easier cleaning. Silt catchers were made at pre-selected locations. The drain network was streamlined based on slopes so that grey water could converge at the filter

chamber for final release into the pond, which ultimately connects with Yamuna River. Ajay, the e-rickshaw driver noted, *“Earlier, one could not drive in the bylanes as there was so much open dumping of waste, liquid waste, potholes and waterlogging. Now I go every morning and evening conveniently”*.

Taking pride in her contributions, Niharika stated, *“Now the District Panchayat Resource Center for Firozabad district uses my panchayat for demonstration during trainings. The people in the district are learning from my gram panchayat.”*

Niharika’s relentless efforts were recognized, and she was awarded the *Ganga Samman*, celebrating her dedication to maintaining the cleanliness of the Ganga River in December 2023. This award was organized by the State Mission for Clean Ganga, Uttar Pradesh at the UP

Jal Nigam Headquarters, appreciating Niharika’s noteworthy steps to prevent dumping of waste, discarded idols and other *puja*-related materials into the river.

The funding and physical support from Swachh Bharat Mission–Grameen, along with the ongoing guidance from UNICEF, played a crucial role in establishing her village as an Open Defecation Free Plus Model Village. This assistance significantly contributed to Niharika’s growth as a confident leader. Ultimately, it fostered a synergy between her leadership, the community’s needs, and implementation of government programmes, creating an enabling environment for her to excel in her new

role. In just three years of her tenure (from 2020), she successfully transformed her *gram panchayat* into an *Adarsh Gram Panchayat*.

An evolving social fabric

Niharika’s leadership has fostered a direct line of communication between women and the *pradhan*. Often, women call and speak with her directly – something that has never happened with previous *pradhans*. Manju Devi, a *safai karamchari* says, *“When she*



became pradhan, village women felt that they now have the power to speak. Otherwise, they remained silent, often staying behind a veil. They previously never spoke of their issues to any pradhan". Niharika's engagement with women has created a protective net where they support each other and succeed together.

Continuing her commitment to overall village welfare, Niharika is playing a proactive and multi-dimensional role in promoting the welfare of girl child and adolescent girls in her community. She has helped streamline missing paperwork to ensure girls' education. There were many instances where girls did not have their identification cards or birth certificates, preventing them from attending school. Niharika's leadership ensured that this documentation was completed, allowing these girls to enrol in school. She has worked to improve school

sanitation facilities, recognizing their critical impact on girls' enrolment and retention. Separate toilets for boys and girls have been constructed in schools.

Niharika has driven menstrual hygiene management initiatives in her village, addressing a critical but often neglected and silenced aspects of women's health. She recalled a time when taboos related to menstruation were so strong that girls and women were not allowed to bathe for three days during their periods. Niharika initiated a comprehensive campaign focusing on breaking the silence and myths around menstruation in the hopes for a better tomorrow.

Deepika Tomar, a teacher at the Government Primary School since 2015, vouched that girls' enrolment has increased in 2023–24. She said, *"Niharika is a role model – an example of an empowered woman who has*

emerged as a leader and proven what women can achieve. Under her leadership, the panchayat has focused on school-level improvements and ensured efficient usage of existing funds for the school."

She is now an aspirational role model for other women in the community. Women now believe in the importance of education. Men in the household also see value in educating their daughters. She also sees a gradual reflection of change in her own daughters with her own empowerment. She sees their confidence growing as they do not shy away from speaking their minds or putting forth their opinions on various matters. She laughingly recalled, *"My elder daughter wants to join politics. She says now that mummy, you have shown the way, I can also become a political leader! My younger daughter aspires to do a government job"*.

Interestingly, Pradhan Niharika has changed the traditional approach to wedding gifts. Previous Pradhans gave money to the bride's father, but Niharika visits the family and asks the bride what she wants. In several instances, brides have requested practical items like sewing machines for economic opportunities.

Community apprehensions have been replaced with pride, trust, support and cooperation as Niharika now commands immense respect. A proud Ramdas said, *"Niharika, with her work, has commanded immense respect in the community"*.

A partnership of dreams

Born into a family that values education, Niharika was a bright student with aspirations of a successful future. However, her path changed

course when her father, a dairy farmer, faced a sudden decline in health. He sought to secure a good match for his daughter, one who would respect her educational ambitions. Niharika was married to Ramdas and joined a large joint family, introducing her to the weight of family responsibilities and societal expectations.

Upon arrival, Niharika encountered an economic reality starkly different from the prosperous household to which she belonged. Faced with her in-laws' dire financial struggles, she grappled with daily challenges, such as limited access to sufficient food and basic needs. Yet, Ramdas, her husband, says, *"She never once complained about her situation or viewed these hardships as her bad luck"*. Instead, she adjusted with maturity and her resourcefulness shone brightly as she quietly sought creative ways to address her family's needs. Niharika took it upon herself to make the most

of their resources, transforming scarcity into opportunities. Her innovative solutions, like purchasing a cow for milk and growing vegetables in-house, helped optimize the family's limited resources, earning her respect, appreciation and acceptance as a valuable member of the family.

Despite their challenging circumstances, Niharika and Ramdas shared a mutual commitment to education. In 2018, Niharika successfully completed her Bachelor's in Education (B.Ed.) and secured a teaching position in Bharaich, far away from her village. She also cleared other exams (such as the Teacher Eligibility Test), which was another feather in her cap.

Ramdas and Niharika were active members of the community and deeply invested in social issues. With both of them being teachers, people often looked up to them as role models and the community had immense

respect for them. Village-level *chaupals* or informal meetings often took place under a tree at their house, making it a hub for community discussions. Niharika observed and learnt how the village community thought and the common concerns that perturbed them. As the *panchayat* election approached in 2020, village elders often suggested that someone like Ramdas should lead them and stand in the next elections. When the time came for nominations, Ramdas declined and proposed Niharika's name. With strong backing from both the community and her family, Niharika submitted her nomination for the *panchayat* elections. Ramdas said, *"I want her to support me equally like the two additional wheels in a cart. I want my life with her to be like a strong carriage where we can share burdens and take along many people with us"*.

Niharika's journey is filled with such instances of marital collaboration

where they both helped each other grow strong together.

Transforming communities

Building on the foundations established through her initiatives in sanitation, Niharika continues to expand her impact by addressing

multiple facets of community welfare, including health, education, livelihoods and social empowerment.

Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen opened a door of opportunity as the first stage of Niharika's growth as a leader. The ripple effect of this leadership has spread across several areas of development multi-sectorally, showcasing the power of women in leadership roles.



Under her guidance, the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen resulted in the successful construction of a Resource Recovery Centre, complete with eight vermicomposting pits, which enabled the generation of own source revenue through compost sales. Additionally, grey water management systems were installed, effectively resolving the severe waterlogging issues that plagued the village.

Beyond these core infrastructural developments, Niharika oversaw the creation of 70 soak pits, installation of community dustbins and establishment of plastic waste banks to promote recycling. She also facilitated the installation of improved drainage systems along the village roads and undertook school and *anganwadi* sanitation facility improvements.

Furthermore, rainwater harvesting is emerging as a new initiative. The

Panchayat Bhawan now has the infrastructure to support it, reflecting a forward-thinking approach to water resource management.

In 2022, when Niharika assumed the role of the *pradhan*, she found that most self-help groups were dormant. Undeterred, she organized a meeting with block officials who offered a crucial incentive: a seed grant of Rs. 15,000 to rejuvenate these groups. The officials explained that this initial funding could be increased if the self-help groups engaged in economic activities. Inspired by this opportunity, the women reinvigorated their self-help groups, resumed regular savings and began actively participating in community-led economic initiatives.

Aligned with the revitalization of self-help groups, another complementary project undertaken by Niharika was the revival of the community sanitary complex through the involvement of self-help

groups. Although Basai Mohammadpur once featured a community sanitary complex, it had fallen into disrepair due to lack of maintenance. Recognizing the importance of this resource, Niharika transferred its management to the self-help groups, allocating Rs. 9,000 per month from the 15th Finance Commission funds of the *gram panchayat* to support their efforts – Rs. 3,000 were designated for operational costs and Rs. 6,000 were earmarked for the salary of a *safai karamchari*.

While challenges continue, Niharika's leadership showcases how the *panchayat*, as an institutional body and water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes like Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, can create opportunities for women to engage in development work – empowering them to take ownership of community resources while generating opportunities and an inclusive environment in overall governance.



Niharika plays an active role in transforming Basai Mohammadpur into an ODF Plus Model Village through SBM-G Phase II.

Case study 09

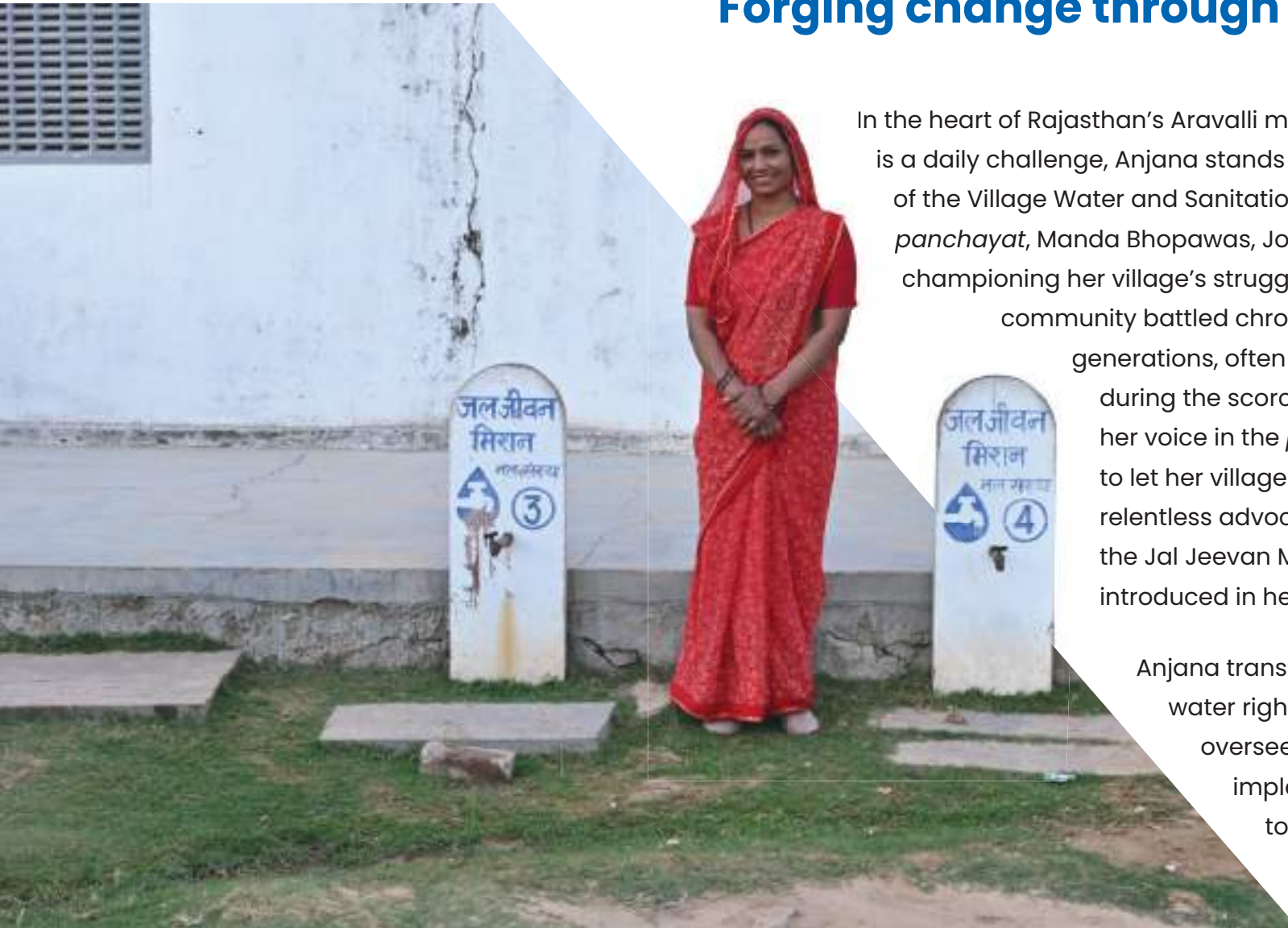
Leader to mentor

Anjana Prajapati

Anjana, a member and leader in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee of Manda Bhopawas gram panchayat in Rajasthan, played a pivotal role in tackling chronic water scarcity and sanitation challenges in her village. She mobilized the community, especially women, by providing them with a platform to voice their concerns and suggest solutions tailored to their needs. Supported by water, sanitation and hygiene programmes like Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen, which created an enabling environment for inclusive community development, Anjana led efforts using participatory governance and capacity-building initiatives to bring about change. These achievements resolved immediate challenges of water and sanitation and initiated a significant shift in gender roles within the community. Traditionally excluded from governance, women now lead critical initiatives, manage financial and administrative tasks, and actively participate in public decision-making. This has fostered greater respect for women's leadership, increased political participation and inspired others to challenge societal norms, setting in motion a broader cultural shift towards gender equity and inclusion.



Forging change through access to water



In the heart of Rajasthan's Aravalli mountains where water scarcity is a daily challenge, Anjana stands out as a committed member of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee in *gram panchayat*, Manda Bhopawas, Jotwara block, Jaipur district, championing her village's struggle for access to water. Her community battled chronic water shortages for

generations, often leaving families desperate during the scorching summers. Anjana raised her voice in the *panchayat* meetings, refusing to let her village's plight go unnoticed. Her relentless advocacy eventually bore fruit when the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme was introduced in her village.

Anjana transitioned from an advocate for water rights to a decision maker, overseeing the scheme's implementation, which enabled her to bring meaningful change to her community through

dramatic improvement in her community's water supply situation. Anjana recalled the joy and excitement in the eyes of the women on the day when water finally flowed into their homes. *"Women were elated! It was like a festival day,"* she said.

With her unwavering commitment to the water, sanitation and hygiene programme, Anjana earned recognition, leading to her promotion to a Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act Mate⁵ in 2021. In this role, she supervises a team of 20 to 40 women workers across various worksites, earning a monthly income of approximately Rs. 7,000. This position gave her financial independence and allowed her to connect with some of the most marginalized women in her community, highlighting their struggles and needs.

Anjana's multifaceted roles

Married early, Anjana has been supporting her husband and contributing to the family's financial stability despite not holding any formal title for her efforts. She skilfully juggles between roles and responsibilities, managing her household and children while being an active member of the self-help group's village-level organization since 2018. Anjana narrated the social scenario regarding women in 2018 when she started the village-level organization, *"The self-help group meetings were many women's first and only means of getting out of the house and socializing. But even for this, they faced a lot of resistance from their families. At times, there were family conflicts because they attended these meetings"*.

Before Jal Jeevan Mission was introduced in her village, Anjana and the other women in the village faced the daunting challenge of inadequate availability of water almost every day of every year. Raju Devi, Anjana's close friend and ally in her fight for water, recounted the days before Jal Jeevan Mission. *"The whole day was spent in somehow arranging for water for the entire household,"* she said. Physical tiredness and mental stress were pervasive.

The village relied on two community water tanks, which were usurped and controlled by wealthy families who were benefiting at the expense of others. Additionally, only a few hand pumps were available, and farm-based tube wells gradually shut down due to unpaid electricity charges, leaving women to scrounge for water.

⁵ A Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act Mate is a frontline supervisor Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act programme. Mates are considered semi-skilled workers due to the specialized nature of their role.

Anjana recalled the daily humiliation of navigating this challenging reality. The people with access to water looked to their own convenience while allocating timings at which the women could fetch water, often denying them access altogether. Anjana reflected on the tense dynamics caused by this situation. She said, *“There was a fear of approaching their households to ask*

for water. We walked hesitantly to their doorsteps. Whenever possible, we recycled water for multiple uses. For example, wastewater from laundry was utilized for flushing toilets.”

Water scarcity severely stretched the fabric of society. Community fights for water were common, and even at the household level, women fought among

themselves to prioritize the needs of their immediate family within the larger joint family. Community, familial and personal conflict caused strains and added to the emotional stress that women, the custodians of water provision for their families, felt. Often, children were ignored, and school attendance was side-lined as mothers were busy fighting for water, especially during morning hours. On top of it, the use of toilets was limited due to lack of water, which was an added physical issue for women.

Often, children were ignored, and school attendance was side-lined as mothers were busy fighting for water.

As a self-help group member, Anjana had been in touch with several women in the village and had developed a wide support network of peers. When



they started the self-help group village-level organization in 2018, they had nowhere to hold their meetings. So they used the only available space, the *Panchayat Bhawan*, as their venue. Due to this advantageous location, they also started meeting the *sarpanch* and would speak to him regularly about their water woes, requesting his intervention for a resolution. Anjana said the women were so desperate that they even went to his political rallies to seek his attention.

During the sweltering summer months, the *panchayat* occasionally arranged for water tankers, but these deliveries were infrequent and unreliable. This inadequate response only deepened the frustration of the women in the community, who were already burdened by the daily grind of searching for water.

In 2019, a particularly dire situation unfolded when water did not flow into

the village for 10 consecutive days. With each passing day of the water shortage, their desperation grew, compounded by the physical stress and mental trauma of searching for water and running their households in difficult circumstances. The struggle was a test of endurance and dignity as they faced the sting of condescension from those with more resources. They frequently returned home with empty vessels, their hopes dashed and their spirits battered.

Anjana vividly recalled the charged atmosphere during this time: *“The air was thick with tension as women united against the long-standing neglect. Their determination to be heard marked a pivotal moment in the fight for access to water.”* Jagdish Prasad, the Village Development Officer from *Panchayati Raj* Department, said, *“Anjana was the first one to come to the gram panchayat to raise the concern. She led and 10–15*

women followed her. She also told the women that they should learn to fight for themselves!”

The journey of change

Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen guidelines emphasize the importance of community participation and ownership of the assets created, making the formation and activation of Village Water and Sanitation Committees an essential component of these programmes. These guidelines also stipulate that at least 50 per cent of Village Water and Sanitation Committee members must be women, ensuring that women’s voices play a crucial role in the decision-making processes of water, sanitation and hygiene-related issues. In alignment with these programme guidelines, the Panchayati Raj Department issued a

government order in May 2020 mandating the formation of Village Water and Sanitation Committees. Establishing and activating this critical community-level institution marked a significant milestone, initiating a participative process for planning, monitoring and managing water, sanitation and hygiene service delivery in the community.

Neighbourhood meetings were organized specifically for women so that they could speak freely.

In early 2020, a convergent approach to water, sanitation and hygiene was advocated by UNICEF for implementing both Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission. Manda Bhopawas was selected for the pilot to demonstrate the effectiveness of this convergent model. The work in Manda Bhopawas

commenced in August 2020. It featured village-level meetings and capacity-building programmes aimed at fostering community engagement. Efforts were focused on community immersion and the promotion of women's larger involvement. Although women were eager to come out and voice their opinions, cultural norms in the communities inhibited them from doing so in front of men and elders in the community. Self-help group meetings and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act sites, where more than 150 women worked, served as entry points. Neighbourhood meetings were organized specifically for women so that they could speak freely. As the topics discussed touched the sore point of water, women gradually started to participate. This gave confidence to many more and propelled a chain reaction in the community.

When the formation of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee took place in the Gram Sabha, Sarpanch Mahendra Kumar Yadav spoke of the role that women played. *"Men were not very positive towards the scheme and did not come forward. But women were eager to get nominated and came forward on their own,"* he said.

Anjana recalled, *"I was working at the Grameen Bank as the self-help group bank mitra when the meeting happened. Raju Devi put my name forward for the Village Water and Sanitation Committee in my absence."* The women in the community had complete trust in her, reflecting their strong friendship bond. Suraj Devi affirmed, *"We knew she would never step back and steadfastly support our decision to include her in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee team"*. Enrolment in the planning committee gave Anjana an



opportunity to address the issue of water availability, which she had been raising for a very long time.

Jagdish Prasad recalled, *"When the first meeting of Village Water and Sanitation Committee was held after its formation, there was 100 per cent attendance. It was like a marriage function in the village. A wave of enthusiasm had pervaded the village."*

A Gram Sabha member signed and approved the Village Water and Sanitation Committee member list,

demonstrating the feasibility of meaningful community participation leading to sustainable results.

Anjana was provided with multiple opportunities to build her skills following the establishment of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. With the mandate of 50 per cent women's participation, significant strides were made through these capacity-building initiatives, changing the decision-making landscape within the community.

The capacity-building sessions demystified the water, sanitation and hygiene flagships, enabling Village Water and Sanitation Committee members and the broader community to understand what the programmes entailed and how they were different in their approach and implementation methods. The goal was to sow the seed in the community's mindset that they would play an integral role at every stage, from planning to scheme handover to operation and maintenance. A significant focus of these trainings was to facilitate a cultural shift in governance by including women, underscoring that their participation was essential for the effective implementation of the twin schemes. This pioneering approach placed women at the heart of water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives for the first time, empowering them to step out of their homes to participate in meetings and training sessions within the village and beyond.

The training guided the panchayat on effectively utilizing funds under these schemes, including strategies for channelling the 15th Finance Commission funds towards water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives.

Following the training sessions, skilled Village Water and Sanitation Committee members began preparing Village Action Plans using participatory rural appraisal techniques and collecting data to inform the detailed project report to be developed by the Public Health Engineering Department. Utilizing pre-prepared questionnaires, the Village Water and Sanitation Committee gathered essential household-level information.

However, securing community support for the participatory rural appraisal process to plan the in-village water supply scheme collaboratively proved challenging. Many community

members were sceptical due to a history of mistrust in government initiatives. As Anjana and her Village Water and Sanitation Committee team ventured into the community for mobilization and participatory rural appraisal exercises, they often encountered negative remarks from the villagers, such as *"Now women think they will bring water to our village!"*

Anjana actively encouraged women to step out of their homes and attend neighbourhood participatory rural appraisal meetings, consistently seeking their approval for crucial decisions regarding pipeline laying and valve installation. This engagement instilled a sense of value and ownership among the women, giving them a space to find their voices and express their opinions. At the same time, they also engaged with the larger community. Anjana remarked, *"As we worked in*

neighbourhoods, our self-help group members provided invaluable support in engaging with families across the village, helping us mobilize the entire community around this critical issue."

The Village Water and Sanitation Committee was also dedicated to ensuring last-mile coverage and inclusivity for the most marginalized families. It conducted several meetings to identify and include the scattered households far from the main settlements. Raju Devi noted, *"We have lived in the village for many years, but we did not know all the households. When the Village Water and Sanitation Committee started mapping houses, we got to know our village better."*

This participatory process ensured inclusivity and corrected mis-estimations using local knowledge.

There were several instances where Anjana and Raju stepped in to correct inaccuracies in the estimates initially developed by the Public Health Engineering Department.

Parallel to these efforts, training sessions for the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members nurtured their interpersonal communication skills, enabling them to sensitize the community about the joint implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen. The training covered various topics, including waste segregation, greywater management, soak pit construction and water quality management. Anjana remarked, *“For the first time, we learned what kind of water we were actually drinking and whether it was safe.”*

The training imparted to the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members initiated a social phenomenon where other women began to build trust and seek guidance from them.

Furthermore, the training imparted to the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members initiated a social phenomenon where other women began to build trust and seek guidance from them. They even turned to the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members for personal and domestic assistance, viewing them as advisers and mentors. As Anjana narrated, *“Women would come to us for help with ration cards, birth*

certificates and other administrative issues.” This shift not only solidified the Village Water and Sanitation Committee’s role within the community but also positioned its members as guides for navigating various challenges in daily life.

The Jal Jeevan Mission scheme in Manda Bhopawas became operational in July 2021, marking a significant turning point for the community.



Anjana recalled the joy and exhilaration of that first day when tap water flowed into their homes, *“We could finally hold our heads high. We had silenced those who criticized us and questioned our capabilities as women.”*

The Village Water and Sanitation Committee unanimously agreed on a one-time connection fee of Rs. 2,250 to be collected from each household. The women made this decision collectively, with the fee being collected by the Village Water and Sanitation Committee members. Since the women were actively planning the infrastructure, resistance to paying the connection fee was diminished. Anjana marked this moment and said, *“When the connection fee was decided, it was for the first time that decision-making came into women’s hands. It was our first step in becoming a part of the administration. Earlier, such decisions were taken by the panchayat or the village elderly.”*

Additionally, a Village Water and Sanitation Committee bank account was opened at this stage, marking an important milestone in women’s engagement with the banking system and enhancing their skills in financial management and financial literacy. This development strengthened their ability to handle funds and cemented their role as decision makers within their community.

Currently, Anjana and her fellow Village Water and Sanitation Committee members oversee the collection of fees from households that may be resistant and resolve any conflicts related to fee payments. The Village Water and Sanitation Committee also issues new connections while addressing issues, such as leaks and breaks, by utilizing the collected user fees for necessary repairs. The community relies on the Village Water and Sanitation Committee for any complaints

regarding water supply, particularly recurring pressure-related issues. The Village Water and Sanitation Committee women manage these communications via a WhatsApp group and hold monthly meetings of women to discuss any concerns.

The Village Water and Sanitation Committee conducts water quality tests using field testing kits. Five Village Water and Sanitation Committee members, including Anjana, received training in water quality management and the proper use of these kits. This training significantly improved their digital literacy and allowed them to effectively understand, disseminate and manage water quality concerns within their community.

Anjana expressed her appreciation for the Jal Jeevan Mission process, stating, *“For the first time, we witnessed genuine sincerity in the implementation of a government*

scheme. This programme truly prioritized women, giving us the respect we deserve. It made an effort to understand our issues and provided a space for us to connect with the panchayat and participate in the village development. Now we feel confident that we can make a difference for our village."

Taking great pride in being Village Water and Sanitation Committee members, Anjana and her fellow women stated, "Our names are written in

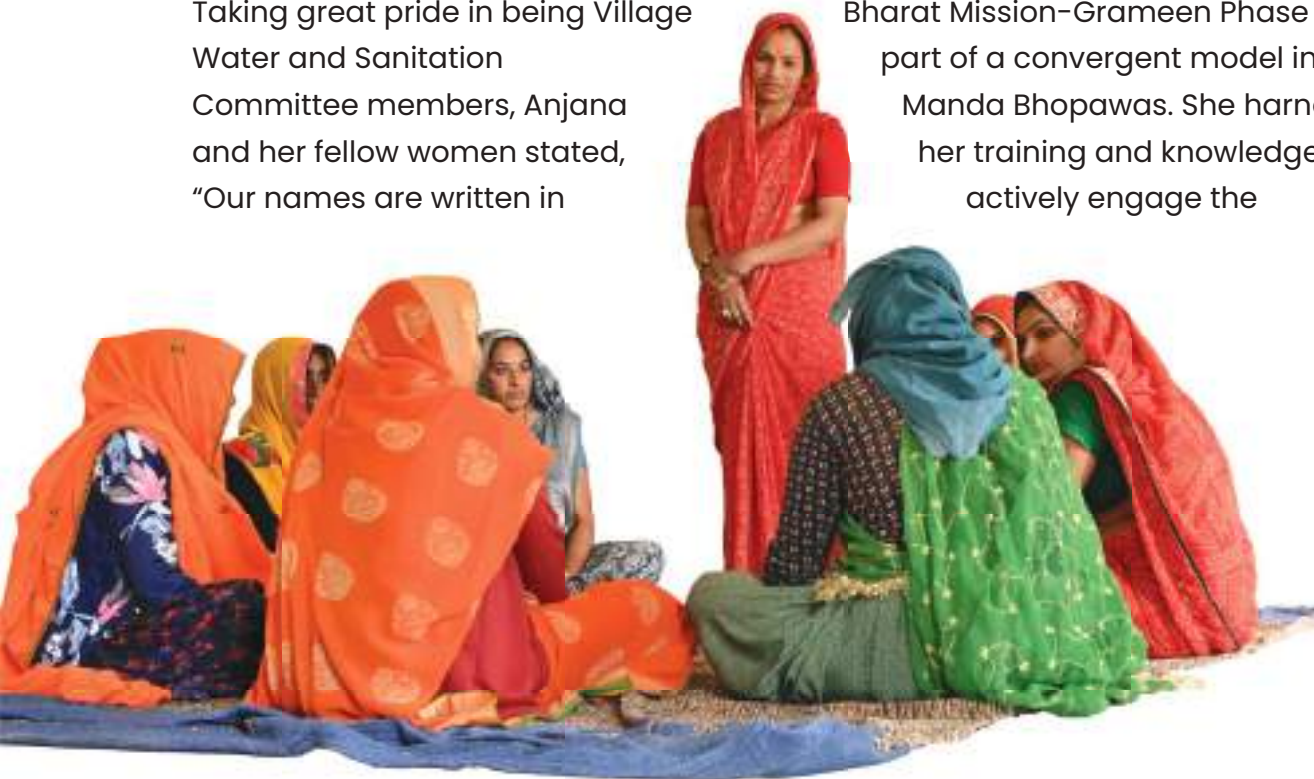
the pump room as Village Water and Sanitation Committee members. The respect and recognition that we have received makes us feel very good."

Following the successful implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission, the Village Water and Sanitation Committee, led by Anjana, played a critical role in rolling out the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen Phase II as part of a convergent model in Manda Bhopawas. She harnessed her training and knowledge to actively engage the

community in sanitation efforts. Awareness campaigns, organized through self-help group meetings, facilitated the establishment of solid waste management practices and involved women in the planning and execution of sanitation projects. As a result, waste segregation began, a route map for the e-rickshaw vehicle for waste collection was charted, community dustbins were installed and soak pits were constructed by clustering households to manage grey water.

Anjana harnessed her training and knowledge to actively engage the community in sanitation efforts.

The launch of Jal Jeevan Mission marked a significant transition in the functioning of the sarpanch and the panchayat. The *sarpanch's* approach



has shifted from authoritative governance to one that embraces collaboration with the Village Water and Sanitation Committee. His leadership style has evolved into a more needs-centric, demand-driven model that genuinely considers the voices and perspectives of women. Sawai Singh, a ward member, reflected on this change: *“Previously, even though women were listed as ward members on paper, there had been no participation. Now, we have six active women ward members, and families recognize the value of their participation.”*

The involvement of women through the Village Water and Sanitation Committee has dramatically transformed village-level governance in Manda Bhopawas. Anjana’s leadership ignited a movement, bringing together over 50 women who emerged from their homes to voice their concerns and actively engage in

community life. Anjana acknowledged, *“We have come a long way in Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen implementation. Previously, women in this village did not attend the Gram Sabha. Now they actively track its schedule and participate, recognizing it as an important platform to voice their concerns.”* Political awareness and participation of women has increased manifold.

With the Village Water and Sanitation Committee activated and functioning effectively, the *gram panchayat* has engaged these women in various community programmes, such as tree plantation drives and verification of land titles to ensure women’s access to housing schemes under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Ram Dev Jhaghra, another ward member, highlighted the scenario, stating, *“There is a growing receptivity to listen to their views and accept their suggestions.”*

Anjana notes that the emphasis on women’s participation is evident even at the district and block-level meetings, as the first call is often for *“women representatives to come forward”*. This reflects a strong administrative push for increased female involvement, providing women with the space and encouragement to emerge as future community leaders.

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As a Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act Mate, Anjana feels a sense of power and authority. She said, *“Now I feel that so many women depend on me. I am seen as their officer. The women look at*

me as someone who can help them and change their lives.” After attending so many trainings as a Village Water and Sanitation Committee member, Raju Devi said, “A hunger to learn has developed. Recently I attended a training on cattle rearing, and now I am curious to know more about it to be able to help my community.”

Interestingly, the sarpanch noted a marked increase in newspaper circulation within the village as women now seek to stay informed about new government schemes. He recognized this transformation, stating, *“There are times when women come to inform me about new schemes. They now know how to handle documentation and obtain essential certificates for their children. They are also aware of when their electricity and water bills are due.”*

The aspirations and vision of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee for developmental change

have significantly broadened. The members are eager to take on new projects based on the community’s needs. Anjana stated, *“Now that we have secured water access, we want to focus on improving connectivity between the four villages of Manda Bhopawas. Our aim is to initiate various changes in the future, ensuring that the women of our village lead these efforts for substantial social transformation.”*

Anjana’s path to recognition

The impact of Jal Jeevan Mission on Anjana’s life has been profound, equipping her with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate financial and administrative landscapes. Anjana plays a leading role in managing the Village Water and Sanitation Committee account funds in collaboration with the *gram panchayat*.



This growing recognition of her capabilities culminated in 2022 when Anjana was invited to the residence of the Chief Minister of Rajasthan to offer her advice on the state budget as a proactive Village Water and Sanitation Committee member.

Many women have approached Anjana and her peers to join the Village Water and Sanitation Committee and learn water quality testing.

Anjana proudly stated, “Our names are registered in the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission national app, and we each have our own IDs. The state Jal Jeevan Mission website also lists us as Village Water and Sanitation Committee

members. Our photo was featured on the state website for one month, showcasing how we conduct water quality testing. Additionally, our videos were circulated on the district

WhatsApp group, and the District Collector spoke to us! The village’s appreciation for the respect and recognition we have brought has been overwhelming.” As a result of



these accomplishments, many women now approach Anjana and her peers to join the Village Water and Sanitation Committee and learn water quality testing.

In 2021, the national Jal Jeevan Mission team, led by the Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Jal Shakti, visited Manda Bhopawas for an experiential assessment and praised the implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission and the strengthening of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee in the *gram panchayat*.

On 2 October 2022, Manda Bhopawas was shortlisted by the Prime Minister as a best practice for Village Water and Sanitation Committee activation, leading to an invitation for the Village

Water and Sanitation Committee members to participate in an online interaction.

Furthermore, the Public Health Engineering Department has showcased Manda Bhopawas as a model for successful Village Water and Sanitation Committee-led initiatives across Rajasthan. This success has inspired numerous other *gram panchayats* in the state to adopt women-led initiatives based on the achievements seen in Manda Bhopawas. Rushabh Hemani, WASH Specialist with UNICEF Rajasthan, noted, *“This gram panchayat has been able to pollinate the idea of Village Water and Sanitation Committee-led Jal Jeevan Mission implementation model across several other areas of*

Rajasthan”. To facilitate further cross-learning, exposure visits focused on community-led approaches for Jal Jeevan Mission were organized for three other states.

Anjana’s journey underscores the potential of the Village Water and Sanitation Committees as an effective community-based institution and their significant role in water, sanitation and hygiene programming. To sustain this momentum, there is a need for continued capacity-building and institutional strengthening of Village Water and Sanitation Committees such that they can serve as a critical platform for inclusive and participative processes, empowering communities and driving their own development initiatives.



As a symbol of change, Anjana leads her community towards a brighter, more equitable future through access to water and women's empowerment.

Case study 10

Steering innovative solutions

Bernali Deka

In Batabari village of Bordoulgari gram panchayat in Darrang, Assam, there is a unique Piped Water Supply Scheme as it is the only one that is managed by an all-woman Water Users' Committee. Spearheaded by 30-year-old Bernali Deka, this Water Users' Committee has tackled the challenge of iron-contaminated water affecting 50 households. Bernali's journey began with community mobilization, advocating for clean drinking water to reduce health risks. Her efforts overcame initial community scepticism, securing government support for the water infrastructure. As Water Users' Committee President, Bernali has inspired a shift in governance, emphasizing accountability and inclusivity. The Committee's active role in maintaining the water system reflects a commitment to sustainable management while also reshaping perceptions of women's leadership. Beyond infrastructure, her leadership has catalysed broader social change – encouraging women to participate in Gram Sabhas and aspire for leadership roles in public life. The Batabari Piped Water Supply Scheme stands as a testament to how women's empowerment can drive tangible benefits in resource management and foster a culture of shared responsibility, inspiring other communities across India.



Valuing the resource

In the lush green district of Darrang covered with paddy fields, 738 *Piped Water Supply Scheme* are providing safe drinking water under Jal Jeevan Mission. Among them, one scheme stands out – the Batabari water supply scheme in Bordoulgari *gram panchayat*. What makes it unique is that it was the only *Piped Water Supply Scheme* in the entire district managed by an all-women Water Users' Committee. At the helm of this transformative effort was Bernali Deka, the president of the Water Users' Committee. At just 30 years of age, Bernali had reshaped her village's relationship with this vital resource – water!

The launch of Jal Jeevan Mission in Bordoulgari *gram panchayat* in 2023 laid the groundwork for a new approach to water infrastructure management, encouraging community ownership of the assets created. This initiative catalysed the establishment of community-level institutions in the form of Water Users' Committees to facilitate the successful



transfer of the scheme and ensure its long-term operation and maintenance. Panchayat Secretary Gajanchandra Deka explained, *“The concept of a Water Users’ Committee was a novel approach because, by mandate, it could only include beneficiaries as its members. This means that those who utilize the water also hold the responsibility for its maintenance. The establishment of the Water Users’ Committee created a direct connection between the users and the service provision, which was missing in previous schemes and was a key reason for it to eventually become inoperable.”* Bernali’s commitment and efforts have instilled a deep sense of responsibility among residents towards the sustainability of the piped water supply system that has been set up.

Meeting daily water needs has never been a struggle in verdant Assam, where the mighty Brahmaputra River

flows. For households in this region, dug wells, ponds and tube wells are woven into the very fabric of everyday life. Water scarcity is not a concern. Yet, beneath this apparent abundance lies a hidden threat: the quality of the water itself. Traditional sources, so relied upon and familiar with iron contamination, were posing significant health risks. This quiet crisis had long gone unnoticed by the community, largely due to a lack of information and awareness.

Amid this backdrop, Bernali started a compelling narrative on what ‘safe’ water is and why it is important, in a

There was a silent water crisis in Assam. While water was abundant, its quality was suboptimal, a fact largely unknown to the community largely due to a lack of information and awareness.

community accustomed to the status quo, where the quality of water was never questioned or seen as a pressing problem.

Past experiences made this task even more daunting. Neglect of the old system during the pandemic, characterized by unattended breakages and leaks, led to its deterioration and eventual dysfunctionality. Atul Chandra Deka, the jal mitra for the Batabari water supply scheme, said, *“There was no one to take care of the system after its installation. People thought that it was the government’s duty to provide water. There was no channel of communication between the people and the administration to highlight or resolve the matters.”*

As a result, the community returned to using their old, traditional water sources. This lapse underlined a critical lesson: for *Piped Water Supply Scheme*

to be effective, the community must own and be responsible for maintaining it. Vigilance, regular upkeep and prompt repairs are essential for sustainability. However, these can be achieved only if the community is fully aware and understands that maintaining water quality is important in mitigating health risks. Using the mechanism of an institution is crucial for seeding acceptance, ownership, community buy-in and, therefore, ensuring that the *Piped Water Supply Scheme* continues to succeed.

Between 2020 and 2022, Bernali was the only voice continually advocating the restart of the *Piped Water Supply Scheme* in her village, Bordoulgari. Her concerns were acknowledged during panchayat meetings and community gatherings. But

no substantial action was taken. Despite this, Bernali persisted in keeping the conversation alive. Bernali explained her motivation, saying, *"I come from a very backward and remote area where the dug well was the only source of water. I saw a piped system with a tap for the first time in 2019 after I came to this village after marriage. I understood the importance of such a facility. I wanted this not just for myself but for my entire community."*

When Jal Jeevan Mission was launched in the Bordoulgari *gram panchayat*, Bernali's village was left out. Feeling a sense of urgency and determined to find a solution, Bernali took matters into her own hands and turned to the government for support. She began attending every *Piped Water Supply Scheme* meeting that included the Public Health Engineering Department, implementing support agency and *panchayat* representatives, and relentlessly

advocated for an extension of the scheme in her village. During

these meetings, she observed how the implementing support agency demonstrated iron contamination using field testing kit. Intrigued, she shared her insights with the women in her neighbourhood, explaining how the field testing kit worked to detect iron in the



water. This sparked their interest and concern. Chandamita Deni, Bernali's neighbour and now a Water Users' Committee member, recalled, *"Our clothes and utensils used to have a tint of red colour all the time. But we never knew the reason. Bernali learned about this water test and then told us that it is because of the presence of iron in the water we use. We were surprised! We were unaware that the water we were using was not safe."*

As some people learned their water was unsafe and that safe water is important, Bernali began to reach out actively to the implementing support agency to spread this information to the entire community. She requested that they conduct a demonstration of iron contamination in her village. When the implementing support agency confirmed that the water they consumed was unsafe, the impact was profound. Bernali's efforts gradually sparked a movement that united

women, men and the elderly. They recognized the credibility of the information she shared and understood the urgent need for improved water quality.

As Bernali communicated the critical importance of ensuring access to safe water, she fostered a sense of shared responsibility among community members. Men who had previously been indifferent became engaged. Emboldened by her leadership, women rallied to advocate for change. The elderly lent their voices to the cause, influencing the movement and encouraging broader participation. Their united effort to demand better quality water marked a shift in how the villagers approached their water resources. Reinvigorated by strong community support and emerging as their leader, Bernali tenaciously pursued the goal of bringing the *Piped Water Supply Scheme* to Batabari.

Reinvigorated by strong community support and emerging as their leader, Bernali tenaciously pursued the goal of bringing the Piped Water Supply Scheme to Batabari.

Whenever senior officials visited to assess ongoing schemes, Bernali prioritized being present and seized every opportunity to advocate for her village's need for inclusion. She consistently highlighted her fellow villagers' challenges, illustrating the pressing need for access to clean water and the potential benefits of the *Piped Water Supply Scheme*. Her confidence in these interactions was evident: she spoke assertively and articulately, capturing the attention of panchayat members and Public Health Engineering Department officials.

Through persistent follow-ups and detailed explanations of the community's water needs, Bernali generated a momentum that could not be overlooked. Her ability to engage with the officials on a personal level, combined with her unwavering commitment, gradually began to shift the conversation. Panchayat members, initially sceptical, found themselves increasingly impressed by the strength of her arguments. They began to see Bernali not merely as a community member but as a credible advocate for change who genuinely understood the needs of Batabari. This shift in perception led to a newfound respect for her insights and increased willingness to prioritize her cause with Public Health Engineering Department.

Recognizing that this small, often overlooked section of the village deserved equal access to clean water, the Public Health Engineering

Department prioritized water supply to the 50 households in Batabari. Parismita Das, the Junior Engineer and Supervising Officer for the Batabari Piped Water Supply Scheme said, *"Jal Jeevan Mission emphasizes 'Har Ghar Nal', so we had to ensure that every household has a functional tap connection. In fact, Bernali helped me remain true to the spirit of Jal Jeevan Mission and ensure equal access to safe water."*

From advocate to president

To bring water to every home in her village, Bernali stepped into a leadership role voluntarily and proactively. Supported by the Junior Engineer of the Public Health Engineering Department and the implementing support agency, who kept her informed about their plans for

initiating the scheme, she sought ways to assist in bringing the Piped Water Supply Scheme to fruition. Parismita Das, Junior Engineer, highlights the pivotal role that Bernali played in initiating the Batabari water supply scheme, *"She was the one who first approached me about how to start the scheme, which speaks volumes about her eagerness! She played a crucial role throughout the entire planning and implementation process. For instance, she gathered samples with the help of the field testing kit women's group, enabling me to send them to the lab for the final sanctioning of the scheme. It was truly her initiative that made it possible for us to develop a scheme for just 50 households."*

The implementing support agency quickly recognized her as a local champion, vital for breaking new ground and spearheading community

mobilization efforts. Through her initiative, in March 2022, she facilitated participatory rural appraisal activities that laid the groundwork for mapping out the pipeline network. Rupam Bordoloi, the implementing support agency project head, added, *“She was our on-the-ground resource, taking us on door-to-door visits to help us understand the local conditions and gather vital information for planning. She helped us conduct the transect walks to map small alleys for laying the pipeline network. After all this, the Village Action Plan was submitted to the Public Health Engineering Department in May 2022.”* Jal Jeevan Mission District Coordinator Priyanka Das, emphasized, *“Unlike traditional top-down methods, where decisions are made solely by authorities, the case of Batabari illustrates how a bottom-up approach can effectively provide demand-driven and needs-based infrastructure.”*

Unlike traditional top-down methods, where decisions are made solely by authorities, the case of Batabari illustrates how a bottom-up approach can effectively provide demand-driven and needs-based infrastructure.

Together, these officials’ perspectives underline how Bernali’s initiative started a participatory process and, after a yearlong wait, resulted in the final sanction of the *Piped Water Supply Scheme* in early 2023.

Bernali recalled the moment vividly with excitement, *“Finally, on 23 December 2023, the pipeline laying work started in our village! From sanction to implementation, it nearly took 11 months.”*

This milestone marked the culmination of her relentless efforts and the promise of clean water for her community. Anita



Baruah, a member of the gram panchayat water quality management group, said, *"People started believing that she will not let this scheme go to waste like the previous one. They had confidence in her that she would make this successful."*

As the project progressed and the contractor began the critical process of laying the pipelines, the Public Health Engineering Department and implementing support agency representatives could not always be on-site. Bernali stepped into the role of a site supervisor, bridging the gap between the technical and implementing teams. To equip her with the necessary skills for this supervisory role, the implementing support agency provided informal training that focused on overseeing the pipeline installation while monitoring essential quality aspects throughout the process. Bernali explained how she applied this training

in the field, *"I made it a point to check whether the contractor was installing the pipeline at the proper depth and ensured that pipelines were adequately buried to prevent exposure."*

Bernali played a vital role in ensuring that the water supply project adhered to the Jal Jeevan Mission guidelines. She recounted several instances where she stepped in as a vital link between the community and the implementation teams. *"As per Jal Jeevan Mission guidelines, the point of a functional household tap connection cannot be further than 25 metres from the households. There were numerous instances when the pipeline fell short of reaching the last mile. When residents approached me with complaints about the inconvenience of tap points being too far from their homes, I informed them that the Public Health Engineering Department could give connections up to 25 metres from*

their households. If they want an extension of the pipeline, then the cost would have to be borne by the household," she said.

Bernali played a vital role in ensuring that the water supply project adhered to the Jal Jeevan Mission guidelines.

Bernali took the initiative to report any anomaly to the implementing support agency and Junior Engineer, acting as a crucial liaison between the community and the administration. The support of Public Health Engineering Department and Bernali facilitated the successful installation of the infrastructure, ensured that it genuinely served the needs of the community and reinforced the importance of local oversight in development projects. Bernali's efforts

are changing the lives of Batabari's residents. Jenima Boruah, a Water Users' Committee member, reflected, *"Earlier, we were spending time filtering the water first through the ring filter and then again through the candle filter. Even then, the red tint was present in everything we washed with that water. Now we drink water directly from the functional household tap connection without any filtration."*

Bernali joyfully recalled the heartfelt blessings she received from households after the functional household tap connections began operating in February 2024, saying, *"One day, Dhan Deka and Khagen Deka came to my house to express their gratitude and offer their blessings for bringing water to them. They were from among the poorer families in our village and did not even have a tubewell at home."*

The support provided by government agencies and UNICEF played a crucial role in enhancing Bernali's skills and knowledge throughout this process. As she engaged with the Public Health Engineering Department and implementing support agency

representatives, Bernali gained valuable insights into the technical aspects related to water supply systems. These interactions deepened her understanding of infrastructure management and refined her communication and negotiation skills.



This new level of competency enabled her to convey her ideas clearly and assertively, making her a credible leader within her village. Bernali's husband, Amar Jyoti Deka, observed these remarkable changes first-hand. He said, *"She met numerous well-qualified people who imparted valuable knowledge to her. She confidently and fearlessly talked with government officials. She also visited government offices for the first time. She no longer hesitates to approach new people. Her communication skills have significantly improved."*

Bernali reflected on her personal development throughout the project, saying, *"I learned how to test water and define water safety standards. My understanding of the overall workings of the panchayat deepened – how it operates, the role of wards and their members. Through the participatory*

rural appraisal process, I gained a clearer idea of my village boundaries and how the houses are spread. During the pipeline installation phase, I acquired valuable technical knowledge about the construction process. Additionally, I learned effective strategies for dealing with contractors and how to ensure that work gets completed. I also formed a rapport with the Public Health Engineering Department and implementing support agency officials – I could call them anytime."

After the functional household tap connections were activated in February 2024, the Water Users' Committee was established in March 2024, paving the way for the community handover of the scheme planned for July 2024. Bernali was the natural choice for community leader and was unanimously nominated as

Water Users' Committee President by the community, Public Health Engineering Department and implementing support agency. Priyanka Das, said, "This nomination was far more than a mere gesture; it represented a collective acknowledgement of her tireless efforts and the profound impact she had made in advocating for safe water access. The Public Health Engineering Department supported her nomination because officials could see that she could ensure the survival of the scheme in the long run."

Bernali's husband proudly shared his thoughts on her becoming president, "She is respected in the community. In meetings, people often say – here comes our President! So, it is a moment of pride for me. But what is most important for me is that she is happier and content in this role."



Women at the helm

At Batabari, the 17 member Water Users' Committee consists entirely of women, Bernali emphasizes passionately that the decision to create an all-women Committee stemmed from the fact that *"women are personally invested in the service, and so their degree of motivation is higher, as is their sense of ownership of the infrastructure and responsibility towards operating and maintaining it."* Led by Bernali, the Batabari Water

Users' Committee has become an inspiring model of women-led governance. Their success as women leaders is inspiring the community to invest in education, especially for girls.

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The community supports women and, in turn, women rise to the occasion; this reciprocity has made Batabari *gram panchayat* a symbol of empowerment. Having women at the helm has enhanced the efficiency and responsiveness of water service delivery. Parimita Das, Junior Engineer, underlines that when addressing issues such as leakages, breakages or disruptions in water supply, it is good to see the Committee's urgency. *"With Bernali, I receive prompt and proactive updates from Batabari. Bernali sends*

me real-time updates on what is happening,” she said.

Rupam Bordoloi, Project Head of the implementing support agency acknowledged, *“When a problem arises in a household – such as a pipe breakage or low water pressure – individuals feel comfortable reporting the issue as they are confident of a quick response.”*

Bernali’s leadership showed that informal communication channels within the community accelerate the grievance resolution process; both men and women feel more comfortable reporting water-related issues, and the sense of accountability within the community grows. This accountability and grievance redressal system was supported by Bernali’s growing network, which includes direct connections with the Public Health Engineering Department officials, local plumbers and repairmen. By engaging

with the right people, Bernali ensured that repairs and maintenance tasks were carried out quickly and that the water supply was not disrupted.

Constant practice has sharpened her management and crisis-handling skills and her ability to address problems quickly and coordinate solutions. It also enhanced her reputation as a problem solver and a person who can get the job done and strengthened her influence and respect within her community. Bernali playfully reflected on the change she has experienced, saying, *“People now refer to me as ‘Madam’ in meetings, just like they do with the Public Health Engineering Department officials who visit.”* Women leaders are being recognized and treated with the same regard as their male counterparts – a cultural change. The ripple effects of Bernali’s leadership extend beyond her immediate achievements; they are

cultivating a generation of women who are equipped and eager to contribute to their community’s governance.

Bernali’s efforts are altering women’s aspirations and inspiring them to imagine themselves stepping into leadership roles. The Water Users’ Committee member Jenima Boruah spoke of her newfound confidence. *“If Bernali is not around, I feel ready to take up the baton and lead the Water Users’ Committee myself. I am also working with Bernali to raise awareness on curtailing water wastage,”* she said.

Bernali’s own aspirations have grown. She has been eager to take on larger roles within the panchayat if the opportunity beckons. *“I want to be a part of the panchayat to ensure that equitable services reach everyone in my community. My husband also pushes me to rise further and take on more important roles.”*

Panchayat Secretary Gajanchandra Dekha commented on this shift: “We are witnessing a noticeable increase in women’s presence and participation in Gram Sabhas. They are now actively questioning new schemes and keeping a vigilant eye on the work being carried out by the panchayat.”

The group of five women trained in water quality management, known in the village as the field testing kit group, said, “It was for the first time that the panchayat involved women in water provisioning.”

The increased presence of women in decision-making forums and local institutions is not only amplifying their voices but also lending them confidence for broader civic engagement.

The increased presence of women in decision-making forums and local institutions is not only amplifying their voices but also lending them confidence for broader civic engagement. Together, Bernali and Chandamita stated emphatically, “*If the existing Jal Jeevan Mission scheme closes, then the Water Users’ Committee will talk to higher authorities and ensure that the scheme keeps running. At the Water Users’ Committee, we have also taken a collective decision to levy a small user charge of Rs. 30 per functional household tap connection per month soon to take care of minor repairs!*”

In Batabari, women are not merely filling roles, but leading with purpose and vision, demonstrating that effective governance can flourish when powered by diverse voices and perspectives. Bernali proudly said, “*Women together made this victory*

possible. Our sarpanch is a woman, the field testing kit group consists of five trained women, our Water Users’ Committee includes 17 women, and both the district coordinator and Junior Engineer at Public Health Engineering Department are also women.”

This successful integration of women into leadership roles through the water programme provides a compelling glimpse into the future of governance – inclusive, responsive, profoundly attuned to community needs, where the community recognizes the value of leadership that supports initiatives aimed at well-being for all, whether man or woman. In the future, to be fully realized, this vision requires a commitment to ongoing capacity building, mentorship and resources so that women can continue to be equal participants in all opportunities and be empowered to make a difference.



Through her journey, Bernali Deka shows how grassroots leadership can bring lasting change.

Way Forward

The documentation of the 10 case studies illustrates that India's water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes, the Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen and Jal Jeevan Mission, have made notable strides in integrating gender lens with the policies and programme delivery. These programmes have empowered women through capacity-building initiatives on non-traditional work like masonry and plumbing, encouraged village-level leadership roles, and mandated increased participation in water and sanitation committees, thus catalysing significant shifts in social and gender norms, roles, and power dynamics within diverse communities across India. These case studies also serve as a testament to the significant

opportunities available to deepen gender-transformative outcomes by addressing structural gender inequalities and embedding long-term empowerment strategies into policy and programme delivery frameworks.

Drawing on the rich insights from the case studies shows that initiating and integrating gender-transformative approaches into water, sanitation and hygiene programming can create pathways for women to emerge as community leaders, breaking entrenched gender stereotypes. Women leaders like Sunita Devi, Babita Kumari, Niharika and others through their roles as village heads demonstrate how inclusive participation enhances programme

sustainability. Programmes that provide technical training, such as those for *rani mistris* in Jharkhand or pump operators like Sitabai in Madhya Pradesh, empower women with new skills, boosting their confidence and creating economic opportunities. These roles challenge traditional gender norms and inspire a broader societal acceptance of women in non-traditional jobs.

The case studies highlight the effectiveness of leveraging women-led community structures, such as self-help groups and Water Users' Committees. These platforms not only mobilize communities but also amplify women's voices in decision-making processes, as seen in Assam's Batabari

village and Bihar's Bishanpur Baghnagari *gram panchayat*.

Initiatives such as waste management entrepreneurship and user-charge systems illustrate how water, sanitation and hygiene can serve as an entry point for women's economic empowerment. These programmes enable women to generate income while contributing to the sustainability of water, sanitation and hygiene services.

The experiences documented in this collection offer a compelling case for embedding gender-transformative principles into the core design and implementation of future water, sanitation and hygiene programmes. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the following recommendations:

Advancing gender-transformative policies for water, sanitation and hygiene in future flagship programmes

Strengthen systems to promote women's leadership and enhance participation in governance

Promoting women's leadership is a cornerstone for achieving sustainable and gender-transformative outcomes. The case studies illustrate the immense potential that women have in reshaping their communities through bold leadership and effective governance. Mechanisms should be strengthened to engage, train and support women leaders at the grassroots level, ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-

making processes. Integration of women's perspectives in water, sanitation and hygiene planning and execution also fosters inclusive solutions that address the unique needs of all community members. When women lead, they bring first hand experiences of issues such as water access and menstrual hygiene, resulting in more equitable and effective interventions.

Enhancing women's participation in governance requires a shift from policy frameworks to effective operationalization. While policies mandating women's representation in water, sanitation and hygiene-related committees exist, challenges remain in translating these into meaningful participation. Women often face socio-cultural barriers, lack of confidence

and limited access to resources, which hinder their active involvement in planning, monitoring and decision-making. To operationalize these policies, it is essential to provide structured support for women leaders. Capacity-building initiatives, including technical training, leadership development and financial literacy programmes, can equip women with the skills and confidence needed to take on governance roles. Structured mentorship initiatives can further nurture emerging leaders, providing them with guidance to navigate systemic and sociocultural barriers. Peer support networks can further enable them to navigate institutional and societal challenges effectively.

Creating enabling environments within committees is equally crucial.

This includes fostering inclusive meeting practices ensuring safe spaces for women to express their views. Community sensitization interventions are needed to promote acceptance of women's leadership roles. Recognizing and celebrating women leaders amplifies their influence, inspiring others to break stereotypes and join governance roles. This holistic approach not only empowers women but also drives systemic change, ensuring long-term community resilience.

It is crucial to ensure specific budget allocations and its utilization for gender-focused interventions to meet the diverse needs of women and girls. A critical step is to start operationalizing gender planning within Annual Implementation Plans of

the water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes. Efforts should be made to ensure that the gender plans are developed, and funds allocated, tracked, utilized and reported. This will enable the systematic prioritization of gender in planning and execution phases. Additionally, expanding budgetary provisions for non-traditional jobs, such as masonry, plumbing and pump operation, can empower women economically while breaking gender stereotypes. Gender planning and budgeting will also involve capacity building of government and implementing agencies to design and monitor gender-focused expenditure. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks must include gender-specific indicators to track and strengthen women's participation at all levels.

Facilitate non-traditional skill development

Facilitating skill development for women in non-traditional water, sanitation and hygiene roles is a transformative strategy to promote gender equity and economic empowerment while addressing community needs effectively. Programmes that train women as masons, pump operators or sanitation entrepreneurs equip them with valuable, employable skills, enabling them to secure livelihoods and achieve financial independence. These initiatives also challenge deeply entrenched societal norms by showcasing women's competence in roles traditionally dominated by men, as evidenced by the impactful journeys of leaders like Sitabai, Bernali and others.

Skill-building programmes must be tailored to meet local needs and

provide hands-on training in technical and operational aspects. For example, training women in masonry during the *rani mistris* initiative not only accelerated toilet construction under Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen but also redefined perceptions of women's capabilities in the community. Similarly, teaching pump operation and water quality testing, as seen in Sitabai's case, ensured the sustainability of water supply schemes while empowering women as key stakeholders in water, sanitation and hygiene governance.

To ensure success, skill development programmes should include supportive measures such as mentorship, confidence-building workshops and financial incentives. Partnerships with government bodies, academic institutions, civil society organizations and private

organizations can provide the necessary resources. Empowered with skills and knowledge, women become agents of change, fostering a shift towards gender equity, improved water, sanitation and hygiene outcomes and lasting societal transformation.

Strengthen community engagement and mobilization

Strengthening community engagement and mobilization is the key to fostering sustainable social change and achieving gender transformation. Grassroots platforms like self-help groups and women's collectives are vital tools for mobilizing communities, raising awareness and driving participation. These platforms provide women with a voice and a safe space to discuss challenges and explore solutions collaboratively,

paving the way for shifting attitudes and dismantling deeply entrenched gender norms.

The case studies illustrate how through community mobilization, women were not only equipped with technical skills but also encouraged to challenge stereotypes, take leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes. This participatory approach helped communities see women as active agents of change, fostering greater respect and acceptance of their contributions.

Effective mobilization creates ripple effects within families and communities, as women's increased visibility and success inspire others to follow. Over time, this can build a collective movement that challenges inequities and promotes gender-balanced leadership. Community-led

behaviour change initiatives, supported by grassroots advocacy, can ensure that water, sanitation and hygiene programmes not only address practical needs but also transform power dynamics, fostering long-term changes reshaping societal perceptions.

Addressing socio-cultural barriers in water, sanitation and hygiene programmes requires concerted efforts to shift deeply entrenched norms that limit women's roles in leadership and technical fields. The transformative journeys of women in all 10 case studies underscore the effectiveness of targeted behaviour change communication strategies. Contextual social and behaviour change strategies can address barriers against women in leadership roles. Tailored messaging, regular community dialogues, group meetings and interpersonal communication can

shift attitudes and foster acceptance, as seen in the narratives.

A blueprint for change

As India charts its course for future water, sanitation and hygiene flagship programmes, the integration of gender-transformative approaches is not just imperative but a pragmatic strategy for achieving sustainable development. By addressing the root causes of gender inequality and fostering an enabling environment for women's participation, policymakers can ensure that water, sanitation and hygiene programmes contribute to an equitable and inclusive growth. The case studies of resilience, leadership and innovation captured in this document serve as a blueprint for action, reminding that empowering woman through water, sanitation and hygiene is a powerful lever for societal transformation.

Glossary of Hindi Terms

Hindi terms	Description
AADHAR card	Identity card
Adarsh Gram Panchayat	Open Defecation Free Plus Model Village under SBM-G Phase II
Adhyaksh jal sahiya	Master water frontline worker
Chaupals	Community meetings
Deep Jyoti Ajeevika Mahila Sangathan	Women's organization for livelihood
Didi	A respectful term used for women
Diyas	Lamps
Ganga Samman	Commendation award for maintaining the cleanliness of Ganga River organized by the State Mission for Clean Ganga (SMCG), Uttar Pradesh
Gaushala	Cow shed
Gram Sabha	A village assembly of people who are registered to vote in a panchayat
Gobardhan Yojana	Waste to wealth scheme to incentivize rural communities to manage their organic waste, increase household income and improve environmental sanitation
Har Ghar Nal	Taps in every household
Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal	Tap water for every household

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Hindi terms	Description
Indira Awas Yojana	Housing scheme
Jal mitra	Water frontline workers
Jal sahiyas	Water frontline workers
Jal Satyagraha	Water revolution
Jan andolan	Community revolution
Kachra patra	Garbage container
Mahadalit Basti	Hamlet of Mahadalits. Mahadalits is a term used for the poorest social groups within the Dalits. Dalits are the lowest stratum of the castes.
Mahila Mandali	Women's group
Mann Ki Baat	Translating to heart-to-heart conversation, it is a monthly radio programme of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, interacting with Indian citizens on themes and issues relevant to the nation
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, a social welfare scheme that aims to guarantee the right to work
MGNREGA Mate	A frontline supervisor, considered a semi-skilled worker due to the specialized nature of their role
Mission Shakti	Integrated umbrella scheme for women's safety, security and empowerment
Mukhyamantri Gramin Payjal Nischay Yojana	Chief Minister's rural drinking water promise scheme. Launched in 2016 in Bihar to ensure access to safe drinking water through a piped supply system in every household
Nari Shakti Samman	Award presented to individuals or organizations who have contributed significantly to women's empowerment by Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI

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Hindi terms	Description
Nigrani Samitis	Monitoring Committees
Nirashrit Asthai Gaushala Scheme	State government scheme for infrastructural development of cow shelters for abandoned and stray cattle
Panchayat	Village-level governance structure that forms a part of the three-tier local self-governments in districts, blocks and villages under the Panchayati Raj
Panchayat sahayak	Helpers
Pani Samiti	Water Committee
Pathshala	School
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana	Prime Minister's Housing Scheme. Central government scheme to provide "Housing For All"
Prashasti Patra	Letter of commendation
Project Alankaar	State government programme to revamp Sanskrit secondary schools in Uttar Pradesh that are over 50 years old
Puja	Worship
Rani mistris	Women masons
Ratri chaupal	Night-time community meetings
Safai karamcharis	Sanitation workers
Samagra Shiksha (Madhyamik)	Integrated education – middle school
Sandhya chaupal	Evening community meetings

(Continued)

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Hindi terms	Description
Sarpanch Mukhiya Gram Pradhan	Elected panchayat head
Sarpanchpati	Woman sarpanch's/pradhan's husband
Self-help group bank mitra	A liaison between banks and community, in this case a banking agent for self-help groups
Shramdaan	Labour contribution
Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman	Clean water empowerment award
Swachhagrahi	Frontline sanitation workers for community engagement and mobilization/cluster facilitator
Swachhata Hi Seva	Cleanliness is service - name of a national social mobilization campaign
Swachhata mitra	Sanitation worker
Swachhata Pakhwada	Name of a national social mobilization campaign. A fortnight-long promotion of cleanliness and sanitation in India which is a part of the Swachh Bharat Mission
Swachhata preraks	Sanitation coordinators
Satyagraha se Swachhagraha Campaign	Name of a national social mobilization campaign. A reference to Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent resistance and civil disobedience and his principles of swachhata or cleanliness
Tehsil	Sub divisional revenue office
Yashasvi Mukhiya	Successful leader





पेयजल एवं स्वच्छता विभाग
जल शक्ति मंत्रालय
भारत सरकार
DEPARTMENT OF DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION
MINISTRY OF JAL SHAKTI
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

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