



## WINDS OF CHANGE

*Talking about adolescent reproductive and sexual health*

A Community Health Initiative in Bihar and Jharkhand  
by National Foundation for India



भारतीय प्रतिष्ठान  
NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INDIA

*AUTHORS:*

USHA RAI

Usha Rai is a senior journalist who has worked with three national dailies of the Capital, Times of India, Indian Express and Hindustan Times from 1965 to 1998. She was Deputy Director of the Press Institute of India for five years and is currently a media consultant and independent journalist. She is a pioneer development journalist and has specialized on population, health and development issues.

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

Swapna Majumdar is a Delhi based independent journalist focusing on human development, education, health, population and poverty, child rights, gender and the role of women as agents of social change. She has received several professional awards and fellowships including the prestigious Dag Hammarskjold fellowship.

# **Winds of Change**

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## PREFACE

*The National Foundation for India is an independent, Indian grant-making and fundraising body helping people improve their own lives. Founded in 1992, NFI aims to support long term development initiatives that are community based and driven and that work towards building a just and equitable society. Today NFI makes a difference by supporting partners who look for innovative solutions to complex problems in poor, remote and challenging parts of the country.*

*It is within this perspective of supporting social change and constructive work in the broadest sense of the term that NFI has been working for the last 15 years. In these years the foundation's programs have evolved to support work in the fields of elementary education, community health, livelihood security, local governance, peace and justice, citizens and society, and development journalism. The resources for the grants that NFI makes are drawn from the interest of its corpus which now stands close to 25 crores and by raising resources from other philanthropic institutions, individuals, and corporate donors.*

*In 2003 The David and Lucile Packard Foundation made NFI a generous grant of US\$ 6,50,000 towards addressing the concerns of adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH) in the states of Jharkhand and Bihar. At the time NFI had no prior experience in the field of ARSH issues per se, but had worked with a number of high-quality NGOs in the region supporting programs to battle gender discrimination and improve the wellbeing of the girl child.*

*Moreover, The Packard Foundation also provided a great deal of capacity building support to NFI. They helped the foundation build a strategy to identify the causes of poor reproductive and sexual health and develop communication techniques to enable our grantee partners to initiate dialogues within their communities to reflect critically about their own responsibilities in enabling young people to be sexually aware and responsible and also be more caring and supporting of each other as couples and companions. Identifying suitable practices in the field to implement and also the idea of local communities examining their own beliefs and working to establish more gender sensitive and equal relations was a big challenge during the course of the project.*

After publicizing the program in both states, NFI received over 300 applications. Subsequently, on careful sifting through the applications, grants were made to ten partners in some very poor parts of Bihar and Jharkhand. These partners were assured support for three years. Like NFI, these NGOs were new to the issue of ARSH, though many had been in the field of community health before. Therefore, it required enormous amounts of effort on the part of NFI to help these NGOs gain the skills and self-confidence required to deal with an issue like ARSH.

Debjani Ghosh (Sr. Programme Officer, NFI), led efforts to sensitize and build the capacities of partner NGOs. She made innumerable trips to remote places in Bihar and Jharkhand to inspire confidence in our partners. She also organized a number of workshops to enable partners to share their experiences and learn from each other as also from experts nominated by The Packard Foundation to help build their capacity. Debjani was supported by NFI's Programme Director, Partha Rudra. Because of his knowledge and experience of the voluntary sector in this region, Partha was able to identify suitable partners and also help them negotiate the complex social and political environment they had to operate in. On the communication front, Debjani was assisted by Nandita Roy (Sr. Programme Officer, NFI) responsible for NFI's Development Journalism portfolio. Nandita was able to activate interest in the regional press on reproductive health issues and she successfully persuaded NFI's partners based in Daltonganj, Jharkhand to use community radio to create awareness and discussion on reproductive health issues. It was at her initiative that we were able to persuade Ms. Usha Rai and Ms. Swapna Mazumdar, both veteran journalists, to visit our partners and communicate something of the work being done by them to the outside world.

The experience of working on one issue for close to four years has been enormously enriching for the Foundation. It has given us a feel for ground realities and the enormous potential of NGOs and local people to bring about profound changes in belief and attitudes. Thanks to the efforts of the Packard Foundation, staff at NFI have received international exposure as well as learnt more about best practices in the country. This combined with NFI's own experience of seeding and strengthening voluntary organizations in remote areas to work on issues of social change, has strengthened our conviction in investing in processes that over

*a long term contribute to a community accepting desirable norms for adolescent reproductive and sexual health. Such an approach can often be tiring especially as most social programs today face enormous pressure to show early scalable and replicable results, which in our reckoning may not be sustainable.*

*NFI continues to work in this field with funds from its own resources and has strategized to dovetail with CCF (Christian Child Fund) to optimize resources for partners to work on this issue. In our estimate the work done by some of the grantee partners was of outstanding quality and for that reason we do our best to continue to support them. Of the ten partners supported by Packard in the first phase, we continue to support six in the second phase of the program. NFI aim's to learn from the work that these courageous and committed grantee partners are doing and take the lessons to similar programs in other parts of the country.*

*No project is completed in isolation and good work is often a coming together of a number of committed organizations and individuals. NFI would like to thank the Packard Foundation for its generous support. Their grant has helped NFI grow as an institution and in turn we have been able to grow other smaller voluntary organizations. We would also like to thank our grantee partners for their courage and commitment in discharging their obligations to their communities and donors. Ms. Usha Rai and Ms. Swapna Mazumdar, who took time from their busy schedules as journalists to write these empathetic essays on the work they were witness to. And finally I would like to thank my colleagues at NFI, Debjani, Partha and Nandita, who were responsible for leading this effort.*

**Ajay Mehta** (Executive Director, NFI)

## Transforming Rajauli's Piped Pipers

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

**W**omen stand with small babies at their waist, wide-eyed girls still in their school uniforms jostle with men trying to hold back the restive crowd. Some young boys are dangerously perched atop a tree. The residents of Gairwa village in Rajauli, Bihar, gathered to hear the *nukkad natak* (street play), occupy every inch of space around the village temple.

Surprisingly the play is neither historical nor mythological. Rather, it is about gender equality, dangers of early marriage, and adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH). Yet, the audience remains riveted.

But achieving this feat hasn't been easy. In 2003, when the Mahila Vikas Samiti (MVS) first started work on ARSH with Moosars, a tribal community known traditionally to survive on rats, they faced resistance and hostility. Cleanliness, personal hygiene, reproductive and sexual health were all alien concepts for this tribe hovering on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. But three years later matters have come to such a pass that not only are young and adolescent boys refusing to follow the traditional practise of killing rats because it is unhygienic, there has also been a significant drop in the number of early marriages.

"In the beginning when we began the ARSH initiative in 15 villages with the support of the National Foundation for India, we were worried about the kind of response we would get to street plays on gender equality, personal hygiene and adolescent reproductive and sexual health. This was especially



because much of our work was with the Moosar community, which did not consider these issues important,” said Leela Kumari, project director, Mahila Vikas Samiti (MVS).

So, instead of embarking on ARSH straightway, they decided to adopt a multi-pronged approach. They identified a group of families who were already sending their children to MVS’s non-formal education (NFE) centre in the Moosar hamlets. Then, MVS trained their NFE teachers on ARSH issues. MVS believed that since the teachers had already built a rapport with the community, it would be easier to introduce the subject.

So while young girls and boys at the NFE centres learnt that rats were revered along with Lord Ganesha, the street plays were used to enliven the issue of ARSH and make it interactive.

The strategy of getting the audience involved was easier said than done in the beginning. But after a couple of performances, the theatre group realised adding a personal touch was what was needed to get the audience involved.

So, as the actors sing and enact the dangers of marrying off girls early instead of educating them, lead actor Ravindranath Sharma taps the head of five-year old dishevelled girl in the torn dress sitting in the front row. Then he points to the neatly dressed boy with his front teeth missing and sings about the importance of treating daughters and sons equally. And when it comes to the part about the parent’s responsibility, he dances up to a toothless granny who nods in agreement.

At the end of the performance, when the audience is asked questions about gender equality, the age of marriage, reproductive and sexual health, so many hands are raised that Sharma finds it hard to choose. “Unless we involve the audience, it can be difficult to retain their interest during the three hour performance. We base our street plays on real life stories to sensitise people on adolescent reproductive and sexual health,” explained Sharma.

Sharma and his group are not a full time theatre group primarily because it cannot sustain them financially. Yet, they unhesitatingly take time off to perform whenever MVS asks them. “We do it not just because we love theatre. We see ourselves as agents of change and it gives us great satisfaction when we see an attitudinal change in people,” contended Sharma.

One of the biggest impacts has been the change in the mindsets of many young and adolescent boys belonging to the Moosar community. They now refuse to kill rats not just because it is unhygienic but also because cats are revered along with Lord Ganesha as his companion. While some of their fathers continue this traditional practise, many have been forced to give it up because of pressure from their children. In village Nirmal Bhiga, the MVS organises a prayer service for Lord Ganesh every Saturday to ensure that the children of this Moosar hamlet continue to revere the God and his companion.

Another significant change MVS has effected is a drop in the number of early marriages in the community. According to Leela Kumari, their records show a 30 per cent decline in marriages of girls under the age of 18 years at the end of three years of their work. This has been possible by dovetailing the issue of ARSH with livelihood skills. Amidst the sewing and stitching, various issues like pregnancy, contraceptives and other family planning programmes, menstruation and personal hygiene are discussed.



For 15-year old Hema Kumari who was unable to study because she had to look after her younger siblings, this was a novel experience. "Since I didn't study I didn't know about the right age of marriage or why my body undergoes changes. I was married young but I have persuaded my parents not to marry my younger sisters before they are 18 years," said Hema.

Hema's transformation was just what MVS needed to boost their programme. They were quick to make her a peer educator. Now, Hema accompanies the NFE teacher who makes a home visit two days in a week to interact with parents whose daughters attend classes and

also those still reluctant to send their daughters

Interestingly, attracting adolescent boys to ARSH classes has been easier for MVS compared to their experience with adolescent girls. This was because boys had already formed small social clubs in their villages and met regularly. So MVS field supervisor Shankar Singh did not have to go from house to house to organise an ARSH meeting. Initially the boys were shy but now they ask questions about their reproductive and sexual health openly. Vishal Singh of village Kairgaon said that the information had helped them understand better many issues including the much-feared HIV and AIDS. "One of our club members fell sick. But he didn't tell us what had happened to him. Only when he was very sick he told us that he has acquired HIV. We use his example to tell everyone the importance of being faithful and of using condoms. If our friend had been careful, he would not have died," said Singh.

This information is given specially to newly married couples. The club has taken on the responsibility of becoming the conduit for couples in the village who may want oral contraceptive pills and condoms but may be too shy to ask MVS or the local medical practitioners.

However, there has been a surprisingly lack of response from the local self-government bodies or panchayats. Despite several efforts MVS has been unsuccessful in involving the panchayats. According to MVS director Kamal Kishore Bindu, persuading pradhans and other members of the panchayats, who play a crucial role in the development of the village, remains their biggest challenge.

Change is creeping into the Moosar community. However it will be difficult to sustain this change in the long run unless MVS can develop strategies to convince panchayat leaders that their participation is critical to linking ARSH programmes with other health and livelihood schemes.





## *Vidya Daan, Phir Kanya Daan*

USHA RAI

**D**urga Kumari, Pinky and Manju are 17 years of age and members of the adolescent girls club in Katbhanga Village, Hazaribagh District. After joining the club and learning about Adolescent Reproductive Sexual Health through an initiative supported by the National Foundation of India and implemented by the Ramakrishna Sarada Math and Mission, the girls decided that no member of the club would get married before 18. It was a quiet resolution taken after learning about their own reproductive health, the small size of the womb in their still developing bodies, the problems of bringing up babies when they themselves are still not mature enough and of course the legal implications of an early marriage.

But in September 2006, Durga Kumari's father announced that he had met a wonderful boy who had a good job with Coca Cola and Durga would marry him. Durga immediately told her mother she was not prepared to marry till she was 18 at least. Her mother spoke to her father but he was adamant. "You don't get good boys easily and in any case my responsibility for you will be over once you are married," he said.

Durga then shared her dilemma with her club members. A group of girls then approached both parents and requested them not to go ahead with the marriage. They used all the knowledge they had acquired as members of the club to persuade the parents to change their view. It took a whole week of repeated visits to convince them. Durga's elder brother also supported her. Fortunately the date for the marriage had not been finalised. The father

then spoke to the boy's parents and they agreed to postpone the marriage till Durga was ready.

A quiet battle was waged and won because of the collective determination of a small number of enlightened, ambitious adolescents. Durga is determined to finish her graduation in commerce, work for a couple of years before honouring her parents' commitment. "But I will work where ever I go," she says.

Pinky is the peer educator of the village. She started the adolescents club with five members in 2003. At its peak the membership rose to 18. After three girls got married the club now has 15 members. Members meet regularly to discuss a range of issues from the growth of their bodies, pubic hair, to male bodies, masturbation, their studies and cleanliness of the village they live in.

The programme has come a long way since it was started in 2003. Sadhna Kumari, 20, peer educator of Patha village, recalls how the girls of the Radha Kishori Club would hide the material on adolescent reproductive and sexual health from their parents when the club was started and material distributed.

But Sadhna has innate leadership qualities, which are also being honed as a peer educator of the village. She has 25 members of 12 to 20 years in the Kishori Club. She has been able to motivate 5 women with more than 2 children from the village to have sterilisation procedures. After the first round of successful surgeries, others are approaching Sadhna for sterilisation. The young girls of the village, all members of the Radha Kishori Club are playing a stellar role in health and hygiene of the village and in the size of families.

Sadhna, herself, is studying for her intermediate in arts with maths, economics and history. After becoming a peer educator she feels she should have chosen medicine. "But I can finish my arts course and do a science course that would prepare me for medicine", she says. Sadhna's mother is a school teacher, her two brothers are still studying and her father stays at home, reversing the male/female role in this traditional, still seen as backward district of Jharkhand.

The winds empowering adolescent girls have not left behind the more conservative Muslim population of this district. At Devura village, Afsana Khatoom, 16, is the peer educator of the village. She proudly introduces you to Hamida Pervez, also 16, who she has rescued from an early marriage and Mohammed Basit Ali, a 16-year-old peer educator of the boys clubs. Ali is equally at home with the girls and boys because in this village the boys and girls adolescent clubs meet regularly and work together on various issues.

Each club has about 25 members and on Eid and during the Chaat puja, they come out as a group to sweep and clean the roads. At club meetings everyone

contributes a rupee and from this small but growing fund, money is used for purchasing birthday and wedding presents. So Babli got a diary and cake on her birthday and Gita, bangles, the *henna* decoration on her hands and feet and a sari on her wedding.

Since Devura is a Muslim dominated community, it was a challenge to win the confidence of the community. The programme began with a meeting of parents and Mamta and Shamshad of RSMM and Afsana, the local peer educator seeking their permission for girls to be allowed to come to the youth clubs. The difference in the way society treated girls and boys were depicted through photographs showing the different jobs being done by girls and boys. While the boys took pictures of girls at work, the girls took pictures of boys at work. The gender gap was immediately apparent and parents slowly accepted that a correction was called for.

High priority was given to raising the age of marriage for both girls and boys. Eighteen was the age determined for girls and earning a livelihood for boys, which meant not before they were 21/22 years old. It was the girl's club that interceded with Hamida's parents against her early marriage. When they would not listen to the youngsters, some of the parents of the club members approached Hamida's relatives.

Today girls and boys of the club go together to counsel newly married couples about delaying the birth of the first child, spacing methods and the importance of nutrition and cleanliness.

The RSMM has created excellent resource material for the sexual and reproductive health and education classes. There are games like snakes and ladders, carom and ludo, which incorporate messages on HIV and AIDS, gender and health. In carom the coins have various messages on HIV and have to be hit into the right pouch on how it spreads and how it does not. In snakes and ladders, the player goes up a ladder when he hits the right message and down when he is gender insensitive. So girls and boys share information on menstruation, using a clean cloth (sanitary pads have still not come to the villages), masturbation and nightfall or adolescent male secretions.



There is so much confidence in the project coordinators that when a 17-year-old in one of the villages of the Katakamsani block did not get her periods, she consulted Mamta. Mamta took her to a gynaecologist who after a thorough examination and X-ray informed her that she had no uterus and would never have children. The girl's parents were heart broken and pleaded with Mamta not to divulge this information to anyone else in the village. The girl is now being put through a vocational course so that she can stand on her feet.

Another young adolescent who contracted a serious vaginal infection, when she used a cloth on which a spider was sitting during her menstruation, has also been told she will never conceive. But efforts are being made to send her to bigger and better hospitals with proper gynaecologists who might be able to treat her. Such is the confidence and courage that the adolescent programme has generated in the region.

The adolescent girls and boys clubs are affiliated to the Nehru Yuva Kendra which has plenty of funding and sufficient projects that the youth can tap into. Sixty girls and boys were able to do a six-month computer course with NYK on a scholarship of Rs 300 a month. At the end of it they receive a certificate that comes in handy when job hunting.

The youth clubs and SHGs have also been linked to the horticulture programme of the government. In fact there is a demand for an information centre where information is provided on courses, jobs, loans etc. This is being done through the Continuous Education Centres. These linkages have ensured the sustainability of the adolescent youth programmes even after the National Foundation of India has pulled out in October 2006.



## The Making of an All Women Auto Garage

USHA RAI

**I**t's an amazing sight for the dusty township of Hazaribagh. Women of different ages, dressed in the dark blue overalls of mechanics, caps jauntily perched on their heads, riding a motorcycle. Some, unable to balance the heavy two-wheeler, fall down and get bruised. They quickly get up, brush off the dirt and their embarrassment and scamper back on to the vehicles. All of them are training to become Hazaribagh's –and probably Jharkhand's – first women auto mechanics.

They all nurture a common dream – to have a garage of their own. Learning to ride a motorcycle is the first step, says their young trainer Mohammed Kalam who has eight years experience as a mechanic in a workshop and motorcycle and scooter showroom. Kalam also owns a small garage and despite being very young has remarkable patience with his students. The sprawling playfield of the Ramakrishna Sarada Math and Mission school serves as their training ground, a small room adjacent to the play field is their garage cum workstation where two old Hondas are ripped apart, their innards dissected and trisected and then reassembled.

While Soni Kumari and Neelam Kumari, 17 and 19 respectively, are members of the Ramakrishna Sarada Math and Mission (RSMM) Sirsi Girls Club, the rest of the women are older. Most of them are married and all are members of self-help groups(SHG), promoted by the RSMM. Having learnt about sexual and reproductive health through their network of clubs, the girls had determined that they would not marry before 18. *Pahile vidya daan, phir kanya daan* (first education then marriage) was the slogan of the youth clubs. Since college education entailed travelling out of their villages, both boys and girls were keen on vocational skills. The girls wanted to do something challenging, something different!

Rakesh Narain, RSMM's project coordinator and his two assistants, Mamta and Shamshad, were able to link the ARSH Clubs and SHGs with vocational skills, supported by the Bangalore based Functional Vocational Training Forum (FVTF). They have also been able to tap

into various government schemes and funding. The idea to train women to repair, maintain and service motorcycles was born after seeing an article in a women's magazine. The district administration in Hazaribagh, with whom the idea was shared, has offered space for the city's first auto garage run by women.

These trainee mechanics have visited the local Bajaj and Honda workshops and showrooms and their excitement is mounting by the day. Mamta says "both companies are even willing to give the women jobs once they prove themselves.

Initially 15 women joined the auto mechanics course but for a variety of reasons four have had to drop out. Anita, 32, of Kirti Shankarpur village is a member of the Mahila Samiti. Her husband is a security guard who is extremely supportive of Anita's new venture. So are the other husbands of the trainee mechanics. Malti Devi, 22, of Sirsi village had completed a six months course in tailoring and machine embroidery. But when there was the opportunity to do the auto mechanics course, she jumped at it. "I want to do something that other women don't," she says. Malti's husband says "it is great if you can ride and repair motor cycles. In our family no one knows how to ride a cycle even. You can give me a lift to work every day."

But it is grey haired 50 plus Rajshree Devi from Sadar block that astonishes everyone with her enthusiasm and courage. You can see her pedalling a cycle round and round, in untiring circles. Learning to cycle is the first step to riding a motorcycle and Rajshree is determined to complete the course and get her certificate as well as the kudos. Her 25-year-old daughter, Neelam, has also joined the course. Forty-year old Renu identified all the tools on display and explained the intricacies of opening the bike, greasing various parts, changing the oil and the oil seal to repair the shock absorbers.

In four months the trainees will be able to open the motorcycles, fix the defect identified, change parts if necessary and service them. The FVTF provides the trainer's fees, the running cost of parts, tools of the trade and of course the cost of the two motorcycles. The District Development Commissioner A N Pande has guaranteed space for the all women's garage in the shopping complex being developed.

After the women complete the course and have their

certificates, RSMM will approach the bank for a loan. The RSMM is a credible organisation and has built its reputation on the school that it runs and its spirituality. This reputation enables it to access various government schemes and bank loans. Trainer Mohammed Kalam, who has his own garage, will assist the all women's garage for a minimum of six months.

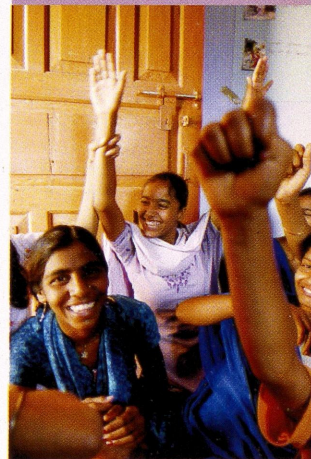
In Banadag village 30 girls are completing a very different kind of course, a six months beautician's module. Currently eight others are waitlisted to join the beautician course. There was a real scramble to join this course because it meant an opportunity for a livelihood and a bit of glamour in their lives. Television and Bollywood have whetted young women's desire for better lives. This course too is supported by Bangalore's FVTF. Lovely Rose, a qualified beautician from the Women's World Development Institute, was having a tough time deciding how many she could handle in a class.

Here again most of the girls are from the adolescent clubs and some are members of the SHGs. The course includes hair cutting, threading, massages, manicure, pedicure, mehendi of hands and feet, bridal dressing. It's a hands-on course and the students practise their skills on one another. Occasionally, Mamta, who handles the ARSH programme, gets her eyebrows threaded at the classroom.

On completing the course, the girls can run their own beauty saloon in groups of two and three or work out of their homes. For bridal make up they can charge anything from Rs 300 to Rs 500, for a good facial Rs 500, for a massage Rs 110 and for threading Rs 10. Those who have learnt to do mehendi can sit with shopkeepers selling bangles, the various requirements for pujas and at festivals like Teej, Karwa Chauth and Diwali and make a tidy Rs 600 to Rs 800 in a single day. Rose, who runs the course, was working out of her home and earning Rs 3000 a month.

There will be an entrepreneurship and soft skills (handling clients) development programme towards the end of the course. There will also be exposure visits to beauty saloons in the city of Hazaribagh.

Before starting either of the vocational skills programme, RMSS carried out a detailed adolescent needs assessment amongst



its youth club members. Some 900 young people filled in their responses and it became clear that livelihoods, career counselling and skill training were a priority. RMSS has been able to partner with 13 other organisations including, the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Janshikshan Sansthan, the Fisheries Department, Soil Conservation Department to implement skill training schemes.

The ARSH (Adolescent Reproductive Sexual Health) programme run by RSMM and supported by NFI could not have sustained itself on its own for very long. Apart from discussions on cleanliness, sexuality, nutrition and sanitation, young people needed skills and professional courses that would give them access to world outside their villages. They wanted the resources to run their own businesses and training in vocational skills. RMSS has been able to do this extremely successfully.



## Breaking the Myth on Breast Feeding

USHA RAI

Contrary to popular belief that village women begin suckling their newborns at birth, in Barrisa village, Banka District of Bihar, mothers' do not begin to breastfeed their infants until the village *pujari* (priest) gives his consent. The newborn either suckles from another lactating woman in the village, or is given water sweetened with *mishri*. The subsequent results of this practice is that children usually miss out on the protein rich colostrum from their mother's milk or develop diarrhoea due to the quality of water.

It was the young girls and boys, working through their clubs on adolescent reproductive sexual health (ARSH) that first brought this practice to the notice of Mohan Pande and Rekha Kumari, the two coordinators of ARSH programme of Mukti Niketan. Ramni Devi, 25, had given birth to her fourth child, Manjit, and several hours had passed but Ramni refused to suckle her baby till the *pujari* consented.

Word of the birth of the baby and that it's young mother was refusing to feed it soon reached the youth club. The club had been working to sensitize young people in the village on issues of health, sanitation, family planning, the spread of HIV and AIDS and encouraged discussion on whether the mother should be persuaded to break with tradition and feed the child without the priest's consent. The issues was brought to the village council and the club members urged both the village leaders and Ramni Devi to break custom and feed the child. Because Mukti Niketan is recognised for their authority in the village and their good work, they were able to influence public opinion and change a practice. Since that day, three other mothers have chosen to breastfeed their newborns at birth rather than wait for the *pujari's* consent. Today Manjit is a healthy and spirited infant,



crawling all over his mother's lap and creating havoc as all children do. Ramni Devi looks at him proudly and announces, "he is my healthiest child."

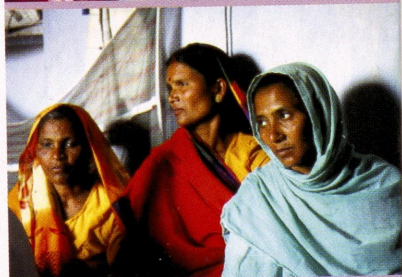
This is indeed an inspiring example of the day-to-day achievements of the ARSH programme started with the support of the National Foundation for India (NFI) in 2005. Previously, family planning programmes concentrated on married adults and families, rather than adolescents. In other words, men and women became aware of their family planning options and reproductive and sexual health only after they were married and possibly had already had 2 or 3 children.


Mukti Niketan runs two adolescent clubs; the boys club is called *Kishor Friend Club* and the girls group calls itself the *Bharati Kishori Samuh*. The boys have a small space of their own where they meet fortnightly to talk about village cleanliness, nutrition, child marriage, and reproductive and sexual health. Unfortunately, due to migration, the group has shrunk from 15 to 6. Young men in this part of the country migrate to Mumbai, Delhi and other large cities to look for work in factories and mills and usually come home only during the harvest season. Those who remain are interested in advancing their career prospects and are busy finding ways to improve their vocational skills.

The girl's club started with 13 active members. Some of the original participants have left the village after getting married, but membership still numbers 11-12 young women.

In this part of Bihar it is not easy to talk about reproductive and sexual health. These are private issues, especially not discussed by unmarried girls and boys. Words like menstruation, masturbation and even sex were taboo. However, due to the consistent efforts of Mukti Niketan this is changing. There is greater awareness and understanding of these issues. Sneha, a member of the girls club, talks regularly with her fellow members and Bhagirathi, the project coordinator, about the changes she has noticed in her body after she started menstruating.

Bhagirathi focuses her discussions with the girl's club on





issues of child marriage, delaying the birth of the first child, adequate spacing between children, contraception, menstruation and even masturbation. They also discuss related subjects like nutrition or healthcare. The girls feel that these issues are important and this knowledge will help them once they are married.

Literacy in Barrisa is low, especially amongst girls. Many girls do not go to school because they work in the home. Due to high levels of migration, most fathers are absent and so mothers co-opt their daughters into helping with household tasks and looking after younger siblings. The members of the girls club, however, are working hard to motivate their siblings to attend school regularly. Ajhola Kumari and Lucky, both 17, started going to school two years ago. Peer pressure from members of the girl's club inspired these two to stay in school; they are currently in class 5.

With help from a DFID sponsored programme, a number of self-help groups have mushroomed across the village. The ARSH group has also been recognised as an SHG under this program and has saved Rs. 25,000 to date. Access to low-interest loans means that visits to the local *mahajan* (moneylender) have decreased and families are able to stem the cycle of debt.

Seven kilometres away in the village Katoria, the ARSH programme is doing far better in schools than in the youth clubs. 375 students from class 7-10 (86 of them girls) have been enrolled in the ARSH groups. At first, parents and children objected to these classes. But painstakingly the project coordinators have raised awareness and sensitized parents to the desperate need for ARSH education. Now the challenge lies in making the classes interesting and participatory.

Quiz competitions are held between the girl's group and boy's group on reproductive health. The questions are drawn from a module drawn up by NFI on child marriage, HIV/AIDS, sanitation, health, anaemia, nutrition etc. The group that wins the competition walks away with the coveted trophy. Last year the local panchayat leader Malti Murmur presented the trophy to the girl's team. Kanshi Miranda, an articulate and intelligent class 9 student, won the individual prize for best performance.

The road for Mukti Niketan has been challenging. Imparting reproductive and sex education amongst adolescents has taken a lot of patience and time. Today they have interventions in over 10 schools and youth clubs perform *nukkad nataks* on sensitive social issues. Parents and teachers are more responsive and open to the subject and in one school in particular the principal herself has offered to teach the ARSH class. Three years on they realise that even though they have come very far, there is still much more they can achieve to understand sexual and reproductive health in this part of rural India.

## Making Motherhood Count

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

**W**hen her labor pains started at night, Anita Devi was afraid that her child would be born on the road. Not only was the nearest hospital in Danapur, Bihar, six kilometers away from her village but she was afraid that it would be difficult to persuade a local rickshaw to take them there on such a cold December night. Unfortunately for Anita, her fears came true. Her husband was unable to find anyone to take them.

So they started walking to the hospital, thankfully just as they were setting out, Anita's neighbor suggested she go to the *Jachcha Bachcha Ghar* (an informal delivery centre). Since the centre was only two kilometers away, it would be easier to walk there. More importantly, there would be some one trained to help in childbirth.

"If my neighbor had not told me about the *Jachcha Bachcha Ghar*, I don't think my daughter would have been alive today. I was very frightened because it was my first baby and I was in great pain. I thought I would die. But the Dai (trained birth attendant) here calmed me down and gave me confidence. I am thinking of naming my 15-day old daughter after her," said 19 year-old Anita.

Anita is not the only one who owes her and her child's life to the *Jachcha Bachcha Ghar* (JBG). Ever since Shaktivardhini (SV), a non government organization based in Danapur, established the innovative initiative with the support of the National Foundation for India (NFI) for pregnant women in Nargada village in Danapur in 1996, about 1000 children have been born at JBG. More importantly, as more women avail of the JBG there



has been a decline in both maternal mortality rates (MMR) and infant mortality rates (IMR) in the past 10 years.

“Our research showed that 25 per cent of mothers and 10 per cent of newborns died because they were born outside their home, primarily in fields or on the roadside while walking to the hospital. Furthermore, a lack of government health delivery systems and the practice of a *dai* not being allowed to visit villages outside her domain had exacerbated the problem. So it was essential to establish a centre where the antenatal and post natal health of rural pregnant women could be improved. Also, the JBG would allow us to interact with adolescent girls as well,” said Vandana Kumari, field supervisor, SV.

But once they became aware of the alarming regularity with which new born female children were either abandoned or killed in Danapur, merely focusing on proper nutrition and care, ante natal and post natal health would not be enough, they had to integrate reproductive and sexual health in such a way that they could also address the prevalent practice of female infanticide in the area.

So the JBG, which caters to 12 villages in Danapur block of Patna district, adopted a multi-pronged approach wherein pregnant women were monitored before and after childbirth to ensure the survival of the girl child and the mother. It was also decided that during registration of pregnant women, education on their personal hygiene, breast-feeding, nutrition and diet and gender equality would be given. However it was by organizing a baby show, an innovative idea to ensure involvement of the community, that SV managed to attract a sizable number of families. About 110 children between the ages of six months to three years participated in the baby show. This gave SV the opportunity to increase awareness of the parents about the child's health and to assess the overall health of the child. It was also a chance to disseminate knowledge about reproductive health and family planning, importance of breast feeding, nutrition of the mother and child and personal hygiene.

Once the community became familiar with the concept of the JBG, the next step was to win the confidence of the mothers-in-laws so that they could talk to young women about adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH). After the mothers-in-law were invited to Shaktivardhini's office and encouraged to discuss any misconceptions they had about the subject, activities were planned for both adolescent girls and boys. Besides discussions about physical and behavioral changes taking place during adolescence, boys and girls were



encouraged to sketch their thoughts on the importance of the right age of marriage and parenthood, the reproductive cycle and HIV/AIDS.

Past experience had shown SV that unless they included men and boys within their ambit, their efforts to improve the low status of women in that area would not be as effective. So while stressing the importance of gender equality, meetings were held to inform fathers-in-laws and newly married men about PNMT laws and the need to stop female foeticide under the garb of family planning.

In the past 10 years the JBG has become such an integral part of the Danapur women's lives that they were willing to take up the responsibility of running it themselves after the project period with NFI ended in 2006. "Before the JBG was established, the women didn't know anything about personal hygiene. But having worked here for the past 10 years, I have seen the difference that JBG has made in women's lives. They have become more informed and aware. Also, the JBG is like a lifeline for countless women in the surrounding villages," said Lakhpatu Devi.

In fact, women prefer to come to the JBG instead of the local hospital because they get personal care and moral support here. "I live in Shivchak village which is three kilometers from the JBG. But I have been coming here for the past six years. I have delivered two sons here. The *didis* here take good care and always help us even if we need them in the night," stated Sunaina Devi.

So, the women are determined to keep the JBG open even if it means drumming up the requisite financial resources themselves. They need a sum of Rs. 2000 every month so that they can pay the rent and the salary of the two *dais*. Some resources will become available in the form of fees as women are charged Rs 50 for daytime deliveries and Rs.100 for those at night. All the women registered with the JBG during the past 10 years will be asked to contribute a minimum of Rs. 10. However, families with a better economic status will be asked to pay a higher sum

The next step is to rope in the village advisory committee (VAC). The JBG has already established some links with the VAC. It has

held meetings in the community to discuss various government health schemes. Now the women have planned to take advantage of this association to get financial support.

In addition to being involved with the JBG, Lakhpatu Devi is also a panchayat ward member. Being politically savvy, she understands that unless everyone has a stake in the JBG, it cannot be sustained. So she and a group of women have already sounded out all the stakeholders including the parents of the adolescent girls and local panchayat leaders. However, Lakhpatu Devi has another ace up her sleeve. Lakhpatu is confident that in the event of any shortfall of finances, the pradhan will step in. This is not just because the head of the local government is a woman. More importantly, she is a mother and motherhood, feels Lakhpatu, will win their battle to keep the JBG a community initiative.



## ARSHering Winds of Change

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

**I**t is easy to miss out Simalbari. Hidden between fields of yellow mustard and rapeseed and lush verdant tea gardens, it is not hard to see why this Santhal hamlet in rural Kishanganj, Bihar, is not very popular with government officials. The dusty track leading to the tribal community is narrow and uneven. Electricity too, is a distant dream. Yet, slowly and silently change is taking place in this tribal community.

In a state where 60 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18, young teenage girls in Simalbari are beginning to take a stand against the practice of early marriage.

When 15-year old Radha Hemdar refused to give up her studies and get married, it sent ripples of shock in her community. It was hard for the illiterate tribal hamlet to understand why Hemdar was ruining her life by giving up the golden opportunity of marrying a 'good' boy for the sake of school. But Hemdar steadfastly stuck to her beliefs.

Thanks to her determination, she has become the first in many generations of Santhals in that hamlet to reach Class 9. "If I have to get married and work in the tea gardens for the rest of my life just like everyone else in my community, what is then point of studying? I am studying because I want to become something and also because I know that an early marriage is not good for my health," says Hemdar, proud in her accomplishment obvious when you speak to her.

In fact, Hemdar has inspired more young girls



in her community to follow in her footsteps. Several between the ages of 10 – 14 years have told their parents they do not want to forsake their studies for marriage before they are eighteen. “It is convictions like these that has given us hope that our work with these adolescent girls on reproductive and sexual health is finally bearing fruit”, said Sayeeda Hussain, chairperson, Azad India Foundation (AIF).

But the path has not been easy for AIF, a non governmental organization working on adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH). Funded by the National Foundation for India (NFI), this ARSH project, which began in 2003 in 15 villages in Kishanganj, has seen numerous twists and turns. There have been several occasions over the past three years when AIF field workers have almost given up in frustration.

One of their biggest challenges came from a rural village Mirbhatha in Powakhali block. A majority of Mirbhatha, a predominantly Muslim village, is illiterate. Girls are married young and have no control over their bodies or the number of children they bear. Local religious leaders or maulanas play a crucial role in influencing decisions within the community. “The maulana of this village opposed all our efforts to talk about ARSH. He argued that young girls would become ‘polluted’ by information about their bodies or talking about reproductive and sexual health,” recounted Parwez Raza, AIF field supervisor. So pervasive was the maulana’s influence that even his brother Qurban Ali, an influential community leader and one-time AIF ally also resisted any ARSH intervention.

But AIF workers did not give up. They just changed their strategy. Instead of talking about ARSH, they decided to use their existing non formal education (NFE) centers as a platform to gather parents of the students. Since the centre was next to Ali’s house, he along with other parents were invited every week to see what their children were learning. After four weeks AIF workers asked the parents if they were satisfied with what their children had learnt and if they had the confidence that their children would not be taught



anything wrong, they (the parents) should give the NGO a chance to talk about ARSH.

It was then that Ali changed his mind. "In the beginning I was opposed to it because many people in the community including my brother were against it. But after AIF explained that our children would be able to protect themselves by learning about the biological and behavioral changes that take place when girls and boys reach puberty, I realized I was wrong in resisting them. Now I have convinced my maulana brother also to end his opposition," said Ali.

Although it took several meetings to bring around Ali and the small group of parents whose children attended the NFE centres, AIF was quick to realize that they could sustain the intervention only if a member of that community spearheaded the initiative. So they decided to train Ali's daughter, 17-year old Marguba, as an ARSH peer educator.

This was a smart move considering most of adolescent girls in the village see Marguba more as a friend than teacher. With many parents still reluctant to send their girls to the ARSH classes, AIF is hoping this friendship will attract these girls too.

But 55-year old AIF worker, Madhuri Das, needed more than just perseverance when she was given the duty to introduce ARSH to village Mohiuddinpur. Despite being a more affluent, educated and urbanized village, the mindset of its residents was no different from rural Mirbhata. Here too, the maulvi (religious leader) was opposed to any discussion on ARSH. Matters came to such a pass here that the petite bespectacled Das had to don an aggressive avatar to counter hostility. "I am follower of goddess Kali. I realized that I had to be equally aggressive if I was to succeed in my mission. So I kept at it despite the abuses and taunts. Even when some people pelted stones at me, I did not run away.



I told them I was ready to face anything. Fortunately, the maulvi finally understood that what we wanted to teach the girls would help them to look after their health before they took on the responsibility of child-bearing," revealed Das.

Once AIF was able to win over the maulvi, the 70-year old religious leader invited Das to hold classes in his madarsa. "The Koran says that if need be one should go to China to acquire education; so why not the madarasa? Although chairs are not permitted in the place where the Koran is kept or recited, we just take the Koran from the verandah to another room when the classes are held," said Maulvi Gyasuddin.

However, not all religious leaders have been helpful. AIF has had to close down three of its centres because of resistance from both Muslim and Hindu religious leaders. Nevertheless, AIF believes that without religious leaders on their side, it will be difficult to make a breakthrough.

The district of Kishanganj ranks 588 out of 590 districts in the country on the reproductive and child health (RCH) index according to a government survey of 1998-99. Although the ARSH work AIF is doing is showing some results, they have a long way to go before this RCH index improves. Their lessons on nutrition, personal hygiene and family planning will be of little use unless they also include adolescent boys and newly married couples. Equally important is the need to design stronger linkages with the local health delivery systems.

AIF's biggest advantage is the rapport and trust that it has built with the community with which it works. But to turn this advantage in to a successful strategy, it must develop better tools to monitor and evaluate its work. Only then can their interventions be more meaningful and sustainable.



## A Bounty of Bananas

USHA RAI

**M**anju Devi of Sadanandi Badni Panchayat in Deoghar District of Jharkhand is a human dynamo and an empowered woman ushering in a quiet revolution in her community on a range of issues; from reproductive health, raising the economic potential of women through self help groups and building up entrepreneurship skills through horticulture.

In 2001 she started Saraswati *samuh* (women's collective) with 10 women who had seldom stepped out of their homes. The idea of a self help group came from a programme she had happened to hear on the radio. Each woman contributes a rupee a day and is entitled to a small loan from the *samuh*. The interest rate on Rs. 100 is Rs. 2.

Three women in the group have taken loans of Rs 5000 to Rs. 10,000 and bought buffaloes, which give more milk than the cows they already have. Buffalo milk is sold at Rs. 16 a litre to the local dairy, tea shops and *halwais*. The daily sale of milk is three litres and their children too have more milk, butter and ghee in their homes. Other women grow vegetables and sell it at the *mandi*. The returns on green chillies and watermelon are generally very good.

With financial assistance for the promotion of horticulture from NEEDS (Network for Enterprise Enhancement and Development Support), 200 banana trees have been grown by the *samuh*. Each banana plant has 60 to 70 bunches of bananas and each bunch 140 to 150 bananas.

With a collection of Rs 30 every month, savings have gone up steadily. Today the group has Rs. 14,000 in





the bank and another couple of thousand in their money box. If a woman, who is not a member of the *samuh*, wants a loan, she has to keep in mortgage some jewellery. When she pays back the loan and the interest on it, she is given back her jewellery. A novel feature of the *samuh* is that it also gives loans for girls' education thus ensuring that all girls in the village go to school.

Manju Devi was selected as the leader for NEEDS' reproductive health project started with the support of the National Foundation for India in 2003. Through her network of women she was able to make inroads into the community and its health needs. The *samuh* extended reproductive health issues to pockets where there were no clubs to facilitate the discussion of these issues.

In a large number of villages of the country, women are treated as outcasts during their menstruation but not in Sadanandi. Now there is no need to hide during menstruation. Women wash the cloth used during menstruation in warm water and babies are delivered not at home but at the health centre.

The group encourages women to eat hot meals and delay the age of marriage for girls to 18 and for boys to 21. Now no marriage takes place in a village till the girl is 18. The group also promotes the use of condoms for small families. In fact no woman of the group has more than four children. Most of the younger couples have just two children. Manju too has just two.

Family planning has come to the Sadanandi panchayat and its adjoining areas. Condoms are popular and after two children, the women opt for sterilisation. Earlier they were scared of the 'operation' but with the new slogan "*operation tho naam hai, mamuli se kaam hai*" (it is called an operation but is really a simple job) doing the rounds, the scare factor has blown away.

An active member of the *gram shiksha samiti* (village education committee), Manju proudly announces that in her panchayat every child goes to school. Till class eight they attend a local school and thereafter the high school in Sarwan. Manju is able to influence her community because



she believes in leading by example. Though she had studied only till class 3 when she got married, in 2000 after seeing her own children through school, she did her matriculation.

If elections are held in her panchayat, Manju would easily be the winner. Her energy and motivation skills have attracted a lot of attention. She was asked to motivate farmers to practice horticulture in addition to farming. The dual responsibility seemed a burden for many of them. But Manju retorted "if Gandhiji had thought he would lose his life fighting for independence, we would not be Independent today. She knows how to make bio-degradable *khaad* (manure) through vermiculture and is hoping to spread this awareness. Seeing the potential for mushroom cultivation, she is looking for someone who will market it for them before encouraging women to grow them.

The Saraswati Samuh has been able to get *kisan* (farmer) credit from banks for three of its members, including Manju, based on their land holdings. There is an eight per cent interest on the *kisan* credit but once you pay back the loan and interest, the credit keeps increasing. *Kisan* loans of Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 have been procured.

Since the village is very much into animal husbandry, the villagers find it irksome to take the sick animals to the veterinarians in the district or wait for one to come to their village. They are now demanding a permanent vet for the village and are lobbying with NEEDS for one.

NEEDS runs the ARSH programme through youth clubs of boys and girls in 41 villages of Deoghar. Since the villages are scattered it could take two to three hours to reach them if you have a car. So it is difficult to keep in touch with the groups and ensure that their energy levels are sustained. Discussion on sexuality is taboo in the villages and it has not been easy breaking ice on reproductive and sexual health. It is also difficult to sustain the groups because girls get married and drop out. The boys leave the villages for higher studies and work. Despite these drawbacks, there have been some good interventions in the villages of Banbaria, Ratura and Nawadih in Palojori block.

At Banbaria the programme revolves around Kumar Singh

Pappu (20), who completing his B.A. from IGNOU and is a teacher in the local school. He leads the Jagriti Yuva Club of 20 boys and Asha is a member of the girls' Rani Club. The subjects they take up include cleanliness (personal as well as civic), health, education and child marriages. Though the groups meet twice a month, it is always in the open under the shade of a tree. They have not been allotted a room from which they can work. About 15 to 18 of the 20 members attend the meetings on a regular basis.

Health is a major concern in Banbaria. Twice a week from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m, the ANM comes from Deoghar. She has a key to the cupboard at the primary health centre where all the medicines are stocked. Diarrhoea is quite common in the village and when there is an outbreak, it is difficult to access medicines. There have been times when glucose bottles were procured from Sharma's health centre, says Pappu. Now medicines for TB and other ailments are left with the Anganwadi worker and the youth club members sit with her when the doses are being administered.

Among the range of issues discussed at the fortnightly club meetings are farming techniques, seed procurement, cropping patterns etc. This information is shared with the community. Age of marriage is another issue of concern. Pappu has stopped three young men of his club from marrying. Shailender was only 19 in 2003 when he got a proposal for marriage. It was by speaking to Shailender and his parents that the marriage date was pushed back to November of 2006. Rajiv and Gautam were 18, lived outside the village and were not members of the youth club. Both had private, factory jobs and were eligible bachelors. It was not easy to persuade them to wait till they were 21 before marrying. Afraid he would not be able to withstand the pressure from the family for marriage, Gautam in fact ran away from the village. Villagers do not understand the disadvantage of marrying young, says Pappu. For them it is a *bhoj* (responsibility) off their shoulders.

Asha, 16, studying in class 7, says girls in the village usually get married at 12 and 13. They are now persuading parents to wait for the girls to be 18 before looking for a groom. By and large they have been successful. But



Guddi's marriage at 13 was done quietly in a temple and Asha and her group did not get to know about it. But they met the couple soon after and persuaded them not to have a child for a few years. Pappu presented the groom with condoms. It is 18 months since the marriage and so far there is no sign of a baby, says Asha with pride.

Asha's two older sisters got married when they were 17 and her brother when he was 21. "I did not want to marry my girls so young but it is a custom in the village and I did what everyone else was doing," says Asha's father. In our caste there is not much demand for dowry but if they ask for a TV or a motor cycle, it is better to give it. Those who cannot meet these demands just catch their *sambandi's* feet and express their inability to pay, says Kamdev Mahto.

Poonam's Priyadarshini girls club in Ratura village was considered an exemplary group that others could emulate. Poonam was only 13 in 2004 when she was selected by the community and NEEDS to be the peer educator for the 10 to 14 age group. Most of the older girls had already been married. Poonam was trained by NEEDS and showed leadership qualities.

Both in Banbaria and Ratura, the girls and boys club members mingle and put up joint programmes periodically. This is a great achievement. The setting up of adolescent panchayats, with representatives from different villages, has been a non-starter. For the girls, in particular, it is difficult to walk 10 kms. to attend the adolescent panchayat meetings.



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## National Foundation for India

Core 4A UGF India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003  
Tel: 24641864/65; Email: [info@nfi.org.in](mailto:info@nfi.org.in); Website: [www.nfi.org.in](http://www.nfi.org.in)

Design/print: VAP | [info@vaponline.com](mailto:info@vaponline.com)

