

Maharashtra Village Women Take Charge of Ration Shops, Ensure Fair Prices & Food for All

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Women in a small village located in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra have come together to ensure that their family members are getting nutritious food throughout the year, with a ration shop run by them.

These days, rural Maharashtra is going through extremely trying times, with 15 districts, almost a fifth of the state, declared drought-hit. Naturally, there are few good-news stories from this region these days, but here's one from a small village in the otherwise violence-affected Gadchiroli district where local women have bonded together to ensure food security for their already struggling households. Pandarigota is a quaint village with a population of 305, tucked away in the dense forests of Korchi block in eastern Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. Seasonal agriculture is the mainstay of food as well as livelihood around here, so the local communities, predominantly Dalits and tribals – Madiya-Gond and Bhil – rely heavily on their entitlements under the Public Distribution System (PDS), a government-sponsored food security net for the poor and marginalised populations. Till last year, when Bimlabai Adulwar, 40, used to head into Korchi town to pick up her quota of wheat, rice and sugar on the appointed day every month, she would never be sure if she would come back with the promised food grains.

Bimlabai Adulwar, mother-of-three, from Pandarigota village in Korchi block of Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, runs her village's fair price shop from her home with 13 other Self Help Group women.

"Going to Korchi would take up nearly an entire day. But the most frustrating part was when after spending so much time and precious money on bus fare one would either find the shop closed or have the shopkeeper announce that he had run out of stock. However, the situation is quite different now. No family in Pandarigota sleeps hungry these days," she states.

What has brought on this welcome change to the otherwise tough existence of Adulwar and her fellow villagers? The transformation began when Ami Amchya Arogyasthi (AAA), a local non government organisation rolled out a comprehensive intervention aimed at improving the dismal maternal health indicators in 35 villages of Kurkheda and Korchi blocks of Gadchiroli with the support of UK Aid's Global Poverty Action Fund. The idea was to work closely with the community on two aspects – monitoring the availability of quality healthcare services and access to food under the PDS and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The AAA began by engaging with the Village Health Sanitation & Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs), constituted at the panchayat level, to assist them in securing people's rights and entitlements and understand the value of community monitoring.

According to Dr Satish Gogulwar, Chief Functionary, AAA, "Empowering the community to claim their rights and actively monitor essential government services is key to bringing about lasting change. Work on strengthening the PDS services started in November 2013 and by conducting regular meetings and social audits in the village, with the complete participation of locals, including the women, many loopholes in the system were identified. Thereafter, people were encouraged to turn things around."

Bharti Sonagre of the AAA, who has been overseeing the work in the villages and facilitating interactions with the local government officials, gives a low down of ground reality, "In the 10 project villages in Korchi, most families live below poverty line. Some have small farm lands although they barely manage to grow enough to meet their needs. To supplement their diet, they gather fruits and wild greens from the nearby forests. The PDS supply is, therefore, crucial to feeding the household. When we started talking to the VHSNC members and the community, a couple of problems emerged. Firstly, not everyone had a ration card in their name despite having applied for one, and secondly, merely having a ration card did not assure them of their monthly quota." One demand that was voiced loud and clear was the need for setting up a fair price shop in every village. "The women told us that they found it very difficult to go all the way to Korchi. The pregnant women and new mothers were particularly burdened by this expedition," adds Sonagre.

Radhika Hundra, a rice farmer in Pandarigota, goes on, "We were desperately trying to find a solution to this problem when we met Bharti and other AAA activists who came to our village in early 2014. They informed us about our rights under the PDS and ICDS, which could help us boost our health as well as that of our children. It's not uncommon to hear of young mothers dying during childbirth in our area and we now know that this is directly linked to our poor, inconsistent diet."

Since it was the women who had voiced the demand for setting up a ration shop in their own village, it was not difficult to convince them to join the movement.

Radhika Hundra, a rice farmer in Pandarigota, now knows about her rights and entitlements under the PDS and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services).

Dr. Gogulwar elaborates, "Women Self Help Groups have been getting preference for fair price shop licences since 2012. When we told them about this order, they were keen to get on board. We taught them how to fill up the application form and held trainings to enable them to run the shop properly. However, an inordinate delay in getting approvals on these applications proved to be a major roadblock. So in August 2014, when we organised a 'jan sunwai' (public meeting) to deal with issues related to PDS services at the block level, especially those concerning non issuance of ration cards, the SHG women took this opportunity to complain to the tehsil officials about how their PDS shop applications were stuck." Incidentally, the men in the community have not had a significant role in this effort, as AAA worked closely with women to promote and empower women SHGs to apply for running fair price shops. Recalls Sonagre, "Such enthusiastic participation from the tribal women came as a big surprise to the officials. The tehsildar decided to personally intervene in the matter and a couple of months down the line SHGs like the Sant Krupa Mahila Bachatghat in Pandarigota were running their own outlet." Bimlabai Adulwar, Radhika Hundra, Khembai Miri and 13 others who make up the Sant Krupa Mahila Bachatghat SHG are proud to run the PDS shop in their village.

Khembai Miri, 30, feels good knowing that the SHG women in Pandarigota can easily approach the tehsildar or the Block Development Officer to talk about problems related to PDS services, if the need arises.

Adulwar stores the grains in her home and keeps the shop open in the evening so that women can finish their work and then come over to collect their ration. "All we had to do was to fill the form and apply for the licence. We don't have to go to Korchi anymore or be at the mercy of others," says the mother-of-three, who works as a farmer and a daily wager during off-season. The SHG members take turns to work at the shop. Each month, two women take charge of distributing the ration – around 25 kilos of rice, 15 kilos of wheat and a kilo or two of sugar per family – and keeping a log of the sales. Remarks Niranta Jamkata, an SHG

[member, "There was a time when we had to stand in long lines the whole day to get what was due to us. We never make anyone wait." Monitoring PDS disbursement and keeping an account of the money has also done wonders for their confidence. Khembai Miri says, "We know we won't be cheated, harassed or disappointed anymore. And it's certainly good to know that we can easily approach the tehsildar or the Block Development Officer to talk about our problems, if the need arises." "This is exactly the kind of self-reliance and community ownership we want to achieve across the region. Villagers keeping a check on public services will raise the accountability and quality of the programmes. This is a good beginning," concludes Dr Gogulwar. All Pictures: Dilnaz Boga\WFS First published by **The Better India**](#)