

Leading Women at the Panchayat

Name : Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh
Age : 36 Years
Education : 05thClass
W/O : Sh. Adharu Ram Gond
Caste Category : Schedule Tribe (ST)
Caste Name : Gond

C HATTISGARH

Born on November 1, 2000, Chhattisgarh constitutes the youngest member of Indian Union and formed with the 16 districts of undivided Madhya Pradesh. It shares with border with six states namely Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Chhattisgarh forms the 9th largest state of India with a geographical area of around 1,35,000 sq. km. The state lies at 17°46' N to 24°5'N latitude and 80°15' E to 84°20' E longitude. It accounts for two percent of India's population of which 80 percent demography reside in the rural areas and the rest 20 percent in urban areas. The main population is mainly concentrated in the central plains regions. Of the total population of 25.5 billion, 50 % represents the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe categories. These people mostly reside in the dense thick forest areas in the north and south. 12% of the India's forests are concentrated in Chhattisgarh state and 44% of the state's land is under forests. The literacy rate is 70.28% with a sex ratio of 991. Population density is 189 per km².

(<https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/chhattisgarh.html>).

Major source of economy of Chhattisgarh is agriculture. 80% of the masses owing to rural sector depend on agriculture for their livelihood and so known as the "rice bowl of central India". The state is endowed with all the major minerals including diamonds and comprises for mega industries in steel, power, mining, aluminium and cement sector. It accounts for more than 13% of India's total mineral production. While the official language of the state is Hindi but Chhattisgarhi is majorly spoken in most parts of the state. (<http://www.chhattisgarhonline.in/About/profile/index.html>). (<http://cg.gov.in/>,, 2011).

GARIABAND DISTRICT

Gariaband district carved out of Raipur district operationalized from January 2012. The district covers an area of 5822.861 km² and is a forest landscape. It is divided into five blocks namely Gariaband, Mainpur, Chhura, Fingeswar and Devbhog. Chhura, Mainpur and Gariaband blocks are the multiplicity of tribal zones. Paity and Sodhurriver flows from here and the district starts at the ancient temples of Rajim, which is also a famous pilgrimage center. The total population of the district is 5,97,653 and the sex ratio stands at 1020. There are around 711 villages in the district with a literacy rate of 68.26%. The main occupation of demography is agriculture with 49.56% area of farms in the district is irrigated. 50.41% area of district is covered by forest. Saal and Teak forests comprises mostly the forest zone of Gariaband with a total forest cover area of 1951.861 sqkm. There are four urban bodies in the district in which there is one Municipality(Gariaband) and three Nagar Panchayats (Rajim,Chhura and Fingeswar). (<http://gariaband.gov.in/en/about-us>)



The socio-economic status, quality of life and level of education is quite low among the demography of Gariaband district. The tribal economy depends upon minor forest produce and labor activity. They are totally dependent upon rain for paddy cultivation. Their annual income is less than 35 thousand rupees and more than 90% of the people are below the poverty line. Women are mostly illiterate and only a few percentages are able to complete their education. People usually live in kachha house with fewer access to the benefits of the government schemes. (Satyajeet Singh Kosariya, 2016)

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE - GARIABAND

INDICATORS	GARIABAND	CHHATTISGARH	INDIA
POPULATION	5,57,199	25,545,198	1,210,854,997
SEX RATIO	1020	991	940
SC POPULATION		12.28%	16.63%
ST POPULATION		30.62%	8.63%
LITERACY RATE (%)	68.26%	70.28%	74.04%
MALE	2,75,794	12,832,895	623,724,248
FEMALE	2,81,405	12,712,303	586,469,174

CENSUS DATA 2011

PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

Panchayati Raj Institutions promotes for greater participation of the ordinary citizens in their own governance. The 73rd Amendment Act passed by the India Parliament in the year 1992 of the democratic decentralization process enables decentralized governance through PRIs in the rural areas. These institutions offers the common citizens to participate in the process of village planning and implementation of various government development schemes through interacting with the elected representatives directly and ensure that their interests are being effectively served and funds properly utilized. These PRIs function at the village, intermediate and district level.

The term “Panchayat” literally means assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community for carrying out the general affairs of the village. Here gram Panchayats constitutes for the basic units of administration. Panchayati Raj was advocated by Mahatma Gandhi which advocated that each village will be responsible for their own affairs and to be the foundation of India’s Political system. His literalvision for a village was “Gram Swaraj” (Village Self Governance) and adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish Panchayats in various states. The history of Panchayati Raj in India reflects that on 24th April 1993, the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions and it was extended to the tribal areas of eight states namely Bihar, Gujarat, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra & Rajasthan since December 1996. To date Panchayati Raj System exists in all the states except Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Panchayati Raj system in India extends to all the Union Territories except Delhi. The Act aims at providing 3 tier system of Panchayati Raj to hold Panchayat elections consistently every five years to provide reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women members, to appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district. (A.K. Mishra, 2011)

PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN CHHATTISGARH

A three-tier Panchayat System operates in the Chhattisgarh state with Gram Panchayat at the village level, Janpad Panchayat at the intermediate block level and Zila Panchayat at the district level. Additionally Gram Sabha acts as a basic unit in the Panchayati Raj mechanism. The first panchayat elections were held in Chhattisgarh in the year Jan’ 2005. Gram Panchayats constitutes the smallest unit of elected local self-governance at the village level. The elected Panchs and a Sarpanch heads the Gram Panchayat proceedings and village affairs. Sarpanch is deputed by an Up- Sarpanch and also a Secretary who may service one or more Gram Panchayats. Secretary is appointed by the State government who services a Gram Panchayat or a group of two or more Gram Panchayats and is responsible for maintenance of records of the Gram Panchayat and administratively responsible to the Chief Executive Officer of the Janpad Panchayat. General Administration Committee, Construction & Development Committee and Education, Health & Social Welfare Committee are the three standing committees constituted by the elected members. (Paul, The Right to Information and Panchayati Raj Institutions: Chhattisgarh as a Case Study, 2006)

There is a Gram Sabha for every village which provides a local platform to the registered voters in a village to meet and discuss on local development problems, analyze the development and administrative actions of their elected representatives thus ensuring transparency and accountability. One of the crucial factors is that it provides an opportunity for participation of all the sections of people in a village may be Dalits, tribal or women and other marginalized groups. All the people can actively participate in planning and implementation of local development issues of the village. The Chhattisgarh PR Act 1993 provides for special powers to the Gram Sabha who can monitor and question the functioning of Gram Panchayat in subjects to preparing Annual plans for the villages, implementing its decisions on projects valued up to Rs. 3 lakhs. Thus a Gram Sabha can be constituted for villages, hamlets or even a habitation and every three months one meeting is to be scheduled and conducted in a tribal dominated Panchayat. These meetings are to be presided over by any member of the Scheduled Tribes of the Gram Sabha and not the Sarpanch or Up- Sarpanch. (Chhattisgarh Scheduled Areas Gram Sabha (Constitution, Procedure of Meeting and Conduct of Business) Rules, 1998)

Janpad Panchayat

Collection of villages makes a Block and each District is divided into many such blocks. A Janpad Panchayat is constituted for each block whereby the members are elected by the registered voters in a block divided into constituency. Each constituency elects a member and one-fifth of the Gram Panchayat Sarpanches work on a rotational basis for a period of 1 year. A Janpad Panchayat is headed by a President and a Vice-President elected by and from the elected members. A Chief Executive Officer also works over the proceedings and administration who is vested with the executive power for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of the Act.

Zila Panchayat

Zila Panchayat is constituted for each district and comprises of members elected by the district voters. They usually comprise of the members of Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and State Legislative Assembly returned from the district. The Panchayat is headed by a President and Vice-President elected by and from among the elected members.

A Zila Panchayat and a Janpad Panchayat can constitute standing committees from amongst its elected members on General Administration Committee, Agriculture Committee, Communication & Works Committee, Education Committee, Co-operation & Industries Committee etc. to carry out the administrative works.

Tribal Areas and Panchayat System in Chhattisgarh

Since a majority of the population comprises of tribal demography in Chhattisgarh, a large proportion of the state has been declared as Schedule V Areas under the Indian Constitution obligated with special rights. The districts namely Koriya, Surguja, Jashpur, Bastar, Dantewada, Korba and Kanker are covered fully under the Schedule V and the districts of Bilaspur, Durg, Raipur, Dhamtari, Raigarh, Rajnandgaon are partially covered under the Schedule V. It was in 1997, that the State Government added a new provision to the existing Panchayati Raj legislation for Panchayats in Scheduled Areas in Chhattisgarh. The 73rd Amendment in the Constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution provides for one-third of the total seats reserved for women members in Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Backward Castes and General caste

in Grampradhan/ Sarpanch of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat and District Panchayat. (Ram Babu, 2015)

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh comes from a humble poor background of a tribal community. Due to the patriarchal and social pressure she was only able to complete her education till class Vth. Her aspiration to study higher couldn't be fulfilled due to the poor economic condition of her parents. At a very lower age she was married to Sh. Adharu Ram Gond of her Gond community. Adharu Ram Gond is an ex-Sarpanch of his village whereby he has worked towards the economic and social progress of her village. She is gifted with two sons and a daughter and enrolled in government schools. She hopes her dreams of higher education would be fulfilled by his children. Family is totally dependent upon agriculture which specializes in vegetable cultivation. But the vegetation is totally rain-fed and they are fully dependent upon the rainfall for a good agricultural production. They grow vegetables by fetching water from distant sources since the irrigation system is not well developed in the village nor they can't afford to install such expensive systems. It is very difficult to meet the ends of giving a good life to children with such meagre income. Despite all the hardships she is very determined to progress the future of his children.

CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES ADOPTED

Being from the family where her husband served as the Sarpanch for the village Devri, the sight of Gram Panchayat meetings and interaction with governmental administrative officers was a common sight for her. During the meetings, Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh used to accompany her husband on most of the Panchayat affairs and literally gained a fair bit of knowledge about the administrative proceedings of Panchayat. During these visits she witnessed that there were hardly any women being present in the Gram Panchayat meetings be it for higher castes or women belonging to the weaker sections of the society. No women members of the village would file their nomination in the Panchayat elections or interested in the proceedings of the Panchayat. As a result there were no issues or problems in context to women members presented on the Panchayat meetings platform. Even if some women be present in the meetings she would hardly speak due to lack of proper communication skills. She realized that their poor socio-economic condition, social norms and culture acts as an impediment in their participation. Even being a tribal women and aware of the problems faced by the women members in the village she decided to take a step forward in improving the socio-economic profile of her village. She knew on gaining a leadership position she could be able to bring about some changes and this could be possible only when she becomes a Sarpanch. She decided to contest elections.

When she discussed all these issues with her husband Sh. Adhura Ram Gond (an ex-Sarpanch of the village) her husband was the first to motivate her to contest elections and she gained a confidence that she is competent for the job. In most of the cases it's the spouses who act as the inhibiting factor for women members to contest elections but in case of Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh it remained a contrasting factor. Her mentor and husband Sh. Adhura Singh provided her the basics of functioning of Gram

Panchayats and simultaneously he helped in building a network for her with the Block development Officers and other administrative officers to gain more understanding and knowledge about the Panchayat functioning. Her first target was to bring maximum number of women members into the Gram Panchayat meetings. Many women representatives didn't bore the knowledge that a sitting fee is provided for attending Panchayat meetings. She disseminated the same message among the women representative of the village which later became a motivating factor for all to attend meetings. Her main objective was to erase people's memory in context to the women's stake and position in the village of being rooted only to household activities. Every male member in the village is to realize that women are yet another disadvantage group and needs a representation out of the household chores. Smt. Girja first caught hold of those consensus women members holding the same belief and opinion as of hers. To educate and empower other women members she with her team went house to house with an agenda of women's rights in a society. To make her campaign more fruitful her team carried a sticker to be walled on the door of household. The sticker was nothing but presented her symbol in contesting elections. The election campaigning team ensured that the stickers are displayed at the common place like tea stalls, market and the village buses connecting to other villages. Further the team ensured that not a single women member from the weaker section of the society is left to be approached. Smt. Girja's husband was influential in approaching the male members of his village who could support her in winning elections. Sh. Adhura Ram is held in high opinion amongst the village demography since during his tenure as Sarpanch he contributed a lot to the village by resolving crucial issues. Smt. Girja started participating in various forms and discussions related to women's rights and at the same time validate for maximum number of women members from her village present at the forum. A situation arose where the women representatives were hurt for raising their voice at the socio-economic concern for their village at the Panchayat meeting. They also had to face the abusive language from male counterparts when they placed their views. This in turn had a demotivating effect on the members. To counter such factors, Smt. Girja was purposeful in building confidence among the members to face such situations and dispose of the matters in a positive manner but endorsed for such voice being heard at the Panchayat meetings. With all the hardships being taken by Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh for almost a year, finally she won the Panchayat elections with a great margin. She dedicated the victory to all her team members and women members of the village.

A **EVEMENTS**

Winning with a major difference in votes from counterparts provided a major source of motivation for Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh to contribute something noteworthy of her responsibilities towards her village. Although familiar with the Sarpanch responsibility due to her husband's political and administrative experience she started working towards the upliftment of her society in a planned manner. Smt. Nagesh was gifted with a very prodigious, hardworking and enthusiastic team. With her team she divided and identified the villages that come under her constitution. A Single Point of contact (SPOC) was assigned for each village whose primary responsibility is to identify the village needs taking into account all the geographical and cultural hindrance. All the SPOC's would then list down the "To do List" in all the

villages. Using the SPOC, important and influential people were identified in the village who could contribute to the economic and social development of the village. Under the leadership of SPOC, small effective working groups were established for each village. During this exercise various problems started popping up in context to Public Distribution Scheme, Open Defecation, poor connectivity of villages and requirement of social dissemination centers etc.

Smt. Nagesh witnessed that the poor implementation of Public Distribution scheme in the village and was reeling under the corruption factor. With the help of Gram Panchayat members she first took the whole initiative under her own jurisdiction and the same was carried out by the SPOC leaders under her supervision. After a span of three months the Public Distribution Scheme was running with its full capacity with a 100% enrollment of eligible households under its banner. With the help of Need Assessment study by SPOC's the connectivity between the villages remained very poor. So under the leadership of Smt. Nagesh a number of roads were constructed and bridges were also progressed over the rivulets. The village used to suffer from contagious diseases most of the time and in the rainy season the situation would go worse. With the help of her SPOC leaders the team was able to analyze the lack of toilets in the village. Under the government's scheme for building up individual toilets at home, she successfully placed a single toilet in each and every household. The most intriguing factor was that all the toilets were connected to water supply. As a result the total village was declared as Open Defecation free village by the collector and awarded from the state government for the same. There was need to preserve the traditional customs of the Community people and support their cultural practices. To safeguard the above Smt. Girja laid the foundation of a Community center to be used by the local people for various social and cultural gatherings. Community Centers act as an important hub for community activity and as social meeting places. The value of social being instills a sense of community satisfaction, sense of safety, an improved built environment and social cohesion among the villagers. One of the crucial contributing factors to the social development was the instigation of Mahila Chaupal in the village. These chaupal acts as platforms whereby women concerns and their discrimination are being addressed to take care of a women's dignity. These chaupal discussed on violence against women, conducted open house discussions gender perceptions, documentaries and films in context to women safeguard and self-esteem were screened to disseminate information of women's rights. For the first time Mitanian Day was celebrated in the village to showcase the leadership efforts of the women members in the society. Her village Devri also constituted forest lands with forest dwelling communities. With a point to support the nature conservation and ensuring livelihood food security of the forest dwelling inhabitants i.e. Scheduled Tribes a number of tribal families were registered a land under the Forest Rights Act 2006. Under the FRA 2006, the tribal communities were granted legal recognition of their forests and it marked a beginning towards giving communities and the public a voice in forests and wildlife conservation.

Major Highlights of her good work

- To have a better connectivity road was constructed from Gonbora to Nisenidador village. These villages were devoid of any permanent roads and only pathways were present to reach these villages. During the rainy season these villages were very difficult to reach since the pathways won't be visible

due to rain water. The villagers use bicycle to reach these villages. Planning and discussing with the community at the Village Panchayats, Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh was able to build the road for the village.

- There are rivulets between the villages which hinders their inter-connectivity. Under the leadership of Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh, micro-planning and participation from the local organizations, a bridge was possible between Gonbora to Nisenidador. The rivulets made possible a four wheeler pathway and thus road transportation and communication could be accessed by all.
- The Public Distribution Scheme saw a new birth under the chairmanship of Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh and 100% enrollment of eligible household got enrolled under this initiative.
- MahilaChoupal was given a new platform at the Panchayat level whereby every women members in the village got a platform to express their concern and domestic distress. All the members assist together to resolve the problem.
- Open defecation being a major problem in the village, Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh made ways for building up individual toilets in every household and the village was declared Open Defecation Free in the whole district. Cleanliness campaigns were conducted throughout the village to disseminate the benefits of clean sanitation.
- Mostly the village people being illiterate they were facing serious problems in opening an account in the bank and carry out the bank transactions. Also the presence of a single bank in the village the tribal people found living in the far off areas of forests weren't able to access the bank facilities. Smt. Girja Bai introduced the concept of Customer Service Center in the village whereby the CSC executive would approach to the village people than vice-versa and making the dream of digital transactions a reality.
- Under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojna, eligible families were able to access the government schemes and found a shelter for their family.
- Through the introduction of Forest Rights Act 2006, 79 families were able to get legal rights of their lands and their inhabited area.
- The Gram Sabha meetings witnessed a sharp rise in the presence of women representatives from 5% to 60%.

LESSONS LEARNT

Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh presents a clear example of how women members with the motivation from their spouse can inculcate confidence and attitudinal change despite the constraints from their male counterparts. There are less participation of women members in the politico-administrative institutions due to their lack of interest. But with proper training and given the confidence to communicate in exchanging their ideas they can prove to be a great asset and contribute towards the socio-economic development of the village. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and domestic fronts, these issues can be resolved given a platform like MahilaChoupal whereby they are educated on their rights and involve themselves in policy and decision making. There remains a myth that women are unable to maintain a balance and feel incompetent in executing their responsibilities on administrative

fronts at the societal platform. Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh was able to deliver efficiently and effectively on both the societal and domestic fronts with the support from her spouse.

To win Panchayat elections, Smt. Girja Bai Nagesh was able to carve out new ideas to gather a momentum in enrolling more women members under her leadership. She focused on politically educating her electors which reduced the number of proxies and thus these responsible electors reduced the role of money power and other parochial loyalties which largely determine the effective merit of winning voters and elections. Creating SPOC to carry out the need assessment study of her village was another such area where she proved her analytical mindset in resolving the basic issues of her village. Women with political affiliations or background are preferred more towards heading a village or becoming a Sarpanch. In case of Smt. Girja Nagesh; the political experience and past work history of her husband was an added advantage in winning her the election.

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