

The Catalysts



This book is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of women and to their innate belief in self and their solidarity, which gives them confidence & a will to fight for change. And to those men who partner them in change. And also to all those, women & men, who support them in change.



Any person can be a catalyst, a change agent, a transformer in any situation, any place. It only requires vision, initiative, patience, persistence, courage and faith to be a transforming leader. Our life situations beckoned us to be one. We, now are the Catalysts for change.



Prince Machiavelli, the famed Italian politician and thinker of the Renaissance period whose works on political thought have become major planks of political philosophy, in his political treatise on the dynamics of change, stated that,

“It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. The reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favour; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.”

Machiavelli splendidly captures the essence of why it is difficult to pursue change not only in relation to political power but also in all forms of processes in which people are involved. Whenever change is an issue there are at least three players: the change agents - people that seek to lead change, the anti change agents - those that resist change and finally, the ordinary people that are pro change but would rather have status quo for “the certainty of misery is better than the misery of uncertainty”.

Initiating a new order is not only difficult but at times also a dangerous exercise. Those that profit from the existing order, enjoy the benefits of status quo and therefore have the most to lose from any change represent the biggest impediment. Then there are a lot of people who support change but are reluctant to show it because they fear that those benefiting from the status quo have control of the power structures, which can be used against them if they support change. Also there is certain inertia in people whereby they are more comfortable with an existing order for no reason other than that they are used to it, even if they know that the new might benefit them.

But undeterred by all this the catalysts in our midst go about correcting the wrongs and raising their voice against injustice. They keep creating ripples of change in the pond of status quo. Throughout history change agents have been from various social, economic, political and religious backgrounds. In this book our focus

is on those who belong to socially, politically and economically disadvantaged communities from SCRIA's outreach in the desert district of Churu, Rajasthan, including Sri Dungargarh block that has lately been included in the neighboring district of Bikaner.

SCRIA is a non-profit organization working since 1979 in the semi arid region of southern Haryana and in arid districts of northern Rajasthan. Life in the villages here is patriarchal, traditional and harsh. Dependent on the vagaries of nature it revolves around agrarian pursuits. In this backdrop SCRIA works towards building capacities of rural communities for their active & meaningful participation in self governance processes so that it is inclusive of and accountable to all citizens. To achieve this SCRIA organizes communities - mainly women, facilitates social political & economic empowerment, promotes local initiatives for inclusive & accountable governance and for the management of natural resources.

India is a republic, wherein the exercise of sovereign power is lodged in representatives elected by the people. But representative government only works when the citizenry is well informed on important issues and where the citizenry holds its elected representatives responsible for how they function for the constant improvement of the well being of entire population and for fair distribution of benefits. At present the peripheral role of citizens' in processes of governance and development does not ensure informed choices by them or inclusiveness and accountability in governance or fair access to development benefits by a vast majority of people in the country. The present status calls for systemic changes with thrust on strengthening people and people's institutions to bring qualitative and quantitative improvement in their lives.

For influencing public attitude for this change, organized efforts and actions over a period of time are required and for this change to be peaceful and non-violent citizens must be geared & primed for desired alteration and modification. To initiate the process of peaceful change, SCRIA facilitates support systems for citizens' role in the decision making of social, political, economic and developmental issues. SCRIA in its outreach villages assists women, from landless or marginal farming families & from socially disadvantaged communities, in organizing themselves into groups and federations whereby they identify their critical problems, prioritize them, avail of opportunities offered by governmental & non governmental agencies and fight against social evils. Men from concerned villages are also involved in various change initiatives.

Taking reins of local initiatives in their hands these women & men act as catalysts. They embark on change missions for promoting meaningful participation of citizens in governance processes, on social issues and in ensuring gender sensitivity in village development initiatives & in public services. Discussions, community meetings, complaints to "decision makers", negotiations, public demonstrations, rallies for support from general public, memorandum to administration, voluntary labor, press conferences and protest march are

some of the tools that they take recourse to during local initiatives. SCRIA supports by providing appropriate information, networking and by ensuring that the initiatives remain lawful. The catalysts themselves manage these support systems.


It's not easy to be an agent of change, particularly when one is from the bottom of social heap. The agents of status quo hit back with a vengeance. Against great odds, adverse social circumstances and personal sacrifices many women & men have sought justice, made their voices heard and above all have made a beginning in an extremely conventional society and a limiting system of governance. The hardships endured by the protagonists cover a wide range of malice from abduction, brutal beatings to social ostracizing which would have made an ordinary woman or man lose its sanity and abandon the struggle. But not these spirited catalysts. Such tribulations have made their resolve to fight for change, truth, equality and dignity only stronger. In this more than 7500 women and men from 297 villages in the district support them.

Initiatives challenging the putrid state of affairs due to status quo are very many. And many more are ongoing. Some of the stories of change have been collated in this book. They present a glimpse from the lives of Catalyst women & men, though on request many incidents of personal hardships have been omitted. These accounts provide a unique opportunity to understand their tribulations and triumphs. We hope that the stories will provoke, motivate and activate people to act for systemic changes in society to bring qualitative enrichment in the lives of millions in this country. Be a Catalyst, blow like a wind creating ripples of change in the sand of time.

Senoo Rawat

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Who is a citizen?

Only those women who have lost their husbands attend village Panchayat meetings and as your husbands are still alive you have no business to be here," said men to a group of twenty women who had come to participate in an ongoing Gram Sabha meeting. Refusing to be intimidated, Jiya Kanwar softly said, "our husbands are dead but as your wives are still alive what are you all doing here?" Since that day men of Ratnadesar village have not harangued women on the issue. Now, many more women in Ratnadesar village regularly attend Gram Sabha meetings, present proposals for development initiatives and are involved in village vigilance committees. Most of these women belong to the 6 women groups facilitated by SCRIA since 2000, while others join in solidarity. These women have not given up prevalent social customs like purdah [veil] but from behind the veil have started to revolt against being treated as voiceless beings relegated to domestic travails, agricultural chores and procreation.

The catalyst for this subtle but definitive attitudinal change in Ratnadesar village is Jiya Kunwar, a mother of six from an economically disadvantaged family who does tailoring jobs to make ends meet and take care of an ailing husband. Till few years back like thousands of other women in the region Jiya's universe was limited to her house & family, she was not involved in 'worldly affairs' that were anyway considered to be affairs for men. But all this did not insulate her from witnessing the continuous exploitation of socially and economically poor in her village. Ratnadesar shares Panchayat with the neighboring village of Loonasar and for many years an upper caste man, Phool Singh, from village Loonasar was managing to be elected as Sarpanch. Phool Singh blatantly indulged in corrupt practices in all development works & welfare schemes, depriving the deserving from just benefits. One day, Jiya raised this matter in women groups' monthly meeting. She did not get any response from others; so on her own she complained to the Sub Divisional Magistrate [SDM] of the area about the fraud perpetuated on the poor & the tax payers by Phool Singh. After few days when no action was taken on her complaint she approached the District Collector. The Collector immediately initiated an inquiry, but 'friendly' officials informed Sarpanch Phool Singh about it, who immediately took steps to put things in order. The official inquiry had an immense effect on group members who then decided to support

Jiya in local actions. They also made their mind to attend Gram Sabhas regularly.

For many years home brewing of liquor in village Ratnadesar was so rampant that it vitiated public order. When after umpteen requests Panchayat did not take any action against it, Jiya persuaded women group members to take matter in their own hands. In the summer of 2005, they declared that henceforth any family that brewed liquor at home would be reported to authorities. The announcement had an immediate effect and most people stopped home brewing. Taking this further Panchayat was then asked by women to shift the licensed liquor vend at least 2 kms away from village perimeter. The Panchayat complied under duress.

During Panchayat elections in 2005 Phool Singh got his sister in law, Dakha, elected as Sarpanch. As Dakha lived in Delhi, Phool Singh became defacto Sarpanch. Incensed Jiya brought a resolution in Gram Sabha demanding the presence of Sarpanch Dakha and other elected women representatives in Gram Sabha meetings. She publicized the issue of missing women representatives in newspapers also. Sarpanch Dakha and other women representatives were then compelled to attend to their duties in person.

After ensuring the presence of elected women representatives in Panchayat meetings, Jiya and her partners in change addressed the problem of non-issuance of subsidized ration by the local Public Distribution System [PDS] vendor, who was incidentally Phool Singh's brother. The outlet was



in Loonasar village and the vendor regularly did not issue the subsidized food items to intended families from Ratnadesar. Instead he would sell the items in the 'open market' at huge profit. This was continuing for many years with no redress. A group of women, led by Jiya, met SDM and shared the problem. They cautioned him that if he did not address their problem they would approach his senior. Not taking any chance, the SDM this time took the complaint seriously and in 2006 Ratnadesar got its own PDS outlet in the village.

Ratnadesar is a big village with no source of potable water of its own. Water came from a source 15 kms away and as the same pipeline came via Loonasar the people of Ratnadesar rarely got water in their village. Complaints to public authorities made no difference. Jiya once again rallied women in the village and with support from SCRIA

renovated 2 village ponds and got 30 traditional rain harvesting tanks constructed. But this was not enough to fulfill the water needs of the village, so one summer day in 2006 nearly 40 women of Ratnadesar, under Jiya's leadership, again went to SDM's office. Along with they took their unwashed kids, clothes & utensils that they dumped on SDM's table. This got the attention of public officials who within few hours' reconnected water pipes that were lying broken for more than 1½ years and in a month's time a parallel pipe line was laid for Ratnadesar village.

The continuous fight of citizen catalyst Jiya for social, political, economic & development justice got her 'powerful enemies'. In 2007, one night police raided Jiya's house claiming that she is harboring a proclaimed offender. They beat her husband & kids and dragged her husband Hanuman in to their jeep. As soon as the police jeep rounded the corner, hundreds of angry women & men from the village blocked its way. Sensing trouble most policemen fled while villagers grabbed one. Jiya shielded the policeman and insisted that he must not be beaten for he was just carrying out orders. At her insistence the policeman was locked away safely. In the meanwhile villagers called the local police station and told them to keep away from their village and demanded a meeting with officials from district headquarters. To unravel the truth & defuse the situation, senior officials from Churu district came to Ratnadesar where people told officials that they took a policeman 'hostage' so that "we could tell you the facts of the matter" and "police otherwise does not listen to people". During

people's negotiations with officials it came to light that the police did not have any 'real' complaint or arrest warrant for Jiya's husband but as certain rich and powerful people in the village wanted to 'teach Jiya a lesson' a police raid was 'organized'. Next day two-bus load of villagers met District Collector demanding inquiry and action. An inquiry was held; few policemen were suspended and on others departmental disciplinary action was taken.

Recently, a 28-year-old man from an influential family in the village raped a 60-year-old woman from a poor family. Victim's family & village did not register the case with police for 'it would shame the village'. When Jiya heard about it, aghast she called for a village meeting where she insisted on legal action against the aggressor, who meanwhile was boasting to all that 'no one can do anything against me'. At last a police case was registered, the perpetrator arrested and the matter is now sub-judice. Jiya and her pro change partners are involved in many issues in their village including the monitoring of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Citizens like Jiya have given a clear message to authorities that even if they are socially and

economically poor they are ready to initiate action for justice. As Jiya says, "Who is a citizen? Are we not free citizens of a free country with a right to raise voice against injustice & corruption?? Are we just sheep to be led unquestioningly and fleeced for bribes & taxes???"



Yes, we are leaders

“Going around the whole village like a leader, I’ll catch your mistakes one day,” darkly muttered, Sarpanch Ramlal. His ire was directed at Achuki & Kamla, who had approached village Panchayat about serious irregularities in BPL [Below Poverty Line] families list in which tractor owning families were listed as poor while the real poor were left out. In the lives of rural poor inclusion of a family in the Below Poverty Line list has extreme importance, as it is a way to get out of the quagmire of poverty by availing numerous state benefits. The interest among non-poor too for inclusion in the List is immense & the issue is very “political”. Irritated, Ramlal told the two to send their men, as he will not talk to women. “Why?” asked Achuki, “Do women not live in this village? Did women not vote for you? We will not send in our men. You will have to talk to us or we will tell people about it in the nine neighboring villages”. Faced with public ignominy, as promised by Achuki & Kamla if the list was not corrected, the Panchayat had to revise the BPL families’ list.

This kind of public confrontation was very new to Achuki & Kamla who had resolved to raise their voice against those who for personal gains continually undermined the poor in the village. Achuki and Kamla are from village Khaari Chaabri and belong to farming families from different communities, with modest land holding. Till 2004





they had not known each other even though they are from the same village. They first became friends when SCRIA facilitated women's group in their village. Since then both have become good friends and firm partners in change.

The word Khaari Chaabri means salty container and true to its name the village is in a saline water belt. Potable water is scarce in desert but in saline zones it is devoid of any. Absence of a village pond in Khaari Chaabri compounded its water woes. A water pipeline in the village brought potable water from 35 kms away but a long pipeline and too much supply en route did not ease the water situation. Women's repeated requests to Panchayat for a pond fell on deaf ears. One day Kamla & Achuki proposed to their group that the women should construct the pond. They requested SCRIA for technical & financial input. With the help of their group members, the two collected nearly Rs.60,000 in cash and kind from families in the village. SCRIA provided Rs.90,000 and technical inputs. For 28 days, in the relentless heat of desert summer, more than 38 women worked from sunup to sundown. They made mistakes one day and corrected them the next, they braved ridicule from the skeptics but did not give up. They dug soil, shored up the

embankment, cleared the catchment zone and got their pond ready. During monsoon when the pond overflowed with water the whole village witnessed the event.

While the village was celebrating its first ever pond and the first pond by women in the region, Achuki & Kamla realized that one pond was not enough to provide water throughout the year. They decided to tackle the contentious issue of water supply. In December 2006 the two motivated women from seven other affected villages along with their own, for a protest demonstration at Sub Divisional Magistrate's [SDM] office. More than 100 women reached SDM's office one morning. The officials told them not to disturb and return home. Angry at official apathy women shouted slogans against them and pitched their camp. Alerted about women's protest, print & television media reached SDM's office and started interviewing protesting women. Rattled, the officials invited representatives for talks, but Kamla said, "All of us have come to SDM for help so SDM must come out and talk to us all." At last, SDM met all and assured them of immediate action. He also gave his phone numbers so that they could telephone him about their problems rather than come all the way to his office.

Within 24 hours water supply to the eight villages was restored and in less than a month work on a new pipeline started. The news of this first ever protest demonstration by women in the region reached far & wide with local MLA wondering about 'which political party is sponsoring them'. The water saga did not end with this. Work on pipeline stalled soon. For two years nothing was done about it in spite of repeated reminders. Achuki then filed an application under Right to Information Act. Within 20 days of filing the application work on pipeline was completed, beating the 30 days statutory deadline for reply.

The courage and relentless pursuit for justice by Achuki & Kamla prompted the school teacher, of senior school in the village, to spill beans about the siphoning off of grains, meant for mid day meal, by the school principal. The teacher told them that they alone could stop this as his department would not do anything about it. Achuki & Kamla confronted the principal on the issue who after initial bluster confessed to his misdeeds. He was made to refund the two sacks of grain he had misappropriated

along with a fine in cash. Women's group bought fans, mats, blackboard, etc. for school with the fine.

When Panchayat did not hold Gram Sabhas, Achuki & Kamla again met SDM. Soon after the meeting, Panchayat held Gram Sabha that was attended by SDM also, who specially referred to Achuki & Kamla's role in the progress of their village. Since then Achuki, Kamla & other women regularly attend village meetings in gwara, common meeting place in village, along with men. This is another first in an extremely limiting patriarchal region where the mere thought of women sitting together with men in the gwara is considered blasphemous. Whenever there are 'official visitors' in the village now, Panchayat especially invites Achuki & Kamla to share their views with the visitors. They are now acknowledged as leaders. Though, Achuki & Kamla are sometimes tempted to ask Ram Lal Sarpanch, "As you are unable to find our mistakes, shall we give you spectacles?" But they refrain, and instead do say loudly, "Yes, we are leaders and are ready to help others who want to be leaders too."



Right to be informed

Please let me know how many buses have been given permit to ply in village Jinrasar; their timings; their registration numbers; the exact route of these buses...,” narrated Uma Ram to his son, who was writing an application on his behalf to Road Transport Office [RTO] of Churu, seeking information under the Right to Information Act. Uma Ram, an illiterate but very aware farmer of very modest means, was doing this at the behest of two dozen tempo drivers who had been forced out of business by local bus operators. Tempos are convenient and reliable means of public transport in this rural region but time and again they are runoff the road by bus operators who want sole monopoly in public transport business. The bus operators usually run their buses as per their wish and change routes as per their convenience, with no regard to the suffering of paying public. As a result of Uma’s application, an urgent meeting was held between the bus operators and the RTO where it was decided that bus operators will ‘permit’ tempos to ply in three villages, which included Jinrasar also. Uma’s one query for information restored convenience to travelers & livelihood to tempo drivers. Now both bus and tempo operators do not charge fare from Uma, one in gratitude & one in fear.

Uma Ram is always ready to take up cudgels for others and actively pitches in various village development initiatives, raises issues of governance

and actively opposes violence against women. Some years back, his daughter was killed by her in laws as he could not give her more dowry. Uma Ram had relentlessly pursued the case and ensured due punishment for the murdering in-laws. Since then his quest for justice on behalf of other women victims of violence continues. His family is not always pleased with his endless crusades on behalf of others, as he tends to ‘neglect his family responsibilities’. Uma relentlessly motivates others to raise voice against exploitation, prejudices and rampant corruption in all spheres of public systems & services. Currently, he is pursuing seven cases in court against corruption by elected representatives and public officials.



Another crusader for public accountability and justice is Badri Prasad of Dharmaas village. Like Uma, he too is an active volunteer with SCRIA. Badri as a member of village vigilance committee, formed under the PRI Act, to oversee physical work undertaken by Panchayat & related financial dealings had been very diligent in his duties. Many a times he has prevented Panchayat from carrying out futile works in the name of development. In 2006 when Panchayat planned a rain water tank & boundary wall for the vast village cremation ground, Badri challenged the illogical plan and instead proposed that Panchayat repair the derelict Anganwaadi [daycare center], construct shelter for community bull cows and build water tank in secondary school of the village. The Panchayat was not pleased with the alternate proposal but as Badri had convinced most people in the village about the futility of providing water & protection to ghosts at cremation ground, they complied with Badri's proposal.

In early 2008, prior to the implementation of NREGS, village vigilance committees were disbanded and as per the statutory requirement village social audit forums were formed. For Sarpanch Radhakrishan this was a god sent opportunity to get rid of Badri.



Contrary to established norms, Sarpanch quietly formed an audit forum. As he expected 'trouble' from Badri he got a fictitious letter from Block Development Office [BDO] stating that state officials have selected village audit forum members. When Badri got to know about the formation of forum by state officials he insisted on written verification from BDO, but BDO refused to do so. Sensing the gravity of situation Sarpanch destroyed the said letter, called a village meeting & reconstituted the social audit forum. Badri was selected by all as its member. In his new role too he is quite active. His constant endeavor is to ensure that work applications are processed on time, job cards are made, allotment of work & its payment is on time, the work undertaken is of use to village and all involved in the process fulfill their obligations.

Badri's reformist enthusiasm and missions for public good has earned him many powerful opponents who do not hesitate in missing or creating an opportunity to foment trouble for him. Many a times he has been falsely framed in criminal cases including violence against women but he relentlessly fights on for truth & justice. The people of Dharmaas usually support him.

Dhanne Singh of village Fransa is barely educated but this has not deterred him from being an integral part of various information campaigns of SCRIA. He is an active member of SCRIA facilitated men's group in the village and actively supports women groups in their various local initiatives. Since 2004 Dhanne has selflessly devoted his time & energy in more than a dozen campaigns for activating local governance institutions, promoting rain harvesting, sharing salient features of Right to Information Act & National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, mobilizing citizens during elections for state assembly and national parliament, etc.. In his mission, of bringing awareness through information, he quite often gets embroiled in disputes with those whose vested interests are affected when common citizen becomes informed. Many a times such people have visited his village and threatened his wife and children with dire consequences. All this does not deter Dhanne who continues to be a 'spoilsport' for the exploiters of poor. Dhanne is so solemn about his mission that



just before state assembly elections in 2008, when SCRIA organized a citizens' awareness campaign Dhanne was not informed about it, for all knew that he was busy harvesting a fully ripe crop, a task that could not be deferred for another week. But Dhanne got to hear about the ongoing

campaign, very annoyed at being excluded he left harvesting work half way through and joined the campaign.

His vigilant attitude and a strong sense for justness has improved the functioning of village school. Hanutaram, the school master, was defacto in charge of the school & its midday meal program. It was well known in the village that Hanutaram devoted more time to his farm & livestock than in teaching children; but as he belonged to Fransa people did not complain, for that would have 'shown the whole village in poor light'. Once Dhanne caught Hanutaram carrying a sack of grain from school, meant for mid day meal for children, to his home. Dhanne reported it to the education department, who in turn did a superficial inquiry acquitting Hanutaram of any wrongdoing. Dhanne convinced people in the village that they must look into the matter for it was directly affecting their children. Going through the records people found fudged school records that among other things showed more children in school than there actually were. After this people got Hanutaram transferred and got another teacher from a faraway village. Similarly, when Sarpanch refused to tell the names of social audit forum members Dhanne filed an RTI application at SDM's office. Sarpanch immediately made the list public and tried to bribe Dhanne with the post of Deputy Sarpanch in the next Panchayat term. Dhanne politely turned down the offer and thanked the Sarpanch for his kindness while mentioning that he, Dhanne, could contest next Panchayat elections for the post of Sarpanch.

A veiled reformer

“As we will be going to jail for practically kidnapping you we would rather go after beating you up”, Santra of Loonch told Bhanwarlal of village Asalsar. She also told him that they will beat him as many times as he has beaten Teeju, his wife, and then will ask Teeju to do so. Santra and eight other women from Loonch had brought Bhanwarlal forcibly to Loonch in a jeep and then tied him to a Peepul tree. Women were very angry with Bhanwarlal as he regularly beat Teeju mercilessly, had forced her to leave their house and would not let her meet their two children. Bhanwarlal, who was an unskilled laborer with a small land holding, was an ideal family man when sober but drunk, he was devil incarnate. Teeju living with her parents at Loonch had shared her marital problems with members of SCRIA facilitated women’s group. Livid, Santra persuaded others to take up cudgels on Teeju’s behalf. When discussions with Bhanwarlal remained meaningless women of Loonch forcibly brought him to their village. There, tied to a tree, he apologized to Teeju and other women for his conduct and promised, in writing, to never beat Teeju again. To ensure that Bhanwarlal lived upto his promise Santra accompanied Teeju to her in-law’s village and gave two phone numbers to neighbors, so that they could inform her if Bhanwarlal ever beat Teeju. It is over four years now; Teeju is living peacefully with her husband and children. Bhanwarlal’s ‘treatment’ had a sobering

affect on other wife beaters also in the village, who have now stopped the ‘daily ritual’ of wife beating as they fear being tied to a tree. The daughters and wives of Loonch rest easy now for they cannot be beaten again.

Buoyed by the success in Teeju’s case, Santra proposed that women group should take decisive stand in the Panchayat elections of 2005. In village Loonch, either of the two rich families always managed to get the post of Sarpanch, but never worked as per the aspirations



of the majority in the village. So, Santra persuaded others in the village to elect a Sarpanch who was as poor as most of them. They decided on Annapurna as their candidate and ensured her victory. With the support of women's group Annapurna started on her new responsibility as village head. But, her husband Parsaram had his own ambitions to 'run' the village. In the guise of helping Annapurna with her work he took over on the sly. Very soon Parsaram fell prey to the temptation of making a quick buck. In this he was actively encouraged & assisted by village Panchayat official. Once, inspite of Annapurna's pleas and threats, Parsaram

submitted to Block office, false bills along with actual for reimbursement in a development initiative.

Apprehensive of losing people's trust in her due to her

husband's greed, Annapurna told Santra the whole story. When payment was released for actual and fictitious expenses, as per Santra's advise, Annapurna withdrew all money and left for her parents' village. Santra then informed all about the release of payment from district office and told those waiting for reimbursement to contact Parsaram. Fed up with constant requests, sometimes even threats, for due money on one hand and his wife Annapurna's refusal to return or hand him over the money on the other, Parsaram pleaded with Santra to intervene and get his wife back. He had learnt his lesson. He promised to let Annapurna actively carry out her duties as Sarpanch of the village while he managed the fields.

Santra was not always this active in 'public issues'. Her foray in 'public affairs' started in 2004 when she, along with seven other women, went to attend a village meeting. There the women were greeted by men with hostile stares and comments like 'now women are going to wear our turbans, fit their feet in our shoes and will sit in village Chaupal. We might as well go home'. Scared but unflinchingly resolved to participate, Santra presented a proposal for the repair of school wall. When asked to put her thumb impression on the proposal she opted for pen and signed her name. The then Sarpanch, surprised, said, "don't know what this woman will do even from behind the veil".

Santra's courage and her resolve have helped many in her village and in the neighboring villages too. When the list of people eligible



for old age pension left genuine beneficiaries out, Santra gave Panchayat an ultimatum to correct the list or face people's wrath. Within two days all eligible names were included and others deleted.

In 2008, the mate, employed to keep record of work & workers under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in the village, asked for Rs.100 per worker, as bribe, for correctly recording the work on muster roll. Santra and forty other women refused to do so. At the time of payment, Santra and others who did not bribe the mate got one-third of the due amount while others who had bribed but not worked got full payment. Santra refused to take partial payment and told Sarpanch Annapurna about it. Upon inquiry they found that the Mate & Parsaram were partners in this scheme. When confronted Parsaram refused to relent so Santra along with other affected women contacted Block Development Office. An official inquiry was instituted, payment was stopped and muster rolls were scrutinized. Parsaram then sought Santra offering her full payment and some additional money to 'let go of the matter'. Santra refused and insisted on proper payment for all. As a result work details were rerecorded and just amount was paid to all.

Santra also played a pivotal row in restoring village pond that was lying in utter disrepair for several years and in motivating small and marginal farming families to adopt traditional processes for moisture based agriculture that increases yield at least by 300%. And all this while maintaining the tradition of remaining behind the veil.



We dare

You dare to challenge my decisions?" bellowed Khotri's Sarpanch Dhanna Ram, "I've told you, you cannot do anything about the list. It's final. Moreover most of you are associated with SCRIA hence your names cannot be included. The orders are from above, as such only senior officials can do anything about it," he further added. "Alright then we will get it done from senior officials only", replied Chandri. With this Chandri, Jinku and few other women left Panchayat office. The women wanted to know from Sarpanch the criterion adopted for selecting families for the Below Poverty Line [BPL] list. As mentioned in an earlier story, the inclusion of a family's name in the official BPL list has immense significance in the lives of rural poor. Inclusion in the list makes poor families eligible for state sponsored benefits and schemes like heavily subsidized food grains & fuel, bank loans, free education, medical facility, free of cost land for housing, monetary benefits for various purposes, etc.. Hence there is a lot of interest among people to be included in it. The BPL list over the years has become a political 'stick & carrot' and is used for 'rewarding' the politically deserving at the expense of poor families. This was the case in village Khotri also.

After the altercation with Sarpanch, Chandri & Jinku gave an application, under Right to Information Act, to Sub Divisional Magistrate [SDM], seeking information on the BPL families selection process.

The SDM refused to accept the application, forbade his staff to do so and ordered the women out of his office. Angry at SDM's incivility and 'unlawful behavior' Chandri & Jinku sent their application by post with a money order of Rs.10 as processing fee. They then approached the District Collector [DC] and told him about SDM's refusal to accept the application and his rude behavior. SDM was then instructed by his senior officer to provide in time the information sought by women. After 6 weeks Chandri & Jinku received a letter, from



SDM's office, sans envelope, dated five weeks back, informing them that the information sought by them is being processed and will take some time to do so. Annoyed by the extraordinary delay in receiving simple information Chandri & Jinku kept contacting the offices of SDM & DC. In the meantime, families of Chandri & Jinku were being pressurized by Panchayat to withdraw the application. When the two crusaders refused to do so and kept on reminding the officials about their application, the SDM ordered the village Panchayat official to redo the village survey for identifying poor families. Ultimately, names of more than a dozen rich families were struck off the BPL list and equal number of poor families included. The fiasco

forced the Sarpanch to publicly apologize to the two women, who dared to question the decisions of people in authority.

Since this incident Chandri, Jinku and other women became active in matters related to village governance. They regularly attend Gram Sabha meetings, whenever they are held. For one such meeting, nearly fifty women reached the venue before the scheduled hour of 11.00 am. In that meeting the village Panchayat official came an hour late. Soon after starting the meeting he told Chandri to submit their development proposals and leave. Annoyed, Chandri asked, "What are the official timings for the meeting?" "11.00 am to 5.00 pm," replied the official. "Then we will stay here till 5.00 pm," said Chandri. Actually, Jinku had heard the official telling Sarpanch about wanting to leave immediately for some personal work and that he would complete the Gram Sabha proceedings' register later and will get Sarpanch's signature on it some other day. Officially, Gram Sabha proceedings are to be recorded during the meeting, at the end of which it is officially closed with Sarpanch's signature. But this does not happen in reality, for in most villages Gram Sabhas are not held 'openly'. The proceedings' register and other such documents are therefore 'cooked' with fictitious details. Chandri & Jinku knew about it and therefore insisted that they will leave only after Sarpanch had signed the proceedings register. The Panchayat official waited in vain but the women did not budge. They instead initiated discussion on the status of various development initiatives of the government.



All this irritated the official, waiting to go home early, who felt cornered. At four in the evening he at last got the register signed from the Sarpanch and requested an early leave from women. The assembled women graciously granted him leave and asked him not to fix personal engagements, in future, on the day of Gram Sabha. Since this incident the Panchayat and its official are punctual in their attendance at Gram Sabha, whenever it is held.

Though lately the schedule of Gram Sabhas in the district has become so 'strange' that very often Panchayats get a day's notice only, instead of a fortnight in accordance with the statutory stipulation. In the



absence of proper scheduling from district officials and pressure from women for proper notice, Sarpanch Dhanna Ram now avoids unpleasantness by changing the SIM card of his phone just when Gram Sabhas are due.

It had been more than four months but even after numerous complaints, the Public Health & Engineering Department [PHED] officials were not doing anything to repair the broken down water pipeline of the village. It was the summer of 2007 and all residents of Khotri were everyday facing an uphill challenge in securing a pot of potable water. The Panchayat collectively 'washed its hand off' the problem. Chandri, Jinku and other members of women group had to step in and assume responsibility for ending the problem. They contacted senior PHED officials and warned them of an agitation if pipeline was not repaired soon and water supply not resumed. On the other hand they exhorted people in the village to renovate their village pond, lying unused for decades, for harvesting rain. The work on broken pipeline started within hours of the warning and water supply resumed in a day's time. Village pond too was desilted and repaired before the onset of monsoon rains. During monsoon the pond filled to the brim, ensuring water security for at least six months in a year. The pastureland surrounding the pond too was restored for the regeneration of vegetation.

Chandri and Jinku, two ordinary women, continually dare to take up insurmountable challenges and stand up against all those who are not just & fair.

Now we sleep without fear



“**W**hen they come asking for votes they do not bother about our caste but when it is their turn to deliver they suddenly remember it”, a furious Bhanwari mumbled to herself while returning from a Panchayat meeting in village Tendesar, 12 kms away from her village Soniyasar Shivdaan Singh. She was vexed, as the Panchayat did not take her complaint of land grabbing seriously. In fact, when she told the assembled members how her relatives have used forged land documents to usurp their agricultural land, Sarpanch told her to go away as ‘people of her caste cannot have land and are always looking for freebies’. The land in question was a sand dune less than a hectare in area, but for Bhanwari it was the sole means of livelihood for her family of five children and a sickly husband.

Deeply disappointed Bhanwari shared the matter with other group members. After the meeting, seven women accompanied her to land revenue office, where after much ado Bhanwari got a copy of original land deeds. Armed with original possession papers she confronted the land grabbers and threatened them with legal action. Faced with the prospect of criminal charges the relatives surrendered the illegally grabbed land.

Hardships have been constant companions of Bhanwari as she belongs to a very poor family from a socially disadvantaged community. Adversity

never scared her but it also did not let her and her family live in peace. Seven years back her family never had enough to eat and was in perpetual debt to the village moneylender, who at times would call them in the middle of night to work at his fields. Sick or well, Bhanwari's family had no choice but to do unpaid work at all hours or risk moneylender's wrath. In 2002 Bhanwari joined SCRIA facilitated women's group in her village and availed of a small loan. She bought goats from it, reared them and sold the kid goats. From the profits she repaid her loan and bought more goats. She took another loan, this time for a cow. Over the years her micro entrepreneurial ventures helped her pay back the moneylender Rs.27000 she had borrowed for food & other household expenses. Return of the loan in full has raised Bhanwari's social standing in the village and has instilled immense confidence in herself. She has not looked back since. Her family has not become affluent but they do not go hungry any more, they also have modest savings in the post office and most importantly as Bhanwari says, "Now we sleep without fear. No one can now make unreasonable demands on our time & labor."

Truly, Bhanwari is now a force to reckon with in the village. Even though she lives away from village proper she actively takes interest in its governance affairs. Like in all other villages in the area, in Soniyasar Shivdaan Singh too Gram Sabhas were not being held openly. When Bhanwari inquired about it from Panchayat she was curtly told that women were not allowed to attend Gram Sabha meetings. But Bhanwari had heard otherwise during

capacity building events facilitated by SCRIA. So, she mobilized more than hundred women from eight nearby villages who appealed to District Collector to ensure that Gram Sabhas are held on time, people are informed about it and women are allowed to exercise their constitutional right. Soon, village Panchayat officials were upbraided for excluding women from Gram Sabha meetings and were asked to publicly apologize for it. Since then Bhanwari & others are regularly informed in advance about the time, place and sometimes the agenda of Gram Sabha. Though covert efforts to exclude women from the proceedings continue, like in one Gram Sabha meeting Sarpanch asked women to leave once their proposals were recorded by Panchayat official. Unperturbed Bhanwari quietly told the assembled men to also leave as their proposals too had been recorded. Bhanwari and 14 other women, who were there, informed all that their purpose in attending Gram Sabha was not only for getting their proposals recorded but to participate in the proceedings of this basic unit of village governance. At times there aren't many women who accompany her to Gram Sabha as it's held in a village 12 kms away. Women with young children find it tough to make the trip on foot across the sand dunes but Bhanwari prodigiously carries out her duties of a responsible and alert citizen. Over the years, she has ensured that social welfare measures like pension, housing, etc. benefit the deserving.

Recently when Sarpanch distributed kits of improved seeds among people 'close' to him, Bhanwari vociferously protested and complained to the senior officials in the district who ordered redistribution of



seed kits among small & marginal farmers. Similarly, when every summer people in the village struggled to get potable water and the Panchayat did not take any sustainable measure to alleviate the hardship, Bhanwari motivated the forty odd women in her women's group to restore the dilapidated village pond for harvesting rain water. They managed more than 40% of the renovation cost on their own and SCRIA contributed the remaining 60% cost. After a month of backbreaking labor the group restored the pond. Now the village and fifty of its hamlets have access to potable water. Bhanwari, personally does not benefit from it but says, "So what if my family does not benefit from its water. The others are getting benefit. They did not have enough understanding on the issue, but I had, so I worked for their good."



Be it rain harvesting, regeneration of village pasture land, revival of traditional dry land agricultural techniques, the issue of violence against women or of making public services and facilities deliver, Bhanwari leads from the front.



Rules must be same for all

“Let us all make our fodder and fuel stockades in the remaining common land of village Oran”, suggested Mooli during discussions in the emergency meeting of women’s group in her village. “Let’s see what action Panchayat will take. Rules must be same for all”, Shingaari added. The meeting was called to discuss the pressing issue of selective action on encroachments by village Panchayat. Jana had brought the matter to the notice of women’s group of village Chajusar. In Chajusar the common land between village and main road outside the village had been earmarked, for decades, as village Oran [common place for cattle] where during daytime cattle rested and lazed around. For the past seven years rich and influential

people of the village had encroached on a large part of this land, putting many cattle owners to inconvenience. Repeated requests and complaints to Panchayat fell on deaf ears. Jana lived next to the village Oran in a very small plot of land. As she is from a landless family she did not have much space for her goats, so she made a temporary shed in a very small patch of Oran. The size of land encroached by Jana was many times smaller than that encroached by others. Within a week of Jana constructing the shed, Panchayat asked her to dismantle it for Panchayat wanted to construct a room there. Jana refused to remove her shed till other encroachers too vacated the Oran. A day later few men came, entered her goat shed, dismantled





the shed, removed wooden fence and threw her things out while cussing her and her family. Shaken by the violence, Jana approached Mooli & Shingaari, women group leaders who had many times taken Panchayat to task.

Incensed by the violence and the fact that poor are always picked on, Shingaari had called the meeting of the group wherein Mooli suggested the brazen plan for encroaching the remaining Oran. Within couple of hours all members had built their fodder and fuel stockades in Oran. They had encroached the Oran in such a way that it blocked all major exits from the village, including the way to school. This got the attention of Panchayat, which ordered them to vacate Oran, and threatened legal action, especially against Mooli and Shingaari who were regarded as 'regular troublemakers' by Panchayat. Women sent a message to all that they will vacate the Oran only after all long time encroachers have vacated the same. Mooli, Shingaari and others shifted temporarily into their new stockades. Day & night they stayed in their stockades, on encroached land, to prevent Panchayat from destroying it. Most village residents supported the action initiated by Mooli and Shingaari, even though all were facing problems as exits were blocked. The standoff continued for four days. People in the village pressed Panchayat to bring an end to the blockade. Officials told Panchayat to resolve the matter soon. Neighboring villages too asked the Panchayat to come to an amicable solution soon. Caught on the wrong foot, Panchayat called a village meeting on the fifth day of the standoff, wherein it was decreed that everyone must dismantle



their stockades from Oran and other common lands of the village by sundown of that day. Furthermore, to deter future encroaching on common land, a fine of Rs. 5100 per encroachment was decided upon.



new list did not contain names of thirteen very rich families while the names of more than two-dozen poor families were added. The current list is better than the previous ones though due to village politics names of few rich families are still in the list.

This was not the first time Mooli and Shingaari had raised their voice against injustice in their village. Since 2007 the two had been actively involved in the affairs of their village. Both belong to socially and economically disadvantaged families but it has not dimmed their ardor for justice. Their journey as change makers started when a survey for identifying families living below official poverty line was done in their village. As expected, the names of real poor were not in the list while those having extensive property and substantial means of livelihood were classified as poor. Mooli and Shingaari raised the issue of wrongful inclusion & exclusion of families in BPL list with Sarpanch who told them to 'get lost' in no uncertain terms. Unfazed the duo complained to the District Collector. Panchayat was then compelled to take corrective action. A special Gram Sabha meeting was held but due to divisive politics and political compulsions no one in the village pointed to the wrong names in the list. Most people present were more interested in getting their own name in the list. So Mooli and Shingaari insisted on a resurvey; during the survey they monitored the surveyors and gave them a list of rich families and poor families that was complied by their group. The

Recently, payment for work done under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme [NREGS] was not at par with the work completed. The due amount for most people was Rs.1200 but they received Rs.500 only. Mooli refused to accept Rs.500 and urged others too to refuse. When no satisfactory reply for missing amount was received from the official in charge of payment, more than sixty people led by Mooli went to Block office. Upon checking the records there they found that full payment for 90 persons in the village had been released even though only 62 had worked! 28 names had been fraudulently included. The ensuing hullabaloo by people ensured correction in muster rolls and full payment for all, which was distributed in village Gwara, commonplace, rather than at Sarpanch's house.

People in the village have started respecting Mooli and Shingaari's opinion, the Sarpanch keeps them informed about Gram Sabha, school authorities involve them in keeping check on mid day meal program and follow their suggestions, like the ones for rain harvesting and waste water utilization.

Bond of sisterhood

“Are you related to these two girls?” asked the Superintendent of Police [SP] from Sugni. “Yes, but it is not a relation of blood or through marriage, it is a bond of sisterhood”, replied Sugni. Kesar & Bulli, two sisters, of Mundra village were married to two brothers from Jaswantgarh. Few months after marriage the two sisters were sent back to their parents house. Their in-laws were demanding more dowry, but as the girls’ parents were very poor they were unable to meet the demand for additional dowry. The strain of married daughters being ‘returned’ by in-laws took their father’s life. A socially and economically difficult life became more difficult for the two sisters and their mother. Their neighbor referred their plight to



Sugni of Balera village. Sugni, a member of Shakti Parishad, shared the case with other members. The Parishad contacted the local police station but they did not show any interest in it. So, twenty women then hired 2 jeeps and went to SP’s office, some 100 kms away from their village. Upon hearing the story SP directed the local police to actively pursue the case. Police then summoned in-laws, who in turn contacted Sugni requesting for social negotiations. Soon a tripartite meeting between Kesar & Bulli’s family, their in-laws and Shakti Parishad members was held. The in-laws apologized for their behavior and promised to cherish the two daughters-in-law in future. It’s being three years now; Kesar & Bulli continue to live peacefully at Jaswantgarh.



Shakti Parishad is a federation of thirty- six women, from different villages of the district that helps women fight for their rights and dignity. Parishad assists women victims of domestic or gender violence, social intolerance, economic injustice, etc.. Its members' act as a pressure group, lobby with pertinent administrative bodies, legal offices, social and political institutions to secure immediate relief and justice for the victim. Most of its members have personally gone through horrific personal misfortunes and adverse experiences in life. The hard knocks in life have made them resolve to help others going through similar hardships. They work voluntarily, at times spending money from their own pockets but do not give up till the victim gets justice. For providing financial assistance to victims Parishad has a fund called Shakti Kosh. Jiya Kunwar of Ratnadesar village is the current chairperson of Shakti Parishad.

in-laws, who are Rajputs, did not approve of her working outside the home; they asked her to leave her job immediately. As the income from her job was the sole income in the house she refused. One night her husband, provoked & goaded by his relations, beat her mercilessly and forced her out of the house. Women group members in the village gave her shelter, arranged for medical care and tried to reason with her husband and his relatives. It was of no avail. The group then contacted Bhagwati of Dharmaas village, a Shakti Parishad member. Bhagwati contacted police, district officials and State Women Commission. Months went by and nothing happened. None of the officials & official organizations did anything to alleviate Sushila's plight. Tired of the endless wait and official apathy, Bhagwati, during quarterly meeting of the Parishad, related the matter to other members. The very next day all thirty-six members of the Parishad staged a



Sushila of village Keu Purani was married at an early age. Her husband did not have any regular work or income. When it became difficult to make ends meet she started working in the village Anganwadi [Crèche cum preschool]. Sushila's

protest demonstration at district Collectorate. The SP invited women for discussions and suddenly the official machinery creaked into action. Under immense pressure, official from police and social from Shakti Parishad, Sushila's husband and his



relatives offered a written apology in public and promised never to beat her again. Sushila is now once again living peacefully with her husband and working at the Anganwadi. Similarly, in the case of Dhapu, from Mingsariya village, when she was badly beaten and left unconscious at the bus station and the police refused to register a case against her in laws as they had powerful political connections, Shakti Parishad stepped in at the request of Dhapu's parents. Parishad members laid siege to the police station compelling the police to register a criminal case against Dhapu's in-laws and take action in accordance with law.

To the uninitiated it may seem odd that a woman cruelly treated by her husband trustingly returns to his home after a while. Well, in the context of desert society returning to husband's house is many times better than staying with parents or alone. Socially, life of a 'single married woman' is unthinkable; hence Parishad usually tries for reconciliation, but with caution.

In village Gosainsar the village Sarpanch hands - in - glove with officials paid women, engaged



in development work, less than one fourth of the due wages. Nobody liked it but kept quiet for they were afraid of losing out on work. When Geeta, a Parishad member, too was paid less after signing on the full amount for a week's work on the road construction project, she protested demanding full wages. The cashier refused to do so. Geeta then rallied other women; together they encircled the Sarpanch, cashier and the contractor. Women refused to let them go till all were paid just wages. Many more women from the village, who had been cheated over the months, joined them. Many men too sat on dharna along with women. This went on for over forty hours. At last district officials intervened and all were promised due wages in two days time. The promise was diligently kept.

There are very many instances of Parishad members speaking, protesting, fighting and assisting women victims of violence. Tirelessly & selflessly they continually strive for justice and dignity for women. They are all committed to the bond of sisterhood.

Wisdom and courage

“At least half of the people working in drought relief work must be women. This is the rule”, insisted Uchchav. “Where have you got all this wisdom from?” baring his teeth the Sarpanch replied sarcastically and left. It was the summer of 2004 and in village Hemasar Athuda pond desilting was being done under drought relief program of the state government. As per the government guidelines, 50% people in the workforce were to be women. In Uchchav’s village this was not so, all forty people employed were men, most of whom were from not-so-poor families. Drought relief work in the desert district of Churu provides succor to poor families who are otherwise forced to migrate in search of livelihood. With no hope of getting a fair treatment, Uchchav, Santosh and Gulab along with seventeen other women of their village hatched a plan to force Panchayat to be just and fair. Early next morning, before anyone arrived, eighteen women, who desperately required wage work, led by Uchchav, Santosh & Gulab reached the pond site. There they sat down in protest. When men came to work they were politely requested not to work till women got their share of



employment. The stalemate continued for five days. From sun up to sun down women sat in protest at the work site. Women groups from nearby villages too offered to join the sit-in-protest in solidarity. On the sixth day Sarpanch gave in and engaged women in drought relief work.

Uchchav, Santosh & Gulab won but from that day onwards every time they stepped out of their houses they faced sarcasm and ridicule from men. Turning a deaf ear towards it they prodded on their quest for equity and justice. When Chotu Singh, a rich village resident with 8 hectares of land & a house in city, was included in the official list of poor families Gulab raised the issue in Gram Sabha. No one supported her, for Chotu Singh was Sarpanch's relative. Sarpanch told her to shut up and mind her own business. From behind the veil, Gulab sharply rebuked the Sarpanch and told him to strike the wrong names out or women will initiate collective action against the fraud. The gathered crowd too, by then, started to protest against the inclusion of rich families in the BPL list. Finally all undeserving names were struck off the list.

Most of the people in the village had started to admire and acknowledge, albeit quietly, Uchchav, Gulab and Santosh's zeal against perpetual corruption and inequitable practices. So when the village water pump operator insisted on getting Rs. 10 per month, as water levy from every family in the village, in lieu of operating pump regularly, Santosh was called in to 'sort out' the matter for

Panchayat refused to take the issue seriously. Santosh, upon inquiry, found from pump operator's line department that there was no official 'water levy'. She then went up to the pump house and threatened to lodge a complaint with anti corruption bureau if the pump operator did not do his duty for which he was paid by the taxpayers. Chastened, the pump operator apologized and carried on with his assigned work without fail.



Apart from the arid conditions, constant scarcity of water and rising cost of living, in 2006 women of Hemasar faced and feared rising instances of chronic alcoholism in the village. Every third house in the village had someone who was in the grip of alcohol. Many members of women's group were becoming victims of alcohol-induced violence. Their families were on the verge of total financial ruin. Amidst all this, Gulab heard that her brother



in law has got a license to open a liquor vend and the Panchayat has sanctioned a place for the vend right in the middle of the village, next to the main water supply point. The way to girls' school also passed from the sanctioned place. Alarmed, she contacted Uchchav, Santosh and other women in the village.

They all appealed to the Panchayat to prevent the coming up of an alcohol vend in the middle of the village. Panchayat expressed its inability to do so. Women, once again, warned of an agitation. Meanwhile, Gulab's relatives were threatening her to back off or else all will socially boycott her. Caught between family on one hand and welfare of the vast majority of people in the village on the other, she opted to side with the later. Resolute in her resolve to prevent the opening of liquor vend, Gulab took lead in the matter. After several meetings with the officials and Panchayat she, along with others, at last succeeded in getting the vend shifted to couple of kilometers outside the village.

By then people in neighboring villages too had heard about the determined women of Himasar, who selflessly worked for the welfare of all. In the neighboring village of Balera, women's group wanted to enlarge their pond and rehabilitate a part of the vast pastureland. In principal, all in the village had agreed to it but for all practical purposes men were creating 'a trouble a day'. Fed up with constant criticism and obstruction in their work, women of Balera called a meeting in which they invited all 'prominent men' of their village. They also invited Gulab, Uchchav, Santosh and other members of women's group of Himasar. As anticipated by women of Balera, the meeting went off quite well. Men asked reasonable questions to which women replied reasonably. The presence of women from Himasar deterred the men of Balera from being unreasonable without any reason. This was a salute to the wisdom & courage of women like Uchchav, Santosh, Gulab and their women partners in change.



Someone has to speak up

You are a woman Lichma, you must behave like one. You cannot go around the village behaving like a leader and then argue with me about ration distribution. I have told you, Gyarasi has been given her due share so shut up and just get lost," screamed the PDS vendor of village Ghantiyaal. The commotion had attracted a lot of men & children around the village ration shop. With all the yelling and increasing crowd Lichma was getting nervous. Gyarasi, an elderly widow in whose support Lichma had come, was openly crying and urging Lichma to leave. All of a sudden, angry at ration dealer's brazenness, Lichma loudly said, "Yes, I have assumed the responsibility of a leader in this village. I will not shut up. Someone has to speak up. I will not let you defraud poor elderly widows of their share of subsidized ration. You will have to give Gyarasi six months of pending ration or I'll report you to the police." This halted the dealer's tirade against Lichma and assuming a posture of reasonableness he explained that he has all the pertinent records to prove that Gyarasi has received the ration. Not satisfied by dealer's contention, Lichma insisted on seeing the said records. Once again the dealer lost his cool. He refused to show the records, as 'government records were not meant for scrutiny by all & sundry in villages'. Lichma reminded him about citizens' right to information on government working. But, unfazed the dealer flatly refused to either give due ration or show records of





ration distribution. Disappointed, Lichma & Gyarasi returned to their homes.

Next day, armed with a booklet on Right to Information Act published by SCRIA, Lichma again went to the ration depot. From the booklet she pointed out statutory provisions regarding citizens' right to information on all government works, the obligation of officials to provide information and the methodology for filing application seeking information. Apprehensive at the prospect of an RTI application, the dealer requested Lichma not to bother about filing an application and smilingly offered to give Gyarasi the due ration for the past six months. Lichma & Gyarasi agreed to do so if in addition the dealer also promised to fairly distribute ration to all in future. It's been three years since the incident but the people of Ghantiyaal continue to receive their due share of subsidized food items.

To ensure that even the poorest in this country don't go hungry, the Government provides grains other food items & kerosene at heavily subsidized cost to the poor through its Public Distribution Scheme [PDS]. The price difference on items sold at PDS outlets & those sold in the open market is often ten fold. And this difference has become the bane of the scheme. It is very common for dealers to refuse eligible people their share of grains and divert the stock into the open market at huge profits. The dealers are not the only ones who profit from this, all the cogs in the system - be it Panchayats, public officials, politicians - are cohorts in this criminal enterprise. And Churu is not the only district

plagued by it. The whole country is under its grip. The malaise is well known to the national planners and leaders but apart from periodic bluster, hand wringing and few cosmetic changes nothing worthwhile has been attempted to stem the rot. It has been left to people like Lichma to speak up against it.

There are many like Lichma, in SCRIA's outreach villages, who have decided to speak up. Baali & Shera of village Keu Purani are also one among them. Bali & Shera belong to two different ends of social spectrum and in a society with a strict caste hierarchy their friendship goes beyond just being partners in change. In their village too, since many years, there was unfair distribution of ration from government's Fair Price Shop. Here the dealer of the village shop distributed the subsidized food items as per the political affiliations in the village, thus depriving a large number of families of their share. Baali & Shera approached the dealer but he refused to listen. Shera then raised the matter during women group's meeting. All decided to do 'something' about it during Gram Sabha few days later. Baali offered to get a complaint written from her son that could be given to Panchayat. When women raised the matter in Sabha, Panchayat expressed its helplessness. Shera then urged them to sign the complaint so that she could forward it to senior officials. Sarpanch asked Bali & Shera to come next day, as he did not have his seal with him. In the meantime, Sarpanch informed the dealer about the complaint and



the proposed plan for its perusal with higher ups. Aghast, the dealer immediately contacted Baali & Shera with an offer to give ration regularly to the two. The two refused the offer and insisted that all should benefit all the time. The dealer then offered them 'hush up money', but the two remained unmoved. Unable to change their mind the dealer apologized, promised to distribute the ration fairly in future and requested the duo to refrain from filing the complaint. Since then not only the residents of Keu Purani but of seven villages nearby have been receiving their due share of ration in time. All the ration dealers in the area are scared that someone in their village too may speak up.



SCRIA, is a non profit organization working in over 1800 villages of southern Haryana and northern Rajasthan in northwest India. Founded in 1979, it builds capacities of rural communities for their active & meaningful participation in self-governance processes.

In concurrence with the problems of the region SCRIA has organized its' work around key initiatives of governance, livelihood & natural resources management. As true social change cannot be expected to take place with the participation of only half the population, SCRIA, in a patriarchic society, mainly works with women from socially and economically disadvantaged rural communities by facilitating women groups for meaningful participation in social, political and economic development process.

Over the years SCRIA has assisted voluntary groups in Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Assam to initiate development work in the villages of their region.



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Never doubt that a small group of citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

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