



RGMVP

Working for Poverty Reduction and
Women's Empowerment

Capacity Building through Self Help Groups

LEADERSHIP AMONG THE COMMUNITY: GEETA PRAJAPATI, CHERI
MISHRA KA PURVA VILLAGE, BLOCK KUDWAR, SULTANPUR DISTRICT

● In her own words



**Geeta
Prajapati**
President, Asha
ki Kiran Mahila
Block Sangathan

“Before I joined the samooh, I had no idea about banks and paper work. I was scared to go there. But I have learnt through the samooh. Now when I go to the bank, the manager tells me to sit down and asks what work I have. I have taught the other women how to handle the work. I went with them for the first few times and showed them what to do. Now they handle it themselves without problem.”

● The Challenge

- To motivate RGMVP SHG women to unleash their capacities so that they can lead themselves out of poverty.
- To create leaders among the SHG women so that a movement for change – of the community, led by the community – takes place.

● The Solution

Geeta Prajapati belongs to the poorest section of Uttar Pradesh's social structure. In this rural, caste-ridden society, her caste-Prajapati-is considered the lowest. These economic and social disadvantages placed a burden on Geeta that was almost too huge for her frail shoulders to carry. She is married into a Prajapati family and has four children. Her husband, unable to find a source of income in the village, works in a nearby town. His income was the only source of livelihood for the family. So Geeta decided that she would learn a skill and start earning to supplement her husband's income. She began to attend stitching classes in a village close by.

Her teacher was a SHG member and began to motivate Geeta to join. At first, Geeta was sceptical; she felt that not much could be achieved by saving Rs 20 or 40 a month. After she was explained the concept of SHGs in detail, she agreed. When RGMVP's Community Resource Person (CRP) came to her village, Geeta quickly mobilised the village's women and two groups were formed on that day. Geeta, who has attended school till class 8, was elected to take charge. At this point, Geeta felt that she had realised her vocation. She forgot about monetary considerations and knew that she wanted to be a *neti*, a leader. This was in February 2007.

Since then, Geeta, through her sheer determination and will to change, has emerged as a community leader whose goal is to ensure that not a single poor woman or household is left outside the fold of RGMVP's SHG movement in her area. She serves as the Adhyaksh (Chairperson) of her own SHG, Satguru Saheb Swayam Seva Samooh, as well as the Adhyaksh of the Cluster (Village)



Left: Members of Asha ki Kiran Mahila Block Sangathan; right: its President Geeta Prajapati



RGMVP
Working for Poverty Reduction and
Women's Empowerment

“I belong to a very low caste family, and want to tell you how much respect I have started getting after I joined the samooh. One day, I went with the Community Volunteer (CV) to a Thakur (high caste) household. The CV sat down on the charpoy and told me also to sit. Then the Thakur woman came and asked me who I was. I told her which family I belonged to. She was really angry and said, ‘You may be an animator but you have no right to sit on the charpoy without permission. This is a Thakur house and your behaviour will not do here.’ I begged pardon and got off the charpoy. The CV was very upset at the way I had been insulted. A few months later, the same Thakur woman needed money for a wedding in her family. She called the CV, who told her to get in touch with me. So the Thakur woman asked me to come and see her. She ushered me in and made me sit on the charpoy with her. She wanted Rs 25,000 which I arranged for her. Since then, whenever I go to her house, I am treated with a lot of respect. In our samooh, there is no differentiation between castes – we all work together, share together. Since the samooh came to the village, caste consciousness is disappearing”

Level Association (CLA), Jai Vishnu Mahila Gram Sangathan, and of the Block Level Association (BLA), Asha Ki Kiran Mahila Block Sangathan. She has worked as an Animator for RGMVP and currently also handles the responsibility of a CRP.

In less than two years, Geeta's life has seen a dramatic change for the better. Before joining the SHG movement, Geeta was known as the mother of her children. Now she is known by her own name and is recognised and respected by over 5,000 women in her BLA. People turn to her to solve their problems, which she is able to do with the support of other SHG women.

Geeta feels that she has gained a lot of knowledge through the SHG movement. She received training from RGMVP when she first joined the group, when she became Animator and CRP, and when she was elected Adhyaksh of the BLA, she was sent for training to Hyderabad. Here she received training from Ms Vijaya Bharati, well-known social activist associated with the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), for 12 days. She also recently attended training on toilets and sanitation in Orissa. It is this knowledge that Geeta is keen to pass on to all the women in her BLA. She feels that the more the women will know, the more ability they will gain to move forward and progress.

Progress has also been made at the village level. Debt swapping has been successful and no family in the village is in debt to the local money lenders. The BLA's collective action is showing results in several social areas. The women regularly carry out surveys to learn which children are not going to school and why. They together solve problems so that the children – boys and girls – can go back to school. They also collectively ensure that every member has a ration card and identity card by bringing pressure to bear on the village Sarpanch. Recently, when a SHG member lost two male members of her family in an accident at an unmanned railway crossing, the BLA organised a 'rail roko' agitation and gained a promise from railway and local authorities that the affected woman will be compensated and the crossing will be manned.

For the 35-year-old Geeta, the transformation from an unknown housewife to a community leader has been a huge learning experience. She is extremely proud to be associated with the RGMVP SHG movement and the fact that she has gained so much respect within her community. She is determined to ensure that every single poor woman in her block learns from her experience and throws off the shackles of economic and social deprivation as she did.

● About the Mission

RGMVP believes that the poor have an immense capacity and strong desire which can be harnessed by organising them, so that their capacity is unleashed and they can lead themselves out of poverty. External facilitation through social mobilisation and internal animation by developing champions and leaders within the community form the crux of the process of SHG formation, the most critical aspect of the programme. The programme thus builds the social capital of the community by creating a movement – of the people, of the community, led by the community. RGMVP acts as a facilitator but the actual leadership is driven by the community and the community institutions.