

# Institutionalising gender in patriarchal rural communities:

Creating spaces through uncontested domains

SDC Gender Capitalisation Workshop  
Fribourg, Switzerland  
June 15-19, 2003

Jayapadma RV and Liby T Johnson  
Gram Vikas

Mohuda village, Berhampur 760002

Orissa, INDIA

[info@gramvikas.org](mailto:info@gramvikas.org)

Phone +91 680 2261870/71

Fax +91 680 2261862

# Institutionalising gender in patriarchal rural communities: Creating spaces through uncontested domains

## Abstract

The thrust of *Gram Vikas*<sup>i</sup> in engineering social change in gender dimensions has been through creating spaces in 'uncontested domains' - such areas where men have no apparent clash of interests with women. The main intervention involves community managed systems for protected piped supply of drinking water and sanitation<sup>ii</sup>, involving every family in the habitation.

Being immediate necessities of women, and serving their 'practical needs' this forms a core rallying point to elicit participation in large numbers. The same degree of effort that goes into bringing women on board, is also invested in involving the 'last man' - from the poorest family, in an effort to improve livelihoods and living conditions in villages.

There are many firsts in the process, including creating spaces for women's representation in village bodies. In the process 'unknowing' to both men and women, a new social dynamic is created.

## 1. The context

Like her mother, Sumitra picked up the mud pot and started out towards the pond. In the month of May, the two tubewells in her village have run dry and the pond is their only recourse till the monsoons arrive. The pond is over a kilometre away and between them she and her mother must fetch six fifteen-litre pots of water for use in the house - for cooking and drinking as well. For these two months as the sun scorches down, the women trudge relentlessly, for a greater part of the day, for water - for survival.

The pond - more a cesspool - is muddy green - where cows and bullocks paddle alongside humans. Even after she washed herself and her *sari* she felt unclean, and was developing itches and rashes of late. Day after day she goes with her mother to the pond - unquestioning. She does not expect her father or brothers to help.

This was not half as bad though, she said, as they wait for darkness - pre dawn and after dusk - only then could she go with her mother or friends to relieve herself. They sat by the roadside with their heads covered, warily watching from under the veil, if there were any men coming that way. Her brothers did not have to wait for these odd hours.

This plight is common to 70% of India's villages, and over 95% of Orissa's villages, yet when it comes to articulation, one of the least expressed is the need for the privacy of a toilet or a bathing room. For Sumitra and her friends piped drinking water happens only in the movies and dreams. She did not think that it was possible in her *adivasi*<sup>1</sup> village - 30 km from the district headquarters, where politicians visited only at the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Adivasis* are indigenous people, designated as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India

time of elections; where there were no roads or electricity; where the nearest school and health centre remained closed for most of the year.

In 1991, when Gram Vikas conducted a study on the reasons for poverty and backwardness, we found that one of the main contributing factors was the extent of morbidity and mortality, resulting in loss of productivity and erosion of the meagre savings of the families. Over 80% of the instances of morbidity and mortality could be traced back to water borne diseases - diarrhoea, dysentery, scabies, gastro-enteritis, jaundice, typhoid, even rising instances of malaria.

What came into light only later, were the complex ailments related to reproductive and gynaecological ailments, which the women were reluctant to speak about. These could also be traced to the habit of holding back the urge to purge and inadequate cleaning while bathing in common ponds.

For our field workers, a visit to these villages was an experience, draining all energies and numbing the senses. The approach to these villages is typically soiled by human faeces and other kinds of filth. People bear the burden of living, with resigned acceptance. There were other problems in multi-class and multi-caste villages. The *dalits*<sup>2</sup>, living on the edge of villages did not have access to the main pond in the village. They had to make do with a smaller, murkier pond or well. The richer people tried to dig private wells, with some success.

When we started devising strategies to work in these villages, we felt that to make any dent in improving conditions, it was imperative to begin at the basics and enable access to protected water and sanitation. It could be a way to bring dignity into the lives of the people, improve their health and get them out of the spiral of poor quality of life and poverty.

## **2. A 100% approach**

Early on we realised that any intervention of this kind would not work by involving just a few families. For total sanitation to happen the entire habitation needs to be treated, involving all families without exception. Even one family continuing to defecate in the open or using the pond would be a potential factor in perpetuating diseases. We also realised that the intervention would have to be designed in a manner so that it would be self-perpetuating for all times to come. From the outset, it was clear that the intervention would not succeed as an externally managed affair - it had to be owned and managed collectively by the community to succeed.

Reflection on development experiences brings out the linkages between water and sanitation with livelihoods and poverty. Yet worldwide over 1 billion people do not have access to protected water and over 2.4 billion people do not have access to sanitation. It is evident that the experience of a limited approach to addressing the issue with the government taking the onus for water supply and the target driven approach for sanitation, has contributed little to closing the gap in need and demand.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Dalits*, were termed 'Untouchables' in the Hindu Caste system. During the freedom movement, Gandhiji called them '*Harijan*' or Children of God. Their own leaders called them *dalits* or *bahujan*, in a people's movement for rights, in the 80's. They are designated Scheduled Castes under the Constitution of India

The core thrust of the Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) designed by Gram Vikas is to harness the physical, natural, social and human capital in every village through convergent community action, to create a spiralling process of development. Sanitation infrastructure and supply of piped drinking water all through the year to all houses are only the entry point and the core rallying element to bring people together, cutting through barriers of patriarchal systems, caste, politics and economic differences. The energising of collective action provides an effective springboard for poor communities to emerge from years of marginalisation and work together as a community, for individual and collective gains.

RHEP is built around a number of principles that ensure that the intervention has total commitment and participation from the villagers involved, towards improving their quality of life. These include:

- *Inclusion of all*

RHEP is contingent upon 100% agreement and participation of adult men and women in the village. All families in the village establish a minimum standard of facilities, including toilets and bathing rooms for each family, and individual connections for piped water supply to all houses.

- *Equitable financial participation*

Contribution by all families in the village to a Corpus Fund, with the poor paying less than the rich. The Corpus Fund is placed in a term deposit, the interest from which goes to extending similar facilities to 'new' families in the village, ensuring 100% coverage at all times.

- *Sharing of costs*

Mechanisms are evolved whereby the villagers find the means to finance at least 30-40% of the total cost of establishing water and sanitation facilities. Each village prepares a budget on how finances will be raised, including their own contribution of labour and materials; support from government schemes and from Gram Vikas.

- *Strengthening Village institutions*

RHEP is driven by elected self-governing institutions in each village that represent all sections, across gender, caste and class differences, and where there is equal opportunity to participate in decision making. The institutions have responsibility to manage and maintain services and facilities and further development activities in the village.

- *Participation of women*

The success of RHEP is dependent on participation of women. Women have equal representation in all village institutions. Self-help groups formed to increase role of women in the economic sphere.

- *Clear mechanisms for operations and maintenance*

Village youth are trained in technical skills for operations and maintenance. Common village resources like ponds and forests are scientifically developed so that they yield greater returns, contributing to common funds of each village.

- *Contractual approach*

RHEP has definitive norms and a contractual approach, which is negotiated with the villagers. Gram Vikas and the Village Executive Committee are equal partners bringing their respective resources to the negotiation table. The norms are defined contextually within the broad framework for every village. This starts with the method of collection of the Corpus fund, where each village defines how it will raise the requisite money. This flexibility or context specificity is evident in every aspect of RHEP and is key to its success.

### **3. Generating consensus**

Given the various levels and forms of divisions in rural communities, this has been by no means easy. In the pilot phase of the programme when we experimented with five villages the intervention took over three years to take root. The 'push factor' was predominant with the greatest energies going into getting communities to work together.

Initially, with most of our staff being men, the main points of contact were male leaders in the village - it was the accepted thing to do. Women were considered 'unapproachable' because of social taboos, preventing them from interacting with strangers, especially males, and not expected to participate in these negotiations.

In most villages, building consensus was the biggest stumbling block. Men said - "Our forefathers shat under the open sky for centuries - diseases don't spread that way". The disillusionment amongst the field staff was palpable and the feeling that this approach was infeasible was predominant. They faced ridicule for talking about defecation - it was dirty; for even suggesting that the same source of water would be used by people of different castes; that the poorest families would have the same level of services. The villagers were suspicious and called them "lepers" and "thieves". Some field workers tried reasoning with women, and faced wither stony silence, or as earlier, ridicule.

Slowly the resistance crumbled, and we noticed that this was stronger in villages where women took the lead. This is illustrated in the case of Samiapalli, which today is considered a model village.

#### **A journey towards dignity**

RHEP was undertaken in Samiapalli village, in Ganjam district of Orissa in the pilot stage in 1992. Samiapalli has 76 *dalit* (Scheduled Caste) families, 74 of them living below the Poverty Line, making it a very poor village. 70 families depend on daily wage labour for a living, in laying roads, breaking stones or as farm labour.

Though 56 families own land (54 of them own less than 5 acres) the quality of soil and non-availability of water for irrigation has hampered the prospects of any sustainable farming.

At the start of RHEP there were problems in getting people together for meetings as most men would be drunk by early evening. The efforts to raise the Corpus Funds and generate people's contribution were also not making much headway, as most of the resources the families had went into liquor consumption. The field workers were at a point of giving up when the women decided to take action, and went collectively to the liquor vendor, and demolished all his pots and bottles. They threatened him that he should not be seen in the vicinity of the village, or face the consequences. Back in the village, they called a village meeting and declared that no one would be allowed to consume liquor in the village. Penal action would be taken against any person doing so. Seeing the women's united stand the men complied and work progressed rapidly.

Beginning with water and sanitation, the programme has enabled the creation of a village level organisation, controlled, operated and managed by the people themselves. This organisation has, today, replaced Gram Vikas as the villagers' interface with the outside world. The village also has a corpus fund, raised and owned by themselves, which has grown from the initial size of Rs.100,000 to over Rs.300,000 today. In addition, the women of the village have come together to save close to Rs.90,000 in their three savings and credit groups.

#### **"Our toilets are better than our houses"**

The development saga of the village did not stop with this. To improve the quality of their lives, they decided that they needed better houses. They lived in mud and thatch houses of less than 10 sq.m, which had to be repaired each year, and the new toilets were better than their houses. Armed with a loan support arranged by Gram Vikas (of Rs.22500 per house of at least 41sq.m each) and their own labour and dedication, all the families in the village today own permanent, disaster proof houses. Their investment paid rich dividends in October 1999 when a killer super cyclone devastated every other village in the area; the houses of Samiapalli were left undamaged.

Similar initiatives by women in other villages have helped propel the development process. In Mohakhand village in Bolangir, the committee members Suprova Mahakur and Pirovati Kampo recollect proudly how they threatened, "if the men do not co-operate in the implementation of RHEP, we will employ labourers from outside for the construction and will go on an indefinite kitchen strike to ensure their co-operation". Twice after the men had failed to engineer community consensus, the women placed this ultimatum and ensured the successful implementation of RHEP in their village.

#### **4. Creating spaces for women**

When Gram Vikas suggested that all adult men and women must participate in the decision making process, there was a great level of apprehension, but not very strong resistance. In our understanding this was so because we were dealing with 'uncontested domains' - such areas where men have no apparent clash of interests with women. While recognising that there are norms for water use and sanitation in every

community, Gram Vikas' intent was to establish a system for community-managed water supply and sanitation in a manner whereby a 'win-win' situation is created for all.

In spite of our efforts, getting women to the common platform was the singular challenge. Hidden behind the veils, women were reluctant to attend meetings, and share the same platform as their "father in law" or "brother in law". In one of the earlier villages, Samantrapur, over 140 meetings were held before women attended. Recognising this, the first step was to work with a separate general body of women in each village. This forum, where they are not hidden behind veils and can express themselves confidently, provided the space for women to develop confidence in articulation and expression. Smaller groups of 10-15 women were also formed where members were encouraged to save small amounts each month. Well performing groups were linked with banks for credit- to meet immediate consumption or own-productive needs, propelling others to better performance as well. The separate forum also provided the space to discuss private issues - of gynaecological health, child-care and hygiene. This combination of social and economic empowerment has been significant in helping women integrate into the mainstream community.

Significant in this process is that we carried out concurrent dialogue with the men. The continued emphasis was that the intervention would succeed only with equal participation of men and women at every stage. The village executive committee (VEC) with equal number men and women was de jure made the apex decision making authority for the village. All other fora and groups were expected to be under the umbrella of the VEC. The VEC in turn was selected by the General Body - this had all male and female heads of households as members. Thus at no time did any institutional mechanism come to be perceived as "stand-alone".

There is still a level of discomfort among men in the selection of the village executive committee. Gram Vikas' norms insist that there must be equal number of men and women representatives in the executive committee. In the initial years we saw that the responsible positions were all held by men, so we made it mandatory that women take up positions of office bearers as well.

There are remarks one still hears from men in villages where work has just begun - "Gram Vikas says we must involve women to make decisions, but this is just for RHEP, not for other activities". Little do they realise that once the dent is made, the "cracks" open wider and wider, as evidenced in the 'older' RHEP villages.

The initial villages where RHEP was undertaken had a toilet for every family, and a stand post for water to be shared by every five families. As we interacted with the villagers we found that toilet usage was directly related to proximity and availability of water. We had not factored the bathing room, and found that the pond continued to be a major source of contamination. We also noticed that it remained the women's burden to fetch water from the stand posts.

In the subsequent villages therefore, we included bathing rooms, attached to the toilets, and piped water supply to every toilet, bathing room and kitchen.

RHEP is functional in over 100 villages covering ~8,000 families (population of ~40,000). The coverage continues to increase, today from a demand pull by women, who have seen the programme work in neighbouring villages.

The social dynamics is such that prospective brides demand that these facilities be available in their future husbands' houses. Thus Gram Vikas today has a self-appointed cadre of parents of brides from RHEP villages motivating other villages to take up the programme!

## 5. Enlarging spaces

The visibility of women in community level decision making and in the public arena has increased through a gradual process.

- # For the first time, women have stepped out of their village to visit banks and government offices. They take loans, manage circulation of funds within their groups and repay loans on time. Banks are keen to work with women - as they demonstrate better credit-worthiness. The economic empowerment of women has increased their own confidence and bargaining power vis-à-vis men.
- # Women have taken responsibility for ensuring that schools function properly in the villages, and discuss with teachers the progress of their wards. In some villages, they have also appointed additional teachers to supplement efforts of the government teachers.
- # Women have formed health committees to ensure that there is proper pre-natal and post-natal care; that deliveries are safe and that all eligible children are immunised as per schedules.
- # In a few villages, women have come forward to be trained as masons. Brick and stone masonry is predominantly considered men's domain, and women are seen usually working as helpers on construction sites. Initially reluctant to work outside, many women masons have now bought bicycles, and are prepared to work on distant locations as well. They have influenced more women to learn these skills as well.
- # Women's groups have also taken lease of common ponds and undertaken scientific pisciculture. This too is traditionally considered men's activity.

The following case study of Nandiagada village illustrates the change processes that are underway:

### **Vikas Mahila Samiti, Nandiagada**

Nandiagada, 10 km from Aska, has 272 families, most of which derive their income from agriculture or wage labour. This village boasts of an extremely active and efficient women's group—the Vikas Mahila Samiti, which started in October 2000, and has 220 members.

The Samiti has 17 active savings groups and two more are in the making. Earlier, in times of need, they had to approach the mahajan (moneylender), who lent money against a deposit of gold jewellery and charged a high interest. Gram Vikas' motivation to save changed the pattern. Women save Rs 20 a month, and have roughly Rs 94,500. They



want to advance loans to people to meet expenditure incurred on agriculture, education, marriages or illness. They charge an interest of 2% per month and have already loaned out Rs.28,205.

As part of the Mahila Samiti, they supervise cleanliness of toilets and the surroundings, motivate children to study, and advise on antenatal care and immunisation. They have recently taken a loan of Rs 50,000 from the Block level MASS. Presently they are engaged in supervising the construction of drains for which they have received a grant of Rs 14,000 from the Panchayat.

They also canvassed for a woman in the Panchayat elections, who won to become the Sarpanch. A woman Sarpanch, they feel, is more approachable and sensitive to the needs of women, besides being capable of doing everything that a man can do.

The groups continue to face problems of non-payment and the indifference of some. Recently they also faced obstructions because of a difficult and particularly dominating office holder, who was promptly removed from her position through a unanimous decision taken by the rest, but not allowed to leave the group. They say that such incidences do not introduce any bitterness in personal relations, outside the Samiti.

Forming the Mahila Samiti has brought substantial changes in the lives of the women. They now have the confidence to take up any amount of responsibility, to deal with officers at the Block level, handle loan transactions with banks, work such as they never imagined they could be doing. It has evoked respect from the men too, and changed their mindset. They treat women's point of view with respect, both within and outside the family, which the women confirm, is a new development.

Presently, the women are concerned about problems the village continues to face — erratic electricity and water supply, the lack of roads. For the future they have planned income generation activities like making *papad*, pickle, candles and even a dairy farm. The village committee has purchased a three phase voltage stabiliser for Rs.24,000 and they plan to purchase a generator as well. The women also plan to start a *balwadi* (*crèche*) and have already initiated an adult literacy programme. A number of achievements have been made, and a lot more remains to be fulfilled, but their resolve is strong and their enthusiasm unmistakable.

## **6. The challenges that remain**

Change processes have been propelled through the RHEP, by creating spaces through "uncontested domains". Sumitra and her mother no longer must carry water from the pond, or wait for the cover of darkness to relieve themselves. They don't veil their faces anymore as they sit in the village meeting, on the same platform as the men. But there is still a long way to go in ensuring that the space for expression and consultation is open not just under RHEP, but also under other aspects of their social and private domains.

A number of practices, which have come down through generations of patriarchal dominance, are being challenged, but change processes are slow. The challenges are particularly evident when it comes to addressing social issues, like the issue of early marriage of girl children; differential wages; ownership of property; and domestic

violence. Strong women's groups have been able to come together to address some of these issues, but in many villages, there are reservations and resistances from both men and women when it comes to addressing these.

While men have wholeheartedly approved of women adding to the family kitty - through their economic efforts, control of family incomes still remains a grey area. This clearly comes under "contested domains". And while women are expected to take up additional jobs to augment family incomes; there is little reduction in their reproductive and homemaking burdens.

At the community level, men have readily accepted women undertaking to do the routine aspects of maintenance of the water and sanitation hardware, collection of dues, etc; but they are unwilling to share the aspects like management of the Corpus Fund. This is slowly changing with women becoming office bearers in RHEP committees.

Where Gram Vikas' intervention impacts is in opening up and re-organising spaces, in a manner that ingrains into the fabric of the society. Men have accepted, albeit grudgingly, the key role that women have played in the path of development. RHEP villages have become the hub of development activity and are recognised by politicians and bureaucrats. It is known that development in these villages has been possible through joint action by men and women, and often with women taking the lead. This becomes an example for other villages in the region to emulate.

There are significant challenges still in the broader political sphere. The local self-governance system (Panchayati Raj institutions) provide for 33% reservation for women to all elected positions. While this is being followed in letter, the spirit of this constitutional provision is not adhered to. In a large number of villages, men use women only as a cover, effective power and control remains with men. Political control and power remains one of the most "contested domains" and a long way needs to be trudged before women can share a fair part of this.

---

Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> Gram Vikas is a non-partisan, secular, voluntary organisation working in partnership with tribal, *dalit* and other poor and marginalised communities predominantly in the South and Southwest Orissa. The mission of Gram Vikas is:

To promote a process which is sustainable, socially inclusive and gender equitable, to enable critical masses of poor and marginalised rural people or communities to achieve a dignified quality of life characterised by:

- Food security and access to secured livelihood opportunities
- Assured access to basic education and adequate health services
- Sustainable use and management of natural resources
- Options for appropriate family and community infrastructure and sources of energy
- Strong self-governing people's institutions with equal participation of men and women
- Conscientisation, self reliance and self-esteem

Gram Vikas is registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860. The outreach extends to over 25,000 families in ~400 villages across 15 districts of Orissa.

---

ii The Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) is an integrated rural development intervention implemented by Gram Vikas. Its coverage extends to 8,117 families (population ~50,000) in 105 villages across 12 districts of Orissa. The mission of RHEP is to improve the quality of life of the rural communities in terms of both physical conditions of living as well as economic opportunities. In the long term RHEP aims to enable convergent community action through the provision of services and resources to overcome the inertia that has been caused by the long spells of marginalisation and deprivation suffered by rural communities. RHEP also aims to transform the momentum created through such community action into sustainable community owned and managed development systems.