



India's Barefoot Revolution – What would it be like if women ran the world?

Reflections from freelance journalist, Karen Bartlett in celebration of the 100th International Women's Day - March 08, 2011 (An edited version of this article 'A Sari State of Affairs' was published in The Times, 07 January 2011). Read the article? Join the debate on our [blog](#)

I encountered the work of The Hunger Project (THP) in London only last summer, and I was surprised that a charity dedicated to helping people relieve their own hunger, and empower themselves, should have such a relatively low profile. It seems THP likes to do the work - and not just talk the talk. Using some ingenuity Tim Holder, THP's UK Country Director in London, and Barbara Ex - a generous and long standing supporter - managed to make my trip happen and I visited some of the women who were benefiting from THP's work in India.

I'd been amazed to discover that there are now more elected women in India than everywhere else in the world combined - and that the work of these women is transforming the country. It's been my experience that issues relating to women are hard to get into the media, and so I wasn't surprised to read an eight page supplement in an international magazine focusing on life in an Indian village that managed not to mention a single woman.

In India itself I was incredibly impressed with the women, and men, who work for The Hunger Project-India - especially those I came most closely into contact with: Rita Sarin, Sriparna Chaudhuri, and Litali Das in Odisha (also known as Orissa).

Some of the experiences I heard about seemed true for women the world over - that when you give a woman the slightest opportunity to use her skills and abilities she seizes it, and makes the most if it not only for herself, but also for her family and the community. When I listen to debates in the UK about 'the end of feminism' it makes me sad and angry to realise how little awareness we have about how different life is for women outside our tiny Western bubble.

Below is an account of some of the women I met in India who are all benefiting from training and support from THP. Some of this account was published in The Times, but I thought you might like to read it in full:

If all revolutions begin in unlikely locations, few could be as unpromising as Borda. It's a poor village, in the poorest district of one of the poorest states in India. Only blasting from a nearby quarry disturbs an otherwise feudal scene of ox-driven ploughing and washing in the river.

But something in Borda is different. Unlike other villages in the Western part of Odisha, the town is clean and well kept. There are water pumps, and toilets. Shops are busy and, on the outskirts, there is a brand new local college offering degree level education. Borda has become the almost unimaginable in India: a functioning village providing basic public services including sanitation, healthcare and education. In a sense it is a community that has been hit by a political earthquake: it is a town run by women.



Sangita Naika is painting a welcome to the gods on the dung-covered step outside her home. The cow dung has been prepared and spread out to dry as a disinfectant. Now Naika take drops from a small bowl of rice-batter paste and finger paints an intricate pattern designed to entice prosperity inside. This is the festival of Su-dasha Vrat where women welcome the Goddess Lakshmi into their homes and pray for good fortune for their husbands. Until now their destiny - indeed their very survival - has depended on it. "For these women their husbands are almost Gods," says Litali Das, a programme co-coordinator for The Hunger Project-India.

But Sangita Naika no longer relies only on her husband's good fortune. As leader of her village council, the Panchayat, she is just one of the one million women

across India at the forefront of a 'barefoot revolution' - a movement where women are in many cases risking their lives to transform their villages, and change the face of their country.

Most of the women, like Naika, are beneficiaries of a process that began in 1992 when the Indian Constitution formally recognised local self-governance through village councils, (Panchayati Raj), and reserved at least one third of those elected seats for women. It has been a slow burn, but women once forbidden from leaving their own homes by their husbands, or banned from sitting on a chair because of their caste, now realise that they can stand for election, and change the way their villages are run. Their remarkable success in tackling an endemic system of corruption that siphons off the resources from every government contract, and controls the lists of those eligible for financial assistance, has brought them many supporters - but also many enemies.

In December Rahul Gandhi, son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi, told a meeting of the Indian Congress Party that the legislation introduced by his father had brought more Indian women into elected office than everywhere else in the world combined. It's a result also championed by President Barack Obama in his speech to the Indian parliament in November. Now the reservation for women elected members of the Panchayat has risen to a minimum of at least 50%, with the Congress Party supporting a controversial bill to reserve a similar proportion of seats for women at national level.

That bill, however, met with a storm of protest when it passed through the upper legislature in March - with some believing it may never achieve enough support in the lower house to become a reality.

At a local level women elected to Panchayats have been threatened with a terrifying campaign of intimidation and violence. A report on Panchayat elections in the state of Bihar in 2006 revealed that 12 women seeking office had been murdered. Another candidate refused to give way to coercion - only to see those threats horribly executed when her three children were killed.

"When the bill for reserved seats for women came to the upper house people jumped on their chairs and tore it up," says Rita Sarin, an architect of the 'Barefoot Revolution' and perhaps the person most responsible for its success. She does not underestimate the dangers women face in challenging a system of corruption so entrenched that Congress President Sonia Gandhi recently described it as a "poison" that threatened the survival of the nation.

India was newly independent when Sarin was born in the hill station of Shimla, but the country remained bound by a rigid caste system, and women were silent and worthless. Her family, from the Kshatriya caste, were traditionally warriors but latterly employed as civil servants. As a member of a group second only in the hierarchy to Brahmins, Sarin was supposed to stand far enough away from a person of a lower caste so that even their shadows could not touch. She remembers, aged 7 yrs, tackling her grandmother about why she was fed only the small scraps of food left over from the boys and men. Inequality still makes her angry: “We kill our girls, we still offer sex selection. There are still abortions. Look at the male to female sex ratio.”

Sarin entered and exited a brief three month marriage in her youth, “My husband was horrified to discover my views,” before setting out on a career that took her from working with women in prison, to a lengthy and well regarded stint with the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Against the advice of many of her colleagues, she gave up her desk-job-for-life to take over The Hunger Project-India - a small global charity that worked to empower people with the skills and opportunity to end their own hunger. A hunger-free India could only be brought about, Sarin believed, through the participation of its women.

At The Hunger Project, Sarin (right) quickly set about her life’s work: writing a roadmap for turning the shy and uncertain women being thrust into the Panchayat system into powerful political operators. Transforming women dismissed as inconsequential tokens into advocates for their communities was not easy.

Most are from the poorest backgrounds, now called ‘marginalised’ but formerly known as Dalits, or untouchables. In the beginning many signed documents they couldn’t read. One woman chaired a meeting and said only two words, “Thank you.” But Sarin persisted; designing a five year hands-on guidance and support system that now operates with partner organisations in 13 Indian states, and has trained 100,000 women.



When the women’s individual decisions were disregarded by men on the Panchayats, Sarin set about organising women’s federations. When the media roundly ignored the very existence of elected women, The Hunger Project founded a prize for best reporting of women in government. The women of the Panchayats used to be laughed-off as “rubberstamps” - proxies who were told how to vote by their husbands. No one calls them that anymore.



When the Chief Medical Officer for the Borda district failed, again, to appoint a local doctor to the village, Sangita Naika organised a mass demonstration by 5000 women: “We were desperate for gynaecology and child specialists. We’re quite a remote village and we didn’t even have a GP to take care of our basic needs.” Naika went door to door explaining to the women she served that health care was crucial to their lives - pregnant women have been known to die by the wayside on a torturous journey of several hours to hospital. On one hot morning Naika marched the women of Borda along the dusty road into town and sat down. For hours the women sat there, blocking all traffic including trucks to the local quarries. It was a shocking spectacle in a community where women rarely leave their own homes, but Naika says, “None of the women questioned that they would come.” Eventually the Chief Medical Officer arrived to listen to their point of view. He sat down to talk to Sangita Naika, and they had a lengthy discussion. Now Borda has a doctor.



Naika has served on her Panchayat since 2002 and in that time she has organised demonstrations, mass mobilisations and petitions. In November she led women from ten Panchayats in hosting a day with district magistrates and the local Secretary for Roads and Rural Development. Naika has stopped liquor shops from springing up in the village. Under her watchful eye those eligible for financial assistance are added to the official lists, and receive payments (previously payments disappeared into the hands of the families who controlled the lists). She still goes door to door to persuade people to send their daughters to school. In the evenings she teaches illiterate women how to read.

“Men used to dismiss me and tell people not to vote for me saying - what can a woman do? “Naika says, “In the beginning I was apprehensive about going out and meeting people - especially men working for the local administration. But now those fears have fallen away. Women take up the work of the villages, men take up drinking. That is the difference between men’s leadership and women’s leadership.”

The women of the Panchayat’s agree that, in the 60 years since India’s independence, men’s leadership has been lamentable and their interest in securing basic services for their communities virtually non-existent. India is a country where, according to UN figures, 575 million people still go to the toilet in the open, causing 475,000 deaths a year, and only a quarter of girls are in school. Sangita Naika says, “I’d be happy if the government reserved all seats for women. Women are much better at governance, and men could get on with earning their livelihoods. ”

Recently she flew to Delhi to meet other women elected leaders and petitioned Sonia Gandhi to repeal a rule forbidding men or women with more than two children from serving on Panchayats. Women in India often have no control over the number of children they have, and Naika said the policy was discriminatory. “It was a very big day for me,” Naika says, “To get on a plane for the first time. To fly to Delhi and stay in a hotel. But the women I met from other Panchayats had a big effect on me. One said her husband made her sleep in the cow shed because of her work. I’ll never forget that.” Naika says her own husband has been very supportive.

Standing up to men, both those who hold official positions and neighbours in the villages, has been a major hurdle for most of the women elected to office. Sukadei Majhi (below with Litali), is a ward



member for the village of Loitera, in the Kalahandi district of Orissa. She lives in a small, dark, house with her husband and five children and the family work as farm hands. As she sits describing her work one drunken man bursts in and berates her for taking it upon herself to get elected to a Panchayat. She shoes him away, but soon another man appears and demands that she leave instantly and goes to the office with him to issue his pension payment. Outside a group of local men have lined up to stare at her and listen to what she is saying,

but Majhi does not let her voice drop. She gestures to her daughters, who are also watching warily: "Tomorrow they will be married and live in another village, but hopefully they'll remember what their mother did."

Odisha is a beautiful, but poor state with rich natural resources - and diverse problems. In remote tribal areas under attack by Maoist guerillas, the women of the Panchayats fight against timber-bandits destroying the forests that sustain the communities.

In nearby Dorgaon village Sarangi Dhal (right) describes her battle to install a supply of clean drinking water, after it was discovered that high levels of fluoride were poisoning the population. In Angul, an industrial heartland so polluted by a ring of belching steel plants that locals often emerge, like ghosts, from the grey sooty air, Bharati Behera shows off a new house that she has helped fund. On the side is a banner proclaiming that the house has been registered in the name of the woman of the family - an almost unknown occurrence.



Like the women in other parts of the state Behera (below) says the urge for self-improvement was in her "like a seed, waiting to grow," and that serving on the Panchayat has been her only route to



personal development. Litali Das, who works with Behera, and the women of Orissa's Panchayats, agrees: "There's more to life than toil. I want these women to live a little, even to live better."

No one denies that the elected women of India are subject to human failings; in some Panchayats ambition and disagreement have already reared their head. Perhaps in time corruption will too.

"In India a good thing can turn into a bad thing very quickly," says Sriparna Chaudhuri, who works with

Rita Sarin at The Hunger Project in Delhi. "A village finds a pond full of fish, and then the mafia takes

over the pond.” Individually women may be corrupt, but “they’re not part of the system of corruption. The success that they’ve had is why people are now trying to keep them out of State Assemblies and Parliament.”

Her husband, who also works for an NGO, points out to her that “Short-haired Delhi women” often fail to recognise the strength of local beliefs and traditions in rural areas, or appreciate that there may be some valid arguments against having a reservation for women in Parliament, notably that it could upset the complex system of reservations already in place to ensure representation by all castes. But Chaudhuri does not agree with him: “This is the only opportunity women have to be involved in public life. There’s no point in NGO personal empowerment programmes if women have nowhere to use that empowerment.”

The success of the ‘barefoot revolution’, however, will not be whether it can change women’s lives - though that might be remarkable in itself. Achievement will be measured in how far, in bringing sanitation, education, health care and accountability to millions of communities, those women can change India. “The burn out rate is high,” says Rita Sarin, “We’re constantly on the edge, constantly tested.” News has come in that another woman Panchayat member has been murdered by Maoists in West Bengal. “But we can’t wait for another 50 years,” Sarin says: “India can’t wait that long.” On the day that the Indian Upper House passed the bill for the women’s’ quota Sarin found her office flooded with messages from the women of the Panchayats, one read: “Madam, prepare a new training module for women MPs. You are soon going to see us in Parliament.”

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