

■ The Hunger Project (THP)

The Hunger Project; empowering women to be change agents

By Ela Dutt

The 30-year old Radhia Adivasi, *Sarpanch* of the village council (*panchayat*) in Chak Dehi village, Madhya Pradesh, has brought benefits to her 1,800 constituents.

She never went to school and is unable to work due to a heart condition, but she has maneuvered the bureaucracy and local power brokers and succeeded in getting four additional classrooms built in the local school and got a 50-foot deep well to improve the water supply.

She is just one of thousands of women elected after the 1993 law passed by the Indian parliament reserving 33 percent of local government seats for women. She intends to run for re-election in 2010.

She is the kind of woman The Hunger Project (THP) has worked with over the years to build leadership capacity for local democracy to function and succeed.

The Hunger Project, a global organization aimed at ending hunger, goes about it by empowering women and other change agents at the grass roots level.

It has been in India for many years taking up projects in at least 14 states, helping implement the Government of India's 1993 constitutionally mandated 33 percent reservation for women in *gram panchayats*.

In 2007, The Hunger Project partnered with Mahila Margdarshi in Andhra Pradesh training 389 elected women representatives of selected blocks of Srikakulam district.

In Arunachal Pradesh, THP helped train 221 women in East Kameng district, 365 in West Siang with 365 and 213 in Changlang. In Karnataka it has trained more than 21,000 women from various districts.

"We have trained a total of 65,000 across the various states of India," Supriya Banavalikar, Director, Research and Communications told *News India-Times*.

In India, THP has programs in 14 states - Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand.

The Hunger Project has been in India since 1983, involved in education and advocacy about 'hunger' as opposed to 'famine,' Banavalikar said. In the 1990s, when it went looking to take up more projects, it was directed to help strengthen the hands of women elected representatives at the grass roots.

"We met with key advocates in India and we were clearly told at that time - if you are really interested then you should work for the empowerment of women."

Despite the law requiring 33 percent representation for women, Banavalikar notes,



The Hunger Project works in most of the states in India toward empowering women in the *Panchayati Raj* system constitutionally mandated by the Government of India to give 33 percent of the seats at the grass roots level to women. (Photo as it appears on www.thp.org)

"There was no mandate from the government to really have the women succeed. We went to various states and sat with women representatives who told us some did not even know they were elected but now that they were, they wanted to know how to deliver on their promises."

That is when THP created Women's Leadership Workshops devoted to building women leaders. "Across India, The Hunger Project is seizing the historic opportunity of the election of one million grassroots women to local government. As women take office, they shift the agenda towards health, education, nutrition and family income," Banavalikar said.

The Hunger Project-India is funded by individuals around the world, and by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, so Non-Resident Indians could contribute to this tax exempt organization in the U.S., which is also recognized by the United Nations.

"We recommend not to have designated funding unless it is \$25,000 or above," Banavalikar said, adding, "We are an international organization and given the way we work, we are looking for funding where we can allocate it where it is most needed. So unless it is a large lump sum to a particular state, we would need to fit it within our purpose line."

The Hunger Project has a four-prong strategy to empower women leaders:

- Leadership Training for women representatives
- Making *panchayats* effective through mobilizing people's participation and advocacy to shift resources and authority to the local level.
- Alliance Building to support these women in achieving their vision
- Mobilizing the media to transform public attitudes

Currently in India, THP has 20 staff members in the Delhi office and 14 in its eight state-level offices.

According to information on its website, www.thp.org, the organization devotes 80 percent of donations to projects, the rest being for administration and fundraising work.

It received the highest rating from Charity Navigator two years in a row and says it meets all the standards of the Better Business Bureau. It is on the roster of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

It is also listed as the Global Hunger Project in the U.S. Federal Combined Federal Campaign (Number 1436).

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■ Radhia Adivasi

A courageous and powerful elected woman representative



Radhia Adivasi (Photo: Courtesy, THP)

Radhia Adivasi is the *Sarpanch* (village governing council chairperson or President) at the Chak Dehi village in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Adivasi lost her mother when she was a young child and she immediately became the one responsible for the maintenance of the household.

She has never attended school. She is illiterate and only learned how to write her own name after she was elected to office in 2005.

Adivasi's husband works in Satna, the nearest town, as a rickshaw puller (pulled by bicycle).

For this work, he makes Rs. 60 a day (\$1.50). Of that, one-third goes just to cover his daily bus fare.

Adivasi is unable to do wage labor due to health issues (including a heart condition).

She does receive a card from the state that allows her to buy rice and wheat for half the going rate at a local government store.

And this is the woman who heads the village council responsible for the well being and improvement of the lives of 1,800 fellow villagers.

I asked her if she planned to run for a second term in 2010. If she chose to do so she would have to run against village men for seats not reserved for women - no small challenge for an illiterate, tribal woman with no children and a heart condition currently living on less than \$1/day.

Without any hesitation, she responded, "Of course, there is much work yet to be done."

(Case study: Courtesy, The Hunger Project)

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