



Once
there was a
lone
Seed...

Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM)

Once
there was a
lone
Seed...



Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM)

Once
there was a
lone
Seed...



Brought out by
**Society for Promoting
Participative Ecosystem
Management (SOPPECOM)**

Written by
Prashant Khunte

Concept
**Seema Kulkarni, Pallavi Harshe,
Sneha Bhat, Swati Satpute**

Cover Design
Raju Deshpande

Layout
Swapnadeep Creatives

Contact Address
SOPPECOM, 16 Kale Park,
Someshwarwadi Road, Pashan,
Pune 411008

Date of Publication
12 October 2022

For Private Circulation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM, forum for women farmers' rights) has been working since year 2017 on issues concerning women farmers in Maharashtra. As a result of the efforts of MAKAAM and other organisations, certain Government Resolutions (GR) have been passed which are important from the point of view of women farmers from farmer suicide households and migrant women sugarcane-cutters. However, if these GRs are to be implemented on the ground, matters need to be taken up and pushed forward by building strong grassroots organisations of women farmers and migrant cane cutters. organisation. Taking this into account, efforts are being made for the last two years by SOPPECOM towards capacity building of women leaders of various organisations associated with MAKAAM. Forty-eight women leaders actively participated in this process, and over the last two years, they have undertaken several action programmes which have proved their leadership capabilities. This booklet tells the stories of thirteen of these women who grew to become leaders. We take the opportunity here to thank all the women who participated in this programme. All the organisations with which these women are associated, contributed much to their evolution as leaders. Besides, the mentors from these organisations stayed constantly in touch with them giving guidance and solving their problems whenever it was necessary. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the representatives of the organisations involved

in this process. (A list of all the organisations, mentors and participants is given in Appendix 3)

Various kinds of online trainings were conducted and participants were given several action programmes related to the training. We thank Alka Pavangadkar, Ashwini Kulkarni, Ulka Mahajan, Mukta Srivastava, Jayaji Paikrao, Seema Kulkarni, Shubhada Deshmukh, Kumari Jamkatan, Manisha Tokle, Madhuri Khadse, Keshav Gurnule, Chhaya Padghan, Swati Satpute, Sneha Bhat and Pallavi Harshe for conducting very engaged and intensive trainings on a range of related subjects.

Thanks are also due to the facilitators of MAKAAAM who gave advice and guidance from time to time and thus helped to find solutions to problems. This programme was made possible only because of the willing participation of all members of MAKAAAM.

We are grateful also to the staff of SOPPECOM who undertook the coordination of this entire process. Special thanks are due to the Association for India's Development (AID) without whose financial support this process of capacity building of women leaders would have been impossible.

Thanks also to Prashant Khunte who took the trouble to follow and understand the journey of the women leaders and carried out the important task of putting it into words and bringing it out in the form of a booklet.

Sandeep Salunke (Layout), Raju Deshpande (Cover), Sharada Mahalle (Proofreading) have made important contributions in the completion of this booklet. Thanks are also due to all three of them.

Last but not the least, we would like to thank Ms Mrinalini Desai and Ms Usha Mahajan, without whose support we would not have been able to bring this English version out.

Maharashtra Coordination Committee of MAKAAAM

Suvarna Damle, Shubhada Deshmukh, Ranjana Kanhere, Madhuri Khadse Seema Kulkarni, Chhaya Padghan, Jayaji Paikrao, Vaishali Patil, Manisha Tokle, Prabha Yadav. ■

Once
there was
a
lone
Seed..



Once there was a lone Seed...

Leadership sprouts
among rural women



Chitrakala
Vaide | 19



Vanita
Shende | 24



Khanjira
Karade | 30



Kalavati
Sawandkar | 35



Geeta
Kale | 42



Anita
Meshram | 46



Archana
Keche | 52



Sunita
Alonay | 59



Neelima
Renghe | 66



Manisha
Uike | 72



Lakshmi
Gajbhiye | 77



Dwaraka
Waghmare | 84



Jija
Darawada | 91

Appendix 1

Gains made by the rural women's leadership that became active after 2020-2021 in MAKAAAM

Appendix 2

Achievements of MAKAAAM's women's leadership development programme

Appendix 3

About women's leadership in organisations associated with MAKAAAM

Appendix 4

MAKAAAM: Coverage of women's leadership in the Districts

About MAKAAM

► Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) is a Forum for Women Farmers' Rights. MAKAAM undertakes actions to strengthen and raise the voice of women labourers in rural and tribal areas, to bring their issues to the discussion table, and to help solve their problems. This national Forum was established in 2014. MAKAAM has a presence in 24 States of the country. In Maharashtra, MAKAAM has been working since 2017. Various groups, such as voluntary organisations in rural areas, activists-scholars, women farmers, are associated with MAKAAM

Nowadays, there is some awareness in society about the abuse of and violence against women in the workplace as well as in the home. However, these questions are raised or addressed mostly only in cities. Problems related to violence or of the availability of health services, education and employment, or even of water and land, although serious, rarely come up for discussion in the mainstream. Farmers' suicides are an issue for discussion at the national and international level, but the problems faced by the women in these suicide-afflicted families do not draw the attention of society or even of the government. It is against this background that MAKAAM works through its network of individual workers and organisations. This network is now spreading in Maharashtra too. MAKAAM is building up leadership among rural women. For this purpose, information about various Government schemes and laws is being made available to the women in rural areas, who

show leadership potential. Training and interaction sessions are organised from time to time to motivate women and to encourage the women leaders.

The objective of MAKAAAM is not limited solely to taking advantage of Government schemes and benefiting from them. In fact, its efforts are directed towards making rural women's problems an important issue in the political discourse and, through the process of addressing and finding solutions to these problems, towards building women's leadership in every village.

MAKAAAM has taken up issues such as the rights of women on natural resources, their health and employment. Efforts are also being made to help step up the participation of women in decision making, first and foremost at the family level.

MAKAAAM has played a crucial role in bringing to the forefront the issues of women in suicide-afflicted families. In Maharashtra a study of the women in suicide afflicted families was conducted through MAKAAAM and one of the key findings was that society is not ready to grant inheritance rights to women. When a man dies his widow's life becomes dependent on others and she is denied even her fundamental rights. As a result of this study and MAKAAAM's intervention in this issue, the Government of Maharashtra issued a Government Resolution (GR) which purports to protect the rights of women in families afflicted by suicide. Taking into account the need for developing and organising women leaders at the local level for implementation of this GR, MAKAAAM is engaged in

capacity building efforts for women, for this very purpose, in several districts of the state. The network has also made a well-researched presentation of issues related to women engaged in women sugarcane cutters. MAKAAAM is making efforts to help women sugarcane –cutters obtain the facilities they need at their work-sites and to solve their health-related problems. During the pandemic MAKAAAM did a study on the plight of single women during COVID-19. A report titled “Unlocking the Crisis: Understanding impacts of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown on single women farmers of Maharashtra” was brought out. Efforts are also being made through the MAKAAAM platform to make such issues a subject of public discourse and to intervene at various levels to help solve these problems.

Establishing the rights of women on forest and other natural resources especially in the tribal belts is also a priority area of action for MAKAAAM. Some parts of the districts of Gadchiroli, Gondia, Bhandara, Chandrapur, Amravati and Yavatmal are covered by forests. Women in these areas depend mainly on the forests for their livelihood. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the period of the lockdown, the income they obtained from the forest was a great support for the women. They collect fruits and other produce of the *mahua* and *tendu* trees, and seasonal vegetables that grow wild in the forest. However, the forest produce does not get the proper market price. MAKAAAM is intervening in various ways to help correct this situation.

Some organisations working in the tribal areas have been associated with MAKAAAM right from the start. Efforts are being made through these organisations for the implementation of the Forest Rights Law-2006. These efforts were mainly towards establishing the rights of the local communities on the resources in their surroundings. In 2018 MAKAAAM organised a National Brainstorming workshop in Nagpur. This workshop brought into sharp focus the view that forest rights are an issue of women’s livelihood. It was after this that efforts began in all parts of

Maharashtra state to deliberate upon the rights of women on forest and other natural produce. These efforts first translated into action when a resolution was passed in the Village Council of Gadchiroli regarding the sale of tendu leaves, and the remuneration for the labour involved was credited to the women's bank accounts. Such interventions are being made by MAKAAAM in other places too such as the Konkan, North Maharashtra and Marathwada areas. MAKAAAM is at the forefront in making such interventions which help to develop leadership in women of the Scheduled Tribes.

Issues relating to rural women are complicated and difficult to resolve. It is a challenging task to develop their leadership abilities. Even so, building women's leadership is taking root through MAKAAAM's efforts. Along with issues of water and ration, these leaders have also begun to bring issues of single women to the anvil. MAKAAAM is endeavouring now to bring about changes in the criteria and amount of widows' pensions. Initiative is also being taken to ensure that works which are especially suitable for women are included in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA).

Thus, MAKAAAM is intervening in numerous ways at various levels from the village to the State level. MAKAAAM believes that a strong leadership on the part of rural women will succeed in asserting the rights and the dignity of rural women. It also believes that these steps will lead towards equality and cooperation in society. ■

PREFACE

► Through MAKAAAM a network of various institutions, organisations and activists aiming to deal with issues of rural women workers is spreading throughout the country. However, COVID-19 threatened to arrest this expansion. At the same time, COVID-19 and the accompanying lockdown also presented serious questions of the livelihood of women farmers. In this situation MAKAAAM began to reach material aid to rural women in Maharashtra. Thus it made contact with various independent women activists and organisations. Previous connections were also strengthened. This led to renewed efforts towards leadership development in individual women and organisations which had connected with MAKAAAM during the lockdown. Online interactions and workshops were held for this purpose. Women took several steps at the village level in accordance with the discussions and action programmes of these workshops. These actions were aimed at strengthening women's leadership at the village level. This booklet tells the story of how a new awareness arose and grew in women of the villages through these action programmes that involved the coming together of women, conducting surveys and engaging in actual processes of problem solving.

Ironically, when life in general had come to a standstill during the lockdown, women, with the help of MAKAAAM crossed the thresholds of their mindscapes for the first time in their lives. In village after village, there were interventions regarding various issues. A new generation of women leaders arose in remote villages.

This booklet besides being a compilation of such happenings also presents the panorama of issues related to women farmers and describes the growth and nurture of leadership through this process.

Additionally, even as this booklet takes a review of the work already accomplished after 2020, especially through the 19 organisations in Vidarbha and Marathwada, it is also a way of acknowledging the workers who have taken up leadership roles in this work and an attempt to encourage them. Although it has not been possible to include here the work and background of all the workers, this booklet will certainly give a feel of the fabric of women's leadership that is being woven at village level. As the reader gets to know these workers, they will get a glimpse of their encouraging achievements of recent times. Of the 48 women farmer leaders, we have included the representative journeys of 13 of them. They highlight the challenges faced by organisations of women labourers. They also help us get an idea of the way the women look at their own lives and what their priorities are.

Women farmers are the lifeline of the rural economy. However, this section has always been neglected due to its own dormant condition. This is the reality, with some differences in scale, in all parts of the world. According to the figures given by the ILO, 41 per cent of women all over the world work in the agricultural sector. However, they earn 40 per cent less than the men in this sector. Less than 20 per cent of the women have ownership of land. Again, all over the world, besides their labour in the fields,

women contribute valuable labour in their homes. When this work is not even acknowledged as labour, it is futile to think in terms of remuneration for it. Even worse, these women are victims of violence and sexual exploitation more often than men. In India, this reality is even more hidden and in the dark. According to figures given by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) one Indian woman falls victim to some kind of abuse or the other, every three minutes. In 2021 a survey ‘Men and gender equality’ was conducted on an international level. In this survey, an opinion that was expressed by 65 per cent Indian men was that ‘Women tolerate being beaten by men in order to keep the family together’. Further, a majority of men also said that often they had no alternative but to beat women. In the same survey, 24 per cent of the men admitted to having sexually abused a woman in some way or the other, at least once sometime in their life. The stories in this booklet must be understood in the context of this reality. It is against this background that MAKAAAM is working to strengthen rural women’s leadership. This challenge has only increased in difficulty in the post-pandemic period.

The first lockdown began in March 2020. Crores of women all over the country lost their means of earning a living. Oppression of women was also seen to have increased during this period. During this crisis, MAKAAAM managed to engage with rural women online. These women found such interactions useful. In fact, women farmers learnt to handle mobile phones for the first time in their lives all because it would enable them to attend the online sessions. Some borrowed phones from their relatives, some even sold a goat or two in order to buy a mobile phone. These instances reveal the desire of the women to learn new things and to be capable of finding a way out of a difficult situation. This book also illustrates how the women put to use the information obtained through the online sessions in their own villages, what changes came about as a consequence and what possibilities for further change were also generated.

Life, disrupted by the pandemic is limping back to normalcy. But the state of the economy is still delicate. Hence, although the percentage of women's employment may increase but so will their hours of work, while their incomes will see a fall. Rural women will also feel the same stress. That is why there is a greater need to organise rural women. The struggle of women leaders narrated in this booklet is to be seen against this background. It underlines the critical need for building up such a leadership.

Maharashtra is a rapidly urbanizing state and yet about 50 per cent of its population lives in the rural areas. It means that issues related to villages, especially to the women, will remain important for a long time to come. However, even now, while formulating policies for rural development, women are not given the independent and comprehensive consideration they deserve. That is why the stories in this book draw attention to the life of rural women and show why it is in dire need of a change.

In recent times, women's participation in the Information Technology (IT) sector is seen to have increased. In view of this new labour force, the Maternity Benefits Act was amended in 2017 to make it possible for women to get 12 to 16 weeks of maternity leave. It also became mandatory for establishments employing more than 50 women to provide child care facilities. Such a law and benefits are encouraging for women in white collar jobs but neither the government nor the policy makers have paid adequate attention to rural women and all others in the unorganised sector. The stories of struggles included here highlight the concerns of the unorganised women workers from rural areas. As we compiled these stories, we became conscious that such studies that attempt to understand the world of women of the lowest strata of our society should be conducted on a continual basis by Women's Studies Centres of our Universities.

Farmers' suicides are a symptom of the breakdown of the rural economy. There is of course the need for deliberation upon this problem and a search for solutions, but due attention should also be given to the women of the suicide-afflicted families who are

left behind. Some of the stories in this booklet will help to understand the struggles of women whose husbands committed suicide. These stories of women being disinherited, denied property rights, denied even a shelter, should not be thought of as individual experiences but as undesirable features of the agricultural economic system. Some of the stories of suicide –afflicted women will mention that a certain one-time amount was received as aid from the government but a woman’s problems do not end with the receipt of this amount. In fact, it may well be the beginning of a struggle that she faces alone.

Getting rations at a fair price from the government is a necessity for rural women. A ration card, registration as heir, aid from the Widow Pension Scheme are critical for survival. But to get the benefits of these basic schemes, women need the help of the men of the village, and sometimes even sexual favours may be demanded in exchange for such help. But with the information provided by MAKAAAM, some women took their courage in both hands and obtained the benefits for themselves and even helped other women to get their dues. On the face of it, this may appear to be a simple thing, but what these workers actually succeeded in doing was to shake up the power structure at the village level. They suffered taunting and rejection from the community. The time-tested trick of questioning a woman’s character in order to suppress her aspiration was also tried on these women. But the book will give several instances of these scarcely educated village women who showed the necessary courage and determination to withstand such threats.

Employment for women through the MNREGA is a crucial issue. A majority of women do not have ownership of means of production. In spite of that, women’s poverty has not been addressed as an independent issue, or with the seriousness it deserves. In fact, women’s poverty is rooted in their poverty of information. That is why MAKAAAM conducted an interactive session to give information about the MNREGA. With that help, the workers in the

villages placed their demand for the Job Cards and employment through the Scheme. It was the first time that women had taken such an initiative in any village. It is important that such demand from women for employment through the EGS increases in order that their issues such as the rights of rural women to employment, the right to equal payment for equal work as compared to men, that the EGS should include works in accordance with the needs of women in rural areas, that women must be given their due place in the decision making processes at the village level and are given due weightage at every stage. In several villages, MAKAAAM has intervened on this front. However, some of stories in this booklet will highlight the ways in which, when women make demands for employment, obstacles are placed in their way or they are simply stubbornly denied employment.

One more point needs to be brought up here. Getting rid of the yoke of the patriarchal mindset is a slow process that can only happen over the long term. Hence it is possible that as we read about some women demanding their own rights, it may appear to us that they are in the process depriving other women of theirs. This can be a critical issue especially in cases of land rights by inheritance. The question that arises here is how far can a woman, claiming rights to the family's land after the death of her husband, be expected to go to protect the rights of the other women in her family such as her sisters-in-law. It is necessary to look at such situations with tolerance and with an understanding of the complexity of an agricultural economy. An unfortunate but important aspect of the agricultural economy is the very small size of most land holdings. The continual fragmentation of land results in more and more people of a family becoming dependent on small pieces of land. If women too demand their right to land by inheritance and begin to farm their land independently, while they will get ownership of means of production, their economic independence will be severely limited. In view of this ground reality, MAKAAAM is also organising women into groups and encouraging the concept

of collective farming.

Thus, the task of working with rural women to develop their self-confidence, economic self-reliance, the ability to participate, even to lead the decision making processes, and while bringing about all these changes to build up a women's pressure group which is different from the entrenched political process can easily be seen to be a multidimensional even complex undertaking. In fact, it can be taken to be first and foremost a struggle for identity. Society has an extremely derisive attitude towards women. But this booklet provides a window through which to observe how a rural woman can become capable enough to stand up for herself and deal with her problems on her own.

Half the world's population consists of women. But there is no country in the world where they form 50 percent of the parliament, bureaucracy, educational institutions, army, police or judiciary. In agriculture, though their contribution is more than 50 percent, it is scarcely acknowledged. Attempts at removing this imbalance in society will inevitably cause some tension and instability. These tensions are being keenly felt not only in society but by the women in their personal lives. A simple question of whether or not to ask a male neighbour for help to change a fused bulb can pose a dilemma for a rural woman because her every action is continuously under scrutiny in the name of protecting her moral character. Although this specific exclusion of women has not been mentioned in any great depth, the reader will sense this dormant feeling of isolation to be the real inspiration for their struggle. This booklet is finally an attempt to document the internally felt and externally obvious agitation a woman experiences as she readies herself for her future journey which will take her beyond her 'proper place' in the family and society.

Our hope is that these notes will help to keep the stream of inspiration alive and flowing.

— **MAKAAM**



Chitrakala Vaide

► Bortola, with a population of 300, is a small village in Gondia district. At the initiative of Chitrakala, the women of this village had come together for their rights. It all started with the online sessions of MAKAAAM that Chitrakala attended which made her aware of her rights. She first used this awareness for herself by making the ration shop owner give her a receipt for her purchases. Encouraged by her success, she met other village women and got them together to demand work under MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in the village. It was not easy. She faced a lot of resistance both from her family and the villagers. What kept her going was her determination to ensure a better future for her two small daughters. She did not

want them to face the same problems that she was going through.

Chitrakala reminisced about those days: My husband stopped talking to me. My in-laws were also very angry. Villagers blamed me for inciting their women and creating unrest in their families. But I continued doing what I thought was right. Gradually, my family realised that I was doing nothing wrong. One day a drunken man shouted at me saying that I was spoiling their women, that I take the women to the Gram Panchayat (GP) or the village administrative office. My husband heard this and was angry that I was spoiling the name of the family. But I explained to him that if I kept quiet today tomorrow our little girls would also face the same fate. Also, if after our efforts the names of our daughters got added to the family ration card it would benefit all of us. We were getting less rations than we were entitled to because their names had not been added on the card. Gradually, my husband saw my point of view and the family's resistance lessened. This, of course, took some time and till then I had to go it alone.

The women of Bortola rarely ventured outside their houses except to work in fields as agricultural labourers. The closest weekly market was in Navegaon Bandh which was 15kms away and the distance had to be traversed on foot. So it was the village men who did the marketing. The only contact the village had with the outside world was through the one bus that came once a day to the village.

In such a remote village the 'Foundation for Economic and Ecological Development' (FEED) began its efforts at development work. Sarita Meshram of FEED began by holding women's meetings to impart information about government schemes. It was at one such meeting that Chitrakalatai attended on MNREGA, when she asked 'Why do we not get rations in the names of our two daughters?' The discussion shifted to this problem. It turned out that a number of women faced problems regarding rations. After listening to each one's problems Saritatai said to the women that these problems could be resolved only if all of them approached

the ration shop owner together.

The meeting ended and all dispersed. But Saritatai's words about women coming together to resolve problems kept haunting Chitrakala. In the meantime, seeing Chitrakala's interest and grasp, Saritatai invited her to join MAKAAAM. The MAKAAAM sessions increased her restlessness as she saw the gap between the schemes on paper and the reality on the ground. She thus began speaking to the other women about all that was troubling her. As the women began speaking to each other they realised how each was facing different issues in the matter of rations alone.

Pramila had made a new ration card but was not getting any rations as the shopkeeper used to tell her he was not receiving any quota in her name. When Vidyabai payed the shopkeeper, he did not return the change to her. When she asked for it, he gave her a soap cake instead. Nirubai, a widow, had a BPL card under which they could receive subsidised rations, but the shopkeeper charged the full amount. These and such problems got voiced. In all this, one problem that was found to be common to all was that no one was receiving receipts.

Chitrakala realised that if they got receipts they would all know exactly what the shopkeeper was charging each. And so she asked for one. But the shopkeeper said 'Why do you need a receipt, what are you going to do with it?' And Chitrakala realised that unless all the women came together he would not relent.

At the same time Chitrakala also began to talk to the women about MNREGA that assured people work for wages in their villages. Women resisted at first as they had never entered the GP office before (which was a male bastion) and neither had they filled Form 5 (an application form by which a person puts forth a demand for work under MNREGA) nor had they received a receipt for the same. After many days of persuasion and discussion one woman agreed to accompany Chitrakala to the office and ask for a receipt too. Hearing about this the other women also, one by one, agreed to accompany them to the office! A major hurdle sur-

Pramila had made a new ration card but was not getting any rations as the shopkeeper used to tell her he was not receiving any quota in her name. When Vidyabai payed the shopkeeper, he did not return the change to her. When she asked for it, he gave her a soap cake instead. Nirubai, a widow, had a BPL card under which they could receive subsidised rations, but the shopkeeper charged the full amount. These and such problems got voiced. In all this, one problem that was found to be common to all was that no one was receiving receipts.

mounted!! But a long road still remained to be traversed.

The women asked the gram sewak or the village administrative officer for the receipt of Form 5. At first he said there is no such thing, he further added that there is no such rule that the receipt has to be given. The staff of the gram panchayat kept stalling the women. The women persisted, going again and again to the office. The staff spread the word in the village of this unforeseen behaviour of the village women with the aim of maligning them and they succeeded. But Chitrakala didn't give up in spite of the barbs coming her way. And neither did the other women.

First they together went to the ration shop where the shopkeeper this time said that he couldn't give the receipts as he had to give them to his boss. As planned, one woman took a mobile from a boy standing there and said 'Tell us the reason again so we will record it and show it to your senior.' A man standing by started verbally assailing the women but the women fought back. Seeing that the commotion may go against him, the shopkeeper quickly agreed to give the women receipts.

Their confidence boosted with this victory, the women went to the gram panchayat office. On the way, they were booed by some men idly standing by, but they ignored them. More women now

joined in. From 5-10 women the figure touched 25-30. As a result of this unity in April 2021, 90 days' work under MNREGA was sanctioned for the village. Ration card issues also got resolved. Everyone was given receipts, Chitrakala's daughters' names were included in her ration card, and the problems of the other women also were solved. A great confidence booster for women's unity. The efforts of MAKAAAM were bearing fruit.

Chitrakala has studied up to Std 10th under adverse conditions. Her parents were labourers on a brick kiln. The school was 4-5 km away from home. Buying a cycle was not within their means. Chitrakala found a way out. She approached a girl from her school who had a cycle and promised to take her double seat every day to and from the school. And so, she completed her schooling. Her education stopped with her marriage. Her chance encounter with MAKAAAM gave her the opportunity of new learning. Problem solving and determination was in her nature which also got full expression when she came in contact with MAKAAAM.

Chitrakala's leadership qualities were getting a canvas to blossom upon. With MAKAAAM's support and training she began to understand and address other problems too. Once she saw a man berating his wife on the road. She brought this up in the women's meeting and it transpired that the man was known to beat his wife. They decided together to meet the man and bring pressure on him. And so they went to his house. Although they spoke politely, the man realised the eventualities and from that day onwards never hit his wife even once!

Such is the effect of MAKAAAM! ■



Vanita Shende

► ‘Will you really work on MNREGA works?’ the gramsewak asked Vanitaitai. Confidently and without hesitation she said ‘Yes’. And so did the 13 other women with Vanitaitai. No work came their way even after continuously following it up for a fortnight. But, the single, widowed, deserted women of Tirzada village had broken a glass ceiling. Before this no woman of Tirzada village had ever demanded work under MNREGA.

It was in March 2021 that, not just any women, but the single women of the village had come together and made their voice heard. They went together to the GP office, asked for a job card and gave an application to the Sarpanch and gramsewak demanding work under MNREGA for three months. Leading these women

was Vanita Shende.

Vanita says, 'I got information about MNREGA in the on-line training sessions conducted by MAKAAAM. This, I shared with the other women in a similar situation like me. Under MNREGA, work for wages has to be provided to anyone who demands it. However, such a demand coming from women was totally unexpected. The gramsewak dilly-dallied over it. But when we persisted he tried breaking our new found confidence by giving us work that as a rule only men are given under MNREGA - digging a 10 feet well and bringing out the rubble. At first the women were disheartened. But I told them that the gramsewak had erred in giving us this work. Finally, as we persisted, the gramsewak relented. Now that we are more informed, next time we will also suggest the type of work we can do, while applying for work under MNREGA.'

To the question, 'What has MAKAAAM achieved through this?' The answer is 'The confidence in grappling with life found by single women and widows left behind by farmer suicides'.

In Maharashtra, Yavatmal accounts for the highest number of farmer suicides. Vanita Shende's village, Tirzada of Kalamb Taluka is in Yavatmal District. Up to 2021, Tirzada alone had more than 30 registered farmer suicides. Vanita's husband had committed suicide in 2013. While speaking about it Vanita told us that nearly half the farmers who committed suicides in her village were related to her!

Vanitai began her work by collecting information about other single women in her village. She found their stories resonating with her own. Nalubai's husband committed suicide. She had to work as a daily labourer on her own fields. Her husband's land was transferred in her brother-in-law's name denying her right to inherit. She neither had the money nor the confidence and knowledge to take her case to court.

Then there was Sharda. Her husband sold their land and also took a loan. Weighed down by the loan that he was unable to repay, he took his own life, leaving Sharda alone to fend for herself and the family.

Looking back at her life Vanita says she has never felt protected and safe either before or after her marriage. Born to landless labourers, she was the youngest with two older brothers. Vanita tai studied up to class four. Their parents could not afford to educate all the children. The eldest being a boy and good at studies was kept in school. The second was not interested so left school on his own. Vanita being a girl, her parents thought it was a waste to educate her and so took her out of school. That, she said, was her first brush with the feeling of being ‘deserted’. Her second encounter was after marriage.

In 1989, she was married to Yadavrao Shende. He was given to gambling and smoking pot. He, therefore, was not interested in working or earning for his family. Being the eldest daughter in law it became her responsibility to look after the needs of her family. She may have even continued like this but the husband would beat her for the flimsiest of reasons. Exhausted, one day she left home for her mother’s house.

While all this was happening, Vanita had given birth to two children. The first was a daughter. The second, born five years later, was a son. This gave her a semblance of respect in her in-law’s house. But this did not last too long. A few years later she got patches of white on her skin - leucoderma. Her in-laws found a new reason to blame her. Her husband broke all relations with her. Villagers stayed away from her thinking her touch might bring them bad luck too. At times, it became difficult for her to get farm work because farmers didn’t want to employ her. Working in the sun became difficult for her as her patches would burn unbearably. Still she tried to overcome it by wearing full sleeved blouses. Finally, not able to bear it at all, she again came back to live at her mother’s home.

At her mother’s home life wasn’t easy except that she didn’t have to bear mental torture in the home. Her brother’s economic condition too was poor and thus she worked hard to make ends meet and bring up her two children. When the daughter turned 18

she again returned to her husband's house so that she could find a husband for her daughter. Luckily, her husband agreed to this. He found her a suitable groom. He even took a loan for the marriage ceremony. But unable to repay the loan he hanged himself to death. Vanitatai was again left alone, without support.

Vanitatai's husband's body was wrapped in a plastic and sent home after the post mortem. All of this cost money. Recalling those days, Vanita says her in-laws made her pay for that and even for the bier and the last rites of her husband. As her husband's death was registered as a 'farmer suicide' she received Rs100,000/- from the government – Rs 30,000 in cash and the remaining Rs 70,000 as postal deposit. This was another reason for the in-laws to be angry with her. They made her repay the loan from her money. Now began the next phase of her struggle.

Her son was small but the in-laws did not want her to get her husband's share of the inheritance. This led to a lot of quarrels in the family with her brother-in-law and wife even abusing her verbally and attacking her physically, on the other hand being a widow she was cut off from society. She was not allowed to attend weddings or any other family functions. She was insulted frequently and derided for being a widow and on top of that being disfigured by leucoderma. The purpose of all this oppression was somehow to deprive her of her share in the land. During this period, she came in contact with Madhuri Khadse of Prerna Gramvikas Sanstha which involved in helping single women. Prerna built up her courage. Her children had grown up somewhat and supported her too. So now she began to make efforts to take possession of her husband's share which was rightfully hers.

The family owned a total of seven acres of land. Of that 3.5 acres came to her husband and his brother and the remaining 3.5 acres was to go equally to her husband's three half-sisters. After a lot of persistent effort, quietly bearing a lot of ill will from her in-laws and resistance from the government offices she finally got her right to her share of the land. Her fight was not just for her

Vanitatai's husband's body was wrapped in a plastic and sent home after the post mortem. All of this cost money. Recalling those days, Vanita says her in-laws made her pay for that and even for the bier and the last rites of her husband. As her husband's death was registered as a 'farmer suicide' she received Rs100,000/- from the government – Rs 30,000 in cash and the remaining Rs 70,000 as postal deposit. This was another reason for the in-laws to be angry with her. They made her repay the loan from her money. Now began the next phase of her struggle.

own right but for that of her young son who would have otherwise been deprived.

After having succeeded in this struggle, she realised that 1.75 acres was just not enough to subsist. She felt that as per the going tradition the daughters should give up their share. If this happened, then her share of land would allow her and her son to live off it. With this in mind she invited her sisters-in-law, told them about her plight and requested that they give back their share.

At first they resisted but later as is the common practice they gave up their share of the land. Now she had 3.5 acres to her name. Vanita got her right but her sisters in law were deprived of theirs. A right that is theirs by law. Vanita's is not a lone case. Girls giving up their right of inheritance in their father's property 'voluntarily' is common. Just as they, as daughters, give up their right they expect their sisters in law to do the same.

Women too have grown up in a patriarchal society and abide by its values unquestioningly. It is bound to take time for women to question this and look critically at their own actions which are flagrantly unjust in a society that promotes and stands for gender equality. Therefore, even while perpetrating injustice, Vanita has to be seen also as a victim of this patriarchal society. MAKAAAM has

this as one of its long term goals in their training of village women.

Vanitatai has taken a number of initiatives in her village with the encouragement and training by workers of MAKAAAM and 'Prerna', a local NGO from Yavatmal. This has seen her natural leadership qualities come to the fore.

Village women enjoy many social-religious get togethers, but widows are barred from attending any of these. Even where they are allowed they are expected to be on the periphery. To address this, Prerna organisation suggested a *haldi Kumkum* for widows only. *Haldi Kumkum* is a social gathering in India in which married women exchange *haldi* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (vermilion powder), as a symbol of their married status and wishing for their husbands' long lives. Vanitatai took the lead, met and convinced all the widows of the village and held the programme. - Another commonly held belief was that widows and menstruating women should never touch a *haldi* plant. With Prerna's support Vanitatai courageously planted a *haldi* plant in her compound and then made it a point to show it to all passers-by.

Vanitatai has formed a savings group of single women. She has interviewed ten single women and written their stories in detail. She helped spread awareness during the Corona period. She has been at the forefront of initiating these and many such activities never heard of before in her village.

Recently a panchayat member passing by her field stood to admire the cotton crop. Vanitatai ran up to him and told him proudly that this was a crop taken by a woman farmer! She repeated it till he realised what she was saying and also agreed to make a note of it in the official agriculture crop register as 'women farmers'. That pleased her immensely. Relating this incident to us, she also told us that in the very first year she harvested 16 quintals of cotton. Last year it yielded 25 quintals, and this year she expects 26-27 quintals - two whole quintals more! Vanita represents the confidence that MAKAAAM wishes to see in all their women members! ■



Khanjira Karade

► MAKAAM selected me as a ‘Woman Leader’ Khanjiratai tells us proudly. We ask ‘So what changed and what all happened after that? She laughed and said ‘I bought a mobile phone’

Khanjira’s maternal village is Khadki, a village of a 150 families, in Kurkheda Taluka of Gadchiroli District. She completed her education till Std 12 after which she had to leave studies because she would have to stay in a hostel where her parents were wary of sending her. This was a common reason for girls dropping out because parents of young girls were worried for their safety. Khanjira wished she could at least do a course in tailoring but even that was not possible as her parents soon got her married. After her marriage, she came to live in Chichewada village. She says

that at first she was very withdrawn in her in-laws' house. She spoke little and rarely went out. Then, Khanjira came in contact with the NGO, 'Amhi Amchya Aarogyasathi' (AAA) which works with the people of Chichewada village. She joined their savings group which took away her fear of talking to people. As she was educated, AAA made her the president of the Savings group and also the farmers group. Over a period, she became a part of the many developmental activities AAA ran in her village. They have also worked towards making the Gram Sabha truly participative with representatives from all communities.

Khanjira's husband is a graduate and, luckily for her, is very supportive. In 2020 she was selected by MAKAAAM as a woman leader. During COVID-19 she was expected to join on-line training and discussion sessions. There was no mobile network in her village. She had to travel 14 km for it. Her husband would gladly take her and wait for her till her meeting got over.

Recalling those days, she says it was the first time that she had held a mobile in her hand. She used to be very scared about speaking into it, listening to the person on the other side, wondering if they could see her, etc., slowly her confidence grew. After AAA, it was her interaction with MAKAAAM that enriched her as a person and made her sensitive to the social problems around her.

As part of her work with MAKAAAM, she identified and interviewed single and widowed women of her village, and came to understand their problems in the process. There was this 65-year-old woman who had been widowed 13 years ago. She was never given her share of the family's land. Her brother-in-law gave her a small piece to till but the land was never registered in her name. Neither did she know about the law of inheritance. Then there was the 45-year-old woman whose husband had died of snake bite five years ago. She also did not get any family land in her name. So also was the case of the 30-year-old widow, who, because she was childless was not given any share in property. She interviewed ten such women. She realised that they all had similar stories to

Recalling those days, she says it was the first time that she had held a mobile in her hand. She used to be very scared about speaking into it, listening to the person on the other side, wondering if they could see her, etc., slowly her confidence grew. After AAA, it was her interaction with MAKAAAM that enriched her as a person and made her sensitive to the social problems around her.

tell. They were unaware of the laws and their rights. They were all dependent on the land for their subsistence but none had any land in their name. The Central Government under the 'PM Kisan Samman Scheme' gives an amount of Rs 6000/- annually to all small farmers. The women knew nothing of this and in any case would remain deprived of the scheme as they had no land in their name. Another common problem they all faced in tilling their land was procuring inputs from the market and getting implements and tractor owners to till their land. Men would tend to ignore them and turn to them only when the work of other male farmers was done. Besides these work related issues, they had to bear the snide and sexual remarks of other men. Their every action and their every interaction with another man was under scrutiny and their intentions were questioned. A widow went pillion with another man on his bicycle to the Talathi (revenue official) office where he helped her with getting her name registered on her land papers. As thanks for the help, she offered him tea. Rumour spread quickly about her being seen with another man drinking tea in a hotel! There were other little things, like a neighbour changing a bulb or a gas cylinder. All these were topics for malicious gossip. These are daily occurrences that single women have to quietly put up with. The women were able to open up before Khanjiratai when she would meet them for her interviews. She gradually brought them together, talked to them about what she had learnt from the MAKAAAM sessions and then encouraged them to act on the

information. She would accompany them to the Talathi office to get their share of the land registered in their names. There were, she said, around 25 to 30 single women in her village. She has been able to help around ten of them.

Another important step Khanjiratai took was to organize women to demand work under MNREGA. For this purpose, she, along with 20-25 women, walked through the village common land identifying the type of work they could suggest to the sanctioning authority. This was a novel idea and women came up with other ideas of public works which would never have been thought about otherwise. There was a large stagnant-water hole near the anganwadi which was a breeding ground for mosquitoes and a risk to the little children of the nursery. The women suggested the work of closing it could be done under MNREGA. They also suggested building a washing place (ghat) near the village pond. Another need they vocalized was reaching tap water to every home. If not that, then at least a small well at every crossroad which would reduce the long distance that women had to trudge to get water and would save them time too.

MAKAAM, through Khanjiratai's efforts and the participation of women was making an impact most of all in the lives of women and the way they looked at themselves.

As her interest in her work, and her capacity for it grew Khanjiratai began looking beyond women to problems of other marginalized people too. Her attention was drawn to two COVID-19 patients who had returned from the city. The village had rightfully quarantined them but along with them they also broke all contact with their families, out of fear of getting the dreaded disease. Khanjiratai met those families and extended support. She then also met the villagers who had broken contact with them and explained the illness to them. When the vaccination arrived, she volunteered to take the first dose to take away the fear of the vaccine from the minds of the people.

To the question about what changes MAKAAM has brought

about in her, she said that now she is able to talk to any government officer and put forward her point. She now knows what papers are required to get a woman's name on the land title as a legal heir, as well as how to procure those papers. Armed as she is with information, she now no longer fears going to government offices and meeting the staff there.

From being a member of a savings group and carrying out small economic activities Khanjiratai has transformed into - as she says - a leader! Asked what a leader means she unhesitatingly says 'someone who helps other women.' 'People thought I do this because I must be benefiting monetarily from this. But truly, it is the satisfaction I get from helping my village women that keeps me going. Nothing else. This is my 'leaderki'!'

Before wrapping up, we asked her one final question. Has she got her own name on the land title of her family. To which she said 'No, the land is still in my father-in-law's name. But I'm confident if I ask my husband about adding my name along with his, he will not refuse. He will definitely support me.' ■



Kalawati Sawandkar

► Kalawati Sawandkar may be just a school dropout having left school in Std 7, but ask her about any information on single and widowed women of her village and she has it on her fingertips. She tells us that in a total village population of 6930, there are 322 widows and 19 single women. Admirably, she has collected all this from the voters list of the village. She has benefited tremendously from her association with MAKAAAM. In the two years of her association, Kalawati has picked up many skills needed in problem solving.

Kalawati's parents were illiterate. But she could study up to Std 7 because there was a school in the village. Then, because she was needed to work in the fields and they could not afford

the expenditure on her schooling, she had to drop out. At sixteen she was married to Tulshiram Sawandkar, who also was illiterate. However, she settled down into this farmers' domestic life. She bore three children – Nanda, Pandhari and Raja. Nanda was married in 2012. They spent more than one lakh rupees on her marriage and gave another one lakh as dowry. They had to borrow from the moneylender. Even before they could repay this loan, her younger sister, Radha fell ill with encephalitis and they had to borrow Rs 60,000 more for her treatment which they were unable to repay. Unfortunately, she did not even survive. At the same time, there was no income from their neglected fields and the interest on the loan kept growing. Burdened by the multiple loans he had taken, Kalawati's husband committed suicide in 2016. At that time Pandhari was in Std 9 but she too had to discontinue her schooling. The responsibility of the work on their land fell on Pandhari and Kalawati.

In government records, Kalawati's husband's death has not been registered under 'farmer suicide' which would have made Kalawati eligible to receive a compensation amount of Rs 100,000/- and relieved her of the debt burden. However, she got to know of this possibility only when she came in touch with Sahyadri, an organisation which had been surveying families of suicide victims since 2014. Kalawati had already had experience of the difficulties in getting a widow's pension. She told the organisation about her problems. As a result of this interaction, she began to work towards proving that her husband's death was in fact a 'farmer suicide'.

In spite of multiple visits to government offices over the last five years, she has as yet not succeeded. But her efforts continue. However, in the process of solving her own problems she gained an insight into the problems that widows and single women faced in society and in accessing government schemes. She developed empathy towards them. In addition, she not only developed confidence as she became familiar with the offices, she also got to understand government procedures, the papers and certificates

required for different schemes, how to submit applications online, etc. All this came in good use when other women approached her for help.

When they had first interacted with Kalawati after her husband's death in 2016, Sahyadri organisation had seen her potential as a leader and suggested to her to become a member of MAKAAM. Her experiences, learning and work got an impetus and focus when in 2018 she became a part of MAKAAM. Her work with women got streamlined and more disciplined. As part of MAKAAM Kalawati collected information on widows in her village. As she collected information, the women opened up to her and she became like a friend to them. The widows in the village began to tell her their problems. As she tried to find solutions to these problems, Kalawati began to develop as a leader.

Single widows in a village find it difficult to obtain something as simple as a ration card. Kalawati's new found leadership qualities played an important role in the lives of many single women in getting them their rights.

A recent example is illustrative. Shobhabai, a widow, met her and complained, 'Everyone is getting a ration card, except me. I even approached a middle man. He told me it will cost Rs. 3000/- . I can't afford it! I was told you would help. Will you?' After her husband's death Shobhabai was singlehandedly bringing up her two children and tilling her land. Subsidised rations would definitely help ease her burden, but she did not know how to go about it. Kalawati heard her and agreed to accompany her to the ration office in Vasmat Taluka on condition that Shobha bought their bus tickets. Shobha readily agreed and as decided they both went to the Talathi office, took the application form, collected the required papers and returning to the village even took the signature of the Sarpanch. Now all that was required was the ration shop owner's signature. This became a hurdle probably because he saw them breaking the lucrative chain he had set up in the village with the middle man. He played hard to get. Finally, Kalawati made a

phone call to him asking him where they should meet him. Still he made them run after him, asking them to meet him at different places.... in the Taluka, in the vegetable market, at the tehsil office, but was not to be found there when they reached the place. Eventually, they requested a man to speak to him on the phone on their behalf. Their persistence paid off and having run out of all excuses, he met them and signed the form. Without Kalawati - and her confidence born out of her knowledge of procedures - this would not have been possible.

Another case that exemplifies Kalawati 's growing knowledge of procedures and awareness of rights is Sitabai's.

Sitabai's husband had died in 2014. She had been trying to get her name registered in the land records. She approached Kalawati. Again Kalawati accompanied her to the Taluka land record office and completed the procedure. Sita's husband had taken a loan from the District Co-operative bank which he had repaid before he died. But the bank had not given a no dues certificate which would make Sita eligible for another loan against the land, if needed in the future. So they both went to the Bank and met the Manager. As expected the manager told them to come the next day. The next day he again told them to come on the following day. When on the third day he again tried to postpone, Kalawati looked him in the eye and told him that for three days in a row not only had they lost their daily wages but had also had to spend Rs.100 a day on transport and all they wanted was the no dues certificate. The manager was not just unsympathetic and uncooperative; he was also insulting in the way he spoke to them. Kalawati swallowed the insult quietly but once outside she took Shobha to the Tahsildar and told her the full case and what had transpired. Luckily the officer was a sensitive lady. She told them to go back home and wait for the receipt to reach them. Two days later a bank employee came searching for them to hand over the receipt! Kalawati had decided that he should be given a dose of his own medicine. She sent him back saying they would receive it only when he also gives money

In her work with MAKAAAM, Kalawati has helped 25 widows to file for widow pension and another 13 to file for gas connections under the Ujjwala Scheme. When the women whom she has helped do not receive the benefits, she feels personally responsible. Pensions had not started, as they should have, after six months. Kalawati followed it up with the tehsil office. There she was told that the meeting to decide on new cases had not been held as yet. The wheels of the government turn at their own slow pace. But it disturbs her because, being with them so closely, she knows the difficulties these women face.

equivalent to the wages they had lost. He tried persuading them but they did not budge. He had to go away and then come again the next day. Having taught him a lesson Kalawati and Sitabai accepted the receipt.

Widows and single women are always treated with discourtesy, never given the respect normally deserved by anyone. By this action, Kalawati, in her own way demanded and got respect for herself and Shobhabai. Who can find fault with her for this?

In her work with MAKAAAM, Kalawati has helped 25 widows to file for widow pension and another 13 to file for gas connections under the Ujjwala Scheme. When the women whom she has helped do not receive the benefits, she feels personally responsible. Pensions had not started, as they should have, after six months. Kalawati followed it up with the tehsil office. There she was told that the meeting to decide on new cases had not been held as yet. The wheels of the government turn at their own slow pace. But it disturbs her because, being with them so closely, she knows the difficulties these women face.

Kalawati has also had to face snide remarks from the villagers, about her character. Recently, Kalawati accompanied a Muslim friend to the taluka hospital when her daughter started getting

labour pains in the night. When she was not seen in the village in the morning, the women began to gossip that she had run away with a man. She returned, only to notice people looking at her with curiosity. On making enquiries, she quickly realised what they were thinking. Picking up courage she faced them squarely and said, ‘Yes, I was out the whole night, not with a Muslim man but a Muslim woman whose daughter had to be taken to the taluka hospital for her delivery.’ And thus she put a clean stop to any gossip.

Single women come to Kalawati with a variety of the problems they face. Nineteen-year-old Padmini, a widow, didn’t have money to take her child to a hospital; Kashibai has sugarcane in her field and a lift pump to water the field, but her electricity bill is an exorbitant Rs.5800/-; Sitabai’s name is not yet registered in the land records after her husband’s death and therefore she cannot avail of the benefits of any government scheme. To address these and other such problems Kalawati has formed a savings group. It is different from other savings groups in that it is a group of farmer-widows only. Facing similar problems, they bond easily and helped each other. They can go together to the taluka market to buy seeds and other agro inputs. Together, they also get courage to bargain in the market. They no longer need to be obliged to a man to help them in these matters, nor do they have to stave off gossip that would inevitably follow. This group helps the members in other ways too. They began going to each other’s fields to work thus saving labour costs. Another step the women took was to take loans from their savings group and buy farm implements and even pair of bullocks, that they now own collectively. Thus, and more importantly, they overcame a difficulty that widows regularly face. They do not have to plead with other farmers any more to make implements or labour available to them. Now they use their own resources for organic farming. The members of this group are mainly Maratha (Open category) farmer women except for two others, Kausabai who belongs to the Kumbhar community

(Scheduled Caste) and Tilisma Sheikh a Muslim landless labourer. Tilisma is assured of getting daily wages by working in the fields of the other women in the group, besides getting some of the produce too. Considering Tilisma's weaker economic condition when compared to their own, the group members have shared her loan amount amongst themselves and repaid it.

In conclusion when asked if they had a name for their group, Kalawati said her group was called Sayabai Savings Group after Shivaji Maharaj's wife. A fitting tribute to the new found dignity and self-esteem these women display on coming in contact with MAKAM. ■



Geeta Kale

► Geeta was only 28 years old when her husband died leaving behind the responsibility of three small children on her young shoulders. Recalling those early days, Geeta said, ‘No one came forward to enquire how a widow might be living and making ends meet, how she was managing to feed her children and educate them! When MAKAAAM meetings began, it was the first time I felt I had some support. It gave me the good feeling that there was someone who was concerned for widows also.’

As a child Geeta had dreamt of becoming a police woman. She was athletic and was a part of the kabaddi team. But her dream remained a dream. Moreover, after marriage she was confined to her home as per the ‘gosha’ custom amongst the Marathas of

Marathawada. ‘Gosha’ is somewhat similar to the burkha system of the Muslims. Women are not to be seen or heard by the in-laws and other men. Being seen in public spaces was, therefore, out of the question. She told us that the first time she breathed freely was when she came in contact with MAKAAAM.

In 2012 Geeta’s mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer. To meet the cost of treatment the family had to sell some land. It put the family under a lot of economic stress. The very next year her father-in-law died. Soon after that, in 2014 her husband too died leaving her alone to see her family through the trying times that lay ahead. She had no time to grieve and come to terms with the losses that had hit her one after the other.

Geeta realised that her name should be added in the land records, but she had no one before whom she could open up. She felt that if she did so, people would say ‘She has just lost her husband and here she is thinking about land ownership!’ The family land was in the name of her elder brother-in-law. Geeta quietly worked on that land and also on daily wages on other people’s land to do her share for the family.

In the first phase of the pandemic, MAKAAAM had distributed grains for widows through an NGO. This brought Geeta in contact with the Prerna Mahila Vikas Sanstha and its Director Gautam Mogale. Once she approached him and said, ‘Sir, I have studied up to Std 12, please give me a job’. He suggested that she begin to attend the online sessions of MAKAAAM. That is how she connected with MAKAAAM.

Geeta had no mobile phone. Initially, she attended a few meetings by borrowing her brother-in-law’s phone. Realising that these meetings could lead to employment in the future, she took a loan from her savings group and bought herself a mobile phone. After the lockdown was lifted Geeta was given the responsibility of surveying the widows in her own and surrounding villages. She collected the information of the three widows in her village.

But going to neighbouring villages alone was a problem. She

Geeta had no mobile phone. Initially, she attended a few meetings by borrowing her brother-in-law's phone. Realising that these meetings could lead to employment in the future, she took a loan from her savings group and bought herself a mobile phone. After the lockdown was lifted Geeta was given the responsibility of surveying the widows in her own and surrounding villages. She collected the information of the three widows in her village.

needed company. For this she teamed up with Sunita Jadhav, another active member of MAKAAAM. They decided to do the surveys together. Geetatai approached a young boy related to her to take them triple seat to the villages. The boy agreed and Geeta and Sunita got a lift to the four other villages that they surveyed. So far, the only reason for leaving her home had been for working in someone's fields. It was for the first time that Geeta had left her home and village for an entirely different purpose.

The survey helped Geeta to meet ten other widows and get to know their plight. Three of the villages - Girhamwadi, Kalamkonda and Chakmat - are in very difficult terrain and, therefore, inaccessible. Most of the widows were in great need of help. Social pressures restrict their movements outside the house. Geeta said that after she had filled their survey forms, every time she met any of them, they would ask when they would be receiving help. She did not know what answer to give them, so she would say she would let them know as soon as she got any response from the higher-ups. But in her mind, she also felt that the women may be thinking that help had come but that we (the surveyors) had cornered it! She also felt that women were not ready to stand up against their families, so they could not do anything to help themselves! In such a situation how much could an outsider help,' she wondered.

One of Geeta's experiences during the survey is worth

mentioning. In a village they were surveying, a widow gathered her whole family together assuming that she would get help. Among them was her brother-in-law too. As the survey progressed, discussion came around to the name of the person who owned the land, and the fact that a woman also could be an owner. The woman asked Geeta to help her to get her name registered in the land records. After the meeting, the brother-in-law came up to Geeta and quietly told her that they were well able to look after their matters and that she should mind her own business and not cause in-fighting in his family. The poor widow knows nothing of all this and is waiting in the hope that her name will be added to the land record with Geeta's help!

All these experiences have given Geeta a new confidence. A widow from her village wanted help for her ration card. She had gone to the same man who had asked Geeta for sexual favours in return for help. When he heard that the woman had approached Geeta, he met Geeta and told her that she should not interfere as the woman was related to him and that only he could help. But he was not talking to the earlier meek Geeta. This Geeta stood her ground and told him that he did not have monopoly over helping women in distress. Anyone could, and that she was going to. This change is all thanks to her association with MAKAAAM.

Because of MAKAAAM, Geeta has seen small but sure changes in herself. She has felt her self-confidence grow each time she did something new - as when she visited other villages for the surveys, when she took steps to get her own name on the land records with her brother's help, when she stood up to threats by goons and was able to answer them back, when she took a decision of her own and bought herself a mobile phone and now as she steps forward to help other women.

MAKAAAM has been by her side during this entire journey and Geeta acknowledges it. ■



Anita Meshram

► One day four men entered Anita's hut unannounced. They were not just anybody but the Sarpanch, his deputy, the ration shop owner and one other from Anita's village. Anita's house is just a 10' x 5' mud hut with a tin roof that became hot in the sun. And here come four prominent men of her village with a population of a good 3000 people. But they hadn't come without a purpose. As they left they casually threatened her with serious consequences if she did not desist from her recent activities! Anita had just about begun asking questions regarding welfare schemes and their rules and the village leadership was already feeling threatened!

Anita Meshram is a landless widow, making ends meet through daily labour wages and a meagre widow pension she receives

from the government. And therefore the village leaders coming up to her door was definitely special. And special it was. They tried to entice her to their way of thinking by tempting her with a sack of grains that would be delivered to her doorstep. But she did not fall for it. Instead she told them that she would want only that which is her due. This strength of character and clarity of thinking that Anita showed was surely because of the online sessions of MAKAAAM that she had recently begun attending.

When MAKAAAM sessions first started, Anita did not possess a mobile phone. She had attended them on a borrowed phone. How often would someone lend her a phone, she thought. So a few sessions later she sold her goat and bought herself a phone. Aware of her hand to mouth living, Anita's mother had gifted her the goat, so that when time came, Anita would be able to get her daughter married off in style. Explaining to us why she sold the goat for a mobile, Anita said the sessions were giving her a lot of information that she could use to help other women in distress. She was sure that someday this would help her get a job and so she sold her goat. We too thought that it was not wrong of Anita to expect her efforts to yield a benefit for herself also. Anitatai tells us, 'Now I don't care about what anyone talks about me. People always talk badly about a single woman - about where and with whom she may have gone. I have spent my whole life worried about what people will say, never having a moment's joy. But now I don't worry'. We can only imagine what Anita has discovered within her when she expresses these thoughts! Anita's journey from a scared and worried woman to a confident lady who can stand her ground before the accusing eyes of a village has surely much to do with the sessions with MAKAAAM.

Anita was studying in Std 8 when she was given away in marriage. She says her father thought that as she was dark, it was best to get her married as early as possible. She remembers there was an exam on the day of her marriage but she did not go for it. She was all of eleven years old. Not old enough to know the gravity of

She was around fourteen years when she got married for the second time. The second husband was also landless. His small earnings were from grazing goats. He had a widowed mother at home. Anita's family thought their daughter could easily adjust in such a house. Besides, supported by the belief that a girl should die in her husband's house, and, wanting to fulfil his responsibility her father got Anita married to this boy.

the occasion. She went to her husband's house after marriage with a light heart as if it was a child's play. But when her husband tried to become physical with her she got frightened and started crying. In a month's time she returned to her mother's home and pleaded that she not be sent back. At first, the father thought his daughter was spoiling their name. But when she did not relent and pleaded saying she would stay there and work for her living he relented. Her brothers got both the parties together and in front of village elders dissolved the marriage. The family were landless labourers where feeding an extra mouth is not easy. Also the family was sure that her happiness lay in her being married. They felt it was not easy for a woman to lead a life as a woman deserted by her husband. So, soon they got her married again.

She was around fourteen years when she got married for the second time. The second husband was also landless. His small earnings were from grazing goats. He had a widowed mother at home. Anita's family thought their daughter could easily adjust in such a house. Besides, supported by the belief that a girl should die in her husband's house, and, wanting to fulfil his responsibility her father got Anita married to this boy.

Anita's husband was physically weak. He would bring home just about 500-700 rupees per month as earnings. They depended upon their goats to meet their expenses. The mother-in-law received a widow's pension from the government but that would

go to meet her own medical expenses.

Anita would do manual labour while in her mother's home. She continued with the same here too. One day, to meet some need, her mother-in-law sold their goats. That was a blow her husband could not recover from. He felt his main source of income had gone. In depression, he began drinking. He got a job as a cleaner on a truck. The driver would let him drink at his expense. This easy access to free drinks turned him into an alcoholic. Later, he left this job and began working in a *dhaba* (local restaurant) where he would get paid daily wages. Initially, he would bring home part of the money and drink from the remaining. As his addiction became worse he stopped giving any money at home, drinking away all that he earned.

In the meanwhile, Anita had given birth to three daughters even before she had turned 18 years old. One of the girls died of pneumonia because Anita did not have money to buy medicines. With an alcoholic husband, Anita knew the burden of earning and looking after her daughters was hers alone. She felt that there would be some security if she had a house of her own. With that thought she collected 5000 rupees from selling the gold beads she was wearing and the anklets and bangles her daughters had received as gifts from her relatives. With that she bought herself a small hut. Now she saved on the house rent and that was a great help to her in meeting her monthly expenses.

Years passed. Her daughters were growing up. Her mother-in-law died. Her husband a complete alcoholic would sleep in the *dhaba* that he worked in. One day Anita got to know that her husband was ill, that he had got jaundice. His liver was irreversibly affected due to excessive drinking. Anita tried all she could to treat him. But it was beyond her to take him to bigger hospitals at the district place. His health deteriorated in spite of her efforts.

To raise money for treatment Anita decided to go as labour for sugarcane cutting. The contractor gave an advance of Rs. 25,000 as was the practice. During the season, Anita was taken

to Parbhani for sugarcane cutting. She got the message that her husband's health had deteriorated still more. She rushed back and admitted him to the Nanded District hospital. There the doctors gave her no hope. They finally asked her to take him back home. Within a fortnight of going home her husband died.

Anita had always run her home singlehandedly. But with the death of her husband she was now a destitute widow. People's way of looking at her changed. Now, every time she left her house for work people's eyes would follow her making her uncomfortable. She got depressed in this situation. In these tough times, it was Chhaya Padghan of Ugam Organisation that gave her the much needed emotional support. They included her in their savings group. Anita began getting small loans for her needs. But more important was the company of the group members which helped her come out of her depression.

Anita's husband died in 2018. She came in contact with MAKAAAM in 2019. Ugam selected her to collect information about the single and widowed women of the village. This helped her to get to know the other widows from her village. Working to get educational scholarships for children of widows also helped Anita gain confidence in herself. As part of her work Anita had to go frequently to the taluka place. This again raised people's eyebrows and they would gossip about her. This time her brother stood by her. Generally, he would not be too concerned about how she was managing her life. That may, of course, have been because being a landless labourer himself he could have done little to help her. But when he saw how the villagers were mentally harassing his sister he stood by her and told off the neighbours saying 'My sister will go where she pleases, no one is to bring any pressure on her'. This gave Anita a lot of courage. Now, when someone pointedly asks her where she is going she answers them in her mind 'to meet my boyfriend'. Such is her confidence she has gained.

MAKAAAM had given Anita the responsibility of getting

information about the holders of *antyodaya* cards (food security scheme for the poorest of the poor families) from the ration shop owner. She knew he would not give her the information if asked directly. So she tried to collect it through a casual conversation. But even then he caught her out and asked her why she was asking. At the same time, Anita also met the *rojgar sewak* (village level mate) and asked him for work under MNREGA for ten widows. He first dillydallied but she persisted. The village leaders got worried with the pertinent questions Anita was asking. Questions that somehow were about information that they wished no one to know. Deciding to nip it in the bud they had gone to her house to make her withdraw by subtly threatening her.

They asked her many questions - why are you asking these questions, who has appointed you, are you paid for this work. Anita answered all these questions openly. Then they cautioned her against asking too many questions, saying she could meet with an accident anywhere and have her body thrown away. No one would even know. Of course, they said all this jokingly, but were still surprised that this did not scare her. Anita's courage came from her confidence that MAKAAAM was standing in support and would always be there for her. It is now MAKAAAM's responsibility to ensure that this new found courage in Anita remains intact. ■



Archana Keche

► Cases of domestic violence saw a sudden increase during lockdown. It was around the same time that MAKAAAM began their on-line sessions on women's rights. It can be said that, inspired by these sessions, Archana hit upon a way to control domestic violence in her village.

Chanapa is a village of 1200 population. And in this village there were 3 villagers who were selling liquor without a license. It was no surprise that this easy availability led to many men drinking liquor at any and all times of the day. The most affected were, naturally, the wives of these men. In their drunken state, the men abused and beat their wives. Lockdown only increased this problem manifold. Archana realised that closing down the

liquor shops could be one way of controlling wife beating in her village. And, Archana, who had only passed her Std 10 exam and hitherto had been just a housewife led the affected women successfully - the liquor shops closed down. Archanatai told us that she has been working for Prakriti organisation for 18 years and with their help has initiated a number of development activities in her village. Then came MAKAAAM an organisation that has been building an association of widows and single women throughout Maharashtra with the help of local NGOs like Prakriti. Seeing her long experience, MAKAAAM chose her for their on-line sessions. These sessions increased Archana's knowledge of women's rights as also her general grasp of issues. As a result, Archanatai picked up a number of women centric problems and brought them to the notice of the village by discussing them in the various forums of the village. She also dealt with many of the issues successfully.

Archanatai's family, both her maternal family and her family after marriage, were farmers. Her parents were illiterate but, as farmers, they were economically well off. The village had a school up to Std 10, so Archanatai studied up to Std 10. Remembering her carefree childhood, Archanatai told us that she was an outdoors girl. She used to come back from school tired after playing kho-kho (in which two teams compete to tag each member of the opposing team in the shortest period of time) and yet on reaching home she would throw her bag and run out to play again. The boys would play viti-dandu (This is a game in which players try to strike a small stick called a vitti with a longer stick called a dandu). The girls would join them. Her family was liberal and the atmosphere in her home was free. But, she remembers Jayabai, a widow, who was their neighbour and relative. As a child she always wondered why she did not wear a kumkum, why she did not mix with other women, why she was not invited to haldi kumkum programmes. Seeing women being beaten by men, she once asked her grandmother 'What if a woman beats the man'. Her grandmother jokingly said, 'You try it and see what happens'.

Luckily for her she did not have to face such a situation.

Archana failed in English in the Std 10 exam. She then did a diploma in tailoring. And soon she was married to Shivaji Keche. Shivaji had studied up to Std 9, but being from a landed family and related to Archanatai's family, education did not matter. Archana became busy in her new family. She gave birth to two daughters and a son. Around the year 2000, Prakriti organisation began its development activities in Chanapa. Noticing her outgoing nature, Suvarna Damle of Prakriti appointed her as their representative in the village. And so began Archanatai's journey as a village worker. She took the initiative to start a women's savings group. Being naturally talkative, other women found it easy to talk to her and share their problems and other domestic issues.

Aarti was a member of one of Archanatai's savings groups. For some years, she had been telling Archanatai about her husband drinking and beating her every day; about his throwing his dinner plate in anger and wasting the food. While listening to the online sessions of MAKAAM, Aarti's case came to Archanatai's mind. During the same period Nalu came to Archanatai asking her for Prakriti organisation's contact number because she wanted to make a police complaint against her husband with their help. Nalu said her husband was gambling every day. And if stopped he would drink and beat her. She was sure the police would straighten him. A third case was that of Kalpanabai. The same problem but double the trouble. Kalpanabai's husband and son both were alcoholics. The family was in deep financial trouble. To tide over it Kalpana sold their land adjacent to the highway and bought another piece of land away from the road which came cheaper so she had some cash in her hand. Fearing that her husband and son may sell this for alcohol she came to Archanatai. Archanatai's advice about registering the land in her own name proved crucial for Kalpana. Archanatai realised that there were many women facing domestic violence due to the easy availability of alcohol in the village. Archanatai began talking to these women similarly afflicted by

Generally, women labourers are not thought of separately while planning work under MNREGA. MAKAAAM has been advocating with the authorities to think of women separately while determining works to be sanctioned under MNREGA, because their skills and capacities are different from those of the men. Archanatai told us that in her village there really was no need for MNREGA works as farm work is available all the year round. However, because of MAKAAAM, Archanatai, along with her women's group, took a round of the village. On interacting with village women Archanatai realised that there were indeed some women who were in need of work under MNREGA.

their husbands' drunkenness. She got them together. Archanatai told us that none of the three shops in their village were licensed. Besides, they were open day and night so the men were able to drink whenever they wanted. And then came the lockdown which increased the problem both of drinking and fights and beating the women, as the men were at home with nothing to do.

Archanatai prepared an application. Monica and Pradnya of Prakriti Sanstha helped her with the draft. It was decided to collect signatures of a hundred women on the application. This done, Archanatai, with, five of the women, went to the police station with the application and lodged a complaint. Archanatai told us she had never before been to a police station, but she gathered courage and led the women. Now the men of the village had started gossiping that her family had let her loose in the village to interfere in village affairs. They scoffed at her attempt to close the alcohol shops. The alcohol shop owners even bad mouthed her to all and sundry. These were hard times and full of stress. But she patiently waited. A week went by.

One day, at 11 o'clock at night, the police came and raided the three shops. They found no stock of alcohol. The police fired

Archanatai saying that people like her increase the work load of the police by making such false complaints. But the women from the village again complained to the police. This time the police took it more seriously and called the three owners and gave them a strict warning. Archanatai also went to one of the shop owners and told him to stop selling alcohol. This getting together of the women of the village and their determination had the desired effect. Alcohol stopped being sold in Chanapa village!

Armed with the confidence that the alcohol prohibition gave her, Archanatai now turned her attention to other problems faced by women. She began by meeting and talking to the widows and single women of her village. These meetings gave her a deeper understanding of their problems. Manisha lost her husband when she was 21 years old. She was a mother of two children by then and was grappling with the question of how to bring them up as a single mother. The government had sanctioned a house but the in-laws were unwilling to transfer the land title in her name which was a pre-condition for the government to build a house for her. Alka's husband died when he got hit by a bull. The in-laws are unwilling to give her her share of the farm. And Alka can do little besides weeping over her condition. Seema has not married and lives with her parents. She can get pension meant for single women only if she has a ration card in her name. Archanatai got to know the problems faced by thirteen women of her village, like Manisha, Alka and Seema. She tried finding them some source of income. For one of them she found the job of cooking the mid-day meal for school children. For another, she got a sewing machine sanctioned from the village panchayat. She filled the application forms of all thirteen of them for a pension. Eleven of them have already begun to get their pension. The case of two is pending because their dates of birth were wrong. To correct this, she is helping the two women first to get their school leaving certificates and then to get their aadhar cards corrected. Suddenly, the widows and single women are experiencing a lot of happenings in their lives. In all, the single

women have found a support for their issues in Archanatai. The women have for the first time understood government schemes, their rights in property and also the certificates and records required for each.

Generally, women labourers are not thought of separately while planning work under MNREGA. MAKAAAM has been advocating with the authorities to think of women separately while determining works to be sanctioned under MNREGA, because their skills and capacities are different from those of the men. Archanatai told us that in her village there really was no need for MNREGA works as farm work is available all the year round. However, because of MAKAAAM, Archanatai, along with her women's group, took a round of the village. On interacting with village women Archanatai realised that there were indeed some women who were in need of work under MNREGA.

Chitra is a landless adivasi woman whose sole income is from daily labour. Vanita has a similar story. Bijabai, now old is not supported by her children. Such women needed work and, following this walk around the village, women raised their demand for work with the government. During their round of the village, Archanatai also identified works that could be done by the women under MNREGA. Village paths needed to be cleared of the wild growth of creepers, bushes, weeds, etc., trees planted by the panchayat under the tree plantation scheme needed tree guards, watering and maintenance. These works, if sanctioned, could easily be carried out by women. And thus, for the first time in Chanapa village, works under MNREGA were sanctioned keeping women in mind.

A positive impact of Archanatai's efforts is now being noticed in the village. Archanatai was a member of the education committee earlier. The panchayat has now appointed her on the Ration committee as well. Archanatai tells us that as a result of working with MAKAAAM, she now goes to the Zilla Parishad office by herself if there is work to be done there. She also discusses

with the panchayat members of her village about schemes that can be started from funds earmarked for women. Because of the unlicensed alcohol shop project, she is now familiar with the police station too. Recently, a lot of happenings in Chanapa village have revolved around Archanatai. What is especially remarkable is that women, as never before, have been at the centre of these activities. Seeing her energy and enthusiasm one cannot help but say, ‘This is only the beginning. She is fully ready for taking some big leaps in the future.’ ■



Sunita Alonay

► Sunita Alonay depends on daily wages for her sustenance yet most of her time is spent in helping the poor of her village. She works as a labourer from 8 am to 1 pm. After that, nearly every day she goes to the taluka place to help people with their various needs - someone wants help with their ration card, another for some government scheme. This has been her routine for nearly 8-10 years since when she first came in contact with Nutan Malavi who had just started the Urja Foundation for village development. Nutan took Sunitatai on as a worker in her Foundation and that is how she picked up courage and began to work to help her people. Sunitatai went to school but failed her Std 10 exam. The financial condition of her family is just hand to mouth. But the thought

that she is able to help people is so satisfying that it gives her the impetus to go on in spite of the economic hardship.

MAKAAM began its work in 2014. Urja Foundation also got associated with MAKAAM. Sunitatai was already working on problems of health, education, ration, pension and MNREGA in 4-5 villages as a representative of the Foundation. Her association with MAKAAM added another facet to her work – the problems of widows and single women.

Sunitatai's efforts resulted in more than 500 people getting job cards, 80% of whom were women. She also took the initiative to get work sanctioned under MNREGA for the widows and single women. She told us that in just two years from 2019 she has succeeded in getting at least 100 ration cards for the needy. She has helped form savings groups of the widows and single women. She has also successfully intervened in getting widows their land rights. Sunitatai, who has been instrumental in getting so many people their rights, is however herself a landless labourer. That may be the reason why she has given herself wholly to social service.

Sunitatai's maternal family as well as that of her in-laws were landless families depending entirely on agricultural labour for their sustenance. In 1998, they received land under the land ceiling act, along with 28 other families from her village. But the landlord probably bribed the patwari because they never got possession of the land. To fight their case in court, the lawyer was asking for two lakh rupees which we did not have. So they lost the case. After that, their case is being fought by *Kisan Adhikar Abhiyan* a farmers' organisation in Wardha and is still in court. Sunitatai came in contact with the organisation because of this dispute. After that she continued to work with Urja Foundation. Her association with them continues to date. Her work involves addressing problems faced by the poor related to ration cards, health insurance cards, pension for the widows and single women, etc. Very often the poor either do not know about the schemes

or believe that they will have to bribe the government officials to get the benefits that are due to them. Sunitatai has been able to reach the benefits of the various schemes to hundreds of the poor from the villages, helped by her knowledge of schemes and the documents required under each, and by her experience gained from visiting government offices regularly.

Often the poor feel the government is doing them a favour when they get benefit under a scheme. The thought that it is their right to get support from the government never occurs to them. Sunitatai, however, is aware of the rights of the poor citizens. Her efforts have obtained work for widows and single women under the MNREGA. To elaborate this - Sunitatai got job cards issued to women from four villages. After that she went to the taluka office and met the BDO and explained to him the need of the women and the importance of sanctioning work under MNREGA for single women separately. Generally digging work is sanctioned under MNREGA which is unsuitable for women. So she suggested works like maintaining trees planted under the tree plantation programme in the village, starting a plant nursery, etc. These works were sanctioned. Sunitatai was successful in getting the women their right to employment and thus fulfilled an objective of MAKAAAM.

Sandhya Veerkade's husband had committed suicide in 2008. She was cast off by her in-laws. Her father in law refused to give her husband's share of their land. She was thus making ends meet as a landless labourer due to the denial of what would have been a legal land title in her name. It was beyond her means and capacity to fight with her in laws and go to court for her share. Sunitatai met her father- in-law. She realised he did not want to give his daughter- in-law her share because he feared that she may get married again and abandon her children. This mind-set of questioning the character of widows and thus denying them their legal rights is common and such instances are encountered everywhere. Realising his fear, Sunitatai responded with great

maturity. She told him that Sandhya will give in writing on a stamp paper with witnesses that she will never abandon her children. And so Sandhya did, witnessed by the police Patil. The result was that the father-in-law transferred six acres of land in Sandhya's name. Sunitatai had wisely got a settlement in favour of Sandhya without any acrimony. She had the maturity to realize that it was more important at that stage for Sandhya to get her right than challenging the father-in-law who was an inheritor of an oppressive and regressive social custom which would take time to get dismantled from the minds of people. Generally, such cases languish in courts or create animosity. But Sunitatai was successful in amicably settling the matter.

The case of Indubai Chahande was similar. After her husband committed suicide her brother in law refused to give her a share in their land because Indubai had only two daughters, no son. He was ready to give her money in lieu of her share of the land. But Indubai wanted only land. Here too, Sunitatai mediated successfully. Firmly, but in a tone of conciliation, she explained to the brother-in-law that Indubai's demand was legal and that he would, in the end, have to give her land. He saw her point and Indubai was given eight acres of land as her husband's share.

Getting women their due share in property is not easy. But Sunitatai's mediating skills made it possible for these women to get theirs. In Agargaon village, a woman's husband died of COVID-19. Her brother-in-law also is refusing to give her a share in the land. Sunitatai went in to mediate but has slowed her pace when she heard that the man is suffering from blood pressure and diabetes. She fears that the stress may impact his health. So she is going about it carefully.

Sunitatai has also solved the problem faced by Malabai of Nadora village through mediation. Malabai's in-laws are old. Malabai's family was living separately even when her husband was alive. But they had one common ration card. After her husband died, Malabai has to sustain herself on her agricultural labour wages.

Often, there are times when Sunitatai does not get an ST bus from her village to the taluka place. There is also no guarantee that one will get an auto-rikshaw. Therefore, there have been times when Sunitatai has had to ask for a lift from one of the motorcyclists of her village. Initially, the conservative villagers looked askance at a woman going so often to the taluka place and that too on a motor-cycle with a man. But Sunitatai ignored the taunts and carried on.

The family belongs to the 'below poverty line' category so they are eligible for free rations. But, not having a ration card in her name has deprived Malabai of this benefit, which she is greatly in need of. Her in-laws refused to give her a share of her quota of the rations. Due to government rules, it was not possible to remove her name from the original ration card. Sunitatai decided to help. She visited the ration shop owner and the concerned officer. But rules prevented any solution. With official avenues closed Sunitatai decided to mediate between the father-in-law and Malabai. She succeeded in convincing the father-in-law of Malabai's equal need. A *via media* was agreed upon. Malabai and her in-laws pick up the free rations on alternate months. The ration shop owner has been informed of this arrangement and he too has agreed. And so, a complicated problem was solved with her creative genius and mediation skills. Giving the women strong support, presenting their case firmly and using innovative strategies leading to win-win solutions to the problems appear to be Sunitatai's strong points.

Sunitatai's husband had a business of collecting plastic and metal waste in exchange for *rangoli* powder (powder used to decorate the floor during festivals) and selling it further. This required him to travel from village to village on his bicycle. But in the last few years he has been diagnosed with high blood pressure and has also suffered a mild paralytic attack and has become very weak.

He can no longer go out to work and earn a living. As a result, the entire burden of running the household has fallen on Sunitatai and her two young boys. Her elder son Akshay did a course in hotel management after Std 10. The younger son Avinash left school after Std 12 and joined a finance company. But in spite of the sons having started to earn, Sunitatai has to continue to work.

Often, there are times when Sunitatai does not get an ST bus from her village to the taluka place. There is also no guarantee that one will get an auto-rickshaw. Therefore, there have been times when Sunitatai has had to ask for a lift from one of the motorcyclists of her village. Initially, the conservative villagers looked askance at a woman going so often to the taluka place and that too on a motor-cycle with a man. But Sunitatai ignored the taunts and carried on.

On one such occasion, she faced a near panic situation. She was returning home after a meeting of her organisation. It was night time. There was an auto-rickshaw at the stand. Sunitatai went and sat in it. Just then two drunken men came and sat by her side. Sunitatai was talking on the phone with Nutan Malavi. They were talking about the discussions in the meeting. Hearing the word meeting, one of the drunks asked in which hotel this meeting was to take place. Sunitatai realised his insinuation and got angry. The man took hold of her hand. This got her angrier still. The auto driver, seeing things might get more violent, asked the two drunks to get off. Single and or working women in small towns have to face such situations where the men think they are easily 'available'. Sunitatai has, over the years, developed strength to face such situations with courage. But at times she wonders if her ways have caused her husband's high blood pressure problem. He must have been getting stressed hearing what the people spoke about her behind her back. Once, she asked her husband if he got stressed by her work and timings, etc. She even told him to talk to the children or anyone else if that was the matter but to not allow it to cause him stress. But he said that it was not so. He believed his

high blood pressure may have been caused by financial stress or, perhaps, hard manual work. Even so, some guilt keeps gnawing at her although she persists with her work because she feels it helps the poor.

In spite of the stress and strain in their personal life, women like Sunitatai continue to bring the problems of single women and widows to the discussion tables of decision makers. The work they are doing is not fully appreciated today. It is not easy to win the confidence of the single women, the poor farmers, the deserted and the widows, because they feel isolated and insecure in their villages. They don't trust easily, thinking (as a result of experience) that people will take advantage of them.

When Sunitatai first proposed a savings group of these women, the response from them was not enthusiastic. Sunitatai felt that one of the reasons for this was that there are many savings groups in villages and some of the women who take loans do not repay. Then the remaining group members have to bear the loss. It is also possible that the single women and widows do not earn enough to have money left to save. Most do not have bank accounts and see no reason to open one either. Yet, with her efforts, she has been able to win their confidence and soon at least two savings groups may be formed.

Sunitatai tells us that the people who would earlier mock her now make phone calls to her to ask for help. There is no doubt that she will instil this same confidence in the single women and widows she works with. ■



Neelima Renghe

► When asked, ‘What change do you see in yourself after associating with MAKAAAM?’ Neelimatai answers, ‘I got courage! I can go forward with confidence in myself.’ Actually, Neelimatai is by nature self-confident. Perhaps, MAKAAAM’s support helped her to actually rely more on herself. Neelimatai belongs to Dhadgaon village of Ralegaon taluka in Yavatmal district. Although she has studied only up to Std 8, she deals with her difficult situation with the steadfastness that her self-confidence gives her.

Sick of the burden of debt, Neelimatai’s husband committed suicide in 2014. She was pregnant at the time. As this was a farmer suicide, she got some aid from the government. However, that was all spent in paying the hospital bill for her delivery.

Then, she prepared resolutely to bring up her child. She paid off her husband's debt. His family would not give her a share of the produce of their land. She did not let the formalities of the relationship stop her from securing her rights to the land. Tilling the land and doing labour work had pushed her husband into a depression. She is doing the same, but stands tall and has not succumbed to the conditions.

Neelima always believed that one should stand on one's own feet. She failed her Std 10 exam and wanted to try again but her father said he could not afford to spend any more on her education and she had to drop out. However, asking to at least attend a tailoring class, Neelima acquired a vocational skill believing that it might come of use sometime in the future. And she proved to be right.

Neelima got married in 2011. The family owned ten acres of land but because it was only rain fed land it was given on contract to others for farming. This fetched them some annual income, but day to day expenditure was borne out of wages of labour. Although her husband and his father were given to drinking, his uncle was not, and therefore they were not on good terms with him. The family had incurred debts during four family weddings, and the debt burden was growing from year to year. Neelima started taking on tailoring jobs to help the family and they were managing somehow to make ends meet. Her husband also tried to farm his share of the land but only incurred more losses. For some time, he turned again to labour work for daily wages. Later, he also tried to farm land on contract with others but no matter what he did he could not pay off his debts. On the other hand, his addiction to alcohol had only worsened. In desperation, one day, he consumed poison and died of it. After cremating her husband Neelimatai came back to her parents for her delivery. They were her only support. Although her father and one brother were barely eking out a living from farm labour work they decided to support Neelima and her baby. In spite of the fact that her husband was no

Neelima always believed that one should stand on one's own feet. She failed her Std 10 exam and wanted to try again but her father said he could not afford to spend any more on her education and she had to drop out. However, asking to at least attend a tailoring class, Neelima acquired a vocational skill believing that it might come of use sometime in the future. And she proved to be right.

more, Neelimatai tried to go back to his family. But they let it be known that they were unable to look after her and her baby. They were offended that, when it was their son who had died the aid from the government was credited to her account. She was left with no choice but to stay on with her parents.

Neelimatai was meeting her baby's needs with her earnings from tailoring jobs. When her son Soham became two years old, she went back to her husband's family. She told them that since he was an heir of the family, he should get his share of the family's land. No one cared about her claim. After Soham's third birthday she went back to them to press them for his share, but again met with their denial. But this time she dealt with them more firmly. She asked them to call a meeting of four people from their side with four from hers. They should consider the fact that it was their son's son that she was supporting and looking after and, in the meeting, they should decide upon giving him his rightful share. After staying with them for a couple of days, she went back. The father-in-law probably thought that such a meeting to sort out a family matter, would shame them in front of the whole village. He let her know that she should not call any such meeting and that he would instead send her money. Twice he has sent her the grandson's share from the money they got from the contracted land. In most instances, widows are denied their rights, but Neelimatai was sharp enough to have her claim acknowledged by her husband's family.

However, it is the grandson's claim that they acknowledge, not Neelimatai's. Her own family too found her insistence on claiming the land quite unjustified. They felt that when the boy grew up he would, sooner or later, get his share of the land. They felt there was no such immediate need for her to fight for the land. No one had the least idea that the woman too has some rights. In fact, Neelimatai also was making these efforts only in view of her son's future, and not for herself.

Around 2018, Neelimatai had come in contact with Madhuri Khadse of the Prerna organisation which is engaged in the rehabilitation of widows in suicide afflicted families. It was because of the support from Prerna that Neelimatai was able to go back to her husband's family a second time to fight her case. Madhuritai had already suggested to her to work with Prerna. In 2020, Neelimatai began to attend MAKAAAM sessions at Madhuritai's house at the taluka place as she did not have a phone of her own. Neelimatai's family were not prepared to let a single woman travel alone to another town. But Madhuritai took the responsibility, and Neelimatai was allowed to go.

Neelimatai found that three other widows, who also were deprived of their rights, were attending these sessions. As she got to know them better, she got more courage to fight her own battles. She told her in-laws that they should not give her share of the land on contract for farming. She was ready to farm it herself. They were sceptical about her ability to farm the land by herself, and perhaps, just to have the pleasure of seeing her fail, they gave her three acres of land to till. However, her name has not yet been included in the land records.

In the first year, Neelimatai took seeds and fertilisers on loan from the government's agricultural centre, to sow cotton, soyabean and toor (pigeon pea) lentils. She harvested 15 quintals of cotton and three quintals of lentils and earned an income of about 12,000 rupees. Up to now she had been commuting by State Transport (ST) buses from her parents' village, to work on her land. Now,

she decided to build a simple hut near her in-laws', and to live there independently, away from her parents too. Besides working on her own land she began to undertake labour work as well as tailoring jobs. It would not be at all wrong to claim that she got all this courage through her association with MAKAAAM.

But now her father-in-law began to keep a watch on her. Neelimatai used to leave her son with her parents whenever she had to attend MAKAAAM meetings. 'Where does this woman go to live, leaving her son behind?' he wondered. She also made more frequent visits to the taluka town for her farm's needs. Another time her male cousin was seen visiting her. Out of suspicion, they jumped to the conclusion that she had begun to entertain men at her house. When the gossip reached Neelimatai's brother, he met the in-laws and told them that she was living her life on her own terms and that they did not need to worry about her. He warned them not to set up obstacles in her way.

When her son was very small, it was difficult for her to leave her house to go out. But now that he is eight years old she has begun to step out to meet other widows like her. She has learnt to look up land records on the internet, she has obtained information about the documents required for registering one's name on the land records, about where applications for a ration card, widow pension, etc. are to be submitted. By sharing this information, she has now undertaken to encourage other women to stand on their own two feet.

At the time when the farmers' agitation was at its peak in Delhi, demonstrations related to it were taking place in Wardha too. Neelimatai participated in them. When asked what demands the farmers were agitating for, she answered that women farmers cannot avail of loans because they do not have land in their name; and that officials demand 50 to 60 thousand rupees to register their names in land records, which of course widows could not afford. People who were not facing any problems were enjoying their lives but others, who depended on their labour for a living, had

to agitate.

The actual aims of the farmers' agitation might have been quite different, but Neelimatai had worked out in her own mind what the aims should be. She appears to think that women farmers' issues have, or should have, priority in this agitation. She wishes to be a part of the bigger movement.

Awakening a barely educated woman to her rights, to the extent that she believes her own expectations to be a part of this far more comprehensive movement. It is in such changes that MAKAAAM's success becomes evident. ■



Manisha Uike

► ‘I will not force my daughters to get married. I want them to get an education and become able to stand on their own feet’. This is the firm opinion of Manisha Uike from Ashoknagar in Amaravati. Manisha is 31 years old and has studied up to Std 6. Her three daughters are just thirteen, ten and eight years old, but her harsh experiences have already led her to the conviction that she wants to see these girls living free and independent lives. Without any help from her own parents or her in-laws, and in the face of the opposition from the people of her village she has gone so far as to build a tin shed of a house for herself. Thus this adivasi woman is a role model who symbolizes how single women can fight and take charge of their lives rather than whine away their days.

In 2017, she came in contact with Aarti Bais and began to work with MAKAAAM. Although she says that MAKAAAM gave her the courage she needed, her mentors feel that it is her struggle against her village, her relatives, and society that is, in fact, a source of inspiration for them.

Manishatai's three daughters Tejasvini, Dnyaneshwari and Janhavi, born in succession, were only seven, three and one year old when her husband committed suicide. Manishatai tells us that when the third child also happened to be a girl, he began to drink heavily as he could not tolerate the taunts aimed at him, that he was ill-fated and could not have a son. He lost heart and gave in.

After his death, her in-laws refused her the share of the family land. Her mother-in-law's crudely worded argument meant, in effect, 'When my son is no more, I have no obligation to those he left behind'. She and the brother-in-law refused her even the subsidised grain from the ration shop. But Manishatai was not to be cowed into submission. She has fought various adversaries including her mother- and brother-in-law, her own brother, the villagers, the ration-shopkeeper, the officials in the tehsil office etc. Her resolve and her daring nature have won her rights. People may call her quarrelsome but harsh experience has taught her that nothing is gained without fighting for it. Ever since she joined MAKAAAM, she has inspired other women with stories of her own hard fought battles.

Manishatai has seen nothing but struggle and fights ever since her childhood. Her parents were both illiterate so the family lived only on their daily wages as labourers. The children got no proper education. To add to that, the father was given to drinking alcohol and when drunk would verbally abuse her mother and beat her too. So the little girl dreamt of marrying an educated man and would even observe fasts for that purpose. When she was married to Manoj Uike who was a graduate, her dream came true and it made her very happy. But she felt cheated and disappointed when she found out later that Manoj had one polio-affected disabled leg. However, when she realised that her husband was a mild natured

man she did not harbour her sorrow for too long. The couple began to till some of the family's two and a half acres of land. Things went well till one day Manoj injured his disabled leg and thereafter could not work in the field any more. After that accident, Manoj fell into a deep depression.

In his depression, and under the burden of the responsibility of bringing up three daughters he turned to gambling as well as boot-legging hoping, perhaps, that it would bring him a lot of quick money. Although he had hidden this from Manisha, she inevitably found out and then began her fights with him to make him stop these illegal activities. While selling alcohol he himself began to drink and became addicted. The fights got worse and worse till the girls became victims of his anger and depression. Finally, Manishatai went back to her parents and began to earn her livelihood as a labourer.

After some days, Manoj went to Manisha, saying he did not wish to go on living. Manisha tried to boost his morale, gave him her mangalsutra, (a chain that signifies that the woman is married) to pawn in exchange for some money which, she thought, he would use to make a fresh beginning. But her hopes were belied. He threw the money away on alcohol which in turn threw him into a depression again. Eventually he went back to his village and hung himself to death.

Now she was left alone to bear the responsibility of her three girls. The share of the family's rations they got while Manoj lived also stopped coming her way. She went to meet the ration shopkeeper, but he demanded sexual favours in exchange for the rations, a problem that single women often face. But she was not one to keep quiet about it. She went straight to the tehsil office with her complaint. The local MLA happened to be there for a meeting. The attendants there tried to stop her but she barged into the meeting. The officers were embarrassed and angry but the MLA gave her a hearing. At once he made a phone call and passed the order for her to get an orange ration card. Though she got it without further ado, she soon found that she did not get enough rations on that card. She had to apply again for the yellow ration

After some days, Manoj went to Manisha, saying he did not wish to go on living. Manisha tried to boost his morale, gave him her mangalsutra, (a chain that signifies that the woman is married) to pawn in exchange for some money which, she thought, he would use to make a fresh beginning. But her hopes were belied. He threw the money away on alcohol which in turn threw him into a depression again. Eventually he went back to his village and hung himself to death.

card which she got but not without another struggle.

Manisha had been living in a shack she had built near her parents' house and was getting by on her wages as a labourer. One would have expected a brother to support a widowed sister in these conditions. But that is not often seen to happen. So it was with Manishatai. Her brother would drink and revile her. During one such fight, he actually kicked little Janhavi out of the house. That was the last straw. Manishatai left the house and decided to stay in a rented room. She spent two years like this in rented accommodation. But, she says, people believe that if an adivasi lives in one rented accommodation for six months he or she can legally lay claim to the place as their own. Hence, the owners made life difficult for her, going so far as to cut off the electricity to her room so that she had to live in darkness for six months. Not knowing how to face the situation she too felt like giving up her life.

Seeing her condition, a childhood friend came to help her out. He found a place for her alongside the village road and advised her to make a tin shed for herself there. But soon after that, the leaders in the village went after her to vacate the place as the road was to be expanded into a highway. She stood her ground saying that she would not move until she was given an alternative place to stay. The leaders countered her saying that she did not belong to the village and she did not vote from there. Hence she had no rights in the

village and should go and live in her husband's village instead. But she knew that she has better options for getting work in her parents' village besides the fact that her relationships with the family and people in her husband's village were now broken. Again Manishatai did not back down. She did not leave and she dares anyone to evict her from her present location until she gets another place of her own. She is still fighting for her right to a house in the village.

Once, Manishatai's in-laws conspired to have the ownership of their fields assigned to her brother-in-law's children and to divest her and her daughters of their legal claims. But Manishatai let them know what she thought about their actions and fought with them roundly about it. A subdued mother-in-law agreed to put one acre of land in Manishatai's name in the land records. Again, Manishatai believes that she actually has a right to one and one quarter acres of land. So she has held her own and not accepted the offer of one acre. Instead she has had her own and her daughters' names registered on the land records so that their rights to the land remain protected. She could think of these legal options and take the right actions because of her association with MAKAAAM.

After joining MAKAAAM, Manishatai has submitted the pension applications of thirty women for widows' pensions. Seven widows got their own ration cards through her efforts. These women had not known, until they met Manishatai that they were entitled to a yellow ration card, meant for people living on wages below the poverty line. Manishatai also got herself a job card under MNREGA and motivated other women to do so too. The women of this village do not wish to take work that is offered under the MNREGA projects. However, Manishatai has become known to all single women and widows in the area as a person with a standing of her own who can procure government aid for them and help them. She says she owes her strength and courage to MAKAAAM but, in fact, it is she who is proving to be the source of courage and strength for many women. Manishatai's daughters too look up to her as an ideal of a brave and courageous woman. ■



Lakshmi Gajbhiye

► In Lakshmitai's village, Sillori, in Nagpur District, they do not even get newspapers. So, the idea that women get any news or information is quite unthinkable. In such a village Lakshmitai became the Sarpanch in 2012. Her tenure was remarkably praiseworthy. Their Gram Panchayat did not have its own building; the anganwadi had a leaky roof besides being dilapidated on the whole. She pursued these matters relentlessly with the Zilla Parishad and got the works for these buildings sanctioned. Some houses would get flooded with rainwater. She got this problem resolved by concretisation. She successfully implemented a scheme for drinking water. She engaged with the animal husbandry department to motivate farmers to take up occupations like keeping

goats and cattle. She helped women to start their own business of selling vegetables.

Lakshmitai was not just an efficient Sarpanch but she had done better than the men in improving the village. Even then she could not get re-elected in 2017 because, as she says, she had hurt the men's ego. Unable to stomach her superior performance the men came together and canvassed against her saying she did not belong to the village and thus defeated her. However, Lakshmitai has not withdrawn from the political activities of the village. In fact, she participates actively, particularly where the women need support and help.

In a recent incident, Jayashree, a widow, could find no one to help her secure a widow's pension for herself. Her husband had fallen ill with rabies but because it happened during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the husband's family thought he had COVID-19. As it happened, under the tremendous pressure of the pandemic he could not be hospitalized. After a phone call from Lakshmitai, he began to receive treatment, but as rabies is, in any case, a fatal disease, doctors indicated that there was no hope and discharged him. He died the very day that Jayashree brought him home from the hospital. Her in-laws blamed her for his death saying that he died because she brought home too soon. So he broke all relations with her. She was left to look after two little children on her own. When she took steps to apply for a widow's pension, they even criticized for being in such a hurry to grab the pension after her husband's death. With no help from the in-laws she had to turn to government officials but the Patwari would not forward the application she had submitted to him. He could not understand the direness of her situation. In desperation, Jayashree went to Lakshmitai who met the Patwari and took him to task. Only then was her pension sanctioned.

Lakshmitai began to intervene in such matters after she came in contact with MAKAAAM in 2019. She has helped nearly 140 widows of the neighbourhood get the pensions due to them. She came

to know of MAKAAAM when they organized a workshop on the theme of 'Farmers and Climate Change'. At this workshop she gained a deeper understanding of issues related to widow farmers. Since 2005 she had been working with the Prakriti organisation on issues of domestic violence. Women had always come to her with their problems and she had her own way of dealing with them. She would reassure the woman, meet the abusive man, warn him against such behaviour and on occasion get help from the police or the court. She had, therefore, seen the problems faced by rural women from very close.

She relates the story of a sixty-year-old woman who had been turned out of the house by her husband. 'I gave this woman shelter in my house for a fortnight. Eventually I went to meet the old man. She didn't cook in time, didn't listen to him, was his complaint. He expected her to do his bidding only and all the time. I talked to him for over two hours and finally persuaded him to take her in.' These incidents taught Lakshmitai that young or old, all women have to put up with such oppressive treatment. Hence, when she deals with these problems, she does not look at them as an individual woman's problem but a problem that women should come together to resolve. She believes that if someone with clout in the village, gets some women to stand by the victim of abuse and give her support, she does not feel overpowered by the situation and is able to stand up to it.

Kalpana was a battered wife because of which she had returned to her parents' house leaving her children behind with the husband. However, she could not bear to be separated from her little ones and that began to affect her health. Lakshmitai took Kalpana and went with her to her husband but he began to threaten Lakshmitai too. Undeterred, she firmly took charge of the children and left the house telling him that he would get them back only when they were grown up. She then went straight to the police station and registered the case there. After two months, the husband came to Kalpana and asked to be forgiven. Without Lakshmitai's solid

support, Kalpana would have given in to a life in depression.

Aarti was a woman whose husband had abducted their children. He had extra-marital relations, for which reason he had abandoned his wife to her parents. Their two children were with her. One day he came to their village on his motor-cycle and rode away the children. When she came to know of it, she went to the police, they said since it was the father who had taken the children, there was nothing they could do. In her confusion, Aarti turned to Lakshmitai for help. Lakshmitai went to the police station together with a few other women for support. At that time, the police were short on manpower due to extra COVID-19 duties, which is why they had been unwilling to help Aarti. But Lakshmitai's intervention forced them to send two Hawaldars (policemen) to accompany them to Aarti's husband. Thus, she regained custody of her children.

Sugandha is yet another woman who got justice with Lakshmitai's help. Sugandha's husband was in the army. While he was in service she was living near his sister's house. When he came back on retirement he threw Sugandha out of the house. She suspects that her sister-in-law poisoned his mind about her. Sugandha was helpless as she had a little girl to look after and no means of livelihood. Again, Lakshmitai intervened. She went with Sugandha to meet the husband but he only threatened them in uncouth language. Sugandha escaped a beating only due to Lakshmitai's presence. Then Lakshmitai took legal steps. They applied to the military court and got a regular allowance sanctioned for the family's maintenance. They are also taking steps to get the child admitted to a Central School.

Madhuri is one more example of a woman who got courage and hope because of Lakshmitai's intervention. Madhuri's husband, who was extremely suspicious about her, would accuse her of having illicit relations with his brother and beat and abuse her. For a long time, she bore it quietly for the sake of her small twin daughters. Finally, when it became intolerable for her she came

Madhuri is one more example of a woman who got courage and hope because of Lakshmitai's intervention. Madhuri's husband, who was extremely suspicious about her, would accuse her of having illicit relations with his brother and beat and abuse her. For a long time, she bore it quietly for the sake of her small twin daughters. Finally, when it became intolerable for her she came to Lakshmitai for help. Lakshmitai twice tried reasoning with the man but he did not change his ways. Then Madhuri took the decision to sue for divorce. It was only with Lakshmitai's support that she remained steadfast through the ordeal.

to Lakshmitai for help. Lakshmitai twice tried reasoning with the man but he did not change his ways. Then Madhuri took the decision to sue for divorce. It was only with Lakshmitai's support that she remained steadfast through the ordeal.

Lakshmitai says 'It was MAKAAAM that made me aware of women's rights, that women also have property rights. As a result, I can give other women the right advice. I let them make their own decisions but I don't allow them to feel defeated by their situation. I explain the law to them as I have understood it.' Even though Lakshmitai could not pass her Std 12 exams, she is able to resolve these difficult situations because she has a good understanding of women's issues. Thus we see that with help from organisations like Prakriti and the necessary information from MAKAAAM reaching women like Lakshmitai when they need it most, women's issues gain attention and get resolved.

Lakshmitai's family is active in local politics. She tells us that she has taken part in canvassing for election candidates since before she became old enough to vote. 'I used to meet the voters. Election days excited me. Political activity has been my hobby ever since my childhood. What this 'hobby' means to her is standing up for and supporting people who are poor and helpless.

Lakshmitai's politics consists of helping people in need. The help she gave to an adivasi girl can be mentioned here as an example. Kiran used to take her cattle to graze on the hills near the village. One day she fell down and injured her head. Not having the money for treatment, her condition deteriorated and she became seriously ill. It looked as if she had suffered a paralytic stroke. When Lakshmitai came to know of this, she started a collection in the village, and with the money admitted her to a hospital and paid for her tests and treatment. And so this girl was restored to good health.

Lakshmitai does not help only women but takes the lead in helping all poor people in need. For instance, once a cattle-shed caught fire and a poor shepherd got burnt in the accident. He went to the government hospital for treatment but, frightened by the conditions in the burns ward he came back home. His burns did not heal. Instead, they got infested by maggots and began to give out a foul smell. No one would go anywhere near him. But Lakshmitai took him to the hospital herself. For eight days she visited him in the hospital and looked after him. She felt better only when he had recovered. Lakshmitai's hobby of political activity is thus a humane one.

When helping women, however, there is a certain sharpness to her humane attitude. Sanjubai, a widow, wanted tapped water supply in her house under the government's Ghar Ghar Jal scheme. When she went to the gram panchayat she was told that the scheme has closed and she could not get a tap. 'Then,' Lakshmitai tells us, 'I went to meet the secretary of the gram panchayat and asked him if the date for the scheme had passed. He said it had not and he would readily sanction a connection if I only told him who wanted it. Then I called Sanjubai and asked him why she was being denied when she pays all her taxes. The Secretary realised his mistake and Sanjubai's house got a tap.'

Recently, as she implements some of MAKAM's programmes, Lakshmitai has begun to take up issues of women's rights to prop-

erty too. Geetatai's older brother-in-law would not concede her right to her share of their agricultural land. Lakshmitai met him and explained the law to him. As a result, her name was included in the land record as an heir and she got ownership of one acre of land. Surekha was another widow whose mother-in-law was denying her right to property. 'So long as I am alive, I will now allow her name to be put in the record' she had said. Lakshmitai intervened in this case too and Surekha got ownership of her property.

Lakshmitai called a meeting for the purpose of a shivar pheri or a survey of the fields in the village. Between 30 and 35 women attended the meeting. As a result of their inspection of that the land they decided that making pathways through the fields was something the women could do. They asked for this work under MNREGA and it got sanctioned. She has also submitted a proposal to the gram panchayat for the women's savings group to start a plant nursery under MNREGA. After her association with MAKAAAM, Lakshmitai has submitted online applications of 42 widows for their pensions. She has also submitted ten applications for old men under the Shravan Bal Scheme.

Lakshmitai says, 'The Constitution tells us that men and women have equal rights. But it's not like that in a village. To turn that ideal into a ground reality, we must take the initiative and work towards it. That is exactly what I do.' That is why MAKAAAM's political activity in Sillori village is focused on helping women to secure their Constitutional rights. ■



Dwarka Waghmare

► Dwarakatai is known simply as Tai in her village and other neighbouring ones. This honorific she has earned on the strength of her leadership qualities. Otherwise she would be just another illiterate woman of a Dalit community, a simple farm labourer. But her intolerance to injustice and her compassion for the poor led her to lend support to many people. Inevitably, people came to recognize her as a leader and address her respectfully as Tai. Dalit women rarely get such respect from others.

Dwarkatai is from a scheduled caste which usually does not find respect in the village. But her reputation is such that she is called to help sort out issues of higher caste girls who find themselves in trouble. One such girl was married to a most unsuitable man. The

marriage almost destroyed her life. Dwarkatai rescued her from that relationship and later, sensibly took the initiative even to arrange for her remarriage. She is now happy with her new family life.

It hardly ever happens that a Dalit woman gets to involve herself in resolving a domestic issue in a high caste family. Such is the respect for her that no one ever comes before her when they have been drinking alcohol. Political leaders will seek her support at the time of elections whether to the Gram Panchayat or the Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha. Dwarkatai is a part of the decision making process when the village is planning public functions like Ambedkar Jayanti or Annabhau Sathe Jayanti. Even though such programmes are mostly conducted by men, Dwarkatai an illiterate woman, has attained that special position in the affairs of the village solely by the leadership she has displayed. An elder sister is addressed as Tai. Dwarkatai's leadership is like that of a compassionate and all-knowing elder sister. That is why she is respected by everyone from every caste and class.

During the lockdown, MAKAAAM provided grain rations to single women. During that period Dwarkatai was of great help to them. In fact, she had begun to provide help to many women even before MAKAAAM stepped in. She tells us, 'Vandanabai, of our village, was in a very difficult situation. She does not get to eat unless she works, and during the lockdown all work had come to a stop. Her family was literally left starving for food. I could not bear to watch their helplessness.' Corona and the lockdown had had become a matter of life and death for the poor. There was no way to estimate when the situation would improve. In these conditions, Dwarkatai offered bajara from her own stock to Vandanabai. Dwarkatai's leadership has a special characteristic, when it is a question of helping the poor, she does not think of what advantage or disadvantage it might be for her, or if she might offend those who behave unjustly.

There was such an incident in the village during the lockdown as a result of which a certain family has stopped talking to Dwarkatai. The reason was that Dwarkatai had helped the daughter-in-

law of the family. This family used to do labour work in Pune for a living. But when the lockdown started, the mother-in-law left her pregnant daughter-in-law behind and returned to the village with her son. They somehow reached the village but the younger woman was left alone in their room in Pune literally facing starvation. With no one to help her, all she could think of was to join the hordes of people returning to their villages on foot. Somehow, covering the distance piece by piece in her pregnant condition, she reached her village in Beed. Her mother-in-law did not take her in but sent her to live in a separate shack. This young girl had come from Pune and might have been COVID-19 positive. But Dwarkatai, did not fear for herself and went to her. She reassured her, gave her food grains, and enquired after her needs. Usually people do not intervene in others' family matters for fear of inviting their ire. As expected, this angered the mother-in-law. Dwarkatai has drawn the anger of the village people upon herself in still another matter. A certain man got married a second time while still married to his first wife. In spite of them being acquaintances as well as of the same village, she reported the case to the police. People got angry with her. But Dwarkatai is not afraid to give offense.

During the lockdown, MAKAAAM started their online sessions on the Zoom platform. Dwarkatai was new to this technology, but learnt to use it. In one such session, she came to know that the government was giving free rations to the poor. But in their village, Kathoda, they were not getting these rations. Then Dwarkatai got 15 to 20 women together to go with her to the ration shopkeeper and questioned him about why he was not distributing the free rations. Seeing the women united against him, the shopkeeper quickly expressed his readiness to give the free rations and within the week, the poor of the village had got their rations. Had MAKAAAM not provided this information and had Dwarkatai not questioned the shopkeeper, this help would not have reached the needy in the village.

When the COVID-19 vaccination drive started, many women were afraid to take the vaccine. Then Dwarkatai first took the vac-

cine herself and then went door to door to motivate the people. She got the women to come out of their homes and took them to the vaccination centres. It is as if she has developed a hobby of taking leadership in all the public activities of the village. But there was a time when Dwarkatai was a very meek woman indeed.

When Dwarkatai was married to Nivruttirao, she was no more than twelve years old. He had been married before but because he was a wife-beater, the first wife had left in desperation, leaving their infant child behind. As soon as she was married, Dwarka stepped into the role of a mother. Beed district sends many labourers for sugarcane-cutting but they are employed only as married couples. That is why many minors were made to marry only so that they could go to work as sugarcane-cutters. Nivruttirao was a sugarcane-cutter but without a wife he could not get employment. It is possible that he had married Dwarka to get someone to look after the baby and to enable him to get work. Dwarkatai began to go for sugarcane-cutting along with her husband. At the age of 12 this girl had taken on the responsibilities of domestic life and, by the time she was 18 she had even borne three children. All three of her children were born at the temporary settlements of sugarcane cutters in unfamiliar villages. Women in these settlements live in extremely difficult conditions. Besides sugarcane-cutting with their husbands, and the daily cooking and cleaning, they may have to go through such untimely pregnancies and deliveries too. Dwarkatai has been through all this, not to mention the battering by her husband. She tells us how her husband would not only beat her in front of her children but, when he felt like it, would even tie her up hand and foot in the field and beat her there too. Now, she does not even remember what was the reason for such beating. Perhaps, Nivruttirao believed this was the only way for a husband to keep his wife under his thumb. But Dwarkatai slowly brought about a change in this man. She began to step out of her home and meet other people. As she began to get acceptance and respect in the village, Nivruttirao also began to change.

Between 2011 and 2012 Dwarkatai came in contact with Human

The Organisation supported the Dalit labourers in many ways. It was because of the Organisation that Dwarkatai began to keep goats. Thus she stopped going for sugarcane cutting work. Before she came to know of the Organisation, three of her children had been married while still minors.

But Dwarkatai did not allow her youngest daughter to be married off before she completed 18 years of age. Thus her leadership qualities have taken shape through the various developments in her family and the village.

Rights Campaign and Manisha Tokle. Issues of the Dalit community are raised through the Human Rights Campaign. Manisha Tokle is an activist of the organisation. Observing an activist like Manisha Tokle must have led Dwarkatai to find her own path to emancipation. In Kathoda village, a certain moneylender started a Savings Groups only because it helped to keep his business going. When the Organisation proposed to start a Savings Group in the village, Dwarkatai was one of the women who left the moneylenders' group to start a separate one of their own. After they started their own group, Savitribai Phule Jayanti began to be celebrated under their auspices. This gave Dwarkatai another new idea. At this very juncture there happened an incident of Dalit oppression. The Dalit Sarpanch allotted shelters without consulting the village residents. Angered by this, the upper castes perpetrated a stabbing attack on the Sarpanch. The Organisation supported the Dalits during this incident. It became a police case. The Dalits became united. The Organisation gave them information regarding the Prevention of Atrocities Act, and how to register an FIR etc. On joining the Savings Group Dwarkatai had learnt to sign her name. Now she wanted to gain an understanding of the law too. Thus she began to obtain information about a variety of such subjects.

The Organisation supported the Dalit labourers in many ways. It was because of the Organisation that Dwarkatai began to keep

goats. Thus she stopped going for sugarcane cutting work. Before she came to know of the Organisation, three of her children had been married while still minors. But Dwarkatai did not allow her youngest daughter to be married off before she completed 18 years of age. Thus her leadership qualities have taken shape through the various developments in her family and the village.

There are several instances of Dwarkatai having helped others. Two of such instances will suffice to show in what kind of matters Dwarkatai intervenes and how she goes about doing it. In the first case, a girl of the Maratha community left her husband and went back to her parents. Her father came to Dwarkatai to get justice for his daughter as he himself could not find a way out of the situation. The daughter wanted a divorce but the husband was not agreeing to that. The girl believed that her husband was having an affair with another woman. Besides, he would beat her and abused her in other ways too. Which was why she was not willing to go back to live with him. The husband's family came to the girl's house with a lawyer. As the lawyer began to speak in a formal way, Dwarkatai stopped him, saying 'As a lawyer you should speak in the court. Why are you arguing their case here? And if you have come as a friend of the family, then you should speak only when you are spoken to....'. Using his position as a lawyer, this man was trying to intimidate them and force them to send the girl back to her husband. Dwarkatai read the Domestic Violence Act to the husband's family. Following her advice this case had already been registered with the Mahila Takrar Nivaran Kendra (Grievance redressal centre for women). As a result, the lawyer was left with no arguments to advance, and for fear of the law the family agreed to the divorce. Dwarkatai's intervention also helped in deciding upon a reasonable amount towards the girl's alimony.

In the second instance, Dwarkatai found it necessary to take Manisha Tokle's help because the police would not register the case. It was a complex case of a girl who had been sold into prostitution. The girls' neighbours had taken her along, just for a change of scene, to

another village. Her family had trusted her into their care. However, the girl did not return at the given date. When the family made enquiries they were told that the girl had never come to that village at all. They tried to make a case as if the girl had somehow gone missing. But there was evidence to show that the girl had gone to the neighbours' house. The matter came to Dwarkatai, she went to the police station. The police said, 'She must have run away. Just enquire with all your relatives. You'll find her.' Seeing that the police would not take the matter seriously, Dwarkatai asked Manisha Tokle for help. Only then the police took note of the matter and a search for the girl began. It was found that the girl had been kidnapped for prostitution. Dwarkatai's promptness and persistence helped to save the girl in time.

Since Dwarkatai started working with MAKAAAM she has helped four widows obtain the benefits of the Gharkul scheme (housing scheme) for shelter for the needy. She has submitted applications for widows' pensions. In addition, she is experimenting in self-reliant agriculture. She has formed a group of five women and undertaken this experiment under the guidance of MAKAAAM. she has helped several women to obtain job cards to enable them to get work under the MNREGA. She even took out a rally of the women to demand from the gram panchayat, jobs particularly suited to women. However, she finds it difficult to establish the property rights of a woman. To do this is to offend the son as he thinks that the mother has no trust in him. Dwarkatai's village falls in the drought prone region of Marathwada. Few people own land here. They depend both on agricultural labour and tilling the land for their livelihood. Dwarkatai feels that may be the reason why the problem of being deprived of land rights is not so keenly felt here. That is why she focuses her efforts more on other problems such as domestic violence against women rather than on questions of inheritance rights.

For MAKAAAM, Dwarkatai is an example of a grassroots kind of leader who intervenes giving due consideration to the problems of their own localities. ■



Jija Darawada

► ‘Does she think she’s an MLA?’ ‘What help does she think she can give us?’ Jijatai has heard such comments from many people. She works in Adivasi settlements. The poor and adivasi people have become quite convinced that they can expect no help from the government. If they want it, they must be prepared to oil some palms. Jijatai tells us, ‘People say their parents, grandparents have died without receiving any benefit from a single government scheme for the deprived. They do not believe I will be able to help them. But that makes me all the more determined to go on with this work.’

Jijatai’s experience has been that Government officials expect a couple of hundred rupees and Gram Panchayat members, up to

1000 rupees, even for such basic things as filling an application form for a widow's pension or for the Shravan Baal Scheme for aid to the elderly, or to get a ration card made. Once she even asked an official at the tehsil office, 'What exactly do you charge us for?' She was told, 'We have to make out a receipt.' This was, of course, a falsehood. This is a brazen method entrenched in government offices for taking advantage of helplessness. However, when Jijatai submits an application, no such demand is made. Jijatai helps people without charging them for it. Through MAKAAAM she has learnt where an application for any Scheme is to be submitted, which documents are required to be submitted with it, etc. With this information, obtained with the help of MAKAAAM, Jijatai is endeavouring to build up the confidence of the poor people in her surroundings. But this is no easy task especially for a single Adivasi woman facing this challenge on her own.

The poor have had such bad experiences that they find it very hard to believe that any change for the better is possible, or that pensions, rations, roads and water are their rights. Jijatai relates an experience. 'I started work with MAKAAAM, going to the needy, filling out application forms for them. There was this old couple in our village, Dhamani. They do not have children. In order to apply for the Shravan Baal Scheme for them, I began to ask them for the required information. People started saying, 'How much life do these two have left in them? They have one foot in the grave. What help can they get? No one could help them. And you will not be able to either.' I let them say what they had to. I submitted the old couples' application and was able to get them their pension.' The importance of this kind of work by people like Jijatai, is in fighting the hopelessness into which the people have fallen. Society has a strong mind-set of denying the weak even what is rightfully theirs. Challenging this tendency at the village level can make even the workers feel hopeless. Sometimes it is difficult to get help for those who need it. Workers like Jijatai may put in a lot of time and effort for them but the prospective beneficiaries themselves fail to

do what is required of them. Jijatai tells us of one such experience. ‘Suman is a young woman whose husband had committed suicide by taking poison. I decided to help her submit an application for the Widow’s Pension. But Suman’s father-in-law refused to let her file the application. He said to her “Is this an age at which to apply for a widow’s pension?”. And Suman shelved the idea of applying for it. The real reason was quite different. The father-in-law feared that if she starts getting the pension she will be registered in government records as a widow, and then she will demand more rights. But Suman did not understand this...’ It is very difficult to motivate single widowed women to fight for their rights. Through her struggles to remove the obstacles she faces in her own personal life, Jijatai is evolving into a social worker.

Jijatai’s husband Sanjay died in an accident in 2012. She was left with the responsibility of fending for four small children. Theirs had been a love marriage. Sanjay’s mother was not happy with this marriage. So she rejected Jija. Fortunately, however, she had Sanjay’s support. He worked as a watchman at a farmhouse. He had even encouraged his wife to work to help support the family. So after marriage she had taken a job with an NGO and they were happy with the situation. But the picture changed drastically after Sanjay’s death. Her mother-in-law turned Jija out of their house and told her to go and live with her brother, leaving her children with the in-laws. Jijatai, however, decided to live independently with her children. She had received a very small piece of land from her husband’s family. She began to grow rice there. In addition, she undertook labour work to make ends meet. Sanjay had been hit by a private delivery van. So she filed a legal suit for compensation. She pursued the case without any help from anyone for four long years. Eventually she was granted a handsome amount as accident insurance by the court. She even gave a share of this amount to Sanjay’s family. She believes that she does not need to behave badly with them just because they did so with her. This helped her to mend her relationship with the family although

Jijatai goes to the Taluka office nearly every day. This makes her neighbours, even the women, whisper about her behind her back. Recently, Jijatai had gone to Karjat to apply for the caste certificate for her children. A resident of her village saw her there. He came and spread the malicious tale that this woman was gallivanting in Karjat town. Such things do eventually reach her ears, and she does feel bad about it, but she has stopped giving such rumours any importance although once there was a time when they used to disturb her.

she still has not received her legal share of the family's land of which Sanjay was the sole heir. As the land has not been officially divided, Sanjay's uncle continues to make covert efforts to prevent Jijatai's name from being added in official records as a legal heir. Jijatai does not put in too much effort to pursue this case as she feels her children will, in any case, obtain their share of the father's property when they become adults. As society does not accept a woman standing up for her rights, even women workers like Jijatai go slow in such matters. This is of course a long struggle. Society is unwilling to accept even the small steps that Jijatai has taken in this direction.

Jijatai goes to the Taluka office nearly every day. This makes her neighbours, even the women, whisper about her behind her back. Recently, Jijatai had gone to Karjat to apply for the caste certificate for her children. A resident of her village saw her there. He came and spread the malicious tale that this woman was gallivanting in Karjat town. Such things do eventually reach her ears, and she does feel bad about it, but she has stopped giving such rumours any importance although once there was a time when they used to disturb her.

For two years after her husband's death, Jijatai did not step out of her home very much. She was still disturbed from the cruel

treatment that society hands out to a widow. She related one such incident. It was her brother's wedding. So she dressed up for it in a new sari and wore bangles. People pointed fingers at her for enjoying a wedding even though her husband was dead. 'This hurt me deeply', she says and relates other such instances, 'There was the naming ceremony of a baby in a relative's family. Everyone was invited but not me. During the Ganapati festival, our family invites all women for a function. On such occasions, I was forced to avoid attending it.' Such experiences were diminishing her self-confidence.

At this juncture, Manas Foundation began to hold meetings at her settlement, Jambhulpada. At these meetings the social workers would listen to the issues the locals were facing. Jijatai was not restricted from attending these meetings. She not only attended the meetings but gave voice to her problems and raised questions. The Foundation workers saw her potential as a leader and encouraged her to start working with them. Jija got a glimpse of a new horizon for herself.

Amita Jadhav of Manas Foundation started the 'Krantijyoti Adivasi Sanghatana in Karjat. Jijatai was appointed secretary of this organisation. Jijatai is aware that she, just like Savitribai Phule, would have to face much torment by the people. She says, 'No matter much how much trouble it causes for me, I will continue to work with this organisation which is in the name of Savitribai Phule.' Amita Jadhav introduced Jijatai to MAKAAAM. So even during the lockdown, she would travel to Karjat to attend MAKAAAM's online meetings from Amitatai's home. On the basis of what she learnt from MAKAAAM she began to work at her village level. She began to get the opportunities to visit different cities to attend various workshops for the Sanghatana. Manas Foundation selected her for a fellowship granted by the CORO organisation. Jijatai says, 'I now get a lot of different kinds of information. As a child I was very interested in studying. Poverty prevented me from doing so. But now, I am learning a lot of

things. I have gained respect in society. Because I work outside my home, my children have also learnt about the importance of an education. I feel that my daughter should get educated, should work and become independent. My children have also begun to feel the same way.’

When Jijatai had to leave her home after her husband’s death, she was in a state of depression. Her mother-in-law had not allowed her to take so much as a teaspoon with her. Jijatai started her new home with only two big vessels which had been among her wedding gifts. But she did not let that stop her. She encouraged all four of her children to go to school. As the children grew up, they became independent, and Jijatai got more time for herself. She began to address the problems of single women in the neighbourhood. As a task for MAKAAAM she organized a ‘Walk for women’s issues’ with MAKAAAM. That was when the problem of water supply revealed itself as a common problem faced by all women. She raised this issue of water supply in the Gram Sabha and followed it up with members of the Zilla Parishad. As a result, their village got tapped water supply. The town’s roads had many puddles and potholes; these roads were re-laid with paver blocks, all through her efforts. The individuals for whom she had obtained job cards began to get employment under MNREGA. Even when trying to solve such problems she does not get the support of the entire village. They still remain somewhat negative, mainly because they still cannot believe that change can happen. Jijatai says, ‘Savitribai tolerated so much oppression, and that is how changes were brought about. Why then should I lose hope? ‘

It needed an organisation like MAKAAAM to give Jijatai her lost self-confidence. ■

Appendix 1

Achievements for rural women leaders active with MAKAAAM since 2020-21

Extent of MAKAAAM's areas of work

- ▶ At the village level, discussions began to be held about women's rights, women's issues and problems, as well as strategies and steps for resolving them.
- ▶ Women leaders developed a better understanding of and greater sensitivity towards problems of single women.
- ▶ The need for organised action programmes came to be accepted as a way to resolve issues related to rural women.
- ▶ Women's leadership came to be recognized at the village level.
- ▶ Women who associated with MAKAAAM, developed an

increased desire for new information and skills in order to become leaders in the community.

- ▶ Action programmes suggested by MAKAAAM could be carried out in a more systematic and organized manner at the village level with the help of the women leaders.

MAKAAAM has raised a cadre of workers who function as mentors for the village level leaders. However, more and more issues are being resolved at the village level with minimal help required from the mentors.



Appendix 2

Outcomes of MAKAAAM's Women's Leadership Development Programmes

Remarkable
development of
leadership qualities
in 48 rural women
in Maharashtra

- ▶ MAKAAAM was able to reach 516 single women through the medium of a survey.
- ▶ Demands were made by 570 women for job cards under the MNREGA.
- ▶ Intervention by women leaders trained by MAKAAAM led to 344 people getting job cards under the MNREGA.
- ▶ Intervention by women leaders trained by MAKAAAM led to 740 people getting work under the MNREGA.
- ▶ Due to the guidance received from MAKAAAM, women leaders at the village level brought to the fore issues related to the inheritance rights of 217 women.
- ▶ Women leaders at the village level, by their own efforts, obtained e-job cards, online, for 1600 women.

Pic: Datta Gundaji Suraywanshi



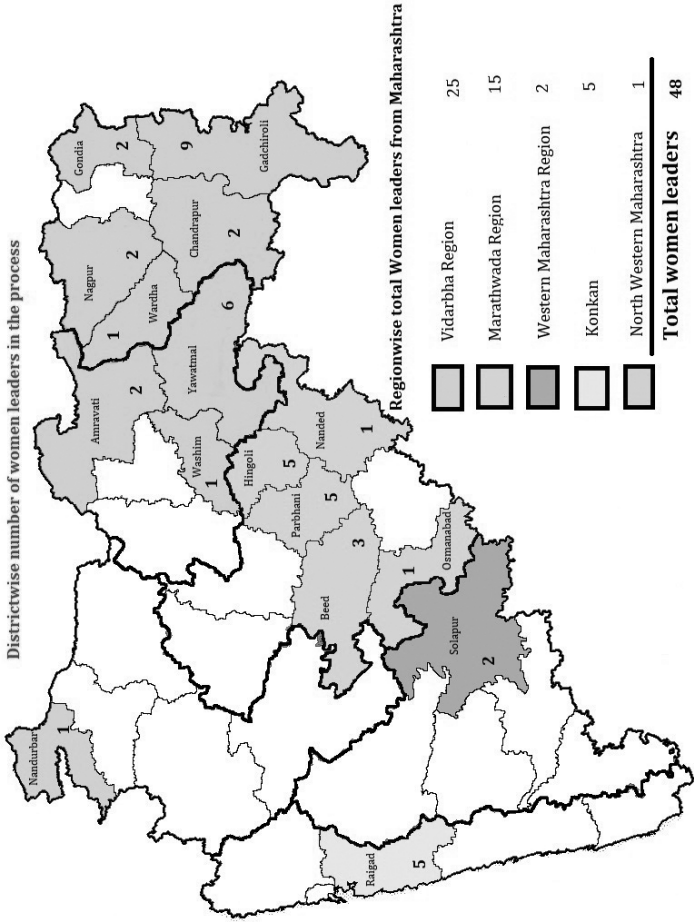
Appendix 3

Organisation-wise list of women leaders participating in the leadership development programme under MAKAAAM

District	Organisation	Contact person	Woman leader
Amaravati	Swarajya Mitra Samajik Sanstha	Aarti Bais, Ranjana Neware	Mangala Wankhede
			Manisha Uike
Gadchiroli	Srushti	Manda Keljadkar	Rekha Haate
Gadchiroli, Chandrapur	Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi	Shubhada Deshmukh, Pratima Nandeshwar	Khanjira Karade, Sangita Sahare, Chhaya Kharkate, Vaishali Shende, Seema Chavan, Aarti Madavi, Ranjana Kumare, Shalu Meshram
Gondia, Washim	Foundation for Economic and Economic Development (FEED)	Sarita Meshram, Kaustubh Pandharipande	Chitrakala Vaide, Bhumeshwari Gavad, Suchita Solanki
Nandurbar	Janarth Adivasi Vikas Sanstha	Vanita Patale	Babytai Bhil
Nagpur	Prakriti	Pradnya Mandape	Archana Keche, Laxmi Gajbhiye
Nanded	Anandashray	Dayananda Kadam	Savitribai Phirange, Archana Thoke
Beed	Jaagar Pratishthan	Manisha Tokle	Chandrakala Shinde, Dwarka Waghmare
Beed, Osmanabad	Ekal Mahila Sanghatana	Chitra Patil, Surakha Bhosale	Asha Jhinjurde, Ujjwala Magar
Parbhani	Rajalakshmi Pratishthan, Vikalpa India, Saad Samajik Sanstha	Raju Kendhe, Gajanan Survase, Yogesh Kudmule	Meena Gore, Sagarbai Zhodape, Swati Survase, Jyashree Jadhav, Vaishnavi Samale

Yavatmal	Prerana Gramin Vikas Sanstha, Foundation for Ecological Security, Srujan	Govind Pednekar, Ranjeet Todasam	Vanita Shende, Neelima Renge, Sulochana Dehankar, Lalita Rathod
Raigad	Ankur Trust, Manas Foundation	Suvarna Patale, Amita Jadhav	Bharati Pawar, Rekha Waghmare, Lalita Waghmare
Wardha	Urja Foundation	Nutan Malavi	Sunita Alonay
Solapur	Dr Ambedkar Sheti Vikas va Samshodhan Sanstha, Sangola	Sharmila Kedare	Sharada Thokale, Sarita Babar. Baby Pardhi
Hingoli	Ugam Gramvikas Sanstha, Prerana Mahila Vikas Sanstha, Sahyadri Bahu-uddeshiya Samajik Sanstha	Chhaya Padghan, Gautam Mogale, Balaji Narawade	Narmada Wakale, Anita Meshram, Gita Kale, Savitri Kharwade, Kalawati Sawandkar

The Reach of Women's' leadership under MAKAAAM – District wise map





कोरची येथे महिलांना नेतृत्व विकासाचे धडे

कोरची तालुका प्रतिनिधी

स्थानीक महाग्रामसमा कार्यालयाच्या सभागृहात महिला विकासन अधिकार मंच आणि आम्ही आमच्या आरोग्यासाठी नेतृत्व विकासाचे धडे देण्यात आले.

यावेळी साधनव्यक्ती ईजामसाय कार्टेगे, प्रतिमा नंदेश्वर, कुमारीबाई जमकानत यांनी महिलांना वन अधिकार आणि जमीन, महिलांचे अधिकार, वनधन योजना, अनुदान प्राप्त ग्रामसभेत महिलांचा सहभाग तसेच विविध विषयांवर महिलामध्ये नेतृत्व विकसीत करणे आदी विषयांवर मार्गदर्शन करण्यात आले.

कोरची तालुका प्रतिनिधी
सहाय्यक तालुका अधिकारी

Once there was a lone Seed...

This booklet presents a glimpse of the rural leadership which has been active in association with the Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM) since the year 2020-2021. The stories in this booklet offer the reader an insight into the issues that confront rural women, the strategies adopted by them to resolve these issues, the challenges faced by an non literate rural woman when she stands up to fight for her rights and thus give the reader a feel of the way leadership evolves from among women farmers and how they become organised. Scholars, activists, students and all others who feel concerned about the problems faced by rural women will find this booklet useful. This compilation of stories vividly illustrates a certain thought process, the seed of which MAKAAM, a loose network of women farmers, wishes to plant in heart and mind of society at large. That is why the booklet is titled *Once there was a lone seed.*

We are also confident that these seeds of rural leadership already sown will thrive and grow into a flourishing tree.

