

# Women in Panchayati Raj:

*Change Agents for a  
New Future for India*



An Initiative of  
The Hunger Project







A photograph of a woman in a purple sari carrying a large metal pot on her head. She is looking down with a serious expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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# Two Indias — One Future



**A**t the start of the new millennium, there are really two Indias. Together they comprise one-sixth of all humanity.

**The first India — modern India — has a remarkable record of accomplishment.**

Since independence in 1947, India has become a power on the global stage. It is the world's largest democracy and the 10th largest industrial power, with solid, consistent economic growth.

It has the largest middle class of any nation, with the third largest scientific and technological workforce. Indian engineers hold top jobs in computer corporations on every continent. In agriculture, India is the number one producer in sugar, groundnuts (peanuts), tea and fruit. It is number two in rice, wheat, vegetables and milk.

India's diverse and ancient reli-

gious traditions, its languages and its arts are all part of its greatness. No nation has contributed more spiritual richness and truth to humanity. The list of winners of the major international prizes in literature, including the Nobel, Booker and Pulitzer Prizes, is filled with Indian writers and poets.

**The second, and much larger, India is an entirely different world.** Of the one billion people living in India today, 720 million — nearly three-quarters — live in rural areas characterized by grinding poverty and social injustice. This India has been bypassed by progress and opportunity.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, most rural Indians live with the technology of a thou-

sand years ago. In the age of the Internet, the majority cannot read or write, and few have ever seen a computer. Living and voting in a democracy, with constitutional guarantees, many remain powerless, locked in an oppressive system of economic exploitation, class division, caste prejudice and pervasive corruption. While the economy of modern India is growing, many people lack access to education, nutrition and health care, sanitation, land and other assets that could enable them to escape the trap of poverty.

Rural India has an infant mortality rate of 85, compared with 53 in the cities — and a life expectancy of only 54 years, compared with 63 in urban areas.



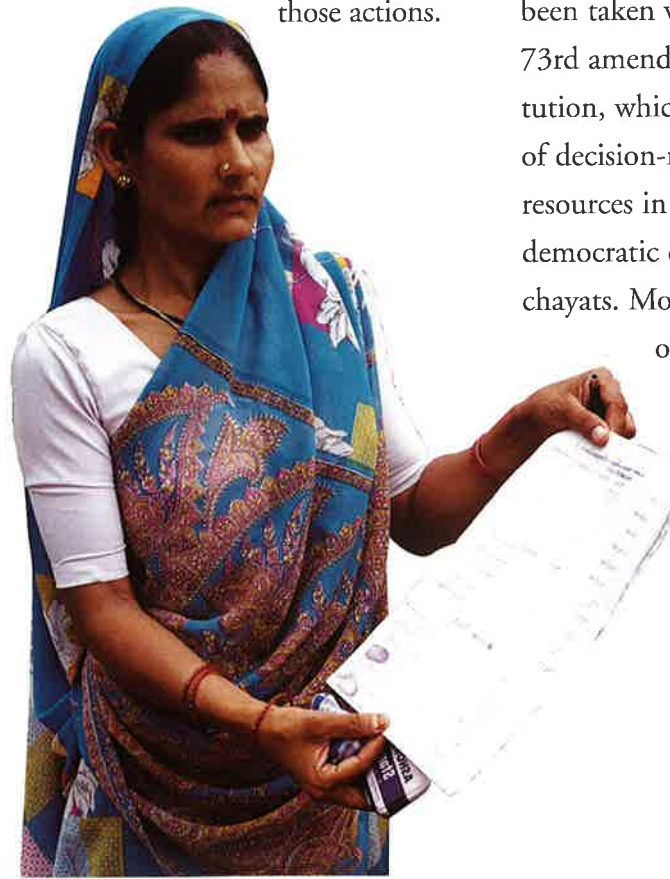
**There is a truth that many would like to ignore: India's future will be determined in this "second India".**

Concern for the people of the second India is not merely humanitarian. Modern India has chosen to join the emerging global, information-based economy. To thrive in that economy, it must enter as one nation, with broadly based participation, productivity and prosperity. It cannot survive with rafts of wealth floating in a sea of poverty, and the resulting instability. The nations that prosper in the global economy are those with a healthy and educated workforce, stable population growth and relative freedom from corruption and conflict.

**India's recent history demonstrates that action from the top alone cannot meet the challenge.** It will take the creativity, resources and participation of the *entire* population, many of whom have never before had a meaningful role or voice. For India, this means a two-fold revolution: the creation and nurturing of genuine participatory local democra-

cy, and a profound transformation in the status and leadership of women.

**In the critical areas for the well-being of the nation, women are on the front lines.** The future of rural India depends on overcoming enormous challenges in health, education, nutrition, population and environment. Women bear primary responsibility in every one of these areas — day after day after day. It is women who know best what needs to be done, and it is women who are most committed to taking those actions.



Yet, for thousands of years, India's rural women have been systematically denied the freedom, resources, information and decision-making power they need to carry out these responsibilities. In many parts of India, women have been kept in an almost unimaginable state of powerlessness, illiteracy, isolation and malnutrition.

**India today faces an historic opportunity.** As local democracy and expanded opportunity flourish around the world, India must not be left behind. The first step has been taken with the unprecedented 73rd amendment to India's constitution, which mandates the transfer of decision-making power and resources in the rural areas to local democratic councils known as panchayats. Most revolutionary of all, one-third of all panchayat seats are to be reserved for women — guaranteeing them a role in determining the future of their communities. If fully implemented, women



Thomas Haley/SIPA

will, for the first time in India's history, have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

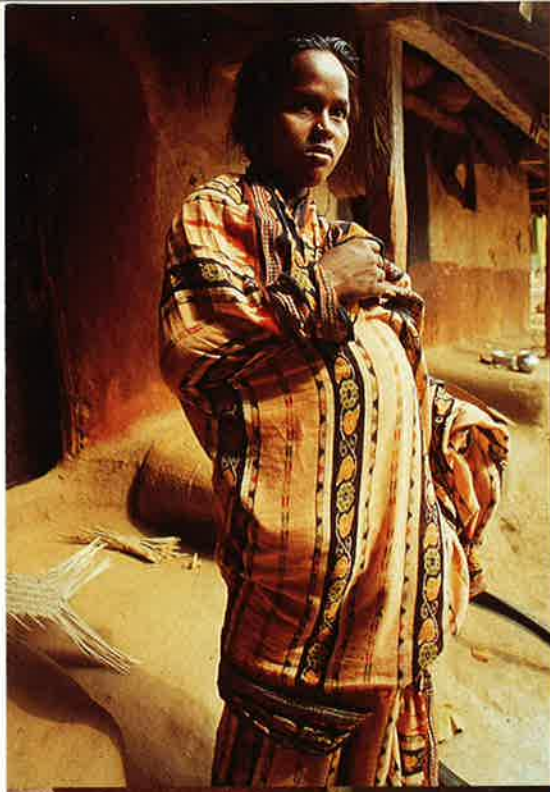
**The struggle has only begun.** Passage of the constitutional amendment on paper does not guarantee implementation in practice. Deeply entrenched interests oppose local democracy and women's rights, and are working to undermine this process directly and indirectly. There is a prevailing public cynicism regarding the possibility of grass-roots women's leadership. Removing these obstacles requires a social transformation of unprecedented-

ed proportions, demanding a concerted campaign lasting many years. The first generation of women panchayat leaders will need to possess enormous courage. Those supporting them will require great endurance.

**The most strategic action that can be taken for India's future is to strengthen the hand of women panchayat leaders.** The strategies and actions required to accomplish this are being shaped even now by an emerging network of committed individuals and organizations at all levels of society.

**The transfer of power to one million women elected local representatives — many of whom are malnourished and illiterate — is the greatest social experiment of our time.** These women are struggling against enormous odds to improve the lives of their families, their villages and their nation. They are the key change agents for a new future for India. By ensuring that they gain access to the resources and information they need — and by allowing their voices to be heard — India can finally become one nation. In doing so it will fulfil its destiny and reveal its true greatness.





*'If you want me to tell you what a nation is like ... tell me the position of women in that country.'*

— Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India



# A Lifetime of Subjugation

**A** female in rural India faces some of the harshest discrimination in the world. Each phase of her life may be shaped by malnutrition, denial of selfhood and lack of voice in the decisions that affect her life.

**The social and economic conditions that subjugate women are expressed and reinforced by the institution of dowry.** Having a girl is a great burden, while having a boy is a great asset. Although illegal since 1961, dowry is flourishing and on the rise, cutting across all classes and castes.

For most women, there is no way out. Subjugation and submission are a pervasive pattern, **enforced by violence** and the threat of violence throughout their lives (*see page 12*).

- **Unwanted before birth.** Often, a baby girl is born into a family that had wished and prayed for a boy. Increasingly, girls are not born at all. Modern science allows parents to determine the sex of their child before birth — and abort it if it is a girl. As a result, India's population ratio is now estimated to be 900 females (in some areas as low as 600 females) to 1,000 males.

- **Deprived as a baby girl.** Girls may be breast-fed for a shorter time than boys, in the hope that the mother can become pregnant with a boy. They are fed less food, and lower quality food. Girls who are ill are less likely to receive medical care than boys, resulting in a 43 per cent higher risk of dying for girls than boys aged one through four.

- **A childhood of drudgery.** By age five, girls carry adult responsibilities both inside and outside the home. At home, a girl cares for her younger siblings, and for her sick or pregnant mother. She fetches water, firewood and fodder, and makes dung cakes for fuel. Outside, she works in agriculture and wage labour. Thirty per cent of women's work burden in India is carried by girls between six and 11 years old. Education and play are nearly unthinkable.

- **Adolescence: health crisis and sexual violation.** Girls who reach puberty face a new set of problems. At the time her body needs more nutrition, she receives less. Adolescent girls suffer high rates of anaemia, vitamin deficiencies, tuberculosis and gynaecological problems. As almost everything in her life tells her she is worthless, her mental health deteriorates.

Adolescent girls run high risks of sexual assault.

- **Marriage: a new cycle of subjugation.** She is married young, to an older man she has never met, and into a family and a village where she is a stranger. Early and frequent pregnancies about which she has little choice — and during which she rarely receives medical care — put her health at risk. She is isolated — often not permitted to leave the household, and thus unable to be protected by other women.

- **Adulthood: overworked and undernourished.** A woman may work twice as many hours as her husband (*see page 10*). Her triple burden — household work, agriculture and wage labour — goes unrecognized and unsupported. She is often malnourished throughout her life (*see page 8*).

- **Outcast in widowhood.** When her husband dies, a woman may be socially, economically and emotionally outcast, stripped of her only place in society. A widow is often forced to shave her head, eat only one meal per day and sleep on the floor.



# The Cycle of Malnutrition:

## *determining factor in India's future*

India has the second worst rate of child malnutrition in the world, just behind Bangladesh.

The vicious cycle of malnutrition among the women of rural India perpetuates the cycle of malnutrition and poverty for all rural Indians, both men and women.

When children are born malnourished and underweight, they are at severe risk in all areas of personal development, health and mental capacity. They are physically weak and lack resistance to disease. They face a lifetime of disabilities, a lowered capacity for learning and diminished productivity.

The cost of this deficiency, solely in economic terms, has been estimated to be as much as US\$28 billion in reduced GDP — in 1996 alone.

This is greater than India's total annual public expenditures on nutrition and health combined.

**This reality is a clear and direct result of the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women throughout their lives.**

We should not need to focus exclusively on women as mothers in order to be committed to transforming their status. Yet, in their role as mothers, they represent the most critical link in the chain of human well-being and development.

It is widely recognized that the health and nutritional status of a pregnant woman dramatically affects the health of her baby. But this is only part of the story. The truth is that a woman's health, *from the time she is in her own mother's womb*, is the single most important factor in determining the health of her child. It is clear that traditional responses to

child malnutrition, such as simply providing nutritional supplements to pregnant women, are inadequate and ultimately futile. If India is to interrupt the cycle of persistent hunger, the lifetime health and nutrition of women must improve dramatically.

This, in turn, means transforming the way women are treated in the family and society as a whole:

- No longer can she eat last and least, after feeding her husband and sons.
- No longer can a girl be kept from the breast, so that her mother may become pregnant to bear a son.
- No longer can teenage girls facing the stresses of puberty also face deprivation, pregnancy and abuse.

*No longer will a lifetime of malnutrition be the primary legacy that Indian women pass on to their children.*

*'The exceptionally high rates of malnutrition in South Asia are rooted deep in the soil of inequality between men and women.'*

— UNICEF, "The Asian Enigma", *The Progress of Nations*, 1996



### Malnourished in motherhood

- 60% of South Asian women of child-bearing age are underweight and malnourished. By contrast, the proportion of malnourished women in sub-Saharan Africa is 20%.
- She receives no extra food or special care in pregnancy, although her nutritional requirements increase dramatically. She gains only half the weight necessary to have a healthy birth. 88% of pregnant Indian women are anaemic.
- She continues her back-breaking work in the home and the fields throughout pregnancy, while seldom receiving any prenatal care.
- Her malnutrition will be passed down to the unborn child in her womb.

### Unsupported in adolescence

- She receives no extra nourishment in adolescence — when her body requires it most for growth and attainment of sexual maturity.
- Married as a teen, she becomes pregnant before her body is ready.
- Lack of nutritional support for adolescent development results in reproductive health complications and increased mortality.

### Underweight at birth

- 33% of India's babies are underweight at birth due to the malnutrition and ill-health of their mothers.
- This compares with 15% of those born in sub-Saharan Africa and 7% of those born in the United States.
- Babies born underweight face physical and mental health problems throughout their lives.

### Eats last and least as a girl

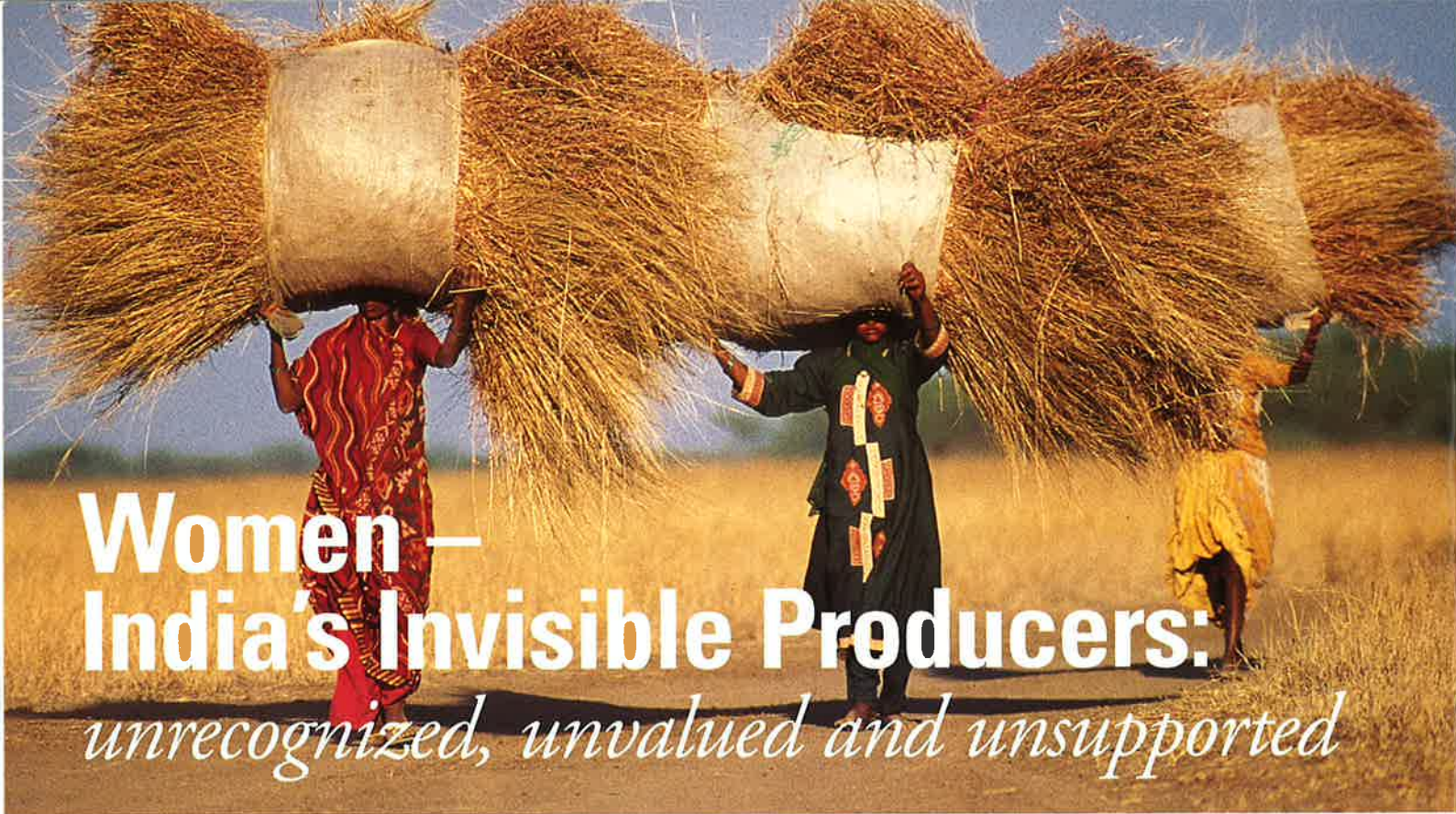
- She and her mother eat last and least in the family. The food they eat is less nutritious.
- 53% of India's children under age five are malnourished and underweight, compared with 32% in sub-Saharan Africa. Severe malnutrition is worse among girls than boys.
- Chronic malnutrition can result in stunted growth and incomplete physical and mental development.

### Breast-fed less as an infant

- Girls may be breast-fed for 2 months less than boys.
- Women wean girls earlier so that they can try again sooner to give birth to a son.
- Babies who are not sufficiently breast-fed suffer from poor immune system development.







# Women – India's Invisible Producers:

*unrecognized, unvalued and unsupported*

above: D.P.A./The Image Works; right: Shehzad Noorani/Woodfin Camp

**R**ural India depends on its women for survival.

Its children and families are fed, clothed and sheltered by women's labour. Its water and firewood are gathered by women's hands. Its family farms and rural economy are productive because of women's work.

Yet, when men are asked, many say that women do nothing at all.

*Because of women's low social status, their work goes unrecognized, unvalued and unsupported.*

Women carry a triple burden. They make indispensable contributions in all areas of rural life and economic activity, particularly in *household maintenance, agriculture and income-generating activities.*

## Household maintenance

- Women and girls have primary responsibility for all household work, and caring and providing for their families. They are traditionally responsible for collecting water, fuel and fodder (animal feed).
- Women hold full responsibility for cooking, cleaning and washing, and caring for children, the sick and the elderly.
- Women may cook for more than three hours per day — burning wood, dung and crop residues. The smoke they inhale is equivalent to 20 packs of cigarettes per day. It causes eye and respiratory problems, bronchitis and lung cancer.

## Agriculture

- Women contribute between 55 and 66 per cent of total farm labour. Their work includes planting, transplanting, cultivation and weeding, fertilizing and harvesting.
- Women provide 50 per cent of the labour in rice cultivation.
- Women account for 93 per cent of total employment in dairy production.
- Women do nearly all post-harvest processing and preservation.
- Women are generally not allowed to use agricultural implements. They perform many arduous tasks, such as transplantation and weeding, with their bare hands.



### *Income-generating activities*

- Women are critical income earners for the family. They engage in small business ventures including silk-cocoon rearing, vegetable-oil extraction, spice preparation and fish farming.
- Women raise animals for milk, eggs, wool, leather and meat.
- Women are involved in various paid labour activities, which are often severely physically taxing. Women's work includes cutting rocks and stones, construction, digging and carrying loads on their heads.

- Women constitute 51 per cent of total employment in forest-based small-scale enterprises such as basket, broom and rope making. Women who transport firewood on their heads may make two to three trips per day to the forest, carrying as much as 20–25 kilograms (44–55 pounds) of wood per trip.



### **Unequal pay for unequal work**

Despite their hard work, women are rarely compensated for their labours.

In a 1992 study of family-based textile workers, male children who helped in a home-based hand-loom mill were paid, while the adult women and girls were not.

When women do earn an income, it is significantly less than men's. In the state of Tamil Nadu, women's agricultural wages are only 57 per cent of men's.

When women control their own income, they invest in the well-being of their children and families, while men often spend earnings on themselves.

*'... to fetch, to carry, to cook, to wash ...  
year after year a submissive silent slave  
sold to life for nothing.'*

— from *Silver Shackles* by Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay

# Violence against girls and adolescents

## Foeticide and infanticide

- Between 3 million and 5 million female foetuses are aborted in India each year. In one clinic in Maharashtra, 7,999 out of 8,000 aborted foetuses were female.
- Indian gender-detection clinic advertisements suggest that it is better to spend US\$38 now to terminate a female foetus than US\$3,800 later on her dowry.
- More than 10,000 girls each year are killed when they are born. Girls are murdered by suffocation, having their spines snapped, or having rock salt shoved down their throats.
- The intentional deprivation of girls — through insufficient breast-feeding and denial of food and health care — leads to malnutrition and death. This mistreatment, along with foeticide and infanticide, has led to 50 million women “going missing” in India’s population.

## Rape and sexual abuse

- Psychiatrist Sudhir Kakkar has estimated that at least 600,000 to 700,000 Indian children are likely to have experienced sexual abuse, mostly by members of their own families.
- For every crime reported against children, there are 100 that are not reported.
- The incidence of rape of girls under age 10 increased by 27 per cent between 1996 and 1997.
- 20 per cent of the pregnancies of adolescent abortion seekers in Mumbai were due to rape or incest.

## Child marriage

- 39 per cent of girls aged 15–19 in India are currently or have been married. In Rajasthan, 56 per cent of girls are married before the age of 15. Of these, 3 per cent are less than five years old; another 14 per cent are under age 10.
- Many girls have their first child while they are still teenagers. Up to 17 per cent of total fertility in India is accounted for by births to women aged 15–18. These young mothers face the stresses and risks of childbirth before their bodies have matured, and have a high incidence of maternal mortality.
- Young married girls have little control over when and how often they have children; 37 per cent of live births occur within two years of the previous live birth. Infant mortality for these children is more than twice as frequent as it is for those more widely spaced.

## Child prostitution

- Between 70,000 and 100,000 prostitutes were working in the six major cities of Bangalore, Calcutta, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai in 1991.
- 15 per cent of Indian prostitutes are children.

# Violence against women

## Physical abuse and domestic violence

- In spite of the fact that most spousal abuse goes unreported, more than 70 per cent of women in some regions report physical abuse by their husbands.
- Wife-beating is often seen as a husband’s right. Divorce is not an option for battered wives.
- Alcohol abuse contributes to the likelihood that men will beat their wives.

- Thousands more are injured and maimed because the husband, or the husband’s family, is dissatisfied with the dowry brought by the wife.

## Psychological abuse

- The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women cites psychological harm as a major form of violence against women.
- Women suffer from belittlement, threats, taunting and confinement. This can lead to depression and even suicide.

## Violence in motherhood

- India’s maternal mortality rate — at 410 deaths per 100,000 live births — is a leading cause of death. Beatings or denial of health care during pregnancy can lead to maternal mortality.
- Battered pregnant women are twice as likely to miscarry and four times as likely to have a low-birthweight baby.
- Children born to battered women are 40 times more likely to die before age five than children of non-battered mothers.

## Dowry deaths

- As many as 15,000 women annually are killed by their husbands in disputes over dowry. Reported dowry deaths have increased by 170 per cent in the past decade.

## Abuse in widowhood

- Widows in India are frequently harassed, beaten and even murdered.
- 15,000 widows are abandoned to temples where they have no protection from sexual violence.





# Violence against Girls and Women

**'Violence against women and girls,** many of whom are brutalised from cradle to grave simply because of their gender, is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today.

**'Long after slavery was abolished in most of the world, many societies still treat women like chattel:** Their shackles are poor education, economic dependence, limited political power, limited access to fertility control, harsh social conventions and inequality in the eyes of law. Violence is a key instrument used to keep these shackles on.

**'Stopping violence against women and girls is not just a matter of punishing individual acts.** The issue is changing the perception — so deep-seated it is often unconscious — that women are fundamentally of less value than men. It is only when women and girls gain their place as strong and equal members of society that violence against them will be viewed as a shocking aberration rather than an invisible norm.'

— Charlotte Bunch, Executive Director of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership, in UNICEF's *The Progress of Nations*, 1997





नारी शरीर नारी का हक

कम्यो पर मौनिक प्रत्यावर्त  
के कायज नहीं है

औरतों को बर्बाद कर रहे हैं लिसक और आमची

औरतों को बर्बाद कर रहे हैं लिसक और आमची

नारी के बर्बाद

बर्बाद कर रहे हैं

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Document with text, possibly a petition or report, held by a woman in the foreground.

बर्बाद कर रहे हैं



# Awakening to a New Possibility

The subjugation of women is ingrained in Indian society. It has been so much a part of ordinary reality that it is largely unseen, unexamined and unquestioned. Yet today, after thousands of years of suppression, the women of India are awakening to a new possibility — a future based on selfhood, equality and full participation. This awakening is part of a dramatic world-wide shift in consciousness about women and their role in society.

## A global struggle and a global stand

The twentieth century saw the roots of women's emancipation take hold in many parts of the world. In 1900, women had the right to vote in only one country — New Zealand. By the 1920s, women had won the right to vote in Great Britain, most of Europe and the United States. In 1948, the year

after India's independence, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaiming the "equal rights of men and women".

In the years that followed, the struggle took on momentum. In 1972, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 1975 International Women's Year, launching an historic series of international conferences.

Global women's conferences were held in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985, in Beijing in 1995 and in New York in 2000. Women's issues moved to the forefront of the international agenda in global conferences on food, environment, population and human rights.

## The shift in India

India has a long history of women's activism, and Indian women have been leaders in the emerging global

women's movement. Only in the past 10 years, however, has this shift in thinking begun to be felt throughout Indian society.

There were some important precursors. Thanks to years of activism, India made dowry illegal in 1961. In the 1980s, the Indian government began to acknowledge women as key actors in development, instead of treating them as welfare recipients. It converted its Division for Women's Welfare into the Department of Women and Child Development. Various states began to experiment with the reservation of seats for women in local political offices. Agitation began for a national-level reservation for women's participation at every level of the political system, resulting in one of the most important triumphs to date — the reservation of seats for women in panchayati raj, India's system of local self-government.

*'Sisters, how much longer are you to keep silent? Now the time has come to open your mouth.'*

— Song of women activists



Mohini G

*'Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights.'*

— Rallying call for women's groups at 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna

*'The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.'*

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

*'Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family, and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity.'*

— Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979





## The Shift in World Consciousness

- 1948: The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims “the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”.
- 1975: The *First United Nations Women’s Conference* in Mexico City establishes the women’s movement as a global phenomenon, and launches the UN Decade for Women.
- 1979: The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* calls on nations “to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women . . . which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes.”
- 1980: The *Second United Nations Women’s Conference* in Copenhagen first addresses the issue of women and development.
- 1985: The *Third United Nations Women’s Conference* in Nairobi helps to catalyse the emergence of women’s NGOs world-wide.
- 1992: India’s parliament passes the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution, promising grass-roots democracy and radically new roles for women as leaders.
- 1993: Women’s groups at the *World Conference on Human Rights* in Vienna declare that women’s rights are human rights, and human rights are women’s rights.
- 1993: The *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* proclaims that “violence against women constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women”.
- 1995: The *Fourth World Conference on Women* in Beijing calls for gender issues to be fully mainstreamed into government policies and actions — making women full and equal partners in society, and creating a strong platform for action and advocacy for women.
- 2000: Women mobilize in New York for *Women 2000: Beijing +5*, to hold governments accountable for the commitments they made in Beijing, and to address new issues of domestic violence, trafficking, HIV/AIDS and globalisation.



# Panchayati Raj:

*local democracy in action*



Sharryu Varma Chopra

*'India is poor because the villages of India are poor. India will be rich if the villages of India are rich. Panchayats should be given greater power, for we want the villagers to have a greater measure of real swaraj [self-government] in their own villages.'*

— Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India

In spite of India's status as the world's largest democracy, the vast majority of Indians, particularly the 720 million people who live in rural villages, are largely dependent upon remote and unresponsive government structures historically characterized by bureaucracy, corruption and lack of transparency.

In many parts of rural India, there has been a deep rift between the people and their government. Rural people rarely receive information about the plans and actions of government. They lack ways to influence policies, programmes or resource allocations for development. Many have no effective means of participating in shaping their future, and government officials are not always accountable to the communities they purport to serve.

It is no wonder that progress in improving the conditions of life in most parts of rural India has been slow to nonexistent.

As Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has pointed out, ***“Democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary***

***means of development”***. Only when every individual experiences greater freedom, voice and opportunity will each fully bring her or his creative powers to bear on solving the problems of the community.

The challenges facing rural India can never be solved by top-down, bureaucratic interventions. The needs of communities in health, sanitation, clean water, education, family planning and income can only be met locally — through local responsibility and accountability.

This truth, and the Gandhian principle of *gram swaraj* (village self-government), were recognized at the time of India's independence, but were not made part of the constitution, were not institutionalized and were never fully put into practice.

**Only in 1993, with the adoption of the 73rd amendment to its constitution**, did India begin a process with the potential to create genuine democracy at the village level. This represents an historic opportunity to transform the face of rural India.

**The 73rd amendment establishes panchayati raj**: a system of local democracy through local councils known as *panchayats*. The amendment mandates that resources, responsibility and decision-making power be devolved from central gov-

ernment to rural grass-roots people, with elections every five years.

**The most revolutionary aspect** of the amendment is that one-third of all panchayat seats are reserved for women. Rural women — who for centuries have lived in conditions of malnutrition, illiteracy and powerlessness — are now taking leadership roles in addressing these very issues.

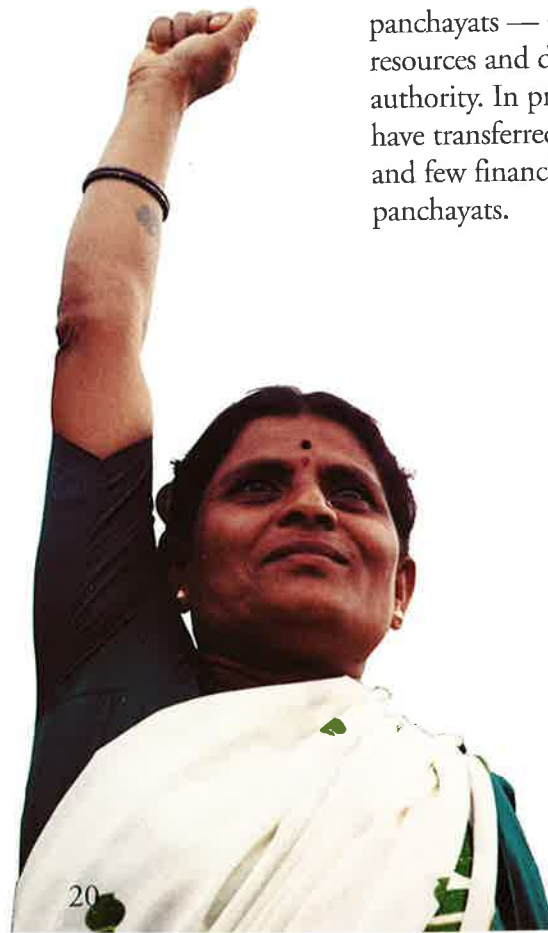
**This revolution is not going unopposed.** Social and political elites in many areas are seeking to undermine panchayati raj, which they perceive as a threat to their power and a challenge to their domination of society. The democratic process is held back by an entrenched patriarchal and feudal mind-set that insists that panchayati raj — and certainly women's leadership — will never work. The forces that oppose local democracy are the same forces that hold the subjugation of women in place.

**The destiny of the nation.** For India to build a broad-based, solid foundation for economic and social progress, it must uproot the vestiges of feudalism and instil democratic values and practices. The people who live in India's 750,000 villages must become the authors of their own lives, and women must be respected and supported as equal partners in the process of development.



# Basic Facts about Panchayati Raj

- **Tradition:** Panchayats are an ancient form of local government based on the idea that when five (*panch*) elders come together, God will be present.
- **Gram swaraj** (village self-government) was a goal of India's Freedom Movement, although it was not originally enshrined in India's 1951 constitution.
- **Until the 1960s**, panchayati raj served as the foundation for rural development in India's first two five-year plans. As bureaucratic power increased, panchayati raj was allowed to die in most states.
- **The passage of the 73rd amendment** in 1992 by the Indian parliament became part of the constitution in April 1993 after many years of national discussion and debate. The late prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, championed the rebirth of panchayati raj.
- **State action.** The amendment required every state to pass or amend its own panchayat act by April 1994, and to hold elections by April 1995.
- **A three-tiered system.** The amendment created a system of local democracy at the village level (*gram panchayat*), the block level (*panchayat samiti*, the lowest level of the government bureaucracy, encompassing 10–20 panchayats), and the district level (*zilla panchayat*, comprising 4–10 blocks).
- **Gram sabha.** To ensure that the panchayats themselves stay accountable to all the people of their constituency, they are required to hold village assemblies (*gram sabha*) several times each year, with a quorum of citizens attending.
- **Reserved seats.** The 73rd amendment reserves seats for the most powerless members of society on a revolving basis, as determined by the election commission. One-third of all seats — including one-third of all panchayat presidencies — are reserved for women. In addition, seats are reserved for members of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes proportional to their population.
- **Devolution of powers:** The “11th schedule” of the amendment specifies 29 areas of responsibility, covering all key aspects of village life, which states may transfer to the panchayats — along with sufficient resources and decision-making authority. In practice, most states have transferred very little power and few financial resources to the panchayats.



**Panchayat responsibilities.** The 11th schedule of the 73rd amendment specifies 29 areas of responsibility that states may devolve to the panchayats. Note: areas marked in bold are areas where independent observers have indicated that women bear primary responsibility.

- 1 **Agriculture, including agricultural extension**
- 2 Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation
- 3 **Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development**
- 4 **Animal husbandry, dairy and poultry**
- 5 **Fisheries**
- 6 **Social forestry and farm forestry**
- 7 **Minor forest produce**
- 8 Small scale industries, including food processing industries
- 9 Khadi (homespun cloth), village and cottage industries
- 10 Rural housing
- 11 **Drinking water**
- 12 **Fuel and fodder**
- 13 Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication
- 14 Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity
- 15 Non-conventional energy sources
- 16 **Poverty alleviation programmes**
- 17 **Education including primary and secondary schools**
- 18 Technical training and vocational education
- 19 **Adult and non-formal education**
- 20 Libraries
- 21 Cultural activities
- 22 Markets and fairs
- 23 **Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries**
- 24 **Family welfare**
- 25 **Women and child development**
- 26 **Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded**
- 27 Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes
- 28 Public distribution system
- 29 **Maintenance of community assets**



# Women as Change Agents

**T**he greatest social experiment. The historic confluence of forces taking shape in India — the awakening of women and the emerging commitment to local democracy — have led to what is unquestionably the greatest social experiment in the

world today: the transfer of decision-making power to one million elected women local government representatives.

These women are not only the beneficiaries of change — they are the key agents for change.

**Women and the Freedom Movement.** Throughout India's long struggle for independence, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men. The Freedom Movement was their movement, and the battles were their battles. In fact, it was a woman — the Rani of Jhansi — who fired the first shot that began the freedom struggle in 1857. While the women of India worked, fought and died for freedom, few

Thomas Haley/





have been able to share the fruits of that freedom. They remain subjugated, marginalized and disenfranchised, as they have been throughout history.

Today, their struggle is again the nation's struggle. Freedom for India's women means freedom for India to create a new future.

**Women face harsh opposition.** The forces of patriarchy and feudalism that oppose local democracy also resist women's assumption of leadership roles in that democracy. Women who dare to contest and win local elections are often victims of manipulation, physical attack, violence and humiliation. A mind-set of cynicism pervades India — portraying elected women representatives as puppets of men. Yet, study after study has shown that once women come into power, the overwhelming majority exercise power independently.

**Women are making a difference.** Against all odds, women in panchayati raj are already making headway in areas of immediate concern to their families and their villages. These issues, often ignored by men, range from health and sanitation to campaigns against alcoholism and domestic violence. At the dawn of this new millennium, many of the entrenched social evils that have persisted for thousands of years are beginning to change.

**Women are transforming the development agenda** to address issues critical to village life:

- *Health:* Women — who often

suffer from poor health throughout their lives — take a stand for better nutrition, sanitation facilities, safe drinking water, and access to reproductive health care essential for healthy families and communities.

- *Education:* Women organize literacy courses for other women in the community. They ensure that schools are built for children, that teachers are held accountable, and that both girls and boys attend.
- *Income generation:* Women form self-help groups and credit organizations among themselves to increase family income. Women leaders organize skills training for the women of the community.
- *Addressing social evils:* Women take action to address crucial social issues such as dowry, domestic violence, alcohol abuse, child marriage and child labour. They ensure that women know their rights and have access to information. They commit themselves to include traditionally excluded groups — the landless, scheduled castes and tribes.
- *Redefining leadership:* Women are changing the nature of leadership, incorporating values such as honesty, openness, patience, collective support, inclusion and accountability.
- *Changing village dynamics:* In even the most conservative villages, women's leadership unleashes a process of change for the whole community. Women leaders

empower other women to step out of the home, become literate and contribute to the community. They help to dissolve old prejudices, creating new partnerships with men.

### The Case of Kerala

While the state of Kerala falls below India's average in terms of traditional economic measures, it has been a pioneer in implementing panchayati raj and investing in women. For the past 30 years, it has focused heavily on education, land reform and health services — especially for young mothers. It has a strong panchayat system, and has devolved significantly more responsibility and resources to its panchayats than have other states.

This commitment has paid off in dramatic and lasting improvements in quality of life for its rural people.

Kerala has achieved a female literacy rate of 82 per cent — one of the highest in Asia. It has a life expectancy of 74 years — 15 years above the all-India average — and the lowest death rate for every age group among all Indian states. Kerala's infant mortality rate stands at 17, compared with 69 for the nation as a whole. This means that for Kerala, hunger can be said to have ended as a society-wide issue.



# Agenda for Action

**There are two major prerequisites to broad-based progress in rural India:**

- **Panchayats must become effectively responsible for all key areas of village life.**
- **Women must be empowered as key leaders in the panchayats.**

**Achieving these goals will require a sustained multi-sectoral campaign of action, producing breakthroughs in each of the following priority areas:**

## Panchayats

- **Reserved seats.** Panchayats and people's organizations must ensure that representatives serving in seats reserved for women, as well as for scheduled castes and tribes, are actively supported in attending meetings and engaging in panchayat activities.
- **Training.** All panchayat members must gain access to the training they need to carry out their responsibilities in all key areas, including panchayat finance, nutrition and health, family planning, sanitation, education and economic development.
- **Gender sensitization.** Male panchayat members and government officials must have the opportunity, through workshops and training programmes, to appreciate and become more sensitive to the importance of women's leadership and the challenges women face.

## Women Representatives

- **Leadership training.** Leadership training and ongoing support must be available for the development of the leadership skills women need and want — the ability to create a vision, to speak and listen powerfully, to build constituencies and to make things happen.
- **Literacy training.** Women panchayat leaders who cannot read when they are elected (as many as 50 per cent in some states) must have access to literacy training.
- **Networking.** Women representatives must have the opportunity to share experiences, learn lessons, and build structures of mutual support that enable them to experience themselves as part of a state, national and international network of women travelling the same path.



## Government

- **Elections.** Ensure that panchayat elections are held every five years.
- **Devolution of authority and responsibility.** Establish legislation at the state level that effectively transfers all 29 areas of responsibility to the panchayats, particularly those related to women (*see page 21*).
- **Transfer of resources.** Ensure that adequate finances are allocated to panchayats to carry out their work, and are delivered for use in a timely manner, without undue restriction or delay.
- **Political will.** Government leaders at the national and state levels must express leadership and act consistently in support of panchayati raj and devolution of power to the local level.
- **Bureaucratic support.** Officers at the national, state and district administration levels must work actively with panchayats, facilitating their access to resources and removing obstacles to their progress.
- **Access to information.** Rural people — and particularly women — must gain access to all information about the responsibilities and entitlements of panchayats. All relevant legislation, regulations and budget documents must be readily available and translated into local languages, along with straightforward information on the many government programmes to which the rural poor are entitled.
- **Judicial activism.** The judicial system must provide prompt and firm support for the full implementation of panchayati raj.
- **Avoidance of parallel structures.** Government ministries must channel decentralization strategies through the panchayats rather than creating alternative or parallel structures.

## Alliances for Advocacy and Action

- **Alliance building.** NGOs, women's groups and other civil society organizations must form vibrant and active networks and alliances dedicated to advocacy and co-ordinated, strategic action for panchayati raj and women's leadership in the panchayats.
- **Public awareness.** These alliances must create a climate of awareness and support for panchayati raj throughout all sectors of society.
- **Communication and information flow.** The alliances must facilitate effective and open communication between the government and panchayats to ensure that information about available resources, programmes and initiatives is available and fully understood.
- **A national and international spotlight.** The alliances must keep the efforts of the panchayats and women representatives visible and present on the state, national and international agendas.

## Media

- **Education and political awareness.** Media must provide thorough and ongoing coverage of the historic process of building local democracy, with particular emphasis on the rarely told story of women's successes as panchayat leaders.
- **Accountability.** Through its ongoing scrutiny and reporting, the media need to keep a spotlight on the actions of government officials in the implementation of panchayati raj.

# The Panchayati Raj Campaign

The Hunger Project in India (see page 29) is committing itself to ignite and sustain a coordinated, strategic campaign of action for women's leadership and the success of panchayati raj.

The Hunger Project is beginning this initiative in *four states* where there has been strong official support for panchayati raj: Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. It intends to expand the campaign to all 11 states where The Hunger Project works.

**Four-pronged strategy.** The Hunger Project's Panchayati Raj Campaign initially has four major components: alliance-building, leadership training, increasing media coverage and generating international support. The Hunger Project will identify additional pathways for action as the campaign unfolds.

**1: Building alliances for advocacy and action.** Women's leadership and panchayati raj are opportunities of such scale and importance that such a campaign can only be carried out by an alliance of organizations in each state committed

to this issue. The Hunger Project is working strategically to build strong and active alliances among government agencies, NGOs, self-help groups, academics and media in support of women's leadership in panchayati raj.

**2: Leadership skills training.** India is blessed with many organizations providing training to equip women panchayat leaders with key information such as the roles and responsibilities of panchayats, and details of government programmes. What appears to be missing — and what The Hunger Project is in a unique position to provide — is training in fundamental leadership skills.

Elected women representatives have grown up in an environment that tells them, day after day, that they — as women — are powerless. They have had precious few opportunities to develop their leadership skills. The Hunger Project has created a new *Women's Leadership Workshop* to enable women to have a breakthrough in their leadership skills, and to empower their leadership over time.

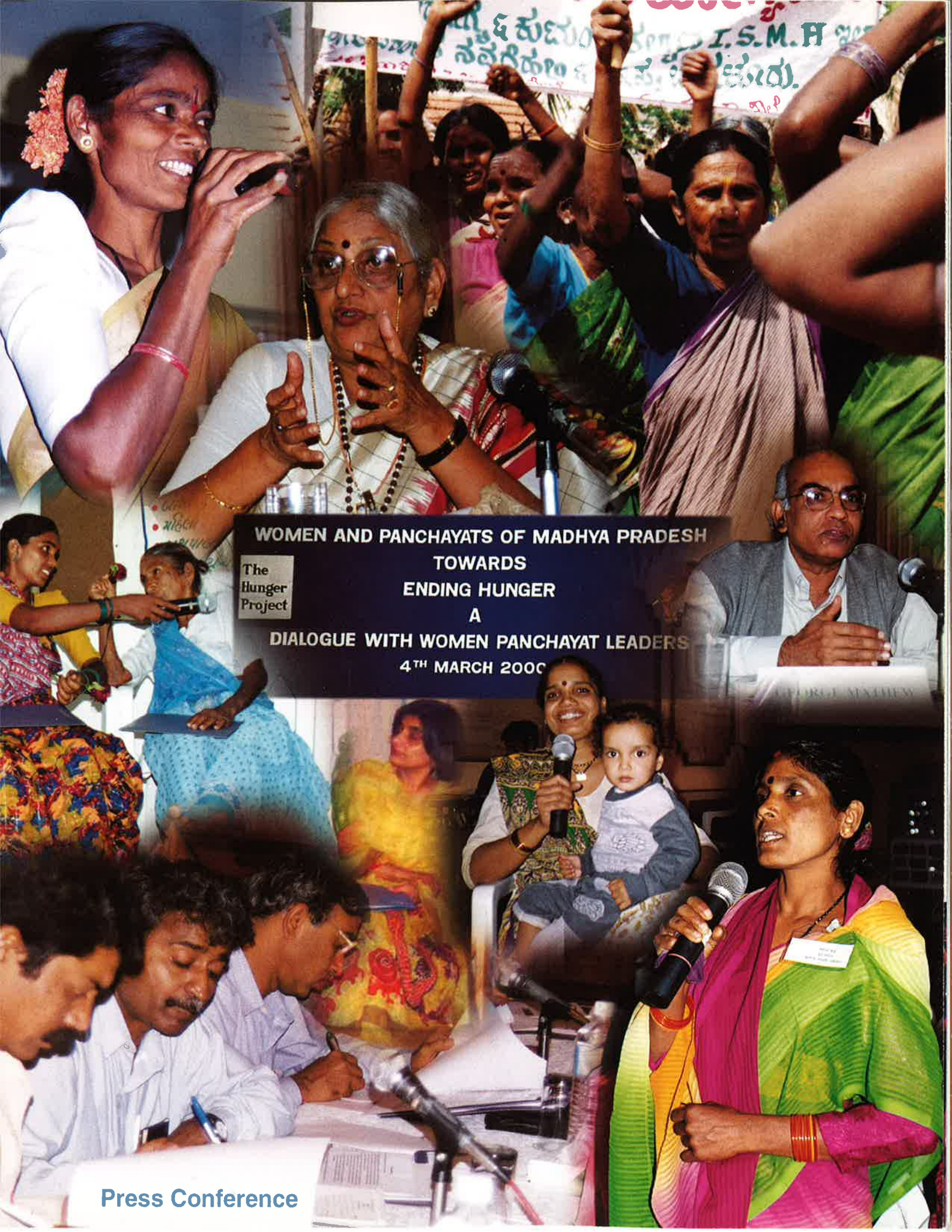
In the workshop, women discover that they possess the power to change conditions they have considered both intolerable and hope-

less. They generate their own vision for what they want to achieve, and learn how to inspire others to stand with them to achieve it. After a lifetime of doing only what they have been told, women discover their ability to create their own strategies and action plans. In the months following the training, participants come back together to support each other in achieving their goals.

**3. Increasing and improving media coverage.** The Hunger Project has held workshops and press conferences to educate reporters about the untold success stories of women in panchayati raj. To enhance and expand this effort, The Hunger Project is launching the Sarojini Naidu Prize for Best Reporting on Women in Panchayati Raj (see page 28).

**4. International support.** India's pioneering work in panchayati raj sets an important example for countries around the world. People in both developed and developing countries need to know about and maintain support for these efforts. Through strategic communications and site visits, The Hunger Project is mobilizing its global constituency to put and keep the international spotlight on this historic phenomenon.





**WOMEN AND PANCHAYATS OF MADHYA PRADESH  
TOWARDS  
ENDING HUNGER  
A  
DIALOGUE WITH WOMEN PANCHAYAT LEADERS  
4<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2000**

**The  
Hunger  
Project**

**Press Conference**





# The Sarojini Naidu Prize for Best Reporting on Women in Pa

*Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) was a poet of repute and an orator and was popularly known as the “Nightingale of India”. A close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, she was a prominent leader of the freedom movement and was president of the Indian National Congress in 1925. After independence, she became the first woman governor of an Indian state.*

**The press plays a critical role in India.** Throughout the twentieth century, India’s media have participated in the Freedom Movement, generated response to famine and disaster, and strengthened Indian democracy. India’s new constitutional commitment to women’s leadership in panchayati raj is the next unfolding of human freedom and development in India.

**It is time for the press to make another important contribution.** Only through accurate and increased coverage of the historic process of women’s participation in panchayati raj — including their battles to achieve hard-won successes — can the mind-set of cynicism be broken and the conspiracy to undermine panchayati raj be halted.

**Given the critical role of the press** in this historic process, The Hunger Project is committed to supporting and encouraging the press to energetically and prominently report the breakthroughs and success stories of women’s leadership in panchayati raj.



top left: Nehru Memorial Museum; bottom left: DPA/Vithalbai Collection/The Image Works



**The Sarojini Naidu Prize** will annually honour three journalists for outstanding reporting on women in panchayati raj. The awards will be presented in each of three categories:

- **Best English-language reporting**
- **Best Hindi-language reporting**
- **Best reporting in other languages**

**Cash award:** Each prize will include a Rs. 2 lakhs (approximately US\$5,000) cash award to enable the reporter to continue his or her work on this issue.

**October 2:** In recognition of the importance placed by Mahatma Gandhi on panchayati raj and the full participation of women in public life, the award will be presented on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday each year in New Delhi, beginning on 2 October 2001.

The prize is limited to reporting in the 11 states where The Hunger Project works: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

**The Selection Committee is chaired by Ajit Bhattacharjea, director, Press Institute of India. It also includes:**

Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, former member, National Commission for Women

N. S. Jagannathan, former editor-in-chief, *The Indian Express*

George Mathew, director, Institute of Social Sciences

Usha Rai, development journalist

Kalpana Sharma, *The Hindu*

# The Hunger Project in India

**Established in India in 1984,** The Hunger Project-India has become the nation's most widespread movement for the eradication of hunger and abject poverty. It works in 11 states that comprise 80 per cent of India's population. The Hunger Project is committed to attaining a critical threshold in India's development — the chance for all of India's people to lead a healthy and productive life, in harmony with nature. The primary indicator for this achievement will be when every state in India has an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 50 or lower.

**A strategic organization.** The end of hunger cannot be accomplished through top-down bureaucratic programmes or small-scale humanitarian projects of traditional NGOs. The Hunger Project is an entirely different kind of organization — a strategic organization, based on profound human principles and a deep understanding of the dynamics of

societal change. It applies a three-pronged strategy throughout its work:

**Mobilizing leadership.** The Hunger Project-India's initiatives are led by hundreds of India's most experienced and dedicated leaders, from all sectors and levels of society. In each of 11 states, The Hunger Project has created state councils that are responsible for catalysing the strategy to end hunger in the state. They influence government, mobilize resources and remove red-tape and other obstacles so that grass-roots action can succeed.

**Pioneering strategies.** Beginning in 1990, The Hunger Project has worked in partnership with the Planning Commission to develop a dynamic, new, people-centred methodology known as Strategic Planning-in-Action (SPIA). Using SPIA, The Hunger Project-India has pioneered more than 100 innovative





*'You would be mistaken if you thought of The Hunger Project as just another NGO. The Hunger Project is a movement, a network of hundreds of organizations and individuals committed to the creation of a new human being.'*

— Dr. V. S. Vyas, former chair, Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur

strategic initiatives — from the village level to the state level — improving the lives of millions of people and in some cases shifting the direction of large-scale government programmes.

**Empowering grass-roots self-reliant action.** The Hunger Project works with hungry people as the authors of their own development, not as beneficiaries. It empowers grass-roots people to create their own vision, design their own strategies, and take self-reliant action to improve health, education, nutrition, family income and the status of women. To demonstrate the

large-scale effectiveness of this process, The Hunger Project focuses its work in 34 districts across the country, involving more than *1,200 villages* in “*hunger-free zone*” strategies designed to enable the entire population to raise their incomes above the poverty line.





# Examples of action in 11 states

In each of the 11 states in which The Hunger Project is working, the combination of leadership development, grassroots mobilization and innovative strategies results in concrete and lasting improvements in people's lives.

**Rajasthan:** A law prevented farmers resettled near a canal from gaining bank loans to enable them to level their land and utilize the water. The Hunger Project got the law changed and trained the villagers in growing high-value seed crops.

**Uttar Pradesh:** In 121 villages of the Brahmipur Block, Gorakhpur District, local people were mobilized to build and operate 40 primary health centres, providing primary health services to all 150,000 people of the block. The programme has been so successful that it is being re-created by two other blocks in the state.

**Madhya Pradesh:** The Hunger Project works with five block-level panchayats to devise and launch new strategies for increased income through formation of self-help groups and promotion of fisheries, goat husbandry and reduction of soil erosion.

**Bihar:** The law in Bihar prevented women from forming fishing co-operatives. The Hunger Project council got the law changed, and provided training to enable women to form 60 co-operatives.

**West Bengal:** The Hunger Project, working with UNICEF and the state government, created a training programme for newly elected panchayat members on how to provide good village governance, health and education services. The state has delivered this training to more than 100,000 local leaders.

**Orissa:** The Hunger Project mobilizes agricultural experts to assist people in the poorest districts in identifying, obtaining and planting improved rice seeds. Credit is provided to enable people to diversify their production into potatoes and onions.

**Andhra Pradesh:** In five districts, The Hunger Project works with thousands of women to improve incomes, with training in mushroom cultivation, leaf-plate making, handicrafts, nutrition gardening and vermi-composting.

**Tamil Nadu:** The Hunger Project has pioneered a diverse set of new, environmentally sustainable income schemes for poor women in a programme that has now been adopted and expanded by the UN Development Programme.

**Karnataka:** By mobilizing logistical support from Escorts Ltd., The Hunger Project enabled people in the drought-prone Kolar and Tumkur Districts to desilt and repair water reservoirs (tanks) so that people could re-establish irrigated agriculture. The Hunger Project brought officials to see the success, which sparked a government commitment to desilt 20,000 tanks across the state.

**Gujarat:** A Hunger Project mobile training centre is bringing health and income-earning skills training door-to-door to 9,000 below-poverty-line families in 100 villages.

**Maharashtra:** Holistic, women-centred strategies — including formation of women's self-help groups, health camps, organic farming, watershed development and vocational training — are under way in three districts.





# The Hunger Project Around the World

**The Hunger Project** is a strategic organization and global movement committed to the sustainable end of world hunger.

**In Africa, Asia and Latin America,** The Hunger Project empowers people to create lasting progress in health, education, nutrition and family incomes. It pioneers innovative strategies, empowers grass-roots self-reliant action, and mobilizes local leadership to clear away obstacles, enabling grass-roots action to succeed. The campaign of The Hunger Project is moving forward in more than 2,000 villages across 11 developing nations.

**The final milestone.** The end of world hunger — an accomplishment once considered impossible — is now within our grasp. Humanity can and must achieve the final milestone for the end of hunger.

In recent years, tremendous progress has been made. Many of the obstacles to ending hunger have been overcome. Yet, the remaining challenges are formidable, and are deeply entrenched in the very fabric of society. Strategies to end hunger — to unleash the creativity and productivity of one billion hungry people — will succeed only when coupled with powerful strategies for social transformation.





In the era of the final milestone, humanity must address two overarching and interlinked issues. The Hunger Project is launching new initiatives to cause breakthroughs in these two areas:

- **Local democracy** — ensuring that local people have the resources and the authority to manage programmes to meet their basic needs.
- **A fundamental transformation in gender relations** — women need to be able to participate as full and equal partners in the process of development, and gain voice in the decisions that affect their lives.



**The South Asia Initiative**, of which the new strategy in India is one part, is an expression of this new era. It also includes new programmes in Bangladesh to empower grass-roots women as key change agents for the end of hunger.

In Africa, the new work of this era is the *African Woman Food Farmer Initiative*. This initiative is designed to pierce the unconsciousness surrounding the African woman food farmer, catalyse action for her economic empowerment, and transform policies and resource allocations consistent with her critical and central role for the future of Africa. Through this initiative, women food farmers are becoming economic players, decision-makers, planners and entrepreneurs, powers in their own lives and in the life of Africa.

**Investing in a new future.** Virtually all the funding of the work of The Hunger Project comes from individuals committed to partnership and solidarity with people living in the nations where hunger persists. These individuals participate not as donors but rather as investors — standing as stakeholders in creating a world free from hunger. Hunger Project investors live in 30 countries around the world. They give The Hunger Project the strength and freedom it needs to take strategic action at the cutting edge of the work of ending hunger.



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