One step at a time

Women panchayat leaders spearheading novel campaigns tell their tales...

VOICES OF COURAGE: Shashi Kiran, member, Zila Parishad, Lahaul & Spiti, H.P. receiving her award from V. Kishore Chan Deo, Union Minister for Panchayati Raj & Tribal Affairs; and (right) representatives of panchayats.

Divya Trivedi

Last year, under the command of its woman gram panchayat leader, villagers of Kodoli in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, took an oath to end discrimination against HIV positive persons.

In a country where more than a million people are afflicted with the HIV virus, this was the first time that any village had taken such a step targeted towards ending discrimination against such persons. Manisha Jayakar Gavde, sarpanch, Kodoli gram panchayat, led from the front and in order to bring the formerly hushed up issue into the limelight, organised an HIV awareness campaign during the popular Ganesh festival and announced an award. This opened the channels of communication and some people came forward with their stories. After a year of working with the community and discussing the issue publicly through Nukkad Naataks and other campaigns, people have started coming forward for medical tests. “Women in the village have shed their inhibitions and now openly talk about sex,” she says. Kolhapur is located near the national highway and counts as a high incidence area of HIV/AIDS after Mumbai, Pune, Sangli and Sholapur. In a population of 45,000, around 49 persons including a child are HIV/AIDS positive. The sensitivity of the issue required that various groups were taken on board for the campaign to be successful. “Other members of the gram panchayat, anganwadi workers, CFAR, a non governmental organisation and my family all participated in the campaigns, without whom it could not have been possible,” said Manisha. She was recently given an award for her achievement by the Institute of Social Sciences when hundreds of women panchayat members and leaders gathered in the Capital on the occasion of Women’s Political Empowerment Day. The other awardee was Puniben Chhanabhai Rajpara, sarpanch Mokasar gram panchayat, Surendranagar, Gujarat who has been elected from a general seat twice in a row. Despite taunts and sometimes downright sexist remarks from men, she has been a formidable force in her village. Water scarcity is a perennial problem in Surendranagar. To her credit, she has been instrumental in controlling the problem by building ponds, hand pumps, roads, bore wells and tanks in the village on a shared basis for the community.

“No private ownership, we don’t want feuds,” she emphasised. On many occasions, she has single-handedly walked many kilometres to reach the nearest government office and returned with requisite permissions and on one occasion returned with a water pump that she planted into the ground. She has also seen to it that there is proper implementation of the flagship schemes of the government MNREGA, Indira Awas Yojana and others. Such is her aura that even the police think twice before entering the village without her permission, she says, “Once I had to go to the police station and they asked me to give Rs 2,000. When I asked them to reconsider, they asked me for money to fund their petrol at least. I fumed and asked them if the government did not give them salaries that they had to ask money from people like me who break their chappals to visit police stations.” She has also ensured that men no longer sign documents on behalf of the women in their families. Shashi Kiran, Member Zilla Parishad, Lahaul-Spiti from Himachal Pradesh, won an award for pursuing NREGA funds for the winter months for clearing the snow and actually having them sanctioned. Winters are a harsh time in the mountains with unemployment for six months. At present, there is a 33 per cent reservation for women in the three-tier panchayat system with a few States such as Bihar, Chattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Uttarakhand having scaled up to 50 per cent representation.