



Our Health in Our Hands

Story of Women of Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatan

JMS Team

Raichur District of Karnataka is one of the 5 districts known as 'Hyderabad Karnataka' since it was ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad for over 300 years and is a backward pocket in an otherwise-projected economically developed state. The occasional cry for a separate state of 'Hyderabad Karnataka' or for a special status under article 371 of the Constitution of India indicates the political neglect and backwardness of the area. The human development index (HDI) of Raichur is low, lower than the sub-Saharan African countries. The Nizam's rule has left a lasting legacy of feudalism and many of the Dalit households are landless. Dalit women are a substantial labour force in agriculture, the main occupation.

The denial of health rights to Dalit women can be gauged by the prevalence of untouchability (segregation of wells, water sources etc.), very frequent social boycotts of Dalit women when they are appointed as cooks for

the midday meals in schools, sexual assault in the form of rape or parading them nude. The literacy rate of Raichur District is 35.96 percent (one of the lowest in the state), for SC/STs it is 21.25% (31.87% -Male and 10.61%-Female). The indicators of literacy, maternal mortality and gender-related indices reveal the gloomy story of the political economy of the determinants of Dalit women's health.

JMS evolves

In this context of general backwardness of the area and the socio-cultural oppression of Dalits, and the triple suppression of Dalit women as agricultural labourers, as Dalits and as Dalit women, the work of Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatan (JMS) evolved. JMS is a collective of Dalit women agricultural labourers struggling for their social, political, and economic rights. JMS strives towards being a symbol of empowerment of rural women through mobilization for respect, basic rights and dignified existence

while simultaneously promoting initiatives for economic self-reliance.

Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatan (JMS), which began in 1999, has now grown into a collective owned by the women themselves. It is organized through its basic village units wherein women agricultural labourers are mobilized in the village as *Sanghas*. The *Sanghas* are actively involved in micro-credit, ensuring access to facilities from the state, resisting acts of violence within homes and the larger community, and perspective-building on various issues. These 50 *Sanghas* in 50 villages in the Talukas of Sindhanur and Manvi collectively comprise the constituency of JMS which draws



Community Health Workers preparing herbal remedies

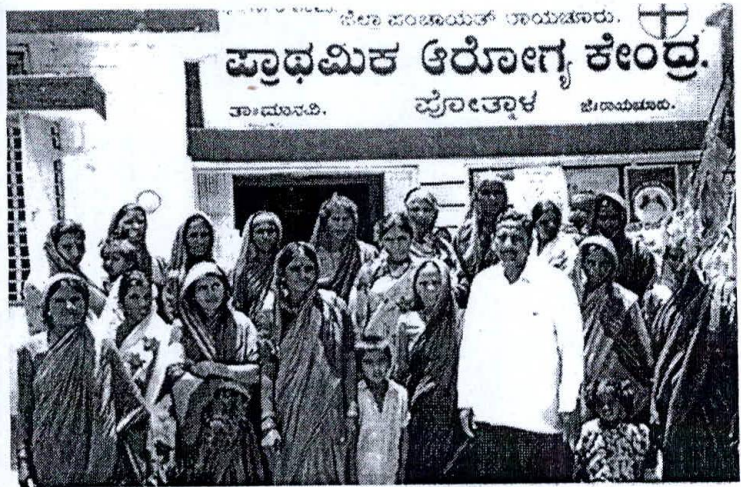
its decision-making body from 2 representatives from each village, called as Karyakarthis. The Karyakarthis meet monthly and determine collectively on decisions regarding the direction and completion of the work. Ten women who grew as leaders in the process of capacity-building are now in charge of the villages and are working full time as 'sanchalakis' (conveners).

In building the collective of women for their dignity, 'Sangharsh' — building of a healthy community and 'well-being' through struggle for dignity and social justice, and 'Navnirman' — reconstructive efforts for a life with dignity formed two pillars of the strategy adopted by JMS.

Sangharsh — struggles and campaigns

Revitalize the Public Distribution System: The Public Distribution system was plagued with issues of corruption, siphoning off of food materials and kerosene, bogus cards, tampered weights and measures, and the practice of untouchability. JMS undertook a detailed survey of the PDS stock in 20 fair price shops of their own areas and had dialogue with shop owners demanding accountability and transparency from them. The results of the survey was submitted to the food inspectors at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Raichur. Women went from village to village, distributing pamphlets, posters, writing on walls, making jeep announcements, and singing songs with social messages. In each village, public meetings and local agitations were held to check corrupt practices and make the system accountable. It was through this campaign that the public became aware and got sensitized to their rights.

Right to Work – Campaign for the effective implementation of NREGS: Raichur was one of the pilot districts for implementation of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). Since 2004, JMS has been part of the collective engaged in mass action in the district demanding effective implementation of NREG Scheme. JMS has spread the message of the various rules and regulations regarding NREGA, facilitated the registering of accounts of labourers in banks and getting labour identity cards for members of our Sanghatan. The women went on hunger strike in front of the District Commissioner's office for 3 days forcing the administration to take action.



Sanchalakis of JMS dialoguing with the Medical Officer of PHC

Campaign for Revitalizing Primary Health Centres:

In spite of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), the status of the PHCs in Raichur — shortage of staff, the crumbling or non-existent infrastructure, lack of basic facilities to the staff, shortage of medicines, and corruption all existed as it were. JMS studied the PHCs and became part of the collective action at the District level through the district forums of the Jana Arogya Andolana Karnataka (JAAK - Karnataka Chapter of People's Health Movement). They also participated in the state-level meeting of JAAK and met with the Director of State Health Services, Karnataka. The issues found in the surveys of PHCs and sub-centres were submitted to the Director.

They are part of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) and have participated in national rallies in solidarity against anti poor and anti development policies.

Navnirman – Creative Reconstruction

Education for Social Transformation: Chilipili School – a school that breaks myths: A large number of children in Raichur are out of school due to a number of factors- including the children of the women in JMS. Many of them were child labourers in the farms of the landlords. A school for these children named 'Chilipili Child Labourers' Special School', was started. The school used the pedagogy of conscientising education of Paulo Freire, creating opportunities for training and mainstreaming children from the villages. The school was shifted from village to village every two years so that all children are benefited. This has been recognized as one of the model schools in the district by the National Child Labour Project and has been converted as residential schools.

The teaching methodology attempts to instill creative expression and a questioning mind among children. Teaching material and content was developed keeping in mind that these children have had rich life experience, language skills and tremendous knowledge of the natural environment. Therefore, teachers start with what the children already know and then explain concepts through their own life contexts. Since 2000, about 300 children have been mainstreamed in the government schools, some of them pursuing their graduate studies. Their progress has challenged the bias that the Dalit children have no capacity to study and the children have redefined and redesigned education as education for life.

Our health in our hands – an experiment with 'Barefoot Doctors' in Primary Health Care: Sixteen women from 7 different villages volunteered as community health workers. In the last 6 years, they have been extensively trained on health—knowing their own bodies, knowing illness and factors causing illness, the use of herbal medicines for common ailments, preventive health and understanding gender dimensions of health. They started by building herbal gardens in villages, preparing herbal medicines and sensitizing the women about the connection between nutrition, hygiene and health. Using the slogan “Our Health in our Hands” the Aarogya Karyakarathas have become healers for their community. They run a clinic during the weekly village market day in Pothnal Village to counsel and heal people with illness. The weekly clinic is very popular among the poor — on an average, every year 3000 people access these services.

Menstrual issues like white discharge, irregular menstruation, vitiligo, kidney stones, gastric issues, ulcer, jaundice etc are treated effectively using herbal medicines. The women also exhibit and sell their herbal products in various exhibitions. The products include pain oil, skin oil, aloe-vera oil for hair, choornam for cough / respiratory problems, aloe-vera tonic for anemia and medicine for paralysis/stroke.

Sustained Livelihoods and Chirugu Enterprise: As agricultural work is very unpredictable and provides very little income, the landless labourers invariably fall into debt and migrate to survive and earn more money. The migration alienates them further leading to a vicious cycle of debt. To tide this crisis, certain skill-building and enterprising ventures were initiated to fetch

supplementary income and sustain livelihoods and hopefully prevent migration of the Dalit households.

Terracotta Unit :Over the course of the past 4 years, 24 women from 2 villages (Pothnal and Amreshwar Camp) have developed their artistic and creative skills to create an entire brand of Chiguru terracotta jewellery and home decorations. For the women in the unit, terracotta jewellery making provides a stable income of Rs 50/day year round. The otherwise socially excluded women feel their dignity reaffirmed through this creative expression of theirs. They were trained by professional terracotta artists with focus on developing strategies for the unit to use their art to promote community responsibility. The Chirugu unit has been part of Dastkar network and has been participating in exhibitions all over the country. The terracotta products range from ear pendants, wall hangings, necklaces, bracelets and door curtains.

Bio Fertilizer (Neem) Unit :The Jhansi Rani Mahila Sangha of Muddanaguddi village, started the production of neem fertilizer from neem seeds collected during the lean summer season. The unit of 20 women produce about 50 tonnes of unadulterated neem fertilizer which is supplied to the Organic Farming Association of Karnataka and to various other groups. The unit was awarded '*the Citigroup/UNDP 2005 Micro Entrepreneur Award*' for southern India — a certificate and a cash award of Rs. 2 lakhs by Shri Kamal Nath, Union Minister for Commerce and Industries in New Delhi. This unit is completely managed by women including raising finances, keeping accounts, planning and coordinating.

Organic Farming and Land Development: Dalits have such an intricate relationship with the soil and land on which they till—at the same time they are denied ownership of land. A Dalit man or woman feels dignified to own a piece of land to work on it. The government distributed fallow and uncultivable land to the Dalits. JMS identified about 100 acres of land of 45 Dalit households across 4 villages for land development: to improve the quality of the land through organic farming. The community has organized and is quite enthused to take this work forward. ■

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