

# Ashankur

## Empowering Rural Women



### Case Study: Self-Help Group at Gujarwadi

Gujarwadi is one of the villages where Ashankur started working with women four years ago. It consists of 1100 people. The village leaders had invited Ashankur to organize women. The first meeting was held in the evening on open ground in front of one house. Around 25 women attended the meeting. All sat backing me. We tried to dialogue with them. With much difficulty two women spoke. They said they are not used to talking in public so they would meet me in their houses. We were a bit nervous and did not know how to make head way to the work in this village. In following days we started visiting families and for couple of times we stayed overnight in the village. We learnt a few facts.

There was a big gap between the landlords and the labourers. Just 8 families own most of the land of the village and rest of the people have very small share or are labourers on these fields. When in need they borrow money from the money lender at the rate of 15% to 20% interest a month. And most of them are still burdened by this loan. Women if ever had gone out of the village it was only for a big feast when they

are supposed to visit their brothers or to visit particular religious centre. Most of these women are uneducated. Young girl when come to puberty is asked to discontinue the school and parents would look for a boy to get her engaged. No proper sanitation in the village. Most of the women looked anaemic.

After building good rapport with them we started speaking to them about the concept of SHG. Some showed willingness; some were hesitant and frightened of what their husbands would say. Slowly 11 women were ready to try out the scheme. We started visiting every 15 days to guide them. They had to hear many adverse remarks from other women as well some of the family members, but they sustained. They began to speak to others about the importance of coming together and saving. After 8 months another two groups of 15 women were formed. The village has strong caste system and one of the three groups is from lower caste. At initial stage it was really hard to get them to sit together for meeting. Sensing the tension we planed strategies to help lower caste women to grow in self esteem and to make upper caste women understand the plight of these women.

It was a difficult task however, it was a process.. After much struggle over a period of one and half year there was some acceptance of each other. Meanwhile the internal loan system among the SHG women got operational, so the men folk of the family began to see the benefits and more women wanted to take part in the program. At the end of two years 11 SHG groups were formed (160 women). The groups were made aware about their own potential and were given the knowledge about government schemes. They were exposed to different government offices. Slowly they began to recognize their own / village resources as well the needs of village.

With great enthusiasm these women participated in government health and sanitation programs. They implemented organic farming, planted trees, cultivated kitchen gardens, fought with government for proper teachers in the primary school,

organized youth and built family toilets. Many of them bought cows with the group money and have improved economic status of the family. Once a month they get together to clean the village irrespective of any caste. Moreover, the village has made a decision that no girl below the age 18 will marry.

Similar kinds of interventions are done in 22 villages of Ahmednagar District. Women are interconnected by village leaders. It's a network of 5500 women. These women now perceive their society differently than they did 5 years ago and the society also has begun to recognize their worth. It is a testimony to women's power and potential. It just shows that if women are organized and are made aware of their potentials they can build a better society.

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