

CASE STUDY

No. 1

Villagers are my source of motivation



When I first met Ashren Kerketta, she greeted me with a handshake. Even if Arshen Kerketta is Mukhiya of the Kunjuba Gram Panchayat of Simdega district in Jharkhand. Kerkatta's qualities of leadership are as strong as the hand she grips mine with, evident from the fact that she has been elected to her post for the proof second term.

It was around 2.30 pm by the time the Tuesday meeting of Mukhiyas at the Block Office, presided over by the Block Development Officer, Dinesh Kumar, wound up. We went to the Panchayat Office where Ashren Kerketta introduced herself as the widow of an inspector. Her husband expired in 2010 leaving behind Ashren Kerkatta and their two children. It is to her credit that the elder child is today a civil engineer and the younger one is pursuing his graduation in B.Com.

NAME: Ashren Kerketta
AGE: 50 Years
EDUCATION: Intermediate & Teacher Training
MUKHIYA: Since 2010 (2nd term)
PAST EXPERIENCE: Worked as Mukhiya during 2010 – 2015

Just after her husband died in 2010, elections were being held at her panchayat and her brother-in-law and people around her suggested she stand in contest. She would have work, at least, and more importantly, an income to bolster what little she got by way of her husband's pension, to support herself and her sons' education. She took their advice, contested from an open seat, and won the election.

She told me that her first tenure as Mukhiya, she had to stretch the funds allotted to her for development of her panchayat, a task she worked hard at. In those early days of her tenure, too, she was yet to learn the ways and means of accomplishing her objective. But she succeeded in addressing an important issue: the provision of potable drinking water. In coordination with the Panchayat and Block Offices, she had a water tank constructed.



Community water tank constructed during first tenure of Ashren Kerketta

PANCHAYAT: Kunjuba
PANCHAYAT SAMITI: Kersai
DISTRICT: Simdega
STATE: Jharkhand

Another issue confronted her: the prevalence of alcoholism amongst men. Needless to say, while she went about her job of preventing it, these were the men—resentful of her interference—who leered and jeered at her. Others, too, failed to see that a Mukhiya's power lies in pointing out the needs of her people, not to execute the remedies. So, when a project failed to take off, she had to bear with negative comments made in her hearing. But she ignored them and struggled on.

She had not been willing to contest for the second time due to her sense of responsibility to people in her household—her nephew, her father-in-law and her children who stay far from home. However, on the insistence of the ward members, she agreed to contest the election for the second time, in 2015. The trust and support she had earned from the villagers in her first tenure helped her to win yet again.

One reason for her popularity could be that she makes it a point to be available whenever villagers bring their problems to her, an insight she shared with me as we spoke together. Sometimes, she added, there were cases of conflict, when the police were required to be called in. In this, her second term in office, she plans to work towards the well-being of the elderly and needy.

Trainings received and challenges faced

The most recent training Ashren Kerketta received was between July to October 2016 at SIRD (State Institute of Rural Development) Ranchi, on developing a panchayat, maintenance of records, checking of documents, and understanding government schemes. She insisted that there should be such trainings at regular intervals so that the Mukhiyas would remain updated on information that they could then apply to their field of work. She also underwent 2 sessions of training at SIRD, and one more training at another place she doesn't remember the name of. For the training, she sometimes goes alone, and sometimes with other Mukhiyas of Kersai Block.



A drainage system constructed in Karenjoba Gram Panchayat

Having completed her Intermediate, Ashren Kerketta informed me, she did the Teachers Training Course, which helped her to speak to an audience with confidence. After her marriage, she lived in different cities such as Hyderabad and Jamshedpur, wherever her husband was posted, during which times she actively involved herself in various social and cultural activities. This helped her to develop her interpersonal skills. Ashren Kerketta also used to be a member of the Youth Congress when she was in high school, which helped her to understand the nitty-gritties of leadership

During the last one year Ashren Kerketta has been able to construct nearly 100 toilets and a drainage system with the support of the Gram Panchayat—a feat in itself. Under the current central government, there has been emphasis on children going to school and, therefore, ward members and school committees are making sure to attract more children. She wants to display a profile of her panchayat—number of households, funds available to them under BPL (Below Poverty Line) and other such vital information—at the Panchayat Office and make it an informative example to others.

A major concern for the villagers of Kunjuba is the absence of a bridge over a nearby river that would connect them to the other villages, markets and services. Sometimes, when people ford this river, especially during the monsoons, they taunt Ashren Kerketta, saying, 'Do baar mukhiya ban gai magar pool na bana payi (Twice a leader, but she hasn't yet got us a bridge)'. She said that she had included the bridge in the village plan but it was not passed, so she has to quietly ignore these jibes as well. But she hasn't given up, she said, she is exploring ways to build the bridge.

Promotion of Participatory Planning in Kunjuba

Ashren Kerketta informed me that the GPDP (Gram Panchayat Development Plan) was carried out in the village. She herself tells or gives notice each time to ward members 10 days prior to the commencement of the Gram Sabha on GPDP, so that the maximum public can be covered. A meeting is held, signatures of attendees are taken and recorded. Individuals and groups such as Ward Members, the Panchayat Sewak and Rozgar Sewak, address the meeting. Issues are discussed in the Gram Sabha and documented in a register. She ensured that all the voices and needs of people are heard. A register is maintained and kept at the Panchayat office. GPDP plan has been submitted to DC (Deputy Commissioner) office, BDO (Block Development Officer) office and panchayat office.

There are around thirteen SHGs (Self Help Groups) in the panchayat of which one SHG is running a ration shop. Some of the SHG members in the panchayat received training on making pickles, soaps and detergents, but due to lack of motivation and proper infrastructure, the scheme did not capitalize into benefits. Some of the SHGs do intra-loaning to meet their daily needs or engage small businesses. With regard to MGNREGS [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act], according to Ashren Kerketta, had the payments of MGNREGA been done on time, it would have stopped migration of villagers to a good extent. She also stated that she wanted some knowledge and assistance to be given on modes of livelihood to the youth of her panchayat, so that they become productive and engaged in their work, rather than idle away their time and develop bad habits.