

Women with a 'HEALTHY' ATTITUDE

A television programme has inspired women in Chhattisgarh to start a movement for health awareness in villages, writes **Swapna Majumdar**

IN KUNRA, a small village in Raipur district of Chhattisgarh, a group of women were so inspired by *Kalyani*, a bi-weekly television programme on health produced by Doordarshan, that they decided to get together to tackle illness and disease in their village. But they didn't know how to go about it. So they approached the programme producer, who gave them the idea of forming a Kalyani Club.

In 2006, four years after the club was started in the village, the number of diarrhoea cases has declined. The incidence of malaria is on the back foot and more children are brought in for polio and other vaccinations regularly.

"We did this because we wanted our children to grow up in a healthy environment. There hasn't been a single case of malaria in the village for the past two years and even officials of our community health centre have publicly admitted that it wouldn't have been possible without the Kalyani Club," says a proud Suniti Sahu, 35, president of Kunra Kalyani Club.

When women of the neighbouring villages heard about how the Kalyani Club had encouraged development and improved health indicators, they, too, were galvanised into forming similar clubs. So far, 300 clubs, each with a membership of at least 25 women, have been formed in the 16 districts of Chhattisgarh.

"The clubs have become an integral part of the lives of women in this area. It is really exciting to see how they have become catalysts of change," says Usha Bhasin, concept and series director of *Kalyani*.

Kalyani, which means "benedictions from a Goddess", is broadcast in nine states to create health awareness about malaria, tuberculosis, tobacco, reproductive health, sanitation, hygiene and HIV/AIDS. The programme is produced in

partnership with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Family Welfare and the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO).

Bhasin, who heads the development communication division of Doordarshan, says the objective of forming Kalyani clubs was to give a platform to women, particularly those who had never stepped out of their homes, to participate in the process of development. "The concept of Kalyani clubs was part of the communication strategy of the *Kalyani* programme that was started in 2002. We know that as a medium we can enter into the houses of people but we need support to sustain the messages. It was important to have partners in the field to keep hammering the health messages and the women of the Kalyani clubs have done that in their own innovative ways," she points out.

A novel tactic adopted by Sunita Vishwakarma, 28, president of Kalyani Club in Raveli village in Durg district, was to get the health messages printed on the cover of ration cards. "All our members are housewives like me and use ration cards. So it was a simple and effective way of getting everyone in the house to see the messages," she reveals.

Vishwakarma, however, did not stop at ration cards. Having heard on the programme that her district had the highest prevalence of HIV in the state, the club members knew they had to stop families from following the traditional practice of tattooing. They knew it would be difficult but went from door-to-door explaining how HIV could be transmitted through unsterilised needles used for tattooing. It took several months and repeated visits before the practice was discontinued. "It was a major achievement for us. We were able to inform them about HIV and AIDS without creating



SAFE ADVICE: A Kalyani Club member educates village women in Chhattisgarh on health issues

stigma," adds Vishwakarma.

Kalyani clubs have also been effective in ensuring that special care is given to pregnant and lactating mothers. There has been a decrease in infant and maternal mortality across the state thanks to their efforts. Club members have persuaded nurses at the primary health care centre to pay special attention and get women to opt for institutional deliveries.

In fact, according to the current national family health survey-3 (NFHS-3), in Chhattisgarh, mothers who had at least three antenatal visits for their last birth has increased to 54.7 per cent from 33.2 per cent (NFHS-2), while institutional births increased from 13.8 (NFHS-2) to 15.7 per cent. This assumes significance given that the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in Chhattisgarh is 379 as compared to the national figure of 301 and infant mortality rate (IMR)

is 61 compared to the national figure of 57 per 1,000 live births (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2007).

Although all the credit for these figures cannot be given to Kalyani clubs, some part of it can certainly be attributed to them, says Pradeep Pathak, producer of *Kalyani*, Raipur Doordarshan. This is because at least one member of the Kalyani club is a *mitanin*, or community health worker.

In Kandarka village Kalyani Club members are given respect equivalent to that given to medical doctors. When Deepmala, 24, was in a dilemma over whether or not she should try for a son, she sought the advice of Kalyani Club members. Her belief in the club grew when her grandmother-in-law Bhanuvati Vishwakarma, 70, told her to go in for an operation, after the birth of her second daughter.

Dhaneshwari Thakur, 21, an agricultural labourer in Raveli village says that if it wasn't for the persistence of Kalyani club members who ensured timely vaccinations during her second pregnancy, she may not have been able to deliver a healthy child.

According to the NFHS-3, the percentage of fully immunised children has doubled in the past five years, increasing to 48.7 per cent from 21.8 per cent (NFHS-2). The number of children (under three years) breastfed within one hour of birth has also registered an increase: from 21.6 per cent to 24.5 per cent.

Whether it is in villages plagued by internal strife, like Datedwada, or underdeveloped villages, like Bastar, Kalyani clubs are transforming lives. Today, over 10,000 women are using the Kalyani Club platform to anchor change in the state. — WFS