



Readers' Forum



The *Tais* of Purandhar



Manu Kulkarni

Purandhar is a typically sleepy-seeming valley of 13 *gram panchayats* in the foothills of Maharashtra's Pune district. Visit it, however, and you will encounter a dynamic group of local women – the *tais*, the sisters, as they are known in Marathi, hard at work promoting good health at little or no cost across Purandhar's villages. On average, a *tai* provides intensive health services to a population of around 250 to 300 in her neighbourhood. Yet, she is also a friend who looks after her community as though it were her extended family.

The *tais* are part of a project run by the Pune-based Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH), an organisation that aims to generate and train a cadre of grassroots village health-workers as part of an alternative system of health and medical care. The *tais* have all received training and are accredited by the National Open School under its certificate courses for *Gram Sakhis* and *Sahyoginis* – the content for which has been formulated by the FRCH. The FRCH

takes its inspiration from its Director, Dr. Noshir H. Antia, a plastic surgeon in his seventies who left a highly-paid practice to help the rural poor. Under his working philosophy, the FRCH seeks to demystify medicine and treat illness not simply as a medical problem but as a crisis of poverty and destitution, a problem whose solution must draw from the community's own resources, rather from dependence on external help. In choosing its *tais*, therefore, the FRCH looks for women who are permanent residents of their village and who enjoy community acceptance and the support of their families. They seek out women with a strong desire to serve their community, who possess good social skills and can devote sufficient time for training and work.

Nirmala *tai*, who is in her forties and is educated up to the 5th standard, shows us her medical bag with its stethoscope, blood pressure testing apparatus, thermometer and an assortment of pills, herbs and roots. We watch her diagnosing a female patient, explaining the problem and handing out the appropriate medication. Her consultation fee is Rs.10 and her confidence would be the envy of many an MBBS.

The effectiveness of the village *tai* as opposed to the services provided by the Health Department's Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) scheme is evidenced by the nickname the ANMs have earned for themselves

– the *Aati Nahin* Midwives, the midwives who never arrive. In Purandhar's Parinche village, *Tai* Pushpa Jadhav showed us how she clarifies doubts about complicated deliveries, conferencing long-distance over a wireless set with doctors in the FRCH health centre. We met her later at a training session for a group of *tais*, where she was asked how she would differentiate between a leader and a manager. Prompt came her humorous observation that a manager is only a *naukar*, a servant, who watches the clock, waiting for the first opportunity to leave his desk. A leader, on the other hand, is a person who looks beyond today and thinks of tomorrow and the day after as well. Leaders, she went on to say, should be like mango trees, providing good shade, allowing people to enjoy their fruit, and yet also expecting to be occasionally pelted!

The *tais* of Purandhar, however, have not restricted themselves to only being health-workers. Instead they have truly emerged as trusted friends of the village *panchayats*. Their role has expanded to providing assistance in areas as



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diverse as land relations, thrift and savings, animal health, education and the empowerment of village folk. One *tai* has organised a self-help group of several women who have taken up the production of vermicelli, to be sold in Pune's hotels, as part of an income-generation project. Globalisation has even fired the imagination of young entrepreneurs in the Purandhar valley who have taken up cut-flower production under green-house conditions with an eye to the export market.

Dr Antia's efforts in making the village *panchayat* the primary agency for promoting rural health are well-founded, given that the village *panchayat* is the last tier of India's governance structure and the ultimate guardian of the health and well-being of our villages. Sustaining this effort, however, is critical, not only for the social body as a whole, but also for the *tais* themselves who, through the FRCH programme, have come into their own as empowered members of their communities.

Manu Kulkarni, Bangalore

Uphill All the Way

The Women's Reservation Bill – should it come or not? Will it work or not? Is it worth it or not? Parliament

sessions boycotted. A hundred and one questions raised. Why should women be given reservations? Aren't they capable of getting seats for themselves? Surely gender equality holds good even in this case. Women should also contest and win seats on their own merit, without special privileges.

The arguments go on and on. What we tend to forget is that when doors for women are closed, a mere knock is insufficient – the doors must be broken open. Women excel in medicine and engineering, where gender never becomes an issue. Only merit matters in these professions. But in Indian politics, the iron gates are strong. One can break them open only if there are special privileges.

Udupi, a coastal district of southern Karnataka, is developing fast but no faster than its buses. If we were to compare the local Udupi bus to our Parliament, the situation would perhaps look like this. The driver and the conductor are, respectively, the speaker and vice-speaker. In this system, we have just two parties: men and women. The issue is reservation. Unlike in Parliament, however, women can't register opposition by "staging a walk-out", for then the very purpose of boarding the bus would be

defeated. One boards a bus to avoid walking out; it's as simple as that.

Buses here have provided women with reservations – another point of departure from the Indian Parliament. "*Chalakane hindeya 4 seatagalu hengaserige aarkashita vagidhe*" (the first four seats behind the driver are reserved for women) is the notification in Kannada, written in all buses.

In cities like Madras and Bangalore, men are compulsorily asked to leave the front entrance free for women and to vacate "ladies' seats" every time they "unknowingly" occupy them. People in Udupi, however, don't give a hoot. Men continue to flock the front door and make a beeline for seats reserved for women. Women's seats simply do not belong to them. They hardly protest for, pacifists by choice, they decline to become activists by chance.

It is a pathetic situation. Even when women are given rights, they are unable to make use of them. Women still have to fight for rights that are their own. Rights that they should have enjoyed as a matter of course. Rights, instead, that they have struggled to claim. Be it in Parliament or in the local bus. Reservation or no reservation, nothing impacts the fight for the seat.

Deepa Ballal, Udupi □