

Daring to Be the Change

Ms. Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)

When residents of Patahi block in East Champaran district of the Indian state of Bihar see Anita Lakra, they feel reassured. They know that come rain or shine, Anita, an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM), will come to help them. What has endeared Anita to the community is her courage to brave not just the vagaries of weather and the rugged, difficult terrain that she traverses every day for work but also the Naxals. The area is affected by internal conflict and school teachers, government functionaries and even students prefer to stay at home rather than risk confrontation with the Naxals. But Anita has never missed a day of duty. Every day she is out at 8 am on her cycle to visit the eight anganwadi centers (rural child care centres in India) under her area of work to give pregnant women tetanus shots and iron tablets. She also gives information and advice about remaining healthy and helps immunize their children.

Just as everyone knows the 42-year-old tribal health worker, Anita too knows almost every family. So, she does not hesitate even when she receives desperate calls late at night. Such is her reputation for saving lives that she has never been stopped or threatened by the Naxals so far. Her popularity among the community is so high that when she was promoted and posted to a primary health centre in another block, over 100 residents wrote a letter to the authorities to revoke her transfer. This was the first time such a demand was made. Fortunately for the community, Anita's transfer was cancelled.

But it was not always like this. When Anita first started working as an ANM, she faced some opposition from the community. It took her time to understand the work and gain the trust of the community. She also had to learn to cycle because the distance between the health centre where she has to report every day is 12 kilometers from her home and each of the eight anganwadi centers are two to three kilometers apart.

Anita has also learnt how to give injections, drips and stop the bleeding of a pregnant woman. She has even done mouth-to-mouth resuscitation of babies. Her commitment to saving lives has made her a hero in the village. Earlier, she would do deliveries at home. But now she encourages institutional deliveries. But if there is no doctor or there is an emergency, Anita assists in home births and this is also why pregnant women depend on her. In fact, the block faces irregular power supply

and it was because of Anita's expertise that she was able to save both mother and child in one such emergency with the help of torch light.

One of the issues that Anita has handled sensitively is raising awareness about family planning. Talking about contraception or advising women to plan their families is difficult in a state where women have little power of negotiation over their bodies. But Anita has adopted a good strategy. She advises pregnant women to eat nutritious food, rich in iron, so that their babies are healthy and they have safe deliveries. She tells them that this way there will be less neonatal and infant mortality and families will not need to have more children. Anita explains the advantage of having smaller but healthier families and distributes oral contraception pills. Though family sizes are still large, there is greater awareness about family planning today, she says.

This is also because she reiterates the message on the maternal and child health day at the anganwadis. When pregnant women and children come to the anganwadis on this day, she discusses their health as she administers vaccines, weighs the babies and treats them for minor ailments. This way, women do not feel shy in speaking openly about their sexual and reproductive health issues.

After attending various training sessions to upgrade her skills, Anita is now earning well and has bought her own cycle and a scooter. She has become an agent of change in the rural health scenario and has become an inspiration for girls and women in the community.



A happy mother with her healthy children thanks to ANM Anita