



# AGAINST ALL ODDS

*At a young age of 22, she had the guts to challenge a social norm and save a girl from child marriage. Saraswati Devi, Resource Person, Godda, is dedicated to eradicate child/early marriage and promote girls' education in her region*

If you walk by the lanes of Jamani Paharpur village in Godda district, Jharkhand, you may cross path with a short, young woman doing rounds on her blue scooter. Don't mistake her thin frame and shy smile as timidity. For she is a symbol of grit determination, a role model for many young girls and a change agent in her community.

Saraswati Devi, a young 24-year-old lady, is mother of two sons (aged 6 and 3). It's tough to believe that she is the same woman who stood against everyone in her village, including her own family, to avert child marriage of a 12-year-old girl two years ago. Her multiple acts of fearlessness and dedication towards the cause of adolescent girls have enabled her to climb up leadership ladder from an Active Woman to Resource Person under Project Umang.

Project Umang is being implemented by JSLPS in partnership with PCI India at Jamtara & Godda districts in Jharkhand for reducing the prevalence of child/early/forced marriage (CEFM) through promoting girls' education. Saraswati has been associated with the Project since its initiation in 2019 under various capacities.

## Up for a Cause

During 2021, she was working as an Active Woman whereby she was responsible for managing 17 out of total 48 Self-Help Groups (SHGs)<sup>1</sup> in her village - Jamani Paharpur. Her role involved ensuring active participation of members during SHG meetings & conducting Umang sessions during these meetings. One of the SHGs under her was 'Maa Durga Mahila Mandal', in which a member, Baby Devi, was planning to marry off her daughter, Neetu Kumari (12-year-old, grade 6 student then).

On hearing this, Saraswati's initial reaction was to counsel the mother against the ill effects of CEFM. "I told her how Neetu's childhood would be ruined this way. I reminded her of our own sufferings as young brides and the tough times we had gone

through," says Saraswati. Being a part of Project Umang, Saraswati had become aware about the adverse effects of CEFM and was driven for the cause. She reminded Baby Devi about the key learning from Umang sessions about a mother's role in averting child marriage by negotiations at family level.

"However, to my disappointment, my initial counselling miserably failed as within a week the family went ahead to fix Neetu's marriage," recalls Saraswati. As a next step, she visited Neetu's home, where she tried to convince her father, Phuchhu Kevat (45-year-old fish seller) to stop the marriage. On the contrary, he turned away her unsolicited advice.

For a family stuck with poverty, getting the daughter married early meant one member less to feed. For decades, child marriage has remained a social norm in the village, where community members prefer to marry off daughters early lest they marry off of their own choice after growing up or elope with someone, thus disgracing the family. Hence, Neetu's family was unable to look beyond the norm. Rather, it mistook Saraswati's concern as a hindrance to their decision.

Saraswati didn't give up though. She kept requesting the parents to change their decision. But resistance against her efforts grew stronger and one day Neetu's family walked up to her home and accused her of interfering in their family matter. "They had a heated argument with my in-laws. So much so that my family and neighbours suggested that probably I had overstretched the matter and I should let it go," says Saraswati.

## Moment of Realisation

"That was the moment where I felt completely isolated. As if I was standing against an entire community. Strangely, this isolation didn't scare me," recalls Saraswati. "Taking a step back then wasn't possible as this would have conveyed wrong message

1] Project Umang is designed on the three-layer SHG structure comprising SHGs, Village Organisation (VO) & Cluster Level Federation (CLF). It capacitates SHG women (many of whom are also mothers of adolescent daughters) for improving the lives of girls.



Saraswati Devi with Neetu, who is in grade 9 now & aspires to pursue higher education

to the community. So, I fought back with more vigour,” she adds. Saraswati mustered up the courage to visit Neetu’s family again but was turned away. She then tried to contact prospective groom’s family, who lived in Deoghar (70 km away from Jamani) and warned them against legal repercussions of CEFM. It took three months of consistent efforts by Saraswati with support from team Umang before the wedding was called off. “I am so grateful to Project Umang for placing trust in me and supporting me throughout. This incident has boosted my self-confidence to avert cases of child marriage,” says Saraswati.

This has given Neetu a chance to continue her education. She will be promoted to grade 9 this April and wants to pursue higher education ahead. Saraswati notices an attitudinal shift at household and community levels that has been facilitated by Project Umang. Baby Devi now supports her daughter’s educational aspirations (she buys her books, sends her for tuition, etc). SHG members are also more vocal about the issue of CEFM now. “This isn’t a lone battle anymore,” says Saraswati.

## Back on Educational Track

In another incident in 2021, Saraswati Devi had helped a migrated girl who was a school dropout with her re-enrolment. Fifteen years old Anjali had shifted with her family from Sahebganj to Jamani (75 km away) in 2020 as her maternal grandfather needed post pandemic care and support. After moving in, Anjali’s mother, Hirni Devi, had joined ‘Maa Kaali Sakhi Mandal’ – a self-help group in Jamani – that fell under Saraswati’s area of duty. It was during SHG meetings when Saraswati Devi realised that one of its

members, Hirni Devi, had a school dropout daughter. “On probing Hirni, I found that Anjali had studied up to grade 7 in Rakshi village school (Sahebganj), after which her family had moved to Jamani. Owing to lack of documents (migration certificate, school leaving certificate, etc), Hirni had failed to get her daughter enrolled in Jamani government school for more than a year,” recalls Saraswati Devi.

Saraswati Devi enquired with school authorities about the documents required. She then suggested Hirni to get them from Rakshi village school. “Initially, Hirni was reluctant to go as this would mean loss of a day’s income for her who works as a daily wage labourer,” says Saraswati.

For 38-year-old Hirni Devi, her daily earning is a crucial determinant to feed her family comprising her daughter Anjali and as her son Amar (10). Her husband, Panchanand Kevat (47), is a fish seller in Sahebganj and his income isn’t sufficient to meet family expenses. Her two elder daughters are already married. Hence, it took many rounds of counselling by Saraswati before Hirni agreed to visit the school. “I told Hirni that expense on bus fare and loss of income were easy trade-offs for placing Anjali back on educational

pathway as this will shape her future,” adds Saraswati. “After two visits and multiple telephonic follow-ups in a span of 2.5 months, the mother was able to acquire the documents. During this period, we also sought help from an acquaintance who was a teacher at Rakshi school,” recalls Saraswati.

Once the documents were in place, Saraswati Devi and Umang team members accompanied Hirni Devi to the village school for Anjali’s admission in grade 8. “It’s been two years since then. Anjali is a dedicated student and has been promoted to grade 10 this year. I feel very content that I

could help bring a girl back to school,” says Saraswati.

Meanwhile, Saraswati has been promoted as a Resource Person in January 2022. She currently manages three CLFs in Markhan, Dumariya and Sundmara. She conducts Umang sessions in these CLFs and supervises sessions held by active women at VOs and SHGs. Her work also involves training active women and making field visits. She is mostly on the move, making village trips (at least two villages per day, 5 days a week).

Saraswati Devi is among 11 Resource Persons from Godda who are contributing towards bringing quality enhancement in the lives of adolescent girls under Project Umang. In the last four years, Project Umang has facilitated re-enrolment of 121 school dropout girls and successfully averted 39 child/early marriages in Godda. “Umang sessions have helped me reflect on how I was a victim of CEFM. This project has given me a meaning in life. I feel so determined and motivated not to allow any girl to suffer the way I did,” she says.

Saraswati Devi  
is among 11 Resource  
Persons from Godda who  
are contributing towards  
quality enhancement in the  
lives of adolescent girls  
under Umang