

# Women's secret bank accounts spur quiet revolution

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MUMBAI: "It is quite normal for women, especially in rural areas, to have some secret money stashed away," says Chetna Gala Sinha. "In our Mahila Bank, many of the women have secret accounts. It's a little like a Swiss bank. After the weekly *haat*, when they sell vegetables, eggs or goats, they don't reveal their entire earnings to the family. They keep some of it with friends or the *savkar* (moneylender), or more frequently, in their accounts with us." Ms Sinha was recently in the city to deliver a lecture at Mani Bhavan on the role of micro-finance in empowering rural women.

Whenever the subject of successful micro-finance and rural banking comes up, the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh is usually the one hogging the headlines. But a meeting with Ms Sinha, women's activist and chairperson of the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank Ltd (Mahila Bank for short) in Mhaswad, Satara district, underlines how successful micro-finance projects are going under-recognised in our own backyard. Small loans have helped rural women to conduct business, acquire property rights, break caste barriers and play key roles as panchayat members.

They have come a long way. The Mahila Bank's original application for a licence was initially rejected by the Reserve Bank of

India because the women were illiterate. But when officials saw how the women could snappily calculate interest despite their illiteracy, they relented. The Mahila Bank today has more than 2,000 members with a share holding of Rs 24 lakhs and a loan recovery rate of 98 per cent. Besides, there are more than 60 self-help groups across 125 vil-

"Money is power," says Ms Sinha, who is also president of the Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha (MVSS) in Mhaswad, Mann Taluka (population 14 lakhs) in Satara. So, inspired by the example of the women's bank run by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), generating assets for women living below the poverty line became a priority.

structure of centuries. The women now have assets in their own names, such as savings bank accounts and property papers. Moreover, they have been given identity cards to make them economically and socially visible.

The self-help groups have taken loans from the Mahila Bank to buy cows and buffaloes and formed 14 mahila diaries. Marginal women farmers can thus earn a regular income, while landless women labourers can buy sheep and goats on credit.

The MVSS and bank especially encourage Other Backward Caste women with subsidised micro-loans as well.

"Typically, it is non-Brahmin women who take greater initiative than Brahmin

Sinha observes. Accordingly, the MVSS has also conducted orientation programmes for women panchayat members in Mann, Satara, Phaltan, Patan, Karad and elsewhere. The project has received various awards, including the Vasantrao Naik Krishi Sansthan Award, the Jyotiba Phule Samajik Sanskrutik Pratishthan Award and the Ashoka Innovators award.

No wonder the self-help groups are making rapid strides. In Mane Wadi village, nothing was done about the drinking water problem for years.

The self-help group went to Satara, organised a dharna in front of the collector's office and negotiated with the local MP until a water supply scheme was set up. Soon after, women candidates in the panchayat elections were elected unopposed.

Who would have imagined that something which started so innocuously with *kanda*, *batata*, sheep and goats, could take women this far?



**Small loans from the Mahila Bank have helped rural women in Satara to conduct business, acquire property rights, break caste barriers and play key roles as panchayat members**

lages, with a share holding of Rs 28 lakhs. According to Ms Sinha, they have a loan recovery rate of 100 per cent.

"Our project was inspired by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini established by Jayaprakash Narayan in 1977," Ms Sinha begins. "Under the land to the tiller movement in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, women became co-owners of the land acquired." Ms Sinha and fellow activists realised that before they could uplift the women through improved health and education, they had first to tackle the migration from the drought-prone areas of Satara.

That's how the women were encouraged to save and form self-help groups in 1999, with support from the Association of India's Development Programme.

"When the women came to ask for loans, they needed collateral such as immovable property and two guarantors. It was the perfect occasion for women to ask their husbands to make them coparceners of their land/property," says Ms Sinha. Since women have long been marginalised from the ownership of land or means of production, this move quietly effected a revolution that challenged the patriarchal feudal

women," Ms Sinha reflects. In the case of self-help groups, Mahila Bank loans are given on the advice of the entire group. Hence upper-caste women who may want to take loans from the bank must first seek approval from the group, which usually consists of lower caste women, and this dramatically influences the power structure.

Now, when there are village functions, self-help group leaders are usually invited, irrespective of their caste.

"Women like to empower themselves in the process of empowering the community," Ms