



IIMC CASE RESEARCH CENTER (IIMCCRC)

NIMRUJI JAMMULAMADAKA, ARPITA MATHUR

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BEING WOMEN: CONVERSATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The following paragraphs present episodes of conversations about women. These conversations have been recreated from real life conversations amongst various women. The real contexts have been anonymized to facilitate confidentiality as well as classroom discussion. Given below is the background about the context and the women.

BACKGROUND

Some of the episodes are taken from conversations with people from two villages in the Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Both these villages are located at a distance of 20 kilometres from Indore city. We call these villages Sitapur and Gitapur. Both Sitapur and Gitapur have roughly similar population, between 4,500 to 5000. They are predominantly agricultural villages and are a little different vis-a-vis their caste compositions. Sitapur has a predominantly upper caste profile, with upper caste families being the dominant landowners as well as forming the majority population. In Gitapur, OBC community is the dominant caste both in terms of population (70%) and land ownership. Other castes are present in both the villages, upper caste is the second most important community in Gitapur. Sitapur also has some Muslim population whereas Gitapur has mainly Hindu population.

In both villages, Panchayat elections were an important activity. In the last round of elections for the village panchayats, Sitapur Sarpanch seat had been reserved for a women candidate and Gitapur

Nimruji Jammulamadaka of the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and Arpita Mathur developed this case study as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate the effective or ineffective running of an organization.

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Sarpanch seat had been reserved for a Scheduled Caste¹(SC) candidate. After the elections, Vimala Devi was declared the Sarpanch of Sitapur and Susheela Devi the Sarpanch of Gitapur.

Vimala: She is the wife of a wealthy, upper caste man who is politically active. Her husband was rumored to have contacts within the ruling party at the district and state level. Vimala practiced *ghunghat* and hardly ever came out of the family or talked to strangers. Her husband acted as the *Sarpanchpati* (literally- husband of *Sarpanch*) and performed all official duties on her behalf.

Ghunghat is a practice where women cover their head and face with their saree or their dupatta, when they are amongst men. This is particularly prevalent in the Northern and Western parts of India. This practice is associated with the family's and woman's honour.

Susheela: She is an old illiterate widow from a middle-class SC family. She migrated to Gitapur when she was quite young and eventually became the second wife of an OBC man from Gitapur. After her husband's death she got a share of property and managed it. Her daughter and son-in-law lived with her in Gitapur.

Anita: She is a researcher who went to the villages to study the women Sarpanchs. Anita is from Indore and she received a Ph.D from a premier institute in India. She is single and works in a metro city in India. She is the primary bread winner in the family and supports her retired parents and brother's family. Her brother works at a small private company in her hometown. She is currently researching on management and governance.

Namita: She is also a researcher cum consultant. Namita and Anita had worked closely in the past on their research. Namita lives in a metro city and is a professional consultant. Namita is married and has two children. Her husband stays at home to attend to the children. Namita is quite successful in her career and is the sole bread winner in her family. She stays away from the family to pursue her employment.

¹Indian constitution provides for hierarchical four-fold division of the society into General Category (Upper castes), Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).