



Journalist of the Month

India Paper Taps Marginalized Women as Reporters

Run Date: 09/30/07

By Lauren D. Klein
WeNews correspondent

A family newspaper in Gwalior trains women to report their own stories and confront abuse, fraud and corruption. Rupesh Shrivastava started the paper in 2003 and daughter Samanvaya is editor. Third in a series on the changing role of women in India.

GWALIOR, India (WOMENSENEWS)--Three years ago Lakshmi Bhagel, a dishwasher earning about \$2 a day, wandered through the doors of a newspaper she'd heard about from a friend. She was nervous, and though illiterate, she had reason to hope the editors might publish her story.

Without hesitation the editors of Mahila Paksh--a weekly, family-run broadsheet in the central Indian city Gwalior--sat down and listened to Bhagel. They told her she could do more than talk to the editors: She could report her own story for the paper.



Samanvaya Shrivastava (left) and Rupesh Shrivastava

Credit: Lauren D. Klein.

Mahila Paksh--the name loosely translates to "Women's Side" in Hindi--is the brainchild of Rupesh Shrivastava, a 51-year-old former bureau chief with a prominent Hindi-language newspaper.

With the tag line "To the Women, By the Women, For the Women" it is India's only publication dedicated to recruiting marginalized women as reporters and helping them cover issues that affect them the most.

Shrivastava said he wanted to gear a newspaper around women's topics because he witnessed many instances of exploitation where justice was swept under the rug. He noticed a gap in the news coverage, which he said allows India's economy to move ahead but leaves women behind. He started publishing the paper in 2003.

"To develop a society or country you need to develop the base," Shrivastava said through his 20-year-old daughter, Samanvaya Shrivastava, who translated. "At the heart of that base are women. If women do not progress, we as a country cannot go anywhere."

Under her father's oversight, Samanvaya has worked as the paper's editor from the start while her mother, Asha Shrivastava, a social worker, acts as assistant editor.

Rupesh trains the reporters with basic writing and fact-finding skills. He and his daughter oversee the final cut of every edition and mentor the reporters.

(Shrivastava is the surname of the newspaper family as well as other people in this story so first names are being used to ease identification.)

Stories of Fraud and Corruption

Bhagel's story turned out to be about fighting loan fraud.

A lender had intimidated her and her husband into paying a higher return rate than originally agreed, costing them their entire savings, she told the editors. Her husband went to the police but received no attention. Fraud, among other forms of corruption, is a common story in India's slums tucked behind impressive shopping malls with people speeding past in luxury cars.

Samanvaya and her parents guided Bhagel as she reported her story. Samanvaya then checked the facts and wrote the article.

Shortly after the piece ran, politicians and local leaders who receive Mahila Paksh called the police. The lender has not been seen in her neighborhood since, Bhagel said.

That was the beginning of Bhagel's association with Mahila Paksh. While learning to read, write and share stories from her neighborhood--a locality in Gwalior few journalists take time to visit--she has become a key source and reporter, Samanvaya said.

In other stories from her neighborhood, Bhagel has reported on a man selling fraudulent poverty identification cards that grant bearers government benefits. Another story was about an abducted woman who was to be sold into the sex trade. When the abductors found out reporters were looking into the story they got scared and left the woman in front of the police station, Bhagel said.

Bhagel and about 100 other female reporters around India form Mahila Paksh's network in a country that reveres the power and beauty of goddesses but often suppresses real women.

'Realizing Their Potential'

"It can be very difficult for one woman to stand up," Samanvaya said. "But when you are part of a group that approaches a problem together, it's easier . . . Mahila Paksh is not about the minority of women who realize their potential and know how to use it. It is about the women who do not realize they can make changes."

Under Samanvaya's guidance reporters tell stories--sometimes their own--of refusing dowry, asking for overdue salary raises or demanding the right to stay in school.

Instead of advertisers or subscribers, Mahila Paksh is supported by 12,000 members who pay a yearly fee of 100 rupees--about \$2.50--for the newspaper. Any member can become a reporter by bringing a story to the table and recruiting 15 more members to join. All of the reporters and staff work on a volunteer basis.

A group of reporters in brightly colored saris clustered in the office

recently to discuss how the work has affected them. Many said it has helped them learn how to assert their rights. They are now aware of laws that allow public access to official documents, ban dowries and female feticide. Most of the stories the women cover, however, are not crimes but problems that affect their families and community on a daily basis.

Extracting Answers From Authorities

Durgesh Shrivastava, a social worker, covered the parades and formal ceremonies on her street that were constantly blaring music into the streets. The noise often disrupted children's study and sleep in the whole neighborhood. After her story ran, authorities prohibited the use of loud speakers during events. The experience made her more confident to ask questions and extract answers from authorities, she said.

"We have the power to make changes," Durgesh said. "It's not just in our professional lives."

Sweata Gupta, a student at a local all-women's college, is currently working on her first story about the dropout rate of her peers. Many parents have lost work due to a factory shutdown and when money is tight families often choose to keep one child, usually a boy, in school, she said. Her peers have no support mechanism to keep them in the classroom.

"I noticed that females hesitate to speak up a lot," Vandana Shrivastava, a Mahila Paksh reporter for the past three years, said. "Together we have a powerful voice."

Samanvaya, the paper's editor and a student at the National Law Institute University in Bhopal, said she will use her law degree to improve her work as a journalist and help Mahila Paksh expand its membership so it reaches every community in India and perhaps beyond the country. She has refrained from putting the newspaper online since most of the reporters, members and prospective members do not have access to computers, let alone the Web.

In the meantime, Samanvaya and her parents said the paper's team of female reporters are benefiting women and the community in a way that goes beyond the profit made by their national counterparts.

"These women have gained the confidence to talk about a problem and make people listen," Samanvaya said. "That is our success."

Lauren D. Klein is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi, India.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

To contact Mahila Paksh, e-mail: <mailto:Samanvayakumar@gmail.com>

India's Barefoot Reporters Tell Their Own Story:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2210/>

Note: Women's eNews is not responsible for the content of external

Internet sites and the contents of Web pages we link to may change without notice.

Send this story to a friend.

Your Name:
 Friend's Email:

Please donate now by going to:



Or donate by check made out to:

The Fund for the City of New York/Women's eNews

and Mail it to:

Women's eNews
 135 West 29th Street, Suite 1005
 New York, NY 10001

To Obtain Permission to Reprint or Repost This Article: :



For Complete Step-by-Step Instructions: [Reprint FAQs](#)

Copyright 2007 Women's eNews. The information contained in this Women's eNews report may--with the prior written authorization of Women's eNews--be published, broadcast, rewritten or otherwise distributed.

Women's eNews is a nonprofit independent news service covering issues of concern to women and their allies. An incubator program of the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York, Women's eNews is supported by our readers; reprints and licensing fees; and the Carnegie Corporation of New York; the International Institute for Community Solutions, Fund for the City of New York; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; the Barbara Lee Family Foundation; the Open Society Institute; the Rockefeller Family Fund; The Helena Rubinstein Foundation; the Sister Fund and the Starry Night Fund. The donations from readers are critical to our success. Donate now by going to <http://www.womensenews.org/support.cfm>.

Women's eNews subscribers may select whether to receive a daily full text, daily summary or weekly summary. To change your email address, send mail to membersvcs@womensenews.org. To change the frequency of your mail or to cancel your subscription, send a message to Member Services (membersvcs@womensenews.org) or use our online form: http://www.womensenews.org/update_subscription.cfm

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Donate](#) [Arabic Women's eNews](#) [Press Release](#) [Sylvia](#) [Links](#) [Contact us](#)
[Search Archives](#) [Subscription and Membership](#) [Pressroom](#) [Help](#)

[REPRINT FAQs](#)

[Make Us Your Homepage!](#)

[sign in](#)

Copyright 2007 Women's eNews Inc.