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The winner takes it all

MRIDU RAI | April 11, 2014 | 15:51

Photographs by M ZHAZO Three extraordinary women from ordinary backgrounds all armed with the common purpose of changing society for the better were honoured at the CII Foundation Woman Exemplar Award 2014. Initiated in 2005 by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the award recognises women from across the country who have worked at the grass root level and contributed towards the development process in India in the three key areas of education and literacy, health and micro-enterprise. This year the awards were conferred upon Kalpana Gagdekar, 33, for education and literacy, Lata Mane, 38, for health and Devti Biaga, 60, for micro-enterprise. Kalpana Gagdekar is a well-known theatre and TV artist in Gujarat. She educates and spreads awareness about the plight of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT) using the medium of theatre.

A mother of two, Gagdekar initially had to overcome several obstacles before she found the courage to follow her passion and work in the theatre. "Society expected me to remain indoors and do household chores. But I was never one to back down," she says. Lata Mane, who earlier worked as a female sex worker after being sold to a brothel owner by her own husband has transformed her life after joining the NGO, Vijay Krida Mandal. She now devotes her life to providing health education to female sex workers in the slums of Ghatkopar in Mumbai.

Mane has also formed Self Help Groups involved in income generating activities such as making imitation jewellery and perfume. Additionally, Mane also works with the NGO, Clean Mumbai Project where she supervises garbage collection, cleaning of gutters, toilets and providing awareness about the importance of sanitation. Devti Baiga belongs to the Baiga tribal community of the Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh. Having long struggled as a farmer because of the scarcity of water in the region, Baiga, with her natural entrepreneurial skills was quick to adopt new farming techniques implemented by the Indian Grameen Services. Today, she helps tribal communities access alternative means of livelihoods and is considered a natural leader as her own life is the best example of what is possible.

Kalpana Gagdekar education and literacy

"The impact that theatre leaves on someone cannot compare to any awareness speech. If you speak for an hour about any issue then people start getting bored. It's very likely that in the end they won't even remember anything you said," says Kalpana Gagdekar. "But a half an hour's play which highlights several issues will have a direct and immediate impact. It not only entertains but also inspires the audience to act," she adds.

Gagdekar, who was married at the age of 15, soon realised that



the DNT community to which she belonged had been branded as a criminal community during colonial times. Gagdekar set up Budhan Theatre and through this creative medium, set about removing the stigma attached with her community. "Only a handful of people are aware of our situation. We want to bridge the gap between DNT and mainstream communities," says Gagdekar. Despite facing flak from society for doing something different, Gagdekar has never looked back and continues to work towards her goals.

Lata mane health

"A woman's dignity does not diminish just because she lives in a brothel. A female sex worker has the same selfrespect as someone who lives in a mansion," says an outspoken Lata Mane. "Every single woman should have the courage to fight anyone who has tormented her," adds Mane who was sold for Rs 40,000 to a brothel owner by her own husband after bringing her to Mumbai from her native place Karga in Karnataka.



Today, as a full-time outreach worker with an NGO- Vijay Krida Mandal, Mane earns a monthly income of Rs 5,500. She admits that it was her two daughters who motivated her to find a different line

of work. "I wanted my daughters to have a secure future. But until I brought a change in my own lifestyle, how could I expect to change my children's lives?" says Mane whose elder daughter has just completed her 10th standard, Mane's vision is to give her daughters the best education possible and to make a difference in the lives of her community of female sex workers.

Devti baiga micro-enterprise

Those who know Devti Baiga know her to be an indomitable spirit. For a tribal woman working as a daily wage labourer and struggling to make ends meet, Baiga, today, has inspired 700 households in six villages in the core area of Bandhavgarh National Park to adopt alternate sources of livelihood which allows them financial security. Baiga's husband passed away early and she had five children to look after. As is the custom of the Baiga tribal community, she practiced shifting cultivation in a forest area which earned her very little. Baiga's biggest problem was the scarcity of water in the area.



"Five different sarpanch came and went, but my constant request for water was never heeded," she says. Finally she got Rs 40,000 through the Kapildhara Yojna and she put all of that money to dig a well. As luck would have it, even after digging for 30 feet, there was no sign of water and Devti's efforts and money went to waste. When the Indian Grameen Services were brought in to help the tribal community at Bandhavgarh National Park, Baiga was the first person to adopt new farming techniques. From the system of rice

intensification method to sericulture and vermicompost, Baiga always jumped at any opportunity to learn new farming methods. Her perseverance and entrepreneurial spirit has inspired and helped change the lives of many in her community. "One should always be able to look beyond their means," Baiga says.

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