

## **"From Margins to Mainstream: Sarita Devi a Grassroot Trailblazer of Rajiv Gandhi's women empowerment vision"**

### **Introduction**

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were visionary initiative under the leadership of Shri Rajiv Gandhi who revolutionized. India's governance by empowering women at the grassroots level. This case study celebrates the remarkable journey of Sarita Devi a 43-year-old woman and a Mukhiya of Tirla Panchayat, Bagodar Block, Giridih District, Jharkhand, who embodies the transformative impact of decentralized governance. Sarita Devi's leadership exemplifies resilience and innovation in addressing local challenges, from improving healthcare access to promoting education and sustainable livelihoods. Currently Tirla panchayat has a vibrant social diversity in castes: the population of OBC makes up the bulk population group at 3,355 (50%), earning a livelihood mainly from agriculture and small business; followed by General Category at 1,677 (25%), comprising mostly farm-based landholding farmers and local shopkeepers; Scheduled Castes at 841 (12.5%), traditionally backward classes with occupations based on manual labor and Scheduled Tribes at 838 (12.5%), indigenous people with conventional distinctive culture and ways of living on forest produce and agriculture. In a region marked by socio-economic disparities, her efforts have strengthened Panchayati Raj Institutions, ensuring inclusive development and women's participation in decision-making. Through this case study, we explore how Sarita Devi's initiatives align with Shri Rajiv Gandhi's vision of empowering women in local governance by documenting her achievements, we honor not only her contributions but also the broader movement for gender equality and grassroots democracy that Shri Rajiv Gandhi championed. This study aims to inspire future leaders and highlight the contributions of Sri Rajiv Gandhi in governance, reinforcing the ideals of equity and inclusive development in terms of gender.

### **Background**

Tirla Panchayat, nestled in the rural landscape of Giridih district, Jharkhand one of the most underdeveloped states in India. It reflects the socio-economic challenges such as gender inequality limited livelihood opportunities and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Against this backdrop, Sarita Devi, a homemaker with a matriculation education, emerged as a transformative leader. Her journey into public service began as a 'Sahiya Didi' (ASHA worker), where she spent five years witnessing the struggles of women such as domestic violence fuelled by alcoholism, exclusion from decision-making spaces like 'Gram Sabhas' meetings and

restricted access to skill-based employment. Initially opposed by her husband but having support from her mother-in-law She stepped into politics in 2015 as ‘Up-Pramukh’ of the Panchayat Samiti with the determined to bring change. Her firsthand experience with community health and gender issues shaped her leadership approach.

Sarita Devi was elected ‘Mukhiya’ of Tirla panchayat in the year 2022 with 13 wards in it and it was one among 20 panchayats within Bagodar block. Since then, she initiated impactful reforms, curbing public alcoholism, which reduced domestic abuse, and mobilizing women to participate in governance and livelihood programs like tailoring and weaving. Her story exemplifies how Shri Rajiv Gandhi’s vision of decentralized governance and women’s empowerment enables grassroots leaders to challenge systemic barriers and foster inclusive development. This case study explores her journey, highlighting the impact of women leadership in transforming rural India.

## Leadership style and achievements

Her governance approach focuses on three key pillars:

- Women-Centric Development – Breaking patriarchal barriers by ensuring women’s active participation in governance and livelihood programs.
- Pro-Poor Welfare Schemes – Maximizing the reach of government initiatives to the most vulnerable.
- Crisis-Responsive Governance – Addressing immediate challenges while building long-term resilience and sustainable and inclusive development.



**SARITA DEVI WAS HONORED AT VIGYAN BHAWAN, NEW DELHI FOR HER EXEMPLARY WORK AS AN EMPOWERED PANCHAYAT LEADER AND FOR INDEPENDENTLY HANDLING ALL PANCHAYAT-RELATED TASKS WITHOUT FAMILY ASSISTANCE.**

## **Transformative Projects and Governance Innovations**

### **1. Women's Empowerment: From Dependence to Self-Reliance**

Recognizing that economic independence is crucial for women's empowerment, Sarita Devi facilitated the formation of 50 Self-Help Groups (SHGs), each comprising 15 women. These SHGs have been linked with banking and microcredit facilities, enabling women to start small businesses in tailoring, poultry farming, and handicrafts.

**Impact:** It reduced financial dependency on male family members, leading to greater decision-making power for women.

**Innovation:** Introduced gender-sensitive Gram Sabha meetings, where women are encouraged to voice concerns. Previously where women were not allowed to sit in the gram sabha meetings, they were not given place to sit resulting into voiceless women has changed today now their participation has increased and they sit for the same and raise their concern.



IMAGE: Sarita Devi spreading awareness among women on international women's Day

### **2. Skill Development: Bridging the Employment Gap**

To combat unemployment, the panchayat organized skill development programs in nursing, tailoring, and agriculture-based livelihoods. 100 women and men received nursing training, with many securing jobs in local healthcare centres. Vocational training in weaving and handicrafts has helped artisans access markets through government schemes like JHARCRAFT (Jharkhand Silk Textile & Handicraft Development Corporation).

### 3. Social Security: Ensuring Dignity for the Vulnerable

Sarita Devi's administration ensured that welfare schemes reached those most in need, over 1,000 beneficiaries, including elderly citizens, widows, and differently-abled individuals, now receive pensions. 1,100+ ration cards were distributed, eliminating food insecurity for marginalized families.

### 4. Employment Generation: MGNREGA and Beyond

Under MGNREGA, job cards were issued to all eligible households, and employment was generated through: Construction of irrigation wells and dobas (small ponds), improving water availability for farming. Embankment development to prevent soil erosion and floods. Mango orchard plantations, promoting sustainable agro-income.

### 5. Education Revolution: Bringing Children Back to School

Previously, high dropout rates plagued Tirla's schools, especially among girls. Sarita Devi's interventions included, Community awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of education leads to Collaboration with teachers and parents to ensure regular attendance, Which resulted in the Result about 80% reduction in school dropouts, with more girls continuing their education beyond primary level.



**IMAGE: Upgraded Plus Two High School, Dorio, Mukhiya Sarita devi who had come to inspect the education system - observe and talk to the children, was told by the children about the poor condition of the toilets, The Mukhiya announced to strengthen the toilets and remove the deficiencies.**

**Crisis Handling:** Mukhiya Sarita Devi's courageous campaign against alcoholism and its devastating consequences in Tirla Panchayat stands as a landmark example of grassroots crisis management. Recognizing that alcohol abuse was not just a personal vice but a systemic threat to women's safety and community development, she implemented a comprehensive strategy and campaigned against it during her five-year tenure of ASHA DIDI.



IMAGE: Sarita Devi inaugurating new Transformer for Electricity crisis handling

**Awareness Drives:** Conducted meetings with women, youth, and village elders to highlight the social and economic harms of alcohol abuse.



IMAGE:BAAL SABHA AYOJAN Organised by Sarita Devi for spreading awareness among children regarding cleanliness

## Resilience in the Face of Adversity: Challenges faced by Sarita Devi

### 1. Gender Bias: Breaking Patriarchal Norms

As a woman leader in a traditionally male-dominated political space, Sarita Devi faced skepticism and resistance from villagers who questioned her ability to govern. Many believed that women should not participate in public decision-making, and she often encountered disrespectful behavior initially during Gram Sabha meetings. Additionally, her campaign against alcoholism which was a major source of domestic violence—faced backlash from men

who saw it as a threat to their dominance. However, through persistent engagement with women's groups and community awareness programs, she gradually shifted perceptions, proving that women leaders could bring transformative governance.

## **2. Caste and Class Barriers: Ensuring Inclusive Development**

Tirla Panchayat's social structure is shaped by caste and economic disparities, making equitable resource distribution a challenge. Sarita Devi, coming from a humble background herself, had to navigate resistance from upper-caste elites who opposed welfare schemes reaching marginalized communities. Some accused her of favoring certain groups, while others tried to undermine her authority. By maintaining transparency in panchayat funds and actively involving all sections in planning, she ensured that development benefits reached the most vulnerable, gradually reducing caste-based opposition.

## **3. Local Political Resistance: Overcoming Power Struggles**

Entering politics as a former ASHA worker with no political dynasty backing her, Sarita Devi faced opposition from established male leaders who saw her as an outsider. Some tried to block her initiatives, particularly those empowering women, fearing a loss of traditional power structures. However, her grassroots connect and visible impact—from SHG formations to education reforms—helped her gain broader public support, weakening political adversaries over time.

## **Analyzing the Impact Under Sarita Devi's Leadership as Mukhiya of Tirla Panchayat**

The tenure of Smt. Sarita Devi as Mukhiya of Tirla Panchayat in Giridih, Jharkhand, has been transformative, demonstrating how women's leadership in grassroots governance can drive social, economic, and political empowerment. Her administration has not only improved basic amenities but also redefined gender roles in rural development, aligning perfectly with Shri Rajiv Gandhi's vision of decentralized governance and women's political participation through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

### **1. Women's Participation in Governance: From Silence to Leadership**

One of the most significant changes under Sarita Devi's leadership has been the increased participation of women in Gram Sabha meetings. Earlier, women were either absent or silent spectators due to patriarchal norms. Today, women outnumber men in many Gram Sabha discussions, actively voicing concerns about water supply, sanitation, and education. This shift

was achieved through, Gender-sensitive meetings where women were encouraged to speak without fear, Separate women's forums to discuss issues before presenting them in the main Sabha and finally awareness campaigns on the importance of women's voices in governance. This change has made the panchayat's decision-making more inclusive and representative, ensuring that policies address women's needs effectively.

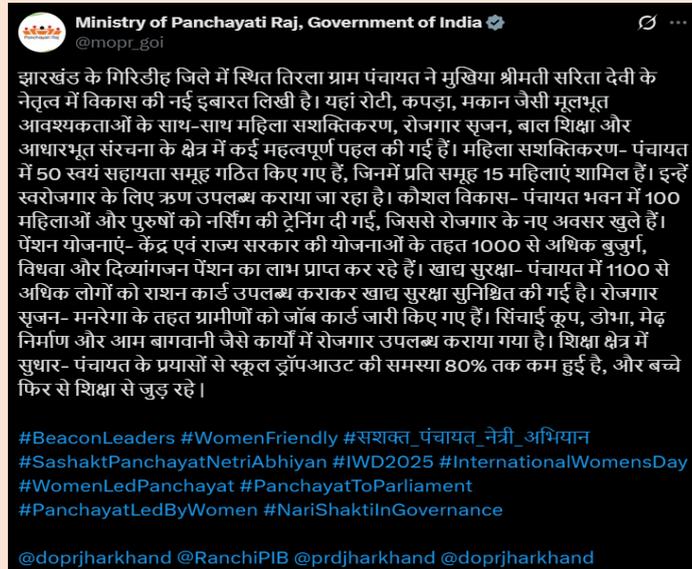


IMAGE: Featured at x handle of  
Ministry of Panchayati Raj,  
Government of India

Link:

[https://x.com/mopr\\_goi/status/1901196743188041781](https://x.com/mopr_goi/status/1901196743188041781)

## 2. Economic Empowerment: Linking Women to Livelihoods

Recognizing that financial independence is key to women's agency, Sarita Devi prioritized skill development and employment generation. Under her leadership 50 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were formed, engaging over 750 women in micro-enterprises like tailoring, weaving, and handicrafts, Vocational training in nursing, animal husbandry, and organic farming provided alternative income sources.

Market linkages were established through government schemes like JHARCRAFT, helping women sell their products at better prices, As a result, many women who were once confined to household chores are now earning their own income, gaining respect within their families and communities.

## 3. Education Revolution: Keeping Children in School

Tirla Panchayat previously struggled with high dropout rates, especially among girls. Sarita Devi's interventions led to an 80% reduction in school dropouts through Community mobilization where parents and teachers were sensitized on the importance of education. Several works on infrastructure improvements also done for the better school facilities and mid-day meal programs increased enrollment.

Today, more girls are continuing their education beyond primary level, breaking the cycle of early marriages and illiteracy.

#### **4. Social Justice: Combating Alcoholism and Domestic Violence**

One of Sarita Devi's earliest and most impactful initiatives was her campaign against alcoholism, a major contributor to domestic violence. By organizing village meetings to highlight the social and economic harms of alcohol abuse, it Encouraged women to report abuse and seek support through SHGs. It also leads to Work with local authorities to stop liquor sales. The panchayat saw a noticeable decline in domestic violence cases, creating a safer environment for women.

#### **5. Sustainable and Inclusive Development**

Sarita Devi's governance model focuses on long-term sustainability and equity, programmes like MGNREGA helped in the different forms of works like irrigation wells, ponds (dobas), and embankments have improved water conservation and farming yields, she also helped many old age persons to get their pension schemes, her work for food security is recommendable where she taken action through distributing 1,100+ ration cards to marginalized families. Her emphasis on inclusive growth ensures that no section of society is left behind, whether in welfare schemes or employment opportunities.

#### **Awards and Honors:**

1. Sarita Devi was honored at vigyan bhawan, new delhi for her exemplary work as an empowered panchayat leader and for independently handling all panchayat-related tasks without family assistance.
2. she had previously been invited to the independence day celebrations at red fort in 2024 and participated in a national conference on panchayat of good governance in srinagar in 2023.
3. sarita sao was among three female mukhiyas from giridih district invited to the national conference on the empowered panchayat leader campaign in delhi

#### **Reflections**

Sarita Devi's journey from a homemaker to a transformative Mukhiya has made her more than just a local leader, now she has become a symbol of possibility for young girls not only in Tirla

Panchayat but many other. Today, when she walks through the village, girls look at her with admiration, often requesting to take photos with her, seeing in her the proof that they too can break barriers. Her presence has redefined what women can achieve in rural Jharkhand, demonstrating that leadership is not determined by gender but by courage, vision, and commitment to community.

For many young women in Tirla, Sarita Devi is the first woman leader they have seen in power, making her a natural role model. Schools now invite her to speak to girls, where she shares her story, how she went from being an ASHA worker to leading the panchayat, overcoming skepticism and resistance. Her message is simple yet powerful: "If I can do it, so can you." This has led to a noticeable shift in aspirations—more girls now express interest in politics, education, and entrepreneurship, no longer viewing early marriage as their only future.

#### Feminist Values in Governance: "I Am Nothing Without My Women"

Sarita Devi's leadership style embodies feminist principles of inclusive development, where progress is measured not just by infrastructure but by whose voices are heard and whose lives are improved. She often says, "I am nothing without the women in my village—their support, their cooperation, and their courage are what enable me to do what I do." This statement reflects the Ubuntu philosophy—"I am because we are"—highlighting that true leadership is rooted in collective strength rather than individual authority.

Her governance model is built on three feminist pillars:

1. **Coexistence & Collaboration** – She ensures that development is not imposed but co-created with the community, especially women.
2. **Inclusive Decision-Making** – By bringing marginalized voices (women, Dalits, tribal communities) into Gram Sabha discussions, she has made democracy more participatory.
3. **Empowerment Through Livelihoods** – Recognizing that economic freedom is the first step to gender justice, she linked women to employment opportunities, breaking cycles of dependency. This approach has not only improved material conditions but also shifted patriarchal mindsets, proving that feminist leadership creates more sustainable and equitable societies.

## **Lessons for Youth: Leadership Beyond Privilege**

The inspiring journey of Sarita Devi, from a homemaker to a transformative Mukhiya of Tirla Panchayat, offers powerful lessons for India's youth. Her story teaches that authentic leadership emerges from empathy and lived experience rather than privilege or position, having witnessed domestic violence as an ASHA worker, she channeled her anger into systemic solutions rather than complaints. Young people can learn how she combined courage with pragmatism, facing patriarchal resistance not with confrontation but through persistent community engagement and by demonstrating tangible results. Her holistic approach to tackling alcoholism, addressing economic drains, social norms and women's safety simultaneously, it shows youth how to solve entrenched problems through interconnected solutions rather than isolated interventions. Most importantly, Sarita Devi's life demonstrates that meaningful change begins with small, consistent actions as her first victory was simply convincing one liquor vendor to reduce sales, which gradually transformed into a panchayat-wide movement. Her leadership style, which balanced feminist principles with inclusive governance, proves that empowering marginalized voices strengthens entire communities. For young Indians disillusioned by politics, her example reaffirms that grassroots work creates the most lasting impact, and that women's leadership is not about power over others but power to transform lives. Ultimately, Sarita Devi's journey inspires youth to see themselves as agents of change, reminding them that every great movement begins with ordinary people taking responsibility for their communities. As the next generation looks up to her, her legacy offers two powerful truths:

- 1) Women's leadership is not a privilege, it's a necessity for equitable development.
- 2) Real change begins when those who have lived struggles lead the solutions.

Her story is a call to action for youth to engage in community leadership for policies to empower more women in governance and for society to recognize that feminist values create stronger democracies. In honoring her, we honor the vision of Shri Rajiv Gandhi, a India where every village thrives because every voice matters.



IMAGE: ADDRESSING STUDENTS AND LOCALS ON THE OCCASION OF REPUBLIC DAY.

Live Interview with Sarita Devi link at Google meet: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G5vXSxA4HL7-AcmjeDf0kjLukBzqYEjE/view?usp=drivesdk>

Award ceremony For सशक्त पंचायत-नेत्री अभियान featured by dd news:  
[https://youtu.be/w8BnBXbRjzA?si=0\\_69A7mtRXsr8X55](https://youtu.be/w8BnBXbRjzA?si=0_69A7mtRXsr8X55)

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