

Sarita

Crossing 6 km of hills and valley every day, the 23-year-old Shakti activator works with the women and children of Chandauli to make them educated, alert and aware



Sarita, 23, started as a Shakti activator in Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh, in 2014. One of the few women who was able to access education, she crossed six kilometres of hills and a valley on foot every day to reach the community to conduct Shakti sessions and run non-formal education classes with children.

Preetpur Kodaniya in Chandauli is a cluster of small, impoverished hamlets, comprising mud houses with thatched roofs, accessible only by dirt roads. Identified as one of the most backward districts by the Ministry of Rural Development, Chandauli has deeply entrenched poverty and caste divisions, and a complete absence of basic services. There are no employment opportunities, and a majority of the families subsist on a meagre amount earned by selling wood collected from the forests. Many families often have to survive on one meal a day. These straitened circumstances make families and children highly vulnerable to abuse and trafficking.

Sarita began working with Shakti girls, but soon also began helping adult women to learn how to read and write. With her help, two of the five PACT workers in Chandauli learnt how to sign their names. Sarita firmly believes that in order to progress, the community needs to be educated. This is why she also spends a part of her day in the school established by M.S.E.M.V.S., a partner organisation, interacting and helping students in their lessons.

In the past year, Sarita has played a huge role in stopping four early marriages in the community. She regrets that she could not stop a fifth child marriage, but that only motivates her to work even harder for the girls of Chandauli. It is no wonder that the girls in her Shakti group look up to her and want to grow up to be like her.

Sarita is currently studying in her second year of her MA in sociology. But her college is in a city 40 kilometres away, and attending classes regularly is difficult. So she studies by herself, and selflessly gives as much time as she can to the community.

“At first, I didn’t think that what Sarita was doing was proper,” Sarita’s mother told the Aangan facilitator in Chandauli. But now, she says she is proud that her daughter is doing something good, and her family supports her to continue to do her work.

The Situation

Chandauli has been identified as one of the most backward districts in India. Deeply entrenched poverty, caste divisions, a complete lack of basic services and employment opportunities means the families here, especially young, adolescent girls, are extremely vulnerable to early marriage, abuse and trafficking.

The Solution

Through Shakti, adolescent girls are connected to a peer network, supported and empowered to recognise risk, and develop strategies to resist pressures of child marriage, dangerous work, and being pulled out of school, to access services, negotiate for themselves, and take steps towards achieving their goals.