

Swara gives power to the voiceless

RANCHI: Following a complaint by a rural activist from Bokaro on Swara about the state's indifference to malaria-afflicted Siyari panchayat in Gomia block last November, and subsequent pressure from activists, the health officer of the area was transferred and the government swung into action organizing health camps in the villages there.

Similarly, Raju Sahu, a resident of Salaiyatand village in Simaria block of Chatra district, complained that they did not have a road in their village. Soon, an NGO worker from Ranchi paid them a visit and advised them to pass a resolution from the gram sabha and submit it to the collector. The road construction work has now begun in full swing.

These are among the few complaints registered and solved with CGNet Swara, a voice portal which enables ordinary citizens to report and discuss issues of local interest. The interesting thing about this new system is that most of the citizen journalists are from the interior villages of Jharkhand and nearby states, with a dominant tribal population, which is not conversant in Hindi.

One of the activists of Hyderabad, Syed Shah Ali Hussaini, updated his status on Facebook regarding a problem in Jharkhand about which he came to know through Swara. The post said, "A village called Salayatand in Chatra district doesn't have a school. More than 50 students walk for 5 km everyday to attend school. There is a river on the way and some kids nearly drowned in it during monsoons. I request people to call the collector and other officials and request them to build a school in the village."

To his utter surprise, several calls were made and mails sent by some of his friends and after one month, officials visited the village, land for school was identified and a school management committee was formed. The village will get a school soon, he added.

The voice portal is the brainchild of a former journalist, Shubhranshu Choudhary, who was born and brought up in a tribal-dominated area of Chhattisgarh. He said, "Being a journalist, I realized that the people in interior tribal villages do not have any mode to communicate their problems to the officials. Thus they always remain unheard. I came up with the idea to make a platform where the villagers could be heard as well."

The programme focuses on tribal-dominated areas like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. As part of the Swara programme, people have to call up on +91-80500 68000 and record their message in their language. Choudhary said, "Nowadays, almost every household has a mobile phone so I thought it was the best way to communicate with people and help them share their grievances."

Volunteers from across the country, and some from abroad like Saudi Arabia, Canada and United States of America, who know the language in which the message is recorded, listen to the messages and translate them in English.

Choudhary said, "The messages are then published on our website and also sent to activists, journalists and other people through mails or social media along with the phone number of the official concerned so that people can call them up and inform them about the problems, and at times build pressure on them."

He added, "We are not successful in every case, but we do have many success stories to our credit."

Choudhary and his team visited Dumka and Chaibasa districts of the state in the last week of January where they informed people about the programme. He said, "Our project started in 2010 and has since grown in popularity. We inform people and rural activists about our programme and give them the contact number where they can leave their message. More and more people are joining us with every passing day."