

Empowerment through Action: The Story of Anna Lakshmi

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One woman - with the help of a local NGO - learns how to become a leader in her household, village, and beyond bringing toilets, education, and compassion to those around her.

Priyadarshini, or Priya to friends, wanders inquisitively around a large cement pad where a group of about thirty women and men are gathering to create a map of their village using a colored chalk powder called Rangoli. This map will show water and sanitation conditions in the village of Pudukkulam in central Tamil Nadu after interventions by a well-known NGO called Gramalaya with funding from Arghyam to promote sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene. Priya, with her bright eyes and expansive smile, is a precocious nine-year old bursting with questions about the group map that her family and neighbors will soon create.

The group mapping activity is held at the home of Priya's grandmother, Anna Lakshmi. A warm wind whips across the flat landscape. Green fields, coconut trees, and sandy roads line the horizon. Village members finish drawing the map in just over an hour. A young man walks around and shows that thirty-six of fifty-four houses in the village have toilets. The rest of the homes are either building toilets or sharing existing toilets. Twelve homes have individual water connections, and others use one of thirteen community stand posts built to provide free drinking water through a government scheme.

Today water and sanitation resources are readily available in the village, but eight years ago the situation was radically different. Most of the village, about two-hundred and fifty people, practiced open defecation. Diarrheal illnesses and hookworm were common. One woman fell and broke her hand while going to relieve herself in a field. Another person was bitten by a snake while going to defecate and died. Few people recognized the importance of good hygiene practices. Slowly water and sanitation conditions began to improve with the help of Gramalaya and a dedicated woman named Anna Lakshmi.

Anna Lakshmi was born and raised in Sri Lanka. Her family moved to Tamil Nadu when she was eleven. By 6th standard, her family asked her to quit school to help in the fields growing rice, chili, and root vegetables. She married and moved to Pudukkulam at the age of nineteen. Life was difficult for her in this small, isolated village. There were no toilets, all houses were thatched, and there were no roads. One well supplied drinking water for the entire village. "Few people would allow their daughters to marry anyone from this village," says Anna Lakshmi.

Eight years ago water conditions in Pudukkulam began to improve. Anna Lakshmi attributes some of these improvements to the election of someone from her village's majority caste, Kurumba Gounder, as a Member of Legislative Assembly. The government constructed four borewells to supply drinking water to three villages in the area following this election. In her village, the government constructed an overhead tank for water storage and thirteen community stand posts. Around the same time, someone from Gramalaya visited to repair a hand pump sourcing water from a borewell. Gramalaya chose to work in this village because most people had low annual incomes ranging from Rs 6000 to Rs 62,500 (129 to 1,349 USD), and the potential for improving the water and sanitation system was high. To encourage development, Gramalaya suggested that women form a Self-Help Group (SHG) and take small loans for entrepreneurial projects.

In the beginning, Anna Lakshmi declined to join an SHG because of work in the fields. She said to her husband "If you guarantee to me there will be no problems [with me not working in the fields], then I will join the group." He agreed. The first SHG soon formed in her village. Gramalaya suggested they attempt tailoring or other enterprising schemes. Other women encouraged Anna Lakshmi to speak to panchayat (local government) officials about SHG matters, and she eventually became a

representative of an SHG in her village.

Three years ago sanitation facilities in Pudukkulam became more accessible with the aid of Anna Lakshmi and Gramalaya. Her daughter had married and moved to a nearby village. That house had a toilet and bathing facility. Anna Lakshmi thought "Why can't we have a bathroom for ourselves?" The family said the toilet and bathing facility cost about Rs 15,000 (300 USD). This price seemed too expensive. She attended a training held by Gramalaya and found she could build a toilet for Rs 2,500 (50 USD). Gramalaya offered financing to SHGs to provide low-interest loans for toilet construction. Anna Lakshmi was the first person in her village to build a toilet with a government subsidy of Rs 600 (12 USD) and a loan. Others in her village wanted toilets of their own. Through trainings offered by Gramalaya, they discovered they could use local materials (local stone and coconut fronds) to make toilets even less expensive. In her SHG, thirty out of thirty-seven people have constructed toilets using loans with a 100-percent repayment rate.

Now Anna Lakshmi works with SHGs in two villages, passes information between SHGs and panchayats, and promotes water and sanitation projects. Her SHG has been engaged in income-generating activities like operating a sweet stall, leasing cooking vessels for marriages, tailoring, and selling vermi-compost. Her SHG has been involved in other activities related to clean water and improved sanitation by attending trainings held by Gramalaya, holding community-wide village clean-ups, participating in a cycle rally to raise awareness, and proving low-interest loans for water and sanitation. Asked why she works tirelessly on water and sanitation issues, she states,

"It's a strong sense of wanting other people to have the experiences that I've had, to have the hygiene that I have now, and to have the empowerment that I have because of my work... Though it does not pay anything, though sometimes my husband gets a little agitated because there is work in the field, he also supports me. He enjoys the fact that I'm able to reach this message across to people because when we wanted to build a toilet, we had no money to build one... [Gramalaya gave us a loan to build a toilet]."

She used to feel uneducated and would not participate in meetings, talk to panchayat leaders, or even go out of the house. She is self-assured because of working with Gramalaya. This confidence has encouraged her to ensure her own and other children receive an education. One of her recent endeavors in the SHG is promoting loans for children to study. "I want my daughters to mingle with the world," she said. She hopes all children in the community can go to school, find jobs, earn well, and bring prosperity to the village.

Anna Lakshmi's, her SHG's, and Gramalaya's dedicated efforts for water and sanitation have not gone unnoticed. Her panchayat was voted best panchayat in the district for work done by SHGs. Her village was chosen best village in the panchayat for sanitation. Twenty-eight panchayat leaders visited Pudukkulam in 2007 to view sanitation facilities. And, if little Priya is any representation, the future certainly looks bright. This young girl is outgoing, smart, and not afraid to speak her mind. When she grows up, she wants to become a doctor. Such assertions from a young girl in a rural village without toilets or regular water access might have seemed difficult to achieve in the past. But, this day, with knowledge about the importance of hygiene practices, a regular water supply, a toilet, and an empowered grandmother, her chances of achieving this goal are within reach.

If you would like more information about [Gramalaya](#) [1], please use the contact information below.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.gramalaya.in/>

[2] <http://www.gramalaya.in>

[3] <http://oregonstate.edu/>

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