Swastha Kanya
Saakshar Kanya

How caring for girls empowers Rural India
Please let me tell you about a dream come true. I am a young woman born in Uttarakhand who has longed for the complete emancipation of women.

Now, as Health Coordinator for Amrita SeRVe, I have been assigned the task of organising Swastha Kanya Saaksbar Kanya (Healthy Girls Educated Girls)—our movement to unite the people of our villages to give girls solid health care and education. The project is in support of the Government of India’s Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Campaign (Save the Girl Educate the Girl).

So as you can surely imagine, April 2017 was a big time for me because that was when we launched. And I wasn’t alone. I will never forget the words of Riya Salotra, an 18-year-old girl I met in Pandori, Jammu & Kashmir. She wants to become a police officer, a big hurdle for women.

“The future I wish to see for girls in our village is that they all should be given a good education,” she stated. “We should not have to rely on others. We should become independent.”

However, strength like Riya’s is not the current experience for the majority of village women.

Where Do We Begin?
Assessing the reality for village girls and women

by Bri. Swati Amrita SeRVe Health Coordinator

All around the world, heated discussions are arising about giving women an equal place to men in all spheres of society, according them the same respect and reverence. This is a welcome sign of change.

- Mata Amritanandamayi Devi
Their Voices

These stories are of girls and women from our villages.

Four-year-old Sita is not able to form proper sounds with her mouth. Her entire body is weak. This is likely due to the fact that she does not receive proper nourishment.

Pushpa refuses to go to school. She will only do housework or work in the fields. She doesn’t see any point in education, as she says she will only get married, do housework and take care of the kids.

Jyoti is a young married woman. She was assaulted by a local teenage boy who broke into her family’s home. She had the courage to run and tell others, so the boy was disciplined. However, all too often offenders go free.

46% of rural women are literate. This is compared to 71% of men.

47% of adolescent girls remain chronically hungry.

56% of adolescent girls are anaemic.

33% of girls are married before the age of 18. Only 5% of boys.

47% of adolescent girls remain chronically hungry.

But it doesn’t have to be this way.

Actions to support the health and education of girls have started in our villages across India. These are a few of the things that we have accomplished so far.

10,337 people have attended health awareness sessions

1581 children immunised for common ailments

2709 children taught proper handwashing

402 children out of 483 identified as underweight

3879 children in after school tuition and yoga classes at education centres

1191 people joined rallies for Swastha Kanya Saakshar Kanya

56% of adolescent girls are anaemic.

*Numbers are according to UNICEF except literacy, which is from the 2011 Indian Census.
Starting with the rally days in April 2017 made a huge impact. Women, men and children across the villages participated with full strength, proclaiming loud slogans for educating the girl child and taking care of her health. A better future for girls means a better future for all.

There was an unforgettable glow on the faces, and the crowds kept growing with people coming out of their houses to join in. Some of the women even had tears in their eyes. For many, it was a first time to gather in large numbers and show such courage.

“Now people are finally realising and changing their attitude,” said Bhagelu Pal a 70-year-old man in Sarai Nuruddinpur, Uttar Pradesh. He was happy and full of support for the girls and women.

Sometimes, though, the old attitudes could be seen. In some places, a few men outside shops would make comments such as, “All these women have no work. That’s why they’re doing such futile things.”

But the women and girls remained brave and simply moved on. All in all, about 1,200 people took part.

In school, the children study the stories of women who have made huge strides in breaking society’s barriers.

Sampath Pal, for example, is from a poor village in Uttar Pradesh. She started the Gulabi Gang—now a four lakh group that protests for women’s justice.

Shruti Kumar is a judge at the same court in Punjab where her father has been a tea seller much of his life. He had to take loans for his daughter to pursue her dream. In return, she worked with sheer determination and succeeded.

Students put on a play called Man ka Rogi. It portrayed the vital role that family plays in educating their children. The goal was to inform parents how education can truly bring a better future for all and also encourage them to take part in school activities.
Children are learning how to stretch, twist and instill peace in their hearts. Yoga classes are taught at education centres in the villages. In fact, at last count, about 1027 people were registered in ongoing study.

It can be a jump to convince students and parents that it is worthwhile to invest in the study of asanas and meditation. This is time that children can use for their school studies.

However, the fact of the matter is that as little as 20-30 minutes a day can actually support and increase a child’s physical and mental faculties to the point where it can improve their grades.

Of course, as is natural for children, they have a lot of fun in class as smiles spread across their faces. But the surprising thing is that they also attain meditation concentration very easily once they are properly trained on how to focus. Kids are good meditaters!

As a result, the quest for yogic practice resounds in the villages. In fact, 1,200 people took part in Amrita SeRVe’s festivities for the last International Yoga Day.

Let the Games Begin!

A healthy body brings a healthy mind

Kids jumped and ran and climbed throughout the day on August 29. It was the first time National Sports Day was celebrated in our villages. The event was given the name Amrita Bal Khel Pratyogita.

Elder students competed in athletics like 100 metre sprints and long jumps. Young ones enjoyed frog races and musical chairs.

As well, traditional games were a key part of the day from Kho Kho to Kabadi. SHG women also took part playing such things as Tug of War. Meanwhile, all ages ran fiesty lemon spoon races! Every participant was awarded with a prize for taking part in the day’s events. And of course, trophies for the winners.

The idea behind the gathering was to promote physical exercise, mental focus, and also a pure joy in life. The slogan encapsulates it all: Swastha Tan, Swastha Man—Health Body, Health Mind!

Now we will continue to encourage sports participation in village schools through intramural and interschool competitions.
One of our major focuses is the health of children and the right nutrition for them. Planting kitchen gardens at school is a way to teach them the value of healthy eating, which can then be shared with their families.

For example, a health session we held with teenagers in Indpur had more than seventy students. It addressed the topics of hygiene and sanitation, diarrhoea, making of oral rehydration salts, tobacco use and smoking prevention.

Children learn how to prepare organic compost and put manure to the land. They then study how to care for the fruits and vegetables with each child taking a different responsibility.

Harvest from the kitchen gardens is used in the midday meals at school. Children also see connection with nature and revive their relationship to Mother Earth.
Big Sister and Big Brother

Students are taking on the responsibility of monitoring the attendance of their classmates. They are known as bade bhai (big brother) and badi bhen (big sister). When students are absent for 3 days in a row, they alert the Amrita SeRVe Village Coordinator.

The coordinators then get in touch with families to find out what is happening. Children often miss school because they are called to work in the fields or in jobs to earn. The goal here is to speak with parents to convince them of the value of educating their children.

The Power of Words

No one should be left behind

“W hat used to bother me a lot was that many parents considered it a priority to send their children to graze the cows and goats,” explains Anju Singh, the Amrita SeRVe Village Coordinator in Madhya Pradesh.

These children would not attend school as they were gone from 8 am to 5 pm. No amount of persuasion from Anju’s side could change the parents’ minds. They would ask her, “Who will do this job then?”

Then along came Raju. He was a boy who asked Anju to start teaching reading and writing to him after work. He was determined.

“Before I knew it, the class size had grown. There were 10 children, and I was teaching Hindi to all of them,” says Anju with a smile.

“My dream is that all of these children grow up to be responsible members of society. I am also from a village and it’s because my parents motivated me to complete my college degrees that I am here today. No one should be left behind.”

Such tutoring and literacy programmes are happening for children in all of our villages. AmritaCREATE uses tablets to uniquely encourage studies.

Seedballs are a Start

For World Environment Day, children made seedballs, which are a mixture of mud, cow urine and cow dung to hold and nourish the seeds. The balls were planted throughout their communities and many sprouted a month later.

Adults Learning to Read

Literacy programmes for adults are gaining a foundation. In some villages, nearly every adult is illiterate. We hold sessions to explain the usefulness that reading and writing hold and that motivates people to attend, mostly women.
Menstrual Hygiene Day
Celebrate health and wellbeing

On International Menstrual Hygiene Day, people gathered in our villages to discuss female needs and to celebrate what it means to be a woman.

The theme was how to go from powerless to empowerment through education about the issues. More than 400 people in our villages—including men in some places—shared their thoughts.

Village women are learning how to stitch menstrual pads made from cotton. The pads are washed and reused and, with proper care, can last many years.

The pads have been given the brand name Saukhyam—Sanskrit for happiness and well-being. This new path to income generation holds great potential for women in the villages to earn as the popularity of cloth pads increases. Plastic pads are a huge pollutant in landfills around the world.

School girls in Telangana, for example, made the decision to use the pads. Five-hundred-fifty-eight Saukhyam Cloth Pads were delivered to KGBC School in Dharur. The pads were stitched by the Amritasree Bhagyalakshmi JLG, an Amrita SeRVe team in Kodur.

Real strength should come from within. If we are going to rely only on the external, there is no stability. In the olden days, the people of India’s villages knew their inner strength. They were also completely in tune with Nature, which lead to a full harmony of being.

With the goal of returning to these traditions in mind, it was in 2013 at Amma’s 60th birthday celebrations that she launched Amrita SeRVe - Self Reliant Village. In actual fact, this is a team effort. Both rural and urban people provide for each other. Amrita SeRVe’s goal is to join with India’s villagers so that they can understand their inner strength and from that foundation, achieve true self-reliance once again.

We work from seven focus areas so that we can reach all goals of development. These are health, water & sanitation, education, agriculture, income generation, eco-friendly infrastructure, and self empowerment.

AmritaCREATE works with us in the villages to provide support for child and adult learning. Their programme use tablets to target needs in remote areas. AMMACHI Labs conducts projects for village women’s empowerment. They are, for example, training women in toilet construction.
Amrita SeRVe has projects underway in 21 states across rural India. Our focus areas are health, water & sanitation, education, agriculture, income generation, eco-friendly infrastructure and self empowerment.