

# Power Panch

Chhavi Rajawat gave up corporate life to become sarpanch in a village in Rajasthan



JEAN- CLAD, sometimes looking elegant on horseback or sometimes driving an SUV, 30-year-old Chhavi Rajawat doesn't fit in with your idea of a village sarpanch. She's spent most of her life in the city: she went to college in New Delhi's Lady Sriram College and worked as corporate sales head at Radisson Hotel, Delhi, and Bharti Airtel, Jaipur. She also had a go at assisting her mother in their hotel business in Jaipur. Then one day, she was approached by villagers in Soda, her ancestral village in Rajasthan, to contest the sarpanch's post.

It's not common for the urban youth to get mixed up with village level government. But then, Rajawat has a sarpanch connection that goes back to her grandfather, Brigadier Raghubir

Singh — he was the village sarpanch for three consecutive terms. That was 20 long years ago, though.

Now, fed up with the corruption and the bad state of affairs, villagers from Soda insisted that Rajawat give it a shot and follow in her grandfather's footsteps.

Her family was more than happy to support her in her decision.

Nine months into the job, Rajawat finds herself running from pillar to post to generate money for her dream project — a huge water reservoir in a village that lacks potable water. With funds difficult to come by, the 100-acre project, costing ` 2.5cr, has run against a stone wall.

Rajawat, of course, expects such challenges to be part of her job package and she is all set to

present her proposal for more funds a second time at the next gramsabha meeting.

"The government has asked us to raise the money ( for the reservoir) ourselves since big machines are involved in the project.

I have approached many agencies, including corporate houses for help but they weren't forthcoming. I have managed to raise some money from my business, friends and family, but I have no clue where the rest will come from," says a worried Rajawat. Besides, a water reservoir, Soda is also in dire need of good roads and a revamp of the village schools.

WHAT made her leave a corporate job to opt for the heat and dust of the village? Becoming a sarpanch was more by coincidence than design. "When

the villagers approached me and said that there were 18- 19 women wanting to contest and that it was splitting the village along caste lines, I didn't have any choice but to accept," says Rajawat. By the time she filed her nomination, there were only two others in the fray, as the others had withdrawn their candidature.

"It shows their trust in me," says a proud Rajawat.

For those who rue that GenX is far removed from the reality of rural India, Rajawat's focus on a master plan for the village's development should provide some comfort. The plan includes introduction of vocational training courses in schools. "I am here with a purpose and I am fully aware of my responsibility," she says. But she is disappointed that the sarpanch has such a limited role in policy decisions.

"We are like puppets. The panchayat can only suggest projects, the nod has to come from above," she says. Not that Rajawat is easily disillusioned — but yes, she wants more educated youngsters to come forward.

"The system isn't as hopeless as we think. Only the negatives get highlighted, but there are good people and we can change things," she assures.

The last nine months have been a learning experience for Rajawat. In charge of schemes under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act ( NREGA), she has realised that it takes a lot sometimes to bring about discipline among villagers. "I have to constantly monitor their work. Under NREGA, they are paid a daily wage of Rs 100, but there is no awareness or any guidelines.

Sometimes, the villagers take their pay without turning up for work," says Rajawat. However, the villagers don't take it to heart when the strict Bai- Sa ( village head woman) asks them to abide by the rules. "They understand perfectly because they consider me as their daughter," says Rajawat. The challenges are many, but with the villagers behind her, Rajawat is prepared to face it.

Rajawat says her stint in a management college came in very handy while planning the project, mapping and estimating costs. Being a woman makes a difference too.

"Women are at ease discussing their problems with me — say about a toilet or things they don't like discussing with men," she adds. But being a woman also brings with it challenges, like fighting the male ego. "I can sense the disquiet among men, not in this village, but outside.

There is resistance from male officers too. They can't see a woman at the helm," she says.

Was it difficult for this citybred woman to come to terms with village life? "I am used to most things now. But when my friends come visiting, they find it very difficult, especially with the erratic power supply," says Rajawat, who spends at least 25 days in a month in the village.

Her father, Narendra Singh, her source of inspiration, accompanies her too. Rajawat loves to unwind with her horse, Magic, when she is not working. She also runs Equest — a riding academy at her farmhouse in Jaipur — along with her business partner. Marriage is not on the cards, at least for now. Her dream is to see a self-sufficient village, and she is working towards it.