Jayanti Laghuri - a champion community health worker saving lives in tribal Odisha

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For the tiny Munda tribe community that lives deep inside the Cuttack jungle, 30 kilometers from the nearest health post, without any electricity or water supply—access is often its biggest struggle.

The night of December 11, 2016 was a night of similar struggles. Geetanjali Dehuri, 24 year old, had gone into labor in the middle of that winter night. Forest officials had issued a warning and closed all movement through the forest, as a herd of wild elephants was passing through. The chances of getting Geetanjali to the health facility in time for her delivery got grimmer by the minute.
Gouranga Dehuri, Geetanjali’s husband, moved around frantically to catch a steady connection on his mobile phone. He was trying to call Jayanti Laghuri, the ASHA worker (Accredited Social Health Activist or Community Health Worker) of his village. Once Jayanti knew of Geetanjali’s condition, he was confident that she would help. Unable to get through, he tried calling for an ambulance. That got through. He asked the ambulance to bring Jayanti along.

That December day, Jayanti Laghuri had had a long and exhausting day. She had walked miles to visit one of the villages she served and had gone house to house to speak with new brides, pregnant women, husbands and other family members. Having inquired about their well-being she had informed them about ways to improve their nutrition and sanitation. She had spoken about merits of family planning and reminded the parents of their children’s immunization dates. Urging the families of pregnant women to take them to the hospital for delivery she had also communicated to them, “the hospital has all necessary and clean instruments and trained providers to care for you. They can take care of anything that goes wrong”. Having been an ASHA for more than a decade, Jayanti had become a familiar and trusted person in the community. The villagers liked to keep her mobile phone number handy, often scribbling it down on pieces of paper or at the back of the antenatal cards.
It was well past midnight. Jayanti had just fallen asleep when she heard the sound of the ambulance. The driver told her about Gouranga’s call. She sensed the panic and knew she had to be there to help Geetanjali. She hurriedly got ready and sat in the ambulance. But the vehicle had hardly gone half a mile when the forest officials stopped them from going further. They were asked to wait till the wild elephants would pass through.

It was 5 am by the time Jayanti and the ambulance reached Geetanjali’s hut. Geetanjali had already delivered and the newborn was active and crying. But Jayanti sensed the need to take Geetanjali to the hospital. She scooped the newborn in her arms and told Gitanjali’s husband of her decision to which, he agreed.

It took them two hours to reach the nearest health post, the Community Health Center (CHC) at Tangi. This sixteen bedded health facility is being supported through USAID’s Maternal and Child Survival Program (MCSP) in India. “When Geetanjali was brought to the facility, her placenta had not been delivered”, says Nurse Kalyani Mishra who assessed the situation quickly and managed the safe delivery of the placenta, which could otherwise have led to postpartum hemorrhage, a condition which would have caused Geetanjali to bleed uncontrollably, risking her life. The providers at CHC Tangi commended Jayanti’s resolve to get Geetanjali to the hospital and get her timely care, which saved her life.

“When Geetanjali was brought to the facility, her placenta had not been delivered”, says Nurse Kalyani Mishra
In India, like in many other parts of the world, ASHAs like Jayanti are the closest link between the community and the public health system. Being from within the community gives them an edge over all other health workers. It is often their efforts that help families adopt better health seeking behavior, which in turn, helps communities thrive.

It is for this reason that ASHAs play a vital role in MCSP, USAID’s flagship program aimed at ending preventable maternal and child deaths. MCSP is contributing to India’s FP2020 commitments by providing technical assistance to the Government of India to expand access to Family Planning services, with quality as a key ingredient. Built on the tenets of informed choice, respectful care, community participation and gender sensitivity, MCSP is establishing a model for delivering quality services in 186 facilities in the states of Assam, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra and Telangana through development and introduction of client-centric quality improvement tools that will help improve the provision of FP services.

Instilling informed choice and voluntarism in delivery of FP services across all levels of the health system, including the community level, MCSP is engaging ASHAs and Assisted Nurse Midwives by orienting them on quality, focusing mainly on counseling for FP in all focused districts. Across twelve districts in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, around 30,000 ASHAs like Jayanti are being oriented to understand quality and respect and its importance for the community they serve.
Jayanti has visited the family many times after the mother and child returned from the hospital. “Jayanti Didi (meaning elder sister) has asked me to look after my nutrition, eat four to five times a day and to include green vegetables and lentils in my meals. She has told me that I should breastfeed for at least six months. She has also shared with me information on various family planning methods that I could choose from to delay my next pregnancy. I listen very carefully to Didi’s advice and follow it to the core.”

Jayanti Laghuri is a champion who defies all odds to help her community members live healthy lives.

“When I decided to become an ASHA worker I just wanted to serve people. I had this dream since I was very young and I am living it right now”, concludes this amazing woman as she returns her attention to the villagers who have gathered around her, this time to learn from her the importance and correct technique of washing hands.