

**Success story of a young panchayat president who took innovative measures to re-build her tsunami-devastated village**

## Woman panchayat president sets tsunami-hit village on development path

**N**agapattinam (Tamil Nadu): Undaunted by the 2004 tsunami devastation virtually wiping it out, the coastal Vizhundamavadi hamlet near here has now emerged as a model village with all-round development thanks to the determined efforts of its young woman panchayat president.

The most backward village, located 20 km from here and in close proximity to the sea, was one of the worst affected by the killer waves of 26 December 2004 tsunami which claimed 19 lives and left thousands homeless, washing away their belongings. And life became a question mark for the 5,000-odd residents, most of them fishermen, but local panchayat president Radhamani, elected to the post in 2006, has ensured a total turnaround by implementing various development schemes with the cooperation of government and non-government organisations.

Radhamani (30), who has studied up to 12th standard, had done the village proud with her astute management of the finances and tapping of NGOs for development works. Recognising her efforts, District Collector T.S. Jawahar has recommended her name for the Uthamar Gandhi Award, given to presidents of panchayats for innovative methods adopted to excel in the implementation of welfare measures. The award carries Rs five lakh cash prize, a certificate and a shield.

Narrating the success story of the village at a recent

interaction of nine women panchayat presidents sponsored by The Hunger Project, a global strategic organisation committed to empowering women and men to wipe out hunger, Radhamani said she had no prior experience in panchayat administration when she was elected to the post. But, she showed utmost interest to improve the village, which has a population of 5,810, including 2,845 women and 415 Dalits. The panchayat comprised four hamlets of Vadapathy, Thenpathy, Thambiran Kudi Iruppu and Manalmedu. Radhamani had also been able to provide sufficient number of street lights, to undertake desilting works in ten tanks of the village for harnessing water for development of fishing and to increase the panchayat's income through leasing of the tanks for fishing. Seeking to exploit bio-fuel potential for generating more income to the panchayat, she took the initiative to plant 10,000 saplings of jetropa, from which diesel could be made, by utilising funds under the government's Anna Marumalarchi scheme. In a mass contact meeting held in the village on 13 December, 2006, in which District Collector was present, various demands for basic facilities were raised and redressed by the Collector immediately.

With the help of Avvai Welfare Society, an NGO, Radhamani installed tsunami warning equipment in the panchayat office to alert people to move into places of safety from seashore. The panchayat president, who had undergone training for implementation of the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, took care in ensuring that unemployed poor villagers were engaged in works such as desilting of tanks and drainage channels.

Radhamani dedicates her success to her husband, who had been a councillor, saying she could do all this only because of the 'valuable guidance' given by him.