



POLITICS CHAVVI RAJAWAT

The Will Do Lady

TEXT: URMILA MARAK

An MBA graduate is India's youngest village head in Soda, Rajasthan

With her long tresses and willowy figure, Chhavi Rajawat can easily pass off as a slinky model or a Bollywood actor. But instead this MBA from Pune has donned the role of a *sarpanch* or a village head of Soda, 60km from the state capital Jaipur, located in District Tonk, one of the most backward areas of Rajasthan. Only it's not a role. This is real life for the thirty-year-old, clad in jeans and a T-shirt, driving her jeep to supervise the desilting of an old water body or taking a municipal officer to task while villagers listen to her with respect and sometimes shock. It was the same feeling Rajawat encountered when she addressed the 11th Info-Poverty World Conference at the UN when she spoke of the imperatives of

including new technologies in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

This grit and glamour is all in a day's work for Rajawat ever since she left her senior management position with Airtel group's Bharti Televentures to return to her roots. Last year, Rajawat contested the *panchayat* elections and won with a handsome margin following in the footsteps of her grandfather Raghbir Singh who had been *sarpanch* of Soda for 15 years. "It was primarily the love, faith and respect for my grandfather, who also looked after the development of this area, that people here wanted someone from the same family to stand for elections," she says with her trademark candour. Since Soda is a seat reserved for women, Rajawat faced competition from 18 other women candidates who had whittled down to 2 as voting day drew closer.

A popular leader she is constantly helped by numerous villagers as she implements her projects.



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Rajawat's priorities include ensuring safe drinking water for the villagers in this acutely saline-prone area besides building water harvesting structures. In charge of implementing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Soda, she is also trying to increase job opportunities by involving NGOs. "For the reservoir revival project, which covers an area of 100 acres, I thought I would receive support from NGOs and corporate houses," explains the young *sarpanch*. But the response was slow. She needs ₹ 35 million for the project but as yet has been able to collect only ₹2 million with help from her immediate family and friends. "In spite of the number of rural development schemes on paper the villagers are still suffering and struggling. Someone has to take steps to fix it," she says.

In many ways, Rajawat's MBA degree has helped in putting Soda in the public eye. The *sarpanch* has been able to tap well wishers for funds even strangers have contributed to her efforts after hearing her interviews on the radio. "The degree has also helped me plan things and also made government officials realise that I mean business and I am not here to kill time," she says.

The thought of her contemporaries in the corporate world earning the big bucks doesn't faze her. "I have no regrets because the satisfaction I receive from being able to execute projects and improve the lives of

10,000 plus people is far more than any fat salary can bring me," she says.

Rajawat has already been instrumental in opening the first bank in Soda but her to-do list remains packed. Water conservation, water management are top items followed by sanitation, reforestation, electrification, education, with a huge emphasis on primary education and focussed vocational training and schemes for self-employment.

Grassroots politics has always inspired Rajawat. Still, being a *sarpanch* is not exactly a remunerative career path. So this young politician-cum-entrepreneur, together with a friend, who has represented India in international equestrian championships, has taken her love for the great outdoors and her passion for horses by teaching horse riding in the Equest Horse Riding Academy. In between, her packed schedule she also looks after the family hotel in Jaipur.

Educated in Rishi Valley, Bengaluru and Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi and then Pune, Chhavi represents the new face of pan-India: Educated, committed and community-oriented. The road ahead is daunting but just after a year-and-a-half as a *sarpanch*, Chhavi is confident that within three years she will be able to transform her village and bring about the change that Soda as yet has been only dreaming about. ■

More on Chhavi Rajawat at www.soda-india.in