



BARLI DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE FOR RURAL WOMEN

An Alternative Model of Women's Empowerment in India

by *Janak Palta McGilligan*

This Bahá'í-inspired project empowers young rural and tribal women in India for the betterment of their communities.

Rural and tribal women continue to struggle against poverty and discrimination and their negative ramifications – high female and infant mortality rates, malnutrition, illiteracy and gender inequality. This book by the recently-retired Director of the Barli Institute examines how applying Bahá'í principle facilitates the process of sustainable community development. The transformation of these women from victims of discrimination to positive agents of social change is the basic theme of the book.

The fundamental principle on which the Barli programme is based is gender equality: the Institute aims to facilitate change in the traditional attitudes, mindset, and practices that impede efforts to establish equality. One of the ways to achieve this is to increase the capability of women to generate, apply and diffuse knowledge at the individual, family and community level.

It is universally accepted that the training and education of women has a profound effect on the thoughts and behaviour of the next generation, because mothers are the first educators. This implies equal gender rights of education, training and opportunities for being decision-makers at all levels, in form and in spirit. Changing the attitudes of all those who deny this spiritual and social justice to women is necessary.

Women are also a potent and motivating force in sustaining community development. Focusing mainly on young women from tribal communities of the western districts Jhabua and Dhar of the state of Madhya Pradesh, the book describes how the life-cycle approach of the Institute channels this force through a curriculum that is useful at all stages of life. The young women are trained in skills that they use themselves and teach to others; in this way hundreds of lives have been made better, in health, sanitation, diet, income and happiness.

This book is not only an analysis of the Barli Institute's work over the 25 years of its existence – it is an inspiring account of an effective and practical approach to empowering the powerless.

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SPECIFICATIONS

ISBN: 978-0-85398-558-7
 Soft Cover
 200 pages
 216 x 138 mm (8.5 x 5.5 ins)
 £14.95 / \$27.95

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