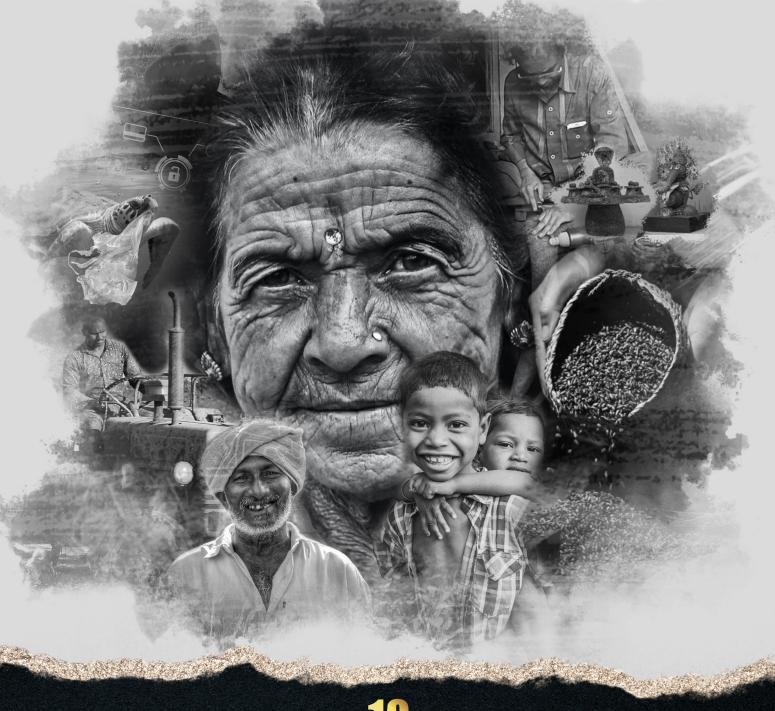
# A Slice of DIA DIA

10 Themes. 10 Stories. 10 Days.



YEARS OF 6

GONNECTION
YOUR CONNECTION WITH RURAL INDIA

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\*Gaon Connection and Gaon Connection Insights are part of The Slow Movement.

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#### ONLINE GAMING AND GAMBLING

The number of children who are addicted to gaming for stakes and online gambling is increasing and many of them are dying by suicide as they lose money online.

**BRIJENDRA DUBEY** 

CHHATTARPUR (MADHYA PRADESH) AND MIRZAPUR (UTTAR PRADESH)

ast year, on August 2, when Preeti
Pandey left for work after having breakfast with her son, little did she know it was going to be the darkest day of her life.

"He came with me up to the gate, and said 'Bye' to me. There was nothing in his demeanour to suggest he was disturbed," Preeti who lives in Chattarpur in Madhya Pradesh, told Gaon Connection.

That day, her 12-year-old son died by suicide.

The boy's father, Vivek Pandey, said that his son had fallen prey to an online shooting game called 'Free Fire' which is played on a mobile phone and requires money transaction. "I found out that he had spent Rs 40,000 from his mother's bank account for an online betting transaction for a game," he told Gaon Connection.

"I wish such online games would be banned completely," said Vivek who struggled to even file an FIR after his son's death. "I learnt how the government has no mechanism to control digital gambling. Even registering an FIR [first information report] wasn't easy. I had to mobilise the support of a lot of influential people to do so," he said.

India has around 420 million active online gamers and the Indian online gaming sector is growing at nearly 30 per cent annually. This industry is slated to grow to five billion dollars by 2025.

Gambling is illegal in India but online gaming for stakes remains a grey area. Internet gambling and online gaming, such as Free Fire, Rummy, Roulette, Black Jack, and Indian Flash, have ensnared hundreds of thousands of children, say the concerned families of children.

As the internet and smartphones penetrate deeper into the villages of India, a large number of rural youth are falling prey to these virtual games that have almost nil regulation. And an alarming number of them are dying by suicide.

"The internet penetration in the countryside is unprecedented but there is absolutely no awareness amongst the rural residents about the potential risks of online gaming and gambling. The unaware villagers are easy targets for such online games. The social impact of gambling especially amongst the younger people is distressing," former Member of Legislative Assembly from Uttar Pradesh's Mirzapur Lalitesh Pati Triptathi told Gaon Connection.



He isn't wrong. In July this year, a 22-year-old from Manpur village in Kendrapara, Odisha, took his own life after losing money in online gaming. Two months later, in September, a 21-year old engineering student in Vapi, Gujarat killed himself after losing money in online gambling.

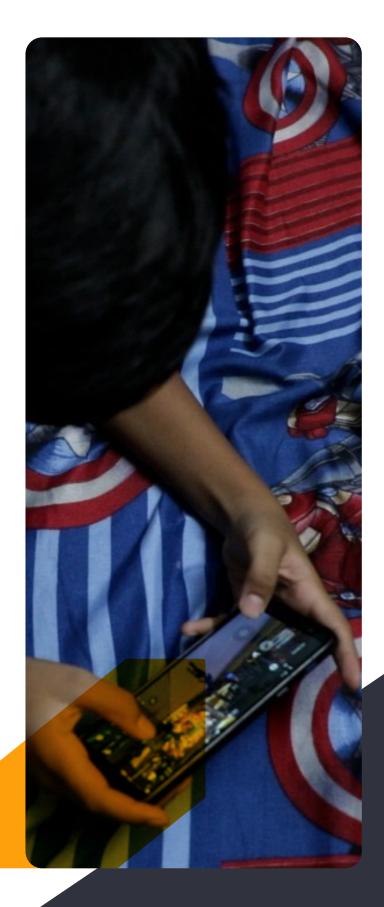
Shockingly, in January this year, an 11-year-old died by suicide in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, after losing money to online gaming.

"There has been a rampant rise in the cases of online gaming and gambling addiction. It is a compulsive disorder in which the patient feels intense cravings despite repeated loss of money," Pooja Singh, a clinical psychologist at Mirzapur District Hospital in Uttar Pradesh, told Gaon Connection.

There is no clear legal differentiation between online gambling and online gaming (for stakes). Promoters of the latter call it entertainment and not gambling as it comes under 'the games of skill' and not chance, they say.

But those who have lost huge amounts of money have been driven to suicide. It is a frightening situation.

Getting addicted to online gaming is not necessarily a long drawn out process. Retribution is often swift, as Pawan Ahirwal from Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, found out, tragically. His younger brother, 20-year-old Aman Ahirwal, died by suicide on September 4 this year, within a week of taking to gambling online.



"He got a new phone last year and only recently began playing teen patti online. He had borrowed almost Rs 50,000 from relatives and friends. He lost about Rs 40,000 in gambling. After almost a week of playing this game, he killed himself," Pawan Ahirwal, told Gaon Connection.

Distraught parents and family members have nowhere to turn to, and they do not know how to seek justice or find closure as there is no comprehensive legislation to control or monitor these digital platforms.

Distraught parents and family members have nowhere to turn to, and they do not know how to seek justice or find closure as there is no comprehensive legislation to control or monitor these digital platforms.

# BILLION DOLLARS INDUSTRY BUT NO REGULATION

In India, the archaic Public Gambling Act, 1867, governs penalties for "public gambling". So, most of the online gaming portals which involve an element of betting or gambling, promote their product as a game of skill rather than a game of chance.

This online gambling vs gaming debate has led to the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) issuing the biggest show cause notice of Rs 21,000 crore in the history of indirect taxation to a Bengaluru-based online gaming company, Gameskraft Technology Private Ltd (GTPL). The latter has already challenged the notice in the Karnataka High Court.

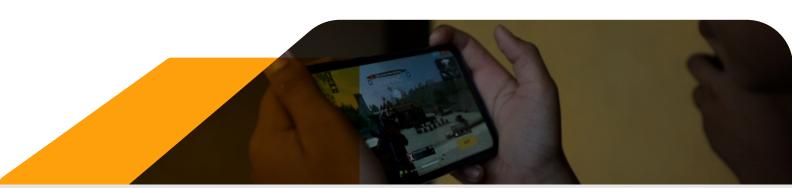
There is a two-tier rate structure for online gaming — 18 per cent in case of game of skill and 28 per cent in case of game of chance. Most online gaming companies levy GST (Goods and Services Tax) at 18 per cent, claiming it is a game of skill.

However, the DGGI feels that it is a game of chance. So, 28 per cent GST needs to be levied. This matter has been subjected to various writs and remains embroiled in legal controversies.

Meanwhile, the 1867 act remains toothless in dealing with online gambling and gaming for stakes.

"Although Section 13 of the Public Gambling Act, 1867 is applicable to such crimes [online gaming for stakes], it is not very effective in curbing online gambling and gaming,"

Narayanji Upadhyay, a Mirzapur-based lawyer, told Gaon Connection. Echoing Upadhyay's comments, Manish Tripathi,



another lawyer from Mirzapur mentioned that the law in place to check gambling (Public Gambling Act, 1867) is too outdated and has a maximum punishment of Rs 600 and an imprisonment up to a year.

"The youth is getting hooked to online gambling and the law we have to prevent such anti-social practices is way too old to make a dent in the multi-billion gaming and gambling industry in this country," Tripathi told Gaon Connection.

Last December, Member of Parliament (MP) Sushil Kumar Modi from the Bharatiya Janata Party, while introducing the topic on the need to legislate in order to regulate the online gaming industry in India, admitted that online gaming has surfaced as a 'big addiction' and demanded it needed to be regulated.

"Online gaming is becoming a big addiction. I would like to highlight that this sector, like the crypto industry, has regulatory lacunae. I would urge the government to bring a uniform tax on online gaming. I urge the government to make a comprehensive framework of regulation for online gaming," Modi said in Rajya Sabha on December 3, 2021.

Also, on April 1, this year, Congress MP Dean Kuriakose introduced the Online Gaming (Regulation) Bill, 2022, to 'establish an effective regime to regulate online gaming industry to prevent fraud and misuse and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto'.

The Bill mentioned that India has

around 420 million active online gamers and the industry is slated to grow to five billion dollars by 2025.

An inter-ministerial task force set up to explore new regulations for online gaming has recently recommended central legislation to govern it, calling the Public Gambling Act of 1867, which currently covers it, incapable "of covering/ defending/dealing" with digital-based activities and the emerging technologies associated with it.

It is also proposed to set up a central regulatory body for the sector, clearly defining what games of skill and chance are, and bringing online gaming under the purview of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, among other things.

But, for now, the billion-dollar industry remains unregulated and the ordinary citizen is paying the price for it.

#### ONLINE GAMBLING AND A TRAIL OF DEATH

It is not just children, even young adults are taking their own lives after losing money in online gambling and online gaming for stakes. A quick Google search on the topic throws up several such news reports. In October this year, a 21-year-old engineering student in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh died by suicide after incurring a loss of Rs 80,000 in online gaming.

The same month a 26-year-old allegedly died by suicide after falling into a debt trap due to online gambling at Malakpalli village in Hanamkonda

district of Telangana. In June this year, came another shocking incident of a 29-year-old mother of two toddlers dying by suicide in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She reportedly lost Rs 10 lakh in online rummy.

Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu was in the news in May this year when a 20-year-old NEET aspirant took his own life after losing money in online gambling.

In February, a 25-year-old student killed himself in Indore because "he had taken a loan to play some online games that offered prize money. But he kept on losing money in these games and failed to repay the loan."

All these cases of death by suicide are just the tip of the iceberg of addiction and debt trap due to online gaming, a fast-growing sector that remains unregulated despite the huge human cost.

#### STATES ENACT THEIR OWN LAWS, BUT...

At present, India has just one central law of 1867 that governs gambling in all its forms. Gambling is largely a state subject in the country.

Tamil Nadu: In October this year, the Tamil Nadu Assembly passed a Bill moved by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to prohibit online gambling and to regulate online games in the state. The government had established a committee under former Madras High Court judge K Chandru to investigate the rise in suicides. In June 2022, the committee had recommended banning online games.

However, due to a delay in the Governor's assent, the Bill expired. The Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Online Gambling and Regulation of Online Games Ordinance, 2022 was promulgated on October 3, 2022 to prohibit online gambling and online games of chance played for stakes.

Telangana: The state of Telangana banned all forms of gambling, including online gambling, in 2017. It enacted the Telangana Gaming (Amendment) Act, 2017 for the same. But, as per news reports, the state government is considering rethinking the ban as the gaming industry could contribute to the state's economy and could be an important source of employment.

Karnataka: Last year, Karnataka introduced changes in the Karnataka Police Act that deals with online gambling and banned all forms of gambling in the state, including online gambling, in order to "curb menace of gaming through the Internet, mobile apps".

However, in February this year, the Karnataka High Court struck down the law that banned online gaming. The next month, in March, the state government moved the Supreme Court of India. The apex court on September 16 issued notices to skill-based gaming companies and industry bodies on the Karnataka government plea.

The Supreme Court bench has also clubbed the matter along with a similar case filed by the Tamil Nadu government against a Madras High Court judgement.

Among the respondents are skillgaming industry body All India Gaming Federation, self-regulatory fantasy sports industry body Federation of Indian Fantasy Sports, gaming firms Mobile Premier League, Games24x7, Head Digital Works, Junglee Games, and Gameskraft.

Kerala: Upon realising the rising popularity of online games like Rummy, on February 23, last year, the Kerala government issued a notification stating that "online rummy when played for stakes" would not be exempt from the provisions of the Kerala Gaming Act, 1960 which regulates gaming which is chance-based and not skill-based.

However, on September 27, 2021, the Kerala High Court overturned the Notification, and held that since rummy has already been found to be a game of skill by the Supreme Court, it is natural that it will enjoy the exemptions under the purview of the Kerala Gaming Act, 1960.

Some other states have also enacted their own laws but experts point out the need for a comprehensive and stringent central legislation to regulate the sector.

#### A SERIOUS ADDICTION

Online gambling and gaming addiction has come to assume frightening proportions, said Pooja Singh, a clinical psychologist at Mirzapur District Hospital in Uttar Pradesh. It is no different from substance abuse, she pointed out.

Singh said that a classical symptom of

such an addiction is fading interest in playing, studying, social interaction and hobbies.

"Other than substance abuse, addiction can also be caused by the brain's response to certain activities. The hormones dopamine and serotonin are hugely responsible for gambling addiction. And, as online gambling only requires a mobile phone and an internet connection, it is easy to access, and quick to become addictive," she said.

Vijay Nath Mishra, a neurologist working at Sir Sunderlal Hospital in Varanasi told Gaon Connection that a person dealing with addiction is treated with cognitive behavioural therapy but the chances of a relapse are high.

"Such persons, especially children cannot be reprimanded for gambling and be expected to quit it. It's a lot more complicated. The family members and peers have to be very supportive during treatment," Mishra said.

"Despite the best of the efforts, the relapse rate is very high for such patients. Almost 53 per cent of such patients revert to gambling later in life or even immediately after completion of therapy," the neurologist added.

According to clinical psychologist Singh, early intervention is the best way to control the addiction. The addict has to be helped to rediscover interest and happiness in everyday activities such as reading, playing or watching movies, once again. But, the whole family had to be involved in the process of de-addicting the patient, she said.







# THE BANANA FIBRE WEAVERS OF ANEGUNDI

A rural development society in the ancient village of Anegundi, Karnataka, uses locally sourced banana crop waste to make baskets, floormats, table runners and lampshades.

PANKAJA SRINIVASAN

ANEGUNDI (KOPPAL), KARNATAKA

huge canopy of trees casts a green shade over the Common Facility Centre of Hari Dharti Rural Development Society, in Anegundi village in Karnataka. On the cow-dung smeared ground at the entrance to it are elaborate rangolis and heaps of marigold flowers.

From within comes the hum of conversation from women who are dexterously weaving baskets, floor mats, coasters, etc., using ropes made out of banana crop waste.

"I dropped out of school in the seventh standard when I was 13, and was trained to weave and earn a living," Sofiya Begum, a 23-year-old inhabitant of Anegundi, told Gaon Connection. She was provided training by The Kishkinda Trust, to weave banana fibre into ropes and create an array of eco-friendly products.

Anegundi is an ancient village near Hampi, a UNESCO world heritage site. It was the original capital of the Vijayanagara Empire, dating back to the 14th century and earlier. Anegundi means the elephant pit, in Kannada, and it is believed that the royal elephants were bathed here. It falls in Gangavathi taluk of Koppal district over 370 kms north of the state capital, Bengaluru.

Sofiya Begum is now one of the 399

members of Hari Dharti Rural
Development Society, made up of
artisans and entrepreneurs from
Anegundi and other villages in the
Kishkinda region (immortalised in the
Ramayana epic as the abode of Vali
and Sugreeva the monkey kings, and
where Rama met Hanuman), around
the Tungabhadra river.

The Hari Dharti Rural Development Society was registered by The Kishkinda Trust in 2016, in order to create an ecosystem with the goal of having a society of small businesses in the area that would make its women members independent entrepreneurs. And importantly, to ensure the pristine environment is preserved and unexploited.

"The area around Anegundi is known for its banana plantations and the bark of the banana tree that is usually discarded is gathered by the makers of the rope. About 80 women of Hari Dharti make the finest quality of hand twisted rope in the country today that is greatly sought after," G Nandini, The Kishkinda Trust's craft-coordinator, proudly told Gaon Connection.

According to her, the banana fibre ropes made by the rural women are bought by design centres and other units across the country that use them for their products.



Sofiya, who is expecting her first child, picks up the bundles of rope from the common facility centre to take back home with her. "Each bundle has 200 metres of rope, and depending on the orders we have, I either weave two smaller baskets or one big basket a day for which I get paid Rs 200 a day," she said. On an average she makes about Rs 5,000 a month. More, if she works overtime.

"The ultimate aim of Hari Dharti is to build the capacity of entrepreneurs and small businesses at grassroots level and enable them to ultimately own and run them independently," Shama Pawar, who founded The Kishkinda Trust in 1997, in Anegundi, told Gaon Connection. The following year, in 1998, Pawar established a banana fibre craft initiative in order to develop local livelihood opportunities for women. Forming Hari Dharti was but a natural transition from that.

## THE BANANA ROPE MAKERS OF ANEGUNDI

T Pushpavathi who came to Anegundi after her marriage is also a member of Hari Dharti. "I have three daughters, aged 16, 15 and 8 years respectively, and the money I earn here helps me pay their fees and feed them well," the 33-year-old said, as she sat on the cool Cuddapah stone floor, next to a pile of banana fibre rope that her fingers deftly converted into a mat.



Pushpavathi earns Rs 200 a day. She works from 10 am to 5 pm with a break in between for lunch for which she goes back home. Sometimes if there is a big order, she takes work home and earns over time for that, she said.

As she measured lengths of banana-fibre ropes before handing them out, craft-coordinator Nandini said, "There are about 80 people who come regularly to the workshop and about 180-200 others who work from home making the banana fibre ropes that are then used in the craft items". If there are large orders, or new designs being introduced, more women join in.

Women are trained in making banana fibre and water hyacinth crafts. "The women come from the non artisanal community who have now become artisans. They are trained for at least six months, in order to acquire a degree of skill and ability," Nandini explained.

"We have been getting orders from design houses, hotels and the corporates. We send them an estimate. Once we have mutually agreed on it and we get an advance, we start production," Nandini added.

According to her the banana fibre baskets, floor mats, table runners and lampshades are a big draw.

"We also make small souvenirs of Hanuman [monkey god] out of the banana fibre and they are popular with tourists who visit this place," she said.

#### HERITAGE AND LIVELIHOODS

"We do not count our progress in the number of artisans who directly work with The Kishkinda Trust, but the number of livelihoods that are generated by the banana fibre craft industry that was set up in the Hampi world Heritage area," said Shama Pawar. The ultimate goal of the Trust is to become a training institute, which provides vocational training in various fields, she added.

For her, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Anegundi and the area near Hampi is a heritage site and of great historical significance. "I believe that in order to preserve and conserve its cultural landscape one must gainfully engage the local communities, repurpose heritage spaces and not isolate them or keep them under lock and key. Heritage is something dynamic, not stagnant and we must continuously reinvent and make it relevant," she said.

Currently, several workshops, training sessions, weaving and dyeing programmes and a souvenir shop buzz with activity. Some of the heritage



structures in the village have been repurposed and only recently a textile exhibition, called 'Red Lillies, Waterbirds', was held there.

Business incubators have been set up in restored traditional houses and this has led to the marriage of architectural conservation along with business enterprises that the local inhabitants maintain and manage.

According to Pawar, there are plans underway to mechanise the rope-making as they recognise there may not be too many takers in the future who will want to take on the cumbersome and time consuming task.

"We are developing a machine that will reduce the time and effort and at the same time the cost of second tier products that will be a lot less than the 100 per cent handmade ones," Pawar explained

"We are constantly working with new materials and whatever is available to us in terms of resources. It would be great to have design interventions from experienced people who are able to put systems into place for the local people so that the model is sustained," she said. If design and management institutes stepped forward to collaborate, this would go a long way in doing that, she said.

There is also a need for a large physical space which can become a training hub, a creative lab or an incubation centre, as most of the spaces Hari Dharti is using for its work are privately owned.

Pawar hoped that organisations such as NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) and NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission) would see the potential in the projects undertaken at Anegundi and extend their support, not just financially, but also towards skill development and expertise.

But there is already a change.

"This cottage industry has now had a ripple effect and more and more communities are independently replicating this model, not just in Anegundi, but other villages too. We take replication as a sign of success. When I first came here in 1997, there were rarely any women walking outdoors by themselves. Now we find them, walking tall, head held high, valuable members not just of their families, but also of the village, the district and ultimately the nation," Pawar said.







# THE SINKING FEELING IN JOSHIMATH

Joshimath in Uttarakhand has both religious and tourist significance. But several villages in the area are slowly subsiding, say the local villagers and scientists who have studied the region. Houses have developed cracks.

MEGHA PRAKASH

JOSHIMATH (CHAMOLI), UTTARAKHAND

eha Saklani is worried sick. While early morning mists blanket the mountains, and the thick warm clothes are out in preparation for the winters, Neha, who lives in the picturesque Sunil village of Joshimath, fears that this year's winter snow may be the downfall of her roof.

Not only is the roof of her house caving in, but the brick-and-cement walls of her home also have developed deep cracks. The college-student said that the ground beneath the foundations of her house was sinking. As a temporary measure to support the roof, her family has erected bamboo pillars.

"The house may collapse anytime, so we quickly clean, bathe and cook before heading out," she told Gaon Connection. She has been given strict instructions by her mother not to venture indoors till all the family members are back home in the evenings.

The college-student is not the only one worried. Her cousin, Ismit Saklani, who lives in the same village, is concerned too."If our house collapses, we will have no place to go. No one from the local administration seems to be taking any note about the seriousness of the situation," Ismit told Gaon Connection.

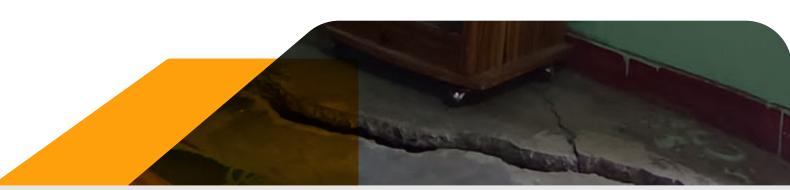
Cracks have appeared on the walls of a shop he owns and he lives in fear too as he comes from a joint family with limited resources or income. A collapsed home or shop would be disastrous, he said.

Not too far from Sunil village is Ravigram, a ward in Joshimath block of Chamoli district, where the inhabitants are living under constant fear. There are about 150 homes in the village that the rural inhabitants claim are slowly sinking.

"Though, the cracks began to appear in 2020, the frequency and depth of the cracks increased after the Raini flood on 7 February 2021," Sumedha Bhatt, a mother of two said worriedly.

Joshimath in Uttarakhand has both religious and tourist significance. The Narsingh temple in Joshimath is the winter seat of lord Badrinath and every year hundreds of thousands pilgrims visit it. Joshimath is also a major tourist destination. Auli, the winter sport capital of Uttarakhand, is barely 16 kilometres from Joshimath. But, the latter is slowly sinking, say local villagers and scientists who have studied the area.

"Joshimath is nestled over highly metamorphosed rocks, which are subjected to weathering by heavy and continuous rains," Debi Prasad Kunango, principal scientist with Roorkee-based Central Building Research Institute, pointed out to Gaon Connection.



The numerous perennial water sources that flow throughout Joshimath and adjoining villages, over the time strip off the upper layer of soil (sand, silt, clay) on the slopes and create huge gaps or cavities, which leads to the sinking, technically referred to as subsidence, Vikram Gupta, a landslide expert from Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Dehradun, explained to Gaon Connection.

Maximum sinking is observed in the wards of Ravigram, Gandhinagar and Sunil. Besides, extensive cracks and sinking is visible along the Auli-Joshimath road, as documented in a report submitted by an expert team of geologists, who surveyed the Joshimath area in August this year. This multi-institutional team was set up by the Uttarakhand State Disaster Management Authority. Piyoosh Rautela (Executive Director, Uttarakhand State Disaster Management Authority) and MPS Bisht (Director, Uttarakhand Space Application Centre), had cautioned of disastrous consequence of an underground tunnel dug by the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) for hydropower project in 2009. In the process of tunnel excavation, the machinery punctured the aquifer, resulting in discharge of about 60-70 million litres of water daily. In their report published in Current Science, they clearly stated that this large-scale discharge, the implication of which was negligibly visible around then, will lead to subsidence in future. Rautela was also part of the team who surveyed the area in August this year.



Recently, Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, a local non-profit, wrote a letter to the state chief minister informing him about villages subsiding in the Joshimath area. Members of the organisation, who belong to the local villages, have demanded stoppage of some road works, rehabilitation of those affected, and a survey of all the houses in the affected region.

Environmentalists are warning of a disaster brewing in Joshimath, which is yet to catch the government's attention. The road to Auli passes through ward Sunil, which is facing severe sinking. "If the town sinks it will displace around 25, 000 people," Atul Sati, convenor of the Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, told Gaon Connection. As per the census 2011, the population of Ravigram (2,920); Sunil (3,030); Gandhinagar (1,520); Singhdhar (2,300); Marwari (2,400), are the most affected.

# LOSING THE GROUND BENEATH THEIR FEET

"Our bathroom door has sunk about five to six inches, and we had to cut the door from below and raise the floor to accommodate the door now," 40-year-old Sumedha Bhatt of Ravigram told Gaon Connection. At night, wild bears frequent the area, and this is dangerous as many of the doors do not close due to gaps between the door and the 'chaukhat', she pointed out.

The problem of faulty doors has forced Neelam Bhujwan, of Kothi village in Ravigram ward, to move out of her family-owned home.

"The door can't be closed so I have rented a room for Rs 4,000. It is difficult because I depend on my husband's pension and a small salary as an assistant anganwadi worker," Bhujwan, who lost her husband recently, told Gaon Connection.

#### THE SCIENCE BEHIND SUBSIDENCE

The sinking of Joshimath is not a recent phenomena. It has been a dated problem but now after the flash floods of February 2021, the cracks have deepened.

There is a history of subsidence and fragility of this region, Saraswati Prakash Sati, a geologist and head, department of basic and social science, VCSG Uttarakhand University of Horticulture and Forestry, Rani Chauri, Gharwal, told Gaon Connection. "The terrain between Joshimath and Tapovan is situated on old landslide material and it was in the late 60s that the Joshimath began to subside at many locations," he said.

As far back as 1982, a report in the Journal of Photo-Institute and Remote Sensing, spoke of how the Sunil-Joshimath hill lay on an ancient landslide zone. The report also said that the area rested on giant boulders that were embedded in a loose sand-clay matrix.



The presence of springs in the vicinity led to excess seepage that caused the boulders to be displaced and led to local sinking.

The authors of the paper, A.
Bhattacharya and DK Jugran,
recommended checking slope and soil
stabilisation, and planting fast growing
vegetation. They emphasised the
importance of a proper drainage
system allowing water from springs and
smaller streams to flow unhindered
into the river Alaknanda

Added to erosion is the rapid urbanisation of the area. This, despite several reports on the dangers of over-building. Way back in 1976, alarmed by the urbanisation and erosion in the area, the Misra Committee set up by the then Uttar Pradesh government (till the year 2000, Uttarakhand was a part of Uttar Pradesh), submitted a report, a copy of which is available with Gaon Connection, where it clearly warned that there should be no further construction in the area until a proper examination of the stability of the site was carried out.

The committee also advised restricting excavations on the slopes for construction of houses, and preventing the removal of boulders and felling of trees in the landslide areas.

"Rapid urbanisation is putting a lot of

dead load on the vulnerable hill slopes of low-bearing capacity," Kanungo told Gaon Connection.

## HEAVY CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES

Too much construction has led to s everal large-scale landslides. Between 2009 and 2012, there were 128 landslides recorded in Chamoli-Joshimath region by CSIR's chief scientist, Kanungo. He published his findings in Landslides: Journal of the International Consortium on Landslides, in 2014.

In 2018, a report published in Current Science, highlighted major landslides in the region. It spoke of the massive landslide on 19 May 2017 at Vishnuprayag, the confluence of rivers Dhauliganga and Alaknanda, eight kms away from Joshimath.

The authors noted: "...The Hathi Parvat is a landslide prone zone because of the presence of loose boulders and large rock blocks on very steep slopes. The slope could fail in future due to triggering factors such as heavy rainfall, earthquake and anthropogenic activities. The road sector particularly from Chamoli to Badrinath is a high landslide prone zone due to weak geological formation, steep slopes, highly dissected topography, seismically active area and high rainfall...



#### PROTESTS AND AGITATION

There was a protest against construction of a tunnel for a hydropower project in Hathi Parvat in 1999-2000. The tunnel was to change the direction of the Alaknanda river to Joshimath. The underground tunnel was a part of the Rishiganga and Vishnugad hydro power projects.

Underground tunnels create cavities, said Kanungo. It was therefore important to understand the tunnel alignments. "It is essential to properly investigate and observe the area. And only after that engineering solutions or measures can be designed to check further subsidence," he said.

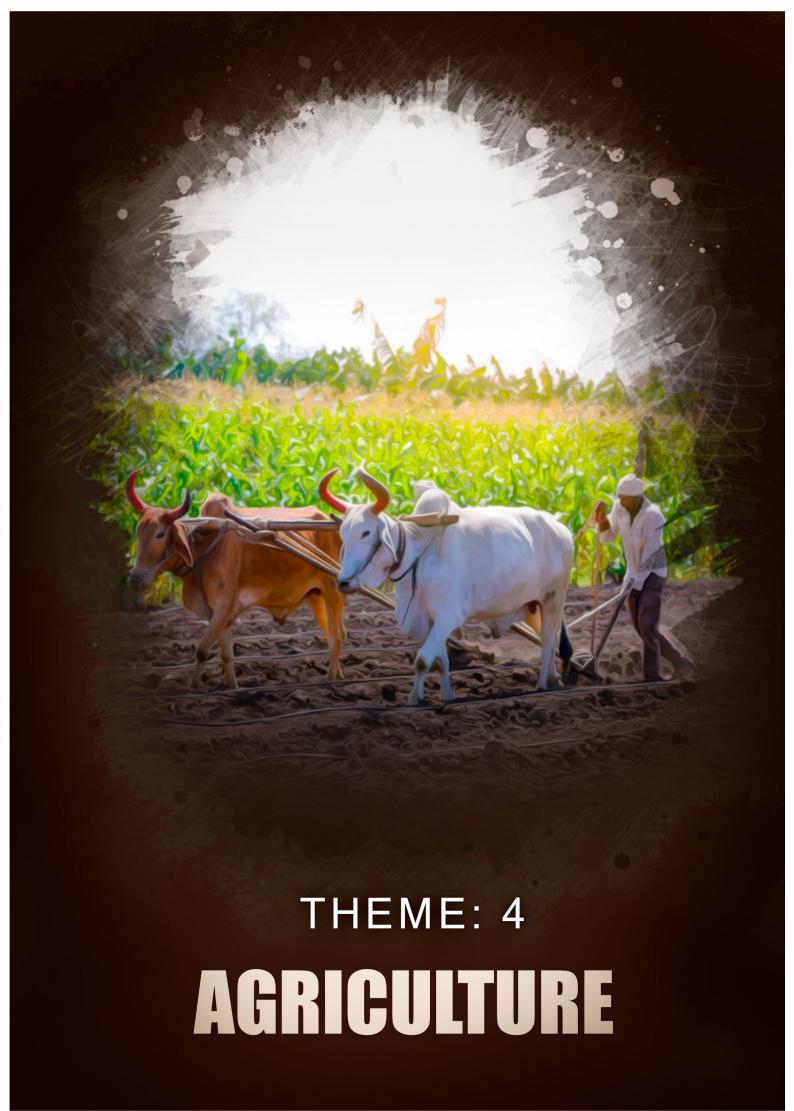
Kanungo feared that many development bodies such as the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) did not really understand the terrain, hill slopes or the cause behind landslides. This lack of awareness could be a source of great danger.

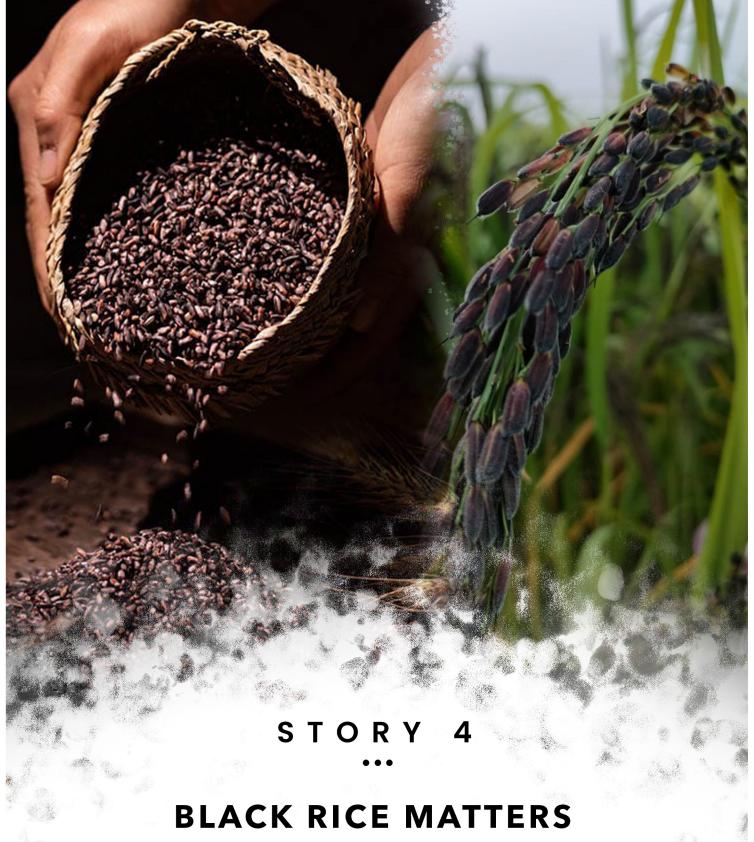
"Remedial measures need integration of knowledge on landslides into the infrastructure process," the scientist said, and added that just putting a retaining wall is not enough. Each landslide is different and its impact differs.

Environmentalists complain that recommendations by scientific bodies and experts seem to be falling on deaf ears. Joshimath still lacks a proper drainage system. And, a wide range of development projects are underway.

On 13 May 2022, the Supreme Court gave the nod to the construction of the Helang-Marwari bypass road. It is a 13-kms stretch before Joshimath. Under the All Weather Road project, the bypass will reduce the distance to Badrinath temple town by 30 kilometres.







# IN CHANDAULI

In 2018, paddy cultivation in Chandauli district of Uttar Pradesh took a new turn, when black rice grains were first introduced here. Farmers who cultivated it got good returns. But, a drop in demand has left huge amounts of the blackrice unsold.

PAVAN KUMAR MAURYA

CHANDAULI, UTTAR PRADESH

handauli in Uttar Pradesh is renowned for the rice it grows.
Drained by the Karamnas,
Chandraprabha and the Ganges rivers, and a wide network of canals, the fertile plains of the district are lush with paddy fields.

In 2018, paddy cultivation in the district took a new turn, when black rice grains were introduced here for the first time. Under the initiative of the Uttar Pradesh government, they were brought from Manipur in the northeast, where black rice or chakhao as it is locally known there, has been cultivated for years.

Navneet Singh Chahal, who was Chandauli's district magistrate then, brought 12 kilogrammes (kgs) of black rice seeds from Manipur at a cost of Rs 1,200 per kg and distributed them to 30 paddy farmers.

Pintu Pradhan, from Kanta Jalalpur in Chandauli, was one of the 30 farmers of the pilot project who first grew black rice in Uttar Pradesh. He told Gaon Connection how black rice cultivation looked so promising to the paddy farmers of Chandauli. But not anymore.

"Initially, the going was great. But, now I have unsold black rice lying in my house with rats and squirrels feeding on them. I have not been able to sell it," the 34-year-old farmer complained.

Pradhan said he would start only when its demand picked up and farmers were assured a market.

Sashikant Rai, a progressive farmer from Amda village who has been practising agriculture for a decade also spoke of the drastic drop in demand that has led to many farmers giving it up. But, he continues to grow black rice.

The government has done a lot to promote this nutritious variety of black rice from Chandauli. It has been added to the state government's One District One Product (ODOP) scheme, and has won the Prime Minister's Excellence Award in 2020-21.

According to data from the agriculture department of Chandauli, 150 kgs of black rice was produced in 2018 and 70 kgs of it was sold at the Prayagraj Kumbh Mela at Rs 70 a kilo. The rest of the rice was retained to be used for the following kharif season in 2019.

In 2019, the number of black rice farmers in the district increased from 30 to 200 and about 100 hectares of land came under black rice cultivation. That year, 1,129 quintals (1 quintal = 100 kgs) of black rice were harvested. The success of black rice cultivation in Chandauli gathered remarkable momentum, when about 1,600 quintals of the black rice in all (including earlier stocks), was



exported to Qatar, Australia, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates, and some other countries.

In 2020, there were 275 farmers growing black rice and they produced 1,300 quintals of which about 250 quintals were sold to companies in NOIDA, Sonepat and Mirzapur in 2021.

But, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic caught up, and the celebrations over black rice dimmed somewhat. Exports fell, and in 2021 only 500 quintals of rice were produced in the district, which is less than half of what was produced in 2019.

Many of the small and marginal farmers who took up black rice cultivation claim they have been unable to sell their crops. According to Basant Dube, district agriculture officer, Chandauli, there are more than 750 quintals of unsold black rice lying in the Chandauli mandi samiti, and the farmers are yet to be paid for it.

Dhananjay Maurya from Kanta Jalalpur village, who cultivated black rice, has stopped growing it now. "Milling of black rice is a problem. Authorities need to provide medium and small farmers access to proper milling and processing facilities," he told Gaon Connection. "Many of the small farmers dry the harvested paddy on rooftops or out in the open air. This can lead to the rice having grit and other impurities in them, which is unacceptable to the foreign markets," he added.



Dhananjay was also waiting for things to look up before he began recultivating black rice.

Black rice makes economic and ecological sense

According to the paddy farmers, cultivation of black rice requires relatively less inputs in terms of fertiliser and irrigation water, and its health benefits. That is the reason it costs more than regular varieties of rice.

"While the minimum support price of regular rice, depending on its variety and quality, goes up to Rs 2,500 per quintal, black rice has in the past sold for as much as Rs 8,000 a quintal and is currently selling at about Rs 5,000 a quintal," Rai said.

Some farmers are holding on to the hope that the demand for black rice will go up once again.

"There are more than two dozen of us who are cultivating black rice in this block. It involves less investment, yields well and is cultivated without any chemical inputs," Ramvilas Maurya from Manikpur Sani village in Barahni block in Chandauli told Gaon Connection.

"When we prepare an acre of land for regular paddy, we use 50 kgs of DAP (Rs 1,320), 25 kgs of urea (Rs 250), 15 kgs of potash (Rs 500), 10 kgs of zinc (Rs 300), and up to a litre and a half of herbicides (Rs 500)," Ramvilas said.

In sharp contrast, according to him, black rice requires no chemical fertilisers and the farmer can save at least Rs 3,000- 4,000 per acre on that. "Those of us who are growing black rice in this block are excited about it, as the rice is chemical-free, involves less expenditure and goes for a good price," he explained.

"The traditional rice varieties such as mussoorie yield about 17 to 19 quintals per bigha. The black rice yields about 10 quintals from the same area. Still, the profit made on black rice is more than the traditional grain," Achyutanand Tripathi, a farmer from Kandwa, told Gaon Connection.

"After deducting the cost of investment on cultivating the conventional rices like the musoorie, the profit lies at Rs 16,000 to Rs 17,000. Whereas a bigha of black rice can fetch the farmer about Rs 70,000 to Rs 80,000 profit," Tripathi pointed out.



## BLACK RICE: HEALTHY AND NUTRITIOUS

The black rice farmers in Chandauli say the rice is bursting with nutrients. "This is no ordinary rice. Black rice has immense medicinal properties beneficial for the human body," Ratan Singh, a paddy farmer from Sikhtha village in Chandauli, told Gaon Connection.

Ratan Singh listed the benefits of black rice. According to him, the rice was packed with protein, natural fibre, magnesium, iron, vitamin E, calcium, etc protein, iron, vitamin E, calcium, magnesium, natural fibre. "So, a kheer made with black rice, along with it being fragrant and tasty is also nutritious," the farmer said.

Cancer specialist Sashi Upadhay from Shri Shiv Prasad Gupt Divisional District Hospital in Kabir Chaura, Varanasi, endorsed the health benefits of black rice.

"It is nutritious and ideal for people of all ages to consume," he told Gaon Connection.

According to the oncologist, black rice had a lot more fibre, minerals and vitamins when compared to the conventional rice. "It is rich in antioxidants, and has anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties. The carotenoid content in the rice is good for eye health and medical research is pointing at its health benefits that could help cancer patients, too," Upadhyah added. The coating on the black rice has

Anthocyanins that gives the grain its black colour, he added.

#### PROMOTING BLACK RICE

Progressive farmer Rai felt that government intervention would go a long way in raising awareness and promoting production of black rice both in the state and across the country.

The government should promote the use of black rice as a health-giving grain. Some of the ways that can be done is by really pushing the consumption locally, he said.

"Black rice khichdi can be served to patients in the hospitals. FPOs [farmers producers organisations] can make chivda, laddoos and other value added products from black rice,"
Rai suggested.

There is already an FPO that is trying to promote black rice. "There are more than 450 farmers who are shareholders of our Chandauli Farmer Producer Company. The FPO provides the farmers who are cultivating black rice, technical know-how, seeds and marketing platforms," Virendra Singh, a farmer member of the FPO told Gaon Connection.

The members of the FPO (there are 15 FPOs in Chandauli) are eligible for several schemes introduced by the government such as financial help, technical assistance and good quality seeds, he added.

"Recently, under the ODOP scheme, farmers were given a 10-day training that included the best way to set up nurseries, taking care of the crop, crop cutting and how to market it well," said Virendra Singh.

If the government extended support to distribute black rice widely, it would be beneficial both to farmers as well as consumers, Ratan Singh pointed out.

"I request the prime minister and our chief minister to direct the public distribution system to give black rice in the rations. Even one kg of the black rice out of the total five kgs that is distributed, will go a long way," he said.

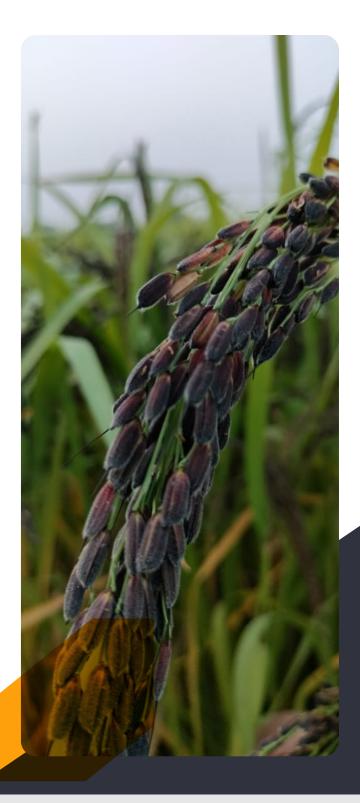
Serving black rice as part of the school midday meals, recommending it to pregnant and lactating mothers and serving it to children in anganwadis will improve the nutrition quotient of the population considerably, he continued. "The farmers will automatically find so many avenues to sell the produce," he said.

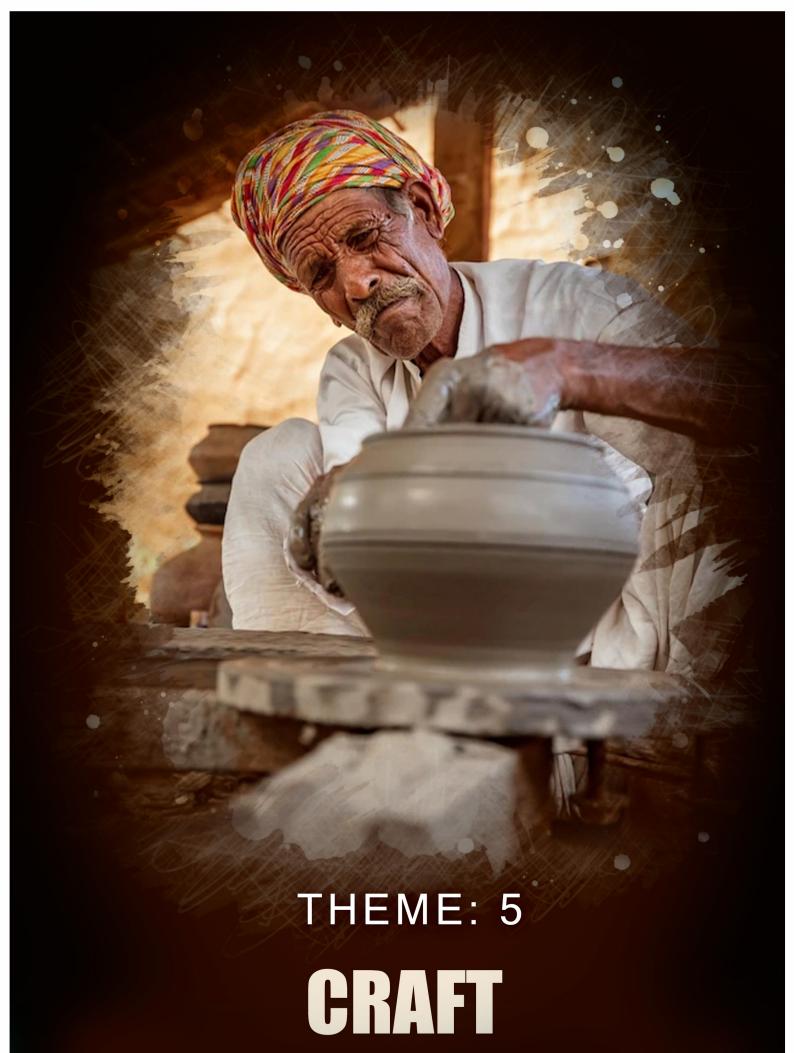
According to district agriculture officer Dubey, the administration was doing all it can to double the income of the farmers. "If the black rice is promoted as a medicinal grain and it is supplied widely enough, the farmers will find a huge market both within the country and internationally," he agreed.

In order to ascertain the health benefits of this black rice when compared to the regular rice, samples of it were sent to the International Rice Research Institute South Asia Regional Centre, in Varanasi, on November 11, earlier this month.

"Once we hear back from there, we will print the medicinal benefits of the black rice on the packets and promote it in tourist spots, farmers events, ODOP fairs, etc.," the district agriculture officer said.









# THE BETELNUT HANDICRAFT OF REWA

A single family has been the custodian of a unique craft from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, that requires them to carve figurines out of betel nuts. But the craft is in danger of disappearing altogether.

SHISHIR AGRAWAL

REWA, MADHYA PRADESH

akesh Kunder deftly carves a betel nut, and it transforms into a miniature wooden idol. The 47-year-old craftsman is the third generation of his family, from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, who does the work of creating these pieces of art from the tiny betel nut, also known as areca nut or supari.

"It was in 1932 when my grandfather, Ramsiya Kunder, used to serve paan and supari to the courtiers at the durbar of Maharaja Gulab Singh of the princely state of Rewa," Rakesh told Gaon Connection.

"My grandfather came up with the idea of making little sindoor dabbas (boxes to hold vermillion) which he also distributed at the court. The royalty loved it and my grandfather was rewarded with fifty rupees, as a token of appreciation," Rakesh said.

Ever since the family has been engaged in creating pieces of wooden art from the betel nuts, Rakesh, who has himself been doing it for the past 32 years, said.

Rakesh Kunder always has the idols of Lakshmi and Ganesha ready and available with him. "But the other things like the Taj Mahal, little lamps, animal figurines, etc., I make them on order," he said.

#### THE MAKING OF THE SUPARI TOYS

The craftsman said that he first selects the biggest betel nuts he could find in the market. Then, with the help of an electric tool, he carves the betel nut into the different parts of the toy he has in mind to make, and finally glues those parts together. And an eco-friendly supari toy is ready!

The price of each toy, idol or figurine depends on its size. They can cost anything upwards of Rs 600 (for a seven-inch artefact) They normally craft pieces that go up till about 13 inches. Anything larger is rare and they only do it on order.

According to the Kunder family, the craft is time consuming. It involves sitting on the floor for hours, focusing on a small nut, handling the electric tools with precision, and straining one's eyes to get the details on the miniature figure absolutely right.

"Our figurines are given as mementoes at all government and private exhibitions held in Rewa and the organisers always order them beforehand," Rakesh said with considerable pride.



The Kunder family has received a lot of recognition from their craft, but the pandemic caused considerable struggle for them.

"Our earnings almost came to a halt during the lockdown, and only now are things limping back to normal. This Diwali we sold nearly 120 pieces of our craft as events start opening up again, we are hoping to step up our work and earnings," Rakesh said.

## CRAFTSMAN SEEK GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Rakesh's uncle, Durgesh Kunder also practises this craft. "I started carving at the age of 15. This work is time consuming," 50-year-old Durgesh, told Gaon Connection. "While it is difficult to say how much exactly we earn per month as that depends on the size of the order, we have about a 50 per cent profit margin," he explained.

But the future of the craft looks bleak, said Durgesh. He feared that none of the younger generation was ready to take it up.

"We had made an offer to the government that we would teach the craft to people who were physically challenged and Chief Minister Shivraj Singh had also recommended that the craft be promoted, but all that has remained out of sight in some files, unseen," he said.



"A single family has been the custodian of this supari art since 1932. But there has been no help forthcoming to help us evolve the craft. Had we been given access to institutions such as NITs, etc., we could have developed the art more," Durgesh said.

"If the craft remains the way it is today, I will definitely not encourage the younger generation to take it up. I don't want my children ruining their eyesight working on something that is not considered worthy of government help or encouragement," Durgesh said.

According to him, the craft is at the moment just enough to keep hunger at bay. And, he would want his children to do a white collar job rather than waste their time on this profession.

"All we do is sit waiting for customers to show up," he said despondently.

## SUPARI CRAFTSMAN NEED RECOGNITION

According to the official website of the Development Commissioner (handicrafts) there are 6.89 million craftspersons in the country. In 2020-21 India exported handicrafts worth USD 3,459.74, though this was the lowest since the pandemic.

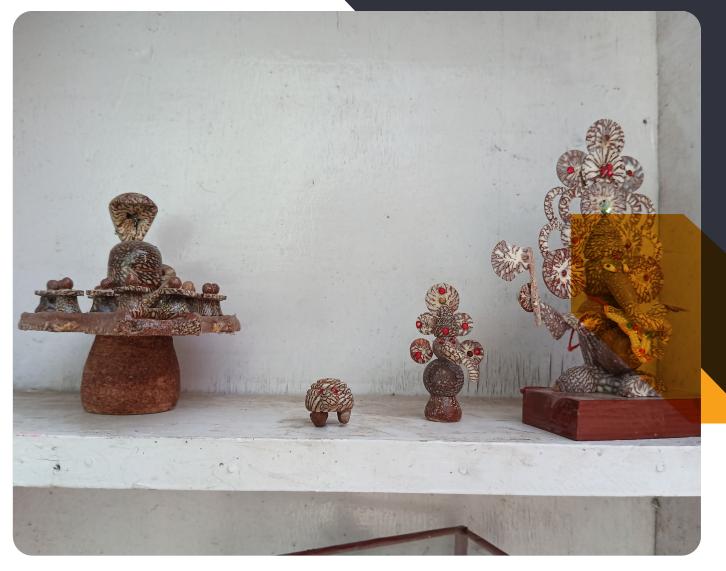
But, the supari craftsmen from Rewa do not form part of this data. One of the reasons is that they are not part of the Pehchan' cards scheme, an initiative by the Union Textile Ministry to register and provide identity cards to handicraft artisans and link them to a national database.

"We are not aware of any such scheme," Rakesh said. They are also not part of the National Handicrafts Development Programme launched by the central government in 2021. This programme is aimed at providing skill development, marketing support and technical knowhow to craftspeople.

The government's Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana, begun in 2001-02 is also part of this. But the supari craftspeople are not part of this either as they have not formed any formal group of community.

According to UB Tiwari, general manager, department of commerce and industry, Rewa, efforts have been made to help these craftspeople. "We wanted to include this craft in the 'one district one product' category, but the kind of volume of craft needed to be included in that category was not there in this particular craft," Tiwari told Gaon Connection.





Figurines made of betel nuts.

The official said that an attempt was also made to include them in the Comprehensive Handicrafts Cluster Development Scheme. "But the five families that were involved in this craft, were not united, and hence we could not proceed," he added.

In response Durgesh said that he worked all day to make four to five pieces of craft. "In order to avail of government schemes, we are asked to meet so many officials. We simply do not have the time to run from pillar to post for this," he said.







### RABIES CONTROL IN KASHMIR

Rabies is a 100% preventable though not curable disease. Qazi Mudasir, a veterinary doctor at the Central Veterinary Hospital Srinagar, recently received an international award for rabies-control.

**MUDASSIR KULOO** 

azi Mudasir spends long hours each day conducting surgeries, administering vaccines and dispensing medicines. The doctor works at the Central Veterinary Hospital Srinagar, and his patients include cats, dogs, goats and cows that come to him from far and near.

The 37-year-old veterinary doctor was recently recognised by the Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC), a leading international non-profit that works towards eliminating rabies by 2030. Mudasir is the only Asian to have received the 'Veterinary Clinic Champion' award this year on September 28, which is the World Rabies Day.

The incidence of rabies in animals has been reduced to almost nil due to efforts of the Jammu & Kashmir government's Animal Husbandry Department of which Mudasir is a part. Rabies is a dreaded zoonotic disease which is transmitted from animals to humans. Its symptoms include fever, headache, excess salivation, muscle spasms, paralysis and mental confusion.

Rabies is a vaccine-preventable viral disease which occurs in more than 150 countries and territories. Dogs are the source of the vast majority of human rabies deaths, contributing up to 99 per cent of all rabies transmissions to humans.

According to WHO, the true burden of rabies in India is not fully known; although as per available information, it causes 18,000 - 20,000 deaths every year. About 30-60 per cent of reported rabies cases and deaths in India occur in children under the age of 15 years as bites that occur in children often go unrecognised and unreported.

The animal husbandry department in J&K has spared no effort to educate people about the role of prophylactic and post bite anti-rabies vaccination in animals. And, it has ensured that anti rabies vaccination is available in every veterinary hospital at subsidised rates. Government provides each dose of vaccine at a subsidised rate Rs 4.72 while in the market each dose costs Rs 150-Rs 250.

"Whoever visits our hospital, we make them aware about this disease and ensure that every animal that comes to us is vaccinated. The vaccination is for every animal. There has not been a single case of rabies reported at the hospital since November 2021, and that is why the award," the award-winning doctor said.

It is a very prestigious award, said Purnima Mittal, director, animal husbandry department, Kashmir, "And we would like to thank GARC for honouring

Dr Mudasir," she told Gaon Connection.



"It is a great achievement that our doctor has won this international award. It will encourage other doctors who are working with such dedication in the field," she said.

Mudasir grew up in Srinagar and did his bachelor's in veterinary science from Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Kashmir (SKAUST, K). He pursued his post graduation from Madhya Pradesh. In 2009, he was appointed as Veterinary Assistant Surgeon and is currently serving in the Department of Animal Husbandry.

It was his love for animals that made him choose veterinary science as a career. "The voiceless creatures deserve as much love and care as humans," Mudasir said. The veterinary doctor has performed more than 5,000 prophylactic anti-rabies vaccinations in canines and felines, and 2,254 post bite anti-rabies vaccinations in animals having history of dog and cat bites thereby reducing the incidence of rabies to almost nil in the area.

According to him, the Central Veterinary Hospital Srinagar receives up to 200 ailing animals a day. "This includes pets and strays. We provide them with the best possible treatment here. Animals get their first vaccination dose at the age of three months, and that is followed by a booster dose. After which they should be vaccinated annually. This will prevent rabies," he said.

The animal husbandry department also has provisions for free treatment of stray and destitute ownerless animals. Mudasir along with his colleagues has spread awareness about canine

behaviour and has provided shelter for strays.

GARC is dedicated to eliminating rabies in both humans and animals to support the global goal to end deaths due to canine-transmitted rabies by 2030. Its mission is to prevent human rabies deaths, and to relieve the burden of rabies in other animal populations, especially dogs.

The Indian government has also launched a National Rabies Control Programme, which has both human and animal components.







### **RURAL INDIA'S TRASH BOMB**

Plastic waste generation is on the rise in the country but there is no separate data on the quantity of such waste generation in rural India. Single-use plastics have invaded the villages where there are no waste management systems in place.

MANVENDRA SINGH

LUCKNOW, UTTAR PRADESH

plates, and wrappers of biscuits and wafers choke the Allupur village nallah that was once a source of potable water for its inhabitants.

"Before handpumps came into our village, this is where we got our drinking water from. Today we cannot even stand near the filthy drain," complained Giridhari, a resident of the village.

"There is neither any dustbin nor any arrangement by the government to handle the plastic kachra [waste], which is fast growing in our village," he told Gaon Connection. Allupur village lies 40 kilometres away from Uttar Pradesh's capital, Lucknow.

It is no different in Chincholi village in Maharashtra's Osmanabad district.

"Every village has a natural flow of water which leads towards the pond. In the absence of a proper waste management system, when people just dump polythene bags and wrappers and it rains, the wastes travel down to the pond," Ashok Pawar, a resident of Chincholi, told Gaon Connection.

India has about 600,000 villages. With the growth of the packaged and processed food industry in the country, ready-to-eat food items such as instant noodles, biscuits and chips, and sachets of shampoos, hair oils and creams, have made inroads into rural India.

Rural markets, which contribute about 35 per cent of the total FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) sales in the country, have seen a rise in the consumption of packaged foods, which are usually packaged in plastic. And, it is alarming to note that about 70 per cent of these packaging end up as waste.

Rural weddings now rarely use biodegradable leaf-plates. Disposable styrofoam plates and plastic cups are more the norm, be it at a jaagran or a mundan ceremony.

Consequently, hundreds of thousand villages are today pockmarked with dumps of mixed plastic waste, which either choke water bodies or degrade the farm lands. Every now and then there are news reports of good samaritans removing kilos and kilos of plastic waste from the stomachs of cattle.

The central government has been enacting legislation after legislation and putting in place bans to control single-use plastics, such as disposable foodware, plastic straws, polybags, etc. But none of these seems to curb plastic waste in rural India where it is growing in leaps and bounds.



## WITHER DATA ON PLASTIC WASTE IN RURAL INDIA?

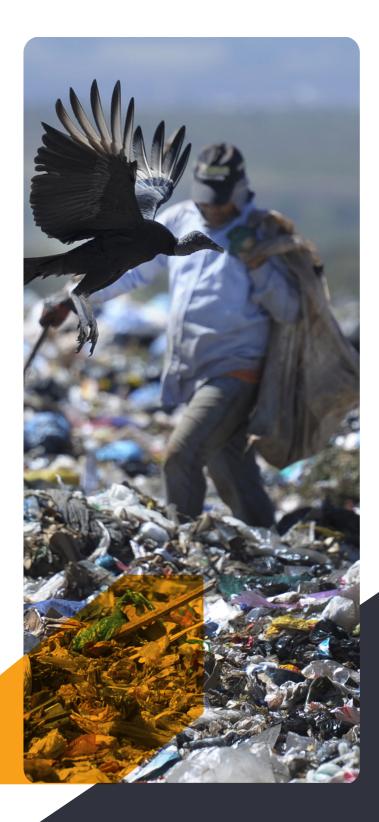
According to a report in March 2019 by the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, 26,000 tonnes per day (tpd) of plastic waste is generated in the country. Of this, 9,400 tpd remain uncollected and pollute streams and groundwater resources.

However, these plastic waste estimates are for the entire country (mostly urban India) and there is no separate data for rural India.

"There are huge gaps in the official reporting of waste generated from rural India," Naveen Arora, head of the Department of Environmental Sciences at the Lucknow-based Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, told Gaon Connection.

"Most of the small factories in rural areas that produce polythene, wrappers of snacks, and plastic bags are rarely covered by the government's estimation or data on the plastic waste generation. The plastic produced by these units when dumped reaches agricultural fields and small water bodies wreaking havoc on the environment," he pointed out.

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) that is entrusted with the task of maintaining records for waste generation and management in the country, does not have a separate set of data for urban and rural India. Everything is put together state-wise.



As per the Annual Report 2019-20 on Implementation of Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016, published by the CPCB, Maharashtra contributes the highest percentage of plastic waste in India with its share being 13 per cent followed by Tamil Nadu and Gujarat tied at second spot with 12 per cent (see pie chart).

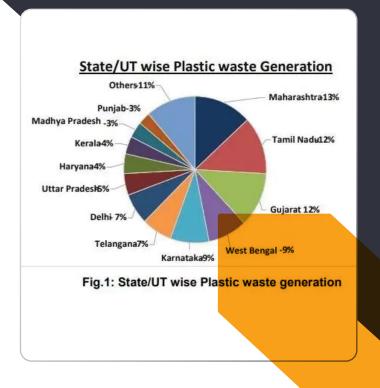
When Gaon Connection approached the office of Uttar Pradesh State Pollution Control Board [SPCB] in Lucknow, officials declined to comment on record on the lack of plastic waste generation in rural areas.

"We don't collect the waste generation data ourselves. There's no staff to bring the data directly from the field. We only collate data sent by local municipal bodies. There's no differentiated data maintained for rural areas specifically," an official said on condition of anonymity.

"There is no official data which keeps track of the waste generation in the rural areas separately. Unless that is known in quantitative terms, it is impossible for the government to come up with an appropriate response," Naveen Arora, the environment science professor, said.

## PLASTIC WASTE MANAGEMENT IN RURAL INDIA

"I cannot imagine life without plastics," Kallu, a 26-year-old resident from Bodhadiya village in Lucknow district told Gaon Connection. "Plastic products are being used widely here but I wish somebody from the administration

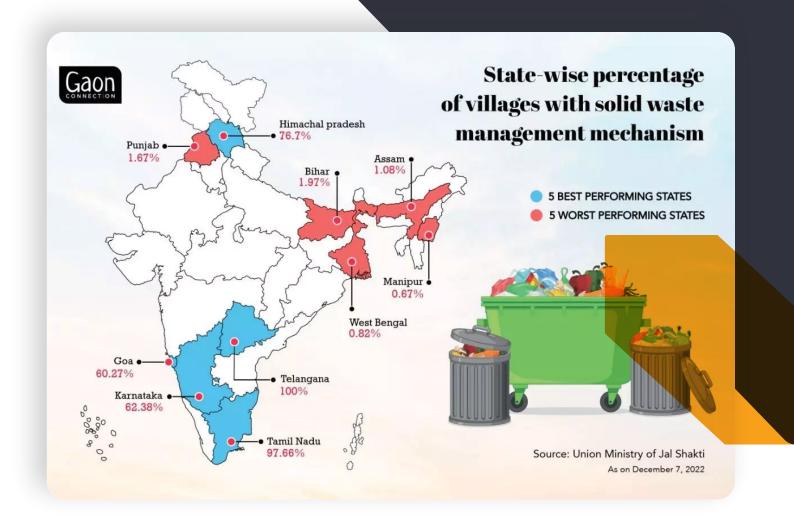


comes to collect the daily waste. That's the only solution I can think of," he said.

But, the waste collection and management system is almost non-existent in rural areas of the country.

This is reflected in the data maintained by the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation. As of December 7 this year, in Manipur, West Bengal and Assam, the percentage of villages which have mechanisms to manage solid waste are 0.67 per cent, 0.82 per cent and 1.08 per cent respectively. In Punjab it is 1.67 per cent while in Bihar, it is 1.97 per cent.

Out of the total 97,640 villages in Uttar Pradesh, only 8,608 (8.83 per cent) have waste management systems in place.



Also, there are only six states for which these percentages are above 50 per cent mark — Telangana (100 per cent), Tamil Nadu (97.66 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (76.70 per cent), Karnataka (62.97 per cent), Sikkim (59.55 per cent), and Goa (60.27 per cent). Also, three union territories have these percentages above 50 per cent — Andaman and Nicobar Islands (100 per cent), Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu (97.94 per cent) and Puducherry (62.04 per cent).

## 67% OF SURVEYED RURAL HOUSEHOLDS BURN PLASTICS

Another recent report, titled Plastic STORI: Study of Rural India,

which was released in September 2022 by non-profit Pratham Education Foundation, found that public waste bins were available in only 36 per cent of the 700 villages across 15 states that were covered in the study.

Just 29 per cent had a community waste collection vehicle, while less than half the villages had access to a sanitation worker or safai karamchari.

Due to the lack of formal infrastructure, 90 per cent of the villages primarily depended on informal waste collectors or kabadiwalas, noted the study, and single-use, low-quality plastics were contributing to the growing waste problem in rural India.

The Pratham study found that some 67 per cent of over 8,400 rural households preferred to burn plastic waste not bought by kabadiwalas. Nearly three-fourths of the households burning waste were unaware about the ill-effects of doing that on the environment, and their own health.

The September 2022 study warns that unless action is taken, over 0.6 million villages in the country will become distributed islands of trash.

"The biggest issue with plastic waste generation in rural areas is the failure to collect it. That's the first and the most important step of treating this waste. The villagers have no idea what to do with it," Mewa Lal, founder of Muskan Jyoti Samiti, told Gaon Connection. His non-profit based in Lucknow was founded in 1994 and works with solid waste management.

According to Arora, a professor at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, discarded single-use plastics, when they get into the topsoil, have a direct impact on the crop yields and quality.

"The plastic in the soil also makes it harder for probiotic organisms to thrive. The loss of fertility in the soil is then compensated by the use of chemical fertilisers which not only adds to the input costs of the farmers but also adversely impacts the soil," he pointed out.

"Only a negligible nine percent of the

recyclable plastic is actually recycled in India," said Arora. Without being able to collect the waste efficiently, there is no question of recycling it," he said.

## TACKLING PLASTIC WASTES IN THE VILLAGES

Lal of Muskan Jyoti Samiti suggested that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) should be used to collect the plastic waste from the entire village.

"A cluster of 10-15 villages can be created. A mobile van should then be tasked to collect the waste from the village every 10 days or so. This can ensure that the waste doesn't pollute the ecosystem in the rural areas," he said.

According to Lal, up to 20 per cent of the waste can be used as a component in the tar which is used to build rural roads.

The state of Tamil Nadu has done so. More than 1,031 kilometres of rural roads have been laid using plastic wastes by District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Tamil Nadu. These roads have been laid in all the 29 districts (approx 40 kms each) of the state.

Recently, Gaon Connection reported on a cluster of women in Madhya Pradesh who use plastic waste to make products that are not only friendly to the environment but are also in great demand in the market.

Mahashakti Seva Kendra, a women-led non-profit, recycles multilayer plastic waste, such as wafer and biscuit wrappers, into laptop bags, baskets, curtains and carpets, Puja Iyenger, the director of Bhopal-based Mahashakti Seva Kendra, told Gaon Connection.

Every month, the non-profit collects about 60 kilogrammes of multilayer plastic waste, and in the past six months, it has utilised almost 300 kilogrammes of the collection in the making of the products, which are sold and are a source of income to the women.

There are other noteworthy initiatives to tackle plastic wastes too. Operation Blue Mountain campaign in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, was led by Supriya Sahu, the then district collector in 2001 to ban the use of plastic in the district. The campaign was crucial to unclog the river sources and springs in the popular hill station of Nilgiris.

In the northeast, the Sikkim government has banned the use of plastic water bottles in all government meetings and programmes. It has also banned the use of disposable styrofoam products across the state.

The Government of Himachal Pradesh introduced the Sustainable Plastic Waste Management Plan in 2009.

The Plan focuses on controlling the use of plastic and developing a systematic disposal mechanism. In order to achieve the objectives of its Clean Himachal and Healthy Himachal drive, the Government has also prohibited the use of plastic cups and plates in 2011.

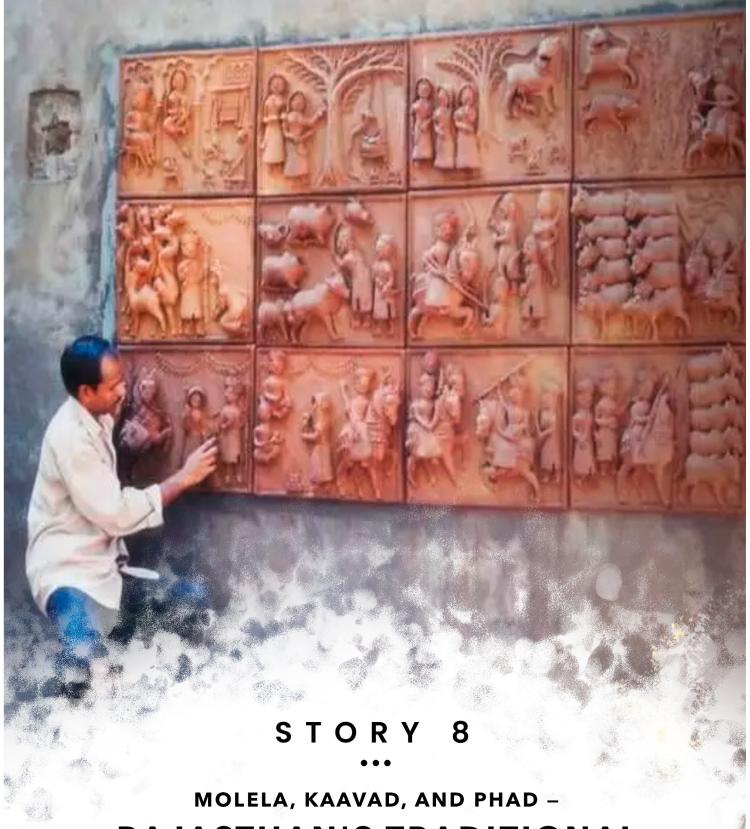
Meanwhile, a petro-chemical company has taken the initiative to collect the PET bottle waste from all over India and convert it into textile products. It has tied up with 150 vendors in India to provide PET bottle bales for processing into textile products.

According to Lal of Muskan Jyoti Samiti, companies that manufacture snacks packaged in plastic bags should be charged Rs 20 per kilogramme of the bags. The revenue thus generated should be used to build a waste treatment facility, which can then convert the plastic waste into usable products.

Currently, several workshops, training sessions, weaving and dyeing programmes and a souvenir shop buzz with activity. Some of the heritage







## RAJASTHAN'S TRADITIONAL ART FORMS GET A MAKEOVER

Art imitates life and so it is with the traditional Molela, Kaavad and Phad paintings of Rajasthan that are struggling to remain relevant in modern society.

PARUL KULSHRESHTA

JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

ajasthan, with its sand dunes and wandering minstrels, holy groves and war heroes, just lends itself to fantastic lore, stirring music, and, therefore, vibrant art.

Art was largely used in the realm of entertainment, as a backdrop to storytelling, puppet shows, hari kathaas, and in other socio-religious activities in Rajasthan. But with the advent of technology, these activities have begun to fade and along with the art forms that were an integral part of them.

The art traditions of Molela, Kaavad and Phad that have all have their origins in religious rituals, but are struggling to survive with their practitioners trying hard to remain relevant. But, the artists say, often, it looks like a losing battle.

#### THE MOLELA ART OF POTTERS

In Molela, a nondescript village in Rajsamand district, south of Rajasthan, is a community of artists who draw their inspiration from an 800-year-old folk tale.

As the story goes, Devnarayan, a deity appeared in a dream to a blind kumbhar (potter) and instructed him to make idols of gods and goddesses from a particular kind of mud available in the

village and assured him that he would regain his eyesight if he did so. The kumbhar followed the instructions, and got his vision back. And so began the tradition of Molela art.

The artist creates images of gods and goddesses on a flat surface like a tile or a plaque that is traditionally installed in temples.

The 'special mud' the folk deity had asked the blind Kumbhar to use is the clay found in Molela village that is mixed with the dung of donkeys or horses. The mixture is kneaded for hours before it is ready to be shaped into the idols that are baked for eight hours in the oven.

According to Molela artist, Dinesh Chand Kumbhar, this religious art is particularly sought after in the Mewar region where Adivasi devotees of Devnarayan travel miles on foot to Molela, buy the idols from the artists and carry them back to their villages, singing and dancing all the way.

"Fairs are held around the temples and the entire village comes to worship there and take part in the festivities," Dinesh Chand told Gaon Connection. While the art continues to be integral to the traditional practices, it has also moved out of the confines of religion.



"There is no survival without innovation and experiment, and we have evolved from folk deities and moved on to relatively modern subjects such as Meera Bai and Maharana Pratap, besides of course reproducing stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata," Dinesh Chand said.

Molela art is becoming a kind of documentation, he smiled. "When my father first travelled by air, he asked me to tell the story through my art, of a village man travelling by air for the first time and the obstacles he faced," the artist recalled. "It took me a few weeks to complete that, but I think, was the beginning of the transformation of the art," he said.

Molela art is also being used as large friezes. "Sometimes the orders are large and it takes us weeks to complete.

I recently completed a project for the Udaipur railway station and it took me nearly two months to finish," said Dinesh Chand.

Some of the Molela artists are travelling the world and getting orders from across the globe. They have adapted their old folk art into contemporary themes, that is paying rich dividends.

But not all have been able to do that, said Dinesh Chand. Many of his fellow artists have quit and have taken up regular jobs where there is a steady income.

The Molela artists are concerned about the fast dwindling clay of the village that is a vital ingredient of their art. Brick kilns have sprung up everywhere and the rampant mining will soon exhaust it, the artists fear.

"We wrote to the chief minister to stop this mining. The government must at least stop issuing licences for mining in our village. Otherwise the art will die," he said.

#### THE ART OF KAAVAD

About 400 odd kilometres north of Molela is the village of Bassi in Chittorgarh district, where also exists an old art form called Kaavad.



Kaavad is made up of colourful painted panels hinged together. It was used as a backdrop to story telling sessions as narrators regaled the audiences with the tales of heroic deeds of epic heroes in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, besides the miracles of local folk gods.

But with modern lifestyles, the art of Kaavad dimmed. Storytelling is now in the realm of technology. No one has the time or the inclination for leisurely community-activities such as theatre, kathaas and so on. And there are barely five people who still practise this art in Bassi.

"Much of these traditional arts have lost their relevance in the modern age," Madan Meena, anthropologist and honorary director of Adivasi Academy, Tejgadh, Gujarat, told Gaon Connection. He said that while some of the artists have managed to give their art a new shape, the soul and faith that drove the artists of yore is forever lost.

Kaavad artist Satyanarayana Suthar from Bassi, who won the national award in 2014 acknowledges this but also recognises the fact that reinvention is the only way forward.

"Old ways are important but will not be enough for survival. I have started experimenting with Kaavad," Satyanarayana told Gaon Connection.

He now makes Kaavads that tell stories of celebrities, or is even adapted into cupboard doors and such. "The idea is to have art on something that is also useful.



I have to do this in order to continue with the art form," he said.

The traditional Kaavad is usually purchased by the Kaavadiya Bhat (storytellers) from Marwar who perform Kaavad in different villages on invitation of their patrons. The usual sizes of these panels range from 12 inches to two feet but as the times have changed, their size has grown to as much as 20 feet.

"I design Kaavads on order. Recently, I made a Kaavad for an Indian couple in Singapore and painted their journey from India to Singapore. The panels now adorn a cupboard there and tell a story," Satyanarayana said.

Kaavad artists also face a shortage of wood from the Adusa (commonlyknown as the Malabar nut) they use. Strict forest laws have made it difficult to source the wood.

"The wood from the Adusa tree is light and is termite-resistant. But over the years it has become increasingly difficult to get this wood. We have to go through a lot of red tape to get the wood. This is also one of the reasons that Kaavad artists are quitting the art," Suthar explained.

Kaavad artist Dwarka Prasad Suthar, from Bassi received the President's award in 2019.

"If we want to survive on this art we need to move out of the villages. If we use Kaavad art in creating cupboards or toys, we can make good money. I make Kaavad for clients all over India," Dwarka Prasad told Gaon Connection.

The days of this art may be numbered with no support from the government and the lack of interest from the younger generation.

"To keep Kaavad alive, the new generation should take interest. But that is sadly lacking. Not more than five artisans are left who are still practising this art form," said Dwarka Prasad. Many of them have now shifted to clerical work, construction labour or farming to earn a stable income, he said.

#### THE PHAD PAINTINGS

Like it was with Molela and Kaavad art, Phad painting from Bhilwara, in south-central Rajasthan, said to be 700 years old, was also a medium of storytelling. Stories of gods and goddesses, especially Devnarayan and Pabuji were painted on 40-feet-long cloth, and this was a prop to the balladeers or Bhopa (from the Rebari clans) who sang or narrated the stories to their audience.

The art of creating the phad on the cotton cloth belongs to the Joshi lineage of the Chippa caste. The artists of the Joshi community were commissioned by the Bhopas, to make the cloth painting.

"If we will just stick to old traditions, the art will not survive and neither will we. And, nowadays, houses are not large enough to accommodate 30-40 feet long Phads," pointed out Kalyan Joshi, a renowned Phad artist. So now the brush strokes adorn designer clothes, smaller wall paintings, coasters, pottery, and so on.

"Recently, a multinational company ordered 500 small Phad paintings that it wanted to gift its employees on Diwali. I have even painted on the walls of the Bhilwara railway station," Joshi told Gaon Connection.

The Phad art tradition was once jealously guarded and only family members were privy to the art form. But Joshi broke this tradition and runs an art school called Chitrashala, where anyone can learn the art.

"I have trained more than 4,000 students. Many have started their own business. Some are experimenting with this art in fashion designing,

tile paintings, crockery and interior decoration," he said.

It has been this willingness to step out of the confines of tradition that has allowed him and to an extent the art to survive. "I would not have managed if I had stuck to the old methods," Kalyan said. "There is a curiosity amongst the young people to learn more about this art form and for that I am grateful," he added.

Though new experiments are keeping this old art form alive its traditional depiction is fast disappearing. The art of painting the stories of Devnarayan and Bapuji on 40-foot cloth is something only four or five people do.

With technology's advent, patience has disappeared, Kalyan said. "I believe that in the coming years there will be no one left to make the original devotional Phads for our folk deities. This is sad, but the new generation is taking forward this tradition on their terms," he said.

"These art forms are ritualistic and have a direct relationship to the religious practices of the communities which patronised them. But that is no more the case," Madan Meena said. "And, even though commercialisation has to an extent put some of the artists in a good place, there is still a lot to be done for the others," the anthropologist pointed out.

The Ministry of Textile has started an entrepreneurship development programme for the artisans in 2021.

"Many artists are innovating their work and we have given them a platform to move ahead. Artisans are given financial support up to Rs 5 lakh and special training to impart entrepreneurship skills in them," Manohar Meena, Handicraft Promotion Officer at the handicrafts service centre, Udaipur, told Gaon Connection.

"Our purpose has always been to make the art form marketable and help the artisans develop their art form as per the taste of the public. This helped them grow financially and take their art to different corners of the world," he said.







## ANGANWADI WORKERS IN UP DEMAND HOT COOKED MEALS BE RESUMED

It's been more than two years since children in Uttar Pradesh's anganwadis have been served hot cooked meals.

**GAON CONNECTION** 

enu Devi works at an anganwadi kendra, a government-run early care centre, in Shahjahanpur district, Uttar Pradesh. Her day is filled with the sight and sound of kids wailing – for food.

"They are hungry, but what do we feed them," she asked as she tried to pacify them. "The children were happy when they were provided a freshly cooked meal at the anganwadi. But that stopped with the pandemic and we only get dry rations now," Renu Devi, who works in Bhawal Kheda village, told Gaon Connection.

According to her, the children were in her care at the anganwadi daily for four hours.

"It is difficult to look after hungry kids. Their share of dry rations are handed over to their guardians when they come to pick the children up," she added. The dry ration kit generally includes daal (pulses), chawal (rice), chana (grams), and daliya (broken wheat or lapsi) mixture.

The anganwadi centre at Bhawak Kheda village is one of 189,309 such centres in Uttar Pradesh that have not resumed hot cooked meals for more than two years now.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in

March 2020, anganwadis across the country were shut down and all the state governments started supplying dry rations to the beneficiaries under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme of the Government of India.

ICDS is the world's largest programme for early childhood care and development, with over 158 million children (2011 Census) in the 0-6 years age group, and pregnant and lactating mothers in the country. It offers six services: supplementary nutrition, preschool non-formal education, nutrition and health education, immunisation, health check-up and referral services, through 1.36 million functional anganwadi centres spread across all the districts in the country (as of June 2018).

Post pandemic, most state governments have resumed hot cooked meals at their anganwadi centres, with some having added more nutritious food items in their daily menus (such as millets) to make up for the loss of calories and rising malnutrition in the wake of the COVID-19.

But, Uttar Pradesh has continued with the dry ration supplies even though the anganwadis have opened and children, between the age groups of three and six years, daily (Monday to Saturday) visit these centres for early education and healthcare.



Anganwadi workers and helpers complain that they find it difficult to manage young children without serving them cooked food at the centre.

It has been tough, said Zainab Begum who works at the Kazipur anganwadi centre in Shahjahanpur. "The children who come to our centre are very young. Ideally, we should be giving them a banana or some other fresh fruit and nutritious food," she told Gaon Connection. But, there is no such food at the centre to feed the children. When they cry for food, we send them back home, she lamented.

In September this year, Gaon Connection visited several anganwadi centres in Varanasi, Barabanki, and Shahjahanpur districts. The workers and helpers complained that the food was in short supply. Some anganwadi centres lacked basic infrastructure, such as a pucca room, or a ceiling fan, or a toilet.

In Varanasi district, which is also Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constituency, there are 3,914 anganwadis centres. In the Kashi Vidyapeeth block, there are 574 such centres. Some of them are well maintained, but some are in a sorry state.

For instance, an anganwadi centre at Malin Basti near the Manduadih railway station functioned under a tree. "We declare a holiday whenever it is too hot or it rains too much," Maya Rai, an anganwadi worker at the centre, told Gaon Connection.

"We have to bring the supplies that we need everyday and take them back

with us as there is nowhere we can keep them," she said. This anganwadi has 33 children between the ages of three and six years. "Because it is run outdoors under a tree, many parents do not want to send their children here. Often my colleagues and I go to each home and bring the children here," she added.

## MALNUTRITION: THE SILENT PANDEMIC

Globally, an estimated 149 million children are stunted (chronically undernourished) and 50 million are acutely undernourished (wasted), with undernutrition a direct or underlying cause in 45 per cent of all child deaths.



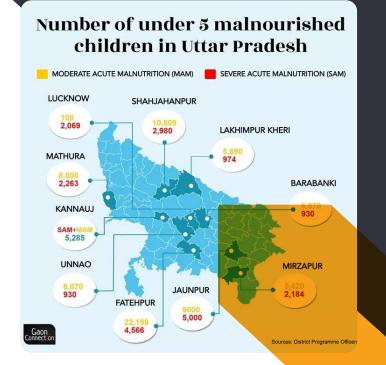
COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these problems as food supplies have been affected and immunisation has taken a hit too. According to The Lancet, "the COVID-19 pandemic is undermining nutrition across the world, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). The worst consequences are borne by young children."

In July 2021, while replying to a question, Union Minister for Women and Child Development Smriti Irani informed the lower house of the Parliament that there are a total of 927,606 children that are identified as severely acute malnourished (SAM).

She went on to inform the house that amongst these, 398,359 children are from Uttar Pradesh.

Further, as per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) of 2019-21, in rural Uttar Pradesh, 41.3 per cent of under-5 kids were stunted (low height for age), while 33.1 per cent under-5 kids were underweight (low weight for age). Seventeen per cent rural under-5 kids in the state were categorised as wasted (weight for height), and 7.1 per cent were severely wasted.

Despite high malnutrition in the state, Uttar Pradesh is one of the worst performers in utilising funds allocated for the POSHAN (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition) mission. The state failed to utilise 66.27 per cent of its funds (from 2017-18 to 2020-21, see map).



And, it has not restarted hot meals at the anganwadi centres.

Beneficiaries — under-six children, and pregnant and lactating mothers — are being distributed dry rations.

#### DRY RATIONS DON'T QUITE CUT IT

Distributing dry rations (uncooked dal, rice, chana and dailya) instead of cooked meals make it difficult to guarantee that the food would actually be consumed by the children, anganwadi workers pointed out.

"The entire family partakes of it and the children do not get their required number of calories and nutrition," Marushi, a worker at Varanasi's Adarsh Bal Vidyalaya, said. "I don't think the dry rations they get now are enough to keep malnutrition away," she added.

"We do get the dry rations, but the daliya they give is usually used to feed animals," Jameen Anwar, whose son comes to the anganwadi centre at Adarsh Bal Vidyalaya, told Gaon Connection.

"The anganwadi would have cooked the nutritious daliya in the proper way. Now we just send some lunch with our son when he leaves for the anganwadi, "Anwar said.

According to him, there was a time [before pandemic] when even ghee was supplied, but not anymore. "The government must do something to improve matters," he said.

"We provide daal, daliya, oil and rice in the dry rations for the children. We ensure this protects them from malnutrition," Yugal Kishore Sanguri, the district programme officer for the ICDS in Shahjahanpur, told Gaon Connection.

DK Singh, the district programme officer, Varanasi, informed that there were 45,000 malnourished children, and 4,500 severely malnourished children in the district. And, the district authorities were trying to bring down that number.

"As September was national nutrition month in the district, several programmes were underway to spread awareness about malnutrition," Singh said. The district official also made an assurance that the authorities would look into the matter of the open air anganwadi centre in Malin Basti and set it right.

## MANY STATES RESUMED SERVING FRESH MEALS

While Uttar Pradesh is yet to resume hot meals at its anganwadi centres, several states such as Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu, have resumed serving hot cooked meals to the children.

At Pipardhaba anganwadi in Kini village in Chainpur block of Jharkhand's Palamu district, Sandhya Devi, a 40-year-old, anganwadi teacher stated that cooked meals were resumed at the centre from December 15, 2021.

"We give them halwa [pudding], chana-gud [jaggery-gram] in the morning, and rice, daal and sabzi [vegetables] in the afternoon," Devi told Gaon Connection.

Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh, Archana Ahirwar, an angwanwadi worker at Ahmadpur village in Vidisha district said that cooked meals are provided to the children as per the diet chart. "In the morning, the children eat namkeen



daliya or khichdi. In the afternoon, they have poori sabzi, kheer, daal-chawal, lapsi, and sattu," Ahirwar told Gaon Connection.

SRS Subramanian, a member of the Coimbatore-based The International Centre for Child and Public Health, said that cooked meals at the government schools and the anganwadi centres were resumed in Tamil Nadu ever since the lifting of the lockdown.

"Fresh meals are cooked with rice, dal, oil, salt, bengal gram, green gram, and eggs," Subramanian told
Gaon Connection.

"In Odisha, children at the anganwadi centres are provided eggs five days a week. The breakfast also includes sprouts and chikki [peanuts and jaggery sweetmeal]. In some districts, the children are also being provided with ragi laddoo. Once a week, they are provided with daalma [rice cooked with vegetables]," Sameet Panda, a Bhubaneswar-based food activist working for the nationwide Right To Food campaign, said.

"The rationale behind suspending these meals at the centres during the pandemic was to promote physical distancing. But that should not become an excuse for the state governments not to provide nutritious food to the children who are the future of this

country," Panda told Gaon Connection.
"It is the state's responsibility to ensure nutrition to children from underprivileged sections of the society," he said.

"Education and nutrition have to go hand in hand. It's a beautiful idea and should be implemented well. There's no way you can make a hungry child study!" Panda added.

"It has long been recognized that poor childhood nutrition and associated social and environmental factors, including poverty, crowding, maternal depression, low maternal IQ, and child maltreatment, strongly affect cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development," a study titled Neurodevelopmental effects of childhood malnutrition: A neuroimaging perspective, published in the ScienceDirect journal on May 1, 2021, noted.

Satish Gadi, a Gurugram-based senior physician, who has been a doctor in the Indian Army and was posted as Chief Medical Director at the Indian Railways before retiring, remarked that child malnutrition ultimately leads to a vicious cycle of negative outcomes in life.

"We have so much investment in health but we fail to deliver where it's most



needed — ensuring proper nutrition to a child for at least the first six years of life. No matter how you intervene in public health, if the coming generations are of those who have been stunted, wasted, underweight or malnourished during the childhood stage, not much can be achieved," he told Gaon Connection.

choolha [kitchen] at the schools for the sake of convenience and economic efficiency," Broca told Gaon Connection.

Meanwhile, kids at anganwadi centres in Uttar Pradesh await the resumption of cooked meals.

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#### **UP TO RESUME HOT MEALS SOON**

When Gaon Connection approached Sarneet Kaur Broca, the director of the Bal Vikas Seva Evam Pushtahar Vibhag [ICDS] in Uttar Pradesh, he informed the hot cooked meals at anganwadis were about to begin from next month in January.

"Uttar Pradesh will resume its hot cooked meals programme in January. The exact date will be announced soon," Broca told Gaon Connection.

Previously, while reporting on the unutilised funds to eradicate child malnutrition in the state, the erstwhile director Sarika Mohan had informed that the plans were underway to merge the mid-day meal scheme with the anganwadi scheme with the collaboration of the two departments of education with the ICDS.

Broca, however clarified that the collaboration would not be on the departmental level but at the ground level.

"Basically, the idea is to cook food for children in a single project. The food for the anganwadi and the mid-day meal will be cooked together in a single





THEME: 10

CRIME AGAINST MINORS



# 2 MURDERS, 22 MONTHS, 1 COURT PROCEEDING FAMILIES OF DALIT COUSINS IN UNNAO STILL AWAIT JUSTICE

On February 17, 2021, three minor Dalit girls in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh were allegedly poisoned. Two of them died. There has been no progress in the case so far.

MANVENDRA SINGH

BABURAHA (UNNAO), UTTAR PRADESH

e will never forget February 17, 2021, he said. The father of the16-year-old daughter had just returned home from a neighbouring village where he worked as a manual labourer.

"It was around 5:30 PM. People on my way home told me that my daughter and two of her cousins — 17-year-old and 13-year-old — had gone missing and that they were looking for them. I joined them," the father, a resident of Baburaha village in Unnao district, narrated to Gaon Connection.

"I learnt that the three girls were last seen going to the fields to get berseem [fodder] for the cattle. We rushed to the fields in the adjacent Pathakpura village and found them lying unconscious in the field with their hands tied. We took the girls to the government hospital where I got to know my daughter had left me forever," the father of the deceased 16-year-old told Gaon Connection. He belongs to the Dalit community.

In February 2021, the village of Baburaha, about 65 kilometres from Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow, was shaken as three minor Dalit girls, who were cousins, aged 13, 16 and 17 years, were found unconscious in a field.

Two of them — 13-year-old and 16-year-old — died in hospital while the

eldest survived. They were allegedly poisoned with pesticides by the 25-year-old accused Vinay alias Lambu and another minor accomplice from the same village.

It is almost two years and the court proceedings are moving at a snail's pace, complain the relatives of the girls. Only one court proceeding has happened in the past 22 months. The families of the girls are incensed at the slow pace of legal proceedings against the accused.

Meanwhile, prime accused Vinay is presently under judicial custody while the minor accused is at the child reform centre ever since.

"So far, only PWI [primary witness 1], who is the uncle of one of the girls, has been recorded. There was a strike in the court at the time when the survivor's statement was to be recorded hence, we are waiting for the further proceedings," Mukesh Verma, the lawyer representing the girls, told Gaon Connection.

Shobhna Smriti, an activist working for the New Delhi-based All India Dalit Mahila Adhikaar Manch, stated that in the past almost two years the case should have made progress towards judgment, but it has not.



According to her, the delay was due to shortage of judges and courts in the country. "There are a lot of things that's ailing the justice delivery system in this country. And, Dalits are amongst the most exploited sections of the society in the rural areas. Such cases should be dealt with swiftly," Smriti told Gaon Connection.

THE MODUS OPERANDI

The Inspector General of Police (IGP)
Laxmi Singh in a press conference on
February 19, 2021, said that the accused
Vinay had befriended one of the girls
(17-year-old who survived the assault)
during the lockdown and they often met
in the fields.

"He decided to kill her when the girl rejected his advances, and refused to give him her phone number," the police official was quoted as saying.

"The other two girls also drank from the same water bottle that had pesticides mixed in it. Vinay said he tried to stop the other two from drinking the water but could not do so. When the girls fainted, he panicked and fled the spot along with his companion," the police official added.

"The hasiya-khurpa (sickle and shovel), which they used to cut fodder from the field, were lying near their heads. My 16-year-old child was frothing at the mouth. We took the girls to the doctor in pradhan ji's car, but she passed away soon after," the mother told Gaon Connection.

Meanwhile, the grandmother of the deceased 13-year-old girl stated that the girl has faced hardships ever since she was an infant.

"I remember the day her mother died when she was an infant. I don't know how this court kachehri works... all I want is that the man who killed my poti [granddaughter] should die a painful death. It's been almost two years, the case is moving too slowly," the grandmother of the 13-year-old deceased said.



## ACTIVISTS MIFFED AT THE SLOW LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

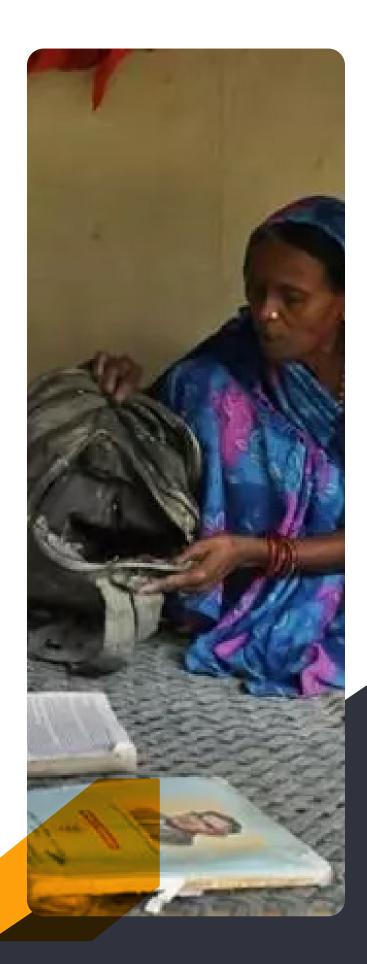
The National Crime Records Bureau in its report titled Crime in India 2021, said a total of 428,278 cases of crimes against women were registered. As per the same report, a total of 171,730 such cases are pending.

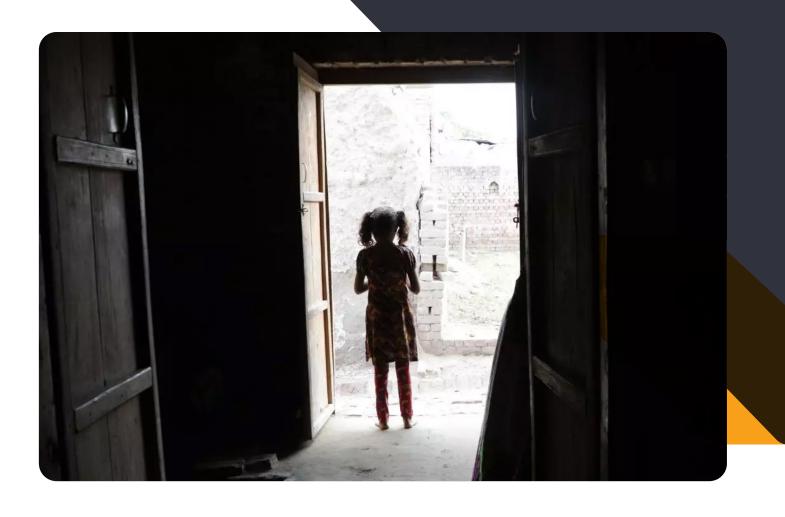
Also, rapes of Dalit women (3,870) were found to be 12 per cent of the total number of rape cases (31,677). There were also 1,285 cases of rape of children belonging to the Scheduled Castes that were registered.

While talking to Gaon Connection about the double murder in Unnao, Seema Kushwaha, the lawyer noted for representing the 2012 Delhi gangrape victim, stated that the judicial systemc certainly needs a reform if justice is to be served to victims of gender violence.

"In this case, the culprits are in custody but mostly, the courts grant bail to the accused and the conviction rates are abysmally low," Kushwaha said. "The perpetrators with a criminal mentality are left to roam around freely in the society which endangers the safety of the citizens at large. The judiciary needs to be reformed in a way that the court proceedings are ensured timely," she added.

Awadhesh Singh, the lawyer representing the accused, stated that the COVID-19 pandemic was a determining factor in the delay behind the case proceedings.





"The courts were barely functioning during the lockdown. My client Vinay is in jail and he was charged with NSA [National Security Act, 1980] which the court dismissed. On what basis was he charged under NSA? How is killing two girls a matter of national security? The administration should not use such laws at will," he told Gaon Connection.

## 'WOMEN IN AGRARIAN SETTINGS FACE SEXUAL COERCION'

The girls who were poisoned on the evening of February 17, 2021 were out to get fodder for the buffaloes at home. According to a study conducted by the American multinational company Dupont's agricultural arm named Corteva agriscience in 2018, 78 per cent

of women around the world who are engaged in agricultural and allied activities face sexual coercion.

"After the killings, I had to change the school of my younger daughter as she was studying in the village where the family of the accused lives. I got to know that some men visited the school to know whether my child studies here," aunt of the murdered cousins told Gaon Connection.

Her fears are justified. According to a report titled Educating the Girl Child published by the non-governmental organisation, Child Right and You, 25.2 per cent of the girls in India drop out of school because their parents are afraid of sending them too far from home.



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