

50 SUCCESS STORIES OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE PANDEMIC

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कनेक्शन
YOUR CONNECTION WITH RURAL INDIA



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PREFACE



Far away from the sensational primetime headlines and the trending hashtags and the reels, the real India lives in its humility and anonymity, facing its everyday challenges and winning its everyday victories. Transformative stories that are changing lives -- for better or worse -- are unfolding in India every day. Nearly all of them never make it to the mainstream media.

At Gaon Connection, it is our duty to document with honesty and empathy these tales that give us inspiration and courage -- wherever we might live, in a city or a village, and whatever we might be pursuing in life. The stories of these 50 women inspire us, provoke us, and tell us far more about rural India than hundreds

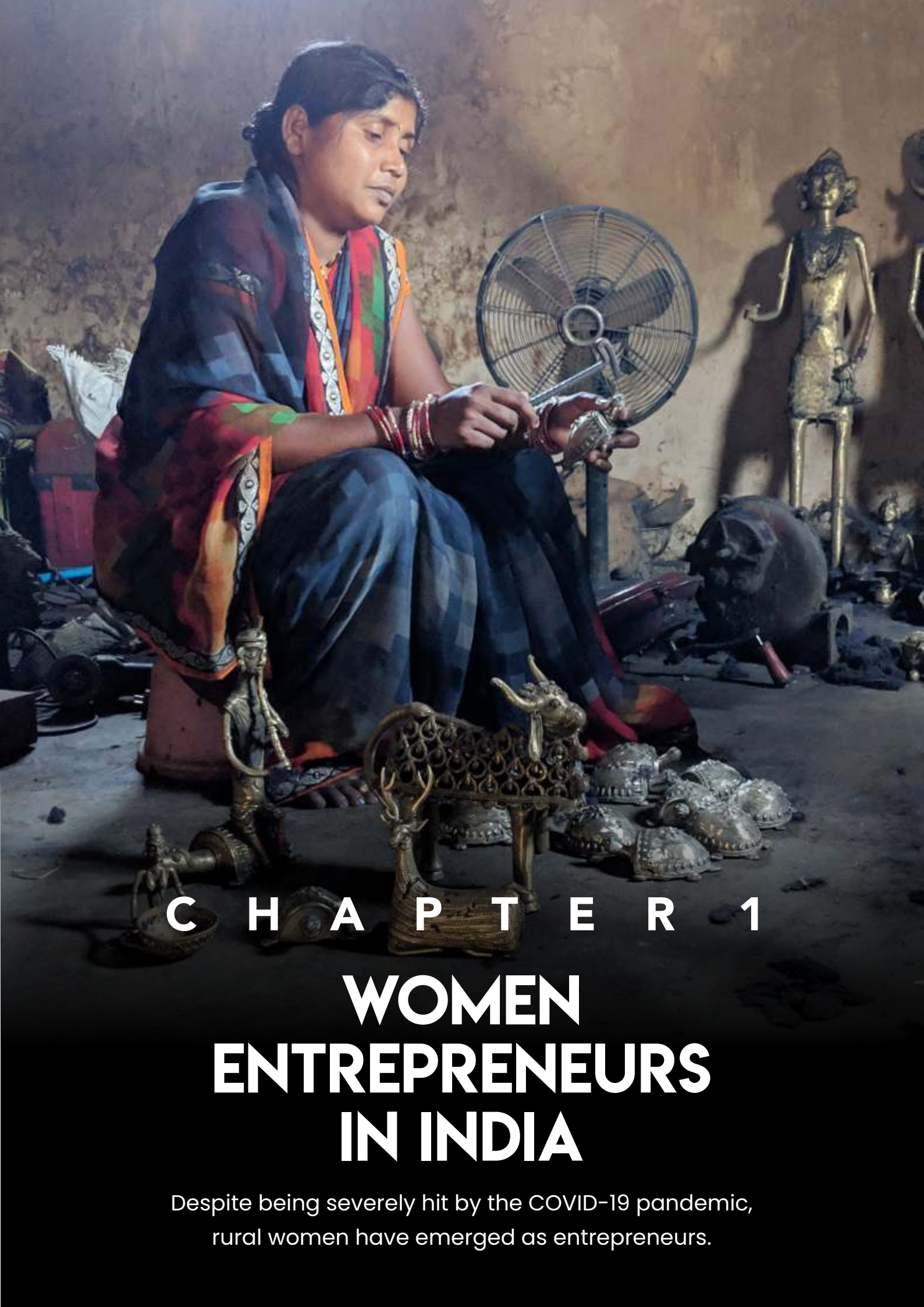
of thick books will.

Managing Editor Nidhi Jamwal and her tiny but incredible team has created a document that shall have a relevance for millions of Indians.

Thank you, and congratulations.

Neelesh Misra

Founder
Gaon Connection



C H A P T E R 1

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA

Despite being severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic,
rural women have emerged as entrepreneurs.

The economic activity in India took a severe hit in the year 2020–21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to data published by the World Bank, the Indian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 6.5 per cent in 2018–19, which went down to 3.7 per cent in 2019–20 and further declined to minus 6.6 per cent in 2020–21 during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

In comparison, the rate of decline in GDP globally was 3.3 per cent in the financial year 2020–21.² Additionally, the unemployment rate in India in 2020–21 was 7.1 per cent while the global average stood at 6.5 per cent.³

Another impact of the COVID-19 lockdown was the decrease in individual income. As per the Economics Observatory, individual income in India decreased by nearly 40 per cent during the first COVID-19 lockdown between April 2020 and May 2020.⁴

Households belonging to the economically weaker section of the society lost nearly three months worth of income during this period, according to the report — *State of Working India 2021* — published by Azim Premji University.⁵ This period marked the worst decline in the financial income of the country since independence, noted Swati Dhingra and Maitreesh Ghatak of the Economics Observatory.⁶

A study published by Pew Research Center in 2021 estimates that after the pandemic, India has witnessed a stark rise in poverty.⁷ The number of people belonging to the middle class (people with incomes of Rs 795 — Rs 1,591 a day) decreased by 32 million in 2020.⁸

Meanwhile, the number of poor people (with incomes of Rs 159 or less a day) in India increased by 75 million during the COVID-19 recession in India.⁹

The Government of India and the Reserve Bank of India have taken several measures to support households and firms who have been deeply affected by the pandemic.¹⁰ These measures not only include financial aids and fiscal policy measures but also measures to ensure health and social protection.¹¹

With the application of these measures, the economy is expected to grow back to pre-pandemic levels in the financial year 2022–23 and the GDP is expected to stabilise at 7 per cent growth, according to the World Bank.¹²

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN INDIA

Despite being severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, India witnessed an upward trend in entrepreneurship activity in the year 2021, as per a study by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.¹³

The Total Early Stage Entrepreneurship Activity (TEA) rate in India was marked as 5.3 per cent in 2020 which increased to 14.4 per cent in 2021.¹⁴ The TEA rate represents the percentage of population between the age group 18 and 64 years who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business.¹⁵

According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, the Established Business Ownership Rate (EBO) rate in India increased from 5.9 per cent in 2020 to 8.5 per cent in 2021.¹⁶

The EBO rate is defined as the percentage of population between the age group 18 and 64 years who are currently an owner-manager of an established business, i.e., owning and managing a running business that has paid salaries, wages, or any other payments to the owners for more than 42 months.¹⁷

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA

According to the Start Up India initiative launched by the Government of India, an increasing number of women have taken up entrepreneurship in the past decade.¹⁸ Women entrepreneurs have made an important contribution to the Indian economy, which has generated a significant number of employment opportunities.¹⁹



According to the Sixth Economic Census published in 2013 by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, out of 58.5 million enterprises in India, 8.05 million (13.75 per cent) were owned by women.²⁰ Out of these 8.05 million women-owned enterprises, 2.76 million (34.3 per cent) were agricultural establishments while 5.29 million (65.7 per cent) were non-agricultural enterprises.²¹

These women-led establishments were concentrated in these top five sectors, namely, agriculture (34.3 per cent), manufacturing (29.8 per cent), trade (18.23 per cent), other services (5.38 per cent) and accommodation & food services (2.77 per cent).²²

Women-owned enterprises see an urban-rural divide. The Sixth Economic Census, conducted between 2013 and 2014, stated that out of the 8.05 million women-owned enterprises, 5.24 million (65.12 per cent) were located in the rural regions and 2.80 million (34.88 per cent) were located in the urban areas.²³

These women-owned enterprises employed 13.48 million (10.24 per cent of total employment) people in India during 2013 and 2014.²⁴ Out of these employed persons, 8.2 million people (61.46 per cent) were employed in rural establishments while 5.18 million (38.54 per cent) were employed in urban establishments.²⁵

Women-led enterprises had a mixed nature as 89 per cent establishments were perennial, nine per cent were seasonal and remaining two per cent were casual.²⁶

The Indian Brand Equity Foundation observes that women-run businesses are more inclusive and employ three times more women than men.²⁷ The Indian Brand Equity Foundation also notes that 20.37 per cent of women are owners of micro, small and medium enterprises which add up to 23.3 per cent of the female labour force of India, the rest being men.²⁸

Since 2019, more than 138,000 (approximately 30 per cent) enterprises have been set up by women under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation

Programme (PMEGP), according to the Ministry of Small, Medium and Micro-Finance.²⁹

It is worth noting that 79 per cent of the women-owned businesses were self-financed, according to the Sixth Economic Census.³⁰ The other sources of income for these establishments were donations from other agencies (14.65 per cent), financial support from the government (3.4 per cent) and loans from financial institutions (1.1 per cent).³¹

Several government-sponsored initiatives such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Stand Up India, Mission Indradhanush, Mudra Yojana Scheme, TREAD (Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development) Scheme, Mahila Udyam Nidhi Scheme, Annapurna Scheme, Stree Shakti Package for Women Entrepreneurs, Bhartiya Mahila Business Bank Loan, Dena Shakti Scheme, Udyogini Scheme, Cent Kalyani Scheme have provided support to women entrepreneurs in India, according to Ministry of Small, Medium and Micro-Finance.³²

STARTUPS IN INDIA

According to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), in a five year period from FY 2016-17 to FY 2021-22, the number of registered startups in India went up from 726 to 65,861.³³ Spread across 640 districts, these

registered startups have created more than 700,000 jobs in India.³⁴

As of today, 30 states and union territories in India have implemented specific policies to support startup businesses.³⁵ Government of India has launched the Government eMarketplace (GeM) to enable startups to participate in e-marketplace to grow their businesses.³⁶

By 2022 March, 12,756 startups were onboarded on GeM which received with 1,19,407 orders from public entities worth Rs 6,128 crore (Rs 61.28 billion).³⁷

The startup enterprises in India are spread across 56 diversified sectors.³⁸

According to Statista, the top five sectors include enterprise technology, health technology, educational technology, financial technology and retail technology.³⁹

IT services, finance technology, technology hardware, enterprise software, artificial intelligence, computer vision, nanotechnology, etc. contribute to 26 per cent of these startups.⁴⁰ Healthcare, life sciences and the agricultural sector contribute to 14 per cent of the startup businesses.⁴¹

A substantial number of startups also work in the climate action sector, renewable energy and green technology.⁴²



PROBLEMS FACED BY FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Despite the growing number of women entrepreneurs, the overall number still remains low in comparison to male-owned enterprises in India as only 13.76 per cent enterprises in India are owned by women, according to the Sixth Economic Census.⁴³

Several reasons have been cited for this low number of female entrepreneurs in India.⁴⁴ The Observer Research Foundation notes that one of the primary reasons is the gender discrimination faced by women.⁴⁵ Women founders do not receive the same treatment and recognition as their male counterparts while running their business.⁴⁶

Additionally, women find it difficult to gain an entry into the male-dominated business networks with an aim to further their businesses.⁴⁷

Access to finance is another constraint that women entrepreneurs face.⁴⁸ Many funders are reluctant to invest in business ventures started by women.⁴⁹ As a result many women entrepreneurs have to self-finance their businesses.⁵⁰ Since the majority of the women entrepreneurs do not own property, loaning money from financial institutions by using property as a collateral becomes difficult.⁵¹

Women often have to struggle with receiving support from their families as care work is still primarily considered to be women's domain.⁵² Women are more often threatened by the lack of safety in workplaces and public places that potentially hinders their chances to successfully run their own enterprises.⁵³

Despite these challenges, in the past two years of the pandemic, a large number of rural women have emerged as entrepreneurs. *Gaon Connection* has been documenting such stories from the villages of the country.



- Out of 58.5 million enterprises in India, 8.05 million (13.75%) were owned by women.
- Women-led establishments were concentrated in these top 5 sectors, namely, agriculture (34.3 %), manufacturing (29.8 %), trade (18.23 %), other services (5.38 %) and accommodation & food services (2.77 %).
- A rural-urban divide is seen in establishments owned by women as 5.24 million (65.12 %) were located in the rural regions and 2.80 million (34.88 %) were located in the urban areas.
- The Indian Brand Equity Foundation observes that women-run businesses are more inclusive and employ three times more women than men.
- 79% of the women-owned businesses were self-financed.

Source: Sixth Economic Census, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation



STORY 1

BUILDING FENCES: WOMEN IN BAREILLY MAKE WIRE AND METAL NETTING TO PROTECT FARMLANDS

In Uttar Pradesh, 560,408 SHGs across the state have helped rural women become economically independent. In Bareilly district, women in more than 7,000 SHGs make barbed wire fences, masalas and more to become self-reliant.

Ramji Mishra
Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh



Outside a house in the corner of a road in Bhagwatipur village is a banner that reads – Vishram Prerna Mahila Gram Sangathan. Step inside, and there are women standing around a piece of machinery making wires and metal netting.

In 2019, Sangeeta Devi formed a self help group (SHG) in Bhagwatipur village and along with a few other women began manufacturing barbed wires. Now, farmers from across Bareilly and neighbouring districts buy the wire and netting from them to fence their fields.

In the Bhagwatipur gram panchayat in Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh, miles of barbed wire and metal netting are required to protect agricultural lands from stray cattle, and they are all made right here by the women of this self-help group.

“I learnt how to make these [barbed wire and metal netting] in Chennai when I lived there. On coming to Bareilly, I formed the self help group and trained women in the job too,” Sangeeta Devi told Gaon Connection. “We earn about three and a half lakh rupees a year,” she added.

Stray cattle is a growing problem in the state where farmers lose their standing crops to the chhutta pashu (stray cattle). While the population of stray cattle in the rest of the country has reduced by 3.2 per cent between 2012 and 2019, in Uttar Pradesh their numbers have registered a 17.34 per cent increase.

According to Sangeeta, their earnings grow in the sowing season when hundreds of wheat and paddy farmers in the area need fencing for their land.

The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) has enabled many such SHGs to be

set up and that has helped many women into self employment and economic independence.

According to data from NRLM, in Uttar Pradesh, there are 560,408 SHGs across the state's 75 districts. In Bareilly district alone, there are more than 7,000 SHGs across its 15 blocks.

On December 21, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an address in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh to women coming under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission, said that he considered the role of women in the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan as invaluable. And women were contributing to an increase in income in families in rural India.

"I work for about four hours a day making barbed wire and metal netting and earn about ten thousand rupees a month," Preeti Kumari, who is part of the Vishram Prerna Mahila Gram Sangathan, told *Gaon Connection*.

GENERATING INCOMES, SECURING LIVELIHOODS

In Giridharipur village in Bithri Chainpur block, women of the Adarsh Lakshmi Swayam Sahayata Samuh (SHG), prepare vermicompost and natural fertilisers with the cow dung as most of them have cows at home.

From manufacturing wire and net fencing and tailoring clothes to preparing vermicompost and masalas, the women in the SHGs are engaged in a range of activities.

"A packet of vermicompost weighs a kilogramme and can sell at anything up to twenty five rupees each. In a day we manage to sell about six packets," Madhu, a member of the SHG, told *Gaon Connection*. Besides vermicompost, several women are engaged in apiculture.

"The SHGs provide a platform for the women to become independent earners and there has been a marked change in their economic state," Sanjay Dwivedi, assistant development officer of the co-operative in Bithri Chainpur, who also discharges the duties of the Block Development Officer, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to Tejawant Singh, deputy commissioner, NRLM, Bareilly, women are encouraged to become self-reliant in the district. "From manufacturing wire and net fencing and tailoring clothes to preparing vermicompost and masalas, the women in the SHGs are engaged in a range of activities," Singh told *Gaon Connection*.

“Some of the products they make are even being exported. The women have liberated themselves from a life of poverty and want, and are contributing to nation building,” the deputy commissioner added.

STITCHING UP A SECURE FUTURE

Taking advantage of the fact that many rural women are adept at embroidery, sewing and knitting, sewing units have been set up in villages where the women work for a few hours for a salary.

“There are eleven sewing machines in our SHG and the women earn about Rs 3,000 a month. While before they got paid per piece of what they tailored, now, because we are getting a lot of orders they get a monthly salary,” Pooja Varma who heads the SHG Aparajita in Faridpur Inayat Khan village, told *Gaon Connection*.

Another SHG in the same village called Gulab, tailors school uniforms for several schools nearby. “During the pandemic we made about ten thousand masks and many PPE kits,” Mithilesh Kumari, a member of Gulab, told *Gaon Connection*.

The women can look forward to better things now, said Manshi Patel from Faridpur Inayat Khan village. “Earlier we were either daily wage labourers or just unemployed. In 2019, through the SHG we



began to make masalas. We gradually began to make profits. We work from ten in the morning to five in the evening and earn up to Rs 250 a day,” Patel told *Gaon Connection*. The advantages of being part of an SHG, added Patel, was that in times of need, the SHG and banks provide financial help.

In December 2021, the central government made it possible for members of self help groups to avail of an overdraft up to Rs 5,000 if they held an account in the Satyapit Mahila Bank. According to the government, more than five crore women have benefitted from this scheme.



STORY 2

RURAL WOMEN IN CHHATTISGARH BAKE AND SELL COOKIES MADE OF TRADITIONAL GRAINS

The women of Jay Maa Kali self-help group bake cookies with little millet, kodo, finger millet and other traditional grains, scented with mahua blossoms. The group has earned about Rs 20,000 in two months.

Deepanwita Gita Niyogi
Bastar, Chhattisgarh



At one in the winter afternoon, Lili Thakur, president of Jay Maa Kali self-help group (SHG) in Kudalgaon village in Bastar block of Bastar district, is busy. She and 10 others, sit inside a room baking fresh batches of hand-made cookies for the day.

The women, ranging in age from 25 to 42 years, work every day from 11 am to 5 pm in the village's community hall, to make nine varieties of cookies — including the popular multigrain version made with grains such as kodo millet (koden), little millet (kutki) and finger millet (ragi) as well as refined flour and whole wheat flour.

Some of the members sit on a thin mattress to knead millet dough while others press small balls of ready dough between their palms to shape the cookies. Finally, the cookies are placed on a baking tray and baked at 180 degrees centigrade.

It's been over a month since this group of women in Bastar began baking cookies to sell at Bihan Bazaar, which retails products made by self-help groups in Chhattisgarh, and other retailers.

So far, they have made 750 packs of 250 grams each (priced between Rs 80 and Rs 120), sold them for Rs 75,000 and earned a group profit of Rs 20,000. This has provided them a source of income at a time when the pandemic has hit most livelihoods.

"I help make about thirty to forty packets every day. Sometimes, we use tutti frutti, cashew and dried mahua flowers, which we are very fond of, for added flavour and crunchiness," Mamta Thakur, a group member told *Gaon Connection*.

These women have earned a lot of appreciation for making nutritious cookies this festive season. Such snacks made with

millets are in tune with the Centre's efforts since 2018 to promote millets through its nutri cereals initiative.

The cookies are marketed under the brand name of Tribal Taste through Tribal Tokni, the marketing platform of non-profit Arya Prerna Samiti, based in the district headquarters of Jagdalpur.

According to Mohit Arya, who runs the non-profit Arya Prerna Samiti, which trained the women, 20 to 30 per cent of the cost of the cookies goes to the group — between Rs 20 and Rs 30 a packet. The retailer gets about 15 to 20 per cent. The money directly goes to the group's account. "We are yet to calculate the pace at which they make cookies, since they are still new to the job. Once we do that, we wish to give them a full thirty per cent as their share," Arya added.

HOW THE COOKIE CAME TOGETHER

The Jay Maa Kali group was formed on February 2, 2016. However, this is the first time the group has attempted to collectively earn a livelihood by making a value-added product. This SHG was registered as part of the Indian Government's National Rural Livelihood Mission, which envisaged the formation of women's SHGs.

"We came to know about the initiative to make cookies through the district

The Jay Maa Kali group, a women's SHG, is as part of the Indian Government's National Rural Livelihood Mission.

administration in October last year and were trained later that month. It is a godsend opportunity, for money is tight after the pandemic. After the initial fifteen-day training, we started making cookies," Lili told *Gaon Connection*.

Arya arranged for the training to bake cookies after being approached by the district administration. The women were trained by Gaurav Kushwaha, an engineer turned baker based in Bastar.

TRAINING THE RURAL WOMEN

Kushwaha introduced the women to the basic ingredients needed to make cookies — all-purpose flour, whole wheat flour, fats (ghee, vanaspati and margarine), flavours such as vanilla and chocolate and milk solids. Then he told them about the proportions.

"I have not used any chemical additives in these cookies. The women use a hand

blender for making cookie dough. I have also taught them how to add flavours. I still sometimes go and check the end quality," he said.

"As of now, sales are good and there are repeat customers, since we use quality ingredients and there is no palmolein, artificial colours and preservatives in the cookies," Arya added.

Arya's wife Preeti, oversees a part of the operations. "Cookies are a much-loved item and sold on a daily basis. The women were trained for five hours and picked up the skill very fast," she told *Gaon Connection*. Since most women could not come in the morning due to household work, the training was held in the afternoons.

PROJECT FUNDING AND FUTURE PLANS

Since 2012, several self-help groups have been formed in Bastar; it now has 9,385 groups. As people have become more aware, newly-married women arriving in the villages are urged to form groups with 10 to 15 members each.

The funding of Rs 1,25,000 for the cookies project has come from the start-up village entrepreneurship programme of the district administration. Jay Maa Kali group contributed Rs 32,000 and the Arya Prerna Samiti contributed about Rs one lakh.



Currently, the group is not charged for using the community hall, but in future, they will have to pay rent and foot the electricity bills, district programme manager Raj Kumar Dewangan said.

The group hopes to shortly introduce imli or tamarind cookies. "The local grains, especially koden and kutki, are high in nutrition. The cookies' initiative can help promote nutritious grains, especially millets, through value addition. People like the products and the response is good," Arya explained.

With cookies already finding a ready market, other items such as cakes, chocolates and khakra are in the offing. Seeing the success of Jay Maa Kali group, other self-help groups are looking forward to learning to bake cookies too. In neighbouring Dantewada district, a group is being trained to prepare premium mahua cookies.

And so, in a terrain so far scented just by mahua, the local people are getting used to the heady aroma of molten butter and cookies.



STORY 3

TAMIL FISHERWOMEN SET UP A RESTAURANT AND FREE THEIR HUSBANDS OF DEBT

In Poompuhar village where women aren't even allowed to sit with men in public, five of them break gender stereotypes and start their own restaurant, where their vatha kuzhambu and rava kesari wow their customers.

Eva Badola
Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu



They have to work harder than ever. Their day starts at the crack of dawn and after toiling at home they set off to work at their restaurant they call Dolphin.

Five fisherwomen from Poompuhar, a small fishing village in Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, about 275 kilometres from the state capital, Chennai, are rewriting their stories, by daring to be innovative.

Stella Gracy, Silvarani, Rajkumari, Uma, and Pushpvalli got together and started a small seaside restaurant in 2016, where they serve fresh and local vegetarian and non vegetarian specialities to their guests on banana leaves. These include idlis, vada, puri, chapati, and of course curries made from freshly caught fish served with rice.

FROM POVERTY TO SELF RELIANCE

Five years ago, each of the women was leading a hand to mouth existence. "I had no money to pay my children's school fees," Stella Gracy told Gaon Connection. The 35-year-old and her husband were in debt.

"My husband was catching fewer and fewer fishes and was selling the catch to middlemen at throwaway prices," she said.

Today, these women not only own a business but are also earning Rs 10,000 each a month from their restaurant. They are in the process of expanding and will

soon be delivering up to 200 orders a day to nearby towns.

It was a difficult journey. The women come from a small fishing village that is tradition bound, has very rigid notions of what a woman should and should not do, and very patriarchal. Most women in the village work long hours, earn a pittance and invariably watch helplessly as their men take to drinking.

"We live in a conservative society where women are expected to cook tasty food from birth till death, but never empowered to enter professional kitchens," said Stella.

But that thought stuck in her head and the more she thought about it, the more determined she was to cook professionally and earn an income from that.

"It means we have to multitask more than usual, but we are used to that," she smiled.

A STRONG BUSINESS PLAN

The idea for the restaurant came about when they realised that the many fishers and traders who came to Poompuhar to do business had no place to eat in. "We decided to look for a place near where they did business," Silvarani, one of the partners, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India,

"We called our restaurant Dolphin, because it is a unique creature, different from other fishes."

there are schemes to empower fisher women. On paper, in the last seven years, approx. Rs 31,000 lakh has been set aside to help them in Tamil Nadu.

But, Stella and her partners have not been able to access any of the schemes that provide loans for start-ups at subsidised interest rates.

But that did not deter them and they managed Rs 75,000 from relatives and another lakh of rupees from private moneylenders to set up the restaurant and the kitchen. "We called our restaurant Dolphin, because it is a unique creature, different from other fishes," smiled Stella.

BREAKING THE MOULD

They managed to rent 1,250 square feet of land for which they pay Rs 1,000 a month. They cleared the land of its undergrowth themselves, and constructed a hut with bamboo walls and a thatched roof.

It was a bumpy start. Especially when they had to contend with disapproval from fellow villagers. "Women are not even allowed to sit with the men, and the fact that we had dared to start a business on our own without any male involved did not go down too well," Silvarani laughed.

But the five fisherwomen put their heads down, cooked and served food at their restaurant and even managed to repay their debts.

Soon, they were doing brisk business and were catering for several functions in the villages from celebrating birth of babies, weddings and even funeral feasts. And they kept the price point reasonable.

Initially they were getting orders for at least 60 meals a day. Now it is almost 200 orders a day. It is Rs 60 for a vegetarian meal and Rs 120 for a non-vegetarian one.

Rajkumari, the 42-year-old head chef of the restaurant, told Gaon Connection. "A housewife's cooking skills are often under-valued. But, even at home, I used to experiment with new dishes and standardise the recipe so that the dish would taste the same every time I made it. I apply the same techniques professionally now for bulk orders," she added.

Rajkumari said that their Vatha Kuzhambu (a spicy tamarind curry) and



their Rava Kesari (a semolina halwa) were popular.

"Earlier I was hesitant to come out and serve strangers, especially men," Uma, who serves food at the restaurant and packs the takeaways, told *Gaon Connection*. The 38-year-old said she had gained confidence working in her own enterprise.

The oldest partner is Pushpavalli who at 65 years of age is responsible for procuring ingredients and fresh seafood that she gets at the harbour every day.



A RIPPLE EFFECT

“If we want to alleviate poverty at grassroots level, low-income women need strong training and funding for small enterprises,” Stella said. “We learnt by trial-and-error method as there was no one to guide us or support us financially,” she pointed out.

A Nagapattinam-based non profit called SNEHA (Social Need Education and Human Awareness) helped them out with equipment for their kitchen, such as a rice grinder that made their lives so much easier. The five fisherwomen freed their husbands from debt.

While in the lean season the fishing activities of the village slow down and often stop entirely, Dolphin remains active supplying takeaway orders, and vending hot fish snacks on a cart to nearby areas.

“We worry non stop when our men are out in the sea,” Stella said. There are times the sea claims their lives, leaving their families helpless. “So, I motivate women to become independent so they can become independent and face any adversity life throws at them,” she said.





STORY 4

A WELL-OILED ENTERPRISE OF RURAL WOMEN IN MADHYA PRADESH

Twelve women from a self-help group in Pipal Kheda village, Madhya Pradesh, make cold pressed oil out of the locally grown Karera peanuts, which has found a market in Malaysia and the United States.

Shyam Dangi

Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh



Phoolwati Lodhi of Pipal Kheda village is a happy lady, and a busy one. She, along with 12 other women from her village that falls in the Khaniyadhana block in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh, are engaged in making cold pressed peanut oil.

“We own an acre of land. And some of our family members work as daily wage labourers in order to make ends meet,” 35-year-old Phoolwati told Gaon Connection. While her family lived on the acre of land and the Rs 200 a day they earned as daily wages, things have changed for the better, she said.

It is all thanks to the peanuts cultivated in Karera, Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh. They are renowned for their taste and are often referred to as Karera ke kaju (cashews of Karera).

The Karera peanuts, also considered extremely nutritious, recently got a fillip as cold pressed oil made from them was exported to Malaysia and the United States. Nearly 400 litres of oil from Pipal Kheda was exported.

“The women from a self help group in Pipul Kheda are working at Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooh, giving them an extra source of income,” Pramod Srivastav, district manager, NRLM, Shivpuri, told *Gaon Connection*.

“The Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooh provides employment to 65 people from the area including peanut farmers. Even the dregs of the peanuts, left over after extraction of oil, is used to generate additional income,” he said.

AN AUGMENTED INCOME

The women of Pipal Kheda who once depended on wages that they earned as labourers, are now making an added Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 a month.

Around 50 local peanut farmers in the area supply the Karera peanuts to the SHG. The women clean the peanuts, extract the oil and then pack it.

The peanut oil has brought a smile to the face of Siya Lodhi too. Like Phoolwati, she too struggled to make ends meet till she became involved in the oil-making enterprise. The 42-year-old barely managed with the yield from her acre of land and worked as a daily wage labourer.

Phoolwati's 22-year-old son Prasendra Lodhi helps the women run the cold-press. "I am confident that the way the demand for oil is increasing, our income will increase too," he told Gaon Connection. According to him, he makes up to Rs 5,000 a month at the cold-press.

In days gone by, the oil extraction would take place with the help of big crushers turned by bulls. The same kind of method is used now, only instead of bulls, the press is run by electricity.

"We got the cold-press from south India at a cost of nearly two lakh rupees. The

Around 50 local peanut farmers in the area supply the Karera peanuts to the SHG. The women clean the peanuts, extract the oil and then pack it.

women extract about forty litres of oil from it every day," Srivastav explained. The quantity will be increased, the district manager said.

FINDING A FOREIGN MARKET

The oil from Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooh sells at Rs 240 for a one litre pack and Rs 1,180 for a five-litre pack. The group earns anything up to Rs 40,000 a month from the oil.

"About three to four thousand rupees are credited to each woman each month and efforts are on to increase the amount to eight thousand rupees per woman," Srivastav said.

"Ninety litres of oil have been exported to the United States and forty five litres to Malaysia with the help of a private company, Ma Reva Vaidik Food Research and Producer Company, based in

Bhopal,” Srivastav informed.

“We have also sent samples of the oil to Germany and Dubai. We may also get orders from there. There is a good demand for the oil that the rural women are making,” Varun Singh, co-founder of Ma Reva Vaidik Food Research and Producer Company, told *Gaon Connection*.

PEANUT CULTIVATION IN INDIA

After China, India is the largest cultivator of peanuts in the world, with Gujarat leading the production. The other states that grow peanuts in significant amounts are Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

Peanuts are cultivated in both the rabi and kharif seasons. According to the Union ministry of agriculture and farmers welfare, in 2019-20, the production of peanuts stood at approximately 9.95 million tonnes that increased to 10.12 million tonnes in 2020-21.

In 2020-21, India exported about 638,000 tonnes of peanuts earning Rs 53.81 billion in foreign exchange.

India exports peanuts mainly to Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Russia, Ukraine, China, Nepal



and the United Arab Emirates. The Agriculture and Processed food Production Export Development Authority (APEDA) is going all out to give peanut exports a boost.





STORY 5

BEEKEEPING GIVES SANTHAL TRIBAL WOMEN A BUZZ OF HOPE

Bee keeping is scripting sweet success for tribal women in south Bihar who have formed the Banka Madhu Farmers Producer Organisation and are transforming their lives.

Nidhi Jamwal
Taruniya (Banka), Bihar



Draped in a bright pink sari, with a helmet firmly strapped to her head, Seema Hasda sat astride her scooty and rode off towards a farm of flowering sesame where some Santhal tribal women from Taruniya village were already there.

Their faces protected with nets, the women carefully pulled out frames from inside the neat row of boxes to check on the honey production.

“Soon the til flavour of honey will be ready for sale. I already have a quintal [100 kgs] of honey with me,” Seema smiled.

“Last year, during the mahamari (pandemic), we sent about nine quintals of madh (honey) to Mumbai,” she added.

Taruniya village is in Banka district of

south Bihar, where these women are part of the Farmers' Producer Organisation (FPO) – Banka Madhu Farmers Producer Organisation. The FPO was registered in 2020 with 350 members. More than 60 per cent of them are tribal.

Of the total annual honey production of 50 tonnes in Banka district, 40 tonnes is produced by this FPO alone.

Maria Tutu, a young Santhal from Taruniya village, who is the co-director of the Banka FPO, encouraged other rural women to take up bee-keeping.

In 2019, she herself took it up with 15 boxes. She received technical guidance from the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra and financial support from the government. Today she has 65 boxes.

“These boxes, including the bees, were provided at a subsidy of 90 per cent. I had to contribute only ten per cent of the cost (about Rs 500),” Maria told *Gaon Connection*.

Maria encouraged four other women from her extended family and together these five Santhal women started bee-keeping. Now, women from all the 15 households in Maria's village are into bee-keeping and earn a regular income by selling honey in a variety of flavours – sheesham, mustard, litchi, palash and mahua.

“Right now as the til crop is getting ready, there is til honey. By December, it will be time for mustard honey as farmlands will be covered in yellow mustard flowers,” said Seema, from Sarlaiya village.

“January to March is the best time for honey as there are multiple flowers, so honey production gets a boost. On an average, one honey box helps earn Rs 2,000–2,500 per year,” said Seema who now has 150 boxes.

“Last year, despite the pandemic and the lockdown, Banka district produced 50 tonnes of honey. This year, if the season favours us, we will produce a lot more honey,” said Ripusudan Singh, CEO and co-director of Banka Madhu FPO.

A farmer from Bindi village of Banka, Singh works with the tribal women in the district

training them in bee-keeping and helping them access government schemes and benefits.

WHEN DREAMS TAKE SHAPE

Soni Murmu of Rasuiya village, told *Gaon Connection* about how she started off.

“Last year, before the lockdown was announced, I attended a training programme on bee-keeping at the krishi centre. After that, I felt confident enough to bring 50 boxes home,” she added.

“Even during the lockdown, our work did not stop as flowering continued and the honey bees kept working. A large chunk of my honey was purchased by the local villagers and traders,” said Soni, who sells the honey at anything between Rs 300 and Rs 500 a kilo.

HONEY PRODUCTION AND BOX MOVEMENT

“Depending on the season and wind direction, per box honey collection is two to two-and-a-half kilos every 15 to 18 days,” Beena Murmu, a bee keeper from Taruniya village, who has 20 boxes, informed *Gaon Connection*.

“February and March are the best months for honey due to large scale flowering. In the monsoon, there is no production. Also,

if there is purva hawa [east winds], we get 2.5 kilo honey per box. But a pachiya hawa [west winds] reduces it to two kilos per box only," she added.

"During the litchi season, we send boxes to Amarpur [about 50 kilometres away]. We hire labourers who travel with the boxes and harvest the honey," said Seema. "We pay close to three hundred rupees per day to them," she added proudly.

The district administration is actively helping them out. "We have identified a honey corridor, which passes through Purnea, Bhagalpur, Banka, Godda, and Dumka. By moving the boxes along this route, honey production can be boosted," Suharsh Bhagat, district magistrate of Banka, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Honey production has gone up from two to three months to six to seven months a year in Banka. We have trained tribal women in honey keeping and results are promising," he added.

The state government is also finding new markets. "We have launched a web portal to sell products made by rural women and Jeevika didis. The women can now directly sell to the consumers anywhere in India and get a good profit," Balamurugan D, chief executive officer of Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (JEEViKA), told *Gaon Connection*.

"Only if our children study, will they succeed in life. I am funding my daughter's education in an English medium school through my honey sale."

QUALITY OF LIFE

The money these women are earning by selling honey is transforming their lives and that of their families too.

Sabina Murmu's daughter studies in standard 9 in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. "Only if our children study, will they succeed in life. I am funding my daughter's education in an English medium school through my honey sale," said the proud mother.

Seema Hasda's 15-year-old daughter wants to become a nurse. "The honey business is helping me save money for that. I also bought the scooty with my earnings," she beamed.

Seema who has herself only studied till class 5 always wanted to do something. "Madhumakkhi ne rasta dikha diya [The honey bees showed me the way]," she smiled, as she turned the key to her scooty and sped off.



STORY 6

IRULA TRIBES IN TAMIL NADU MAKE FURNITURE OUT OF THE INVASIVE LANTANA

Women of an Irula tribal settlement, in the foothills of the Western Ghats in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, make furniture out of the invasive Lantana Camara, one of the world's ten most invasive species.

Pankaja Srinivasan
Senguttaiyur (Coimbatore) Tamil Nadu



The scattering of thatched homes lining either side of immaculate pathways in Senguttaiyur village, basked in the sun.

Rangamma sat in the shady thinnai (sitout) of her home, watching over the bright green aruppu (albizia amara) spread out to dry. Aruppu is used as a skin scrub and to wash hair.

"We collect the leaves, dry it out in the sun and powder it," Rangamma told Gaon Connection. The powder is then packed and sold as a minor forest produce (MFP).

Senguttaiyur, the Irula village falls in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. The tribal women in Senguttaiyur augment their family livelihood by collecting, processing and selling MFP such as aruppu and

But today, there is a certain impatience amongst the women who have been kept away from the forests by lingering elephants. The delay in going into the forests has meant an interruption in a 45-day training course kicked off earlier this year.

The course trains women to make furniture out of Lantana Camara, (rated as one of the world's 10 most invasive species) from the forests, and turning it into furniture.

Lantana has debilitated large tracts of forest lands in India threatening the nutrient cycle in the soil, and not allowing the local flora to grow, thereby posing a threat to the forest-based livelihoods of the Irula tribe.

training," 27-year-old Selvi, told Gaon Connection. They are learning how to make chairs, tables and shelves out of the lantana wood, but they have almost exhausted the stock of wood, and are waiting to go into the forests for more.

"The elephants have been walking right through the village too," Vendhiamma, another resident of Senguttaiyur, told *Gaon Connection*.

Senguttaiyur nestles on the lower slopes of the Western Ghats within the Perianaickenpalayam Range of the Coimbatore Forest Circle falling in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve in Tamil Nadu. It is home to 40 families belonging to the Irula tribe. The Karamadai town panchayat it comes under is more than 20 kilometres away.

The Irulars are identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. According to the 2011 Census, there are 23,116 Irular households in Tamil Nadu, and their numbers are depleting. They are a denotified tribe.

The lantana project aims to add value to non-timber forest produce. It was the outcome of seven years of work put in by social worker Kamini Surendran.

"I was doing my PhD and my research paper was on Empowerment and sustainable development of Senguttaiyur village Irular tribal women. I surveyed many

Senguttaiyur is home to 40 families belonging to the Irula tribe. The lantana project aims to add value to non-timber forest produce by working with the tribal community.

villages in this area, and found this village to be really remote and underdeveloped... and all the families here were below the poverty line," the 57-year-old told *Gaon Connection*.

Surendran approached Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham that had initiated similar projects in other tribal villages in the Siruvani Hills in Coimbatore.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change funded the Senguttaiyur project through ENVIS, its Environmental Information System, in partnership with the Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham in Coimbatore. ENVIS disseminates scientific, technical and semi-technical information on various issues related to the biological invasion (invasive alien species).

One of its objectives is to promote Green Skill Development Programmes (GSDP) to skill people in the environment, forests and wildlife sectors, and create sustainable livelihood options for tribal communities

and at the same time contribute to forest and biodiversity conservation.

"We have worked with seven Irula settlements around Coimbatore since 2011," Maya Mahajan, centre co-ordinator for ENVIS and associate professor at Amrita University, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Using chemicals to control or eliminate the invasive lantana is tedious, time consuming, expensive and not good for the environment. So, we experimented with the help of local artisans, and found that the lantana was strong enough to be made into furniture, and began the programme," Mahajan said.

Each training capsule gets a fund of about six to seven lakh rupees, and this includes a stipend of Rs 300 a day for all those being trained. "It is a win-win situation that provides a sustainable livelihood for the tribals and at the same time conserves forests," Mahajan said.

There are plans afoot to replicate the lantana project in tribal communities in Dahanu in Maharashtra, and Wayanad in Kerala, she said.

Meanwhile, in Senguttaiyur, master trainers Rangasamy Kumara and Veerasamy from the Irula villages of Singampatti and Mullamkadu respectively in the Siruvani Hills teach the women how to measure and cut twine that will be wrapped around the legs of the chairs.

"We are divided into five groups of four members each and each group is responsible for learning and then making one piece of furniture," 27-year-old Selvi explained, pointing to a couple of arm chairs, a centre table and some peg tables, in different stages of completion. "We are yet to finish the three-seater sofa," Selvi said.

The women go into the forests looking for lantana and it takes them two to three hours to pick and cut them, after which they bring back all that they can carry as a head load.

MARKETING THE LANTANA FURNITURE

"The environment ministry ordered nearly a lakh and a half rupees worth of lantana furniture from a tribal community in the Siruvani Hills," Mahajan said.

The ladies wing of the Federation of Indian Commerce and Industry, the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Coimbatore Chapter, has taken the onus of marketing the finished furniture that is made here through a furniture outlet.

"We will inform you when it is ready. Please come for the exhibition we will have then," Lakshmi beamed. "Of course, it all depends on when we complete the three-seater sofa, and that depends on what the elephants decide," she said.



STORY 7

RURAL WOMEN IN UTTAR PRADESH SPIN A YARN WITH BANANAS

A novel initiative of the Lakhimpur Kheri district administration in Uttar Pradesh is bringing financial freedom to rural women who extract fibre from discarded banana stems.

Mohit Shukla

Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh



Till recently, Radha Devi and her husband worked as daily wagers, together barely earning Rs 400 a day. And in the pandemic, as the work dried up, they struggled to survive.

Now, Radha Devi alone earns Rs 400–600 a day. And the credit goes to a novel initiative that is underway in Samaisa village of Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh.

Using discarded banana stems, the district administration is killing two birds with one stone — reprocessing crop residue and also providing livelihood to rural women.

Radha Devi, a member of the Ma Saraswati self-help group (SHG) in Samaisa, is one of 40 women in the village who are earning Rs 400 a day through this enterprise.

“When COVID happened the work dried up and we had no money to support ourselves and our five children,” 35-year-old Radha Devi, told Gaon Connection. “Now, I am able to support my entire family,” she added.

WASTE BANANA STEM TO FIBRE

In Lakhimpur Kheri district, nearly 1,000 acres (405 hectares) of land is under banana cultivation. When the bananas are harvested, the farmers usually throw away the stem. Clearing the discarded stems from the field requires an additional spending of Rs 5 a quintal (1 quintal = 100 kilogrammes).

But not any more. The discarded stems have become a source of employment to rural women who draw out fibres from them. Banana fibres are largely used in

textiles, hygiene products such as diapers, etc. The fibres are bio-degradable and therefore eco friendly. The project was launched at Samaisain December 2020.

"We bought machinery from a company in Gujarat and the same company imparted online training to the women," Arvind Singh, chief development officer, Lakhimpur Kheri, told *Gaon Connection*.

"The Samaisa project was our first pilot project. Since it took off so well, we are going to scale it up, and replicate it in other villages too," he said, adding that it would be part of a 'One Block, One Product' initiative.

"Ma Saraswati SHG has signed an MoU with AltMat, a company in Gujarat that transforms agriculture waste into natural fibres and yarns to be used in clothing and packaging. The company has placed an order for two hundred kilos of fibre to be delivered in 2022," Arvind Singh said.

According to him there are other orders of nearly 10 tonnes [1 tonne = over 900 kilos] of fibre from several companies. But the MoU is not yet signed, but will be once the banana harvesting gets underway.

This initiative has not only cut down the expenses of the banana farmers, but also augmented the income of women from the village, said the district officer.

The initiative to convert banana crop waste into natural yarn has not only cut down the expenses of the banana farmers, but also augmented the income of rural women.

FINANCIAL FREEDOM TO RURAL WOMEN

Radha Devi told Gaon Connection that each banana tree yielded about 100 grams of fibre, which can be extracted in 20 minutes.

"I leave home at about eight in the morning and on some days I even extract about nine to ten kilos of fibre," she said.

For every kilogram of fibre extracted the women are paid Rs 100. On an average, one woman is able to extract at least four to six kilos of fibre a day, earning Rs 400-600. "The yarn is sold at anything between hundred eighty to two-hundred-fifty rupees a kilo," said Radha Devi. "The women do not have to worry about finding buyers. Companies come to the village to collect the yarn," she said.

"I always wanted to study but could not do so out of poverty. But now, I have the confidence that my children will get the education I could never afford for myself," she said with hope echoing the dreams of all the other women in her village who are now employed and self-reliant.

GOING PLACES

"We have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the textile company in Gujarat, and this has created a buzz of excitement amongst the women," Arun Kumar Singh, the block development officer of Isa Nagar (Lakhimpur Kheri), told *Gaon Connection*.

"AltMat has already sent an advance amount of Rs 21,000 through RTGS (Real-Time Gross Settlement). We will set up more machines that will lead to more output and benefit the women," he added.

CDO Arvind Singh also explained that they were using social media platforms to publicise Lakhimpur Kheri's banana yarn. "We hope companies from India and abroad will come forward and invest in it, and help our villages progress further," he said.

A graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology and Indian Institute of Management, Arvind Singh has several



years of technical research experience in South Korea and Hong Kong under his belt.

Meanwhile, the women of Samaisa wait in anticipation. The next banana crop will be harvested in July and they are already planning to fulfil the huge order of 10 tonnes of fibre.





STORY 8

WOMEN IN VARANASI ENTER THE WORLD OF TOY MAKING

A skill upgradation training programme initiated by the Central government is preparing 200 women of Varanasi to enter the business of wooden toy making.

Anand Kumar

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh



In a skill upgradation training programme initiated by the Union ministry of textiles, women residents of Kashmiri Ganj in Varanasi, about 320 kilometres (km) from the state capital Lucknow, are learning to make tops, dolls, sindoor daani and other small toys. These women, who are training to be wood artisans, are also being paid a daily allowance of Rs 300.

"I was only involved in household work. But, when I heard about the training scheme, I signed up for it," Abhilasha Devi, one of the trainees, told *Gaon Connection*. "I have learnt woodcraft now and I hope to get work orders soon so that I can earn something and support my family," the 33-year-old added.

Abhilasha has learnt how to use the special tools required for toy making and

has become adept at crafting wooden tops. She only wished the duration of the skill upgradation course (two months) could be longer, giving her the opportunity to learn more.

Kashmiri Ganj, where Abhilasha Devi lives is a major hub for the manufacture of colourful wooden toys, popular all over the country.

Although the craft is traditionally practised by men, with the women only involved in painting them, things will soon change as the 200 women trainees of the programme are set to enter the toy making business.

"The women trainees are taught to cut the wood, use the tools and shape and paint the wooden toys," Narendra Singh, a trainer at the workshop, informed

Gaon Connection. "But the duration of the workshop could be longer," Singh said as well.

"Two months is inadequate for teaching the craft which takes at least six months to learn," he said.

"After making toys, we are currently learning to paint them. At first, I didn't even know how to hold a brush," Babita Singh, another trainee, told *Gaon Connection*. Babita attends the workshop at 2 pm every day.

"When the traders order toys next, these women will be given the task of preparing them," said Narendra Singh. "Like male artisans, they too will be paid full remuneration," he added.

WOMEN BECOMING SELF-RELIANT

"Though I have frequently watched wooden toys being made, I never learned to make them," said Archana Devi, who spends four hours every day learning the craft. "Now I await orders so that I may earn a living, making the toys, sitting at home," the 36-year-old said.

She hoped that the skill upgradation programme initiated by the Central government, would bring about a change in the lives of the women.

"Though I have frequently watched wooden toys being made, I never learned to make them. Now I await orders so that I may earn a living, making the toys, sitting at home."

Prime Minister Modi has repeatedly voiced his support for the local toy making craft in Varanasi. The wooden toys of Varanasi were also included in the first ever Virtual Toy Fair 2021, organised by the Central government from February 27 to March 2. The theme logo of Toy Fair 2021 was a top, which is a very popular toy in Varanasi.

"India should focus on making good quality toys as well as those with some educational value. We enjoy a lower cost of labour, have more ideas, so we will work on our toys and sell them in a major way to the world," Piyush Goyal, Union commerce and industry minister said, when the fair was inaugurated.

He stated that it was important for the younger generation to understand how toys contributed to the overall development of a person. He also talked about how toys could bring alive the lore and legends of the past for children.

In his *Mann Ki Baat* radio programme on August 30, 2020, Modi had appealed to the people to make indigenous toys and promote them. He had said that would make India self reliant. He made special mention of the toy industry in Varanasi.

According to a International Market Analysis Research and Consulting Report, 85 per cent of India's toy market depends on China, while 15 per cent of the toys are sourced from Malaysia, Germany, Hong Kong and the United States.

While China exports a staggering Rs 1,472 billion worth of toys to India, in comparison, India is able to export toys only to the tune of up to Rs 20 billion.

However, the Indian toy industry is showing improvement with the intervention of the Central government. As per news reports, the demand for toys across the world is growing at the rate of five per cent per annum, while in India it is 10 to 15 per cent per annum. Therefore, it is being estimated that the toy industry in India will be worth Rs 147-221 billion by the year 2024.





STORY 9

WATER HYACINTH GETS A MAKEOVER AS YOGA MATS

From resisting all efforts to uproot it from water bodies, the problematic water hyacinth has now become a source of livelihood for women in Assam as a project repurposes the invasive plant to weave yoga mats.

Divendra Singh



The water hyacinth, pretty as its name sounds, is a nightmare for those who are restoring water bodies. Just a small patch of the aquatic plant spreads out, and in no time at all the entire lake is covered in it, blocking the sunlight and killing aquatic life.

Considered a highly problematic invasive species, the water hyacinth has improved its reputation somewhat with the Meghalaya-based North East Centre for Training and Research (NECTAR) initiating a project in Assam, where it is turned into sturdy yoga mats.

In Guwahati, Assam, huge portions of the Deepor Beel, a Ramsar protected water body, is covered in water hyacinth, but now it has become a source of livelihoods for local inhabitants, mostly women, who are employed in using them to weave mats.

“Using the water hyacinth for handicrafts is not new to this part of the country,” Arun Kumar Sharma, director of NECTAR (an autonomous society, set up under the department of Science & Technology, Government of India), told *Gaon Connection*.

Training programmes were initiated so that the women could put their weaving skills to better use and have a better source of income. “The yoga mat was one of the ideas we came up with and it is doing well,” Sharma said.

Rumi Das, Sita Das, Mamoni Das, Mitali Main Das, Mitali Das and Bhanita Das were the first six trainees who from a fishing community in Guwahati. Now there are nearly 40 girls being trained.

“Most of them are school dropouts, who

had to discontinue studies for one reason or another,” explained Sharma.

But they are all driven and want to make something of their lives, he said. The programme began at the end of March, this year. They have a target to make 700 hundred yoga mats by the end of the month, Sharma added.

THE PROCESS

Sharma explained the process of harvesting the water hyacinth and turning them into mats. “The plant needs to be sun dried, and to dry twelve kilos of water hyacinth it can take up to three days in the sun. When dry, the twelve kilos are reduced to two kilos.”

But because Assam sees a lot of rains, NECTAR has installed solar dryers that can do the job in twenty four hours. And this saves a lot of time, Sharma said.

After the first six women were trained they took over the training of those who followed them. Presently 38 women are weaving the mats on traditional looms. And, it takes approximately two kilos of dried water hyacinth to weave one and a half mats, Sharma said.

“We are planning to introduce semi-automatic looms which will enable them to weave more mats in less time,” he said. The women have woven 150 mats in a

Presently 38 women are weaving the water hyacinth-based mats on traditional looms. And, it takes approximately two kilos of dried water hyacinth to weave one-and-a-half mats.

week's time. They have to weave another 550 mats by May 31, 2021.

The brand name for the yoga mats is going to be “Moorhen Yoga Mats” after the birds Moorhen (medium sized water birds) that frequent Deepor Beel. Natural dyes in black, red and green are used to colour the mats.

IMPACT ON TOURISM

The presence of water hyacinth in Deepor Beel had decreased the number of migratory birds visiting the lake and with it the number of tourists who came there for bird watching also came down, said Sharma.

This had an impact on the economy of the people living around the lake, who depended on tourists for a livelihood. “With this Yoga mat project, we are hoping to revive the economy,” he explained.

Looking at the success of putting the water hyacinth to such good use, other states are also getting in touch with NECTAR.

Powai Lake in Mumbai, Maharashtra has the same problem and the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay has also reached out to NECTAR to provide similar training to people living in that area.

Sharma hoped that once the pandemic subsided, more people would approach them to help train youngsters in weaving water hyacinth. They can also start their own businesses with the skill they will learn in the training, Sharma pointed out.

NECTAR has already got enquiries about the yoga mat from other countries. At present it is priced at Rs 1,200 in India and Rs 1,500 abroad. "As the production increases the price of each mat will automatically come down. But, most importantly, this training will enable women to easily earn up to twelve thousand rupees a month, from home," he said.





STORY 10

RURAL WOMEN EMPLOY JOBLESS MALE MIGRANT AND EMERGE AS CHANGEMAKERS

Women associated with self-help groups (SHGs) in Uttar Pradesh's Gonda district provided employment to male migrant workers who returned from cities during the lockdown and were jobless.

Saurabh Chauhan
Gonda, Uttar Pradesh



People in the villages of Gonda district in Uttar Pradesh were worried about livelihood as the nationwide lockdown was announced.

A few women took matters into their own hands, stepped out, and planted some five lakh saplings, that is benefitting male migrant labourers who had returned from cities, and were jobless.

In Gonda, as many as 50 women are members of 10 self-help groups (SHG) in the four developmental blocks of Itiathok, Mankapur, Chhapia, and Haldharmau. They have been involved in planting saplings of teak, sahjan, guava, mango, jamun and roses since 2018.

“The lockdown rendered my husband jobless. This nursery work was our only source of income,” Sunita Devi of Binhuni

village of Itiathok told *Gaon Connection*.

Women linked this project to MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) so that they could get government funds to purchase saplings and bear labour charges.

“For a month, we earned Rs 200 per day as MGNREGA wage. A government official told us the profit from the sale of these saplings will also be divided among us,” she said.

Most women in the area are farm labourers barring a few involved in stitching and other handicraft work. The lockdown hit them hard. “We earned Rs 10,000–15,000 each from this nursery business last year. Since this was the only source of livelihood, we planted

more saplings,” said Vinita Pal, head of a self-help group in Bishnupur village of Haldharmau in Gonda.

“Some migrant workers arrived from Mumbai and Gurugram. They asked for some work. Since we had increased the plantation, we required more helping hands. Hence, we agreed to employ them,” said Meera Pal, another member of the self-help group.

Bishnupur village grabbed the headlines on June 26, 2020, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi acknowledged their work and spoke to Vinita Pal. Modi, a few days ago, had spoken to a select few who created employment opportunities for themselves during the lockdown.

“Nobody realised planting saplings could be a source of livelihood for those who came walking, back home with empty pockets and shattered dreams,” Mithilesh Srivastava, a retired schoolmaster from Bishnupur.

FROM RIDICULE TO RESPECT

A narrow road leads to Bishnupur village in Gonda. The nursery is established on about an acre of land. Deepak Kumar, a local villager who had worked in Mumbai as a gardener years ago, guides the women.

The migrant workers who returned to Bishnupur village during the lockdown had no hope of getting work. But a plant nursery run by local women offered them hope and provided them work.

“Initially, these women were laughed at. A local district administration official, however, encouraged them. Even I was sceptical about it yielding any profit. I wondered if it would push them into debt,” said Kumar. “The women’s group pays Rs 50,000 per month as rent to the landowner of the nursery,” he said.

The migrant workers who returned to this village had no hope of getting work. The situation was grim and the government had not pushed forward the MGNREGA scheme.

“I used to get Rs 11,000 in Mumbai before lockdown. When I reached here, I was jobless with no money in hand. I was depressed and I had got married in October last year,” said Kumar.

Locals suggested he should work with self-help groups. “I had heard about the nursery but was not sure whether I would get work there,” he said.

The 10 SHGs employed 60–70 migrant workers during the lockdown. “They were paid by the SHG,” said Vinita Pal.

“Bishnupur Nursery planted 1.50 lakh saplings and it would not have been possible without the help of migrant workers,” she said.

These women have emerged as changemakers.

Pal Ravinder Kumar, Mohit and Anil Pal of Paharapur village of Gonda worked in a plastic box-manufacturing firm in Mumbai. They returned from the city in May, with no savings.

“I borrowed Rs 10,000 from my friend in Mumbai to come home,” said Pal Ravinder Kumar, 22, who got married a year ago. He said, “My wife told me to work with these groups when I came back from Mumbai, and I initially snubbed her,” he said.

“I asked him to work with Kamalpur SHG. Since he had been working in a factory in Mumbai, he felt it was below him. But now, he is the one motivating the women to form a similar group,” Shalini, Pal’s wife told *Gaon Connection*.

Nitin Bansal, Gonda’s district magistrate said, “There are a lot of rural livelihood schemes. The government is ready to assist them to become self-reliant.”

TOWARDS SELF-RELIANCE

Anila Devi of Binhuni village of Gonda has been waiting for the government to purchase the saplings. “So far we have only got the daily wages. We will earn more money once the saplings are sold. The district administration has assured us they will buy these plants,” she added.

A government official said the district has a target of planting more than 50 lakh trees in the coming monsoons. “We purchase plants from different nurseries and the saplings prepared by the SHGs will be purchased at a good price,” he said.

These villages have more than 300 migrant labourers who have returned from big cities. “Our effort is to reach out to them and provide them work. We will approach the women first. More self-help groups will be formed,” said Vinita Pal. SHG member Reema Devi said, “We don’t know how long this [COVID-19] situation will persist... A self-help group is a stable source of income.”

The state government has just completed the skill mapping of migrant workers, including women, to provide them jobs under rural job schemes. The head of the State Rural Livelihood Mission, Sujit Kumar said more women will be employed in the coming days through SHGs across the state.



STORY 11

THE ECO-FRIENDLY BAMBOO RAKHIS CRAFTED BY BASTAR'S TRIBAL WOMEN

Tribal women in the naxal-affected Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, who otherwise worked as farm labourers, are making eco-friendly rakhis and handicraft using bamboo.

Shivani Gupta



The mood is festive across India as it is the festival of Raksha Bandhan when sisters tie a rakhi on their brothers' wrist, and pray for their long and healthy life.

In tribal dominated Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, there is excitement too. While the adivasi women do not celebrate Raksha Bandhan, their creation of beautiful rakhis is all ready to adorn the wrists of beloved brothers.

"We were trained in rakhi and jewellery making. We enjoy working in groups and creating new designs. And it feels good to earn an additional income," Chameli Nag, a resident of Rotama village, told *Gaon Connection*, while she threaded colourful stones with a rakhi thread.

For one month, every morning, after their household chores, the tribal women in

Bastar district set out of their homes and gather somewhere to spend the day making bright colourful rakhis. A local non-profit has been training them as part of an endeavour to help them earn a livelihood.

"These women use locally sourced bamboo to make the rakhis," Mohit Arya, founder, Arya Prerna Samiti, a non-profit working for sustainable livelihood of tribal people in Chhattisgarh, told *Gaon Connection*.

"In Bastar, a variety of bamboo is available. The local craft of this area was dwindling. We wanted to revive it and provide an avenue for the artisans of Bastar to earn both respect and a livelihood. Making rakhis out of bamboo has done that," he added.

"We want to show the country the beauty of Bastar," said Arya, who has been working with tribal communities for the past 21 years.

ONCE FARMER LABOURERS, NOW ENTREPRENEURS

At least 30 tribal women in Rotama and Narayanpur villages of the district benefited from this initiative taken by the non-profit and the district administration. The women managed to earn between Rs 6,000 and Rs 10,000 each a month.

They had to make at least 20 rakhis a day.

An additional honorarium is given if they make more than the daily target. For instance, they get Rs 150 for making 20 rakhis a day, Rs 75 for an additional 10 rakhis and Rs 300 for 40 rakhis.

"Ham log ko income mil raha hai to acha lag raha hai" (It feels so good to earn a living out of this), a tribal woman, who is part of the group that made rakhis, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Earlier, these women used to work as labourers in the fields. Now, they sit under the shade, and do the work they enjoy," Uma Negi, resident of Jagdalpur, who trains them, told *Gaon Connection*.

Making rakhis is no easy thing.

"Earlier, these women used to work as labourers in the fields. Now, they sit under the shade, and do the work they enjoy [making eco-friendly rakhis]."

"Women have to separate the fine fibres from the raw bamboo. It requires patience and a lot of intricate work to create designs. These are then painted, dried, and knotted with stones," she added.

Apart from rakhis, these women also make jewellery using locally available bamboo.

MARKETING AND SALES

These eco-friendly rakhis are being sold at stalls in the local market in Jagdalpur city in the district. It is supported by Tribal Tokni, a social platform for tribal products such as handicrafts, handlooms, and minor forest produce.

"We are working in collaboration with Tribal Tokni, which is working on marketing of these rakhis. We got some online orders too," said Arya.

The non-profit recently registered with

Amazon and Flipkart to expand the sales of handmade products made by the rural tribal women.

“We are stressing on increasing the production level. These tribal women are good at production, but it is difficult for them to sell the products. We aim to provide a marketing ecosystem to the tribal didis (sisters),” he added.

Last year, a record sales of Rs 1.6 million was made by selling eco-friendly rakhis in Dhamtari district. This benefitted women associated with 60 self-help groups.

“Sales are good. People are asking us if our stall will be there even after rakhi. Customers are bored of buying rakhis made of stones and pearls, which cost over forty rupees per piece. We have given them a new variety and our bamboo rakhis are priced at twenty rupees only,” said Negi, who was on duty at the local market while she spoke with *Gaon Connection*.

Next on their plan is bamboo lamps and jewellery, said Negi.





STORY 12

RURAL WOMEN PUT PANNA'S AMLA ON THE MURABBA MAP OF INDIA

*Women SHGs in a small village in Panna, Madhya Pradesh
shine the light on the amla after giving it a sweet makeover.*

Arun Singh

Panna, Madhya Pradesh



Something sweet is simmering at Dahlaan Chauki, a village in Madhya Pradesh, 70 kilometres away from its more famous neighbour the Panna National Park and 400 kilometres north east of the state capital Bhopal.

Dahlaan Chauki is making news, thanks to enterprising women like 60-year-old Bhagwati Devi. Her *amla murabbas* (sweet pickled Indian gooseberries) are famous not just in the district and state, but also across the country and abroad.

And, watching Bhagwati make a success of her pickling skills, other women in the village have also taken to it, creating a village industry that is putting Panna on the *murabba* map, besides providing a source of income for women who can work from home and earn a livelihood.

The Government of Madhya Pradesh has also included the amla of Panna in its 'One District, One Product' scheme that promotes small scale industry and local produce.

WOMEN SHGS PICKLE THEIR WAY TO FAME

Dahlaan Chauki falls on the Panna-Ajaygarh route. There is a simple board with 'Ma Durga Self Help Group' (SHG) written on it and beside a table laden with her *murabba*, neatly packed, stands Bhagwati Devi who is also the president of the SHG. "Many people stop here in their cars and carry away my *murabba*," Bhagwati told *Gaon Connection*.

"We have managed to sell fifteen quintals [1,500 kilogrammes] of *murabba* during

the pandemic. In fact the demand went up,” she added.

The SHG has been making *murabbas* and other products for about 10 years now and looking at the growing success of the venture, many other women in the village joined in. There are presently 10 SHGs in the village with over a 100 women working in them.

THE WELL TRAVELLED AMLA

According to Dashrath Yadav, who helps his wife Bhagwati in the enterprise, the SHG made nearly 30-40 quintals [3,000-4,000 kgs] of *murabba* every season, besides pickles, candy, juice, etc. The products have travelled to Bhopal, Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and even to parts of Kerala as part of events to promote amla, he said. He said the SHG had also won many awards.

“But, the yield of the amlas was not too good this year,” Dashrath told *Gaon Connection*. “We do not use the wild amla growing in the forests. We buy amlas cultivated by the local farmers,” he said.

Meanwhile, the state government is trying to promote Panna's amla. “It is the aim of the government to promote the amla which carries many medicinal qualities, not just within the country but even abroad,” Sanjay Kumar Mishra, district collector of Panna, told *Gaon Connection*.

This would be a boon for the over one million people who live in Panna district, 45 per cent of which is covered in forests, where the amla grows wild in abundance. This move will also go a long way in making Madhya Pradesh a self reliant state, Mishra said.

GETTING SELF RELIANT WITH THE GOOSEBERRY

Farmers in the state are being encouraged to cultivate amla, not just in their farms, but also in empty spaces, Mahendra Mohan Bhatt, assistant director, Panna's horticulture department told *Gaon Connection*.

Besides growing wild in the jungles, there are amla orchards in 500 hectares of land in the district. Many farmers are also planting saplings in their land, Bhatt said.

According to the horticulture department, there are big schemes in the pipeline to promote products made out of amla. “The department is also organising training workshops for women in the district in the making of products from amla. These workshops will enable women to work from home and become independent and self reliant,” Bhatt said. The aim is to make Panna district synonymous with amla, he concluded.





STORY 13

THE ALL-WOMEN TEA STUDIO IN THE NILGIRIS BREW A PERFECT CUP OF TEA

*Eight women at an elegant and tiny tea facility in the Nilgiris
in Tamil Nadu, make artisanal teas from locally grown leaves
and supply them across the globe.*

Pankaja Srinivasan
Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu



It's difficult to write about Nilgiris tea and not mention how the rolling hillsides with tea plantations look like an intricate patchwork quilt in shades of green. A pop of defiant red in the midst of all the soothing green catches the eye. It is as if the blue mountains ran out of green and decided to hastily sew on a red patch.

That red patch, perched in a tiny village called T Manihatty, Kattabettu in the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, about 550 kilometres from the state capital Chennai, is Muskan Khanna's Tea Studio.

Set up in 2018, Tea Studio is a tiny artisanal teas manufacturing unit in the Nilgiris, the largest tea growing district in south India. Artisanal teas manufactured here include four black teas, six green teas, three white teas and two Oolong. They are all semi-hand crafted.

Inside the facility, the fragrance of roasting tea makes it warm and toasty, a welcome contrast to the crisp cold outdoors. What sets it apart is the fact that it is an all-woman enterprise, with its seven employees living in the neighbouring villages, except for the owner 35-year-old Khanna who lives in Coonoor, 20 kms away.

It is perhaps the only tea manufacturing unit in the country that uses LPG for the drying, roasting and processing of the tea leaves, which does not pollute the environment in any way (most units use coal or wood); it supports and encourages the philosophy of being 'local', Khanna pointed out.

The tea leaves for the factory come from local growers who own no more than half-an-acre (0.2 hectares) to four acres

(approximately 1.5 hectares) of land around the tea factory.


Most of the growers are from the Badaga community, who bring their tea leaves there to sell. Khanna inspects them and if they pass muster, she buys them right away. Many of these growers are the husbands of the women employed at the studio.

The facility buys approximately 2,000 kilogrammes of tea leaves a month. These tea leaves are 'deemed' organic. "Traditionally, these small growers have never used chemicals or fertilisers on their tiny plots. They use dung and compost. But they are not certified as organic," Khanna clarified.

Khanna is in the middle of a transaction with one of those tea growers, and her trusted 'tea-maker' Vaidhegi translates from the local Badaga language to English. The pile of fresh green tea leaves are scrutinised, the tea grower is asked a few searching questions and a deal is struck then and there.

It is a big, scrupulously clean area, with plenty of light and air. Shiny machines hum and buzz and rumble as women fuss around it, stirring here, tossing there and checking the texture of the tea.

As Tea Studio only wanted to make artisanal teas, a woman's delicate touch was essential, pointed out Khanna. That



As Tea Studio only wanted to make artisanal teas, a woman's delicate touch was essential. As the facility has no sorting machine like the conventional tea factories do, women hand-sort the finished product to pick out anything that is not uniform.

explained the lone woman sitting outside at the gate, fiercely focussed, as she sorted a tray of tea leaves. Because these are delicate teas, and as the facility has no sorting machine like the conventional tea factories do, women hand-sort the finished product to pick out anything that is not uniform.

The facility is a small one with limited production. And it runs on just a single shift that is also convenient for the women working there. It did take some time for the women to be accepted or be taken seriously, in an industry that is conventionally male dominated.

Five of the employees — Chitra, Sharmila, Sandhya, Kalivani and Kunjamma — are daily wage workers and they earn Rs 320 a day (they work six days a week), while Vaidhegi, who is the 'tea maker' earns Rs 13,000 a month. Accountant Ishwarya earns Rs 12,000 a month. Their ages range between 23 and 48 years.

“The fact that unmarried girls are bringing in some income into the households has seen a slowdown in the 'husband hunting','” Khanna joked.

A SPECIAL BREW

A staircase leads upstairs to another bright space dominated by big picture windows. On a counter are arranged a row of cups with the liquor from different artisanal teas. The colours range from a deep garnet to pale champagne.

Visitors to the Tea Studio are encouraged to savour the taste of each tea. With a little nudge and help from the ladies, one can suss out the subtle notes of 'floral', 'citrus', 'pepper', 'jasmine', 'sweet jaggery' and even 'sweet potato'.

The Tea Studio is constantly innovating. Khanna's The Green Nilgiri Bamboo is awaiting a patent in her name. It is made from the stalks of tea and has notes of jaggery in it.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

Although machines are used in the manufacturing process, unlike regular factories where the leaf is fed in at the start and the end product comes out at the other end, at the Tea Studio, there is human interaction at every step. The imported Chinese machines are designed so that the women can closely monitor



each stage of the process.

The boutique Tea Studio sells anywhere between four hundred to five hundred kilos a month and it only manufactures against order. It does not participate in tea auctions. Its regular clients are wholesale buyers, who often rename the product and sell ahead. Markets include Canada, Europe, Japan, Australia and North America and a small portion of it is also sold in retail in India.

Two per cent of Tea Studio's profits are kept aside to help local villagers, especially the women. Whether it is to build toilets or helping out an employee with her child's education, the money is kept aside for them in their hour of need.

“For me, personally, it is to inspire more women to work in this male-dominated industry; to show the younger generation that tea isn't a mundane, boring job,” Khanna smiled, before excusing herself to go and check on the 400 kg order they had for the day.



STORY 14

THOUSANDS OF TRIBAL WOMEN CHART THEIR OWN FUTURE AFTER VOCATIONAL TRAINING

About 4,300 women in Dungarpur and Banswara districts of Rajasthan have set up their own enterprises after undergoing skill development training offered by the Dungarpur Municipal Council and local non-profits.

Madhav Sharma
Dungarpur and Banswara, Rajasthan



Dungarpur and Banswara, two predominantly tribal districts of Rajasthan, are infamous for poverty, malnutrition and high disease burden. While most young men migrate for work, the women are left behind to look after the children and elderly. These rural women lack employment opportunities and face economic hardships.

But joint initiatives by the local municipality and non-profit groups are helping tribal women in these districts script their success stories.

Women are being trained in sewing and embroidery and taught to make sanitary napkins, masks, papads, diyas and candles.

Today, about 4,300 tribal women — 800 in Dungarpur and 3,500 in Banswara — are

reaping the benefits of such training imparted to them in the last two years.

“There are no big companies or permanent means of employment available locally. The men go to Gujarat looking for jobs, but what will the women and girls do,” KK Gupta, former chairperson of Dungarpur Municipal Council, asked *Gaon Connection*.

TOWARDS SELF-RELIANCE

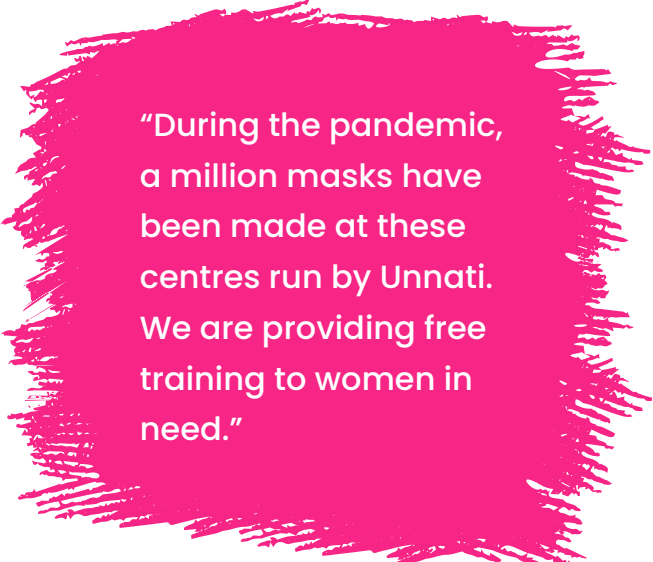
It was in 2018 that the Dungarpur Municipal Council began training centres for women in six wards with 10 sewing machines each. Eventually, these were merged into four centres, where about 200 women undergo training. During training, raw material is provided to them free of cost.

In two years, about 800 women have left the centres after receiving training that gives them a shot at earning. The centres operate in Shastri Colony, Sonia Chowk, Ghati and New Colony. One of them has been handed over to a non-profit institution called Unnati, and the other three are run by the Dungarpur Municipal Council.

Hansa Shrimal, a trainer at the centre run by Unnati, told *Gaon Connection* that, earlier, her centre used to operate with a batch of 50 women. At present, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing norms, it is down to 25, "Most of those who attend the training are in dire need and shoulder the responsibility of their families," Shrimal said.

Among the current trainees at Shrimal's centre, 12 are divorced or widowed and the rest are survivors of domestic violence and other hardships. "During the pandemic, a million masks have been made at these centres. We are providing free training to women in need," Shrimal said.

Many of the trainees now work independently. "They take raw material from us and work from home," said Shrimal, adding that tribal women who used to migrate to Gujarat with their families in search of a livelihood have also opted for this training.



"During the pandemic, a million masks have been made at these centres run by Unnati. We are providing free training to women in need."

Seema from Phoonali village, 20 kilometres from Dungarpur city, earns Rs 5,000 a month, after being trained at Unnati. It allows her to look after her two children well. She used to suffer domestic abuse, and her husband, who used to earn Rs 6,000 a month, lost his job during the pandemic.

Like Dungarpur, tribal women of Kushalgarh tehsil in Banswara district are becoming self-reliant with their craftsmanship. Usually, the highest migration of tribals from Kushalgarh tehsil is to the neighbouring state of Gujarat.

Nidhi Jain, a social worker, began Pratidhwani, a skill development centre, in the region in December 2016 with 55 women from the tribal community.

Today, about 3,500 women are associated with the Sakhi programme of Pratidhwani and learn to do a variety of things along with sewing and embroidery.

Soumya Kharhiya, who is associated with the Sakhi programme, hails from the tribal community at Potliya village in Kushalgarh. Kharhiya said, “In 2018, I joined Pratidhwani and learned stitching. Today, I am self-reliant and work at the institute itself. I made about thirty thousand masks during the lockdown.”

Kharhiya added, “Before 2018, I used to earn less than three thousand rupees as a domestic helper. Now, I earn up to ten thousand rupees from sewing. I am the sole earner at home and still am able to run my household comfortably,” she said.

“The condition of women in tribal districts is worse than that of men on every scale. In such a situation, women will gain social equality with men only if they are financially capable. Seeing our work, the TAD [Tribal Area Development Commissioner] has given us the responsibility of linking women in other areas too with the project,” Jain said.

Jain pointed out that along with skill development, the confidence of women has also received a boost. Some have even gone on to set up self help groups and make pickles and *papad*. Others pick up employment in the field of sewing.



“Until some years ago, they had not even stepped out of their houses. Today, they are travelling all by themselves to big cities like Delhi to sell their goods,” she added.





STORY 15

BAMBOO BOOSTS LIVELIHOOD OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN MIRZAPUR

The Mirzapur forest department in Uttar Pradesh is honing the handicraft skills of tribal women to help increase their income by using locally available bamboo to make jewellery, mats, show pieces, flower pots, and more.

Brijendra Dubey
Marihan (Mirzapur), Uttar Pradesh



On a bright morning at the Marihan's common service centre, tribal women huddle together on a durry cutting bamboo into various shapes and sizes. On a table nearby, jewellery, flower pots, show pieces, mugs and plates, lamp shades are spread out. They have all been crafted by these women of the Dharkaar tribe, many of whom are illiterate.

Seventy-year-old Ramna Devi, a resident of Bharuhana village of Mirzapur, about 300 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow, is a regular at the centre at Marihan ever since August 2021 when a training programme was launched by the Mirzapur forest department to train adivasi women in making bamboo craft.

Ramna Devi has made an array of products to sell in the market as well as to the wholesale traders, and hopes to make

a tidy sum from that.

"A single bamboo shaft costs about two hundred rupees. We usually make about a hundred fans from a single shaft," she told Gaon Connection. The bamboo fans got them Rs 50 a piece. "Now we have learnt to make mats out of bamboo. It takes longer to but we can sell them at a far higher price than the fans," she said.

This training camp is an initiative of the district forest department to increase the income of local villagers by providing them free training in making products out of bamboo for sale.

A number of tribal people in Marihan tehsil of Mirzapur do not own land, and have no other income source. They either work as agricultural labourers or practise subsistence farming. The COVID19 pandemic has made matters worse.

But, the 15-day long bamboo handicraft training camp saw about 25 tribal villagers participate each day. Design consultant, Neera Sharma, had come all the way from Assam to conduct the training.

BAMBOO-BASED HANDICRAFT TRAINING FOR TRIBAL WOMEN

Neera Sharma, a resident of Tezpur district in Assam, is an expert in bamboo-based handicraft was invited by the Uttar Pradesh government to hone the skills of the Dharkaar adivasi community in Mirzapur.

Talking to *Gaon Connection*, she said: "I focus on finding ways in which we all can live our lives in sync with nature. I visit villages across India and teach people the skills by which they can improve their living conditions by making use of the natural resources in the area."

According to Sharma, bamboo is one resource that can help build rural livelihoods. "Bamboo is an excellent opportunity for eco-friendly handicrafts. By utilising the natural resources like bamboo and developing skills to make it lucrative for the markets, the villagers can earn a regular income," the consultant said. She went on to add that rural women are naturally blessed with a talent for handicrafts.



"Bamboo is an excellent opportunity for eco-friendly handicrafts. By utilising the natural resources like bamboo and developing skills to make it lucrative for the markets, the villagers can earn a regular income."

Meera, a 45-year-old trainee at the camp said that she was hopeful that her profit margins would rise now.

"The training is focused on extracting the maximum out of a bamboo shaft. Previously, the products we made earned us no more than fifty rupees a piece. Now we have learnt to make things like bangles, earrings and other small products, and we can earn almost two hundred rupees per item," she told *Gaon Connection*.

VILLAGE MEN ALSO JOIN IN

Meanwhile, some local men have also joined the handicrafts training programme. Ashok Kumar, a 35-year-old from the Bharuhana village of Mirzapur, is one of the three men at the training camp, the rest of them, being women (22 women).

He told *Gaon Connection* that the number of items that he can now make from bamboo have nearly tripled and is eager to take his products to the market and earn better profits.

"Earlier we used to make simple things out of bamboo like a basket, a hand-fan, *jhunjhuna* (a rattle toy for kids) or a sieve. But now I know how to make jewellery, ornamental products like carved animal figures, dolls and other things. I am sure these things will get better prices and my income will increase," he said.

"*Free me sikhaya ja raha hai, jab seekh jayenge aur prabhu ki iccha hogi to aage kaaryakram achha rahega*, (the training is free, and god willing, things will be better when I learn the skills and can earn better)," the 35-year-old trainee said.

"It's been a successful workshop. They are getting to learn to make so many products that they are more confident about themselves now. The products will fetch them better prices and their livelihoods will get better," PS Tripathi, the district forest officer (DFO) told *Gaon Connection*.

CAMP ORGANISED UNDER NATIONAL BAMBOO MISSION

The training camp at Mirzapur has been organised with the support of the Union Agriculture Ministry's National Bamboo



Mission which was launched by the central government in 2006.

The mission was restructured in 2019 with initiatives that enabled local artisans to utilise bamboo and get better prices for their products.

The restructuring was accompanied by an amendment of the Indian Forest Act in 2017, which removed bamboo from the definition of trees. Now, bamboo grown outside forests no longer needs felling and transit permissions.



STORY 16

RURAL WOMEN IN UTTAR PRADESH PROCESS MANGO PULP INTO VARIOUS PRODUCTS

The Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture, which trained these women in extraction and processing of mango pulp, is helping sell their products, and linking them to traders via mobile apps.

Gaon Connection



Uttar Pradesh leads in mango production in the country with a production share of 23.47 per cent. In 13 districts of the state, 45 lakh tonnes of mango is produced every year, of which seven lakh tonnes is produced at Malihabad in Lucknow district alone. Malihabad predominantly cultivates Dussehri variety of mango.

Over 1,000 varieties of mangoes are grown Maharashtra, Gujarat, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Some of its common varieties include *dussehri*, *langda*, *chowsa*, *fazli*, Bombay green, alphonso, *totapari*, *gulab hhas*, *banganapalli*, *kesar*, etc. There are some new varieties too like Mallika, Amrapalli, Ratna, Arka Arun, Arka Puneet, Arka Anmol and Dussheri-51.

Though Uttar Pradesh leads in mango production, scarce access or non-

availability of processing units in the state, continues to be a problem.

A women led self-help group (SHG) — Swavalamban — is trying to make good the gap. It is extracting and preserving Dussehri mango pulp in a scientific manner.

Earlier these women would only make *khatai* (souring agent) from mangoes, which they used to sell to middlemen at a low price. Today, these women are reaping profits by churning out a diverse array of mango products like *amchur* (dry mango powder), pickles and *panna* (a refreshing drink made from mango pulp).

Mohammad Nagar Talukadari is a small village in Malihabad *nagar panchayat* in Lucknow district. Twenty women of this village underwent a two-year training on

adding value to mangoes organised by the Lucknow-based Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture.

Today, the women are part of the self-help group they formed, Swavalamban, and are successfully processing mangoes into *amchur*, *panna* and mango pickle. They are realising the slogan of 'vocal for local'.

It was Pawan Gurjar of the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture who imparted training to these rural women to extract mango pulp. After undergoing the training, Amarauli's Monica Singh collected the Dussehri pulp and preserved it for a year. She made various products from the pulp and got them tasted widely. The feedback she received has encouraged her to choose Dussehri pulp preservation as her source of livelihood.

Meanwhile, the Agri-Business Incubation Centre of the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture has come forward to help sell the products developed by the self-help group by packaging and branding them in the market.

"Earlier these women used to make *khatai* from the small-sized mangoes that fell from the trees. They were compelled to sell to the middle agents at a low price. But now, equipped with training, and organised as self-help



The Agri-Business Incubation Centre of the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture has come forward to help sell the mango-based products developed by the self-help group by packaging and branding them in the market.

groups, they have transformed into entrepreneurs," Shailendra Rajan, director of the central institute told *Gaon Connection*.

According to him, mangoes are cultivated on 28,000 hectares in Malihabad, but there is barely any value-addition to the fruit. "Groups of mango farmers can be developed into cottage industries in mango processing," he suggested.

The COVID-19 lockdown threw up new challenges for these women." Due to the lockdown, *khatai* making process by using raw fallen mangoes had stopped in the villages. But, by observing physical distancing and other precautions, members of Swavalamban continued to make value-added products," said Rajan. These women knew if the mango season gets over, they will have to wait for an entire year to make mango

products. But because of the lockdown, traders could not come to buy their products. In this situation, the use of mobile apps created by the central institute will be helpful for linking entrepreneurs to the market.

The Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture is employing digital platforms for marketing of mango-based products produced by the self-help groups.

“In association with young entrepreneurs, we have developed apps like Mango Baba, Bagwan Mitr, and Subtropical that are providing market access to farmers' products,” Manish Mishra, chief scientist with the institute told *Gaon Connection*, “In the coming days, mango farmers will prove to be a vital link to self-reliant India,” he added.





STORY 17

WOMEN SHGs IN CHHATTISGARH MADE RAKHIS OUT OF COW DUNG AND SEEDS

Under the Bihan Yojana, 100 women from 20 self-help groups in Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh made special rakhis and sold them online.

Tameshwar Sinha
Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh



In Chhattisgarh, unique rakhis made out of cow dung and seeds grabbed a lot of attention ahead of Raksha Bandhan on August 3, 2020.

The women of the group were taught rakhi-making at the multi-utility centre at Chhati village in Dhamtari district under Bihan Yojna of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). About 100 women belonging to 20 groups in Nari village of Kurud and Chipali in Nagri Block made the rakhis.

"For nearly two months, these women have been making these rakhis for this year's Raksha Bandhan festival," Namrata Gandhi, CEO of Dhamtari district panchayat told Gaon Connection. "About 60 women in the district are engaged in this and made more than 10,000 rakhis," Namrata she added.

The women of the Bihan group who made these rakhis were able to earn some money.

More than seven thousand rakhis, out of the 10,000 they made, were sold and the group earned more than Rs 5.26 lakh through the enterprise.

These rakhis, priced between Rs 10 and Rs 200, were put on sale in Dhamtari and Raipur districts. They were also sold online under the NRLM.

"We have also received orders from the big cities like Mumbai and Delhi and from Khadi Gram Udyog. We are also marketing them online," Namrata said. Their goal was to make 25,000 rakhis by Raksha Bandhan festival, she said.

Earlier, these women made ornaments like bamboo earrings, bangles and

necklaces using bamboo and traditional tools in the village. This time, they decided to make rakhis using bamboo, dung, and seeds.

According to Namrata, the self-help group women made four varieties of rakhis. The first, had seeds placed in dung and secured with strips of bamboo. The seeds would sprout into a plant.

The second variety was made up of bamboo and silk, and the third was a combination of bamboo and crochet work. The fourth kind of *rakhi* made in pairs was the *Kumkum-Akshat rakhi*.

Vedic *rakhis* made out of bamboo, sandalwood, turmeric, *kumkum*, and silk, carrying the heady aroma of Chhattisgarhi soil, were widely appreciated.



The rural women used to make ornaments like earrings, bangles and necklaces using bamboo and traditional tools in the village. This time, they decided to make rakhis using bamboo, dung, and seeds.



STORY 18

TRIBAL WOMEN FROM KORAPUT MAKE A CLEAN SWEEP

The humble hillgrass broom is providing livelihoods to 1,500 tribal families in Koraput district of Odisha who are selling the brooms directly to the government agencies.

Ashis Senapati
Bhubaneswar, Odisha



The broom or phul jhadu in Odisha has begun to sweep in profits for many tribal communities in the state, especially from the Koraput district that lies about 485 kilometres south west of the state capital Bhubaneswar.

The district has an abundance of hill grass that is used to make these brooms. While the women in tribal communities have been making them for years, it is only now that the broom-making craft is being seen as a sustainable source of livelihood for them.

“We are sweeping away our poverty thanks to this occupation,” Mina Gomanga, a tribal inhabitant of Kotia village in Koraput, told *Gaon Connection*.

“There are nearly thirty families in the village who are doing this. We collect the raw materials from nearby forests for the

brooms. My family has been doing this for six years now,” Gomanga said.

Till recently, the tribal inhabitants gathered the hill grass, and middlemen would buy it from them at local markets at Rs 25 a kilogramme (kg) and sell it elsewhere at a profit.

But the intervention of the government-managed Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORMAS) and Koraput Agro Products Producers Company (KAPPC), has changed all that.

“We now buy the raw material from the tribal communities directly paying them Rs 50 a kilo,” Roshan Kartik, director ORMAS in Koraput, told *Gaon Connection*.

The hill grass is a minor forest produce available in plenty at Pottangi, Semiliguda and Narayanpatna blocks in

Koraput district. The tribal communities gather them from the forests and dry them before turning them into brooms.

According to Kartik, nearly 1,500 tribal families in the district have directly benefited from the government's intervention. Adivasi women get paid Rs 3.50 per broom and they manage to make about 50 brooms a day.

Unyda Disari, from Uperkanti village in Simuleigada block, lost her job at a brick kiln, when it shut down. But, with the help and support of Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society, the 26-year-old earns enough to care of her family. Unyda makes hill grass brooms through a self-help group she is part of.

TRAINING THE ADIVASI WOMEN

The Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society enabled training workshops for the women of the self-help groups through broom-making producer groups.

And now, the brooms they make are sold in the neighbouring states of Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. This has provided a fillip to the economic and social empowerment of the women from these tribal communities.

"Broom making, which the women had anyway done for years, has been given

"Broom making, which the women had anyway done for years, has been given the status of a traditional craft, and they are considered as craftspeople."

the status of a traditional craft, and they are considered as craftspeople," Roshan Kartik, pointed out.

The Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society also organises trips for the craftspersons to visit other states where they sell their brooms at Craft Melas.

"We are happy the government has provided us with proper training so that we can make brooms that people in towns and cities will want to buy," Joshni Disari of Dankubeda village, told *Gaon Connection*. "We do not have to sell them for a song to the middlemen anymore. We are also being helped to sell the brooms we make," the 50-year-old said happily.



CHAPTER 2

WOMEN FARMERS IN INDIA

Rural Women Form The Invisible Workforce
Of The Indian Agriculture Sector

Being a predominantly agrarian country, the farming sector is an important contributor to the Indian economy. It contributes approximately 16 per cent of the Indian Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is more than twice of the world average of 6.4 per cent.¹

India is recognised as a major producer of several agricultural products such as rice, wheat, pulses, oilseeds, coffee, jute, sugarcane, tea, tobacco, groundnuts, dairy products, and fruits.²

It is the largest producer in the world for milk, jute, and pulses and the second largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, fruit, vegetables, cotton, and groundnuts.³ As of 2019, India was the ninth highest global agricultural exporter.⁴

Approximately 70 percent of the Indian population depends on agriculture for their livelihood, notes the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).⁵ In the year 2019–20, over 233.2 million people in India worked in the agricultural sector, which amounts 45.6 per cent of the country's population.⁶

The agricultural sector provides employment to 61.5 per cent (224.8 million) of people in rural India and 5.7 per cent (8.4 million) in the urban region.⁷

This vital economic sector in India sees a gendered division of labour. As many as 86 million women in India (which is 60 per cent of all employed women) are engaged in the agricultural sector while 147 million men (40 per cent of all employed men) are farmers, as noted in a March 2022 discussion paper of the NITI Aayog.⁸

In the context of rural India, 75 per cent (83.4 million) of employed rural women work in the agricultural sector.⁹ Clearly, the farming sector is crucial for the livelihoods of rural women.

But, there is gender bias in agricultural employment — cultivators vs labourers. In the year 2019–20, India's agricultural labour force stood at 233.3 million workers, which included 173.2 million (74.25 per cent) cultivators and 56 million (23.99 percent) agricultural labourers.¹⁰

Gender break-up shows there were 60.6 million women cultivators and 112.6 million male cultivators.¹¹ Further, there were 24.1 million women farm labourers and 31.8 million male labourers.¹²

FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE

According to the Economic Survey 2017–18 published by the Ministry of Finance of the Government of India, the country has been witnessing 'feminisation' of agriculture.¹³ Over the past decades the

agricultural sector has seen a rapid increase in women's participation.¹⁴

One of the major reasons behind this feminisation is the migration of the male counterparts.¹⁵ Women have increasingly taken over roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and agricultural labourers.¹⁶

Due to the fact that farming in India, largely, is a household enterprise, women contribute not only in terms of formal labour but also unpaid labour.¹⁷ Indian female farmers make a high contribution to the agricultural production with regards to the large scope of work and number of hours invested.¹⁸

Research by NITI Aayog states that women are involved at all levels of the agricultural value chain inclusive of production, pre-harvest, post-harvest processing, packaging and marketing of agricultural products.¹⁹

CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN FARMERS

According to Oxfam International, women perform 70 per cent of the farm work in the Indian agricultural sector which includes crop production and harvesting livestock production, horticulture, social forestry, fishing, and other allied operations.²⁰ It goes on to note that women produce 60-80 per cent of the

food in India.²¹

The National Commission of Women has published data that on an average, women spend 3,485 hours per year while farming on one hectare land.²²

- Although 85% of rural women are engaged in agriculture, only about 13% own farm lands.²³
- In the past decade, India has witnessed a 'feminisation' of the agriculture sector with increasing women working as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and labourers.²⁴
- Rural women produce 60 – 80% of food in India.²⁵
- 70% of female farmers belong to families in which the male counterparts have migrated.²⁶

Source: Oxfam International

OBSTACLES FACED BY WOMEN FARMERS IN INDIA

Several issues have been cited for the social and economic inequalities faced by women farmers in India.

LAND OWNERSHIP

There is no clear picture of land ownership by women farmers in India. Various research studies point out different sets of data. For instance, as per a report by National Council of Applied Economic Research, although women constitute 42 per cent of the agricultural labour force, they own less than 2 per cent of the farmlands in India.²⁷

Meanwhile, another research by Indian Development Review claims that land ownership amongst female farmers is 14 per cent.²⁸ Further, as per the Journal of Development Studies, women farmers own only 11 per cent of the land.²⁹

This gendered gap in land ownership exists because the agricultural land is either owned by the male counterparts or undivided families.³⁰

FEMINISATION OF AGRARIAN DISTRESS

Women face difficulties in price realisation of their agricultural produce as they are paid less than their male counterparts.³¹ Although the Indian government allows farmers to sell their products in any region in India, women find it practically more difficult to travel to the marketplace and hence, find it

difficult to make a profitable business.³²

Despite the fact that India has witnessed a feminisation of the agricultural sector, the obstacles faced by women still remain unaddressed in many ways.³³ This phenomenon has been termed as the 'feminisation of its agrarian distress'.³⁴

UNRECOGNISED LABOUR

Despite the vital contribution of female farmers in the development of the Indian agricultural sector, their work is highly unrecognised and underestimated.³⁵

Due to the fact that farming in India is a household enterprise, women largely contribute in terms of unpaid labour on farms owned by their parents, husbands, or in-laws.³⁶

Despite the fact that women are increasingly taking up various roles in the agricultural sector such as cultivators, labourers, decision makers, managers, the image of the Indian farmers still assumes a male identity.³⁷

WOMEN AND UNEMPLOYMENT

According to a 2020 report by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd., India has seen a downward trend in women's employment since 2017 as more and more women drop out of the labour

market.³⁸

Only 9 per cent women of working age are employed in India as against 67 per cent men of working age.³⁹

As per news reports, between 2017 and 2022, 20 million women dropped out of the labour market.⁴⁰ Further, the International Labour Organisation has documented that between 2005 and 2010, India saw an 18 per cent decline in the female labour force.⁴¹ The primary reason behind this gap is the frustration faced by women in finding the right kind of employment and the lack of job opportunities.⁴²

The COVID-19 lockdown in India had a huge impact on employment in India, and particularly on women's participation in the labour market.⁴³ After the pandemic, the female labour participation rate lowered to 6.4 per cent, which is the lowest since 2016 and has not recovered post COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁴

RISE OF THE RURAL WOMEN

Despite these declining figures in overall female employment and the fresh challenges thrown due to the pandemic, India is witnessing a new trend in women entrepreneurship in rural India.⁴⁵

As per the Sixth Economic Census published by the Ministry of Statistics and



Programme Implementation, 13.76 per cent (8.05 million) of entrepreneurs in India are women.⁴⁶ These women owned enterprises provide employment to 10.24 per cent (13.45 million) of the Indian population.⁴⁷



Out of the total number of women-owned enterprises, 34.3 per cent were related to agricultural activities, 31.6 per cent were related to livestock farming, 29.8 per cent related to manufacturing and 17.8 per cent related to retail trade.⁴⁸

The National Rural Livelihoods Project launched by the government of India provides technical assistance and support to the rural population to increase their income.⁵²

A report by Forbes India indicates that in the year 2018-19, women own 20.37 per cent of micro, small and medium enterprises in India.⁴⁹ Women in rural regions have increasingly started their businesses with the help of self-help groups.⁵⁰

As per the Sixth Economic Census published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, of the 0.19 million self help groups in India, 89 per cent constitute women.⁵¹



STORY 19

RURAL WOMEN IN COOCH BEHAR TAKE UP DUCK REARING TO EARN A LIVING

As their menfolk lost their jobs in the pandemic, women in rural West Bengal rear ducks to supplement the family income, and they are making a tidy profit too.

Gurvinder Singh
Cooch Behar, West Bengal



Beauty Bibi learnt about poultry farming from YouTube videos. She resides at Silkhuri Bas village in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and earns about Rs 3,000 a month rearing Khaki Campbell ducks.

The income from her husband, Bilal Mian's small agricultural land was not enough to see the family through the pandemic. But thanks to the ducks, the 31-year-old Bibi and her husband are earning enough to get by.

There are over 2,000 women like Bibi in Cooch Behar who are rearing ducks for a living now. "It has helped me supplement the income of my husband who is a farmer, and better look after our two children," Bulbuli Roy, who lives in Bhogdabri Kesharibari village in Cooch Behar, told *Gaon Connection*.

Many men who were the bread-winners

lost their jobs in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the women salvaged the situation with their duck business.

A QUICK TURNAROUND

Bibi contacted Satmile Satish Club, a local non-profit that sold Khaki Campbell breed of ducklings and eggs. "We bought around 200 ducklings and 25 adults that were soon going to lay eggs," Bibi told *Gaon Connection*.

She said that her initial investment of buying the Khaki Campbell ducks was paying off. "The ducklings cost sixty rupees each while the adult ducks cost four hundred rupees each. Within a month, the ducks started laying eggs," she said.

This breed of ducks lay about 250 to 280 eggs a year compared to other breeds that lay approximately 180-200 eggs.

"We get at least eighteen to twenty eggs every day. The numbers are going to increase once the ducklings are older and start laying eggs," she said. Bibi expects to earn Rs 12 per egg. Also, if she chooses to, the ducks, once they have stopped laying eggs, can be sold at Rs 350-Rs 400 per bird for meat.

According to Purneswar Barman, a veterinarian based in Satmile, this breed is in huge demand because each duck starts laying eggs within six months and gives around 200-250 eggs every year for the next three years.

GROWING DEMAND

The Satmile Satish Club of Pathagar, a local non-profit working for rural livelihoods, has played a pivotal role in introducing Khaki Campbell locally. "We realised that there was a huge gap between the demand and supply for duck eggs and meat in Cooch Behar. We found that Khaki Campbell lays more eggs as compared to others and can be also utilised for meat," Amal Roy, secretary of the club, informed Gaon Connection.

But the breed was not available locally. So they procured the ducklings from Salem district in Tamil Nadu, nearly 3,000 kms away. But there was considerable loss during transit. "We then installed incubators and started purchasing Khaki Campbell duck eggs from the local

"We installed incubators and started purchasing Khaki Campbell duck eggs from the local women in our own villages who were already rearing these ducks."

women in our own villages who were already rearing these ducks," said Roy.

The non-profit bought the eggs by paying Rs 12 per egg, that is a rupee more than the market price, and the women were happy to sell it to them. "We incubated the eggs and once they hatched, we sold the ducklings to women who wanted to rear them," he explained.

The non-profit sells about 5,000 ducklings a month to both self help groups and individual women.

SOUND INITIATIVE

A sudden drop in the family income due to the pandemic made 17-year-old Jhunuka Khatun and her younger sister 15-year-old Renuka, take to duck rearing. "We decided to venture into the profession because the income of my father stopped during the lockdown," Renuka told *Gaon Connection*. He was working in Bhutan assisting a mason, but had to return home due to the pandemic.

"We used the verandah outside our mud house for rearing ducks. Our father supported our endeavour after his initial reluctance. He brought around 200 ducklings and 15 egg laying ducks," she said.

While they have not been able to save any money from it yet, they have made enough to feed the ducklings that they hope will fetch them money in six months' time. They invested about Rs 46,000 which they will recover once the ducks start laying eggs.

"We were really proud of our daughters who decided to become entrepreneurs at such a tender age. The economic condition has deteriorated during the lockdown and it's difficult to sustain the family," Saha Alam Mian, their father, told *Gaon Connection*.

The 40-year-old has had no work for the past several months. When he saw the poultry business was bringing in money for others, he decided to invest in it. "At least, my daughters are trying to do something on their own which is a good initiative. It might help them fund their own education expenses," said the proud father.

PRANI MITRA

Duck rearing has led to an increase in income for several other women



appointed by the state government for the maintenance of livestock. They are referred to as Prani Mitra, and they are from the animal resource development department.

"We visit homes and administer vaccines to the livestock and also treat them," Jyotika Adhikary Burman, a Prani Mitra based in Cooch Behar, told *Gaon Connection*.

"We sometimes earn around nine to ten thousand rupees a month as we visit homes to administer vaccinations and treatment to the ducks," she said. The women earn Rs 5 to Rs 7 per duck to vaccinate each bird.

"We estimate that the number of women involved in duck rearing could be much higher. While around 1,500 women have bought ducklings from us, they sometimes sell the ducklings to other women who want to start the business," added Roy.



STORY 20

TRIBAL WOMEN IN JHARKHAND SOW THE SEEDS OF AGRI-ENTREPRENEURSHIP

At least 4,000 tribal women in Simdega district earn their livelihoods by collecting, selling and extracting oils from seeds of the forest produce.

Shivani Gupta



Every morning, Sushma Samad cycles five kilometres from her village Kesra to her 'office' in Thethaitanagar block of Simdega district in Jharkhand.

On the way, she is joined by four of her village friends and they report for work at the village centre set up by the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS), a state government body that provides economic empowerment to rural women.

Women farmers, or *kisan didis* as they are known, come to the centre to sell forest produce such as *kusum* (*Schleichera oleosa*) and *karanj* (*Millettia pinnata*). Samad buys these produce at the market rate, packs them into huge sacks and sends them to be processed for oil extraction.

At least 120,000 women in Jharkhand are associated with JSLPS's Mahila Kisan

Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), launched in 2011 to improve the livelihoods of women in agriculture.

On an average 10,000 women under the MKSP scheme are working in the Simdega district. For the project related to only Kusum and Karanj seeds, 4,000 tribal women are working in the district. This scheme is also being implemented in 10 blocks across other districts in the state.

RURAL WOMEN AS AGRI-ENTREPRENEURS

Kisan didis collect the forest produce, such as *mahua*, *kusum*, *karaj*, *imli* (tamarind). This is purchased by the all women self-help group of JSLPS. Then, another set of SHGs process these seeds for oil extraction and sale. Thus, a chain has been set up to empower rural women at every stage of the project.

"*Kisan didis* bring us *vanopaj* (forest produce). We buy those from them at the market price. This saves them the travel expenses to visit faraway markets. We collect the produce and send it to the JSLPS centre," 42-year-old Samad, told *Gaon Connection*.

"This project also ensures that women are not forced to sell the forest produce at a loss to local *mahajans* (intermediaries)," she added.

By working for four to five hours at the centre, women are able to earn a livelihood. "I am able to manage my household expenses now. *Hath me paise ata hai na didi to acha lagta hai* [It feels good to have money in our hand]," giggled Sushma, whose husband is a farmer. They have three children.

HOW DOES THE PROJECT FUNCTION?

There are three categories in which the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana functions in Simdega district — forest produce picking, collection, processing and oil extraction. At least 3,000 women farmers, 1,200 women collectors, and 150 women processors are involved in the project.

By June-end, forest produce such as *karanj* ripen and *kisan didis* harvest them. They sell the produce at Rs 18 per kg.

"Earlier, farmers would get hardly anything for these seeds. Now, *kisan didis* earn up to Rs 3,000-4,000 in a season. Before, they sold them to middlemen at throwaway prices."

"Earlier, farmers would get hardly anything for these seeds. Now, *kisan didis* earn up to Rs 3,000-4,000 in a season. Before, they sold them to middlemen at throwaway prices," Arif Akhtar, state programme manager and state level value chain lead of JSLPS, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Women associated with processing and packaging, and extraction earn up to Rs 4,000-5,000," he added.

"Now the tribal women have earned an identity as farmers. We are also training them to operate and repair machines," said Akhtar.

LIVELIHOOD, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Through this project, the member farmers are ensuring sustainable agriculture practices as well.

JSLPS developed a scientific harvesting system and trained the women on the

right way to harvest the seeds. They also started planting more trees,” he added.

There are health benefits of non-timber forest produce such as *karanj* and *kusum*. Akhtar said that *karanj* oil was a very good substitute for neem oil, and it is used for medicinal purposes to treat skin diseases, allergy, and dandruff. It is also a pest repellent.

“Kusum oil is also a good substitute for refined oil,” the state programme manager of JSLPS said. Other than that, the cake left after oil extraction from the *kusum* seeds is used as a fertiliser to increase soil health and fertility.

MARKETING AND SALES

At least 300 millilitres of oil is extracted from one kg of *kusum* or *karanj* seeds. The leftovers are sold for Rs 40 a kg. A litre of *kusum* and *karanj* oils is sold for Rs 165 and Rs 155, respectively. Last season, over 10 metric tonnes of both *Karanj* and Kusum oil were extracted under the project in Simdega district.

The change being brought about by this rural livelihoods scheme is visible. Samad now calls herself a businesswoman. “We rural women have learnt to do business. We used to do *len den* (business) of one hundred.



Now we deal in thousands. We hope to soon do fifty thousand. This is just the beginning,” she smiled.





STORY 21

RURAL WOMEN ARE TURNING THEIR LIVES AROUND, ONE STRAW AT A TIME

Working from homes, SHG women in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, are supplementing their family incomes by making and selling straws, baskets and slippers from eco-friendly bamboo and khus.

Ramji Mishra

Hathura Bujurg (Shahjahanpur), Uttar Pradesh



Hathura Bujurg village is like hundreds of other villages in Uttar Pradesh. Dusty, cramped, none too clean, and poor. But, in the midst of the squalor, 20 women have come together and formed a self-help group (SHG) called Corona Samuh (because it was formed in August 2020, during the pandemic), which is bringing them some much needed income in difficult times.

Bamboo straws have become an unlikely source of income for these women of Hathura Bujurg in Bhawal Khera block, Shahjahanpur, about 180 kilometres away from the state capital Lucknow.

The women are also making slippers, baskets, planters, etc., with both bamboo and khus (a natural, fragrant grass).

"I manage to keep aside some time to make chappals, dolls, hats, etc.," Yasmin, a 26-year-old inhabitant of Hathaura

Bujurg, told *Gaon Connection*. "If I can spend three hours on this work, then I earn up to hundred and fifty rupees a day for it," she added. Her husband, Abid Hasan is a rickshaw driver.

WORK FROM HOME FOR RURAL WOMEN

This SHG is being helped by social worker Sakshi Singh, a graduate from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, who has initiated a project through her Shahjahanpur-based non-profit, Green Future Collective.

"These women mostly make bamboo straws that do not require great skill. If they can spare the time, they can easily make about four hundred and fifty rupees a day," Sakshi told *Gaon Connection*. Her non-profit provides the group with the raw materials and helps it market the finished products.

"We want to contribute to our family income. And Sakshi didi came into our lives at the right time," Noor Bano, a group member, told *Gaon Connection*. Noor's husband Dilshad is a daily wage labourer.

"We are very poor women and sometimes we do not even have the means to buy the material needed to make these things. A little more organisation and streamlining would go a long way in helping us," 28-year-old Noor added.

The women mostly live a hand-to-mouth existence. "We are willing to work hard and apply ourselves to the job so that our products sell better and we can earn some more," Noor reiterated.

According to her, their income depended on how well the objects they made with bamboo and khus turned out. "If they turn out well, they sell for more, otherwise not," she explained.

'WE WANT TO WORK HARD'

"We are constantly innovating and experimenting and creating new things," Kusum Latha told *Gaon Connection*. The 60-year-old, who brought the women of the village together to form the SHG, hoped that they would be given proper training so as to fine tune their skills and improve their earnings.

"I make hats and footwear, and I earn about Rs 150 a day, depending on how much I can make."

"The women are very motivated as some of the things they have made have already sold and they have received the money for them," said Kusum.

It is difficult for some of these women to even spare a couple of hours for this extra work, they said. But they are determined to stick with it and it is something they can do from the security and comfort of their homes, without stepping out, said Sakshi, who is training them.

Jaitun Nisha told *Gaon Connection* that her husband worked at construction sites. "I make hats and footwear, and I earn about Rs 150 a day, depending on how much I can make," she said.

EARTH-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS

"Bamboo is one of the most sustainable and environmentally friendly plants. It contributes nearly thirty three per cent more oxygen to the environment than other trees," Sakshi of Green Future

Collective pointed out. The Collective focuses on creating products that are earth friendly and do not damage the planet.

The drinking straws that the women in Shahjahanpur make are priced at Rs 125 for a set of four, but at the moment they are being sold at Rs 100 as a promotional offer, Sakshi told *Gaon Connection*. The straws come in three different sizes, and they are reusable.

“The baskets are priced between two hundred and fifty rupees and six hundred and fifty rupees. The chappals are at the fixed rate of three hundred and fifty rupees,” she added.

While at the moment Green Future Collective is sourcing the bamboo from Assam in the North East, Sakshi is in talks with farmers in Uttar Pradesh to start cultivating this grass. The khus, she said, was sourced from Malihabad, Shahjahanpur.

Meanwhile, the effort is on to market the straws. “We are promoting and marketing them in restaurants, hotels and corporate companies in tier one cities. We are confident the sales will pick up,” Sakshi said.





STORY 22

GRAIN BANKS PROVIDE FOOD SECURITY IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Grain Bank, an initiative that started in 2016 to help small farmers, became a lifeline during the pandemic as it staved off starvation and empowered women in rural Uttar Pradesh.

Neetu Singh
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh



Saroj Devi has a family of twelve to feed. Though she had an acre of land in Chhabba Niwada village of Kanpur district in Uttar Pradesh, she struggled to put food on the table.

Her husband and son's frugal income as daily wage labourers barely covered their needs. Things went from bad to worse in the COVID-19 pandemic as the men folk lost their jobs and the family stared at starvation.

"Government aid in the form of rations dwindled rapidly, and in order to feed my family, I got a loan of 300 kilograms of wheat from the grain bank," Devi told *Gaon Connection*.

The grain bank, that saved the day for Devi, is an initiative that was launched by Shramik Bharti, a non-profit organisation that works for sustainable development with equal opportunities for all.

GRAIN BANKS OF UP

In Uttar Pradesh, there are 223 such grain banks across Kanpur, Bhadohi, Chandauli and Fatehpur districts. They store wheat, rice, pulses and oilseeds.

Rural women pool grains and provide them to the needy farmers in times of need and in the pandemic these banks turned out to be saviours.

Women contribute 2-3 kilograms of grains from their homes to store in the banks. The grain is 'loaned' to them and they can repay the loan in kind with a little interest once they harvest their own land.

Initially, these banks are supported by Shramik Bharti but gradually the local women are encouraged and trained to run them independently. The

organisation also provides storage facilities for these banks to function.

“The idea behind starting seed banks was to make lives easy for small land-holders who otherwise have to travel to far off villages to get loans from government cooperatives,” Rana Singh Parihar, agriculture specialist from Shramik Bharti, told *Gaon Connection*.

“That meant loss of a day’s labour and added expenditure,” she pointed out. But, this was a way the really poor could ‘borrow’ and ‘repay’ grain loans with dignity, Parihar added.

Tarawati, a grain bank operator, recalled how the grain bank came to their rescue during the lockdown. “We were harvesting wheat when the lockdown was announced. We stocked a lot of grains in our banks back then. We prepared kits with wheat, rice, pulses and oil and supplied them to needy families,” the 54-year-old told *Gaon Connection*.

The grain bank was also a source of sustenance to the great numbers of migrant workers who returned home, she said.

In Uttar Pradesh, there are 223 grain banks across Kanpur, Bhadohi, Chandauli and Fatehpur districts. They store wheat, rice, pulses and oilseeds.





STORY 23

KAUR COMPETENCY IN THE FARMERS' PROTEST

Male farmers from the villages in the Malwa region of Punjab camped in Delhi protesting against the agri laws. In their absence, hundreds of women back home looked after the home and the hearth.

Vivek Gupta



Three-hundred-and-fifty kilometres away from the power corridors of Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi, where negotiations over the contentious agri laws were on between farmers and the central government, 65-year-old Rajinder Kaur and her daughter-in-law, Taranjeet Kaur, were busier than usual at their six-acre farm in Ghudda village in Punjab's Bathinda district.

Rajinder's son Resham Singh had left home to join the tens of thousand of farmers in Delhi who were protesting against the three agri laws. So, now his wife and mother fed the cattle, milked them, took care of the calves, etc.

"Although I want the farmers to return home as soon as possible, they must come back as winners," Taranjeet told *Gaon Connection*. "But we are prepared for a long haul if the protest in Delhi lingers on," the 32-year-old added.

Neighbours had helped both the women with irrigating the recently-sown wheat. "These are desperate times. We all need to stand up," she said.

Village after village in the Malwa region of Punjab, which comprises 11 districts of Ferozepur, Muktsar, Faridkot, Moga, Ludhiana, Bathinda, Mansa, Sangrur, Patiala, Anandpur Sahib and Fatehgarh Sahib, had joined the protests.

The women who had stayed back tilled and irrigated the lands, looked after cattle and kept the *rabi* farming activities going in the absence of their menfolk.

Rajinder's Ghudda village has about 983 households. The men from about 150 of these households were at the protests.

"In their absence, we make sure that their families and farms get all possible support," Ashwini Ghudda, a local farmer

leader of Nauzwan Bharat Sabha, told *Gaon Connection*. "Our workers helped them in cotton harvesting. The village *panchayats* are offering all sorts of help to families whose men are away," he added.

The women in the villages say that they were contributing to the cause by taking care of home and hearth. "We want our sons and husbands to stay as long as it takes to repeal these black laws passed by the Modi government, while we are strongly staying behind them, praying for their safe return," Dalip Kaur from Baras in Patiala's Patran Tehsil, told *Gaon Connection*.

She cut the fodder, fed the cattle and checked on the crop. "What option do I have? All the men have gone to Delhi. The cattle will go hungry if I don't work," the 60-year-old said.

There are hundreds of women like Taranjeet, Rajinder and Dalip Kaur in Punjab who worked on their farms while the rest are away, 'fighting'.

"The farm bills have attacked the very foundation of our existence. We all need to put up a strong front till the time they are not repealed," said Taranjeet.

Meanwhile, far away from the green fields and comfort of their homes, in the harsh metropolis of Delhi, the farmers struggled in the cold winter days, camping

"The farm bills have attacked the very foundation of our existence. We all need to put up a strong front till the time they are not repealed."

outdoors, sometimes with no access to toilets or running water. There were reports of six farmers dying during the Delhi protest, mostly due to cardiac arrests.

"There is a huge problem at the protest sites, especially of toilets," Gurpreet Kaur, a young farmer leader from Baras admitted. "But no movement is successful without hardships," she added.

Eighty-year-old Mohinder Kaur of Bathinda's Bahadurgarh Jandian village, said she still had a lot of fight left in her. She had helped her husband and sons in farming all her life and even now she regularly worked on the farm and did whatever she could to take care of it. "If we don't stand up right now, our future generation will suffer," Mohinder told *Gaon Connection*.

There were apprehensions, said 22-year-old Mandeep Kaur, from Harigarh village in Punjab's Barnala district, whose young brother had accompanied their father to Delhi. "Many warned us of the dangers

involved and advised us not to send him,” said Mandeep.

The men were lathicharged and water cannoned and are now braving the winter nights outdoors. “But this agitation is a battle for our survival. We too will go to Delhi if needed in future,” she declared.

“I will never ask my husband to come back until these laws are taken back by the centre,” said Karamjot Kaur, also from Harigarh.

This people’s movement is one of the largest Punjab has seen, said Harjeshwar Pal Singh, assistant professor (history) at the Chandigarh-based Sri Guru Gobind Singh College. “It has revived the bondings within villages and brought together farm organisations despite differences in their ideologies,” he told *Gaon Connection*.

“The resources were largely mobilised by people themselves using voluntary contributions and village level donations. The logistical support is being provided by langars and gurudwaras,” Harjeshwar Pal Singh explained.

BEHIND EVERY PROTESTING FARMER...

“We make announcements through the gurdwara public address system and villagers generously donate supplies.



These are sent via tractors and trolleys daily to the Delhi borders,” Sukhwinder Singh, a farm leader from Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) Ugrahan from Barnala district, informed *Gaon Connection*.

He said the supplies included milk and cooked food like *saag* and *makki ki roti*. The winters were a blessing as the milk and food did not spoil so easily, Sukhwinder said.

“Every day, three quintals of milk is dispatched through a private bus operator who runs a free bus service from Dhaula to Delhi,” said Krishan Singh Shanna, from Barnala district. “The milk supply from our district has not stopped ever since protests began in Delhi,” he added proudly.





STORY 24

WOMEN-OWNED FPOS PROVIDE AGRI-RELATED SERVICES TO FARMERS IN JHARKHAND

Women farmers in Jharkhand become joint owners of farmer producer organisations where they sell quality agricultural goods to farmers at fair prices and also offer expert agricultural advice, free of cost.

Neetu Singh



Neelima Muramu from Giridih district, Jharkhand never imagined that she would be on the board of directors of a company. But today, she is, and holding the key position of a treasurer of the Girdhan Mahila Utpadak (Producer) Company.

It all began when the 36-year-old farmer became a part of a Self Help Group called Sakhi Mandal.

In 2019, the members of the SHG formed a Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO), and Muramu became its treasurer.

There are 19 such companies being run by women in Jharkhand. Through the Agrimarts they set up, they sell quality agricultural goods to farmers at fair prices and also offer expert agricultural advice free of cost.

“Our company opened an Agrimart that provides seeds, fertilisers and small farming equipment to farmers at rates lower than the market price,” Muramu told *Gaon Connection*. These Agrimarts have been opened by various agricultural producer companies which are run by women farmers of Jharkhand as part of a World Bank initiative called Jharkhand Opportunities for Harnessing Rural Growth Project (JOHAR).

JOHAR JHARKHAND

According to a brief by the World Bank, over 3,500 FPOs are expected to benefit from this project. And, women especially will form a big chunk of the beneficiaries of the scheme in areas of production, processing and marketing of agricultural produce.

JOHAR builds on the strong institutional platform of women's self-help groups established in the state under the World Bank supported National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). The Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society under the department of rural development enables this project through farming, animal husbandry, fisheries, irrigation, etc. Rural households are linked with producer groups and companies.

"Our Agrimart serves women farmers of more than 160 groups who come to take goods and seek agricultural advice," said Muramu.

Eleven Agrimarts are currently operating in 11 districts of Jharkhand and have, so far, benefited more than 4,000 farmers. The Agrimarts together, are doing business worth over Rs 700,000 annually.

"I was often duped by shopkeepers who sold me date-expired seeds or overcharged me," Yashodha, a member of another FPO in Madhupur, Giridih district, told *Gaon Connection*. "We have opened a JOHAR Agrimart so that other women farmers do not face the hardships that we faced," she said.

This Agrimart is fast becoming the first choice of the local farmers who now do not have to go far to buy reliable seeds and other agricultural materials. "For my paddy crop, I procured seeds and fertilisers from JOHAR Agrimart at a

Eleven Agrimarts are currently operating in 11 districts of Jharkhand and have, so far, benefited more than 4,000 farmers. The Agrimarts together, are doing business worth over Rs 700,000 annually.

price almost 10 per cent lower than the market rate. My paddy crop has been abundant. More recently, I grew chilli from seeds from the Agrimart and had a good yield from that too," Yashodha pointed out. More than 210,000 households in Jharkhand are linked to 3,900 farmer producer groups in 68 blocks from 17 districts of Jharkhand.

Enhancing farming techniques JOHAR Agrimart also provides consultations to farmers on how to enhance the quality and techniques of cultivation. It links farmers to technical advisors through WhatsApp. These advisors help with farming information and are available to consult between 10.30 am and 5 pm every day.

Every agrimart links its farmers to the Krishak Mitra (farmer-aides) through WhatsApp groups and they are able to receive information and support by simply sharing messages with the technical team.





STORY 25

FISHING FOR PROFIT: WOMEN FISHERS IN ODISHA USE TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE THEIR YIELD

The farmer-scientist interface initiated by the Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture has led to nearly 10,000 women in rural Odisha practising aquaculture as a sustainable source of income.

Gurvinder Singh
Bhubneshwar, Odisha



Kabita Muduli owns a pond in her Balabhadrapur village where she does fish farming, while her husband, 42-year-old Banambar Muduli, sells the fish from it in the nearby market. Their village is located in Baliana block of Khurda district in Odisha.

Kabita learnt about aquaculture at a training workshop she attended. Scientists of ICAR-CIFA (Indian Council of Agricultural Research and Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture), provided her with technical inputs and expertise at the workshop that translated into better fish, a bigger catch and more income.

“Earlier, the fish would die because I didn’t know better, and I faced losses, but the intervention of the scientists began to turn things around,” she told *Gaon Connection*.

Pushpalata Sahu is also from the same village. Pushpalata harvests nearly two quintals of fish annually from the pond that earlier yielded one-and-a-half quintals. The size of the catch has also increased, she said, with each fish now weighing about two-and-a-half to three kilogrammes.

FARMERS FIRST

Kabita and Pushpalata are beneficiaries of the Farmers First project, launched by ICAR-CIFA in 2016. The project has benefitted around 1,600 families in the past four years. And the aquaculture training helped fish farmers tide over the tough times brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the project, farmers with small holdings, those who were landless, and

women, were specially addressed through technology-integrated modules.

"We found that the yield was low because the farmers were not aware about scientific methods that included the correct usage of feed in the pond, the application of agricultural limestone in aquaculture ponds to improve pH and alkalinity, and so on," HK De, principal scientist, social science section, ICAR-CIFA, told *Gaon Connection*.

The project aimed to enhance farmer-scientist interface for technology development and application. While the training was on integrated farming, the focus was more on aquaculture.

"The women farmers were trained to change water in the ponds at regular intervals to ensure that fish stayed alive and healthy," said De.

The project has so far covered Kantia Talasahi, Kantia Uparasahi, Jagannathpur and Dorbanga villages in Khurda district.

"Around ten thousand women are supplementing their family income through aquaculture with the help of different projects by CIFA with funding support from the central government," De added.

As the men migrate for livelihood, the women often become the earning

"Around ten thousand women are supplementing their family income through aquaculture with the help of different projects by CIFA with funding support from the central government."

members of their families and take to aquaculture in their village ponds, he explained.

AQUACULTURE GETS A FOLLOWING

Migrants who returned to their homes during the lockdown are now looking up to The Aquaculture Field School (AFS) running in the villages of Odisha to help them.

Set up for the first time in the country in Odisha in 2009, AFS acts as a learning centre for fish farmers who are trained on broodstock management, nursery and feeding management. They are also trained on disease diagnosis, feed formulation, integrated farming, soil, water analysis and technology on culture practices of more than 25 fish species.

AFS is running in the Baisinga block in Mayurbhanj, Banpur and Sarakana blocks in Khurda and Gop block in Puri, besides Durg in Chhattisgarh.

Batakrushna Sahoo, who was conferred with the Padma Shri in 2020 for his contribution in the field of animal husbandry, said his phone had not stopped buzzing after he was honoured with the civilian award. The 70-year-old who stays at Sarkana village of Khurda's Baliana block has been running the oldest AFS in Odisha since 2009.

"There has been a sudden spike of interest in aquaculture since the COVID-19 lockdown," Sahoo told *Gaon Connection*. He has been getting a flood of calls asking for training on aquaculture and about purchase of fingerlings, etc., he said.





STORY 26

TRIBAL FARMER SUKHMANTI DEVI HAS CONSERVED INDIGENOUS SEEDS FOR 40 YEARS

Indigenous seeds require less water, are suitable for local climate and terrain, and are cheaper alternatives to hybrid seeds.

Shivani Gupta



As far back as she can remember, Sukhmanti Devi has been collecting and saving indigenous seeds of crops that grow on her land.

"I started conserving seeds when I was only ten-year-old. My parents were also farmers, and they taught me how important indigenous seeds were for a farmer," 47-year-old Devi, a resident of Chataniha village, Deosar block, Singrauli district of Madhya Pradesh, told *Gaon Connection*.

Devi has conserved more than 40 varieties of seeds. "I have five to six varieties each of *makka* (corn), *dhan* (paddy) and *tilhan* (oilseeds). I collect them, use some for cultivation, and store some after harvesting for the new season," she explained.

Unlike Devi, most of her fellow villagers

using hybrid or a combination of hybrid and indigenous seeds.

"Of the five hundred households in Chataniha village, Devi's is the only household focussing solely on indigenous varieties," Jyotsana Jaiswal, member PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), a non-profit working to transform the lives of some of the poorest communities of rural India, told *Gaon Connection*.

SUKHMANTI DEVI'S LAB

PRADAN has helped Devi create a one-acre terrace farm on her five-acre land. To contain and bind the soil on the terrace, a border row was created using fast growing plants such as bamboo and lettuce, Jaiswal explained. This was to prevent the rainwater washing away the soil.

Devi explained why indigenous seeds were the way forward. "Ours is not a plain land. It is difficult to do farming in such terrain. Hybrid seeds need plenty of water and a flat terrain to grow. We are dependent on the rain for our crops," she said.

"Desi beej (indigenous seeds) require less water and can grow in inclined terrain too," said Devi, who grows maize, paddy, oilseeds, barley, and vegetables such as brinjals, tomatoes, and chillies, mustard, barvati (cowpea) and alsi (flax seeds) on her sloping land.

BENEFITS OF INDIGENOUS SEEDS

A 2019 research paper titled *The impact of the Green Revolution on indigenous crops of India*, shows that the indigenous varieties of rice and millets are resistant to drought, salinity, and floods.

However, post the Green Revolution — in the 1960s, with the introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat to increase food production to alleviate hunger and poverty, indigenous rice varieties and millets declined.

The research paper described how this led to the loss and even extinction of distinct indigenous crops. The Green Revolution impacted the production of indigenous crops, environment, nutrition

"Hybrid seeds can be conserved only for one or two years while indigenous ones can be conserved for two to four years in normal conditions. Kodo Sawan millets can be viable for a hundred years."

intake, and per capita availability of foods, the research found.

"Indigenous seeds require less water as compared to hybrid seeds. The latter also affect soil health as they absorb more nutrients from soil. In the slopes, nutrients continue to get lost as the soil gets washed away when it rains," pointed out Sanjay Singh, a Jabalpur based scientist and plant breeder.

"Also, hybrid seeds can be conserved only for one or two years while indigenous ones can be conserved for two to four years in normal conditions. Kodo Sawan millets can be viable for a hundred years," he told *Gaon Connection*.

CLIMATE RESILIENT SEEDS

Indigenous seeds are those that were nurtured according to the environment, explained Singh who is working with the Plant Breeding and Genetic Department, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwa Vidyalaya,

a public university in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh.

“They are resilient to drought, and less vulnerable to pest attack. The only disadvantage is that their production is less compared to hybrids. But, quality gets compromised in hybrid seeds,” he pointed out.

For Singh, it was imperative to conserve and use indigenous seeds in breeding and genetic improvement programs. “To sustain ourselves on earth, we need to conserve them,” he added.

USING SEEDS TO REPAY LOANS

A survey conducted by *Gaon Connection* last summer also put forth the hardships faced by the rural households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey found 20 per cent of the rural respondents had to pledge or sell land, jewellery and valuables in order to tide over the COVID-19 lockdown. Another 23 per cent had to borrow money to meet various expenses.

This happened with Devi too. During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Devi’s grandson succumbed to fever. “It was in June 2021 that we lost our grandson. We did not even have the money to perform his last rites. We had no other option but to take a loan of three thousand rupees from the baniya (money lender). We also took a loan of five



hundred rupees from a local self help group,” Devi said.

But now, Devi plans to repay the loan with the help of her seeds. “These seeds are necessary for our survival. If we do not conserve them, and they become extinct, what would we eat? How would we survive,” she asked.



STORY 27

ANIYAMMA BABY'S INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUE IS PROFITING COASTAL CASHEW FARMERS

Cashew farmer Aniyamma from Kannur in Kerala found ways to regenerate new cashew trees from the old ones, save them from borer infestation, and protect them from cyclonic storms.

Divendra Singh



Nearly 1.01 million hectares of land are under cashew cultivation in the states of Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The annual yield of cashew is about 753,000 tonnes and many farmers depend on it for their livelihoods.

Most cashew plantations are near the coast making them vulnerable to cyclonic storms. Coastal farmers suffer heavy losses due to the uprooting of these trees.

Aniyamma Baby is a cashew farmer from Payyavoor in Kannur district of Kerala. A chance discovery, followed by her innovations, has come to the rescue of cashew farmers in the state. And the farmers benefitted immensely during the COVID-19 pandemic when the world had come to a stand still.

A NEW BEGINNING

In 2004, Aniyamma literally stumbled upon an idea that was to save her a lot of money. While she was harvesting the cashew from her trees, she noticed that one of the sagging branches of the cashew trees that was hanging low near the soil, had new roots growing from it.

Aniyamma closely watched these roots and within a year found that her old cashew tree was actually giving birth to new ones.

The 55-year-old farmer decided to further explore this discovery and she came up with a technique where, from the branches of old cashew trees, she started regenerating new trees. In other words, instead of investing in new saplings, she has been readying new trees from the branches of the old ones.

WINNING ACCOLADES

So impressed was the National Innovation Foundation – India (NIF), based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, that it spread the good word about Aniyamma's techniques. NIF shared her innovations to rejuvenate old cashew trees and the multiple rooting technology with Indian Council of Agricultural Research– Directorate of Cashew Research, Puttur, Karnataka, and with Kerala Agricultural University, Thrissur.

"Aniyamma's innovative techniques will be of great help to cashew farmers," Smita Kaul Sharma, National Innovation Coordinator, of NIF – India, told *Gaon Connection*.

It is not just about regenerating new roots, it is also an effective way of protecting the trees from gusty cyclone winds that often uproot them. And, Aniyamma also observed that the regenerated trees were left untouched by borer pests.

"Cashew farmers often face great losses as their tree that has been giving fruit for five to six years falls prey to borers or are knocked down by cyclones," Sharma pointed out.

PEST RESISTANT

In 2020, Aniyamma's methods were tested and proved to make the trees pest

"A farmer cannot keep replacing his cashew trees. But using the technique Aniyamma has innovated, the farmer can prepare new trees from old ones."

resistant and strong enough to withstand cyclones.

Aniyamma began to graft new saplings from her old trees. She wrapped the lower branches in soil and covered them with arecanut leaves. She also weighed down low hanging branches with weights and let them set in the soil. From 50 cashew trees, Aniyamma now has more than 100.

"A farmer cannot keep replacing his cashew trees. But using the technique Aniyamma has innovated, the farmer can prepare new trees from old ones," Sharma said. Also, with the kind of support the tree gets from weighing down its branches, it will make it stronger and not so easily uprooted by cyclonic storms, Sharma said.

Indian Council of Agricultural Research– Directorate of Cashew Research, Puttur, Karnataka, also plans to take Aniyamma Baby's techniques further to enable more cashew farmers to adopt them.



STORY 28

CHHATTISGARH'S WOMEN SHGs FACILITATE A RECORD COLLECTION OF SAL SEEDS

Self Help Groups across Chattisgarh buy minor forest produce from tribal gatherers directly after the lockdown was announced in March 2020.

Deepanwita Gita Niyogi



Janak Dulari Pandey, a resident of Banskot village in Kondagaon district, Chhattisgarh, exudes confidence. Once a homemaker, Pandey now heads the 11-member Jyotikala women's self-help group (SHG) that purchases minor forest produce (MFP), especially sal seeds (*Shorea robusta*) and tamarind, from the tribal communities directly, keeping middlemen at bay.

This has proved to be a boon, especially after the lockdown was announced in March 2020.

In the forest villages of Chhattisgarh, tribal communities depend on the collection and sale of a variety of MFPs for their livelihood. About 44 per cent of the state is under forest cover, and sal forests cover 19,682 sq km area (14.56 %) of that.

The estimated trade of non-specified

MFPs, which includes sal seeds, stands at Rs 750 crore.

After the announcement of the lockdown on March 24, 2020, a three-tier SHG model was activated across Chhattisgarh to purchase MFPs. The SHGs purchased sal seeds and tamarind, among other MFPs, directly from forest gatherers or collectors.

In the Keshkal forest division of Kondagaon district, some 158 village-level SHGs, other than Jyotikala, purchased sal seeds and tamarind directly from the gatherers. MSP offered for sal seeds was Rs 20 per kilogram instead of the usual Rs 8-12 per kg offered by traders and middlemen.

Roughly, about 64,866 quintals (64,86,600 kg) of sal seeds were collected in Keshkal division, earning the villagers Rs 7,000-8,000 on average between June 15 and

30, 2020.

Primary collectors – pickers or gatherers – collect sal seeds that fall on the forest floor, and according to Bhag Singh Suryavanshi, the deputy ranger of Keshkal forest division, every family here has collected a minimum of two to three quintals (300 kg) on average.

“This time, after three years, there has been a record collection of sal seeds,” Mona Maheshwari, Keshkal sub-divisional forest officer, told *Gaon Connection*.

“Next year also, the collection will happen through the SHGs,” said Paras Ram Kashyap, forest division’s deputy ranger in-charge of the Bade Rajpur range.

This year witnessed record collection of sal seeds – 2,57,937 quintals (2,57,93,700 kg) state-wide, from 22 forest divisions. “Since the introduction of the MSP, we collected the maximum this year. Last year, the sal seed collection stood at 70,000 quintals in Chhattisgarh,” said Ananda Babu, additional managing director at the Chhattisgarh Minor Forest Produce Federation, a cooperative based in Raipur to aid the trade of MFPs.

South Kondagaon forest division also recorded a good amount of sal seed collection this year, said Uttam Gupta, the divisional forest officer (DFO) of Kondagaon (South). It stands at 89,394.66 quintals (89,39,466 kg)



“This time, after three years, there has been a record collection of sal seeds.”

compared to 3,000 quintals (3,00,000 kg) last year.

THE COLLECTION PROCESS

“After collection, primary collectors bring the seeds home and then separate the wings and seed coats from the seeds and kernels. Then it is cleaned. It is a tough job especially during the hot summer month of June,” Gangaram Paikra, whose non-profit Choupal based in Surgujadistrict of Chhattisgarh, told *Gaon Connection*.

The collection and sale of MFPs is part of the Van Dhan Scheme, a central government initiative that aims to improve tribal income. There are some 18 MFPs traded in the state. The Chhattisgarh government wants to increase the processing rate of MFPs. Around 139 primary processing centres have been identified so far.

The sal seeds produced are bought by the SHGs after which they are cleaned, sorted

and packed into gunny bags. This is done by the SHGs at the *haat bazaar* (weekly market)-level and the Van Dhan-level. There are four Van Dhan-level SHGs and 47 *haat bazaar*-level SHGs in Keshkal.

Once that is done, the gunny bags are transported in trucks to godowns across the state.

HURDLES ON THE GROUND

About 900 quintals (90,000 kg) of sal seeds were bought in June 2021, but things stumbled when they could not be loaded onto trucks due to shortage of labour, said Pandey of the Jyotikala SHG.

It was the same problem in Dantewada district, where 754 quintals (75,400 kg) of sal seed were procured from 337 collectors. The Geedam forest protection committee manager in Dantewada said the women faced problems in loading and unloading the gunny bags.

Madhubala Borkar, who heads the Jai Lakshmi SHG at the village level, said that 1,366 quintals (1,36,600 kg) of sal seeds were purchased in Salna village since collection began mid-June. However, the SHG had to fight with traders, who tried to undermine their efforts. They offered the tribal gatherers up to Rs 40 per kg for tamarind.

“We were buying seeds at Rs 31 per kg,

when they came in and increased the rates, just to disrupt matters. Earlier, they were offering Rs 22 per kg for tamarind,” Borkar said. She informed the primary forest committee manager and the ranger.

According to Borkar there was also a delay in the disbursement of the Rs 3 lakh loan the SHG had applied for from the Gramin Bank.

Edible oil extracted from sal seeds is used in the chocolate industry, often as a replacement for cocoa butter. Last year, around 10,000 quintals (10,00,000 kg) of sal seeds were procured in the division. The oil is extracted from sal seeds by five to six plants in India, mostly for export purposes.

This time, however, because of the COVID-19 crisis, seeds may not be sold immediately, leading to losses. “About 75,000 quintals (75,00,000 kg) of seeds will have to be stored in cold storage,” Ananda Babu of the Chhattisgarh Minor Forest Produce Federation, pointed out.





STORY 29

THE WOMEN FARMERS OF INDIA

While they participate in every aspect of agriculture, Indian women farmers and agricultural labourers are left out in the cold when it comes to policy making and discourses on economy.

Arvind Kumar Singh



It is no secret that women across the country are the backbone of farming. This fact was acknowledged even during the agitation in Delhi where farmers protested the agri-laws. The protesters used the platform to recognise and honour women farmers.

On the 55th day of the agitation, women were handed the reins of the protest, and on International Women's Day, more than 100 days after they began protesting, farmers' organisations honoured the women's contribution to farming.

THE THINGS WOMEN FARMERS DO

Women participate in every single aspect of farming. This includes sowing, planting, irrigating, weeding, harvesting, transporting, sorting, filling and packing.

They also collect fodder, graze the livestock, milk the cows, gather dung, process it and operate tractors.

As per the 2011 census, the number of women farmers was 36 million and the number of women agricultural labourers 12.5 million. This has gone up considerably since then. But, the percentage of women farmers actually owning cultivable land is only 13.87 per cent.

Only 16,857 women farmers benefit under the PM Kisan Yojana.

While The Economic Survey 2017-18 revealed that with the growing migration from villages to cities, the prevalence of women in the agriculture sector has increased, they continue to suffer discrimination when it comes to accessing agricultural resources such as land, agricultural credit, water,

Due to the shortcomings in policy making, they are deprived of the benefits of various government schemes.

Women are generally small and marginal farmers who have less than half-a-hectare of land. Most do not have ownership rights to the land, and are deprived of facilities usually extended to their male counterparts.

The standing committee on agriculture, while recommending bringing women into the mainstream agriculture sector, said in Parliament that the unique role of women farmers in agricultural production cannot be overlooked.

During the UPA government, in 2007, the National Agricultural Policy planned to bring women farmers into the mainstream, and several schemes were formulated to benefit 30 per cent of women farmers.

The participation of women exceeds 80 per cent in the post-harvest process as well as seed preparation. Their presence in all agricultural activities exceeds that of men.

While, post the Green Revolution, men have accessed large-scale technology and tractors, tillers and spares, women continue to work with their hands, making them particularly vulnerable to set backs in health. While various techniques and tools have been developed for

The participation of women exceeds 80 per cent in the post-harvest process as well as seed preparation. Their presence in all agricultural activities exceeds that of men.

simplifying work and reducing fatigue, women farmers have little access to them.

EQUIPMENT FOR WOMEN

With detailed research, equipment that is affordable and can even be made by the local *lohar* (blacksmith) has been developed for women farmers.

For the women farmers of the hills, devices such as fodder collectors, tea leaf picking equipment, umbrellas, fanning instruments and cutters, have been developed, but they need to be made more accessible to them. Companies are not particularly keen on developing agricultural equipment to address the needs of small women farmers, because it is not seen as a profitable venture.

In the Economic Survey 2017-18, it was openly acknowledged that the share of women in the field of agriculture is increasing due to the exodus of men from the village to the city.

The need therefore is to improve land, water, credit and technology access to women. At the same time, rural women need agricultural training.

Women's participation in the animal husbandry sector is 71 per cent. The dairy sector engages 75 million women as compared to 15 million men. Women are the backbone of the dairy cooperative movement.

Women who were once denied the right to be called farmers despite farming, are today working as consultants in the field of rural cultivation. The Narendra Modi-led Central government has given great importance to agricultural development and has brought a number of schemes for rural women but no significant stride has been made towards improving their working/living conditions.

Women farmers do not get facilities for cultivation, nor do they have ready access to loans. Even though farming hinges on their efforts, agricultural policies do not consider them as farmers.

For the first time, on October 15, 2017, India observed Women's Farmers Day to acknowledge the contribution of its women farmers. But, on ground, such measures are little more than symbolic gestures. Women farmers continue to be marginalised and deprived of rights. The policies overlook them and state governments do not take concrete



initiatives to empower them.

In 1991, a new scheme was launched to train women in the agriculture sector, and Krishi Vigyan Kendras were further strengthened. Training was provided in the khadi sector too, in areas ranging from processing of cereals and pulses to papad and spice- making, and collection of non-edible oilseeds. But there is still a lot to be done, and not too many women are able to reach these training programmes.



The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has slightly improved the condition of rural woman labourers in areas where it has been properly implemented. But the participation of women at the planning level is not high.

In most places, the facilities to be provided under MGNREGA such as clean water, a shishu sadan for children, and resting places, exist only on paper.

Most women in rural India are still dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Women farmers and agricultural labourers, who are the most significant contributor to the country's progress, are usually left out of any discussions and discourses on agriculture.

Agriculture remains the mainstay of our economy. The corona crisis has further underscored the importance of farming. It is the largest source of employment in the country, providing livelihoods to 57 per cent of the people.

While the men head to the cities and the burden of unprofitable farming falls upon the shoulders of women who valiantly continue to work. But, are they celebrated for what they do? Not quite.





C H A P T E R 3

WOMEN HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Anganwadi workers and ASHAs went beyond the call of duty to help rural masses during the pandemic.

Healthcare is one of the fastest growing sectors in India and contributes substantially to the Indian economy in terms of employment and generating national income.¹ The healthcare industry in India comprises hospitals, medical devices, clinical trials, outsourcing, telemedicine, medical tourism, health insurance, and medical equipment.²

By Financial Year 2022–23, the healthcare sector is expected to generate an income of more than 29 billion INR according to Indian Brand Equity Foundation.³ The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of the healthcare sector in India has been marked at 22 per cent between 2016 and 2022.⁴

As per the Economic Survey 2021–22, the Indian government spent 2.1 per cent of its GDP on healthcare in 2021–22 which increased from 1.8 per cent in 2020–21.⁵

The Indian healthcare sector employed 3.6 million workers in 2013 and estimates to employ 7.4 million workers by the year 2022.⁶ These healthcare workers constitute of doctors, specialists, dentists, nurses, midwives, pharmacists and allied and other healthcare professionals.⁷

Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) form the backbone of the Indian rural healthcare system.⁸ AWWs and ASHAs are a part of the community

workers programme launched by the Government of India in 1975 and 2005 respectively to address public health issues in rural regions.⁹

These programmes aim to improve maternal and child care outcomes and reduce the spread of communicable diseases specifically in rural areas.¹⁰

AWWs and ASHAs are women healthcare workers from rural communities who are later trained to perform a range of duties such as spreading awareness about reproductive and child health, providing information about nutrition and hygiene, carrying out programs to control the spread of diseases and immunisation drives.¹¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic that severely hit India during 2020–21, AWWs and ASHAs were at the forefront tackling primary healthcare issues in rural regions.¹²

As many as one million ASHA workers and 2.5 million AWWs were a part of the female frontline workers team who worked round the clock to address health related demands of the rural population.¹³ AWWs and ASHAs were responsible for several tasks such as monitoring and conducting health surveys, reporting data to the state authorities, surveillance of COVID-19 spread in rural regions as well as delivering food and ration to the rural population to control malnutrition.¹⁴

STATUS OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

A study by Center for Strategic and International Studies states that the Indian healthcare workers were burdened with tremendous workload while treating the large number of patients during the pandemic.¹⁵

India faced an extreme shortage of healthcare workers to cater to the large population as the doctor- patient ratio was recorded to be 1:1,456 during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a study by Cambridge University Press Public Health Emergency Collection.¹⁶

The second wave of the pandemic in 2021 highlighted the lack of infrastructure necessary to tackle the health crisis as only 8.5 hospital beds and 8 physicians were available for a population of 10,000.¹⁷ Close contact with the patients put the frontline workers such as ASHAs at risk as they were highly susceptible to catching the virus while providing treatment.¹⁸

The severe lack of medical and human resources put a tremendous strain on healthcare workers and took a toll on their physical and mental well being, notes the Indian Journal of Medical Research.¹⁹

India faced an extreme shortage of healthcare workers to cater to the large population as the doctor- patient ratio was recorded to be 1:1,456 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine, medical staff is 5 times and doctors are 1.64 times more likely to suffer burnout due to COVID-19 pandemic related workload and stress.²⁰ The burnout was caused due to physical, mental and emotional exhaustion that the medical workers had to suffer during the pandemic due to the long hours of working under stressful conditions.²¹

The survey by Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine points out that 52.8 per cent of this burnout was caused due to the pandemic, while 44.6 per cent was related to personal reasons and 26.9 per cent was work related.²²

Additionally, healthcare workers were also exposed to increased social stigmatisation, separation from families, discrimination, verbal harassment and physical violence during the pandemic as documented by the World Health Organization.²³

ROLE OF WOMEN HEALTHCARE WORKERS IN THE PANDEMIC

According to a study by UNICEF, women constitute 70 per cent of the healthcare workforce all across the globe.²⁴ In India, approximately 30 per cent of the doctors are women while more than 80 per cent of the nurses and midwives are women.²⁵

Women make up to 47 per cent of the healthcare workforce in India, according to UN Women.²⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic in India, the major responsibility of managing this health emergency at a community level disproportionately fell on the shoulders of female frontline workers, thus highlighting the gendered aspect of the healthcare industry, according to a study by Elsevier Public Health Emergency Collection.²⁷ These frontline workers consisted of community health workers also called ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists), the Anganwadi Workers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs).²⁸

Female frontline workers worked at the grassroots level by reaching out to the Indian population residing in rural and remote areas of the country.²⁹ The other responsibilities that they shouldered were disease surveillance, spreading awareness about the COVID-19 virus,

documenting returning population, keeping track of COVID-19 affected patients and providing support to patients who were in isolation.³⁰

Additionally, women frontline workers also had to work towards preventing community transmission, addressing issues related to misinformation at the community level and were responsible for managing several quarantine centre.³¹

Leveraging Evidence for Access and Development attributes a substantial amount of the success rate of the COVID-19 vaccination drive in India to female frontline workers.³²

A study by BMC Public Health states how ASHA and anganwadi workers had to not just deliver vaccines at the community level but also had to tackle several issues surrounding it.³³ These included discussing the benefits and side effects of vaccines, addressing issues related to trusting particular vaccines, answering people's questions about the vaccine and providing in-depth information about the vaccines.³⁴

For sustained health outcomes, women frontline workers not just needed the medical expertise, but also had to work long hours and effectively communicate with the population

living in remote parts of the country.³⁵

Women frontline workers often had to develop context-specific approaches and implement long-term strategies to increase the number of vaccinated population in areas of low vaccine coverage.³⁶

OBSTACLES FACED BY WOMEN HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Despite being the backbone of the healthcare sector in India, the work of women frontline workers is largely unrecognised and underpaid.³⁷ Women healthcare workers had to deal with unusual working conditions as they became the first line of defence during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸

According to Open Democracy, while tackling pandemic conditions, only 23 per cent of ASHA workers received suits, 62 per cent received gloves and 75 per cent received masks.³⁹

ASHA workers often complained of not receiving personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, sanitisers, face shields and head caps which the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare was expected to provide.⁴⁰

Women frontline workers worked under precarious working conditions as they did



not hold permanent job positions.⁴¹

Despite their crucial role in managing the pandemic, the women healthcare workers received meagre wages.⁴² The state government paid ASHA workers a

sum of Rs 1000 – 4000 per month and an additional Rs 100 for every COVID-19 jab that they delivered.⁴³

ASHA workers were more often treated as volunteers and the waiting period for receiving monetary benefits was as high as six months.⁴⁴

Each ASHA worker catered to a population of 1,500 people which implied that they often had to work overtime and during emergencies travel to remote places at odd hours of the day.⁴⁵ As on January 2022, more than 44 ASHA workers had died due to contraction of COVID-19 virus while serving the population.⁴⁶

This chapter puts together stories of the immense contribution of women healthcare workers, especially during the pandemic.



- The healthcare industry in India sees a gendered distribution of the workforce. Women make up to 47 % of the healthcare workforce, according to UN Women.
- Approximately 30 % of the doctors are women while more than 80 % of the nurses and midwives are women, according to UNICEF.
- Female frontline workers shouldered the responsibility of disease surveillance, spreading awareness about the COVID-19 virus, documenting returning population, keeping track of COVID-19 affected patients and providing support to patients who were in isolation.
- Despite being the backbone of the healthcare sector, the work of women frontline workers is largely unrecognised and underpaid as they have to work under precarious conditions.
- According to Open Democracy, while tackling COVID-19 pandemic conditions, only 23 per cent of ASHA workers received suits, 62 per cent received gloves and 75 per cent received masks.



STORY 30

TIKA WALI NAAV ENSURES COVID VACCINATION IN FLOOD-HIT BIHAR

Frontline women health workers in flood-hit Muzaffarpur district, Bihar row their way to villages to inoculate the residents.

Shivani Gupta



Armed with COVID19 vaccines, Lalta Kumari, an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) and a frontline health worker, is leading the fight against the coronavirus in flood-affected villages of Bihar. She is moving around in a boat, locally known as *dengi*.

At least 14 out of the 38 districts of Bihar are hit by floods leaving hundreds of thousands villages marooned. And with the threat of the third wave of the pandemic looming large, people need to be vaccinated on a war footing. And to do this, Lalta is rowing out to marooned villagers in flood-ravaged Muzaffarpur district to inoculate them.

Known as *Tika Wali Naav* (COVID vaccination boat), two dedicated are working in the district as part of the COVID vaccination campaign. Each boat has two ANMs, one data collector or verifier, a boat-person and a diver.

The initiative, which was started on July 9, 2021, is the brainchild of District Magistrate Pranav Kumar.

“The major concern was to vaccinate people who live near river embankments. They live in close proximity with each other. This could increase chances of COVID outbreak. We want to vaccinate them as soon as possible. Hence the *tika wali nav*,” the district magistrate told *Gaon Connection*.

FRONTLINE WORKERS LEAD FROM THE FRONT

Thirty-six-year-old Lalta Kumari’s day starts early. “At eight in the morning, we report to the PHC [primary health centre]. From there, an ambulance drops us to the boat and we go to the flood affected villages,” the ANM, who works in a sub health centre in Muzaffarpur district, told *Gaon Connection*.

On July 12, the boats reached Bhawanipur village near the Bagmati river, which is in full spate.

Vaccinating people in a boat while sailing on floodwaters isn't easy. But it has to be done.

"Today is my second day on duty on the tika naav. I have vaccinated around 125 people in a day," Lalta said.

Every day between 10 am and 3 pm, the health workers vaccinate 100-200 people. On the first day of the vaccination campaign on July 9, only 20 people could be vaccinated. The next day, health workers managed to vaccinate 50 people. And slowly this number has increased to almost 200 villagers a day.

According to the district authorities, till July 12, over 500 people in the flood-affected hamlets of Muzaffarpur were vaccinated by the personnel on the *tika naav*.

Meanwhile, a total of 827,473 vaccination doses were administered in the district so far. As per the 2011 census, there are around 4.8 million people in the district.

"We have five *panchayats* which are affected by floods. Villagers are unable to come to vaccination centres. We are trying to approach them using these boats," District Magistrate Kumar said.

"We have five *panchayats* which are affected by floods. Villagers are unable to come to vaccination centres. We are trying to approach them using these boats."

"The district has arranged for three more such boats so that a boat can be deployed to each of the flood-affected *panchayats*," he added.

JOINING FORCES

The *Tika Wali Naav* initiative was started as a joint effort of the district administration, the state health department, and CARE India, a non-profit working on projects in health, education, livelihoods and disaster preparedness and response.

"Katara block has twenty six *panchayats*. Of these, fourteen are cut off from by the floodwaters. So, we started this initiative," Sourabh Tiwari, team lead of CARE India, told *Gaon Connection*.

"To avoid overworking the health workers and others, they are asked to report to work on a rotation basis," said Tiwari. "In the sixteen *panchayats* of Katara, there are around one lakh forty thousand (1,40,000)

people. We have a target of vaccinating at least 100 people in a day. We will also start this initiative in other affected areas soon," he said.

JEEVIKA DIDIS PITCH IN

Community participation has also played a key role in the ongoing COVID19 vaccination drive in the flood-affected district. Women from self-help groups, *Jeevika Didis*, who come under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, are assisting at the grassroots level for vaccination.

"*Jeevika Didis* are ensuring mass scale awareness on COVID vaccination. Their involvement ensures vaccination and mobilisation in a systematic manner at the grassroots level," Anisha, district programme manager, Jeevika Muzaffarpur told *Gaon Connection*. By recording data, they keep a tab on the number of people vaccinated in a village and how many left, she said.

"In one federation of a SHG, commonly known as a village organisation, there are around thirty SHGs. In every SHG there are at least ten to fifteen women members," Anisha explained. With their help we can cover nearly seventy per cent of the population of the district, she added.

"Running a vaccination campaign in these villages is no easy task, people are



hesitant to get inoculated," said Tiwari of CARE India. "These *Jeevika Didis* pre inform people about vaccination. They motivate people and make arrangements at ground zero so that the team does not face any inconvenience," he added.



INCENTIVES FOR ANMs?

Meanwhile, frontline health workers who have taken on the additional duties on the *tika naav* to vaccinate people, are none too happy. They complain they are not compensated properly for their work.

“Verifiers and ANMs being salaried workers are not provided separate incentives as of now,” informed Tiwari from CARE India. However, the boatmen and divers are being provided a daily incentive of at least Rs 200-Rs 300 each, he said.

Other than a monthly salary of Rs 25,500, Lalita Kumari said that she was not getting any incentives for the particular task.

According to the district magistrate a decision to provide incentive to ANMs would soon be taken. “It is a tough terrain where these people are going for vaccination. We will recognise their contribution and give them incentives,” said Kumar.





STORY 31

MALKANGIRI MODEL: MICs AND MOSQUITO NETS FIGHT MALARIA

As part of the Malaria-free Malkangiri Campaign, ASHA workers go from door to door in Odisha's Malkangiri, a hotbed of malaria, checking villagers for fever and ensuring they use mosquito nets.

Nidhi Jamwal



Aparna Sarkar, an ASHA (accredited social health activist) worker, draped in a light blue saree with a leaf motif, and wearing red-and-white bangles on her wrists, and a thick streak of *sindoor* (vermillion) in her parting, picks up a large bell and steps out into the dusk.

She will walk around Khairapali village in Malkangiri district in Odisha, ringing the bell reminding villagers to use the mosquito nets — officially known as long-lasting insecticidal nets, or LLINs — distributed to them last year.

The net fabric is pre-treated with insecticide and remains effective for three years. Sleeping inside these nets means protection from mosquitoes and vector-borne diseases such as malaria.

Malkangiri, a predominantly tribal district, known for Naxalism and infamous for

poverty and malnutrition, is a hotbed of malaria as well.

Odisha carries more than 40 per cent of India's total malaria burden, and about half of the total malaria cases in the state is from Malkangiri.

However, with various interventions, the malaria burden in the district, and the state, has come down. The district administration is leaving no stone unturned in its war against malaria, which killed 7,700 people in the country in 2019.

WhatsApp groups, IEC (information, education and communication) materials, mic announcements, training of frontline health workers, active participation of local teachers and schools, mass screening, patient cards, sanitation drives, behaviour change and promoting the use of LLINs are some of the measures undertaken.

"In January 2020, Malkangiri district had a malaria case load of 1,272. But, this year, the district has reported only 235 cases, a decline of 81 per cent," Dhaneshwar Mohapatra, head of malaria division, and additional district public health officer, Malkangiri, told *Gaon Connection*.

ASHA workers like Sarkar form the backbone of the eastern state's malaria eradication programme. Also, based on inter-departmental convergence, 14 line departments in the district are now working in tandem to make Malkangiri malaria-free.

MALARIA-FREE MALKANGIRI CAMPAIGN

Malaria is endemic to Malkangiri district where 57.83 per cent population is tribal/indigenous people. Several ecological conditions, such as hilly areas, stagnating water, high humidity and an annual rainfall of 1,700 millimetre, enable mosquitoes to breed.

Till June 2020, the district was reporting a very high case load of malaria. The number of cases in January 2020 was 1,272, a steep jump from 621 in January 2019. A rising trend was observed till June 2020.

"In December 2019, we received the long-lasting insecticidal nets from the Central government. We distributed four lakh and

In April and May 2020, a survey was conducted to know how many rural households in Malkangiri district were using the new pre-treated nets. The survey showed only 30 per cent of the households given the new nets were actually using them at night.

twenty nine thousand nets among villagers in January, February and March 2020. However, the malaria case load continued to show a rising trend," said Mohapatra.

In April and May 2020, amid the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown, a survey was conducted to know how many rural households in the district were using the new pre-treated nets. *Panchayat* members and local teachers were roped in for the door-to-door survey.

The survey showed only 30 per cent of the households given the new nets were actually using them at night, informed Mohapatra.

On June 11, 2020, Manish Agarwal, the then collector of Malkangiri, initiated the process for the interdepartmental convergence to launch the Malaria-free Malkangiri Campaign.

It was decided that officials and workers from all 14 line departments will work

together to control and eradicate malaria. This campaign has borne fruits and has now emerged as the Malkangiri model.

MONITORING, SURVEILLANCE & REPORTING

The Malkangiri model is based on three tier interdepartmental convergence — district, block and *panchayat* — strengthened by a transparent monitoring, surveillance and reporting system.

For instance, 70 forest guards and 100 forest committees have also been roped in to raise awareness about malaria control and use of the pre-treated nets in forest villages.

Malkangiri district has seven blocks, and the district administration has purchased 30 microphones (mics), one for each sub-centre to hold mass awareness programmes on malaria. The plan is to ensure one mic per village in the coming years (the district has 192 villages as per Census 2011).

ROLE OF ASHA WORKERS

Frontline health workers are the backbone of Malkangiri's anti-malaria programme. They undertake daily house visits to ensure the people are using the



mosquito nets.

“Our main job is to raise awareness about malaria, its symptoms, and the precautions to be followed by villagers. Initially, we held meetings with village-level self-help groups to educate them about malaria and the importance of using the nets,” Sarkar told *Gaon Connection*.



“Apart from this, each ASHA worker daily visits at least 10 households to screen people for malaria. We check if the family is using their nets. We have made patient cards with all health details. We also carry rapid malaria testing kits with us, which can confirm malaria infection within 20 minutes,” she added.

The daily house visits have not only raised awareness about malaria among people, but have also helped frontline workers get acquainted with real-time incidence of malaria and the extent of precautionary measures adopted at the household levels.

Each block of Malkangiri has formed its own WhatsApp group on which ASHA and *anganwadi* workers share information every day about their home visits and patient records. Photographs are also shared.

If a person has malaria, he/she is administered medicine in front of the ASHA worker. Thereafter, contact tracing is done in the neighbouring four to five households and fever surveillance done in the entire village.

“The only secret to making Malkangiri malaria-free is hundred per cent usage of LLINs [long-lasting insecticidal nets], and with our sustained campaign, we will make it happen,” said Mohapatra.

“The past year has been extremely challenging because, apart from the malaria awareness programme, we also had to work day and night on COVID-19. But, there is a great sense of achievement when we get to know that malaria cases are on a decline in our villages,” said Sarkar.





STORY 32

LEADING BY 'EGGSAMPLE'

Tribal women in Thane, Maharashtra rear poultry and earn a living by selling eggs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shivani Gupta



Indubai Vithal Wagh held onto hope when all around her there were people who had lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns.

The 55-year-old now earns about Rs 1,200 a month – with which she is able to contribute to the support of her family of six. Indubai lives in Khanduchiwadi, a tribal village in Shahapur block of Thane district in Maharashtra.

Indubai was a beneficiary of an initiative by Population First, a non-profit that works towards improving the quality of health of the rural women in India. The non-profit distributed chicks to the women in the village, and now 18 tribal women, earn a livelihood by selling eggs.

This has not only provided a source of income to them, but has also addressed malnutrition amongst pregnant and

lactating women, and children in their village.

“We started the poultry project in Khanduchiwadi, in January 2021. Most of these women are uneducated. We trained them in looking after the chicks. In April, we distributed 10 chicks per tribal woman in the village. So far, we have given 180 chicks to 18 women,” Fazal Pathan, programme manager of Population First told *Gaon Connection*.

TACKLING MALNUTRITION

At a time when supply chains in the country have collapsed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these tribal women are providing the eggs to be given to the pregnant and lactating women in the anganwadis (rural child-care centres) in five neighbouring hamlets.

This is helping run the Abdul Kalam Amrut Ahar Yojana – a scheme to combat malnutrition and improve the nutrition of pregnant and lactating women, and children. The anganwadi workers buy eggs from these tribal women directly.

“When the production of eggs increased, these women started selling them to the two local vendors and later to the anganwadi workers. Because of the poor roads and connectivity with cities, tribal people here don’t get to buy vegetables. They were surviving on wheat and paddy. But, ever since the poultry project started, women and children started consuming eggs, which became a permanent locally available food. This has addressed malnutrition in them,” said Pathan.

In a written reply given in the legislative assembly earlier this year, Rajesh Tope, the state health minister, said that 1,070 cases of maternal mortality were registered in the state between April 1, 2019, and January 5, 2020.

In rural parts of Thane, 327 children were diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition and 1736 with moderate malnutrition.

Despite the measures by the state health department, the rate of malnutrition is on the rise. However, the tribal women in this hamlet of Thane, are making some difference.

1,070 cases of maternal mortality were registered in Maharashtra between April 1, 2019, and January 5, 2020.

“Now, we see positive health changes in women,” said Pathan who along with his team has been addressing malnutrition problems in the hamlet for the past five years.

THE EGG-SELLERS

Indubai has sold 250 eggs to the anganwadi centres and the local shopkeepers in June and earned Rs 1,250, she said. On average, these tribal women manage to earn Rs 700-800 a month. They sell eggs at Rs 7-8 per piece. Cost of production of each egg is Rs 2-3.

“We give these chicks rice, wheat, and *bajri* (millet),” said Indubai who also works infarmland provided by the forest department where she grows paddy. She only has to buy millet. The rest, she gets from the field and the ration shop at cheaper rates, she said.

“Of 18, thirteen women started rearing chicks. And a 100 new chicks were added. A few died of heat, the rest survived. Now, we have 250 birds in all. These will later produce new chicks, and in turn, more eggs. This will keep multiplying and hence the profit,” said Pathan.

Population First plans to further the pilot project in three more villages and establish linkages between the local market of Shenva. This will generate livelihood opportunities for many more women living in the tribal belt of the state.





STORY 33

RURAL WOMEN IN UTTAR PRADESH MAKE PPE KITS ON A WAR FOOTING

Around 150 women belonging to a self-help group in Lakhimpur Kheri are now earning Rs 450-600 daily by making low-cost PPEs. The Army has ordered a consignment of 2,000 PPE kits from them.

Mohit Shukla



A women's self-help group in Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh makes low-cost Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits. A lot of them will go to the Indian Army that has ordered a consignment of 2,000 PPE kits from them.

"We were unemployed because of the lockdown. We did not have enough to eat. Our self-help group got us this job. Now we are comfortable in meeting our household expenses," Navrin Jehan, from Lakhimpur Kheri district in Uttar Pradesh, told *Gaon Connection*.

Jehan, along with other women others, is making low-cost PPE kits for protection against coronavirus.

"There are 150 women from the SHG who are regularly engaged in making PPE kits across six blocks of the district. A woman prepares five to six kits every day, earning anything between Rs 450 and Rs 600 a

day," Santosh Singh, the district block development officer (BDO), told *Gaon Connection*.

"All the instructions issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) on social distancing are being strictly adhered to. The women wear masks and are sanitised before they start making the PPE kits," Anamika Bharti, the block mission manager of this self-help group, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to Singh, it was a suggestion by the chief development officer, in consultation with the chief medical officer that began the PPE kits initiative. In the first phase, samples were prepared and sent to the Ministry of Health. After getting a no-objection from the ministry, PPE manufacturing has been undertaken on a war footing."



STORY 34

RAGS TO PADS: YOUNG TRIBAL WOMEN SCRIPT THE SWITCHOVER

Over 26 villages in Rewa district, Madhya Pradesh are benefitting from a menstrual hygiene campaign of Dastak Kishori Samuh, a group of young tribal women, who are making and distributing sanitary pads to rural women.

Deepanwita Gita Niyogi
Rewa, Madhya Pradesh



In a room with pink walls, about 500-kilometre from the state capital of Madhya Pradesh, young college girls from the local tribal community in Rewa, sit on the floor mats, surrounded by cotton wool, thin blue polythene sheets, rayon tissue, glue and a sewing machine.

Mamta Adivasi, Asthma Adivasi and Uma Adivasi are a part of the Dastak Kishori Samuh, an eight-member women's group based in Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh. For two years, the group is helping address the issue of menstrual hygiene by stitching sanitary pads and distributing them to women in 26 villages.

Working as volunteers, the members of Dastak Kishori Samuh regularly hold discussions with the village women on monthly periods.

"All the members of our group received free training to make sanitary napkins.

I learnt to make pads in 15 days. Till now I have made about 250 such napkins. It takes me 20 minutes to make one pad," Asma told *Gaon Connection*. She is a B.Com final year student from Dabhaura village in Rewa.

"The biggest advantage is that when we need pads, we can make them ourselves. And, unlike the popular brands available in the market, our sanitary pads are cheap and affordable," she added.

The first step in making a sanitary pad is careful selection and cutting of thin blue polythene sheet, rayon tissue and cotton wool according to the set size. These are then layered followed by stitching the sides of the pad on a sewing machine and applying glue for fixation.

Thereafter, the pads are kept in a box-like machine for sanitisation and then wrapped in a white packet to distribute to the local villagers.

"I like working on social issues and joined Dastak Kishori Samuh in November 2019. My family supports mein this work," Renu Sahu, another young member of the group told *Gaon Connection*.

The eight members of Dastak Kishori Samuh belong to different villages of Rewa district and meet in the office of Rewanchal Dalit Adivasi Seva Sansthan Samiti, a grassroots organisation based in Dabhaura. This non-profit runs the pad making activity two-three times a week for four hours each.

"During the lockdown, many families in the villages did not have money and benefitted from the free pads distributed by these young women. We also gave free sanitary napkins to female labourers on the Rewa-Sohagi Highway Bypass," Ram Naresh, a social activist associated with Rewanchal Samiti told *Gaon Connection*.

"Before the lockdown, these girls distributed pads at Rs 15 to Rs 20 per packet [eight pads in each packet]. It helped us buy some materials for the pads, as each packet costs over Rs 25," he added.

CHALLENGING SOCIAL NORMS

Asthma remembered when her mother first told her about periods. "My white uniform was stained and I had to rush

"Today girls in my village know about menstruation and are not caught unawares. Many do not hesitate to ask relevant questions regarding menstrual cycle and mandatory hygiene measures."

back home. Till then I had not even heard about periods," she said.

"Today girls in my village know about menstruation and are not caught unawares. Many do not hesitate to ask relevant questions regarding menstrual cycle and mandatory hygiene measures," she told *Gaon Connection*.

There has been a sea change since 2018, when these young women were first trained to make pads by the members of Rewanchal Dalit Adivasi Seva Sansthan Samiti.

One of the positive outcomes is that many girls in neighbouring villages have switched over to pads from period cloth that was unhygienic and likely to cause health problems.

"When we visited the villages for discussions about menstrual hygiene, many girls complained about vaginal infection. The cloth pieces did not dry properly, especially during the

monsoons,” Varsha Sahu, another group member, and a B.Sc student told *Gaon Connection*. “Pads provide a much safer and hygienic alternative,” she added.

POSITIVE DISCOURSE ON HEALTH AND SANITATION

“When we began visiting villages, women opened up about problems they faced during periods. It was about lack of money to buy the pads or the distances they had to travel to the market to buy them,” Sanjay Kumar Kaul, associated with the pad-making initiative of the Rewanchal Samiti, told *Gaon Connection*.

“We cleaned up a room in the Rewanchal Samiti’s office and started making pads. Teenage girls who showed interest were trained to make them and they also distributed them in the villages,” said Kaul.

Making sanitary napkins is part of skill development initiative by Madhya Pradesh-based non-profit, Vikas Samvad Samiti, which provided the monetary assistance as and when needed.

“We first distributed pads free of cost and received a positive response from the local women. Then, many girls came forward to learn pad-making and were trained. Making pads also enables them to hold healthy discussions regarding periods,” Sia Dulari, head of the

Rewanachal Samiti told *Gaon Connection*.

SUPPORT FROM DELHI

Apart from the local organisations, such as Vikas Samvad Samiti and Rewanchal Dalit Adivasi Seva Sansthan Samiti, another non-profit spearhead a campaign on menstrual hygiene.

Delhi-based *Environics Trust* trained the women group members and also donated pad-making materials to them.

“We worked with Rewanchal Samiti in Rewa, and Prithvi Trust in Khajuraho to train young women in pad making, and gave them sufficient materials for two months so that they could start a livelihood activity,” S Vanitha of *Environics Trust* told *Gaon Connection*.

“The size of our napkins is customised. We make it as big as a cloth napkin. We also use high-quality cotton, which is skin friendly,” she added.

Slowly but steadily rural women in Rewa have come to accept sanitary pads. Mamta Devi Kol, a resident of Garve village in Rewa, and a member of Dastak Kishori Samuh, travels 15-kilometre to reach Rewanchal Samiti’s office to make pads and distribute them.



STORY 35

A WOMEN-LED START-UP BRINGS TRADITIONAL CUISINE BACK

Nativ Chefs, an online platform, offers home-cooked meals to those who like traditional food. Besides, it provides employment to home chefs, mostly women, who enjoy cooking.

Shivani Gupta



The best thing about being employed is that she does not have to beg money from her husband every time, smiled Varsha Dhakate. “I am not as dependent on him as I was before,” the homemaker from Nagpur, Maharashtra, told *Gaon Connection*.

Varsha works as a chef with Nativ Chefs, a food-tech startup based in Nagpur. The platform provides authentic home-cooked meals to those craving traditional cuisines.

It also provides employment opportunities to people, mostly women, with good culinary skills, and has empowered 60 home chefs so far.

“It is like other food aggregating apps, but we offer *ghar ka khana* (homemade food) made by a home chef,” Leena Dixit, who started this platform in 2018, told *Gaon Connection*.

Nativ Chefs, is set up on the IIM campus in Nagpur, and it offers traditional Bengali, Marwari, Gujarati, Maharashtrian, Bihari, and Himachali delicacies.

When other food delivery platforms provide regular food like *daal*, *roti* and *sabzi*, Nativ Chefs brings traditional food, which seems to be losing out to junk food.

“Not many know about the traditional foods of our country. What most know is ordinary mutton-chicken, they don’t know there is something like mutton *dhansakh*, for example. They prefer chicken biryani or butter chicken,” said Leena, who provides more than 100 traditional dishes prepared by home chefs belonging to different communities.

“We have *ukadiche*, or steamed, *modak*. It is a Konkan delicacy and is very popular among our foodie consumers. Then we have Bengali cuisines, say, *maccher jhol*. It

could also be *litti chokkha* from Bihar, cooked in the traditional way and a novelty for people outside Bihar,” she said.

TAKING TALENT OUT OF HOMES

For Nativ Chefs, while it brings back the native food back into the market, it also empowers women by bringing them together under one platform. Now, women who had to quit their jobs or those who never worked outside home, can earn a living from the comfort of their kitchen.

“Earlier, I used to work. But when I was pregnant with my first child, I had to quit my job and later, I couldn’t take up any other job. All my time was exhausted in managing the household and looking after the children,” said Varsha, who has two children.

“My husband enjoys my cooking and shares the food I make with his colleagues at work. He often told me to use my talent but I always brushed him off saying there are many out there who cook just as well,” said Varsha.

But things changed when Varsha posted a picture of something she had cooked on social media and received a call from Nativ Chefs. Now, she gets regular orders for her speciality, *gavran* chicken.

“This not only provides me with a source

For Nativ Chefs, while it brings back the native food back into the market, it also empowers women by bringing them together under one platform.

of income, it also encourages me. I have developed the confidence that I can work even from home,” added Varsha. She loved the feeling when she received her first cheque from Nativ Chef, she said.

THE BEGINNING ... AND A PLETHORA OF SMILES

It is never too late to chase one’s dreams. The founder of Nativ Chef, Leena, a B.Tech graduate, worked with a technology services company, but she always enjoyed cooking.

After spending 13-years in the corporate world, Leena decided to pursue her dreams at the age of 38. In 2018, she founded Nativ Chefs. The same year, she organised a food competition for cooks who wanted to showcase their cooking skills.

“The competition was our first attempt at marketing our startup. Until then, we were only relying on word-of-mouth of those who had tasted our recipes,” said Leena.

BALANCING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIVES

"I started alone. I would sit alone in the office," said Leena, who has provided jobs to more than 100 people so far. The startup has five employees and four interns, three in-house delivery executives and 20 outsourced, and up to 60 chef-partners, both female and male chefs.

The platform requires two hours notice to make the ordered food. "It takes time to make these delicacies. We start cooking the food once we receive the order. Sometimes it comes in the way of people wanting quicker orders. But, we believe in promoting fresh food," she said.

The other challenge for the startup was finding consumers. "Finding the right target group was a bit of a challenge. Plus, since we are a startup, marketing is a bit of a challenge. We are so far based in Nagpur, but we want to expand this pan India. We don't have funds and we need to work on advertisement. We will provide our services in other cities as soon as we have funds," said Leena.





STORY 36

ADDRESSING VACCINE HESITANCY IN UNNAO, UTTAR PRADESH

*Government health authorities and ASHAs in Unnao, UP,
are going all out to woo rural communities to step up and be
vaccinated against COVID-19.*

Aishwarya Tripathi



At Peekhi village in Unnao district, 22-year-old Naubhar Bano was head of the line when the health worker opened the first COVID19 vaccine vial of the day. Although the vaccination for those over 60 years and for those over 45 with co-morbidities began on March 1, 2021, not much headway was made in villages of Unnao due to vaccine hesitancy.

Bano stepped up to reassure her fellow villagers, that it was perfectly safe. As a result, 225 other inhabitants of Peekhi, out of the eligible 450, were inoculated.

Mohammad Dilshad roped in Banoto help him out. Dilshad is the district mobilisation coordinator, appointed by UNICEF, who came up with strategies and ways to encourage people in rural areas to get vaccinated.

People like Bano have been catalysts in the district administration's Information, Education, Communication (IEC) strategy to spread awareness to a target audience about COVID19 vaccination. UNICEF is a partner in this exercise along with other nonprofits.

Mobilisation coordinators like Dilshad identify mosques, temples and other religious institutes, as well as local influencers, who then disseminate information about vaccination camps to the communities.

Vaccine hesitancy has been a huge challenge, especially in rural India. Lack of awareness about COVID19 created fear amongst many rural communities who believed that the COVID19 vaccine could lead to death or impotence.

ROPING IN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND INFLUENCERS

According to Dilshad, nearly 1,400 religious leaders from various *kasbas* in Unnao were involved, and this boosted vaccination by 15–20 per cent. In Unwa, Safipur, it was the clergy's call that worked.

A *Nigrani Samiti* – made up of the district magistrate, *gram pradhans*, ASHA *bahus*, *anganwadi* workers, local teachers and *kotedars* – track vaccinations in these villages.

Medical officer at Sikandarpur, Unnao, Vijay Kumar Rajoura, recalled how seven years ago at Takiya Patan village, administering the polio vaccine amongst the people of the Nat community, proved to be a huge challenge. Rajoura sought the help of the local butcher to 'influence' his customers, and the polio vaccine drive took off.

"Vaccine hesitancy is not a new phenomenon. I have seen this reluctance following the introduction of any new immunisation drive," Vikas Yadav, the medical officer in a primary health centre (PHC) at Sikandarpur, in Unnao, told *Gaon Connection*. Already, 1,200 people had been administered the vaccine that day.

"The pace has picked up ever since the slots for the eighteen-year-olds and

"Vaccine hesitancy is not a new phenomenon. I have seen this reluctance following the introduction of any new immunisation drive."

above have opened up," Vikas Yadav told *Gaon Connection*.

"What works is identifying a local figure who the community trusts and roping them in to spread awareness. It could be the *kotedar*, *gram pradhan*, the *maulvi* or a *pandit*," the medical officer explained.

BULAWA PARCHIS

According to Upendra Singh Chauhan, health education officer, at the Sikandarpur PHC, new strategies are being evolved as they go along.

"A *Bulawa Parchi* or an invitation slip will be issued to people requesting them to show up for vaccination," Chauhan told *Gaon Connection*. This door-to-door campaign could work in villages, he said.

The *parchi*, with the date and site of the vaccination camp, would be handed over to the head of each family.

“Many people are not aware of the location and date of camps– the *parchi* fills this information gap and targets the head of the family who is the decision-maker in the household,” he added.

“But, it is important to inform villagers about the common side effects. If you do that, they will be prepared to deal with it instead of panicking and resisting the vaccination even more,” Chauhan cautioned.

FEAR OF MISSING OUT ON GOVT SCHEME

In Sikandarpur, 50-year-old Geeta Gupta was persuaded to get vaccinated in June, after keeping away for two full months. Her fellow villagers who had been inoculated against the coronavirus, had persuaded her to do the same. Soon, her family members followed too.

“People take courage from seeing others get vaccinated. They will eventually come forward,” Neelam Gupta, an ASHA bahu, from Sikandarpur, told *Gaon Connection*.

Many villagers fear government schemes and services will not be available to them if they do not get vaccinated.

Md Kareem, a 24-year-old from Korari Kalan took the jab, only so that he could resume his *silayi* (tailor) job in Mumbai. In



Sikandarpur, 66-year-old retired *mistry* (technician) from the Public Works Department Mohammed Ehsaan took his jab because he heard his pension may be withheld if he did not.

Similarly, his neighbour Abdul Lateef had heard that the *kotedar* would deny them the monthly galla (rations) under the PDS (Public Distribution System) if he did not get vaccinated.

However, there is no truth in these rumours circulating in the villages, say district officials.



VACCINATION CHALLENGES

The other challenge faced by health workers in rural Uttar Pradesh is vaccine insufficiency.

“The Unnao district hospital is capable of inoculating up to thirty thousand people a day. But there are only enough vaccines to cover five thousand people,” Narendra Singh, district immunisation officer, told *Gaon Connection*. He feared that this might impact the momentum of people turning up.

awareness on Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) and Japanese Encephalitis (JE). The war cry was “*Darwaja Khatkhatao, AES aur JE ko Bhagao*” [Knock the door and drive out AES and JE].

DASTAK was hugely effective. According to a government report, the AES mortality rate dropped from 24.76 per cent in 2005 to 8 per cent in 2021.

DASTAK campaign offered a blueprint for the COVID vaccination campaign.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

In February 2018, Uttar Pradesh government launched a massive door to door campaign called DASTAK, to raise



STORY 37

MAYA VISHWAKARMA'S TELEMEDICINE CENTRE IN RURAL MADHYA PRADESH

At a time when inadequate health facilities in rural areas are struggling to cope with the second wave of the COVID 19 pandemic, Maya Vishwakarma from Narsinghpur district in Madhya Pradesh, runs a 10-bed healthcare centre out of her home.

Arvind Shukla



Rural India was spared, relatively speaking, when the first wave of the COVID19 pandemic hit the country. But the second wave has been unsparing as it has engulfed village after village.

“At first it was just a couple of cases of fever. But soon almost every household had three to four people ill in it,” Maya Vishwakarma, told *Gaon Connection*.

Her village, Mehragaon, in Narsinghpur district in Madhya Pradesh, bordering Raisen and Hoshangabad districts, lies 100 kilometres away from the district’s largest government hospital, she said. “The PHC [Primary Health Centre] that is at least 15 kms away, has neither medicines nor doctors to dispense them,” she said.

The gravity of the situation pushed Vishwakarma, who is the founder of non-

profit Sukarma Foundation, into doing something about it and, in March 2021, she put 10 beds in her own home and opened a small facility right there for preliminary treatment of fevers, colds and coughs.

“The big hospitals had neither beds nor enough doctors. I realised that many of the cases in the villages were still mild, and with timely medical intervention, they could be treated,” Vishwakarma said.

While Vishwakarma is not a doctor herself, she was a research fellow in nuclear medicine, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

Vishwakarma, who has lived for many years in the United States (her husband still works there), said it was her dream to serve the village where she was born.

"My village has no health facilities at all. The closest PHC is fifteen kilometres away," There have been several instances while patients have died before reaching a medical facility, she added.

At the 10-bedded healthcare centre, Vishwakarma continues to receive patients without charging any fee. "Barring the cost of a few medicines, we do not take any money," she said. "Mostly adivasis frequent my hospital and I did not want them to hesitate coming here just because they have no money," she explained.

Ganesh Namdeo from SaasBahu Banskheda village, 20 kilometres away, is one such beneficiary. "My wife Aarti developed a fever and I brought her here to Mehragaon," he told *Gaon Connection*.

She was administered glucose, given an injection and kept under observation for a while before she was discharged, he said. He was charged only Rs 300 for the medicines that were given to Aarti there and to be taken at home, he explained.

TELE-MEDICINE CENTRE

Before setting up the 10-bed healthcare centre in March 2021, about one and a half years ago, Vishwakarma set up a tele-medicine centre in her village to provide basic health facilities to the people of her village and those nearby.

Viswakarma set up a tele-medicine centre in her village to provide basic health facilities to the people of her village and those nearby.

But when symptoms of fevers, colds and coughs began showing up in the second wave of the pandemic, she decided to use her resources and offer basic treatment to the village inhabitants at a time no hospital or doctors were available to them.

"I already had oximeters and basic medication; along with two nurses I told people how to self isolate, and just regular and timely monitoring of the oxygen levels and temperature helped them a lot," she said. She also organised an oxygen concentrator at the centre.

Since 2016, Vishwakarma has been running Sukarma Foundation that deals with women's health and hygiene. When the second wave of the pandemic began and with it the fevers, along with volunteers from the foundation, she began to work in the villages, spreading awareness and urging people to report fevers, colds and coughs.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Vishwakarma and her team of 10 volunteers had helped the migrant workers who were

returning home to their villages. They distributed free rations and extended all the help they could to them.

"I developed a strong network in the villages which came in handy this year. We were kept informed of households which had family members complaining of fevers, etc," Vishwakarma explained.

"My healthcare centre has equipment to administer drips to patients, provide them with steaming facilities, and so far many people have found relief," she claimed.

Vishwakarma, through her telemedicine centre, has provided medical consultation to the patients who come there. "I also have doctor friends who are on call to provide help in emergencies," she informed *Gaon Connection*.

So far the initiative of setting up the hospital and running it has been funded by Sukarma Foundation and her well wishers.

"We have worked hard in the last two months and our effort is to ensure no one falls sick and if they do, they are treated quickly, and they need not travel great distances to get themselves looked at," Vishwakarma said. "If people did not hide their



symptoms [of COVID] and got treated early enough, most of them would recover," she concluded.





STORY 38

TRIBAL WOMEN IN CHHATTISGARH, THE TRUE CORONA WARRIORS

From making masks and PPE kits to being frontline health workers, Bank Sakhis and anganwadi workers, women in Chhattisgarh are in the forefront.

Neeraja Kudrimoti



The COVID-19 response in Chhattisgarh has largely rested on the shoulders of women. They have worked as frontline health workers, have engaged in mass production of Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs), ensured that the people, even in the remote locations, have access to financial services, made sure the children in the rural areas got their quota of nutrition, and have played an active role in strictly imposing the lockdown.

HEALTH

The frontline workers of the department of health are all women. The Aspirational Districts of Chhattisgarh – Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur, Rajnandgaon, Sukma – have approximately 1,300 Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and 17,000 Mitans, serving a population of 5,750,063.

The responsibilities of this group of workers increased manifold due to COVID-19.

Given the dearth of doctors in this region, it was these Frontline Workers (FLW) who provided primary health care to the communities. They built awareness in the communities, monitored symptoms, conducted contact tracing and supplied essential medicines. They are ensured post and ante-natal care, immunisation and institutional deliveries.

The FLWs work under extremely challenging situations. They are part of the Gram Panchayat Surveillance Teams and monitored the quarantine/ isolation of migrant labourers.

As was reported by an ANM worker from the Dantewada district: "The spread of fear is more than the actual disease and we are working on it. People now proactively use

gamchha to cover their nose and mouth and also have created roadblocks for barring entry of migrants.”

MAKING PPES

As the pandemic broke out, the demand for PPEs-like masks, soaps and sanitisers skyrocketed. As a result of the lockdown, the state had to look for a localised production and procurement of PPEs.

One way to locally produce and procure was to involve the women collectives across the state by the Chhattisgarh State Rural Livelihood Mission. There were approximately 45,679 SHGs and 505,313 Self Help Groups (SHG) members in the Naxal-affected aspirational districts.

The SHGs began to make three-layered masks, soaps and sanitisers. Some 592 SHGs and 1,686 women members were engaged in mask production in the Aspirational Districts. These members have produced more than 6.5 lakh masks at a unit rate of Rs 8 and sold some 5.7 lakh masks at a unit rate of Rs 10-15.

A member of the Maa Danteshwari SHG from Kondagaon district said, “There are 15 members in our SHG. The idea of producing masks locally was proposed by the Block Project Manager. We already had tailoring machines at home. We were provided the raw materials and were trained on making the masks. Now each

“There are 15 members in our SHG. We were provided the raw materials and were trained on making the masks. Now each member can produce around 50-60 masks in a day. We have produced

member can produce around 50-60 masks in a day. We have produced more than 20,000 masks.”

These products are procured by the Nagar Panchayats, Janpad Panchayat, Police Department, Panchayat Surveillance Teams, Gram Panchayats and Forest Department to be used for their frontline workers.

The SHGs are appreciative of the opportunity. An SHG member in Kondagaon district said: “We would now like to take up bigger tailoring projects like school uniforms and the suits for patients being admitted to health facilities. We want to identify items that are currently procured from outside and develop a mechanism in which we can produce and sell them locally”.

FINANCIAL SERVICES

The Bank Sakhis enhance bank linkage. They open new accounts and undertake

the necessary documentation for those living in remote areas. They act as ATMs for cash withdrawals and perform the role of a Mobile unit (Digi Pay) for money deposit and withdrawal.

During the lockdown period, some 250 Bank Sakhis were active in the Aspirational Districts to provide financial services to people.

Bank Sakhis also disbursed payments from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), old age pensions and cash transactions related to the Rs 1,500 transferred by the government into the Jan Dhan account of women.



NUTRITION

The Aspirational Districts have approximately 7,776 anganwadi centres (AWCs). From March 24, 2020, all the AWCs were shut down with immediate effect. A huge nutritional setback was expected.

But the state government was committed to minimise the setback and so were these women on the frontline. So different aspirational districts tried to ensure that nutrition continued.

In Bijapur, a centralised district-level procurement of dry ration from markets was undertaken and the ration was then

transported to the Child Development Project Officer level centres. From there, the sector supervisors distributed these items to the AWCs. The AWWs distributed these to the households. Community volunteers also helped these women in distributing the food items.

In Bastar, the AWWs were involved in packing of dry ration, which included biscuits, rice, soybean, chana, oil, onion and potato. Special attention was given to the delivery at the doorstep for the pregnant women, severe/ moderate acute malnourished children, and lactating mothers through the Take-Home Ration programme.



AWWs and helpers built awareness among the community about disease prevention, home quarantine, common symptoms, and promotion of safe hygiene practices. They were also the first point of information for reporting suspect cases.

“Nutrition is our responsibility. Even now we are doing home visits to monitor weight and height of children and for counselling of pregnant women and lactating mothers. We walk on foot everyday with weighing machines and registers. Home delivery of ration has been one of the key reasons why people continue to stay at home,” shared an anganwadi worker from Bastar.

POLICE

In the aspirational districts of Chhattisgarh, some 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the police workforce is women. It is a complex role, especially for a woman. They have to be humane, yet firmly deal with the cases of violations of the prohibitory orders, hiding of travel history and non-adherence with the quarantine protocols.

Neeraja currently works as the State Programme Officer for the Aspirational Districts Programme in Chhattisgarh.



STORY 39

CHAMPIONS OF NUTRITION

The female foot soldiers of a nutrition project in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, are finding autonomy, mobility and financial security while helping mothers raise healthy children.

Syed Saad Ahmed



Mamta Sevak grew up in Mumbai, but moved to Khadagda village in Dungarpur district after marriage. The village falls in Rajasthan's Vagad region, bordering Gujarat.

In November 2020, she landed a job as a nutrition counsellor, at the age of 37. She is a 'Poshan Champion'.

Sevak works with Project RajPusht which aims to reduce low birth weight and wasting (low weight for age) amongst children. This initiative is a collaboration between the Rajasthan government, Children's Investment Fund Foundation, IPE Global, and various grassroots organisations.

The Poshan Champions counsel parents, and family members regarding diet, supplements, pregnancy care,

breastfeeding, institutional deliveries and how to fulfil the nutritional needs of infants. They also help women enroll in maternal cash transfer schemes.

Like Mamta, 27-year-old Sangeeta Nanoma, who completed her Bachelors of Arts in 2016 and was looking for a job is now working as a Poshan Champion. She is the sole earning member of her family, and supports her husband and in-laws with her monthly salary of Rs 11,000.

Vijaylaxmi Rawal who quit her school teaching job to raise her two children is now rejoining the workforce after 11 years, also as a Poshan Champion.

Mamta, Sangeeta and Vijaylaxmi ride their scooters into the dusty lanes of the state's villages to drive away malnutrition. They are also an example of financial

empowerment, autonomy and mobility of women in Rajasthan, a state still under the sway of the *ghoonghat* (veil) and other patriarchal practices.

CHAMPIONING NUTRITION

While RajPusht is operational in five districts of southern Rajasthan—Baran, Banswara, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh and Udaipur—Dungarpur stands out.

Thirty-five of the 42 Poshan Champions here are women, which is remarkable considering the much lower proportion of female nutrition champions in other districts.

“If we are working for women, our workers should also be women. Women might not be comfortable discussing pregnancy and breastfeeding with a man they don’t know,” said Devilal Vyas, founder of the People’s Education & Development Organisation, the grassroots partner of RajPusht in Dungarpur.

MIGRANTS, TEACHERS, SEEKERS

“Our family has five to six *bighas* of land where we grow wheat, corn and grams,” said Sangeeta. “We eat what we grow, but there isn’t enough to sell in the market.” While Dungarpur sees substantially more rainfall than the drier parts of Rajasthan, agriculture is not always rewarding.

59 per cent of rural households in Dungarpur district have one or more members as migrants — the third-highest among Rajasthan’s districts.

“There are not many job opportunities here either. Most people do a B.Ed. (Bachelors in Education) and become a teacher or they migrate to Gujarat or Kuwait for jobs,” Mamta Sevak said.

A study by the Aajeevika Bureau mentions that 59 per cent of rural households in Dungarpur district have one or more members as migrants — the third-highest among Rajasthan’s districts.

Most of the Poshan Champions have a Bachelors in Education, teach at a school or are preparing for REET—the Rajasthan Eligibility Examination for Teachers, which they must qualify to teach in government schools. The competition is tough and many spend years preparing for it. In this milieu, a steady income as a nutrition counsellor is a lucrative option.

PATHWAYS AND POTHOLES

“I find this work less stressful than teaching in a school,” said Mamta Sevak. However,

the job has its own set of challenges.

The first is mobility. “Public transport is patchy in Dungarpur. Sometimes, you have to wait for two to three hours to get a bus or a shared jeep,” said 35-year-old Nisha Singh Sisodiya, another Poshan Champion. A personal vehicle is thus a prerequisite for the job.

Many of the Poshan Champions are learning to drive a scooter so they can independently move around.

The hilly terrain of Dungarpur also presents a challenge. “In villages, houses are often scattered and not accessible by road, so we have to walk a lot. The neighbourhoods where adivasis live are outside the village. We have to cross deserted or forested areas to reach there,” explained Vijaylaxmi.

Sometimes when they reach their destination, they find the doors locked. Since migration is widespread in Dungarpur, women are often not at their given address.

PRIDE, PASSION, PATRIARCHY

The risks, however, come with rewards. Magan Nanoma, Sangeeta’s husband, said, “I am overjoyed that she found this job. We don’t have to go to Gujarat anymore to look for work. And staying in



Dungarpur gives me time to prepare for REET. I wake up at 3 am every day to study,” he said.

“My family often wonders why I’m doing this job (at my age),” said Krishna Bhavsar, 52, a mother of three. “At night, we sit together and I explain to them the



condition of women in villages and how that results in underweight infants. I tell them about the work I do and how I enjoy it. So they now see it as a kind of social service. I have to keep motivating my family along with the mothers,” she laughed.

Yogita Pandya, 35, has to contend with the disapproval of her in-laws. “They don’t like this job. I leave early, travel a lot and often return late. Since I’m out all day, they have to look after the children. Regardless, I plan to continue for the duration of the project,” she said.

Premlata Garg, a 37-year-old Poshan Champion, sums it up: “I always liked working in the field, explaining things to people, helping them. So, I am enjoying this job. I would recommend all women to work. We should be independent and not have to ask others for things we want.”





STORY 40

HELPING UNDERPRIVILEGED WOMEN IN J&K ACCESS SANITARY PADS

Peerzada Aaqib Nazar, an employee of the Srinagar Municipal Corporation and an engineer is making sanitary napkins accessible to the underprivileged women in Kashmir.

Irfan Amin Malik
Srinagar, J&K



Menstruation is still not spoken of openly in the Kashmir valley. It is something mothers and daughters may talk about in hushed tones at home, but women's health is rarely a topic for discussion even in schools and colleges.

But, a 28-year-old civil engineer from Rawalpura in Srinagar, brushed all that aside and established an organic and eco-friendly sanitary pad unit to promote safety alongside menstrual hygiene for women in the valley. Within a period of one year he has become a successful entrepreneur.

Peerzada Aaqib Nazar completed his B Tech from Chandigarh in 2016 and joined a multinational corporation in Dubai as a civil engineer. In April 2019 he returned to Kashmir and invested Rs 30 lakh in his eco-friendly sanitary pad packaging unit.

"It was during a casual conversation with a gynaecologist on a flight back home from Dubai that I learnt that the companies were using plastics and toxic chemicals in the sanitary napkins, which is one of the biggest reasons for cervical and ovarian cancer in Kashmir," Nazar told *Gaon Connection*.

Nazar was concerned enough to import eco-friendly organic pads from different countries and sell them under his brand name Seha (Arabic for health). These napkins are a hundred per cent cotton and organic. "I am offering six pads for forty-five rupees which girls from poor and rural areas can afford," said Nazar.

Each organic sanitary napkin is priced quite high, but because he ordered in bulk, he managed to source them at a fairly reasonable price, which allowed him to keep a small margin of profit, he explained.

"Seha sanitary napkins are made of cotton and bamboo pulp and are plastic free," explained Nazar. They are completely organic and he has the proper documentation for it. The cotton allows the skin to breathe and is comfortable. Importantly the material contains no bleach or any other chemicals that could cause cervical cancer or other distress to the women, he said.

He set up a unit in Srinagar to package the organic, imported sanitary pads. Currently eight employees are working with him. "My team packs around 1,000 boxes of napkins a day in a clean and hygienic way," he said, adding that the brand was available across Srinagar and other districts and were also supplied to other parts of the country.

During COVID-19, he supplied 700 boxes of sanitary napkins to female quarantined students in Srinagar district. Each box has six napkins.

According to Nazar, there is no provision for biomedical waste disposal in Kashmir, and menstrual waste is dumped indiscriminately, raising the concerns of health experts over environmental hazards.

Seha napkins were biodegradable and would decompose within 90 to 180 days, he added. Spreading awareness and

"Seha sanitary napkins are made of cotton and bamboo pulp and are plastic free. They are completely organic."

access to a biodegradable sanitary pad, Nazar hopes, will mitigate this problem.

Nazar is also working on a mobile phone App to help women keep track of their monthly cycles. "This app will help women keep track of their monthly cycles so that they can be well prepared," he said.

"The need of the hour is to remove shame which has been associated with women's period, childbirth, etc." he added.

REACHING OUT

Kashmir valley is in the grip of biting cold but 29-year-old Irfana Zargar is outdoors delivering free sanitary napkins to underprivileged women. When she lost her father seven years ago, she wanted to do something humanitarian as a tribute to him and began distributing sanitary pads to women in Srinagar and adjoining areas, who were poor.

Zargar is from Nowshera in Srinagar, in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, and has come to be known as the padwoman of Kashmir. In the past six months she has supplied 17 sanitary kits in 12 public toilets in Srinagar.

These contain sanitary pads, undergarments, sanitisers, hand washes, cloth pads, biodegradable pads, diapers and wet wipes that she buys and assembles into the kit. The cost of each kit is Rs 300.

Zargar's initiative is called 'Eva Safety Door'. "'Eva' means 'women' and 'safety door' refers to the fact that this is a door that opens to their safety," she explained.

According to Zargar, she has funded her project herself and with no help from any non-profit. "I am paying from my own pocket despite being a low-paid contractual employee at the Srinagar Municipal Corporation," Zargar told *Gaon Connection*.

Zargar said she chose to do this as, while there were many who helped the underprivileged with money, food and clothing, hardly anyone thought of sanitary napkins for the needy women. She felt only a woman would understand another woman's personal needs. She said nearly 50 per cent of what she earned went towards this cause.



During the COVID-19, many single mothers, widows and handicapped women with meagre or no source of income, approached her to get sanitary napkins. "Their financial problems doubled due to the COVID lockdown as for many of them, their sources of income stopped," said Zargar. The women continue to visit her home to pick up the napkins, she added.



Zargar admitted that during the lockdown, when the markets were shut and she did not get her salary on time, it was a struggle to continue with her mission, but she did so, but less actively.

Zargar has created accounts on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and had an email id where women could get in touch with her. She said she got most of the requests there. And, she visits people in their places of work or homes to deliver the napkins.

It is estimated that around 120 million menstruating adolescents in India experience menstrual dysfunctions that affect their normal daily chores. But only 36 per cent of its 355 million menstruating females use napkins.

According to a report by the nonprofit Dasra, every year, 23 million girls stop going to school as soon as they start menstruating.





STORY 41

'WOMEN'S COURTS' IN RURAL UP ADDRESS GENDER VIOLENCE

Naari Adalat prove to be a ray of hope for the victims of rape, harassment, dowry-related violence, property disputes, sexual abuse and other gender-based crimes against women.

Neetu Singh
Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh



Multiple cases of violence against women in the rural areas make their way into the headlines. To address the atrocities on women in a predominantly patriarchal society, 'Women's courts' have sprung up in parts of Uttar Pradesh, which are a female-centric set up that seek to counsel and assist women in dispute resolution and getting their grievances addressed by the government machinery.

In the pandemic, the system has proved to be a ray of hope for the victims of rape, harassment, dowry-related violence, property disputes, sexual abuse and other gender-based crimes against women.

Carrying her five-month-old infant in her arms, 30-year-old Arti 30 walked five kilometres on a hot summer day to seek the assistance of the women's court in Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh.

"My husband's brothers want to grab my land and torture me so that I give up my rights on the property. I had written an application to the officials but nothing happened," sobbed Arti.

Arti, who belongs to a Dalit community, lives in a village which is 40 kms away from the Sitapur district headquarters. She approached the women's court hoping her woes will be heard and resolved.

The women, who work as counsellors in the women's courts, listened patiently to her and assured her that she has come to the right place and that justice would be served.

There is no judge in these 'courts'. This set up counsels distressed women to raise their issues efficiently with other women who are not formally educated but have a

system and the provisions of the India Penal Code (IPC).

Their second biggest skill is their counselling ability and determination to raise the issue effectively before the concerned office.

To get the women's cases and issues resolved quickly and efficiently, even the police authorities sometimes seek their help. The volunteers in women's courts have been trained and educated by volunteers of *Mahila Samakhya* – a programme run by the Ministry of Women & Child Development. But at present, the scheme doesn't operate officially.

"*Naari Adalat* (women's courts) is a volunteer organisation. Due to lack of allocation of funds by the government, we had to cease our operations. But the programme is still being run by women without any support from the government," Smriti Singh, former planning director of *Mahila Samakhya*, Uttar Pradesh, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to Singh, there are 150 such courts in the state. "It is hard to tell if these courts are operating unhindered as there has not been a follow-up for the past one year. But I believe that these courts should be functional because I am aware of the enthusiasm of these women," she added.

Naari Adalat
(women's courts) is a
volunteer organisation.
There are 150 such
courts in Uttar Pradesh.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures for 2019 reveal that India registers 87 rape cases every day. That year 32,033 cases of rape were registered out of which 3,065 were in Uttar Pradesh alone which is roughly 10 per cent of the total caseload.

The *Mahila Samakhya* programme was started by the Central government in 11 states in 1989. In 2015, the Centre wrote a letter to the states notifying that the scheme has been wound up from its end and it is up to the states if they wish to continue it on their own.

In Uttar Pradesh, this programme was wound up in 2020 due to insufficient funds but such is the spirit of these women that they continue to operate on their own.





STORY 42

WOMEN IN BUNDELKHAND MAKE MASKS FOR THE BATTLE AGAINST COVID

Women belonging to various self-help groups are making masks which is earning them a livelihood besides giving them a feeling of doing something useful for society.

Arvind Singh Parmar

Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh



The Bundelkhand region, spread over 70,000 sq km in 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, is notorious for recurring droughts and distress migration. Employment opportunities are few and far between.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mask-making became an income-generating activity for rural women.

Bharat Mata Self-Help Group helps women in the region earn a living by teaching them sewing work. However, after the announcement of the nationwide lockdown, the work had come to a standstill.

The women's group had Rs 15,000 in its account. And it decided to stitch masks and distribute them.

"Initially, about 300 masks were distributed free of cost to the poor people in the village who belong to the Sahariya tribe. More than 200 masks were handed over to the development department officials," Rasika, the secretary of the Bharat Mata Self-Help Group, who lives in Silgan village, told *Gaon Connection*.

The district administration, under the Ajeevika Mission, was impressed and gave the task of making masks to 60 self-help groups in six blocks in the region. Rasika's self-help group was given the task of making a hundred masks at home, and a committee has been formed to monitor the same.

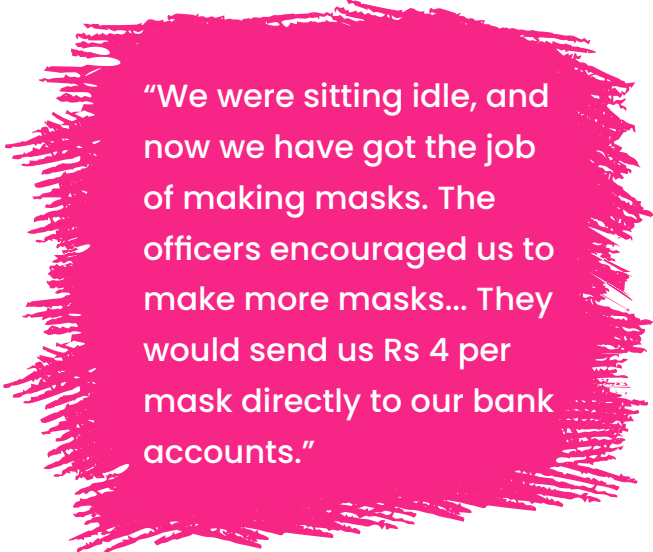
Rasika, and other women from the self-help group are ecstatic after receiving raw material from the administration to make masks.

"We were sitting idle, and now we have got the job of making masks. The officers encouraged us to make more masks and assured us that we wouldn't have to step out to sell and that they would buy the masks from us. They would send us Rs 4 per mask directly to our bank accounts," Rasika said.

It gave the women a feeling that they were doing something useful and worthwhile during the pandemic. Of course, they were also happy that they would earn some money from it.

"The corona crisis has led to an economic crisis for these women belonging to self-help groups. This way they will be able to get some financial help by making masks at home for which 3,800 metres of cloth has been provided to the groups. Now, two lakh masks are being made by the group. The money will be deposited in their accounts at the rate of Rs 4 per mask," Indramani Tripathi, Lalitpur's deputy commissioner, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Earlier, we were worried about managing our household. We are poor people and we survive on daily wages," Rani Pulaiya, 36, the head of Shankara Mata Self-Help Group, in Baansi village, 20 kms from Lalitpur, told *Gaon Connection*. But not anymore,



"We were sitting idle, and now we have got the job of making masks. The officers encouraged us to make more masks... They would send us Rs 4 per mask directly to our bank accounts."

since the administration has entrusted the task of sewing masks to their SHG.

"All the members are making masks in their own homes. It takes five to six minutes to make a mask," Pulaiya said.





STORY 43

ASHA WORKERS IN THE SUNDARBANS PAID Rs 75 A DAY FOR POLIO DRIVES

On October 29, 2021, ASHA workers from the 19 districts of West Bengal turned out to register their protest against the meagre honorarium, unpaid COVID incentives, and no retirement benefits.

Subhajit Naskar and Sayantani Upadhaya

Baruipur (South 24 Parganas), West Bengal



Rafikun Neesha, an ASHA worker, held aloft a banner along with her fellow frontline health workers, in front of the Chief Medical Officer's office at Baruipur block in South 24 Parganas. The 45-year-old was there to protest against non-payment of incentives they were promised for over five months from June to October 2021.

Rafikun has been an ASHA worker for nearly 12 years at the sub centre of the Balban Primary Health Sub Centre, South 24 Parganas.

Rafikun is one of the 60,000 registered ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers in West Bengal, whose contribution to rural healthcare is invaluable, more so in the COVID19 pandemic.

At the national level, India has about one million ASHAs who form the backbone of our rural healthcare system. But, in the past year there have been sporadic protests in several parts of the country as they demanded a hike in their honorarium and the status of a government employee.

In West Bengal, ASHA workers protested outside the offices of the Chief Medical Officers of Health, which come under the state government's Department of Health and Family Welfare.

"ASHA workers are paid an honorarium of a mere Rs 4,500 a month. While they are promised incentives for a lot of the work they put in, the incentives rarely get paid to them on time," Ismat Ara Khatun, general secretary of the West Bengal Union of ASHA workers, told *Gaon Connection*.

ASHAs are not permanent employees of the government. They are paid a pittance for the work they do and receive very few or no benefits at all, such as pension, medical leave, holiday pay, medical insurance for COVID19, etc.

“And, as their payments are mostly incentive-based, their monthly income is irregular and fluctuates month to month,” Khatun explained.

“The state government promised the ASHAs an extra thousand rupees a month for their additional COVID-19 duties, which are yet to be paid,” Ismat Ara said.

The ASHAs who were part of the election duty from March 27 to April 29, 2021 that was held in eight phases during the pandemic, are also waiting for the Rs 670 they were promised for it, she added.

OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID

In March 2020, the Union Health Ministry tasked ASHAs across the country to survey the people in their communities/ villages to identify COVID-19 cases. They had to track coronavirus positive cases, arrange for the testing kits and if anyone was found positive, they had to ensure they were properly quarantined at home or escorted to the nearest COVID hospital.

“When ASHA workers could not organise community awareness programmes during the pandemic, because of lockdown and pandemic restrictions, deductions were made in their pay.”

The women health workers also raised community awareness about the pandemic and collected data.

When ASHA workers could not organise community awareness programmes during the pandemic, because of lockdown and pandemic restrictions, deductions were made in their pay, Ismat Ara alleged.

Pampa Naskar who works at Dhapa, which comes under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, said that the incentives they received for the kind of work they were expected to do, were dismal.

“We were given two hundred rupees to be shared amongst three of us, for the vaccination we administered. And, even that is not paid on time,” the 38-year-old told *Gaon Connection*.

RS 75 A DAY FOR POLIO DRIVE

These women frontline workers are part of every vaccine drive in the state. They are involved in schemes such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Nirmal Banglanto.

Recently a photograph of an ASHA worker administering a polio vaccine at Canning, a town in South 24 Parganas, went viral on social media. “She was giving the polio vaccine to a baby that lay in a big vessel in flooded Canning. We were paid Rs 75 a day for that door-to-door polio campaign,” Ismat Ara said.

“Sometimes we are asked to look for families not having toilets in their homes. Is this our work,” Firoza Begum, who worked under the Madarat PHC in South 24 Parganas, demanded to know. “And after all this, we are treated like nobody,” the 48-year-old ASHA worker told *Gaon Connection*.

ASHA workers said it was common that they went for hours without food or even toilet facilities when they were on duty. Mita Das from Joynagar, Block-1, added angrily that the nurses at the hospitals treated them very badly.



WOES OF URBAN HEALTH WORKERS

In the urban centres there are the Honorary Health Workers (HHW) who after training are elevated to the post of ASHA. Their woes are no different. They too are entrusted with administering vaccinations, etc, but are an underpaid and underappreciated work force.



“Living expenses have gone up, and I am finding it difficult to make ends meet,” Pratima Haldar, a retired HHW from Kolkata Municipal Corporation, told *Gaon Connection*. Pratima was the sole earning member of her family, and she said she received no monetary benefit when she retired.

When Chandrima Bhattacharya, the deputy minister of state, health and family welfare, West Bengal, was asked about the situation, she said she had no knowledge of the representation of the protesting ASHA workers. However, she was full of praise for the work they did during the pandemic.

“The chief minister and the principal secretary are very impressed with the work of the ASHA workforce during the COVID19 pandemic,” Ajay Chakraborty, a health officer, Swasthya Bhawan, Kolkata, told *Gaon Connection*. He made an assurance that the government would look after the demands of the ASHA workers.

Meanwhile, Subrata Roy Chowdhury, chief medical officer at the Kolkata Municipal Corporation said that in Kolkata most of the ASHA workers had received their dues. “In case there are some pending payments, they will be getting them soon,” he told *Gaon Connection*.





STORY 44

TO WAIT NINE MONTHS FOR THE PAYMENT OF RS 600 INCENTIVE FOR ONE DELIVERY

Meena Devi has looked after the well being of her fellow villagers in Kachura, Uttar Pradesh, for 15 years as an ASHA worker. No two days of work have ever been the same. And COVID19 duties have their own special challenges.

Mohit Shukla

Kachura (Sitapur), Uttar Pradesh



In the COVID-19 pandemic, while the rest of the world seems to have ground to a screeching halt, ASHA worker Meena Devi's responsibilities have increased manifold, and she works day and night to fulfil her duties.

Meena, a resident of Kachura village in Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh, is a part of over one million women community health workers in the country, known as Accredited Social Health Activists or ASHAs, instituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as a part of the National Rural Health Mission.

These frontline women workers are leading from the front as the country faces a massive second wave of the pandemic.

And being at the forefront of the workforce, especially in the times of the COVID-19 isn't easy. The job of an ASHA worker often

demands a lot more than providing healthcare support. It involves tact, diplomacy, sensitivity and a certain toughness to get the job done.

Meena, who is in her 40s, has to employ all the tact and diplomacy at her command to screen rural folks for corona symptoms, convince them for testing, do contact tracing and house-to-house survey, apart from the regular work of monitoring other health activities in the village, including institutional deliveries of pregnant women in the raging pandemic.

Her village Kachura, about 120 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow, has a population of about 2,000 people.

"These days there is a constant sense of dread at all the untimely deaths I see around me. But I do not have the luxury to sit and brood," said Meena who had been

on the job for 15 years since 2006.

A BUMPY PATH

Meena's day begins at 5 am. "I have to wake up early to cook, clean and feed my family," she told *Gaon Connection*. She has three grown up children. Meena's husband is a farmer. By 9 am, she finishes her household chores, and departs to the village for her day's work.

Each day is different, the ASHA worker said, and sometimes fraught with tension, especially now in the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I have to persuade people to get screened or vaccinated, accompany them to get their job, distribute medicines, and sometimes stick isolation posters on homes where someone has tested positive," she explained. This last task often led to unpleasantness. "The home owners often protest and fight when we do this," she said.

Besides the COVID duties she also has to attend to the other calls she gets, like accompanying a woman to the hospital for her delivery, and so on.

HARD LABOUR AND NO FIXED INCOME

Despite putting in seven to eight or even more hours of work a day, Meena said she

Each day is different for the ASHA worker, and sometimes fraught with tension, especially now in the COVID-19 pandemic.

had no fixed monthly income. "I have to wait for nine months to get six hundred rupees for each delivery. In some months there may be four to five deliveries, in others not even one," she said.

The pandemic had added to her work burden and that of all the one million ASHAs in the country. However, in the raging second wave of the pandemic, these frontline women workers are working without property safety gear and rightful remuneration. "I have to visit at least ten houses in a day in order to be eligible for the honorarium," Meena added.

Last year, the central government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package Insurance scheme for all healthcare workers including ASHAs engaged in COVID19 response. The insurance scheme provides a life insurance cover of Rs 50 lakhs [Rs 5 million] in case of death due to the coronavirus. However, many ASHAs complain that they haven't received the COVID incentive for almost a year now.

YET TO RECEIVE THE INCENTIVE

“The health department has announced a mere thousand rupees a month as incentive for ASHA workers. But it has not given us anything for our protection, no masks, no face shields nor sanitisers,” Meena complained.

While the announcement of Rs 1,000 has been made, they have received nothing yet, said Meena. Last year, she got Rs 5,000 as incentive for five months, between March and July, 2020. While the honorarium of Rs 1,000 has been sanctioned for six months to the ASHA workers since April 2021, Meena Devi is yet to get that money in hand.

Villagers acknowledge the hard labour put in by Meena in these difficult times. “An ASHA worker is of great value to the village,” Kusum Bajpai, gram pradhan of Kachura village, told *Gaon Connection*.

“Whether it is to spread awareness about health and hygiene, or go door to door conveying health-related announcements, spearhead vaccination drives, or help out during deliveries, or organise health check ups for women, an ASHA worker has a very important role to play,” Bajpai added.

Meena smiled as she said: “The very same people who talked behind my back when I decided to work as an ASHA, now

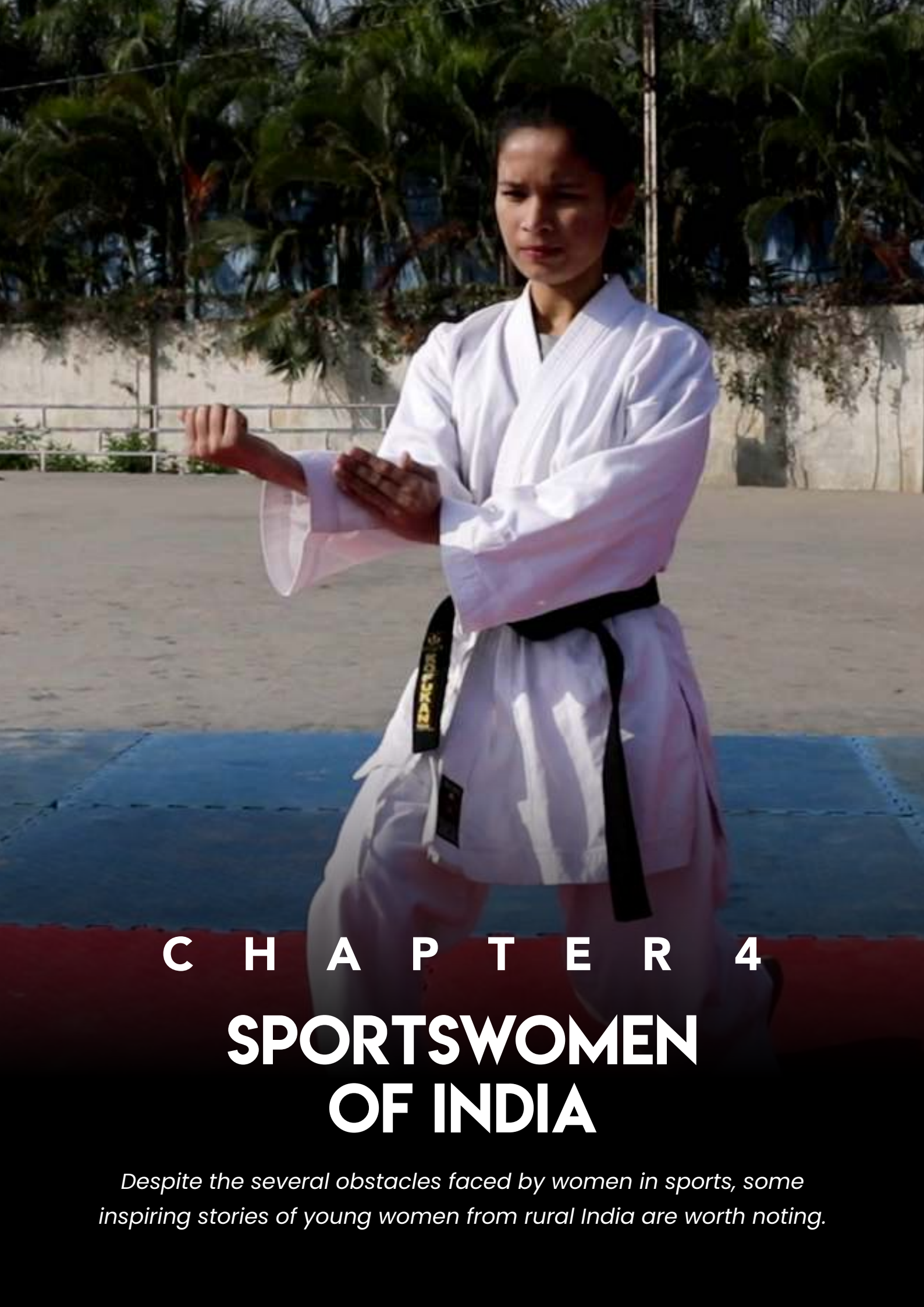


approach me for advice if there is a medical problem at home. I never hold back in helping them out,” she said.

And as Meena Devi does the rounds of her village, discharges her health-related services to the people of Kachura, and returns home, it is almost sunset.

“I get home, bathe, cook the evening meal for my husband and children, eat, and only then go to bed,” she said. But sometimes, her day does not quite end with that. “I get called when someone’s labour pains begin at midnight and I have to be by her side, no matter what time of the day or night it is,” she concluded.





C H A P T E R 4

SPORTSWOMEN OF INDIA

Despite the several obstacles faced by women in sports, some inspiring stories of young women from rural India are worth noting.

The Government of India regards sports as an important part of human resource development.¹ According to the central government's Department of Sports, sports development is regarded as an important national issue.²

Sports activities are beneficial for promoting a healthy lifestyle and child and youth development.³ Additionally, sports also promotes peace and inclusiveness and creates employment opportunities within the country.⁴ Sports also creates a sense of belonging and inculcates a sense of national pride.⁵

The Government of India has drafted National Sports Policies that promote good governance in the development and management of the sports sector in India.⁶ These policies are aligned with Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance of Olympic and Sports.⁷

The National Sports Policies address several issues related to regulation of sports in public and national interest.⁸ These issues include protection of sportspersons' rights, prevent child abuse and sexual harassment, maintain gender equality and prevent discrimination in sports.⁹

The sports ministry has designed policies to promote professional management including financial accountability in sports, address anti-trust and

competition-related issues and regulation of pricing of events and broadcasting rights.¹⁰

Additionally, the Government of India has established several National Sports Federations (NSF) that promote specific sports and sports disciplines.¹¹ These federations function as an autonomous body performing functions that include selection of national teams and representation of the country in international competitions.¹²

The NSF is chiefly responsible for managing, regulating, promotion and development of sports in accordance with international guidelines.¹³

The Sports Authority of India (SAI) is responsible for promotion of sports, setting up required infrastructure and facilities and training and coaching of sportspersons.¹⁴ SAI also provides funds to NSF for the specific purposes which are approved by the government of India.¹⁵

WOMEN IN SPORTS

In the past two decades, participation of Indian women in sports has seen an upward trend at a national and international level, according to the *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*.¹⁶ However, sports is a sector where gender disparity can be evidenced as stated by

At the Tokyo Olympics held in 2020, the gender ratio of the number of athletes has been noted to be 56 men and 44 female as per a report by Price water house Coopers Private Limited (PwC).¹⁸ Out of the seven medals won by India, three medals were won by Indian sportswomen in Tokyo 2020 Olympics.¹⁹ These seven medals were won in hockey, wrestling, boxing, badminton, weightlifting, and track and field.²⁰

BBC reports that 42 per cent of men as against 29 per cent of women in India are engaged in sports.²¹ People within the age group of 15 to 24 years were the most active in sports.²²

OBSTACLES FACED BY INDIAN SPORTSWOMEN

A study by the Bhartiya Stree Shakti lists several reasons for the underrepresentation of women in sports in India.²³ Sports has become a site of gender struggle since the traditional conception of athleticism is associated with masculinity.²⁴

Women are perceived as being inferior to men in their physical abilities and ability to perform in competitive sports.²⁵ This gender bias leads to the exclusion of women from sports.²⁶

Women are perceived as being inferior to men in their physical abilities and ability to perform in competitive sports. This gender bias leads to the exclusion of women from sports.

British Journal of Sports Medicine states that the issues of deep rooted patriarchy in society hinders women from entering the world of sports.²⁷ Customs and traditions in India confine women to the roles of motherhood and caretaker within the family.²⁸ More often than men, women have to overcome the lack of encouragement and support from family and friends before they can take up a career in sports.²⁹

Media reinforces this stereotype through the imbalanced news coverage about male and female sportspersons.³⁰ Only 10 per cent of the sports news was dedicated towards covering female athletes.³¹ Additionally, sportsmen are portrayed as strong and competitive while sportswomen are represented as being feminine and attractive in the news media coverage.³²

The perception of male superiority dominates the field of sports.³³ Women are underrepresented in leadership

positions such as coaches, supervisors and administrative positions of power.³⁴ Male coaches are often assigned to female teams however, vice versa does not hold true due to the gendered assumption that males naturally have leadership qualities.³⁵

Sportswomen in India often face practical difficulties due to the lack of access to sports facilities and training equipment, and often lack the economic means to bear sports related expenses such as clothes, food supplements, travel and medical expenses and hiring specialised coaching.³⁶

Women are considerably more susceptible to sexual harassment than their male counterparts.³⁷ In addition to this, the institutional barriers such as lack of access to established networks, limited provision of scholarships and gender biases in sports recruitment further refrain women from continuing their career in sports.³⁸

The COVID-19 had an unprecedented impact on Indian sports.³⁹ A study by PwC estimates that the sports sector will grow at 3.3 per cent as against the expected growth of 8 per cent during the next 3-5 years in post-pandemic times.⁴⁰

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic also severely affected the revenue generated by the sports industry, according to a study.⁴¹



BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Despite the several obstacles faced by Indian women in sports, some inspiring stories can be worth noting.⁴²

Indian archer Deepika Kumari had to practice archery using homemade equipment and using raw mangoes as targets before she could participate in the Olympics.⁴³

Known as India's golden girl, badminton champion PV Sindhu has won several

medals at the national and international level including the Olympic Silver and Bronze.⁴⁶ In her early years, she had to travel 60 km everyday in order to reach the place of training.⁴⁴

Indian boxer Mary Kom has won eight world championships medals while being a mother to twins.⁴⁵

Bhavana Devi, the first female fencer of India had to practice with bamboo sticks before she could win at the Tokyo Olympics.⁴⁶

Aditi Ashok aged 23 years old was the only Indian golfer at Tokyo 2020 Olympics.⁴⁷ Manu Bhaker was the youngest Indian shooter to represent India at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and has also won medals at the Commonwealth Games.⁴⁸

This chapter of the book presents stories of young women from rural India who have made a mark in the world of sports.



- The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the sports industry and slowed down its growth to 3.5% as against the estimated 8%, according to PwC.
- Only 10% of the sports news was dedicated towards covering female athletes, according to Bhartiya Stree Shakti.
- At the Tokyo Olympics held in 2020, 44 women and 56 men represented India, as per a report by PwC.
- Out of the seven medals won by India in Tokyo 2020 Olympics, three medals were won by Indian sportswomen.



STORY 45

TOO POOR TO AFFORD SHOES, GOLD MEDALIST SUPRITI KACHHAP PRACTISED BAREFOOT

Supriti Kachhap, from the Oraon tribe in Jharkhand, lost her father when she was eight months old, and her mother, a daily wager, brought her and her siblings up. Supriti won a gold medal at the Khelo India Youth Games in Panchkula.

Manoj Choudhury



On June 12, the nondescript Buruhu village in Gumla district of Jharkhand erupted into song and dance as people proudly welcomed home 19-year-old Supriti Kachhap – who won a gold medal at the Khelo India Youth Games in Panchkula, Haryana.

Supriti, who belongs to the Oraon tribe, despite odds made Jharkhand proud. Fatherless and from a very poor family, she set a record of nine minutes 46.14 seconds in the girls' 3,000 metre race in under-21 category.

Supriti is the youngest of five siblings (three sisters and two brothers). Her mother Balmati Oraon, worked as a 'reja' (an unskilled daily wage worker) to raise her kids.

"My mother couldn't afford to buy me sports shoes. However, that did not stop

me from practising barefoot, until I joined St Patrick's School in Gumla," Supriti told *Gaon Connection*. "There I was provided sports shoes to wear only during practice. I had to return them to the department after that," she added.

"We are so pleased that the girl of our block has done well at the athletic championship. We are looking forward to her performance in the upcoming world athletics events," Vishnudev Kachhap, block development officer (BDO) of Ghaghra block in Gumla told *Gaon Connection*.

EARLY YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Supriti's father, Ramsewak Oraon, a medical practitioner at his Buruhu village, was killed by suspected Maoists and his body was found the next morning. She was only eight months old then.

"It was difficult for me to survive, but I decided to fight it out to feed my five kids – Sushanti, Sukhshanti and Supriti, Sandeep and Kuldeep," Balmati told *Gaon Connection*.

Under the state government's policy, a family member of a victim of a Naxal attack is eligible for a government job. Balmati got a fourth grade job at the Ghaghra block development office in 2004.

It improved the family's financial status a little bit, as she got a small house in the block headquarter to live in. Later, she got her children admitted to a local school.

It was at the Nukrudippa school ground in Chainpur (Gumla), that Supriti started running. The school paid attention to sports, and she got inspiration from senior students.

"I ate rice, dal and curry thrice a day at school, knowing it was not sufficient to improve my performance on the ground. However, I stuck on with will power," the gold medalist said.

A CHAMPION IS BORN

Her prospects brightened when Supriti proved her athletic skills at the inter school championship in Gumla in 2015, and caught the eye of the officials of

In 2021, Supriti won silver in 3,000 metre race at the National Junior Athletics Championship in Guwahati as well as bronze medals in 3,000 metre and 5,000 metre events at the Junior Federation Cup in Bhopal.

Jharkhand Sports Training Centre.

In 2018, Supriti got selected for SAI Middle and Long Distance Academy in Bhopal. She won the first national medal – a silver – in the 2,000 metre race at the national cross country championships in Mathura in 2019.

She won a bronze medal in the 3,000 metre race in the national junior athletics championship in Guntur the same year.

In 2021, she won silver in 3,000 metre race at the National Junior Athletics Championship in Guwahati as well as bronze medals in 3,000 metre and 5,000 metre events at the Junior Federation Cup in Bhopal.

The athlete completed the women's 5,000 metre race in the Federation Cup Senior Athletics Championships at Kozhikode, and qualified for the under-20 World Athletics Championship to be held in Colombia in August 2022.

"For improving girls' sports in the block, we pay special attention to conducting seasonal sports events at school, block and district level. Supriti was selected and identified by sports' authorities at such events," BDO Kachhap said.

The Khelo India gold medalist does not have a bathroom at home and has to bathe at a well. The district administration has promised to improve basic facilities in Supriti's Buruhu village.

The district administration assured her that they would provide water and bathroom facilities at her residence. The administration has informed Balmati that she would also get other benefits of various welfare schemes under the state government.

As Supriti's family does not own a television, they could not watch her performance and medal ceremony. It was Supriti who later phoned them up and informed them about her victory.

Supriti, who is in her second year of college said that she would complete her graduation as well as participate in sporting events.

She is hopeful that the state government will offer her a job so that she can support her family. "I need financial support to continue with my athletics journey. I want to make my nation proud," Supriti said.



"There should be playgrounds at all the *panchayats* to let the village students prove their skill. The government should pay close attention to regular sports events at village schools and also at the district and state level as budding stars can be identified at such events," she said.

The district administration has assured Supriti that a stadium will be set up in her village to promote sports activities among the local students.



STORY 46

CHANCHALA KUMARI WRESTLES HER WAY OUT OF POVERTY

The 14-year-old wrestler from Jharkhand's tribal community is set to become the first athlete from the state to represent India at the sub-junior world wrestling championship in Hungary.

Anand Dutta
Hatwal (Ranchi), Jharkhand



There's hope in the air at the quiet village of Hatwal, situated almost 30 kilometres from Jharkhand's capital Ranchi.

Chanchala Kumari's home has suddenly become the most prominent address in the village and a commotion of guests, well-wishers and reporters walk in continuously.

The 14-year-old tribal girl has been selected at the wrestling trials held in New Delhi on June 22, 2021, and is all set to represent India in the under-15, 40 kilogrammes category of the World Cadet Wrestling Championship which will be held in Hungary's capital Budapest from July 19 to July 25, 2021.

Chanchala's success is a pioneering achievement as she is the first wrestler from the state to represent India at an international event.

Kumari's mother Maino Devi, is visibly proud of her daughter. "I want her to earn name and fame and grow up to become successful and support us too," she told *Gaon Connection*.

"I want to win medals like Sakshi *didi*, Phogat *didi*," Chanchala chipped in. (Geeta Phogat and Sakshi Malik — the two national wrestling icons in India)

HUMBLE ORIGINS

Chanchala's family belongs to the adivasi community of Oraon, which is categorised as a Scheduled Tribe.

Her father Narendra Nath Pahan is a plumber but also works as a farm labourer to support his family of six — his wife, three daughters and a son. Chanchala is his youngest daughter.

"I am a farm labourer but also do plumbing work whenever I find any. I have a small patch of land (half an hectare) on which I grow some vegetables and rice that I sell in the market. The earnings are just enough for the family to survive," he told *Gaon Connection*.

"But I have ensured that all my children get education. Chanchala showed an interest in sports, so I supported her in this field as well," he added.

Chanchala is grateful to the hard work and sacrifices made by her parents in raising her and her siblings.

"My parents worked very hard, they still do. Seeing them struggle, I feel like doing something for them too," she said.

A SHERO'S WELCOME

On June 23, when Chanchala came back to Ranchi after being selected for the world championship, her family members, media, officials from the Jharkhand State Wrestling Association were present at the Ranchi junction railway station to welcome the 14-year-old and her coach Bablu Kumar. A band played music to add to the jubilation.

The budding athlete also met Chief Minister (CM) Hemant Soren who congratulated and thanked her for

Chanchala was 10 years old when she was selected to be trained as a wrestler under the Jharkhand State Sports Promotion Society.

bringing laurels to the state. He also assured her that all the expenses and technical support will be provided to her by the state government.

The Jharkhand CM also instructed the Secretary of the sports department Pooja Singhal to provide Chanchala with the resources needed.

Chanchala was 10 years old when she was selected to be trained as a wrestler under the Jharkhand State Sports Promotion Society – a state government scheme to identify sporting talent from the rural areas of the state. The organisation was launched by the government in 2016 by the then Chief Minister Raghubar Das.

Chanchala practises wrestling at the sports village (*khel gaon*) – a sport complex which came up in 2009 in Ranchi's Hotwar area.

Talking about her diet, Chanchala told *Gaon Connection* that she used to eat the simple vegetable-rice, or *maad bhaat* (boiled rice with starch) at home. "But ever since I started my training at the government centre, I have been on a nutritious diet there," she told *Gaon Connection*.

'GOVT'S SUPPORT HAS BEEN CRUCIAL'

Chanchala's coach Bablu Kumar told *Gaon Connection* that the Jharkhand State Sports Promotion Society's scheme has been crucial in recognising the sporting talents.

"I am proud of Chanchala. About eight-nine more players like her are in the fray to represent India at the international level. You will soon find more such players coming from Jharkhand," he told *Gaon Connection*.

Kushti me zyadatar Haryana ka hibolbala raha hai," said the coach. (Haryana has a monopoly on representing India at the world stage). "But now, Jharkhand is hopeful of doing that too. Chanchala's success is motivating for the sports community in the state," Kumar said.



"The children from the tribal farming communities are naturally fit. They have great stamina and are more suited for sports," he added.





STORY 47

THE INDIAN WOMEN'S HOCKEY TEAM HELPS THE POOR AMID THE LOCKDOWN

In a novel move, the Indian Women's Hockey Team is raising money through social media to help stranded migrant labourers.

Daya Sagar



In face of the looming crisis the COVID-19 lockdown has brought about, people from all walks of life are coming forward to help in anyway they can.

The Indian women's hockey team, led by Rani Rampal, is trying to raise funds through social media. In return for a minimum of Rs 100, the players will give a fitness challenge to the people through social media, especially Twitter.

Every day one female player will give a new challenge, including exercises such as lunges and squats to Spider-Man pushups and Pogo hops. The money collected by the people tagged in the challenge will be given to Uday Foundation, which provides ration and food to the poor.

On the very first day under the challenge, Captain Rani Rampal and her team

performed 500 skipping rope jumps and invited participants to do the same while on the second day they challenged them with pushups and dips.

The money raised under this initiative will be used to provide food, dry ration and medicines for migrant labourers and sick people living in slums. In addition, essential items such as sanitisers and soaps will also be provided to them.

"All of us are staying home and there is very little work to do. So, we thought that the online fitness challenge would be the best way to raise funds. This will also urge the people to be active and fit during the nationwide lockdown. Through this initiative, our goal is to raise enough money to feed at least 1,000 families," said Rampal.

The team's vice-captain and goalkeeper Savita Punia is also excited about her

captain's campaign. She said: "We will give a new and fun fitness challenge every day that can be done by anyone. Whoever accepts this challenge can donate Rs. 100 or more."

Savita sincerely hopes that people will support this noble cause. "We know what happens in poverty and deprivation. Most of the players in the Indian women's hockey team come from poor background. We have seen days when we have struggled to eat. But today when we have overcome all that we want to ensure that the poor have access to essential items such as food and sanitary kits," she said.

PEOPLE OFFERING SUPPORT

The Indian women's hockey team is getting the wide support of ministers, leaders, actors, sportspersons and common people. The Union Sports Minister, Kiren Rijiju, said that whether inside or outside the field, our team has given us a chance to feel proud of them. He also appealed to the people to participate in and cooperate with the fitness challenge.

Former Indian hockey captain and legendary hockey player Dhanraj Pillai also lauded the initiative of Rani Rampal and her team. He wrote on Twitter that he was proud of the girls and would request all the international players that he had

On the first day of the campaign by the Indian women's hockey team, Rs 1.5 lakh was raised.

played with, to participate in the campaign.

On the first day of the campaign, Rs 1.5 lakh was raised. Hockey India has also appealed to the people to participate in the campaign for the second day to meet the target of food ration for 1,000 families.





STORY 48

POONAM TIWARI, AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL WEIGHTLIFTER, COACHES VILLAGE GIRLS

Ever since the nation-wide COVID- 19 lockdown in March 2020, Poonam Tiwari has been coaching athletes from villages in and around Hardoi in Uttar Pradesh.

Neetu Singh
Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh



Poonam Tiwari, the 45-year-old weightlifter from Uttar Pradesh's Hardoi district, had to struggle throughout her journey, first as a weightlifter, then as a coach — training village athletes that won accolades at national and state level — with no support from the government.

The biggest achievement of her sporting career is her maiden experience at the international event — Asian Powerlifting Championship held in South Korea in 2002. She bagged a silver medal for the country.

Since then, for the past 19 years, she has doubled up as a coach and a referee in sports tournaments at national and sometimes international events.

Amongst the players coached by her, 23 have excelled in sports events at the national level and 24 have secured medals at the state level.

And, ever since the lockdown, Tiwari has been coaching athletes from villages in and around Hardoi. The coaching is free of cost as most of the athletes belong to poor families.

A GLIMPSE AT TIWARI'S TRAINING CAMP

Just a kilometre away from the Hardoi district headquarters, Tiwari awaits her trainees. Preparations are underway for a sporting event that is scheduled at Cooch Behar in West Bengal later that month.

“Women are not encouraged to take up sports in our village, especially women like me as I am mother to a four-year-old,” Sailja, who lives in a village 60 kms away from Hardoi, told *Gaon Connection*.

The 22-year-old is thrilled that for the first she has been given the opportunity to

participate at the national level. "My family has allowed me to come here for training because this same coach trained my niece who excelled at the national level. So they trust our coach," she said.

Palak Singh echoed Sailja's enthusiasm: "I have been coming to be coached by Poonam ma'am for the last five years. It is because of her training that I won my first gold medal at the national level... after I excelled at the sport, my elder sister, friend and my *maami* (maternal aunt) were also allowed to pursue sports," the 17-year-old told *Gaon Connection*.

Tiwari has been coaching at the Hardoi Sports Stadium for almost 18 years now. But the nationwide lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 disrupted her ad hoc arrangement at the stadium. "I have been training locals along a field outside my house," she said.

TIWARI'S JOURNEY AS AN ATHLETE

Tiwari was born into a middle-class family and had five siblings. "My father worked as a truck driver and the mother was a home-maker. I had to fund my education from the ninth standard itself," she told *Gaon Connection*.

"When I went to represent India at the Asian Powerlifting Championship in South

"When I went to represent India at the Asian Powerlifting Championship in South Korea in 2002, my father was admitted to a hospital with a heart-attack. Doctors said that he could pass away at any moment but he motivated me to go ahead."

Korea in 2002, my father was admitted to a hospital with a heart-attack. Doctors said that he could pass away at any moment but he motivated me to go ahead," she narrated.

"People in Hardoi crowd-funded to send me to South Korea to participate in the event. I went to the tournament with a dream to win it and get my father treated from the money I get at the championship," she added.

Tiwari also said that at the beginning of her career, she had no ambition of making it to the international level. "The financial condition of my family was in a shambles. I merely wanted to get a government job to support my family but my teachers encouraged me to take up sports," she added.

"The first job that I got was as an ad hoc coach at the Hardoi Sports Stadium in 2002. I was paid twelve hundred rupees per month back then. Before the lockdown in

the wake of the coronavirus pandemic was announced, I was receiving a salary of twenty five thousand rupees. I have always worked as an ad hoc coach,” she told *Gaon Connection*.

Tiwari is thankful to her father Rajdhar Mishra for her success. “He allowed me to pursue sports at a time when the girl child was given basic education and married off. He received the brunt of the conservative, patriarchal society for allowing his daughter to become an athlete,” she said.

Tiwari’s father passed away five years ago. He was himself a weightlifter. “Initially, he coached me as well. It is due to him that I managed to accomplish these things in life,” she told *Gaon Connection*.





STORY 49

RURAL GIRLS IN RAJASTHAN HOP, SKIP AND JUMP THEIR WAY TO SPORTING GLORY

In a small village in Hanumangarh, girls who were discouraged from even dreaming about higher education, are now winning medals and trophies.

Kumar Shyam
Hanumangarh, Rajasthan



It was a giant step for the girls of Baramsar village in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district when they traded their *salwar kameez* for sports jerseys and track pants. This did not happen overnight.

When Chandrapal Beniwal joined the government school in the village as a sports teacher six years ago, there was not a single girl participating in sporting events.

But things changed and girls from the Government Higher Secondary School at Baramsar have covered themselves, their school and the district laurels at the state level with glory.

In 2021, at the 26th district level football tournament held between October 20 and 23, the team from the Baramsar school was at the top of its game and

came first in the district.

Six of the team members have been selected to represent the district at the state level. They are Ritu, Nisha, Anusuya, Poonam, Kavita and Rukmani.

Another feather in the cap of the girl students of the Baramsar school was the selection of Ritu, Nisha, Anusuya and Nasreena to represent the district in athletics at the state level.

"When the girls of our school performed so well and returned with the trophy and medals won at the state's sports meet in the under-17 category, the village inhabitants greeted them with flowers and a band," the jubilant sports and physical instructor Beniwal, told *Gaon Connection*.

"This would have been unimaginable six years ago. The school didn't even have a

playing field and I took PT classes in a lane next to the school. And even there, there were hardly any girls in the class," he recalled.

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Baramsar lies about 400 kms away from the state capital Jaipur. It borders both Haryana and Punjab, and six years ago, when Beniwal arrived here, no girls took part in sporting activities.

Girls in the village couldn't dream of either sports or even higher education. Their outdoor activity was limited to playing with their siblings at their doorsteps.

But Beniwal brought about change. "In my first year here, I remember one girl being selected for the under-17 football team. But her family flatly refused to let her go. We had to work hard to persuade the family," Beniwal said.

Gradually, things began to change. One of the village inhabitants allowed the school to use his empty plot of land as a playground and sporting equipment was bought with the help of state support and that of some generous villagers.

"Now, when we begin the selection and training for competitions, of the hundred children who turn up, more than sixty are girls," said Beniwal.

"Now, when we begin the selection and training for competitions, of the hundred children who turn up, more than sixty are girls."

"Thanks to Beniwal Sir we have been able to take part in sports and do well in them," Ritu, who has since participated in several events, told *Gaon Connection*. Ritu took part in the district level athletics meet in 2017-18 and won third place. She also took part in the 62nd State Level Athletics Meet in the 200 metre run event.

THE GIRLS SHINE

For the first time the school participated in the 22nd district athletics meet held in 2016-17, and in that very year, Maya Godara, a class seven student of the school won first place in the under-14 long jump event.

That was the turning point. In 2018-19, at the 24th district level kabaddi tournament, a team of 14-year-old girls from the school played.

Nasreena, a student of class eight showed her mettle and won an opportunity to

represent the district at the 63rd State Level tournament and was part of the winning team. Nasreena also excelled in the high jump event at the district athletics meet and qualified to represent the district at the state level.

In the 26th District Level Sports Meet in 2021-22, the girls of Baramsar created history.

“My family would constantly worry about me going out to participate in these events, but they allowed me to go out there,” Nisha, who is an avid sportsperson, told *Gaon Connection*.

Beniwal on his part wants to see the girls of Barasmar shine not only in the district, state and national levels, but also internationally. He regretted that the village had no play ground where the children could train well.

“If the state authorities could step forward and help in setting up an infrastructure for sports and games, the students and I will do the rest of the hard work,” he said.





STORY 50

A YOUNG ATHLETE FROM THE PARDHI TRIBE BLAZES A TRAIL IN THE SPORTING ARENA

Neelam Pardhi has been a beacon of light for young girls in her Pardhi 'hunting' community by excelling in kabaddi sports and becoming a national athlete.

Arun Singh

Panna, Madhya Pradesh



There is confidence yet humility in the words of young Neelam Pardhi as she said, "*Samaaj me sudhaar aawe, sabse bada sapna sir yehi hai....*"

The 20-year-old wants to stop the practice of child marriage where girls as young as five years are married off. "I want them to study," she told *Gaon Connection*.

She herself is a national-level kabaddi player from a remote corner in Madhya Pradesh's Panna district, and is the first generation of her denotified Baheliya family which has had a chance to receive formal education.

Neelam passed her 12th standard with 78 per cent marks, and her successes at sports and academics have made her a local celebrity. She is an inspiration to hundreds of young girls from the Baheliya

community for whom Neelam didi showed the way.

THE PARDHI TRIBE

The Baheliya samaaj or hunter community is traditionally a forest-dwelling, hunter-gatherer community which was 'notified' by the colonial British government as a criminal tribe in 1871 under a racist law, the Criminal Tribes Act. It was a legislation that branded Indian people as generational criminals by the virtue of their birth in a specific tribe or a community.

After Independence, the government 'denotified' the Pardhi community along with 126 other communities and replaced the British Act with another legislation called the Habitual Offenders Act, 1952, that still classified them as 'habitual offenders'. This tag which in effect left hundreds of

communities at the mercy of the local law enforcement.

But when conservation efforts took off and Project Tiger came into being in 1973, the government introduced several initiatives to educate the younger generations of the Pardhi community to train them for occupations other than hunting.

The Pardhi Residential School was one such initiative. The school/ hostel facility gave Neelam her first brush with the outside world as she came out of Khamtara village which is situated almost 80 kilometres away from the district headquarters.

"I have been studying here ever since I was eight years old. I learned to write, read, mathematics, science, and sports. I feel that every child in my village should get a chance to experience this learning," she said.

SKILL-DEVELOPMENT FOR PARDHI COMMUNITY

Last Wilderness Foundation, a Mumbai-based non-profit has been organising skill-development programmes for the children from the Pardhi community for almost a decade.

"I have known Neelam Pardhi for the last ten years. We funded her education from

Last Wilderness Foundation, a Mumbai-based non-profit has been organising skill-development programmes for the children from the Pardhi community.

classes nine to twelve. She is the only child from the community who has excelled in sports. Neelam qualified for a training capsule at the Bhopal Sports Academy but her parents refused to send her away from Panna," Vidya Venkatesh, founder of the non-profit told *Gaon Connection*.

Neelam's father sells medicinal plants to earn a living while her mother sells cosmetic items — occupations that they have adopted after they stopped hunting about ten years back.

"My community members are coming out of the hunting profession as they don't like killing animals and there is a lot of stigma attached to it," she said.

"We barely manage to survive, and we somehow just manage to eat twice a day. I feel happy that my daughter is studying well, I just wish she finds a job soon," Ajmer Bai, Neelam's 52-year-old mother told *Gaon Connection*.

Neelam's father was once a skilled hunter. "We have lived a challenging life with little comfort. I feel happy as a father that Neelam won't have to face all those hardships we faced," Raketlaal Pardhi told *Gaon Connection*.

Neelam's coach Rahul Gurjar, was all praise for her. "I have coached many young athletes but Neelam's dedication is something truly rare. It's as if she wakes up every morning with a mission to do better in life. She has played at a national level event in Amravati, Maharashtra in 2019.

Not just Kabaddi, she is also an exceptional athlete skilled in football, discus throw, jumps, 100 metres sprint, and 200 metres sprint," Gurjar told *Gaon Connection*.

According to Gurjar, the unfortunate fact was that athletes like Neelam often do not meet their nutritional requirements. "If this girl gets the monthly diet which athletes of her calibre should ideally get, she will do wonders not only for her community but also for the country at large," he remarked.

The efforts of the officials at the Panna Tiger Reserve as well as people from some non-profits are bearing fruit. A small but significant section of the Pardhi population is entering the mainstream.



"We have launched a programme in collaboration with the Panna Tiger Reserve in which we train the young fellows to guide the tourists inside the forests. These trained professionals are called 'nature guides'. The trekking guide safaris are called 'Walk with the Pardhis' and at present we have trained a total of ten such guides," Indrajit Singh Bundela, field coordinator from the Last Wilderness Foundation told *Gaon Connection*.

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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 4

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