



# **WOMEN'S VOICES FROM FARMS**

Stories of survival  
and sustenance  
through the pandemic



**WOMEN'S VOICES FROM FARMS**

**Editing, Translation,**

**Cover Photos and Inside Design:**

Aanchal Kapur and Kriti Team

(Jagruti Singh and Saransh Bisht)

**Inside Photographs:**

Courtesy Story Authors

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Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM)

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Namdev SH

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## Call for media partnership for case studies/stories

We are looking for positive case studies/stories of resilient women farmers/collectives across the country who have dealt with the impact of the pandemic and lockdown in innovative ways. These would include women engaged in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock wage labour or similar such activities.

What are the kinds of solutions that they have come up with? Can these solutions be adopted or modified by others in times of crisis? If you know of any such stories, contact us via email/call (details given below) and we will send you the format we have in mind for covering your case story/study.

The writers shall be paid a flat fee of Rs. 10,000/- per story, which should be around 800-1000 words. Original photographs would be welcome. The focus of the story should be women farmers.

Time frame: Two months (July-August)

A total of 10 stories would be selected for a volume that would be published by MAKAAM in English and Hindi.

### CONTACT:

[mahilakisan.makaam@gmail.com](mailto:mahilakisan.makaam@gmail.com)

Gargie: 8668273469



## Preface

The Covid-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 brought with it unprecedented and life-changing challenges in the lives of millions of people in India. The first year of the pandemic brought with it a lockdown to life and livelihoods across the country. The most affected were the working class, the under-served, un-served and marginalised people of India. Women's work burdens increased with them taking care of multiple household responsibilities with children, men and elders being at home. Many organisations, networks and individuals came forward to

support communities with dry ration relief, cooked food, medicines and necessary medical support. But this was not enough. With limited access to food produce from markets, lack of work and regular incomes, several grassroots communities began to find local ways to sustain themselves, especially in rural India.

MAKAAM put out a call for case studies/ stories of resilient women farmers/collectives across the country, who were dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in innovative and sustainable ways.

The objective of this call was to collect stories of women engaged in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock, wage labour or similar activities, in terms of the solutions they found to cope with this crisis and thereby, share the successes with others to adapt or modify.

This compilation includes 17 stories that came in response to MAKAAAM's call, from 12 states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The stories were written between August and September 2021.

These stories introduce us to gutsy, innovative and hard working women farmers, who have, individually and/or collectively set up successful businesses in the sectors of agriculture, forestry and livestock. Women who have coped with, and innovated against the challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 induced lockdown and economic meltdown. Young and old women who have taken up local and sustainable initiatives that have given them secure and dignified livelihoods during the pandemic, along with food security for their communities and consumers. Many of these women were able to sustain themselves, support and fulfil community needs, from the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Even though some of their efforts were affected mid-way, when women had to prioritise the health of family

members affected by the corona virus, their spirit remained positive and inspiring.

We thank all 17 authors for contributing to this effort, by writing the stories of women from the ground. We acknowledge the editorial, translation and design work done by Aanchal Kapur and Kriti team members (Jagriti Singh and Saransh Bisht), who helped pull this together. Last, but not the least, we thank our team of Gargie Mangulkar, Seema Kulkarni, Soma KP and Usha Seethalakshmi for handholding this process of collating, editing and publishing the stories. The second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic affected the editorial and coordinating team, thus delaying this publication, however it is alive and a testimony to each and every woman's work in and off farmlands and fields. This publication is available in English and Hindi.

The quotable quotes of several women farmers presented in the stories reflect the diversity, the confidence, the knowledge and the skills of these rural women, holding their homes and farms, on their able and strong bodies. As these women farmers build-back and move forward with hope for sustainable livelihoods, MAKAAAM salutes their spirit of resilience, hard work and collective feminist energies.

**MAKAAAM**  
April 2022, India



## Contents

Preface .....	i
Introduction .....	1
• <b>An Eager Farmer @51 Arunachal Pradesh</b> , by Appu Gapak .....	4
• <b>Mahua Ladoos to Sustain Jharkhand</b> , by Dr Basavi Kiro .....	8
• <b>The Mushroom Lady of Barak Valley Assam</b> , by Sayantani Deb .....	11
• <b>Women Farmers on Wheels Odisha</b> , by Rakhi Ghosh.....	16
• <b>The Grain Bank Brigade Uttar Pradesh</b> , by Geetanjali Krishna .....	21
• <b>Nutri-Gardens for Sustenance West Bengal</b> , by Diwash Gahatraj.....	26
• <b>Chemical-Free Farming for Prosperity Himachal Pradesh</b> , by Rohit Parashar.....	31
• <b>Entrepreneurship for Sustainability Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha</b> , by Dr Rina Mukherjee.....	35
• <b>Scientist turns Farmer Jammu and Kashmir</b> , by Hirra Azmat.....	40
• <b>From Subsistence to Financial Independence Chattisgarh</b> , by Ruchika Dhruwey.....	44
• <b>Seeds of Empowerment Uttar Pradesh</b> , by Azeem Mirza.....	47
• <b>Water for Life Rajasthan</b> , by Madhav Sharma .....	52
• <b>Farming on a Border Village Jammu and Kashmir</b> , by Umar Manzoor Shah .....	56
• <b>Local Agricultural Revolution Maharashtra</b> , by Dev Kotak.....	60
• <b>Transformation on Tractors Rajasthan</b> by Babulal Naga.....	63
• <b>Indigenous Knowledge is Power Uttarakhand</b> , by Heera Rautela.....	68
• <b>Towards Collective Farming Manipur</b> , by Ninglun Hanghal .....	70
• <b>Bio-profiles of Authors</b> .....	75







## Introduction

Its over two years since the Covid-19 pandemic struck an unprecedented blow on the lives and livelihoods of millions of people across urban and rural India. Even while the Government of India has lifted the Disaster Preparedness Act and the restrictions therein to prevent and control the spread of Corona Virus, and people are getting back to a 'new normal', there are many stories to be told and heard. This booklet is one such effort, to share stories of women farmers from 12 states of India, holding the key to survival and sustenance in these times.

While we witnessed images and news of thousands of working people (especially men) migrating back from cities to their homes in villages due to lockdown and loss of employment at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic; the women in the villages became frontline warriors for meeting the needs of their families at home, and through their work in the sectors of agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock. With children and family members (men and elders) restricted to move outside of the home, not only did women's unpaid care work and household responsibilities increase;

but in-migration and lack of jobs for men, as well as limited access to food supplies, meant that the women made significant economic contributions as farmers and workers to meet the basic household needs.

Along with migration, unemployment and livelihood losses affecting people's lives across the country, this was also a time of a huge medical crisis with the corona virus spread. It is in these circumstances that we witnessed the stories of women farmers across villages in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and in Jammu and Kashmir where people were living an extended lockdown in the context of the conflict situation there.

### ***Women Farmers Rising...***

*Ploughing their fields to sow and grow food,*

*Doing unpaid care and productive work,  
Making kitchen gardens for home-grown nutrition,*

*Cultivating mushrooms and saving seeds,  
Rearing pigs and chicken,*

*Grazing cows and feeding families,  
Conserving indigenous knowledge and  
reviving local practices,*

*Digging wells and driving tractors,  
Managing decisions and incomes,*

*Innovating and finding solutions to  
survive and sustain,*

*Building and inspiring women's  
solidarities,*

*Women working and earning with  
dignity...*

*Leading with freedom and agency...*

*Women farmers claiming their identities...*

While we applaud and celebrate the leadership and work of women to claim their identities as farmers, and support themselves and their families in times of crisis, we need to reflect on the increasing work burdens of women. Not only are the women managing unpaid care work and productive labour for income, they are slowly also becoming primary earners of their families, while the men either migrate for work, support them in their businesses/ enterprises or do not work at all. We need to ask questions about labour sharing in the family. Is it her toil alone? How does family chip in? Who helps in other chores if the woman is out on the field? Is it her job alone? What are the costs to her well-being and health?

Tribal women in remote villages on plateaus, mountains and forest lands, live and work without their rightful share as Indian citizens, often surviving on their own or with the support of non-government organisations that reach them. Stories of landlessness, isolation and exclusion abound, even as the women labour hard to sustain lives and livelihoods. They are saving seeds, reviving traditional forms of farming, soil conservation, water sourcing; composting with natural resources and shunning chemical fertilizers; promoting organic and home-grown agriculture that provides local food security and surplus for the market. They are generating local food and incomes for themselves and their family members.

The role of external organisations, local panchayats and government in enabling women farmers to set up businesses, gain training and resource inputs, making market linkages and



building women's collectives has been equally crucial in what many of these women have achieved. It is however important to reflect on whether these organisations have enabled them to gain access to traditional rights and resources; whether they have made any effort in strengthening women's autonomy in what they produce or how they manage production and business as collectives. These aspects are integral to their recognition as farmers and as adivasi communities, and must be considered by the external players. There are also concerns around the long-term financial sustainability of women's businesses, especially since, in many cases, it is the support organisations that are absorbing the primary and large costs of inputs.

Lessons of resource viability and sustainability beyond external inputs, mitigation and adaptation to climate change and other natural, man-made or economic externalities emerge from these stories, for the future. And yet, it is women's determination and labour, connects with the soil and indigenous knowledge and their spirit of enterprise and collective work, which gives us these stories of resilience through the pandemic and beyond.

A [report](#) (2021) by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at the Azim

Premji University, estimates that more than 230 million Indians fell below the national minimum wage due to the Covid-19 crisis. Rising unemployment, food supply disruption, a downturn in international trade, etc.—fallouts of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to pose serious challenges to the already precarious state of food and nutritional security among the poor and marginalised in India.

Even as women and children continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the pandemic-accelerated health and food crisis, it is critical that the women farmers presented in this booklet are acknowledged and supported in their efforts to sustain their local initiatives and enterprises. Government support in terms of recognizing women's key roles as farmers is the foremost agenda, followed by technical training and access to agricultural inputs, market linkages as well as pricing support for their locally grown produce. The fact that women are leading an organic farming revolution also needs support, as an investment in the health of the soil, the environment and people.

***Aanchal Kapur***  
*Editor*





# AN EAGER FARMER@51

## NO IDLE TIME DURING THE PANDEMIC

Papum Pare district, Arunachal Pradesh



“When we grow our own vegetables,  
we can self-sustain through any crisis”

- Nangram Yaper,  
Arunachal Pradesh





This is the story of 51-year old Nangram Yaper of Rono Hills, which falls under the Doimukh circle of Papum Pare district in Arunachal Pradesh. An active and busy woman all her life, sitting idle was never Yaper's thing.

### **Kitchen gardening her way**

It's all about what one wants. 'How', comes secondary.

Staying at home during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, led Yaper to grow vegetables for her own consumption and in the process, she managed to self-sustain her family's basic food needs.

*"I came across various ideas about setting up kitchen gardens, while browsing online. Since the market had dried up during the pandemic and it had become too risky to bring things from outside, I thought about converting our terrace into a kitchen garden,"* she recalls, adding that she then shared the idea with her husband, who complied.

The only big challenge was bringing soil to the terrace, that too in large amounts. *"All of my family members, including my husband, helped in carrying the soil,"* says Yaper, who works as a peon at the Primary Health Centre (PHC), in the Rajiv Gandhi University (RGU) campus, Rono Hills.

Using everything from cement bags to flower pots and holders made of bamboo sticks to pot her plants, Yaper sowed different kinds of chilli, cabbage, mustard greens, cucumber and corn, to name a few, on her terrace kitchen garden. *"While my initial effort was to find a way to make my family self-sustain during these hard times, the production was bountiful,"* shares this mother of seven children.



While busy working on her terrace garden, Yaper would share snippets on Facebook and these drew the attention of many people. In awe of her efforts which were yielding great results, many people started approaching her to get ideas on how they could do the same. Some people who lived nearby even came to buy her abundant fresh produce. Yes, she had surplus beyond her family's needs!

*"My largest harvest has been that of cucumber, 50 kgs at one go,"* she says, beaming. Cucumber was among the first batch of plants that she had begun growing in March 2020, and it was harvested six months later, in September the same year.

Yaper grows three types of chillies on her terrace--Cayenne, Dalle and Ghost peppers. While she had a yield of 40



kgs of Cayenne in April 2021, both Dalle and Ghost peppers came close to 25 kgs each. *“While the market price for Ghost peppers was Rs 700 per kg, I sold it for only Rs 500 per kg,”* she says.

Once a flower enthusiast, Yaper says, *“Now I am totally into growing vegetables. Flowers are only for show, but growing our own vegetables means that we can self-sustain at all times. It also keeps our budget in check,”* she reasons, quickly adding that the only things that she now gets from the market are oil, onions and potatoes.

Yaper insists that her produce is all organic, as she only uses compost made of pig manure from her piggery farm.

### **Making a Pig rearing business**

Yaper runs a piggery farm in her compound, which she had started in 1991-92. What initially started just as an interest has grown into a piggery farm business today! *“I started with only five piglets. The next time I bought 10. Currently, we have about 80 pigs in total, including the newly born ones,”* she says.



Sharing her journey to becoming a full-fledged pig rearer, Yaper shares, *“It was not that I intended to come up with the piggery farm when I got the first piglets. However, soon I realised that, whether I take care of one piglet or more, the effort is always the same. That is how the herd kept growing and the piggery farm came up.”*

While most business owners had a tough time coping during the pandemic, it came as a blessing in disguise for Yaper. *“During the March and April 2020 lockdown, I sold a total of 90 pigs in the nearby RGU campus alone,”* she shares. Infact, this is the story of many small and local businesses across the country, as customers opened up to the idea of accessing farm fresh produce, with more confidence and ease than ever before.

Most of the pork meat sellers buy pigs from Yaper. *“Those who are interested in rearing pigs come to me for piglets,”* she says, adding that she has put the sale of pigs on hold for some time because it is breeding season.

Many pigs reportedly died of swine flu in 2020, but none from Yaper’s farm was infected by the virus. *“Not a single of my pigs died,”* she says proudly.

Starting with only five piglets way back in the 90s, today, Yaper has become an inspiration for people to follow. On the request of faculty members of the Karsingsa Central Pig Breeding Farm, Yaper addressed the participants during a pig rearing training in September 2019, about her experience in the field, and how she independently set up a piggery farm, without any government support. The trainees also visited her piggery

farm to witness her work first hand. *“Someone must have told them about me and my venture as they called me up and requested me to motivate the participants,”* she remembers. Infact, the training turned out to be a learning opportunity for her too, as she got a chance to attend veterinary medicine training after this exposure.

### **A Poultry farm that didn't take off**

Yaper is a quite a farmer and entrepreneur you can say. Seven years ago, she used to run a poultry farm and supplied chicken to various schools in the area. *“When my daughter was a student of St Thomas School, Doimukh, I supplied chicken for the school and the earnings worked as her school fees,”* she says laughing.

The bird flu scare in 2014 along with her husband's deteriorating health meant that Yaper could not give the required attention to the poultry farm and she had to close it down. With a tinge of regret she says, *“I have tried everything, though it has not always been a success.”*

### **The resilient one**

With her husband's recent Covid positive status which weakened his poor health further, Yaper was not able to take sufficient care of her terrace garden as well as when she began. But she isn't one to give up easily. *“I will continue growing my own vegetables on the terrace until we decide that we want to build another floor in the building,”* she says.

Speaking about the convenience of cooking fresh food for her family, Yaper shares, *“I don't have the hassle to think about stocking up on vegetables anymore, I can just climb up on the terrace, pluck some fresh veggies and cook them right away.”*

Yaper says that she wants to be an inspiration for women of all ages. *“Most of us sit idle when we don't have anything else to do. I just want to tell them that we should always try to do things that are productive. Start small and it will definitely grow.”*

Written by **Appu Gapak**








# MAHUA LADOOS TO SUSTAIN

## INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND NATURAL RESOURCES FOR LIVELIHOODS

**Jharkhand**

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 “I started with Mahua liquor, but stopped and started making edible products from Mahua flowers”

**- Puniya Khalkho**  
Jharkhand





**P**uniya Khalkho is a young mother of two children and lives in Sosai Maria Toli, a village in Mandar block, about 40 kms to the west of Ranchi, the state capital of Jharkhand.

Since March 2020, she has been appointed as *Puniyaisa Sahiya* (or 'health-friend'), by the state government, with the responsibility to go from door to door and provide any kind of health-related advice or aid to needy families or individuals. In her role of a 'Sahiya', Puniya has spent the last two years taking care of the health needs of women and children in her area, including taking pregnant women to the hospital, encouraging vaccination of children as well as Covid-19 support—door to door testing of people's oxygen levels and temperature. She also distributed albendazole for children, which is a deworming drug. Her efforts in ensuring that the villagers followed all the Covid-19 protocols kept Sosai Maria Toli and its people safe through the Covid-19 pandemic. Puniya Khalkho has particularly been of support to the families of 30 migrant workers who came back home (to a nearby village), from the cities where they worked, as a result of the Covid-19 lockdowns in the country—making regular checks on their health, particularly their safety from corona virus.

Puniya passed her matriculation with a second division in 2007. She was one among nine siblings and her parents were always trying to meet ends meet, as she grew up. Two of her sisters were duped by an agent when they went to work as domestic workers in Delhi. Puniya herself had also gone to work as a domestic worker in Patna a few years earlier, and then again, after her

matriculation, she went to Allahabad. In the case of both employers, she faced a lot of difficulties, was made to do all the work and not given proper food, so she returned back home.

Puniya is a hardworking woman. She begins her day early, with paddy chaffing, and then takes care of her farm, where she also grows vegetables like beans, cucumber, pechki, tomato, chilli etc. She has a very supportive husband. When they got married in 2009, they went to work as construction workers in Himachal Pradesh. They earned a good amount of money and spent it all on getting her brother-in-law married. Puniya has two children: a boy (in class III) and a girl (in LKG), who missed out on schooling during the pandemic as online classes did not make sense for such young children.

### **Empowering the women community**

Struggling to earn a decent living, it was in 2010, that Puniya learnt how to make mahua liquor. However, she never really liked making and selling liquor as she knew that it caused a lot of problems in people's family lives. She knew that, even if there wasn't enough to eat in a house, men would rather spend their money on buying liquor than on buying rice and grain for the family. After several years, one day, Puniya decided to give up this trade and began to make other edible items from mahua flowers.

Puniya says that there was no impact of Covid-19 in her Sosai Maria Toli, but everyone remained confined within their homes. Women and men who had been working as unskilled labour in brick kilns lost their jobs and it was a really difficult time for them financially.



Due to complete lockdown imposed in the country on March 24<sup>th</sup> 2020, it also became challenging for locals to collect the Mahua flower, a seasonal activity that is done in March and April every year. Mahua flowers are an important source of food and drink for the people in this region, but it was a 'lost season' for them in 2020. Only some villagers managed to venture out for mahua collection in remote villages, where the restrictions were lesser.

Meanwhile, Puniya Khalkho contacted Munda volunteers of Torang Trust and asked them to bring whatever Mahua they had. One of them, Ravindra Singh Munda, made the effort to travel 30 kms to their village, and brought 1000 kg of mahua via two rounds, on his motorcycle.

After getting the necessary permissions from the district administration, the mahua was taken to Mander village, where 10 women who were sitting at home jobless, were trained to start processing mahua flowers. They began to make mahua ladoos and cake, under the guidance of Puniya. She taught them how each Mahua flower first needs to be cleaned, unfolded and its 'jeera' taken out, so that the edible products made from it are tasty. The women earn Rs. 200 for cleaning five kgs of mahua, and this work has continued for over a year now. In the months of July to September, the women were engaged in the seasonal paddy cultivation work to add to their incomes.

As the phase-wise unlock began, a Bihar-based company gave Puniya a large order of mahua ladoos, and she and her team of women got busy in fulfilling this order. This company is promoting organic and natural food items and these ladoos's fit the bill.

### **Opportunity in disguise**

Puniya says that the Covid-19 lockdown became an opportunity in disguise for her to get sufficient quantities of mahua flowers processed, because of the 'extra' time that the women in her village had at hand. She is now able to regularly supply mahua ladoos's and cake when the demand comes from consumers. Puniya has been able to support 20 women since July 2020, and even though this number may seem small, it has helped their families survive the economic stress caused due to lockdowns.

*Written by **Dr. Basavi Kiro***







# THE MUSHROOM LADY OF BARAK VALLEY

## NEW FOOD AND INCOME OPTIONS FOR ALL

**Silchar, Assam**

“Malina didi has changed my life. Earlier I used to work as domestic help but after meeting didi I got to know about mushroom farming.”

- **Reena Das**, Assam



**A**lmost a decade ago, one morning in April 2013, Malina Sinha's life had turned upside down, when she received news that the company where she had been working for almost 11 years was closing, due to a multi-crore financial scam. Hit by this unexpected turn of events in her professional life, and after processing the initial shock, she decided that, instead of worrying and cursing her luck, she would look at this as an opportunity to do something 'out of the box'. With the support of her teacher-husband, she took a leap forward—to start a mushroom business. His support was crucial for her as this was typically a male-dominated occupation, and not a common venture in the remote Barak Valley, where she lives.

Born and brought up in the small town of Silchar in Assam, quadragenarian Malina always thought of doing something unique of her own. Popular among peers because of her friendly and helpful nature, she was engaged in various social activities since childhood. Married off after completing her class 12, she started working in a private firm in 2002. In 2007, along with few other women, she had also formed a self-help group called 'Rising SHGs'. Everything was going well until 2013 when suddenly the company where she was working closed down, without any prior information. Though sudden closure brought huge uncertainty and put her in trouble, it also reignited her hope to choose a distinctive path.

### **Mission Mushroom**

One day while leisurely scrolling her phone, Malina found a video on mushroom cultivation. After watching



a few videos, she just couldn't stop. *"I don't know what happened to me at that time. I remember that immediately after watching that video I started getting a craving for mushroom, but unfortunately it was not easily available in the Silchar market. At that very moment an idea struck my mind: why not cultivate mushrooms and make it available for everyone. After doing some detailed research, I ordered a small quantity of spawns from Karnataka and Uttarakhand to begin mushroom farming,"* says Malina.

Even though it seemed like an idea that would be successful, it was only a year later, in 2014, that she got the required guidance and encouragement to continue her journey into mushroom cultivation. *"The words of encouragement from this expert I met in Guwahati tremendously boosted my confidence and I decided to take every action to turn my dream into reality. I took admission in Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Silchar to learn more about agricultural farming,"* she informs. One year later, she received a loan of Rs 10,000 through her SHG, for expanding the venture.



According to Malina, her prime motto was to change the perception about consuming mushroom as part of the local food palette. *“In our society, mushrooms were never accepted as a food item. While growing up, we heard people tagging it as a frog’s umbrella. Infact, when I started my mushroom business, I was often targeted for selling poisonous items. People here have very little knowledge about mushrooms. They think that it is poisonous, and will kill people who eat it,”* she recalls. *“I was discouraged in many ways, but my determination didn’t let me deter in my spirit to make this happen.”*

*“I was ready to go to any extent to introduce mushrooms as a regular food item. One such instance was when I invited a few of my close friends to my place and cooked an elaborate lunch for them. Along with fish, chicken and other vegetarian dishes I also put mushrooms on my menu, but didn’t request anyone to have it. After serving lunch to them I decorated my own plate with a lot of mushrooms. This led my friends to also help themselves to the mushroom curry I had made, and before we knew it, the dish was eaten*

*by everyone. That day, mushroom curry was the show stopper of my lunch,”* she remembers with a laugh.

It took some time and effort to make everyone understand the medicinal benefits of mushroom as well. Eventually, from 2014 there is no looking back for Malina.

Malina has been very clear that she will not compromise on the way she grows mushrooms. Despite an increased demand, she continues to use organic methods at her mushroom farm. *“From washing paddy straw, to cutting them systematically, then boiling and including packaging, I do it single handedly. The increase in demand couldn’t change my process,”* she states.

Pink Oyster, White Oyster, Blue Oyster, Milky Mushroom and Florida mushroom are commonly available at her farm. Among them, milky mushroom, white oyster and blue oyster are very much in demand because of their taste. *“My customers’ say that milky mushroom and white oyster tastes just like paneer, so they want it more,”* Sinha points out.



Mushrooms are now marketed in all the three districts of Barak Valley—Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Apart from selling fresh mushrooms, Sinha occasionally devotes her time in making various ready-to-eat products made with dried mushrooms, such as mushroom pickle, mushroom *bhujia* (a salty snack) and mushroom biscuits.

Malina firmly believes that proper and effective communication in the valley is the need of the hour, *“Even though, in last few years, communication in Barak Valley has developed to a great extent, due to its connection railways and airways, there is still much more to do. Due to the lack of timely and proper communication, farmers in the region suffered a lot during COVID times.”*

### **Challenging COVID-19**

Soon after getting the news of the spread of the deadly Corona virus and subsequent lockdowns, Malina ordered a huge quantity of mushroom spawn from Indian Agrarians Techno Might, in Guwahati, and used the

method of natural freezing. *“During the summer months, crops dry up easily. As the pandemic lockdowns were during the summer season, the storage had to be done very carefully. Me and my husband made a 10 10 bamboo house with sufficient light and fresh air, and covered it with a wet cotton cloth. To maintain the balance of the temperature I went to water the house minimum twice a day so that the room remained cool and the seeds fresh,”* she shares about her innovative technique.

The technique helped Malina preserve the mushroom spawn for a longer duration, and helped her fulfil customer demands without any difficulty. *“During the nation-wide lockdown, fish, eggs and chicken stock was in shortage in the market. At that time, mushrooms became a great source of protein, fibre and anti-oxidants. I am happy that I could meet t increasing demand of my customers,”* she adds.

In the pandemic situation, Malina managed to sell at least four to five quintals of mushrooms every month, at







a very minimal price. *“I want everyone to taste my products without worrying about the cost. I may not earn much, but definitely count the blessings of many,”* Sinha concludes.

### **Inspiring and training peer women**

The mushroom journey of Malina is a perfect example of women’s empowerment, especially in a society where women were merely considered helping hands of male farmers; and where it is unimaginable that educated women will engage in farming. Malina happily chose this profession, breaking the glass ceiling to put a mark in a male-dominated industry. The choice of crop she decided to farm was also not easy, especially as mushrooms were considered next to poison and not allowed inside households in this area. She not only spread awareness on the benefits of mushrooms, but also made it edible and easily available for the people of her region. Her life story has encouraged many other women of this remote region to come out, and chose mushroom cultivation as their full-time profession.

Khukumoni Sinha, a successful mushroom farmer who started her journey under Malina Sinha’s guidance says, *“Few years back me and my friend Purabi Sinha, while attending a SHGs meeting got to know about the mushroom business, its profits and benefits. We contacted Malina*

*and took training in 2019 to set up our farm.”* In the first year, the duo produced around 20kg of mushrooms which increased two fold, upto 40kg in the second year. *“We have successfully cultivated white oyster. Soon, we will also try other types of mushrooms. The next cultivation season will start from September,”* Khukumoni adds.

Reena Das, a domestic help turned mushroom farmer shares, *“Malina didi has changed my life. Earlier I used to work as domestic help but after meeting didi I got to know about mushroom farming, and since the last three years, I am cultivating mushrooms at my farm.”* Das now cultivates both Pink Oyster & White Oyster, which is yielding her great profits for her.

### **Sustainable approach**

In this 21st century when more and more people are getting inclined towards artificiality, the methods applied by Malina are quite appreciable. Through the Covid-19 pandemic, she has continued to follow organic, eco- friendly and sustainable farming methods, and showed the path for other women farmers to follow in order to agricultural production. These innovations are also a great way of increasing productivity without hampering health and destroying nature.

Stories from Barak Valley show that, women farmers are slowly changing the social and economic dynamics in their societies and economies, across homes and agricultural fields. Through hard work, dedication and a belief in themselves, they are carving a niche for themselves.

*Written by **Sayantani Deb***





# WOMEN FARMERS ON WHEELS

## GROWING AND SELLING ORGANIC VEGETABLES DURING THE PANDEMIC

**Bolangir district, Odisha**

“We wanted to stay back in our village and not migrate to work, so we gathered strength to get out and sell our organic product directly”

- **Chanchala**, Odisha



In 2018, Chanchala Sahoo, age 30 years, of Putlamahul village in Khaprakhol block of Odisha's Balangir district, had never thought that it would be the last time that her family was migrating to work at a brick kiln site in Telangana. Though she always wanted to stay back in her village, financial insecurity and lack of employment opportunities had pushed her family and others in Putlamahul to migrate and work in semi-bondage conditions, away from their homes.

As per an informal annual assessment by *Aide et Action*, an NGO, nearly 2.5 to 3 lakh people from western Odisha migrate to Southern states of India, to work in brick kilns. Chanchala's family and other villagers of Putlamahul village are part of the huge family migration statistic of western Odisha. Her family owns one and a half acre of cultivable land, where they could only cultivate paddy during Kharif season. Since this was not sufficient to feed the family, they were forced to migrate to work in brick kilns. The average rainfall in this area is 1229.47 mm.

In 2019, just before an agent lured them to migrate once again, and that too at a fee, they were saved by the intervention of an NGO. This came from Vikalpa, a non-government organisation working in Balangir district of Odisha, that persuaded the women to continue farming and stay back in their village. *"We are farmers but due to insufficient rainfall and no other facilities for irrigation, after the Kharif season, we are forced to migrate. Vikalpa told us that we would earn better than what we are earning at brick kilns"*, says Chanchala adding,

that, they convinced their husbands to agree with this decision.

Vikalpa is implementing the Agricultural Production Cluster (APC), which is a collaborative effort of Department of Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment, Department of Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water, Bharat Rural Livelihood foundation (BRLF), and PRADAN in Khaparakhhol block. In June 2019, *'Maa Brundabati Producers' Group'* was established under the APC project and 130 women joined as members.

To cultivate vegetables in all seasons (Kharif and Rabi), Vikalpa linked the women with government schemes and constructed dug wells and farm ponds as a part of MNREGA programme. *"Once they were linked, the women farmers cultivated vegetables on their farm land and backyards to earn their livelihoods"*, says Tapan Kumar Kalari, Community Resource Person (CRP), Vikalpa. They grew *karela* (bitter gourd), *panikakharu* (water gourd), *chachindra* (snake gourd), *kakharu* (pumpkin), *jhudunga* (cowpeas), *jahni*, (ridge gourd), brinjal, lady's finger, chilly, *kankada* (spiny gourd), *kunduri* (kundru), onion, tomato, cauliflower, cabbage and all types of spinach on 34 acres of land.

In the very first season, the women farmers harvested 510 quintals of vegetables, but just as they were ready to sell, in March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was imposed due to Covid-19. *"All of us were in fear and panic about this unknown virus and the lockdown pushed us in stress and depression"*, says Tilottama Sahoo,



age 50 years, who is the president of Maa Brundabati Producers' Group. *"It was a difficult time, we had no space to store the vegetables and they started perishing. Also, it was difficult to convince our husbands who trusted on our decision of 'cultivation' and 'staying back' in the village", she says.*

Chumki Sahoo, age 30 years, Secretary of the Producers' Group says, *"We were very disturbed that, if we lose the invested money, we would again have to migrate and work in brick kilns". She adds, "Life in brick kiln work sites is like hell. We are forced to work for long hours, with less food to eat. Children are deprived of education; instead they help us in making and drying bricks. For any small mistakes, young women and adolescent girls face verbal and sexual harassment, while the male members are beaten up."*

With the crisis before them, the women came together and took a decision to go sell their produce in the market. They asked Vikalpa to assist them in finding a solution, which it did and, after a discussion with Tarani Suna, the then Block Development Officer (BDO) of Khaprakhol, the women were given permission to go to other villages to sell their vegetables.

### **Vegetables on wheels**

On March 27, 2020, Vikalpa hired a local vehicle for a period 10 days, and the women started going out in batches of two to three, to sell their harvest. They were trained to follow Covid-19 guidelines, including hand washing, wearing mask and

maintaining physical distancing. With requisite administrative support and all protocols in place, they had another challenge to overcome. *"In remote villages, we don't enjoy the liberty of going out anywhere we want. We have to take permission from our husbands. Initially they were reluctant, but we repeatedly explained to them about the need to go out and sell the vegetables", says Chumki.*

The next part was about convincing customers to buy their produce, especially since there was a lot of panic due to the corona virus and many villages were not allowing outsiders to enter. In some villages they had even made bamboo barricades to block entry. When the women farmers reached these villages, they were shouted at, scolded and even told that their vegetables may be carrying the virus. The women farmers calmly convinced villagers about their own difficulties, the safety of their produce and the fact that customers could buy organic vegetables at their doorstep, at a cost less than the market price. *"We showed them how we are practicing Covid-19 guidelines, maintained physical distancing and even offered them hand wash soap and a handmade cotton mask", says Sarojini Dandia, age 30 years, a member. This message spread to other villages and people started welcoming them with open arms. The women were able to sell 95 quintals of vegetables in 25 villages of Khaprakhol block, within ten days and earned Rs. 95,000.*

After a few days when the women wanted to hire the vehicle for a second

round of sales, the owner refused, as the need of the hour at that time was vehicles for emergency and medical purposes. Vikalpa again raised this issue with the administration, which then provided a Tata Ace vehicle (alongwith fuel) to ferry the women's harvested crop. Over four days, between April 4-9, 2020, the women farmers' were able to visit 15 villages to sell their produce. Kamalendu Paul, DPM, Odisha Livelihood Mission and CEO, ORMAS (Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society), also supported them and provided a vehicle for seven days (April 22-29, 2020), to visit different towns and blocks of Bolangir to sell their remaining stock of vegetables. The district administration praised the women for their efforts which raised their confidence levels even further. *"Now, we are earning better than what we had ever imagined"*, says Chanchala.

### **Positive impact**

None of this came easy for the women as they had to balance their household responsibilities with their marketing work. There was no escape from the household burdens. *"We stretched our timings to finish cooking and other household work before going out for selling vegetables. After returning from outside, the focus was on keeping our family safe from any infection. We ensured that we took a bath and wore clean clothes before meeting our family members"*, says Jayanti Sahoo, age 32 years, another member. *"We visited many villages and the income from the sale of vegetables boosted*

*our confidence, agency and decision-making power at the family and community level"*, adds Chanchala.

As the second wave of Covid-19 spread and infected three villagers of Putlamahul, it became more challenging for the women to step out. However, as Jayanti says, *"We convinced our husbands and are happy that until now, no one in our group has been infected. Now our husband's trust our decision and are even supporting in the farm work"*.

The real happiness for these women lies in the fact they are staying back in their own village and do not have to migrate in search of dignified livelihoods. Their children are enrolled in schools, they have been able to repair their houses and the entire family is getting healthy food. The husband's are also working with them in the agriculture farms. *"A year back, our children were forced to work in brick kilns, and not able to eat sufficient food. But now we have even purchased them smart phones to join online classes and are able to provide them nutritious food too"*, says Jayanti.

### **Way Forward**

The local administration's support continued until the lockdown was relaxed and since then, small and medium traders have started coming to purchase the vegetables grown by the women, but this is erratic. Subhashree Patnaik, Member Secretary, Vikalpa, points out, *"They need more support from the administration than this."* *Setting up of cold storage, grading and sorting centres and providing a transportation facility will*



*help to meet any emergency situations in the future.”*

*“When the lockdown was imposed and we couldn’t sell our vegetables, we thought it will be a nightmare if we have to migrate again. We wanted to stay back in our village, so we gathered strength to get out and sell our produce directly. We followed all Covid-19 guidelines, convinced members of the family, community, administration and buyers”, says Chanchala, adding that the administration needs to support farmers in any crisis or else it will increase distress migration.*

Some of the women farmers, happy with the outcomes of their effort voice out, *“Didi don’t you think that the government should declare us as Covid-19 warriors? We created awareness among villagers as well as sold organic vegetables at their doorstep”*. Other women nod their heads, with a smile on their faces and a glint in their eyes. Building and sustaining lives, these are the women farmers of Odisha’s Balangir district.

*Written by **Rakhi Ghosh***





# THE GRAIN BANK BRIGADE

**FOOD IS THE BIGGEST CAPITAL  
IN THE WORLD**

**Bhadohi district, Uttar Pradesh**

“If it hadn't been for the grain bank, we would have had to go to the money-lender simply to buy food.”

- **Tara Devi**, Uttar Pradesh



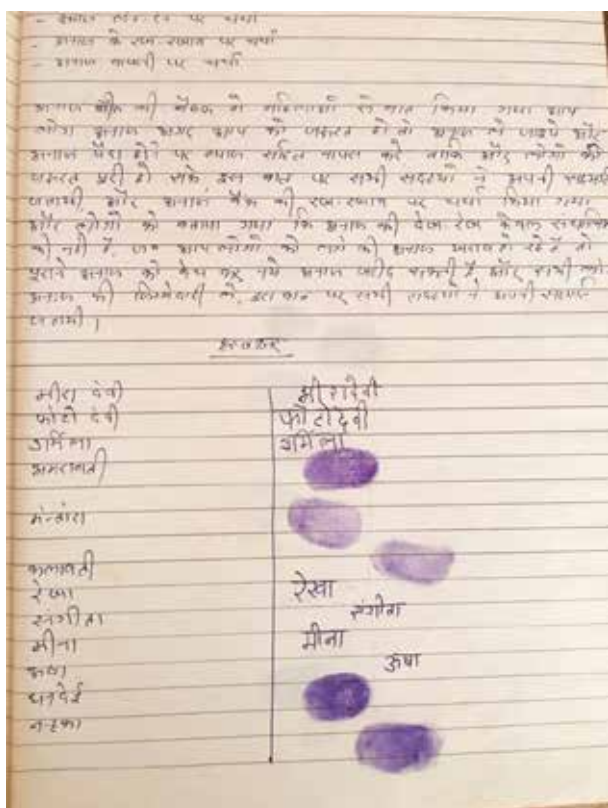
**W**aterlogged paddy fields glisten in the monsoon sun as 40-year-old, Pushplata Maurya, sets off on her two-wheeler for Jamunipur, a little hamlet in Bhadohi district of Uttar Pradesh. In the village, men sitting on their charpoys, with little to do but watch the sun rise and set every day, barely glancing in her direction as she goes by. “They all know me,” she says. “I visit regularly to ensure that their wives and daughters are able to manage the bank efficiently.”

This is no ordinary bank, and Maurya is no ordinary social worker. She works for Shramik Bharti, a Kanpur-based NGO in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), which seeks to empower marginal farming communities by improving their livelihoods.

Operational since 1986, the NGO has helped set up over 200 grain banks in five least-developed villages of U.P., with a combined storage capacity of

more than 100 metric tons. “In rural U.P., we observed that small and marginal producers face shortages of food grains throughout the year. This happens when the prices of food grains in the market are high, and there is no money in hand to purchase them,” says Rakesh Pandey, who heads Shramik Bharti. “Most of the marginal farmers we spoke to, said that this forced them to borrow food grains from bigger farmers and return them at the time of harvest. The problem is that, in return, they are bound to harvest their fields first, and at a lower wage.” To enable food security for such farmers, mostly women, the NGO developed the concept of grain banks to be operated by the local women. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these grain banks have ensured that 6000+ agricultural labourers and marginal farming families in rural U.P. have not gone to sleep hungry.

Pointing at a stainless-steel vat (given by Shramik Bharti), in which the grain is stored in her house, Meera Devi, who manages the grain bank in Jamunipur, explains the concept. “We are a collective of about 50 women, some farmers and others labourers. In 2017, we all contributed two kilograms of wheat to start the grain bank in our community.” At that time, the NGO contributed 400 kilograms of wheat to the grain bank’s corpus, ensuring that there was 500 kg of food grain available to the members. “Members can borrow upto 100 kg at a time,” she says, “and return it by adding 25 percent more grain as interest.” A large weighing scale and a ledger are in her safe custody: “My job is to weigh the grain coming in and going out, and enter debits and credits in the ledger.”





Members of the Jamunipur grain bank attest that this facility has been a huge support. Paucity of job opportunities and increasingly poor returns from agriculture, has forced most of the able-bodied men from rural U.P. to migrate to cities. There, they work as 'labariya', as they are locally known or daily wage labourers, mostly in the construction sector. The women stay behind to till their meagre landholdings, dependent upon the varying amounts of money that their men folk manage to send home. *"Most of us are able to grow only enough for our own consumption,"* says Meera Devi. *"So earlier, when the crop failed, we often did not have enough to feed our children."* She shares that there were times when she, like others, even had to borrow money from the moneylender to run her kitchen.

In a community meeting at the neighbouring hamlet of Beejapur, Arti Devi and other members of their grain bank recount the economic hardship caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. As their men folk fled from the cities where they worked and came back to the village after the imposition of Covid-19 induced lockdown, the women had mixed feelings. *"During the first lockdown, every day we would see fathers and sons returning home,"* Arti Devi says. *"While we were all relieved to see them home and safe, we worried how, with no income and more mouths to feed, were we all going to survive!"*

### **Banking and bonding on the seed bowl**

A large number of the grain banks' 50-odd members are landless agricultural labourers and carpet weavers. Unsurprisingly, all the members have had to borrow food grain during the lockdown. Infact, even non-members approached them for food loans during the pandemic. *"During the lockdown we loaned food grains to at least 50 to 55 outsiders,"* says Tara Devi. *"And every single member needed to borrow some grain during this time. In fact, if it hadn't been for the grain bank, we would have had to go to the money-lender simply to buy food!"*

Before the pandemic, members usually borrowed food grain if they did not have enough from their own field, or when there was a wedding or *terhawi* (thirteenth day death ceremony) in their family. One such borrower is Photo Devi. Her husband and she are marginal farmers and grow rice, wheat and vegetables on their little plot of



land. *“Since 2017, the canal behind our village has been flooding our fields, causing our crop to fail. As a result, we have barely been able to grow enough for our own sustenance, let alone to sell,”* says she. *“The grain bank has ensured we have food to eat.”*

Arti Devi is a carpet weaver whose husband works as a labourer in Mumbai. *“I actually bought the food grain I contributed to the bank from the local shop,”* she says. It has been a worthwhile investment. *“I haven’t had to worry about food ever since, and more importantly, it has ensured that I am not dependent on the money that my husband sends to feed my family!”*

The Beejapur grain bank loaned 3.48 quintals of food grain during the pandemic, of which 2.92 has already been returned. It currently has 156 kg of rice.

In spite of the economic distress that the Beejapur grain bank members are facing, there is a sense of empowerment among them. Tara Devi, who manages this grain bank, says that this initiative has united the women in her village like never before. *“Earlier, we barely knew each other. Today, everyone comes to my house to borrow or return food grain and as a result, we have all formed bonds with one another.”*

### **Benefits beyond sustenance**

Coming together to form the grain bank has had other important consequences for these communities. Members of the grain banks in the villages of Bhadohi have been able to form Self Help Groups (SHGs). *“Our SHG collects small contributions from members and offers loans of*



*upto Rs 15,000,”* says Meera Devi. Her daughter-in-law Neerja, a graduate, is an active member. Neerja rues the fact that few in the village have any savings. Their tiny landholdings are their sole asset. *“I wish there were more job opportunities here,”* she sighs. *“But at least the SHG ensures that we women have some financial support of our own.”* Others aver that while the grain bank keeps them food secure, the SHG helps them with small loans that they need for agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers etc.). This has minimised their dealings with private moneylenders.

The community grain bank model is easy to replicate, according to Pandey. Each bank requires an initial outlay of about Rs 15,000 (excluding Shramik Bharti’s staff and administrative expenses); can be adapted to diverse food habits and can easily be managed by community members. Moreover,



this sort of self-governance gives the beneficiaries a sense of being in control of their own well-being. Perhaps, this is why, as Tara Devi comments, her grain bank rarely has defaulters. Borrowers usually return within nine months, sometimes sooner, she adds. According to Pandey, *“In fact, in all our grain banks, we have seen that members always return the grain they borrow as quickly as possible.”* During the lockdown, they observed that some grain banks even supported the poor and needy households in the vicinity, by giving them free grain. *“Another grain bank earned so much grain in interest that the members decided to sell the excess grain to buy another storage vat,”* he says.

Meanwhile, the meeting in Beejapur ends. The women leave, chatting and laughing. *“How confident they seem!”* says Maurya, getting back on her two-

wheeler. *“I have worked with many NGOs since 1995, but have not seen anything as impactful as these grain banks.”* Tara Devi rolls up the mat after the women have left. She looks at her husband, sitting on a charpoy, and wonders when he can return to Mumbai where he used to work as a plumber. *“Our lives are so precarious— one month, your husband sends home a decent amount of money, or the harvest is good, and everyone in the family eats well,”* she muses. *“The very next month, if he doesn’t get enough work, or if unseasonal rains spoil the crop, there aren’t enough rotis for all of us to eat.”* She is happy that the grain bank has changed all this to a great extent. *“It has taught me that food is our only security,”* she says. *“Food is the biggest capital in the world.”*

Written by **Geetanjali Krishna**







# NUTRI-GARDENS FOR SUSTENANCE

## ADIVASI WOMEN REAP HEALTH AND WEALTH BENEFITS

**Birbhum district, West Bengal**

“After the daily vegetable consumption by producer households a few women farmers are selling their surplus in the local market.”

- **Sonali Murmu,**  
West Bengal

Over 650 odd adivasi (tribal) women of Bengal's Birbhum district have earned their place under the sun by establishing their own vegetable gardens, since the start of 2021. Living on the fringes of society, these adivasi women decided to grow their own vegetables to fulfil the nutritional needs of their families during the Covid-19 induced lockdown. With minimal literacy levels and between 20-50 years of age, these women made the choice to decide what they get to eat. From brinjal to lemons, they grow it all.

*"We are getting a good yield from the nutri-gardens since the last few months. After the daily vegetable consumption by producer households, a few women farmers are selling their surplus in the local market,"* says Sonali Murmu, a woman farmer from Tatinapara village in Birbhum district.

Sonali and 30 other women of the village who don't have cultivable farming lands have been able to lease 15 *katha* (i.e. 25 decimal) barren land from a local villager, and set up their individual nutri-gardens. The concept is to grow vegetables and fruits that are nutritious and seasonal, so that they have healthy and fresh food throughout the year. In the last few months, *"We have grown papaya, tomato, brinjal, lady's fingers, cow beans, chillies, lemon, pumpkin, variety of gourds (bitter, bottle, snake and ridge), and multiple varieties of leafy greens"* adds Pinky Murmu.

*"Most men and women in my village either work as farmers, daily wage labourers or in the nearby brick kilns. During the lockdown, many of the working members of our families lost their jobs. Due to lack of regular income*

*flow, it became very difficult to fulfil the basic nutritional needs of our family members. Eating healthy was the need of the hour to develop better immunity to fight the corona virus. When we were approached by 'Tomorrow's Foundation' to be a part of a nutri-garden initiative, we got associated with it,"* Pinky adds. The foundation is a non-governmental organisation which is helping the women farmers with farming equipment and skills, as well as vegetable seeds.

*"I have five katha (eight decimal) of land on which I have started my vegetable garden in 2021. This farming has helped me with a constant supply of vegetables and fruits,"* she says. The 35-year-old has a college going son who helps her in the field, as her husband is suffering from Tuberculosis, and is unable to do labour intensive jobs. Pinky gets her annual supply of rice from her seasonal paddy cultivation. *"Our pushti bagaan (nutri-garden) has saved us from buying expensive vegetables from the market in these Covid times. We save around Rs 400-500 every week,"* says the mother of three.

A majority of the women farmers involved in this farming initiative belong to the Santhal tribe—an ethnic group native to the Indian states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Tripura. A large number of them are uneducated and live below the poverty line. There are six gram panchayats of Labhpur block where women farmers have undertaken the nutri garden initiative. These are Bipratikuri, Chauhattav Mahodari I and II, Indus, Kurumnahar and Labpur I. *"They are using the most sustainable techniques of farming like*





*preparing organic fertilisers and using mulching techniques etc.,” says Utpal Majhi, Gram Panchayat Secretary of Chauhatta Mahodari – II, and this initiative benefited the women and their families at a time when they needed it most.*

Rising unemployment, food supply disruption, a downturn in international trade, etc. were the unavoidable fallouts of the Corona virus pandemic. These continue to pose serious challenges to the already precarious state of food and nutritional security among the poor and marginalised in India. Women and children will continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the pandemic-accelerated health and food crisis for a long time to come.

India may be the world’s second largest producer of food, but it has its second largest undernourished population. According to a [report](#) by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), there are about 189.2 million undernourished people in India; a majority of whom are women and children.

Whether in rural or urban India, community based and individual nutri and kitchen gardens can play an important role in enhancing national food security and dietary diversity to combat malnutrition as well as provide sustained food for communities living on the edges of survival in normal times or during disasters and crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. A [report](#) by TERI states that nutri-gardens help to combat malnourishment among children, lactating or pregnant women and women in general. Spinach, potato, papaya and other leafy greens can be easily home-grown help to fulfil the basic nutrients required in a balanced Indian diet.

### **Gardening Techniques (learning by doing)**

Many of the nutri-gardens in Birbhum district have been developed either in the backyard or the unused front yards of homes; while some women have leased barren or unused land from their neighbours. Under the initiative, the women farmers were trained to make their own compost using compost pits and earthworms (vermi composting). While preparing the organic agro-inputs, they strived for the optimum use of locally available resources. They have been trained to make rich organic manure that has a concentration of several micronutrients including carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (which increases the microbial count and improves the pH of the soil).

The women farmers also learned about proper fencing methods of their gardens, necessary to protect their crops from any livestock damage. Making maximum use of a small piece





of land, bamboo fencing techniques are used to grow vegetables like bitter gourd and snake gourd. Some vegetables like papaya and lemon are grown on the edges of a field, to work as natural hedge fencing. Creeper vegetables like squash, beans, peas, pumpkin, different types of gourds are grown using bamboo and green net supports, while leafy greens are grown at the centre of the farm.

Birbhum district is known for its red soil, and dry and hot summers which implies that farmers here face challenges in irrigating their fields. As part of this nutri-garden initiative, the women were educated on the mulching technique of farming. Mulching is a water saving technique used to increase the production of fruits and vegetables. It is an economical approach to use local and organic material like hay and dry leaves which increase soil nutrients, maintain the optimum soil temperature and restrict the rate of evaporation from the soil surface, while also preventing soil erosion.

### Surplus Sale

Most women vegetable farmers of Labhpur, whether working in group or individual capacity have sold their surplus produce in the local *haat* (market). *“During the peak vegetable growing season of winter and spring, the womenfolk have sold around five to six kilos of vegetables every week,”* confirmed Majhi.

A veteran in kitchen gardening, Tulsi Soren of Kalikapur village under Chauhatta Mahodari-II panchayat says, *“As a newly married bride in 2008, my mother-in-law taught me to grow vegetables in our backyard. It’s been at least 13 years that I have grown my own vegetables. I sell the surplus and earn around Rs. 500-600 every week during the season”*. Apparently, Tulsi’s vegetables have a good demand in her village due to their organic quality. *“I send my husband to sell the surplus produce in the local haat but mostly, villagers drop by my house to buy their share,”* she says. The 37 year old has approximately three *kathas* (9.3 decimal) of land in her porch and





near the pond, besides her house, where she does her nutri gardening. This effort became her major fallback during the pandemic, with added fillip from the nutri-garden initiative started during the pandemic.

*“The Adivasi women farmers of the region still need many summers to grow vegetables that can make them economically independent by selling*

*the crop in the market, but the pushti bagaan has undoubtedly given us independence from relying on the local market for nutritional vegetables,”* says 56 year-old Sonali from her farm while equally distributing the share of her weekly harvest of *pui saag* (Malabar spinach) with her community farmer friends on a rain-washed morning.

*Written by **Diwash Gahatraj***







# CHEMICAL-FREE FARMING FOR PROSPERITY

**IMPROVING RURAL ECONOMIES AND  
LIVES, ONE STEP AT A TIME**

**Punjyanu, Madni district, Himachal Pradesh**



“Earlier when I used to tell people about low cost natural farming, they did not take me seriously. So, I first set up a model in my farm”

- **Lina Sharma**, Himachal Pradesh





**P**anjyanu, a small village in Himachal's Mandi district, has today become a chemical-free village due to the persistence of one woman—Lina Sharma. It's her hard work that has led to Panjyanu village being recognised as a natural farming village not only in Himachal Pradesh, but across India.

After doing her post-graduation, Lina starting doing traditional farming, like other farmers in her village. Soon, however, she got fed up with the ever-increasing cost of farming and health issues, and turned to organic farming. Within a short span of time, however, what had started out as a fascination for organic farming dissipated when she had to also buy organic products from the market for this type of farming. She decided that she needed to do better and gathered information about Subhash Palekar's natural farming. Lina travelled to Shimla and took a six-day training from Padmashree Subhash Palekar, who is considered the father of this method of natural farming in Himachal Pradesh.



Post the training, Lina got so excited that she first started working in her own fields on a trial basis and after getting better results, she took the initiative to spread it among her women's group and other farmers across the region. Lina's self-help group is called Kamrunag, and includes 20 women members who have rejected chemicals and undertake natural farming, along with preserving old seeds.

Lina shares that most people in her area do commercial farming, which is the mainstay of their livelihood. She says, *"Earlier when I used to tell people about low-cost natural farming, they did not take me seriously. So, I first set up a model on my farm. I made each agricultural input used in the farm in front of my group members and then used them in the field."* Many farmers would tell her that, even though they work very hard, their economic situation was not improving. *"When people saw the results of the model I had in my field, they were stunned. Along with showing my fields to the people, I also showed them my accounts. After this, I went to their homes and taught people to make agricultural inputs that can be used in natural farming—Jivarit, Beejamrut, Ghanjeevamrut, natural insect and pesticide medicines; and also taught them how to use them. I explained to them that this type of farming was both affordable and sustainable."*

Lina has also conducted awareness campaigns about the disadvantages of single cropping and the advantages of mixed farming in this area. She tells farmers how a farmer can profit from one crop in case of the failure of another crop when doing mixed farming; tells them how to increase



profits by planting new crops as well as ways to avoid weeds on their farms.

Lina explains that in this natural method of farming, nothing is bought from the market. All the agricultural inputs used in natural farming are made from indigenous cow dung, cow urine and local resources. *“That’s why I used to give people my own ready-made agricultural inputs for use.”* Talking about her husband’s support, she mentions that he helps in getting cow dung and cow urine from another village to make the agricultural inputs for use by fellow farmers.

Lina says, *“So far my group and I have trained more than 2000 farmers on natural farming and more than half of them are improving their economic condition by adopting this method of farming.”* Not just this, Lina also taught this method to many farmers through the online medium during the Corona period. She has also made herself available to farmers in case they face any problems and has always shared every piece of information they need to make their farms yield the best results. Lina stays connected with her group and other farmers of the district through a WhatsApp group. Along with sharing information related to farmers, she also resolves problems on

the basis of agricultural inputs given in natural farming method in case of any dilemma.

Lina Sharma is now working as a Master Trainer, with the officials of the Agriculture Department, to train farmers in her block and district. The training is not conducted in any closed room or hall. It is done on the field, so that the farmers and gardeners can learn by seeing and doing. In this way, more and more farmers are coming forward to adopt this method.

Lina tells farmers to start the natural farming method as an experiment on a small patch of their field and use the agricultural inputs mentioned for the same. Once they see the positive results, this method can be applied to the remaining land area. In addition, Lina invites farmers to showcase her model farm, so that they are inspired to follow suit.

Lina and her group members also apprise the local farmers about grants from the government-run Pratikriti Kheti Khushal Kisan Yojana, which includes information on the amount and resource reserves to be provided for indigenous cows, establishment of cow shelters etc., so that farmers can get the benefit of this government scheme.





Lina has become an inspiration for the farmers of Panjyanu village and other villages of the district. She has been applauded by the NITI Aayog Vice Chairman, Rajiv Kumar; former Himachal Pradesh Governor; and the present Governor of Gujarat Acharya Devvrat for the work done by her in the interest of farmers of this area. She has also received appreciation from the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh.

Not just this, Padamshree Subhash Palekar, has also appreciated her efforts in many forums. Lina has received a citation for the promotion of natural farming at a district level programme organised on the occasion of Independence Day in 2019. Many private organisations have also honoured Lina in various forums for her efforts towards the upliftment of local farmers.

Inspired by Lina, women farmers—Mamta Sharma, Kanta Sharma, Meena Sharma, Hemlata Sharma, Usha and Satya Kaundal—who are engaged in natural farming share that this method has not only reduced their costs, but also made available nutritious and tasty food. They have been able to off-season vegetables and send them for sale in Delhi and other states. The women say, *“Since the time we are*

*sending the vegetables grown by natural farming method to the market, we are not getting any complaints from the agencies and they are very happy with the quality of our vegetables.”*

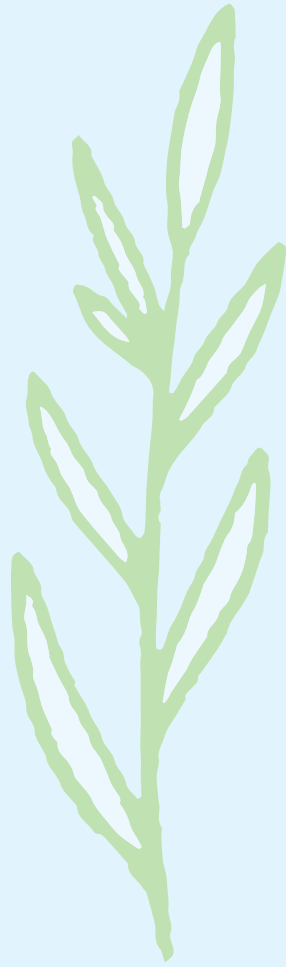
Not only women, but the male farmers are also very happy with Lina’s natural farming campaign which is enabling more profits for the farming community through the production of good quality produce.

Lina says that she had adopted this method of farming only to strengthen the economy and health of her family, and did not realise the impact that would have among the community. She says, *“I had created only one model but people found it profitable and they went on adopting it. Now I am working to take this method of farming to more people. My group is also giving full cooperation in this effort. We are setting up good models in adjoining villages, so that other farmers can also be attracted towards this method of farming.”*

Lina has a dream of making Himachal Pradesh, the natural farming state of India and she is leaving no stone unturned to make it into a reality.

*Written by Rohit Parashar*





# ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

## BATTLING COVID 19 THROUGH FARMER PRODUCERS' ORGANISATIONS

**Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha**



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“We do not need to buy seeds; we maintain our own seed banks, saving seeds season to season.”

- **Sumita Mahato,**  
West Bengal





**P**rofessional Assistance for Developmental Action (PRADAN) is a non-governmental organisation that has been working in Central and Eastern India for more than two decades to end gender disparity, and empower women in farming communities through Farmer Producers' Organisations (FPOs) in Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha.

The FPO model has laid the groundwork for end-to-end agricultural support to women farmers through LEAP (Livelihoods Enhancement through market Access and woman Empowerment) Project, which was initiated in 2019, with the support of WALMART foundation, Bank of America Merrill Lynch (BAML), Corteva Agri Science, and the 10,000 FPO programme of the Government of India. This model turned out to be a livelihood saver during the Covid-19 pandemic, as farmers could depend on the offerings and access to their FPOs in respective states.

### **Agricultural entrepreneurship saves the day - The JHARKHAND story**

PRADAN began its journey with women farmers in the Gumla and Khunti districts of Jharkhand in 1998. Here, a typical farmer has 2.5 acres of land, out of which one acre is upland. Since upland farms were only marginally utilised, owing to paucity of available water, PRADAN decided to convert these into long-term assets. In 2004-05, the cultivation of the Amrapali and Mallika varieties of mango was introduced. *"This was a long-term initiative aimed at income generation and top soil rejuvenation,"* Rajeev Ranjan, the current in-charge of the Farm Livelihood vertical at Pradan,

explains. The Mango project, now covers 15,000 families over 10,000-12000 acres in the districts of Gumla, Khunti, Dumka, Hazaribagh, Bokaro, Lohardaga and Chaibasa.

Where possible, the farmers were also encouraged to take up livestock rearing, lac cultivation, tussar cultivation, mushroom cultivation and growing vegetables, to supplement their incomes.

PRADAN also took to mobilizing and organizing women farmers under FPOs, to provide critical services to farmers with respect to agricultural inputs and marketing. With the initiation of the LEAP Project in 2019, the Gumla Mahila Swablamban Trust was formed after making a dossier of the problems faced by women farmers, PRADAN Executive (Gumla), Rahul Pathak shares.

Under the LEAP Project, a nursery is maintained under the guidance of PRADAN experts, to produce saplings from quality seeds. As members of the FPO, farmers can access these quality saplings from the nursery, with door-to-door distribution undertaken by an agricultural entrepreneur (a woman from the FPO group, who is responsible for the distribution and raising of saplings, for a small fee).

Marketing is also done in an organised way. The produce gets sorted as per size and quality, for sale to vendors in Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Patna and Kolkata, and the money from sale proceeds is directly transferred into members' bank accounts. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the advantages were most evident. Since traders were unable to come to the villages to buy the farm produce, and there

were restrictions on the movement of farmers, the agricultural entrepreneurs took over this task and saved the day. They arranged for the produce to be collected and sold in markets, by hiring the necessary transport. Doorstep selling was arranged in Ranchi and Jamshedpur during the lockdown, bringing assured returns, as the women farmers, Katrina Tirki, Sadima Lakra and Saroj Bevi readily concede.

Katrina Tikri is 27-years old, and belongs to a farming family of five members, comprising her husband, three children and herself. She lives in Kulmunda hamlet, Bhakatpur village, Raidi block in Gumla district. She has been growing Kharif paddy in 1.2 acres of lowland, and some vegetables in her 70 decimal upland farm. Since joining the FPO, Katrina has been growing tomatoes in the Kharif season, and cauliflower and cabbage in autumn. From selling small amounts of tomatoes for Rs. 10-20 per kg, she has progressed to earning Rs. 19,000 for 956 kg of tomatoes in the last season, and comparable earnings from cabbage and cauliflower too.

Sadima Lakra, from the same village, also earned Rs 30,000 from 15 quintals (1510 kg) of tomatoes during the season, since joining the FPO. She is 60 years old, and part of an eight-member family, including her husband, two sons and daughters-in-law, a daughter, and a granddaughter. Like Katrina, her family only grew some paddy in their lowland family farm, and some vegetables upland until she joined the FPO.

Saroj Bevi from Jumvatoli hamlet in Phori village is a lucky beneficiary of a lift irrigation structure installed in Gumla block. Her upland 70 decimal

farm now yields tomatoes during the Kharif season; and pumpkin, beans and peas during the Rabi season. She too earned Rs 23000 from the sale of 1268 kgs of tomatoes in the last season.

### **Diversification brings prosperity - The ODISHA story**

Farmers in Rayagada have traditionally only been cultivating paddy, along with cotton. However, cotton is prone to pests. In trying to meet the demands for pesticide, they borrow heavily from moneylenders, and enter into a vicious cycle of debt. Groundwater falls short for paddy and cotton, but is adequate for vegetables and floriculture.

PRADAN has been working with agriculturists in Rayagada, in water-stressed southern Odisha since the last 13 years. The district is home to tribal communities, cultivating forest land.

Following the launch of the LEAP project, PRADAN stepped in to organise the farmers, guide them scientifically and diversify the crops grown here. They have been encouraged to grow brinjal, beans, and chilli after treating the soil with lime, neem, and vermi compost. They have also been initiated into floriculture, to grow marigold. While *“Cotton fetches Rs 10,000-20,000 per acre, vegetables can fetch Rs 50,000-60,000 per acre, and marigold brings in Rs 80,000 per acre,”* says Amit Prasad Dash, PRADAN Executive.

Gita Nimala is a 35 year old unmarried farmer, who belongs to a seven member family of farmers, comprising three brothers, one sister, her parents and herself. Belonging to Bankili village in Rayagada district, she grew



upland millet, maize, paddy and black gram on her four-acre farm, but yields were low. Getting initiated into the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) has helped improve the quality of her rice crop. *“From just 1500 kgs earlier, the harvest has doubled to 3000kg since the grains are fuller and bigger.”* She now also cultivates marigold on 1.4 decimals of her land, with sales three times a week in the wholesale market, thus improving the fortunes of her family. The two-month marigold season of October-November saw her earn Rs. 8,90,00 last year.

Kumari Kadraka and her husband, Ranka Kadraka, both aged 45 years old, have had to make do with working as farm labour for a long time, being landless themselves. They live in Bandhugura village of Rayagada district. Their meagre earnings are used to meet basic needs of their five-member family, including two daughters and a son, in addition to her husband and herself. One of her elder daughters’ is married and lives with her husband. Last year, after being trained as part of the FPO, Kumari took 0.6 acres of land on lease to farm on, and grew pigeon pea, brinjal, chilli and other vegetables. The quality seeds that she could access, helped her earn Rs 80,000 from chilli, and Rs 20,000 from brinjal, notwithstanding the pandemic and lockdowns.

Today, 2000 women farmers are linked to FPO’s, although there are only 350 shareholders as yet. The FPO operates through shares, with each share priced at Rs 10/- Profits from the operations are distributed to the shareholding farmers, as dividend.

Rather than posing a challenge, the pandemic provided the Rayagada

farmers a rare opportunity. Bandhugura farmer and agricultural entrepreneur, Jayanti Pattika shares: *“Earlier, the markets in Odisha were full of produce from West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. But with the pandemic and restrictions on inter-state movement, we found a ready market here. The only problem was that due to the limited hours of operation for each market during the lockdowns, we had to visit a lot more markets. Besides Behrampur, we went to Rambha, Purusshottampur, Kapituriya Nagar, Oruba, covering 250 kms in a single day.”* For the farmers, access to a vehicle as part of the FPO (with a small fee of Re.1 per kg as transportation charges), gave them easier accessibility to potential customers.

### **Organic is the way to go - The WEST BENGAL story**

PRADAN had been involved in setting up rainwater harvesters under the state government’s Ushar Mukti Programme since 2009. Agro-forestry initiatives here included plantation of mango and cashew orchards, as also Sonajhuri (*Acacia auriculiformis*) and Teak.

In 2015, PRADAN started organizing the farmers through collectives. At that time, farmers were engaged in producing paddy and used chemical fertilisers. This was weighing heavily on groundwater resources in this water-scarce region. *“In 2017, with the help of the Deputy Director of the West Bengal Department of Agriculture, Dr Anupam Pal, we selected five to six varieties of paddy that were most suited to our terrain. Of them, Kerala Sundari and Bohurupee were found to have yields comparable to the most*

*productive modern high-yielding varieties,”* Sourangshu Banerjee, a Pradan Executive says.

Selected women farmers were given a few days’ training where they were taught to produce organic fertilisers like Jeevamrit, and how to treat plants with home-made natural pest-repellents like garlic and neem. Initially, women from 607 self- help groups (SHGs) were incorporated into the FPO. Following the launch of the LEAP Project, the Amon Mahila Chashi Producers Company Limited was formally registered in 2020. Each woman farmer-member is a shareholder; holding a minimum of 15 shares of Rs 10 each.

The women now grow black rice (Kalabhat), red rice (Satthiya), Malliphul, and several other traditional rice varieties. They also grow turmeric on a commercial scale and nurture kitchen (vegetable) gardens around their homesteads. *“Opting for organic methods has drastically cut input costs, while doubling profits. Swarna paddy which was grown using chemical fertilisers fetched only Rs 12 per kg in the market; the organic variety sells at Rs 35 per kg. As against the cost of chemical fertilizers of Rs 5000 a bigha, the home-made organic fertilizer costs a farmer only Rs 80-90 per bigha,”* a 28 year old woman farmer and agricultural entrepreneur, Swarnaprabha Mahato of Pukhuriya village in Nayagram block of Jhargram district, tells me. This has meant a huge saving for Swarnaprabha’s eight-

member family (her husband, his two brothers and their wives, a young niece, and her mother-in-law), whose three bigha farm could hardly produce enough.

It is a similar story of well-being for other farmers in the village. *“We do not need to buy seeds; we maintain our own seed banks, saving seeds season to season. The dung and urine from my cows yield farmyard manure for our crops. Vermi composting does the rest,”* admits 38 -year old Sumita Mahato from Pukhuriya, whose one bigha farm made it difficult to make ends meet for her family including her husband and two sons. The farmers have already obtained organic certification for their produce, and now, are on their way to marketing their products online.

During the pandemic, when transporters could not come to collect the produce due to lack of transport, planning by the women’s collectives helped. *“Turmeric harvesting can be delayed. So, the collectives held on to the crop in the fields until the markets opened up. Upland paddy that is grown here is a 90- day crop, harvested in autumn; hence, the lockdown did not matter,”* Banerjee explains.

Across Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal, these stories of women have shown that, with the right kind of support and training, they are the ‘farmers of the future’.

*Written by* **Dr Rina Mukherji**







# SCIENTIST TURNS FARMER

## POPULARISING ORGANIC FARMING IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY

**Budgam district, Jammu and Kashmir**



“Conventional farming uses a lot of pesticides. I want to create awareness on organic farming among the younger generation.”

- **Insha Rasool**, Jammu and Kashmir





People who truly follow their passion are rare, but those with a passion for disseminating their knowledge for the benefit of their community are rarer. Organic farmer, Insha Rasool, aged 30 years, from Kashmir, falls under both categories.

Insha's love for organic farming began during her research in Human sciences, as a PhD scholar in South Korea, five years ago. Ever since, her passion only grew stronger, making her a strong proponent of organic farming in the Kashmir valley. Not even the lockdowns imposed in the wake of abrogation of Article 370 and 35-A in the valley, nor the Covid-19 pandemic could stop her from pursuing her passion. Today, she successfully grows exotic vegetables on two acres of family land in Sheikhpora village of Budgam district of Jammu and Kashmir.

The climate of the valley is ideal for fruit and vegetable production. Yet, millions of tons of pesticides, insecticides and fungicides (chemicals like chlorpyrifos, mancozeb, captan, dimethoate, phosalone, etc.) are being used by the farmers to spray the

plants, fruits and the leaves every year in Kashmir.<sup>1</sup> *"This has not only affected plant health but also had an adverse health impact on those are growing and consuming these vegetables. Besides, we don't have a proper system of seed collection nor heirloom seeds (seed varieties that are passed down through generations). Everything is hybrid. Whatever heirloom seeds we had in Kashmir, they are gone. These are the primary reasons that led me to start an organic farm called Home Greens, in September 2018,"* Insha says.

Explaining the difference between organic farming and conventional farming, she points out how conventional farmers push the plant to the maximum potential so that there is surplus production. *"Either you give growth boosters or fertilizers in chemical form. However, in the longer run, it causes harm to the microbial community in the soil. If the health of the soil goes down, then, eventually over the years, the nutrition fixing capacity also declines as microbes assist in seeding these nutrients to*



<sup>1</sup><https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21584215/>





*the plants. The second aspect of conventional farming is the use of a lot of pesticides, which are potential carcinogens,” adds Insha.*

Organic farming on the other hand, is the natural way of farming which was practiced in Kashmir many decades ago. Insha shares that, in those times, *“Every other household used to have a cow. They used to get manure out of cow dung, which is the best form of fertilizer. Similarly, natural fertilizers like neem oil, which has a tendency to ward off pests, is used in this farming. Such materials are safe for the soil and do not have any negative impact on the human body either.”* She notes that organic farming helps the microbial community to grow in the soil, slowly and gradually. *“Eventually, the farm becomes a perpetual machine. With minimal amount of fertilization, the microbial community flourishes there,”*

adding that soil amendment is very critical for organic farming.

The young farmer, who is an alumna of the Indian Institute of Sciences (IIS), Bangalore believes that indigenous crops are also high value—both, from a nutritional and a financial perspective. But many farmers have stopped growing them. Insha, on the other hand, has started growing broccoli, purple cabbage, cherry tomatoes and other vegetables. She says that *“They are not hybrid crops but heirlooms and, in a few years, will become the heirlooms of this region. They will bring diversity and become an asset for posterity.”*

Insha is employing various techniques of organic farming like post-harvest management to maximize the shelf life of her produce. *“For example, last winter, I made these garlic slabs. There was a proper procedure involved in it. We could use those garlic slabs 16 months down the line, with little change in texture and properties. This year, we saw a huge demand for it from my clients,”* she says.

However, all these results come with their share of challenges. According to Insha, more than financial support, one needs mental support to keep going. *“In Kashmir, farming is not considered to be one of the jobs that garners’ much respect. Recently, a visitor at the farm made a random comment that, I am a retired scientist and let go of a position to realise my dream of starting this farm,”* she says with a smile.

Even though her parents and husband have financially assisted Insha (who also sold her gold ornaments as part of her investment), in setting up the farm, her parents are not very happy

with the decision. *“My parents get to hear a lot of stuff about why I let go of my lucrative position as a scientist in South Korea, and it comes out on me. My biggest support system is my husband. We have taken this decision together and he is extremely happy with it,”* Insha adds.

Talking about other faulty farming practices in Kashmir, Insha shares that, *“A farmer here doesn’t know what to grow and when. They grow lower temperature plants in high temperature areas and the crops get burnt. There is a complete lack of information and resources.”* She feels that the government should be more pro-active in organizing events and workshops for farmers. *“Farmers should get incentivised for organic practices, organic manures and fertilizer use, etc. A lot of schemes are offered, however, implementation is a challenge. As a result, a newbie (organic) farmer gets demoralised and has nothing to show to his peers in terms of results,”* she says.

Meanwhile, at her individual level, Insha is making every effort to disseminate information on the benefits of organic farming, among other cultivators in the region. These efforts are bearing fruit. Last year, a local farmer from Uri in North Kashmir showed interest in her endeavour and collaborated with her on growing exotic sweet corn. *“The sweet corn crop was a success and we were approached by many restaurant owners in the valley, who bought the produce. Earlier, they used to procure the sweet corn from outside the valley, and paid a huge amount of money for it. Now, we have a proper clientele among the restaurateurs who are interested in sweet corn and other exotics too,”* says Insha.



Currently, Insha has seven employees, including two women, working in the farm with her. She has other plans for the farm, including engaging children in some fun activities during spring and summer, when the farm is in its full glory. *“I want to create awareness on organic farming among the younger generation. They will themselves plant the saplings and the yield shall go to them. This way, they will connect more with the environment and its importance.”*

Insha also hopes to take on interns from next year. *“A lot of young women are showing interest in organic farming. We will provide them skill training, practical expertise and hands-on experience. Besides, they will be taught how to prepare and use organic fertilizers and manure. This will be an important investment into the future.”* Insha concludes.

*Written by **Hirra Azmat***







R AI QUAD CAMERA  
Shot by realme-5pro

# FROM SUBSISTENCE TO FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

## CULTIVATING MUSHROOMS DURING THE PANDEMIC

**Mungeli District, Chattisgarh**



“Paddy has been the main source of our income forever. I learned about mushroom cultivation from experts and took the plunge during the pandemic.”

- **Menika Devi**, Chattisgarh





**M**enika Devi Loniya lives in Lormi village in Mungeli district of Chhattisgarh—the Indian state that is termed as a ‘bowl of rice’. Menika has been involved in traditional farming since a young age, with paddy being the main source of their income.

In 2018, Menika Devi decided to venture into Mushroom farming, as just paddy cultivation did not seem sufficient for Menika to manage her family’s sustenance and livelihood. This was not a crop that she was familiar with, but she decided to invest four to five months of productive time into learning about mushroom cultivation from experts. She accessed trainings provided by the government, with the first one in Odisha’s Bargad district, followed by a training Mahasamund district in Chhattisgarh. A 30-day

training at Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Bilaspur, under the guidance of Jayant Sahu gave her a final and thorough understanding of all the steps of Mushroom farming.

Menika Devi’s vision to do something different from tradition made her determination strong. One of her biggest challenges was to break rigid mindsets about a new crop like Mushroom, in addition to the challenges of arranging resources and training women.

However, with a strong resolve and skills in hand, not only did Menika start earning from her new crop, but also hired other village women to work on her mushroom farm. From four to five women initially, she now employs eight to ten women on a daily basis.





A [report](#) (2021) by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at the Azim Premji University, estimates that more than 230 million Indians fell below the national minimum wage due to the Covid-19 crisis. The loss of jobs, decrease in wages, and unavailability of the health infrastructure remains a concern, leaving the rural masses unable to properly feed their families. During the lockdown, migrant labourers from every part of India came back to their native places. It was the same situation in Menika's village. Seeing so many families in distress, Menika and her daughter, Suman stepped up, and also taught other women in the village how to do mushroom farming in order support themselves in Covid-19 times.

Along with the highs came several challenges, especially during lockdown, as every area had its own timings of moving goods. Providing distributors with the finished and packed mushroom produce in a timely manner was tough, with added transportation constraints. Between delivering on their own and hiring delivery vans to send off the produce, the women producers have tried to keep the balance between the demand and supply channels. In some parts of Raipur, Karwardha, Mungeli, the women have used the local transport system for fast deliveries.

They also faced a problem viz. availability of seeds due to market closures at one point, but somehow managed to procure them when there was a partial relaxation in lockdown rules. This gave them a fillip once more in their mushroom production and sale.

Today, the women of the village are selling mushrooms beyond their vicinity at the local market of Bilaspur. The Farm-direct company has also signed bonds with farmers for organic crops.

All these hurdles gave Menika and other women like her many learning's as well as the confidence to find solutions along the way. Doing something 'out-of-the-box' and growing Mushrooms in a region where paddy production had been in lineage for a long time was a challenge that Menika Devi took upon her. Her effort has borne fruit as many women have gained from taking on a new crop and are earning good incomes of Rs. 150-200 per day.

With an annual turnover of Rs. 4-5 lakhs, Menika's is a story of resilience of rural women during the pandemic, and must be shared widely.

*Written by **Ruchika Dhruwey***





# SEEDS OF EMPOWERMENT

## A LANDLESS WOMAN SUSTAINS LIFE TO INSPIRE

**Bahraich district, Uttar Pradesh**

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“During one year of the pandemic, I earned Rs. 65,000 from vegetable cultivation, after deducting the cost of ploughing the field.”

- **Gudiya**, Uttar Pradesh

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India will be celebrating 75 years of independence in 2022, but a forest village in the lowlands of Uttar Pradesh is still hundreds of years behind in development.

Located in Bahraich district, this village—Dhakia Kailash Nagar, is flanked by forests. The employment opportunities here are very limited because the Tehsil headquarters is 45 km away, while the district headquarters is 97 km away. Even though it is not legal, young people here chop wood from the forest for use as cooking fuel and also sell it in the neighboring villages to make a living. The forest department often prevents them from chopping wood, catches them for not complying with the Forest Act and even arrests them sometimes. All these factors are turning the young people away from the village towards urban areas. However, during the pandemic, this migration was not possible, and people found it difficult to arrange two square meals.

One woman stood out in the crowd, as she not only arranged food and water without money in hand, but also made some savings. Gudiya's husband Raju used to work as a labourer in Delhi. The money that Raju used to earn and send home helped cover the expenses of his wife and four children back in the village. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, Raju lost his job in India's capital city and came back home. For a few days, the family managed to survive with their savings, but after two months, that money got over and the family could not even afford basic food requirements. Finally, they had to take a loan of Rs.1000 to buy food grains, but they realised that this would not be a long-term solution

especially since there did not seem an end to the pandemic very soon. Some villagers explained to Raju and his wife that they should take up farming to sustain themselves. However, the problem was that Raju has *gout* (a knee problem) which could be treated due to their economic condition and lack of proper medical treatment. Thus, Gudiya decided to take up farming on her own shoulders.

### Land and labour count

Gudiya and her husband do not have any land of their own. Therefore, Gudiya took one and a half *bighas* of land on contract from a local person called Ramesh, against one quintal of paddy and one quintal of wheat per *bigha*, every six months. One hurdle crossed, the next was to find money to do the farming. One Geeta Prasad of the village told her, "*I will do as much ploughing of the fields as needed and you can give the money when the crop is ready.*"

The next challenge was to get seeds. For this, the Developmental Association for Human Advancement (DEHAT), came forward. Divyanshu



Chaturvedi, Chief Operating Officer, DEHAT spoke about their programme, *Suposhan* (good nutrition), which was being implemented by the Indo Global Social Service Society (IGSSS), to remove malnutrition in 20 villages of the district. The organisation was responsible for doing the ground work and selecting people with small land holdings to participate in this programme. This led to Gudiya's selection, and she received the seeds of gourd, tomato and brinjal, free of cost.

Divyanshu Chaturvedi shares, "*Gudiya ji is an example for all those women farmers who, despite living in landless conditions, work towards ensure their right to life. That's why DEHAT selected Gudiya in its nutrition programme, and I am happy that, with DEHAT's small support, she has not only moved ahead herself, but is also inspiring others.*"

Even while large masses of Indians were facing a financial crisis due to Covid-19 and its lockdown, Gudiya continued moved towards economic sustainability. She used *surti* and *matka* insecticide at home, due to which her crop was managed with less expenses

and without using chemicals. During one year of the pandemic, Gudiya earned Rs. 65,000 from vegetable cultivation, after deducting the cost of ploughing the field. Of this net profit, she spent Rs. 40,000 in running the household, and Rs. 25,000 was her saving—which she invested in buying baby female buffalo, who would start giving milk after six months.

### **Waiting for their basic rights as citizens**

Dhakiya Kailash Nagar, a small village situated on the land of Katarnia ghat forest of Bahraich district, is struggling to become a revenue village since independence. If this were to happen, then, along with *pucca* (permanent) construction in the village—roads, pavements, drains, etc.—the process of getting government housing for the villagers will also begin.

Before independence, the British brought labourers from outside to plant trees in and build railway lines through these forests. Wherever the labourers made their *kucha* (impermanent house structures made of local and natural materials) houses,





those places became villages. In this way, five forest villages (*Vangrams* or *Vantangiyas*) were formed in this area, including Gokulpur, Tedia, Dhakiya Kailash Nagar, Bichiya and Bhawanipur.

Out of these, only Gokulpur has got the status of revenue village on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2020; and the remaining four villages are waiting for their turn. Sadly, the fifth or sixth generation of locals is living in these forest villages, but these people are still not able to get all the rights as Indian citizens.

Until 2008, all these villagers did not even have the right to vote, but this changed when their names were added to one or another revenue village. In this sequence, the people of Dhakia Kailash Nagar were given the right to vote by adding their names to Chahalwa revenue village—but even today, they cannot make *pucca* houses. With a population of 350 people across 70 families in this village, there are 175 voters but only 25 ration cards have been made. No woman in this village gets widow or old age pension. There is not even a single toilet in the entire village. The primary health centre is 12 km away from the village, and the community health centre is 45 km away. Inter-college is also 12 to 13 kilometres away. If there is one thing closest to the village, it is the forest. The forest starts from just one and a half kilometre of habitation and spreads over 550 square kilometres. There are 29 tigers, an estimated 56 leopards and other predatory wildlife resides in the forest—making villagers prey to wildlife attacks on a regular basis. Though there isn't any official record available about the number of attacks by wild animals on the villagers, Geeta Prasad, shares that at least one such

attack takes place every 12 to 15 days. Living in such extreme conditions, the villagers do not get benefits of the Indira Awas Yojana s because *pucca* construction cannot take place and they continue to live in houses made of thatch and tin.

### **Path to Economic freedom**

What has been done by 30-year-old Gudiya even in these extreme circumstances is commendable. Gudiya is raising four children and looking after her husband with sustenance and earnings from her one and a half *bigha's* of land. Her elder daughter, Gauri is 11 years old; second daughter, Madhuri is seven; son, Sanu is five and the youngest daughter, Ranchi is two-years old. Due to the availability of different types of vegetables in the house, the health of the children has become better than before. *Arbee* (*Colocasia*) is ready as a new crop in Gudiya's field and she has started selling it in the market—earning Rs. 29,000 from her *arbee* harvest. Now, she wants to give this money to her husband for buying an old motorcycle so that he can also go to work a little further from the village. The biggest reason why Raju is not getting wage work in this area is that he does construction work, specifically called shuttering. This kind of work cannot be found in his village because there is no *pucca* construction in the village.

According to the India Data Portal, a total of 22,875,276 women farmers are registered in India; 18,48,986 in Uttar Pradesh and 35,153 in Bahraich; but there are very few women at the ground level who take all the farming decisions themselves. Many

women can be seen working along with men though. About 70% of women, including women farmers and agricultural labourers, contribute to agriculture, yet their valuable contributions are ignored and they are not accepted as farmers. A study on the status of women farmers in Uttar Pradesh shows that only 6% of women own land; less than 1% has attended government training programs; 4% have institutional credit and only 8% have control over farm income. (Source: [Oxfam](#))

Gudiya is among these eight percent of women, who have taken farms on

rent and achieved what a man can rarely do. That is why today, she is on the path of economic freedom and an inspiration for other women. Shanti and Nirmala's family had two and a half *bighas* of cultivable land, yet they used to work in other's fields. After seeing Gudiya's success, both of them gave up their daily wage work and started farming in their own fields and these stories continue to give hope across these forest villages...

*Written by **Azeem Mirza***







# WATER FOR LIFE

## WOMEN FARMERS WORK FOR DRINKING WATER SOLUTIONS

**Sirohi district, Rajasthan**

“In tribal society, there is no tradition of taking things for free. We are farmers. We grow grains by working hard. Taking ration for free was not good for our self esteem. That is why we demanded work.”

**- Kamala Bai, Rajasthan**

**D**ue to the Corona Virus spread since March 2020, the country has faced lockdown to life and work. The havoc of the second wave was seen in every village of the country. And yet, some good news also kept coming in the media.

One such positive story is that of Danavav village of Mount Abu tehsil in Sirohi district. Danavav village is situated at the foothills of Mount Abu hills. Here. The total population is around 600 people, of which 70 percent belong to the Bhil tribal community. Most of these tribes depend on rain for agriculture and work under MGNREGA for the rest of the year. Young people of this area work as casual wage labour in the hotels Mount Abu, which is a tourist destination.

During the first phase of the Covid-19 lockdown, 40 tribal women farmers ended the villages' long-standing drinking water problem. These women dug *beries* (wells to source underground water) to access drinking water at different places in

the village—thus fulfilling the needs of people living here.

One such woman farmer is Kamala Bai. She owns two *bighas* of agriculture land, which is dependent on the monsoon. After the farming season, this 45-year-old woman farmer works in MGNREGA for the remaining days of the year, and takes her eight goats to the forest, for grazing. Kamala Bai has been doing all this since childhood, but was very happy to join the campaign to end the water problem in Danavav.

### **How it all began**

In April 2020, Jan Chetna Sansthan, an NGO working in the Mount Abu area, initiated ration distribution among tribal farmers of the area, during the lockdown. The women farmers of Danavav village refused to take free ration. Kamala Bai says, *“At that time, more than ration, we needed work, because if we have work, we can buy ration. Secondly, in tribal society there is no tradition of taking things for free. We are farmers. We grow grains by working hard. Taking ration for free*







*was not good for our self esteem. That is why we demanded work from the people of Jan Chetna Sansthan. They provided us ration in lieu of work.*

Chandrakanta Bairwa, associated with the Jan Chetna Sansthan, in Mount Abu, tells us that when the people of the village asked for work instead of free ration, “we got the idea of doing something that would help in village development and solve the problems of the tribal community living here”.

A woman farmer from the village, Shanti Bai (43), recalls, “We called a meeting of the gram sabha to identify the problems. Since the PESA (Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 is applicable in this area, the people of the village themselves make decisions by organizing a Gram Sabha before the Panchayat. All the problems of the village were discussed in this meeting and decided on a priority basis. What came to the fore was that, the biggest problem in the village is of drinking water. Women and adolescent girls have to walk three to four kilometres daily to fetch water. They have to cross the forest and Abu Road, and this journey is also not safe for the girls and women”.

Narmada Mundaba, a social worker and school dropout girl in Danavav, adds, “This village is situated at the foothills of Mount Abu. In summer, there is a serious problem of drinking water in the nearby dhanis, including Danavav. For water, women had to cross the mountainous and bumpy terrain and Mount Abu road, and walk for about three kilometres. But after the beri was dug, there was no problem of water in the village. The villagers were able to quench their own thirst as well as of their cattle with water from these beries, throughout the year. Fortunately, at the time when the shortfall of water was about to begin, it rained. In this way, a long-standing problem of Danavav was ended through the hard work of some women farmers in just one month.”

Narmada says, “The task is laborious but very easy. Yet, for so many years, no one had thought about the idea of digging the beri. After the women started the campaign, the men of the village also helped.”

### **What is a beri?**

A *beri* is the easiest and best source of water in hilly areas. Large amounts of water coming into fields after seeping down from the hills gets stored underground via this structure. Clean drinking water is available after digging two to three underground for this accumulated water. The pit dug for accessing this water is called a *beri*.

### **Ration and Clothes for Work**

Chandrakanta shares that, *“When these tribal women refused to take free food grains from us, we talked about giving them ration in exchange for some work that would be beneficial for the village and the community. The women discussed in their panchayat meeting and that is how a solution was identified and worked upon to solve their drinking water problem.”*

Finally, three *beries* were dug near the Neelkanth Mahadev temple, on the foothill road. Each of the *beris* was to be used differently, one for the women to fill water for household needs, the other for the men to access, and the third for the cattle of the village. Two more *beris* were excavated at

the cremation ground of Rupanmata temple and Mukri Mata temple. Due to the creation of a *beri* at the cremation ground, drinking and bathing water has also been made available to the people who come there for the last rites and rituals.

Manu Devi, aged 45 years, another woman farmer from the village involved in the work of digging *beries*, told us that a lot of ration was given by the organisation in lieu of digging the *beri*. This included essentials like 10 kg of flour, five kgs of rice, two kgs of gram dal, two kgs of gram, toothpaste, soap, mustard oil, and soybeans.

Chandrakanta adds that in addition to ration, the organisation has also worked on the concept of ‘Cloth for Work’ in this area. Under this campaign, clothes were distributed to the villagers, in exchange for work. The clothing kit included two rugs, mosquito nets, mats, clothes for men, women and children, including winter clothing. Since the tribals live in extreme poverty, these essentials in lieu of work helped them a lot.

*Written by Madhav Sharma*







# FARMING ON A BORDER VILLAGE

## CULTIVATING CERTAINTY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

R.S Pora, Jammu and Kashmir

“You do not know when the shelling from the other side of the fence will hit the fields and your year of hard work will be destroyed in moments.”

- **Surjeet**, Jammu and Kashmir

Living in the middle of toxic smoke coming out of burnt powder kegs is not an easy task. Helplessly watching fields turning into ashes is tumultuous to every farmer's eyes. Each time that the armies of India and Pakistan exchange fire, people rushing to governments' safe houses, leaving their homes, belongings and cattle behind, is inexplicable to the core. But this is the life that the inhabitants of Bala Chak, a frontier hamlet located in the R.S Pora sector of Jammu and Kashmir, have been living stoically, for decades.

In 1947, when the subcontinent got divided, and Pakistan was formed as a separate country, a deadly line was drawn across this village too. Pakistan's Sialkot is just a few meters away from Bala Chak.

In the midst of the seedy looking dwellings, spread across the lush green paddy fields of Bala Chak, is a dimly lit room where 46 year-old Surjeet Kumari is busy looking after her mushroom crop. This woman has been living here for the past 25 years. Married to a farmer, Pardeep Kumar, Surjeet is mother to a son and two daughters.

Giving an education to her two daughters was always a priority for Surjeet. Having been a victim of patriarchal mindsets which denied her education, she believes that it is the only way to end the centuries of discrimination that women face in Indian households. *"I was the only daughter of my parents and have three elder brothers. They were sent to school and later got government jobs. I was constantly told that I must learn the household chores, and this is what I was born to do. When my daughters*



*were born, I resolved to give them a good and respectable life, away from the patriarchal traps of society,"* Surjeet says. But it was not easy to meet the basic needs of the family and pay for the children's education.

Farming in the open fields, says Surjeet, has always been a dangerous affair in her village. *"You do not know when the shelling from the other side of the fence will hit the fields and your year of hard work will be destroyed in moments. This happened to us in 2014 when the hostility reached a crescendo and our fields were bombed from the Pakistan side,"* she says.

Four years later, in 2018, climatic impacts wrecked havoc on their fields. The late arrival of the monsoons, along with untimely rainfall, put



the hamlet's farming community in dire straits. Every evening that year, Surjeet and her perturbed husband, Pardeep, would talk about switching to some other mode of livelihood for sustenance. *"I was weighing the option of finding some job in the main town. The income from agriculture was dwindling, but leaving the land unattended is considered a sin in our society. I was caught between the devil and the deep sea,"* Pardeep recalls. Meanwhile, Surjeet was worried that the family's dipping income may affect the education of her daughters, who were in class 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> respectively. Their son, the eldest of her children, was meanwhile completing his graduation in the science stream.

One day, while she was narrating her ordeal to one of her cousin's, she came to know about a training programme in mushroom cultivation. *"I was told that the mushroom crop does not need open fields and is not a seasonal one. Being in high demand in the market, I realised that I could earn a constant income from cultivating mushrooms. The training was free of cost, so I thought it would be a good idea to go for it."* Surjeet says.

Alongwith this training by a team of experts from Jammu's Agriculture University, Surjeet learnt that they were also going to provide infrastructure support in terms of fertilizers and seeds to the women trainees. Surjeet was the only woman from her village who registered for this training, at the office of the NGO, Seva Niketan. She received a month-long training in mushroom cultivation and processing, including intricate details about the crop, and do's and don'ts for its harvesting.

The next stage, she says, was to dedicate a small room in the house for setting up the mushroom cultivation unit. *"I reluctantly told my husband about my plans. I told him that he doesn't need to worry about the income and that if all goes well, we can have a decent earning every month. Thank God that he trusted and allowed me to construct a shed in the backyard of our house. Infact, he built the shed all by himself."*

Within three months of sowing the mushrooms, Surjeet was able to sell about 150 pockets to wholesale dealers, and earned Rs.18,000, in the very first season. In the next two and half months, Surjeet was able to produce more than 170 packets and made a profit of about Rs. 24,000. *"I became so well-versed with the crop that I purchased the seeds myself and got into every minute detail of the business. Sometimes, I tease my husband that I earn more than him, and he says it was all because of the shed he built, at the very onset,"* says Surjeet, grinning.

Even at the outbreak of corona virus in the country, her income didn't plummet. Infact, during the lockdown, she also learned how to make organic compost from poultry manure, wheat straw and horse dung—this has also helped increase the productivity in her mushroom farm.

*"While the villagers were ruing their fate due to the lockdown, I was confident of earning enough income from mushroom sales. Now, I also make mushroom pickle and it has a lot of demand in the market. I even got direct wholesale orders during the lockdown. It is the blessing of Maa Durga that my earnings haven't*

*been affected by the lockdown,” adds Surjeet.*

Fortunately, for Surjeet, the ceasefire pact between India and Pakistan has meant that their village has largely remained calm over the past few years, with no major cross-firing incidents. This has had a positive impact on the yields of farmers living in these frontier villagers. Surjeet’s husband reiterates that their family’s income is gradually treading back to normality. *“It is all because of my wife’s hard work, that my children are studying and we now have livestock too. I didn’t know before that my wife was such a resilient woman, and that, when crises would strike the family, she would be at the forefront to steer the ship to the shore. I am proud of her,”* Pardeep says.

Motivated by Surjeet’s efforts, some other women in the village also have begun to come forward and enrol themselves to learn various farming practices. They are getting skilled and earning better. *“Earlier, women in our villagers were treated just like a commodity. They were just expected to do all the household chores and had no other identity. Being self-reliant is helping us women to break these shackles, feel self-confident, and also garner respect from our husbands and families. I am doing my bit,”* says Surjeet.

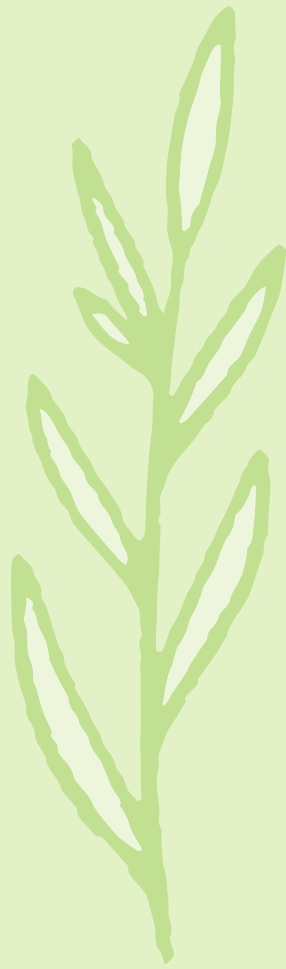
Madhulika Sharma, a senior official at Seva Niketan, the NGO that provides various training platforms to the women shares that, *“Surjeet has been a beacon of light for many women who want to improve their lives and livelihoods. When she first enrolled into their training programme, a lot*

*of local women thought that she was wasting her time. But, she turned the tables around. Surjeet is now a new hope for the women of her hamlet. She is guiding, mentoring and even imparting training to them in mushroom cultivation. All this is very inspiring.”*

Written by **Umar Manzoor Shah**







# LOCAL AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

## WOMEN FARMERS IRRIGATE THEIR FIELDS FOR ABUNDANCE

**Palghar district, Maharashtra**

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“Despite the challenges, agricultural success is sure to come and I urge other villagers to stop migrating to other cities for work... rather, commit to farming on their own field. Agriculture will lead to a sustainable livelihood.”

**- Bhoje, Maharashtra**

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Imagine this! One has to go downhill from their village, cross over a flowing river (it is unimaginable to even take this route during the monsoon) and climb uphill, not to forget the dangerous trek to get to the other village. And then do this all over again, following the same route to reach home. This is what Shanta Bhoje, a woman farmer, does every alternate day, in order to sell her agricultural produce. She treks down the treacherous path from Mukundpada to the adjoining satellite village of Ghodipada and the neighbouring Wanganpada—all this, to sustain herself and her family. Bhoje and other women like her have other real challenges too, in terms of access to basic resources—one such being safe and sufficient water.

*“Ghodipada and Mukundpada are separated by a river and are inaccessible during the monsoons. These are remote hamlets located in the interiors of the Mokhada block, from where the villagers have to walk close to an hour to reach the nearest bus stop. After we initiated a project that assured these twin villages water security, they were happy. The water lifting facility we gave them in 2020, allows access to clean drinking water. Earlier, they dug pits and consumed unsafe water,”* says Shraddha Shringarpure, CEO, Diganta Swaraj Foundation. This is confirmed by Bhoje who tells us that, earlier, the main source of water for the villagers and the cattle was only the river, Wagh. They would dig pits near the source, wait for the water to rise up, and skim the top layer for clean water. Many families would also migrate after the monsoons as they could not have a regular income from farming due to lack of sufficient water. Now, they are engaging in multi-cropping and

working in groups to self-sustain from farming.

The women in Ghodipada and Mukundpada are gutsy and glorious. All they needed was an intervention that was made through Project Chirag by the Diganta Swaraj Foundation—to become change agents in their villages, leading through agriculture. Several villages in the Palghar and Nashik districts of Maharashtra have benefited from the technical and financial support provided by this project, to overcome basic problems of access to water, electricity, education, health and sanitation. Villages, so cut-off and once deprived of resources as basic as access to drinking water, now have water in their farms too. This success has helped villagers improve their lifestyles, along with supporting their livelihoods.

Bhoje, a 34-year-old, who cultivates and sells Rajgira leaves (Amaranth), Bhindi (Okra) and Methi (Fenugreek), largely credits the availability of water as the main reason for the change in her fortunes. Her life, she says, has changed after the arrival of accessible water. She risks the hilly and risky terrain while travelling on foot; every other day. Often, she sprains a limb, gets scratches on her legs and hurts her feet to bleed. Even though she earns only Rs.250 per day, this trek across the river to Ghodipada, she feels, is worth the effort she makes. Bhoje’s produce is in demand and her sales are good and regular, so she feels that she has nothing to worry about.

*“The produce is fresh and straight out of my farm. I cultivate it and come every alternate day to sell it. I face a lot of difficulties and it is extremely inconvenient to make the trips from*



*one village to another. But, now my entire family is engaged in farming and I have inspired many women to get into group farming. When I was offered an opportunity to start farming after the solar-based lift irrigation facility was made available, I took it up. My knees hurt after travelling up and down this path over huge rocks, for two hours, but I have no other choice. There is a risk to life, but I have to do it. Despite the challenges, agricultural success is sure to come and I would urge other villagers too, to stop migrating to other cities for work, rather, and commit to farming on their own fields. Agriculture will lead to a sustainable livelihood,”* says Bhoje.

*“More people need to get associated through agricultural interventions and take the produce to a formalised market. This is our dream. The entire*

*village needs to come together as a group and collaborate, rather than compete. Group farming will be beneficial because of the availability and optimum utilisation of natural resources,”* adds Shringarpure.

Bhoje is an inspiration for other women in the village as she urges them to focus their energies on agriculture to better their lives, instead of migrating outside their region for work. Seven women of Mukundpada and 22 women of Ghodipada are now doing group farming.

Bhoje’s resilience and spirit continue to help chart new pathways in her life, and that of other women in this region, to lift themselves out of the vicious circle of poverty.

Written by **Dev Kotak**





# WOMEN ON TRACTORS

## NON-TRADITIONAL SKILLS AND MODERN FARMING PRACTICES

**Sirohi district, Rajasthan**

“When they learned to drive a tractor themselves, women not only work in their own fields but also in fields of other women of the group.”

- Rajasthan



In different ecological regions of Rajasthan, and across agricultural households, the role of women in agriculture is defined according to different farming practices and crops. Rarely will one find a farmer family whose women do not contribute their labour at various stages of the farming process—from sowing to storage of the produce. Despite this wide-ranging role of women, their contribution in agriculture has been ignored not only by the general public, but also by the government. Even rural women themselves, don't see themselves as working women engaged in agricultural work, and consider themselves to be just those who do the “domestic” and household work due to their role in the family and society.



The general belief has also been that farming is productive work, and all “productive” work is done by men and not women. If you understand in common language, farming is for men, women have nothing to do with it. This notion is so prevalent and deeply ingrained in our psyche that even in our language there are no feminine forms of words like ‘farmer’, ‘cultivator’, ‘tenant’. There is also a belief that ploughing the field is a man’s work. Arguments like “women cannot handle bulls” in this context are baseless. In recent times as government programmes have been initiated for training sister farmers, a new word had to be coined to call them “women farmers”. Infact, there is now a conscious and proactive language change in specifying male and female farmers, when talking about farmers but this change is still slow and scattered.

Perceptions about farming and farmers are changing. Women themselves are at the forefront of this big economic and social change, as is seen in Pindwara block, a tribal area of Sirohi district of Rajasthan. The tribal women here are now adopting modern methods of farming. Today, women can be seen standing with men in equal capacity when it comes to farming. Farming is done by scientific methods. The women also keep complete farm accounts forming groups among themselves. This change has come from the tireless efforts made in the last five years by the Samridhi Agriculture Producer Company Limited (SAPCL), which was formed in collaboration with the Centre for Micro Finance (CMF) Institute that works in Pindwara.



### Steering tractors on the fields

Earlier, these tribal women used to cultivate the field barn in the traditional way with the use of oxen. But with times, women struggled to continue doing this. In 2016, SAPCL selected Kundal village of Worli, Gram Panchayat of Pindwara district, to witness a change. In an effort to connect the tribal women of this village with modern methods of farming, the company initiated something that these women would never have imagined even in their dreams. Women, who had never ridden a bicycle nor used the plough, not only learned to drive a tractor but also did farming with a tractor in their own fields.

Shanti Bai, aged 55 years, lives in Kundal village. She became a member of Samridhi Agriculture Producer Company Limited in 2016. When Shanta Bai sat on the tractor for the first time, with fear in her mind, her hands and feet were also trembling. Conceding with societal norms and out of embarrassment, she put on her veil when she sat on the tractor. Within a week, she was driving the tractor; and

later also worked as a tractor operator and instructor. She taught five women in her area to drive a tractor—Darmi Devi, Nerki Bai, Shanti Bai, Hurli Bai and Rami Bai. Gradually this number grew, with five more women Kundal village learned to drive a tractor.

With a new skill and confidence in place, and having broken a traditional barrier in the farming sector, a group of 50 tribal women was formed. These women were given tractors by SAPCL, and began farming in their fields, whether it was harvesting or gathering the harvest. Earlier, these women used to call a tractor man from the village to plough their fields—who charged Rs. 800 for an hour of work. Once they learnt how to drive the tractor, not only did they start ploughing in their own fields, but also in other farm lands, charging Rs. 500 per hour. This was an added and direct financial benefit for the women farmers.

### Breaking barriers, building collective responsibility

As women began their farming journeys on tractors, they faced many





challenges. When they would drive out on tractor, the women would hear taunts from men. All eyes would be on the women, especially as deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs made it difficult for people to accept that women could drive tractors at par with men. The common perception was that, even if women could drive a tractor in someone's field, they would not be able to plough the field properly. Initially, the women were also hesitant to go to another village alone.

Technically speaking, the women did face some challenges too, especially in ploughing rocky land with the small tractor provided to them by the company. Over a period of two years, some women lost the initial enthusiasm, with which they had learned to plough the fields by driving a tractor. In order to plug this challenge, the company decided to give the women more stake in the process. From being board members to directors, the women were now made entirely responsible

for the company, its decisions and its functioning. With a new energy, the company started the Samridhi Aajeevika Kendras, with the woman farmer running the centre named as 'Samridhi Star'.

Today, more than 7,000 women are associated with 45 Samridhi Aajeevika Kendras, built in 45 villages across 20 gram panchayats of Pindwara block. Of these, 3,176 women are associated with goat rearing, 1,287 with dairy business and about 3,500 women in agriculture. Of these, 80 percent are tribal women.

Hurli Bai Garasiya, Director, Samriddhi Agriculture Producer Company Limited says that the women farmers get seeds, fertilizers and medicines at reasonable prices through these centres. The company provides them with information for improved farming and animal husbandry. Vegetables and seeds of all crops are also available here. Agricultural equipment is also provided by the company at

reasonable rates. Through this centre, women farmers get all important information related to agriculture. The produce of women farmers like urad dal, moong dal, goats, chicken, eggs etc. can also be purchased at these centres at whole *mandi* rates. Only women farmers can come to these centres and buy the material they need for their farming. The company's CEO, Ramesh Chand says, *"It is our constant effort to connect more and more women farmers to these centres. For the village-to-village promotion of the centres, information is also being given by installing speakers on tempos."*

The success of this initiative is seen among the women farmers in this area, as they are using scientific methods of cultivation. Their incomes have also increased in different ways, including setting up nutrition gardens. This training has been provided by the Krishi Vigyan Kendra across the district, and the women have learnt about growing and managing seasonal vegetables. These women farmers have been able to grow tomato, spinach, coriander, beetroot, radish, carrot, brinjal, mogri, sweet potato which are used for home consumption as well as sale in the market.

Sharda Garasiya, a tribal farmer from Moras village, started organic farming two years ago after quitting daily wage work. Today, she is a self-reliant and progressive farmer. Sharda Bai has not only changed her own fate but also that of many other families in her village, especially as she has been an inspiration for many other women in the region.

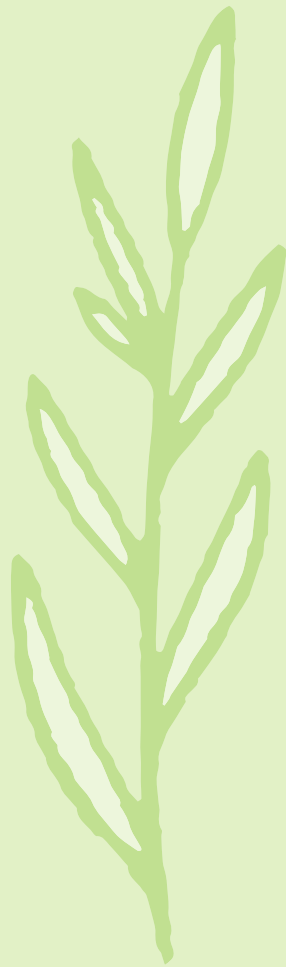
In less than a decade, there has been a transformation in the lives of women farmers in this region from being poor labourers to having a dignified farmer identity. Today, women who struggled to earn a few rupees are doing work worth thousands of rupees. The biggest change they are able to see is in their own homes. Most of the men in this area work in the mining sector, and often fall prey to deadly diseases like silicosis. However, seeing the hard work of the women, the men are slowly joining hands in the farming innovations being led by the women farmers.

Undoubtedly, the women of Pindara block have not only changed the conditions of their own families and homes, but have shown their strength by leading the village in the big vegetable markets of the state.

Written by **Babulal Naga**







# INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IS NATURE'S HERITAGE

## PROTECTING SEEDS THE TRADITIONAL WAY

**Gadarpur, Uttarakhand**



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“Saving and sharing traditional seeds within the community reduces dependency on the market.”

- **Buxa tribes**, Uttarakhand



Every community is recognised by its tradition and history. The same is true for the Buxa tribe of Udham Singh district in Uttarakhand. Farmers from this community mostly use traditional seeds and traditional farming methods, including organic fertilizers, which are very important for a good harvest.

Unfortunately, however, in the last few years, the traditional practices of keeping seeds safe are getting wiped out. As a result, when there is a need for seeds, these tribal farmers need to buy seeds from the market, and, in most cases, the cost of travel is more than the cost of the seed.

In this context, widespread steps are being taken to improve awareness and sensitisation on the traditional conservation and promotion of these seeds. For example, the “*Save the traditional seeds*” campaign gave villagers’ information about the traditional way to preserve seeds—in earthen pots. Regular discussions and meetings are being held in villages, so that the traditional seeds are collected and ‘Seed banks’ organised for protecting and storing them. Due to non-availability of wage work during the pandemic, women from

different villages got together and formed a traditional seed bank, which they managed through the lockdown period. Currently, traditional seeds are being kept safe by this method in five villages of Gadarpur region in Uttarakhand.

The community starts the process of storage by first placing all kinds of seeds in the kitchen area where the stove is lit to warm and smoke them for preservation. This step prevents the traditional seeds from being infected by insects. The seeds are stored in structures made by mixing and drying soil and straw. Small and large size seeds of various traditional crops like paddy, wheat, channa, lentils (arhar dal), maize, and vegetables like cabbage, pumpkin, onion, garlic, bottle gourd, bitter gourd, bean, paitha (pumpkin) and lady finger are kept safe in the seed bank for the future.

The Buxa community continues to strive and keep this custom of traditional seed bank alive, and this includes exchanging seeds from one village to another and reducing the dependency for high-quality traditional seeds from the external market.

Written by **Heera Rautela**







# TOWARDS COLLECTIVE FARMING

## SHARED WORK AND RESILIENCE PAVES THE WAY

**Bishnupur district, Manipur**



“We do not work single handedly or with one family alone. All our activities are done in a group, men and women side by side.”

- **Rebati Leimapokpam**, Manipur



It is the peak season for paddy plantation and kharif crops in Manipur. Farmers ensure that rice saplings are planted in time and there is sufficient water in the fields.

At Keinou village, in Bishnupur district of Manipur, Rebati Leimapokpam, a woman farmer in her mid-50s ensures there is no water flooding or water logging in her family's paddy field. *"If there is too much water we have to make an outlet to let it flow out."* she says. Again, if there is less rainfall, below normal, then she has to find means to draw water from nearby streams that flow down from the hills, or dig wells and pump-out water *"We take water from the small rivulets or streams y from the foothills, either by water pumps or digging canals"* she explains.

Leimapokpam's family owns about 10 hectares of land—including their homestead and agricultural land. They cultivate a local variety of paddy *Dharam Phou* and the popular Black Rice (a type of aromatic rice called *Chakhao Poireiton*). Amidst the paddy field they have a fish pond, while crops and vegetables are grown alongside and on the peripheries near the house.

*"Ours is purely local and organic,"* she emphasises. Leimapokpam's neighbourhood is a close-knit community of organic farmers. There is no boundary demarcation between their agricultural fields or their houses. The culturally rich and traditional practice of community-oriented work is prominently visible in their agricultural activities. Seeds are preserved for the next season, saplings are shared among neighbours. The produce is basically kept for family consumption and surplus is sold in the



domestic market—in towns and cities like Imphal.

Infact this collective way of being and working does not end in just producing a food item; it goes beyond physical labour in their everyday life too. They support each other in terms of their various needs—emotional, economic and social life.

In Leimapokpam's neighbourhood, about 25 farmers formed the *Phouoibee Farmers Association*, an organic farmers' group. Such groupings of about 20-25 farmer collectives are locally known as "Loukol Ama"—meaning 'a field area', wherein a small group of farmers whose agriculture fields are adjacent to each other, work together. Several such "Loukol Ama" will further network together





under a larger platform like district level associations or larger state level networks.

Leimapokpam explains that since their lands are located next to each other, the neighbourhood has to work in a spirit of togetherness. *“For example, in case of heavy rain or drought, we need to dig canals/ drainage that can pass through each of the fields. You cannot do this alone”.*

Moreover, agricultural work is extremely labour intensive. For instance, most farmers do not own a tractor for ploughing, and they have to expend hard manual labour for harvesting their crops. As farmer collectives, they can hire tractors and even labour to get the requisite work done, by sharing the costs. During the harvesting season, they can physically support each other in the field, making the collective way of work not only a boon but a necessity.

*“We do not work single handedly or with one family alone. All our activities are done in a group, men and women side by side,”* says Leimapokpam. Farming, agriculture and allied activities are family based and are collectively done by participation of family members, by both, adult males and females. Since agricultural activity involves several levels of labour, including ploughing, planting, weeding, harvesting and there are specific areas where men and women contribute. *“For instance, planting and weeding are done by women, while ploughing is done by the male members”* explains Leimapokpam. *“We women equally contribute, actually even more”* she says with a smile.

Beside the physicality of the activities, this way of work also requires mutual respect and understanding among the farmers and landowners.

Phouoibee Farmers Association does not have a membership fee nor any membership rules. *“It is a common purpose, a common need,”* says Leimapokpam *“Our collective activity is built upon trust and mutual*





*understanding.*” Such common sharing of labour, collective activity has been practiced since generations. Leimapokpam agrees that certain issues do arise, for example, if a family is unable to contribute in terms of physical labour, then they hire labour for the work.

In case of late arrival of monsoons, the farmers ensure that paddy saplings are planted in time, and the rain water in the paddy fields is managed and controlled. They dig small canals for intake if there is less rainfall from the foothills, and drain out if there is a surplus of water. The next step is clearing and cleaning of weeds.

Farmers in Manipur usually follow multiple cropping—Kharif crops in summer and the monsoon. Once the paddy harvest is over, farmers focus on Rabi crops.

Agriculture being the mainstay of their livelihood and economy, the sector contributes a major share to the total State Domestic Product (SDP). Infact, 52.81 % of the workers in Manipur are engaged as cultivators and agricultural labourers. (Economic Survey, Manipur 2020-21)

Though women do not have separate organisation, they are the key drivers, especially at the neighbourhood and community level of grouping. Seed sowing, paddy plantation, weeding and harvesting are collectively done by the women farmers. A group of women will go from one field to the next, planting, weeding, and clearing—and the whole “*Loukol Ama*” will come together for the harvest.

The next level of grouping is a larger platform. “*We have a group call Phidam Farmers Club*” shares Leimapokpam.



This platform is basically for marketing and other purposes like collection of products and transportation. “*In this group, all farmers, both, organic and non-organic farmers come together.*” says Leimapokpam, and it includes horticulture farmers as well.

Surplus products are marketed in the neighbouring districts and towns and the state capital. Platforms like the Phidam Farmers’ Club take care of transporting and supplying to outlets and various locations in the state. “*There is an outlet like Rural Mart in the town and the city*” says Leimapokpam, “*though many customers come to our home too, to buy the produce.*”

Leimapokpam’s neighbour, Marjit Ahong Shangbam, is a key member of the Phouoibee Farmers Association and Phidam Farmers’ Club, and takes the responsibility of collection and supply to various locations across the state. Ahong Shangbam, who is



also board member of the District Level Farmer Interest Group, keenly watches the market trends and pricing of products in order to get the best for their produce. He is the representative of the farmers' group and plays a key role in linking up the farmers with the government and company agencies. *"We link up with Manipur Organic Mission Agency at the state level"*, informs Ahong Shangbam. The district level organisation also handles the pricing of products and other matters. The platform also ensures that the board of directors have 50% women members.

According to Ahong Shangbam, unless the farmers come together under a certain grouping or organisation, it is difficult to meet their demands. They have some power of negotiation and bargaining for better prices if they are a collective. *"Buyers need certain quantity, as well as quality. If I can meet their demand, then I can bargain,"* he says, emphasizing the need for more numbers of farmers to come together.

These collective efforts are beginning to see the villagers through all seasons—rain or sunshine. They work through the challenges of irrigation and storage; labour and water intensive paddy cultivation by finding collective solutions along the way. Infact on the storage part, they are in the process of constructing a storage facility for the Phouoibee Farmers group. According to Ahong Shangbam, exporting products outside the state is extremely challenging as the products are perishable. *"How much quantity can you export in one cargo?"* he asks. *"Manipur has a lot of potential to produce various crops, medicinal to horticulture, but the issue is how to store them for long periods. There has to be a solution that prevents the produce from being spoilt before it reaches the customer, whether in the domestic or international market."*

Loukol Ama is the way forward for these women and men farmers' organic and collective way of life and livelihood on their fields...

Written by **Ninglun Hanghal**



# BIO-PROFILES OF AUTHORS

(IN ORDER OF THE STORIES ABOVE)

**Appu Gapak** is a sub-editor of 'Echo of Arunachal', the oldest newspaper daily in Arunachal Pradesh. She has been in the field for almost 13 years now. She also works as a casual news reader at the All India Radio, Itanagar since 2010. Appu lives in Naharlagun with her husband and seven year old daughter.

([gapak.appu@gmail.com](mailto:gapak.appu@gmail.com))

**Dr Basavi Kiro** is a woman's rights activist and author of *Bharatki Krantikari Adivasi Auraten*; *Bharat Mae Vistahpan ki Awdharna aur Itihas*; *Mahuwa mae bare bare gun: collection of folk songs* etc. She has received several awards for outstanding journalism including the Chameli Devi Jain Award. She has also received many International and National fellowships. Dr. Basavi Kiro is the founder and President of TORANG TRUST; and a member of the Asian Indigenous Women's Network and FIMI-IIWF. She is also the coordinator of the Indigenous Women India Network (I WIN). She is a writer and currently facing two cases against her for fighting to save land resources and territory. She has visited many countries including USA, Switzerland, Spain etc. Basavi has a Ph.D. on Displacement.

([vasavi.santosh@gmail.com](mailto:vasavi.santosh@gmail.com))

**Sayantani Deb** is a media professional based in Assam. She has more than eight years of experience working in news dailies, magazines, web portals and government agencies. As a journalist, she has covered politics, insurgency, sports and fashion, among other beats. Her primary interests lie in reporting on women and children, agriculture and health issues related to the marginalised sections.

([sayantanideb92@gmail.com](mailto:sayantanideb92@gmail.com))

**Rakhi Ghosh** is an independent journalist, contributing news-features to The Wire, Village Square.in, PARI rural online, Outlook India, 101 Reporters, Hindu Business Line, Down to Earth, Grassroots, Vidura, NewsClick.in, Charkha Features, The Pioneer and The Political Business Daily, on the issues of health, education, migration, food security and climate change from a rights' based and gender perspective.

Rakhi started her career in journalism nearly two decades ago in the state of Odisha. Initially, she worked as a city reporter with a vernacular newspaper, but later shifted to an English Newspaper. After a few years, she joined an electronic media channel, which gave her ample of scope to highlight different issues



in a comprehensive way. She has been engaging as an independent journalist since 2014, and focusing on development journalism in her home state. Her articles highlighting issues and sufferings of marginalised people (mostly tribals and dalits) and women in particular, are being published in different print and digital platforms.

Over the years, Rakhi has received a number of Media Fellowships that include - National Foundation for India (NFI) in 2014, GOI-UNDP Media Fellowship in 2015, Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women (GAATW-IS) in 2016, Reach Lilly MDR-TB Media Fellowship in 2017, and Earth Journalism Network Reporting Grant in 2021. She has received the Statesman Media Award for Rural Reporting in 2019 and PII-ICRC National Media Award on Best Humanitarian subject in 2018 and 2021. Rakhi has also received the Laadli Gender Sensitive Media Award consecutively three times (2012, 2013 and 2014) conferred to journalists by UNFPA-Population First.

*(rakhighosh@rediffmail.com)*

**Geetanjali Krishna** is the co-founder of The India Story Agency, which specialises in telling environmental, public health, and social affairs stories from South Asia to the world. One of the 16 awardees of the Global Health Security Grant 2021 by the European Journalism Centre, she is a contributing editor at Business Standard, an Indian daily. Her recent by-lines can be found in Times, The British Medical Journal, BBC Future, The Third Pole, and Business Standard.

*(geetanjalikr@gmail.com)*

**Diwash Gahatraj** is a freelance journalist from Siliguri. He writes on

people, culture and music from North Bengal and Sikkim. When he is not working on a story you will find Diwash in his kitchen trying his hands on a new recipe.

*(diwash.gahatraj@gmail.com)*

**Rohit Parashar** is a Journalist, Columnist, Social Activist and a Writer. He holds a Master's in Journalism from Himachal Pradesh University, Master's in Sociology and is currently pursuing Post-graduate diploma in Environment and Sustainable Development from IGNOU. For more than a decade, he has worked with various organisations including Sahara Samay, National news channel, MH One News and Dainik Bhaskar. His area of interest includes environment, tourism, development, women empowerment, wildlife, and biodiversity. He regularly writes for Divya Himachal, The Better India, Down to Earth, Yourstory, Yugvarta, Patan Samachar, Himachal Scape and Giriraj-HP Govt. weeklies. **Rohit** also got the Teri Media Fellowship for Climate Change Reporting in the Himalayan Region.

*(rohitsinghprashar@gmail.com)*

**Dr Rina Mukherjee** is a multiple award-winning senior journalist with nearly three decades in the print and online media. She specialises in all aspects of sustainable development, with special focus on agriculture, the environment and climate change. Winner of India's first-ever Laadli Extraordinaire Award in 2012-13, she has won several media fellowships so far, including the 2016 Panos fellowship for Migrant Labour, the 2008 Seaweb media fellowship, the 2010 Women Deliver Fellowship, the Robert Bosch Fellowship for Science Reporting (2008 and 2012), and the 2012 IUCN/EJN fellowship, among others.

Having started her career in Mumbai, she went on to work in several major national newspapers, magazines and digital news outlets based in Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi. Currently, she is an independent journalist based in Pune. She has also been a UGC doctoral fellow, and holds a doctorate in African Studies, with specialization in Third World conflict and developmental issues.

*(rina.mukherji@gmail.com)*

**Hirra Azmat** is a Kashmir based journalist who writes extensively on health, environment and gender based issues. A fellow with Thomson Reuters Foundation, she has written for numerous publications like The Wire, 101 reporters of India, Tehelka Magazine, First Post, IANS, Dainik Bhaskar, The Kashmir Monitor and several local magazines. She is also interested in travel writing, profile writing, personal essays and anything that provokes, inspires and transforms.

*(azmathirra@gmail.com)*

**Ruchika Dhruwey** works as a freelancer. She was previously employed at the English Daily “The Pioneer” in New Delhi as a sub-editor for two years. She has studied English Journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication New Delhi. She is always open for opportunities that offer her challenging assignments as a journalist. Her motto is “I observe – I study – I create”.

*(ruchikadhruwey@gmail.com)*

**Azeem Mirza** has been working as a freelance journalist for the last two and a half decades. Institutions like BBC Hindi, Mongabay Hindi, IndiaSpend, First Post, Array, ANI and 101 Reporter have given place to his writings. In

particular, he reports on social issues, the environment and wildlife. He is among the 25 journalists selected by The National Foundation of India for a media fellowship this year.

*(azeemmirzajournalist@gmail.com)*

**Madhav Sharma** is an independent journalist, active since 2013 in India’s western state, Rajasthan. He has worked for India’s top Hindi daily Rajasthan Patrika and Dainik Bhaskar. Before joining the mainstream media, he did his Post-graduate Diploma in Television and Radio Journalism from India’s top journalism college, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

After college, he joined the Rajasthan Patrika newspaper as a trainee journalist and worked there until 2015. He then joined the world’s top circulated newspaper, Dainik Bhaskar and was there until 2018—after which he has been working as an independent journalist. Madhav writes for various news websites like thewire.com, Down-to-earth, Gaon connection, Mongabay (A French media organisation), People’s Archive of Rural India etc., on health, agriculture, gender, labour, environment and development issues.

Madhav has received many media fellowships and awards, including the IIMCAA award for writing on Children and bonded labour issues in Rajasthan; Media recognition award by UNICEF and Lok Samvad Sansthan; Laadli media fellowship for gender reporting work; No Child’s business award for working on child labour; SATB fellowship on TB in Rajasthan, Media rumble fellowship on Reproductive issues among adolescents groups, and MOJO fellowship to shoot videos by mobile phone.

*(madhavsharma2158@gmail.com)*



**Umar Manzoor Shah** is an independent writer. He is the winner of the Lorenzo Natali Media Prize 2017. His stories focus on giving a voice to those from deprived sections of society, such as mental illness among the people living in conflict zones, stories related to poor women and disabled children, and farmers struggling for survival. (srinagar87@gmail.com)

**Dev Kotak** is a journalist with over seven years of experience, having covered the Tardeo and Kamala Mills fire, farmer's protest in Delhi, Ghatkopar plane crash, etc. He has reported on issues in general news, politics, entertainment and features. He is currently working as a Principal Correspondent for (bilingual) India Today and Aaj Tak channels. He has worked at mid-day, News X, Times Now and a Hong Kong-based channel Phoenix TV (defence and international affairs stories) and has also freelanced for Barkha Dutt's venture, Mojo Story. Dev has studied at the esteemed Asian College of Journalism in Chennai.

(devkotak1990@gmail.com)

**Babulal Naga** is a resident of Jobner town of Jaipur district, Rajasthan. He got his early education from Jobner. After passing 12th class in the year 2009 from the Faculty of Agriculture, he did his B.A. in 2003 from a private college in Jaipur, and M.A. in Political Science in the year 2005. He did one year BJMC in Journalism from Vardhman Mahaveer Open University in the year 2006. From school life, he started writing freelance in newspapers and magazines. From 2007 to 2021, he was a media coordinator at the Vividh

Women's Drafting and Reference Centre in Jaipur. He was also the editor of the fortnightly news feature service, Miscellaneous Features.

Babulal has since, been working as a freelance writer/ journalist. Since the year 2006, he has also been training rural youth by participating as a reference person in various rural journalism training programs continuously. He has been honoured with Gram Gadar Award, Gram Budget Award, Laadli Media Award, Sahitya Noor Samman and Samarpan Samaj Gaurav Award. In the year 2013, he was selected for the Inclusive Media Fellowship by the Centre for Studies of Developing Societies (CSDS). Under this fellowship, he studied the situation of starvation and malnutrition in Baran district of Rajasthan. In October 2016, he was selected for the CMC-Rajasthan University-UNICEF Media Fellowship, under which he studied the status of child marriage in Bhilwara district from October-December of that year.

Currently, Babulal is the editor of Bharat Update. Bharat Update is an online news portal as well as a fortnightly news and feature service that engages with newspapers through alternative journalism.

**Heera Jangpangi Rautela** has worked for the past 15 years in Uttarakhand, as an activist in the field of women's rights, specifically education, violence, and more recently on the forest rights of women farmers. She is currently the President of Mahila Kalyan Sanstha, Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand.

(mks.usnagar@gmail.com)

**Ninglun Hanghal** is a freelance journalist based in Imphal, Manipur. She is the recipient of the Laadli Media Fellowship, 2020. Ninglun is a former Delhi Correspondent of The Sangai Express, Manipur daily newspaper. She is the Consulting Editor of The Northeast Stories, an online e-magazine. She writes for various

media outlets like, the Hindu Business Line, Money Control, The Statesman, Women's Feature Service, Outlook India, The Third Pole; GenderIT.Org; East Mojo and others. Ninglun writes regularly on women, development and current affairs of Manipur and Northeast India.

*(hanghal.ninglun@gmail.com)*





## About MAKAAM

Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM) is a national alliance set up in 2014. Its members include women farmers, apart from organisations and networks.

The main aim of MAKAAM is to ensure recognition and voice to women as farmers as defined by the National Policy on Farmers 2007, which includes all the people engaged in agriculture and allied activities-labourers, forest workers, livestock workers, etc.

MAKAAM strives towards bringing in a layered analysis of patriarchy and other forms of socio-economic differences such as class, caste, religion, into the area of women's work around natural resources.

It has pursued studies and campaigns on various thematic areas - prominent among them are, women and the right to land and other resources; social and economic protection for women from farm suicide affected households; women forest workers fighting for their entitlements and participation in governance; exploring new organisational and institutional forms in collective farming and procurement and marketing of produce from Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs).

MAKAAM has been making systematic efforts towards influencing other civil society actors, farmers' movements, unorganised sector workers that have not paid enough attention to women from across diverse social groups. Engagement with the state both, by way of responding to, and making an effort to propose new programmes and policies; capacity building of women farm leaders through a process of co-learning, and campaigns based on informed analysis of issues, is an important part of MAKAAM's work.



**Email:** [mahilakisan.makaam@gmail.com](mailto:mahilakisan.makaam@gmail.com)

**Website:** <https://makaam.in>

**Social media handles:**

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/MahilaKisanAdhikaarManch/>

**Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/mahilakisan>

**Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/mahilakisan>