

Grassroots

A JOURNAL OF THE PRESS INSTITUTE OF INDIA PROMOTING REPORTAGE ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

Steely determination helps them overcome adversity

These women from the lower strata of society, who have been pushed to fend for themselves by an indifferent administration and an uncaring public, have taken steps to educate themselves about their rights and privileges, and are helping not only themselves but others too to secure a better life. A significant factor common to the women described here is their grit and determination in the face of adverse situations

PUSHPA ACHANTA, Bengaluru



Kannamma, 75, a domestic worker in Salem.

Women who are graduates and homemakers from middle-income households that are headed by men (who may be progressive in their attitudes towards women) are not necessarily aware of government benefits and how to avail of them, or even of relevant laws, policies or rules. This is often because such women are not entrusted with, or take up the responsibility of knowing about them. On the other hand, there are some women who know their basic rights and entitlements, especially if they are on their own – irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, or literacy.

Kannamma, an unlettered but determined Dalit woman who

earns her living as a domestic worker, is a good example of this latter group. The septuagenarian lives in a tiny house in a low-income neighbourhood in Salem, a city in south Tamil Nadu. She is knowledgeable about various government schemes and social entitlements and informs others how to avail of them. “I have been staying by myself for a few years now in this house which I obtained with a lot of difficulty. Although some of my young relatives stay close by, I do not depend on them for anything. I am supposed to receive a pension from the government meant for poor widows but I have discovered that my age is listed in the records as 54 years. I have to follow up to get that error rectified so that I can receive my monetary benefit,” says Kannamma. She can talk about a variety of topics and keeps herself and others informed about news on a number of fronts, including rise in prices of essential goods, socio-political developments and how and where to secure a ration card.

Similar to Kannamma in some ways is 62-year old Renukamma, the leader of a self-help group (SHG) for women in Gadag District of northern Karnataka. Barely literate, this dignified woman was previously employed as a cook in a middle school run by the government. “Some of us local, socio-economically marginalised women decided to form a group to save small amounts of money so that we can rotate it amongst ourselves as per the needs of individuals,” she says. “We have regular meetings where we discuss operational and financial matters. In addition to that we deliberate on how to handle social and personal matters related to our gender, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, education of girls,



Palaniamma, 36, a tailor in Tiruppur.

reproductive rights and other health matters,” she adds.

As the leader of the SHG, the group’s activities took up considerable time, because of which Kannamma decided to resign her job. “My family slowly began to appreciate my work and provide all the support that I need. I travel to other parts of Karnataka to provide awareness on starting and running SHGs, the importance of women in leadership, political governance structures, etc,” she adds.

Palaniamma, age 36, who has studied up to Class VII, has a different tale to tell. She was employed in an exploitative garment factory in Tirupur near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, for some years, but courageously managed to quit the job. She now works as an independent seamstress and supplies her

products to textile manufacturers. Palaniamma has a daughter who is in her early twenties and has completed her graduation because of the encouragement provided by her mother. The younger woman works as a tailor and lives with her husband in a town in the northern region of Karnataka.

In Chikballapur, also in Karnataka, is Muniratnamma, age 27. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Humanities. “Ever since I completed my graduation, I have been trying for a job in a government institution as per my entitlement under the quota for physically challenged persons. That has been denied me under one pretext or the other. For the last few months, I have been a human rights advocacy volunteer at Karnataka Vikalachetanara Sangha, a collective for the advancement of people with disabilities. I am also following up with government officials regarding my job opportunities under the guidance of Kiran, the feisty founder of the organisation who is a wheelchair user of my age. I hope to get a job, as I need to complement the income of my daily wage labourer husband, particularly for the sake of our children.”

Kiran is a transgender who hails from an *adivasi* (tribal) community in Telangana. He relocated to Bangalore a few years ago with his partner after their families refused to accept their gender identity. He is an inspiring individual who has faced different types of discrimination with courage and confidence.

Thirty-eight-year-old Chaya is a domestic worker who migrated to Mumbai as a child with her parents from Mahboobnagar, an arid district in Telangana. Forced to drop out of school to look after her younger siblings after



Renukamma, 62, a self-help group leader in Gadag.



Muniratnamma, 27, a social worker in Chikballapur.

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FOCUS

An unsung visionary and a philanthropist

This year marks the centenary of an institution founded by a remarkable man who, from straitened beginnings, went on to combine best of processes from Ayurveda with modern facilities and a strong ethical base, and set in motion an endeavour which is both profitable and socially relevant. Not only did B. V. Pundit help resurrect and propogate Ayurveda as an alternative to modern allopathic medicine, he also used his earnings for charitable community work, giving generously for deserving causes

SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN, Bengaluru

Photos: from Sadvaidyashala



B.V. Venkatesha Murthy with his book, Medicinal Plants of Arogyashram.

The centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's return to India was observed last month; there are so many other anniversaries of pioneering Indians who contributed significantly to national resurgence through exemplary lifestyles that do not always get the public acknowledgements they deserve. One such is the birthday on February 23, of B.V. Pundit, a visionary who began with a humble effort to eke out a living, and went on to build a famous *vaidyashala* (school) and *arogyashram* (health centre) that have set benchmarks for the resurgence of indigenous medicine. What is more, he returned vast portions of his profits to the community as a philanthropist.

The Sadvaidyashala of Nanjangud (an hour's drive from Mysuru in Karnataka) that he set up, has just celebrated its centenary. Senior citizens may recall a bright pink Nanjangud tooth powder sold in small paper pouches that made the name of this small town in Karnataka famous all over the south. "That tooth powder used to be so tasty, I used to eat it," recalls Sheila Iyer, while M.K. Murthy remembers alighting at Madurai Railway Station early in the morning, buying a pouch of tooth powder for four *annas* (25 paise) and cleaning his teeth at the tap on the platform before having breakfast. Behind that widely popular tooth powder (which was selling 36000 packets per day in the early 1970s, and continues

to sell 100000 packets a month in Karnataka alone, despite the spread of fancy, modern toothpastes) lies the story of B.V. Pundit (1887-1975) who manufactured it.

Born as a posthumous child, his mother, a young widow, could only afford to send him to a school that trained youngsters in Ayurveda. There, he picked up knowledge about herbal preparations. His mother would send him to nearby hills to collect medicinal leaves and roots which she turned into herbal preparations. He helped her in selling these, beginning with the tooth powder. Soon, he moved on to other curative preparations, after training at an Ayurvedic college which offered scholarships and concessions for needy students.

Pundit set up the Sadvaidyashala at Nanjangud as a small commercial unit, with a staff of four (himself, his mother, his wife, and the manager Narayana Rao) and a capital of Rs 300 which he had borrowed. Out of these modest beginnings grew a large facility for research, manufacture and marketing of a wide range of Ayurvedic formulations worth lakhs that made B.V. Pundit a household name. The train by which tooth powder packets were sent from Nanjangud to Mysuru came to be known as Tooth Powder Express. And to think that initially Pundit used to cycle to Mysuru on alternate days to sell the medicines prepared by his mother and wife!

Among the touching details of his life are the fact that Pundit and his widowed mother lived in a small room paying a rent of one rupee per month while he was a student; he earned three rupees a month giving tuitions to students while he was himself a teenager, graduating to a monthly salary of Rs 10 as an apprentice to an Ayurvedic expert. The modest house, Dhanvantari Vilas (named after the deity of medicine) that he subsequently built for himself, still stands, next to the sprawling new Sadvaidyashala

factory with over 60 employees who carefully measure, mix and grind ingredients drawn mainly from the private herbal garden containing over 324 varieties of medicinal trees, plants and bushes. Several ingredients come from the Himalayas and from far off states like Rajasthan.

The *vaidyashala* today combines the best of processes from a 4000-years-old tradition (the oldest among medical systems practiced today) with modern facilities and a strong ethical base, treating its products not as profit generators (although shareholders do get regular double digit dividends) but as a sacred social endeavour. A testing lab strictly monitors quality control.

One of the decisions made when the Sadvaidyashala was set up, was to provide medicines free to poor patients. Building on the popularity of the brand, a clinic, pharmacy and *arogyashram* were added in 1960, and now draw patients from as far away as Germany for treatment of obesity, stress and other ailments. Even the ambience of the clinic and treatment conclave, in the midst of the herbal garden, suffuses the visitor with a sense of peace and rejuvenation (the municipality is considering acquiring a part of the herb garden to widen the road in the face of growing

traffic, but the loss of valuable heritage will not make up for reduced travel time).

Such was the phenomenal reputation of the Ayurvedic initiative that the Maharaja of Mysore and Dewan Mirza Ismail visited the facility and paid tribute to Pundit's work. The road where the *vaidyashala* is situated, known earlier as 13th Cross, is now named B.V. Pundit Road. As one walks through the different units of the *vaidyashala* today, the fragrance of cinnamon, cloves, ginger and various other spices fill the air. Of the 100-odd preparations that the *vaidyashala* puts out, musicians in particular swear by the efficacy of the delicious Kofex (liquid) and Amodini (pills) while the Bhavna Shunti, a very tasty digestive made from sun dried ginger steeped in special salt, is a perennial favourite with children and adults alike.

The original pink tooth powder has now made way to a paste, but the recipes remain faithful to the ancient texts that testify to the advanced medical knowledge that our ancestors had, explains doctors Rajesh Sreenivasan and N.B. Ramgopal, who now oversee the production processes at the factory, as the third generation of descendants of the patriarch. Of Pundit's children, one son,



B.V. Pundit started in a humble way to eke out a living.

Dr Krishnamurthy went on to become a respected economist, while another, Professor B.V. Srikantan, retired as director of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai and is now associated with the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bengaluru.

The meteoric success that B.V. Pundit saw in life, going from straitened circumstances to fame and wealth, did not affect his philosophical bent or compassion for others at the grassroots. Not only did Pundit help resurrect and propogate Ayurveda as an alternative to modern allopathic medicine (which often causes adverse side effects) he also used his earnings for charitable community work, giving generously for deserving causes—including donations to build a children's ward and a girls school, and guest houses for tourists and pilgrims visiting the Srikanteswara Temple that the town is famous for. His ethics prompted immense loyalty from his employees. The story goes that an orphan whom his mother had brought up and who subsequently joined Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar's palace kitchen and became the ruler's favourite cook, left the job because he was not given leave to attend Pundit's 60th birthday celebrations.

Pundit's son, B.V. Venkatesha Murthy, who is now a consulting physician and technical advisor at the Sadvaidyashala, is a recipient of the Rajiv Gandhi Shiromani Award, and has catalogued the collection of medicinal plants that the factory's campus is home to, describing their healing powers in a detailed volume of 338 pages, complete with their scientific names, native equivalents in different languages, habitats and properties. Three generations of this Pundit family, all highly qualified specialists, have upheld standards and ethical norms through a hundred years of dedicated service to the nation's health. ■



Workers making a traditional Ayurvedic product.

Where kitchen gardens do more than just feed the family

Small farmers in remote villages of Odisha are finding that, with a little help, they can turn their kitchen gardens into profitable endeavour. In the rain-fed and drought-prone regions of Nuapada and Kalahandi Districts of Odisha, vegetable gardening is among the main means of maintaining family nutrition and a medium to enhance a farmer's economic status through marketing of surplus produce

AJIT PANDA, Kalahandi, Odisha



A kitchen garden in Gamdamer Village, Dharamgarh Block.

Sanjukta Behera lives in Badadohel, a remote village in Khariar Block of Nuapada District in Odisha. She uses one-fourth of her two-acre plot for cultivation of vegetables. The source of irrigation is a well with a traditional water lifting device called *tenda*. While one person (usually a man) lifts water in a tin bucket from the well using the *tenda* and pours it into a channel, two others distribute that among the plants. "It takes around three hours everyday to water the field and one more hour for work like weeding and digging," says Sanjukta. "The land repays your labour; the more you work the more you get." The plot meets the nutritional needs of the family and also generates marketable surplus.

Srinivas Behera of the same village cultivates half an acre to produce onions, brinjals, tomatoes and chillies. The income from the crops helps Srinivas finance his son's education at the local college in addition to meeting the day-to-day expenses of the family.

The experience of Chhatar Majhi and Ujal Majhi, two marginal farmers of Kusumkhunta Village in Boden Block, is also the same. Two years ago, the families were getting insufficient returns from their monsoon-dependent agriculture. Things started changing when they got funding support to dig farm ponds under the MGNREGA Scheme. Chhatar dug the pond and started cultivating vegetables like onions, sunflower and ladies finger. He now earns around Rs 20000 every year from his vegetable garden. Ujal cultivates onion in a larger

patch and a variety of crops, including sugarcane and *arhar* on the embankment of the pond he has dug. He earns between Rs 18000 and 20000.

Eight farmers out of 23 households in Kusumkhunta are engaged in vegetable gardening. Indeed, kitchen gardening is an age-old practice of farmers of this area. Every household was cultivating a variety of vegetables in their backyards for home consumption. But the picture seems to be changing. There are many more Sanjuktas, Srinivass, Chhatars and Ujals in the rain-fed and drought-prone regions of Nuapada and Kalahandi Districts of Odisha, for whom vegetable gardening is among the main means of maintaining family nutrition and also a medium to enhance their economic status through marketing of surplus produce.

"There are at least 25 households in our village for whom vegetable gardening is a way of life," say the villagers of Badadohel. The Patel community, locally known as

mali (gardener) and the Padhan sect in the districts are known for best practices of farming and gardening.

The scenario of vegetable cultivation in Kalahandi District is more or less the same as in Nuapada except in some pockets of Dharamgarh Block. In 2014-15, the area under vegetables in Nuapada District was 4448 acres, about 2.5 per cent of the total area under agricultural. In Kalahandi, the figure was less than 2 per cent. However, in eight panchayats of Dharamgarh Block, the situation is a little different due to the intervention of an NGO called Karrtabya, which is taking the lead to enhance the livelihood status of the small and marginalised farmers by raising their education and training levels to enable them to use improved technology in agriculture and at the same time increasing their ability to link themselves to the market. The result of the intervention is clearly reflected in the field.

Urbasi Naik of Gadijore Village and her husband, Kailash, a stone crusher, were earning Rs 200 per day a few years ago. Her income from the land in a good rainfall year was about Rs 15000 from 15 quintals of paddy. The couple decided to concentrate on vegetable cultivation in 2008 and expanded their quarter-acre kitchen garden to one acre. Gradually their financial situation changed. "It sounds like a magic, but it is a fact. We earned more than Rs 3 lakh last year in addition to meeting the nutritional requirements of our family. We have added more than two acres



Packaging for marketing, in Gamdamer Village.

Photos: provided by AP

of land to our family property by investing money from our vegetable business. We have also constructed two wells without getting any financial support from anyone," says Urbasi.

Malli Bag, a marginal farmer of Haldi Village in the same panchayat, earned Rs 130000 last season from cultivation of cauliflower from 0.80 acres of land. It was a great achievement for her. She had also cultivated brinjal, chillies and tomatoes in another plot of 0.85 acre, which brought an income of Rs 45000.

Rebati Gopal, Chandrakanti Naik and 780 other farmers in the operational area of Karrtabya in eight *gram* panchayats of Dharamgarh Block have been undertaking vegetable farming in 262 hectares of land and producing marketable surplus. It is interesting that some of these households are landless, but are the best vegetable cultivators. They take lands of big farmers on lease.

"There is a market. There are townships around our village within a radius of 30 km. We can take our produce to the markets ourselves, or we can ask the traders to come to the village and take the vegetables," the farmers say. Most villagers here depend on traditional water sources such as ponds, wells and streams for irrigating their crops. Use of irrigation technology varies from farmer to farmer and ranges from *tenda* to motor pumps. It depends on the quantity of water at the sources and the extent of land under cultivation, as well as the farmer's ability to spend for the technology. However, the *tenda* is the preferred method, according to Radheshyam Rana of Mandosil Village.

No official data is available on the area covered under kitchen gardening in the two districts, but it is estimated that about 10 to 15 per cent of the population do kitchen gardening. However, commercial vegetable farming in these two districts is very low except in some pockets like in the operational area of Karrtabya, where the extent of land under commercial vegetable cultivation has gone up. "The area under vegetable crops in our intervention area has increased from less than 1 per cent to about 7 per cent now," says Ashok Pattnaik, executive director of Karrtabya.

The adoption of commercial practices in vegetable gardening is, however, not altogether safe. Many other problems have cropped up along with the expansion, like the inability of the farmers to tackle plant diseases, non-availability of quality seeds and monopoly of seed traders, the problem of getting agricultural labour, etc. Some farmers have also started complaining about the prices they get for their produce. ■



Women who are being trained in agriculture and have taken to farming easily enjoy sharing their experiences at a meeting.

VIDURA

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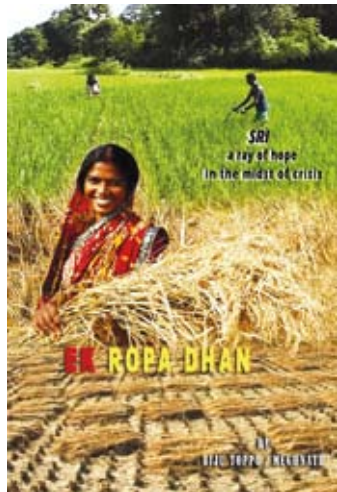
A group of like-minded people try and increase the involvement of *adivasis* in the world of art and literature, with the help of documentary films focussed on their struggles, problems and issues associated with their lives and work

SHOMA A. CHATTERJI, Kolkata

"They wanted to bury us. They did not know we were seeds." (Mexican proverb)

Bijoo Toppo is one of the first *adivasi* (belonging to a tribal group) filmmakers to effectively use the medium of cinema to counter the misrepresentation of his community by mainstream media. His films have bagged national awards and international recognition. Meghnath is an activist working in Jharkhand for the past 30 years. He has been a part of the people's struggle against destructive development. As a filmmaker, he has tried to document the voice of the section of people who remain unheard and also unseen. He makes films with Bijoo and also teaches in the Mass Communication Department of St Xavier's College, Ranchi. Together, they founded an organisation in the 1990s, along with some committed youngsters. They called it Akhra.

Akhra or Akhara signifies a 'group without attachment'. Originally, it denoted a Hindu religious denomination said to belong to the *Vaishnava sampradaya* headed by Mahant Bhaskar Das. But Meghnath begs to differ. "Traditionally, an *akhra* was an open space in the village for community meetings and entertainment. Historically, it was a seat of learning. Unlike the traditional *ashrama* system where the master could choose his disciples, an *akhra* was accessible to all. But today, for us, *akhra* means a group of



Posters and scenes (above, right and below) from some of the films made by Akhra.

committed people, comprising mainly youth from indigenous population groups working in the field of culture, communication and human rights issues of the indigenous (tribal) people of India in general and Jharkhand in particular," he says.

"In the 1990s, we, along with a group of young people, put our heads together to evaluate the development in *adivasi* society. The common feeling that came across is that though *adivasi* had advanced to some extent in the field of government service and in sports, they did not have much of a presence in the fields of literature and journalism. This led to the formation of a group of like-minded people to try and fill this gap, perhaps with the help of documentary films focussed on the struggles, problems and issues involving

the lives and work of *adivasi*. Akhra was born in 1996," says Meghnath.

Over the past 20 years, Akhra has made around a dozen documentary films on various issues directly linked to *adivasi* in various pockets of Jharkhand. Some of them have won national awards. Akhra also makes communication films to spread information, education and awareness among the *adivasi*. One of its films, *Loha Garam Hai* (The Iron is Hot), won the Best Environmental Film Award from IDPA (Indian Documentary Producers Association) Mumbai, in 2009. It is the story of people involved in the sponge iron industry. Beginning with figures and estimates about the industry that generates very high levels of pollution, the film goes on to capture the lives of people working in these factories through interviews with local *adivasi*, ordinary men and women. Pictures of the smoke from the factories engulfing the surrounding area offer a graphic image of the damage to environment and to people.

Ek Ropa Dhan is a 26-minute film by Akhra that won a prize at the 58th National Film Awards a few years ago. Set in the fields of Bihar, it explains and promotes a new technology in paddy cultivation which locals call *ek ropa dhaan*. It takes a look at the basic problem of food and shows how the system of rice intensification (SRI) method can resolve it. The technique needs



Photos: provided by SC

less fertilizer, seeds, insecticides, labour and, most importantly, much less water than normal modes of cultivation.

One of the farmers interviewed says that most farmers produce less than subsistence levels and can barely live for three months on what they normally produce. But the SRI method has bettered their lives in a significant way. Such farming method was introduced by a Catholic priest, Father Henri de Laulanie, in Madagascar, around 25 years ago. One striking feature is the woman's voice heard through the film. Kunti Devi, who has adopted this method, smiles into the camera and proudly recounts how numerous farmers followed her example to adopt the SRI method and got very good results. There are dozens of rural women who not only look after their own farms but also spread the message.

"It is more important to spread the message. Our films have been screened by universities in Germany and Denmark," Meghnath says, but adds regretfully, "Ranchi University did not bother."

Another Akhra film, *Taking Sides*, is a tribute to the memory of Sister Valsa John of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary (SCJM) Order, who decided to work among the Santhal Tribes of Jharkhand fighting for their rights over land, water and forest. She joined the Rajmahal Pahar Bachao Andolan and worked with them for 15 years till she was brutally murdered on 15th November 2011 in the struggle against the Panem Coal Mines in Pachuwara Village. She was beaten to death by a gang of around 40 people who stormed into her home. She was the fourth social activist to have been killed in India that year. ■

Steely determination helps...

(Continued from page 1)

her mother passed away, she has also supported the education of her niece and nephew, the adolescent children of her younger sister, who live with her at present. "I started working in my late teens and decided to remain single. Further, I see many married women experiencing many challenges irrespective of their socio-economic status. Fortunately, I have always found compassionate and empathetic employers due to which I was able to support my family financially and emotionally," Chaya says with a smile.

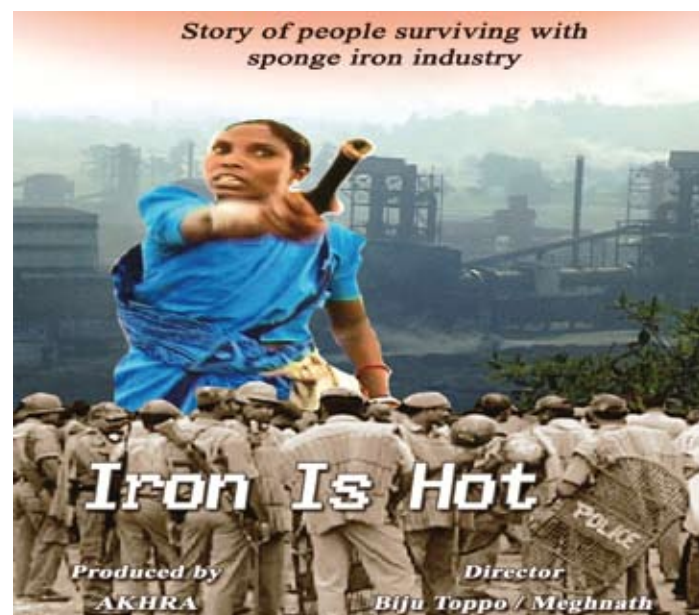
And then there are barely literate, soft-spoken yet self-

reliant women like Shabana, Vijayalakshmi and Julie (all names changed) from Bangalore whose ages range between 40 and 60. The first is a tailor who is relentlessly fighting for justice



Chaya, 38, a domestic worker in Mumbai.

for her late daughter, a victim of domestic violence. Shabana is also raising her two school-going grandchildren. Vijayalakshmi is a visually challenged street vendor who did not let anything come in the way of educating daughter Rupa, who is a college student. And Julie, once a sex worker, is now a part of a local women's collective that counsels women who earn their living from various trades on the streets braving sexual harassment and oral and physical abuse from ruffians and the police. Incidentally, her daughter, an adolescent, is training to be a professional hairdresser. ■



Becoming a landowner brings far-reaching positive outcomes

Empowering women in the workforce is critical to the success of India's growth story. With six out of ten people engaged in farming, the agriculture sector is the largest. Women, who constitute the majority here, are neither legally nor socially recognised as farmers. Lack of access and control over land is pushing them deep into a poverty trap. For the poor, a land title is the fastest way to a secure future. In Odisha, owning legal documents to their property has brought about amazing motivation and socio-economic transformation

MANIPADMA JENA, Bhubaneswar

What is stopping India from becoming one of the third largest economies in the world? Several factors. Agriculture and land rights activists do not see it happening till women farmers are not recognised and given their due. According to noted agricultural scientist-economist, Prof M.S. Swaminathan, "Women and youth farmers will determine the future of Indian agrarian and rural economy. But even though more women are taking to farming - with men migrating to urban areas for work - they do not have land titles."

According to the Landesa/Rural Development Institute (RDI), an international non-profit working on securing land rights for the poorest in states such as Odisha, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, among others, an estimated 20 million Indian families are both poor and landless, while many more do not have secure legal rights to the land they occupy and farm. This lack of access and control over land pushes families, especially women, deep into a poverty trap with no way out of it.

Of course, there is enough evidence today to demonstrate that when women are given ownership of land there are far-reaching positive outcomes, not just for them and their families but even the community at large. According to Sanjoy Patnaik, director of Landesa/RDI Odisha, "We have seen that even small plots of titled land can enhance a family's food security, nutrition and health increase access to government programmes, augment existing income and result in better social capital."

That's exactly what has happened for a few families in the Kharibandh hamlet of Ganjam, a coastal district in Odisha. Getting ownership of land to live and grow food has turned out to be a truly life changing experience for the tribal community here, which had struggled for livelihood and food security for three generations having no legal rights to the land on which they mainly produced rice through share cropping.

Three years ago, facilitated by Landesa/RDI, 13 households of the Sabar Tribe received titles to 400 square metres each (0.1 acres) of government homestead land under the state's Vasundhara Scheme. In 2003, the Government of Odisha had conducted an enumeration that established that there were more than 250000 landless families in the state. Based on this, a homestead plot allocation programme was launched in 2005-06.

In 2010, when the select Sabar families got their *pattas* (proof of land ownership), the women formed a self-help group (SHG) and converted the allotted land into flourishing vegetable gardens.

Rabibari Sabar, a 52-year-old widow, is a happy woman today. In her plot of land - that she irrigates with the help of a collectively owned foot pump that pipes pond water into it - she cultivates seasonal vegetables interspersed with lush coconut and papaya trees. While she uses the produce to feed her family, last year Rabibari also managed to put aside Rs 1500 by selling tubers and spinach at the local *haat* (village market).

For the poor, a land title is the fastest way to a secure future. Almost everything, from collateral for bank credit, legal proof of caste, income, residence, eligibility for government housing schemes, admission to schools and colleges, and even for applying for bail for an imprisoned relative or friend, is dependent on this status. Therefore, simply owning legal documents to their property has brought about amazing motivation and socio-economic transformation. The Sabar women farmers also have access to other government benefits. Elaborates a state revenue official, "With a title to their land, former female sharecroppers now get cash compensation of Rs 8000 to 10000 for each seasonal crop loss - a crucial benefit they could not access previously."

Like Kharibandh, Chilipoi, another village in Ganjam, is better off ever since people there became landowners. For instance, though the village suffers from chronic water



Photo: M/WFS

With land ownership titles, woman farmers get access to credit, among other benefits, to buy equipments that reduce the heavy farm drudgery. A woman farmer uses the treadle pump to irrigate her winter vegetable plot.

shortages, thanks to the land ownership papers that the women farmers here possess, they are eligible for a 50 per cent government subsidy on a bore well. In addition, a third of Chilipoi's households have already moved from mud huts into safer concrete homes, which they are entitled to as landowners under a federal housing scheme for the rural poor.

Unfortunately, Kharibandh and Chilipoi are small islands of progress in women's land entitlement in India. The larger reality is quite disturbing. National Advisory Council (NAC) member N.C. Saxena sees the oppressive patriarchal mindset as the main obstacle in women's struggle for securing land rights. "Patriarchy weighs so heavy on the minds of women that they find it very difficult to go against their sons, husbands and brothers, who end up taking away their land entitlement," he remarks.

This, despite the 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act 1956, which enlarged the rights of daughters and brought

them at par with sons. The Act gives women equal rights over agricultural land as well as other parental property. "Sadly, a telling indicator of the inherent bias that prevails in society is that ever since 2005 not a single official communication from the Central Government has been issued to the states that are largely reluctant to implement the amended law and replace diverse discriminatory legal clauses that still prevail. Political leaders deem it as a radical step that would not go down well with the male vote bank," observes Saxena.

Hopes of catalysing change in the status of women farmers had been pegged on the Women Farmers' Entitlement Bill - that seeks access to water, credit and inputs for women farmers - submitted by M.S. Swaminathan as a private member's bill in Rajya Sabha in May 2012. But now it seems that this bill will lapse because it has not been taken up for discussion.

Nisha Agrawal, CEO, Oxfam India, a rights-based organisation that is working on

land rights issues, feels that laws apart, if rural women themselves come together to demand their entitlements, it would give a major impetus to the women's land rights movement. This too is not a faraway reality today. Says Stephanie de Chassy, head of Social Policy and Governance Advisory Team Oxfam GB, "It is becoming increasingly evident that supported by local collectives, women are summoning the courage to demand their land rights from immediate male family members."

Presently, even though they are responsible for 60 to 80 per cent of India's total food production, only 9 per cent of rural women and overall 2 per cent women actually hold the ownership title of the land they so painstakingly till. Hopefully, the future will see more of women landowners like Rabibari Sabar ushering in good times for themselves and their communities. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

How a helpline has empowered hundreds of poor families

The LifeLines Agriculture Service, launched in 2006, reaches out to farmers in more than 2000 villages across five districts in Uttar Pradesh. It provides critical agri-advice and livelihood information to farmers over landlines and mobile phones. All that the farmer had to do is to dial his/ her designated LifeLines number and record questions with the help of an interactive voice response system. Responses are given within 24 hours. Many families across Uttar Pradesh have benefited from the service

RENU AGAL, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh

As Sunita Tiwari looks at the gooseberries growing on her 10-bigha farm in Hatkila Village in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, she smiles to herself with satisfaction. She is happy because all her hard work has paid off – after all, ever since her husband went to Haryana to work, managing the home and farm single-handedly has not been easy for her. Even her children are grown up now and have moved to a nearby town for their education.

Just a few years ago, things were very different for the family. Successive years of poor yields compelled Sunita's husband to migrate in search of better paying work. When everything, including running the farm, was left in her care she didn't think she had it in her to turn things around. But she has succeeded in doing just that.

What helped transform this quiet housewife into a prosperous farmer? It was an intervention known as the LifeLines Agriculture Service. Launched in 2006 under the LifeLines India project, it provided critical agri-advice and livelihood information to farmers over landlines and mobile phones. British Telecom, Cisco Systems and OneWorld jointly partnered the project. All that the farmer had to do was to dial his/her designated LifeLines number

and record questions with the help of an interactive voice response (IVR) system. There is a nominal call charge and responses are promptly given within 24 hours.

Many families across Uttar Pradesh, a state that tops in net out-migration in the country, have benefited from the service. According to the 2001 census, around 2.6 million people have migrated from the state in search of work. These are small landowners, who often find agriculture to be an uneconomical livelihood. So they go away to cities such as Delhi and Mumbai in search of skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled employment and send remittances home. Their wives who are left behind have the double burden of not only taking care of the elders and children in the family, but also tending to the fields and livestock. Expert farming tips a mere phone call away has therefore proved to be a big boon.

Sunita remembers the time when the lemon plants in her fields were infected by pests, or when her cattle fell sick. The much needed advice from the LifeLines Agriculture service helped her address the problems. "Recently, my potato crop was struck by pests. When I registered my query I was told to change the seeds. I have now

sown the suggested variety of seeds and am looking forward to a good harvest," she reveals.

Besides aiding farmers to solve problems related to crops, the service also renders advice on what to grow, the best varieties for particular soil types and land area, information on fertilisers and seeds available in the market, and – very important – where and how to sell produce.

It was Sunita's husband who had told her about this service, which she could use without even stepping out of the home. "Based on the advice I got from them I planted *safeda* (eucalyptus) and *amla* (Indian gooseberry), which does not require much labour. I have also grown vegetables like cabbage, brinjal and chillies, as they fetch very good prices," remarks Sunita. Having benefited from this service, Sunita informed her neighbour, Sushila Yadav, about it. Sushila's potato crop was getting destroyed by squirrels and she didn't know what to do. Once again, the LifeLines service came to her rescue.

Presently, the LifeLines Agriculture Service reaches out to farmers in over 2000 villages across five districts in Uttar Pradesh. Here's how it works. Once a farmer calls in, the IVR system registers the query as a voice clip. At the backend, a knowledge worker (KW), responsible for processing the queries, listens to all the registered queries. The answers are first looked up in the system's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) database – today, the service has a list of 490000 FAQs with ready answers.

If the answer is available in the database, it is attached to the query in the form of a voice clip or else it is forwarded to relevant experts for their input. Once a satisfactory answer is ready it is also recorded as a voice clip that is played back when the farmer calls the service to get the answer to his/her query. In addition, the system has a provision whereby the farmer can send photographs along with their queries for expert opinion.

In the last six years, the LifeLines Agriculture Service has grown to become a handy and reliable source of reference



Photo: Rahul Kumar

These are the knowledge workers who monitor the interactive voice response system of the helpline and provide answers to farmer queries. They reach out to over 150000 farmers across 2000 villages.

for more than 150000 farmers. It receives over 350 queries every day and more than 95 per cent of them are addressed within 24 hours.

Soni Gupta from Sultanpur may be all of 18 but in the absence of her father, who is working in Kolkata, she is managing their 5-bigha farmland and taking care of four cows. Soni has been discharging her responsibilities well with a little bit of guidance from experts to whom she accessed through the LifeLines service. Says she, "This service is not only economical but it also saves the trouble of going far to learn how to manage farms and cattle in a better way. A few years back we owned two cows now we have four. Moreover, I have started cultivating spinach and cauliflower, which have a big demand in the towns nearby. Of course, my father is relieved that this service is available to us at our doorstep."

Sunita T., who hails from Sultanpur, has a similar story to relate. She lost her husband ten years ago and at that time it was a challenge not just to bear the loss but take care of the family farm alone. "There was no one to tell us about the various requirements of farming. Now, with the help of this service, the family is actually reaping good profits. I was also able to grow more rewarding crops like turmeric," she says, with a smile.

Helping women like Sunita, Soni and others access the LifeLines Agriculture Service are field volunteers like Amit Tiwari. He helps them use the IVR system, register their questions and then get the responses. He is happy to report that many women farmers can now comfortably use the service.

Vidyavati from Hatkila in Amethi, whose husband works in Delhi, owns five *bighas* of land. Vidyavati recalls how she increased the milk production from her cows. She also sought a remedy for the diseases that plagued her crop of *urad* (black gram) and *dhaniya* (coriander). Proficient in new farm practices, the women are aware of better crop varieties, disease control, integrated pest management and even animal husbandry. They are now better acquainted with government schemes and market trends. And, yes, they have also picked up some easy farming tips: cowdung and buttermilk, for instance, make good pesticides. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photo: LifeLines India

Without even stepping off their fields women farmers in Uttar Pradesh now have access to expert advice through an agri-helpline service on everything from solutions to crop-related problems to information on fertilisers and seeds available and where to sell produce.

Making a big difference to rural communities

A few years ago, Sangeeta Devi was like other women in her village in Mewat District, Haryana. Her face behind a purdah, she could not speak to men of her village. When she realised that women in MGNREGA activities were not being paid their due, she spoke up for the first time. And then there was no looking back

B. JAYASHREE, Chennai

A few years ago, Sangeeta Devi was like other women in her village in Mewat District, Haryana. Her face behind a purdah, she could not speak to men of her village. When she realised that women in MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National rural Employment Guarantee Act) activities were not being paid their due, she spoke up for the first time. The government machinery took action against the erring official based on Sangeeta's complaint. That was the trigger that made her decide to do something for the village, especially women.

Sangeeta emerged from behind the purdah, roping in women who had basic education and thus the Sakshar Mahila Sangh (Group of Literate Women) was born. Over years, the group helped resolve issues from education to water to health, livelihood and public distribution to name a few. Sangeeta also pursued higher education, completing graduation and helped in training for government health and nutrition programmes.

Sangeeta's inspiring story was one of many celebrated at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation's (MSSRF) Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy Convocation recently, when Sangeeta and 228 other rural crusaders were awarded the 'fellowship' of the academy, a recognition for making a difference to rural communities. The two-day event on Information Communication Technology for Rural Development focused on hunger and sustainable development, besides launch of the Fisher Friend mobile application. Digital India and ICT and Rural Entrepreneurship being current national priorities, the event helped share knowledge for bridging the digital divide.

Htaike Htaike Aung from Nyangyong, Myanmar, one of the international fellows, spoke about efforts they are taking to provide open source technology besides linking community and service providers. Ko Ko Ye from Myanmar, who runs an initiative called 'fixmystreet', building engagement between civil groups and government in their region, said: "We have

been listening to many stories and it is great that we don't have to reinvent the wheel and can look for ICT-based but simple technology that grassroots people can use."

Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, founder, MSSRF said: "This Academy has probably no parallel in the world since its major aim is both to give recognition and to derive benefit from the unrecognised and unrewarded intellectual potential of rural and tribal families; those who may not have a formal university degree but have shown much innovativeness in developing rural economies and improving the quality of life in rural India."

Said Sangeeta, "Though I have removed the purdah from my face, I still cover my head in my village as that is the norm. I do most of the talking in our work, as many women cannot speak up. Thanks to my family's



Sangeeta Devi, a community worker from Haryana, receiving the NVA Fellowship from Prof. M.S. Swaminathan.

support, and their realisation that I am doing something good for the village, I am able to continue my work."

This is the first time that Sangeeta's work has received recognition giving her enhanced credibility in society. Her confidence in continuing the work is heartening, giving hope that she and many others like

her may continue to serve rural communities for a better life with the hope that other champions may emerge from communities across India and the world. ■

(The writer heads the The Hindu Media Resource Centre at the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.)

Pollution of marine environment a matter of serious concern

A 'hazard line' for the coastal regions of India must be prepared at the earliest to ensure that economic and urban development plans were implemented without affecting the environment or coastal livelihood, urged experts at the end of a two-day consultation at MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Chennai. The hazard line is one at which natural hazards such as adverse weather incidents and tsunami are likely to impact people and livelihoods. According to the CRZ (Coastal Regulation Zone) notification, all economic urban development activities must take the line into consideration.

Sukumar Devotta, former director, National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, and vice-president, Society for Protection of River and Marine Environment, said "The capacity of the industry as well as government

agencies that implement coastal regulation zone notification needs to be enhanced in terms of mapping, planning and monitoring so that the coastal regulation can gradually evolve into coastal management."

Experts at the consultation also expressed concern at livelihood issues. Prof. M.S. Swaminathan observed, "We talk about the economic value of the coast, but we also need to think about the social dimensions and occupational hazards of the people working there. The issue of salt workers, for instance, who face so many health issues, has now been noticed by the Tamil Nadu Government thanks to our intervention and they have been brought under the Chief Minister's Health Insurance scheme."

Participants said, the most pressing need in the context of increased awareness over Clean India, was concern about the pollution levels along

the coast and its affect on the marine environment, specifically with regard to waste disposal. The two-day meeting brought together stakeholders on one platform to outline current status of coastal zone management and document their suggestions and recommendations for future developmental planning for coastal areas, the recommendations of which would be forwarded to the ministry and relevant government departments.

The consultation was organised by Society for Protection of River and Marine Environment, National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, Indian Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Society for Integrated Coastal Management, and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute. ■

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