Samaj
Pragati
Sahayog

Hope in the Hills

TOWARDS WATER, LIVELIHOOD AND NUTRITIONAL SECURITY
IN MELGHAT REGION, AMRAVATI, MAHARASHRTA

Credits

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Photos : Authors and SPS team.

Note : This document is a compendium of stories of change in the impoverished region of Melghat in Maharashtra's Amravati district. The Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a non-profit, is currently engaged in a multi-pronged approach to bring about a social and economic change in the lives of predominantly tribal households who rely on small farm agriculture and forest-based livelihoods and are driven to migrate long distances post monsoon, in the absence of any meaningful employment. The stories portray hope generated by the SPS' work under its Tata Trusts-funded project: 'Towards Water, Livelihood and Nutritional Security in Melghat region.' The SPS Melghat team led by Swami Durke assisted the team of writers in their field work.

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किशोर बालिका और स्वयं सहायता समूह की
महिलाओं का प्रशिक्षण


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A journey into countless new possibilities

Introduction:

Nestled in the densely forested Satpuda hills of Amravati's Dharni and Chikhaldara talukas lies Melghat—a region notorious for extreme tribal poverty and malnutrition.

Its remoteness is staggering: around 320 villages scattered over 4,000 km², each isolated by steep ghats, poor roads, and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Temperatures swing from scorching near 48 °C summers to chilling winters, and monsoons often wash away the fragile lifelines—roads and electricity alike .

Approximately three-quarters of this population are tribals, predominantly Korku, Gond, and other indigenous groups, with over 75 percent living below the poverty line and more than 50 percent illiterate, according to the latest government estimates. Their traditional food ecosystem—wild tubers, fruits, crabs, and forest produce—has been disrupted by forest laws and conservation projects, leaving them dependent on unreliable cash crops or government rations.

Agriculture isn't evolved, with little surpluses to make an income from just one crop, given that the region relies on rain for irrigation. Small land holdings and low inputs makes farming not very paying. Result: overall sagging incomes, high indebtedness, and reliance on migration for making the livelihood as cheap footloose labour.

Malnutrition in Melghat hasn't been merely a health issue but a socio-economic, and cultural, calamity. Between 1992 and 1997, around 5,000 children reportedly died from starvation in this belt, with a certainty that the government estimates were under-reported.

That pattern has persisted since, claiming an estimated 6,000 more women and children by 2016: nearly 3,000 stillbirths, over 1,500 infant deaths, and 1,300 child fatalities. In 2010–11 alone, the tribal villages in Melghat saw 509 child and 20 women deaths due to hunger-related causes.

Even today, infant mortality hovers at about 48 per 1,000—higher than Maharashtra's 33 and India's 47. Maternal mortality is also elevated, despite statewide declines.

And the prevalence rates in Melghat remain sharply concerning:

- Seven per cent children suffer from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM)
- Almost 18–29 per cent suffer from Severe Underweight (SUW)

30–34 per cent of children aged 1-5 from severe stunting

Root Causes: Beyond Hunger

Several intertwined factors fuel this crisis:

Food insecurity due to single-crop dependency, poor soil, and sporadic forest produce access.

Inadequate healthcare, with insufficient staff, lack of specialists, and minimal outreach in remote hamlets; early childbearing and high birth rates compound the risk .

Sanitation and hygiene gaps, low awareness, and deep-rooted reliance on traditional healers ("bhumkas") delay life-saving care.

Early marriages—often underage—lead to low-birthweight babies and neglected antenatal care.

Migration, especially male seasonal migration, disrupts continuity of care and access to benefits.

Lack of alternative and meaningful livelihoods, virtually non-existent, people rely on one crop agriculture.

Administrative neglect, policy mismatches, and bureaucratic inertia prevent effective delivery on schemes like ICDS, MGNREGA, and nutritional supplements.

These and many other factors compound the crisis and turn it into a cesspool of problems.

The government response includes health centers, anganwadis under the Integrated Child Development Schemes (ICDS), and MGNREGA employment schemes.

Yet, fragmented implementation—highlighted by absent staff, seasonal isolation, and minimal impact—dilutes their effectiveness. Early focus leaned more towards agricultural modernisation than nutrition or holistic development, often introducing cash crops ill-suited to indigenous nutrition practices. And so, Melghat continues to face persistent challenges:

Water insecurity: hillside villages suffer dry wells in summer; tankers supply water—but dependency remains and infrastructure delays fuel mistrust.

Health systems remain weak: male doctors remain reluctant to serve tribal areas; community fatigue and low trust linger.

Economic vulnerability: single-crop farming, market dependence, limited agro-industries, debasement of traditional forest livelihoods, and debt cycles remain central issues.

Cultural resistance lingers: preference for bhumkas, reluctance towards certain foods or services, and deeply entrenched traditions complicate behaviour change.

The sustainable, gradual, way out for a positive socio-economic change therefore lies in strengthening and scaling proven community-led models, but it would take patience and time.

Enter the Samaj Pragati Sahayog:

While there have been no dearth of NGOs working in Melghat region, the entry of the Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) marked a certain departure from the earlier approaches.

The SPS started working on implementation of the MGNREGS in the region among villages as a trust building mechanism aimed at generating off-agriculture work mainly during the summers in the early phase of its approach in Melghat, but gradually moved towards a more holistic design with multiple components – central to this approach is gender; women-led initiatives mark the overall intervention; women gradually bring their male companions and children into the fold.

The current project – which this documentation work is about – therefore builds on its strong social capital and an

eclectic understanding of the issues, with a focus to bring about a holistic and meaningful socio-economic change in this vast and forested region. Supported by the Tata Trusts, the project christened 'Towards Water, Livelihood and Nutritional Security' has multi-faceted interventions, and tries to carve two paths: one relies on building community collective institutions and the second one focuses on an individual farming household betterment.

The SPS conscientiously drafts women in their work, because the gender empowerment bridges the development gaps quickly and lays the foundation for the community growth.

This project, now nearing its completion at the end of its third year, is not an exception to that approach. And the actual implementation team is a boisterous group of young and dynamic resource people roped in from a committed and motivated pool of social workers and local community men and women who have stakes in the change they want in their own villages.

Already, the foundational change can be witnessed in the before and after situations albeit it may not have yet led to a major spurt in incomes or lifestyle changes. What's critical to recognise is that this project needs to build on that foundation with handholding for some more time.

In the 20 stories that follow in this compendium, you can see the different verticals, all strongly inter-linked with each other, feeding into the creation of a new milieu in the region – something that the state government, the policy makers, and organisations in the similar space could benefit from. These are but the representative examples from scattered few villages charting a new path.

The Pillars of the Project

It starts doubtless with Agriculture.

Sustainable Agriculture: Within this rubric, there are several components: First and foremost is to wean the farmers away from the chemical and industrial production systems towards a non-pesticide management or what in this project is called as new positive management of the farms. Not easy, this transition, as the case studies show, but the small time period in which such a shift has been made by tens of farmers calls for a special mention, because the tribal and other forest dwellers in this part are ready to make a switch out of their necessity and desperation. They have witnessed the pitfalls of the previous model, and they are willing participants in this new approach. The organic farming systems or a farming that skirts using chemicals needs some training and incisive insights, but the SPS community resource persons also draw the knowledge located in the local community's traditional wisdom.

Supporting this transition is the extension system, anchored in the project work itself. How to do it? What not to do? How to ensure enhanced productivity? And how to diversify?

Each question requires a careful consideration, a sustained training and capacity building, and an algorithm that works on an auto mode. We witnessed an exuberance among the farmers who made this switch three years ago, and we see it being replicated among the other fellow farmers.

Not only are the farmers diversifying to the non-chemical mode, but also diversifying their farms from mono-cropping to multi-cropping, planting local land-races of different crops and bringing in new species – from fruit-bearing trees to millets to cash crops to vegetables and greens.

Within this rubric stands the promising model of kitchen gardens. It works both as a tool of food and nutritional security at home for the farmers, but also diversification of the products. In the long run, the expansion and upscaling of kitchen gardens would help alleviate malnutrition, if the strategy is deployed along with training of households in every single village of this region.

Within this rubric are two small interventions: one, kitchen gardens, where the beneficiaries grow their own diverse all-season greens, vegetables and fruits and sell the minor surpluses locally; and two, the setting up of the Bio-Resource Centres within the community collectives to make in the villages, bio-pesticides required by member farmers to be sprayed on their farms for pest control.

Suggestion: As they go along, the SPS needs to work on one or two game-changing crops that could translate into enhanced income by tapping into market needs through aggregation, value addition and processing at local level, and impeccable packaging and branding of the products – this, in continuation of and after having achieved the domestic and village-level food security.

Livestock: This is then a natural corollary to the vertical of sustainable agriculture. The SPS has a team that pushes for a variety of small and big ruminants, which could be tended by women on their own farm or homes for a steady and regular incomes.

We witnessed several farmers who are rearing goat and poultry alongside their small farms – and the integration of the livestock with farming has worked wonders in enhancing incomes.

Again, even in this vertical, a care has been taken to create a battery of para-vets, trained by the domain experts within the SPS and outside, and institutionalise the extension services.

Three things hurt the unorganised small ruminants sector: one, lack of good feed, inputs and timely medicines including vaccination; two, lack of good upkeep including sheds; and three, the market is scattered and beyond the comprehension of the seller, dominated by buyers.

To address the first two challenges, the SPS team adopted a strategy to train local community members given the absence of

government veterinary doctors and clinics in the region and lack of financial depth with the small farmer to invest in the better upkeep of their animals. The SPS adopted affordable designs that could be built from the locally available bio-resource, with small investments by the livestock keepers. This seems to have helped, but livestock integration with their farms is an ongoing process and would naturally take time for better returns and economic gain. However, a strong foundation has been laid for the future upscaling and market linkages.

A local Korku couple manages the animal clinic in a village, in a building donated by the village panchayat to start the key service in the benefit of the local communities.

One of the model experiments that we could not see since it's still in the infancy stage is the concept of goat bank, learnt

from the model currently working in Akot tehsil of Akola district of Vidarbha region. Under this model, the bank, anchored in the community of keepers, gives two goats and two offsprings to a family, with the condition that the beneficiary family would pass on an offspring per goat to other households – that is two progenies – ensuring that the benefits are passed on and reach more families over time, creating a sustainable community-driven cycle. The first batch of beneficiaries with 30-odd families has started the bank. It'll gradually expand.

At some stage, this activity would need to be studied in detail for its benefit and potential.

Because this removes the problem of capital access to the farmer household without putting the burden of borrowing loan from financial institutions. It banks on the social capital and trust.

As the outcome in the latest quarterly report of this project suggests: The beneficiary farmers rearing the livestock sold as many as 626 goats in the past year generating a cumulative income of Rs 39.31 lakh, while the backyard poultry farmers sold birds valued at Rs 2.41 lakh and eggs for an income of Rs 11,050. This is no small a feat. In the given circumstances, it is impressive.

Watershed Management: In-situ water conservation by improving watersheds are an important constituent to augment agriculture and livestock incomes, since water run-off is very high on the hilly terrain. One of the innovative interventions is on an existing small dam that's three decaeds old and provides surface water irrigation to four or five villages.

The dam's distribution system is in a bad shape and needed repairs – in fact the open canals are a nagging headache since the waters breach the distributaries and channel and flood the farms ruining the crops and leading to losses. The state irrigation officials don't have budgets for the repairs. The SPS has set up micro-piped distribution networks (PDN) on this dam's main canal by leveraging the principles of participatory irrigation, as one story in this compendium shows.

Apart from this, the SPS has leveraged the MGNREGA funds to push for watershed works in the villages that suffer from water scarcity in non-monsoon months, particularly the summers. So intertwined in the overall intervention is the effort to converge the government schemes by supporting the village panchayats and communities and other institutions to seek government funds to bridge the gaps and provide relief. This brings in the component of 'services' offered by the SPS staff to the village communities alongside implementation of its key interventions.

Suggestion: What the SPS could do is to study the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act, 2004, and Rules, 2005, to mobilise the water users on this dam and turn them into a federated command-area water user association

to manage the operations of the system, thereby fulfilling the mandate of this law modelled on the PIM principles. It would not take much time to complete this task, but it would build strong institution of water governance on this small dam. A preliminary workshop could be held in Dharni after monsoon this year.

Women Self Help Groups: This small intervention which started across the world in the mid-1990s forms the backbone of the entire project work; it aims to collectivise women and transform them into strong institutions that could slowly take over the work from the SPS and become the engines of their community.

The aims are multi-fold: The SHGs improve the women's financial literacy and access to all the government programmes, banks, and social and welfare schemes. It taps the pregnant women or malnourished children

who need a special health care and urgent medical interventions. Then, it also mobilises women to create a space and voice within the community in planning and village policy formulation, bringing in a transformation in them from being meek witnesses to agencies.

Turning the women from beneficiary into an agency is the hallmark of the project – this would need a protracted engagement, constant training and capacity building, and perseverance.

Some stories in this compendium therefore focus on how once absolutely mute spectators, these women have found a new voice and energy through the SHGs, and are ready to found income-oriented social enterprises rooted in agriculture, allied activities as well as village services.

As the SPS project data show, the SHG programme was rolled out across 34 villages identified in Dharni tehsil for interventions, leading to formation of nearly a hundred SHGs with about 1150 women members. Their accumulated savings today stand at around Rs 34 lakh. In this period, the SHGs have availed low-interest loans totalling Rs 1.5 crore with nearly a hundred per cent repayment rate. Many of the women leaders of their SHGs went on exposure trips, were trained in book keeping and accounting, and gained practical insights in the functioning of the SHGs.

Key Issues and Challenges as identified by the SPS Melghat team:

Electricity Issues: Farmers face frequent low-voltage power supply, which disrupts irrigation schedules, adversely impacting crop growth and farm productivity. A reliable power supply is critical for ensuring healthy crop development and achieving optimal yields.

The pre-monsoon season: May 2025 posed significant challenges to agricultural farms, primarily due to untimely rain interspersed with high temperatures. These conditions led to soil moisture depletion, delayed sowing preparations, and increased pest attacks, creating uncertainty for farmers and impacting overall crop planning for the upcoming monsoon season.

Limited Access to Organized Livestock Markets: Farmers lack access to large livestock markets, compelling them to sell animals in local informal markets where prices are considerably lower. This limits income potential and reduces the profitability of smallholder livestock farming.

Banking Constraints: Persistent delays in account opening by banks have slowed financial activities within SHGs, sometimes resulting in the closure of sponsored groups. This remains a major impediment to effective financial inclusion and timely fund mobilization.

Migration and Employment Challenges: Due to limited local employment opportunities, many households migrate to distant places for work, disrupting families, causes school dropouts among children, and leads to poor management of household and farm-related responsibilities.

Delays in Wage Payments and Limited Employment Days: Under the MGNREGA scheme, beneficiaries are entitled to only 100 days of employment, after which they often migrate in search of work. Delays in wage disbursement further aggravate financial stress among rural households, diminishing trust in the scheme and further fuelling migration trends.

Conclusion: A Journey, Not a Destination

Melghat's narrative invites humility. Over three decades and countless lives later, the crisis hasn't vanished. But pockets of hopeful transformation—kitchen gardens, tribal health workers, community forest rights, and empowered SHGs—have taken root. The beauty lies in the approach: with communities, not for them—aligning resilience with tradition and dignity.

The future hinges on integrating health, nutrition, water, livelihoods, and culture—not as separate programs, but as cohesive community systems.

The vivid lessons from the SPS's ongoing Melghat programme offer a blueprint not just for this region, but for tribal ecosystems across India.

This is therefore that story – of the journey into countless new possibilities, not the destination.

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Agriculture and Livestock

1 A Part Apart

The Commander of Agricultural Transformation in the Korku Community
Bhulori, Dharni (Amravati)

In Dharni Taluka, the sowing season has begun. Farmers head to their fields at the break of dawn, a hoe slung over the shoulder, accompanied by their oxen. Around 10 a.m., their wives arrive with lunch bundles of bhakri and chutney balanced on their heads, children in tow. Soon, the entire family is hard at work in the field. At such a time, farmers can't spare even a moment. Saint Tukaram once wrote, "He covers the corpse and proceeds with the sowing"—that's how relentless the agricultural life is.

And yet, when a thin and tall Ashok Bhelawekar arrives on his bike at a farm, the farmer knows he's come with important, beneficial knowledge. Even in the rush of work, they pause to listen. Ashok has earned their trust. His journey, too, began in the soil of the Korku community.

Ashok is 30. His household understands only two languages: Korku and farming. His father was the village police patil, but beyond that, all family identity is rooted in agriculture. Ashok tried to pursue higher education and even enrolled in a Bachelor of Science (BSc) programme.

However, financial hardship meant he could only study until the second year. With education cut short, he turned to farming—but his hunger to learn didn't end.

Following his father's instructions, he began sowing seeds and applying chemical fertilizers. But over time, his faith in chemical farming and its impact on the soil began to waver. He realized: the soil needs to be brought back to life. This insight became the turning point of his life.

Ashok turned to organic farming. While working with a small organization on organic practices, he met Mangesh Kharate, a Chief Minister's Fellowship recipient. Kharate introduced him to Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), an organization promoting sustainable agriculture in tribal areas.

In 2017, SPS decided to develop local grassroots workers—and that's when Ashok's journey with them began. His ease of communication in Korku, his familiar face, and his hands-on understanding of farming made him the right fit. But the path ahead wasn't easy.

"Where do they come from, thinking they can teach us?"

Initially, villagers mocked him with comments like "Kaha-kaha se aa jaate, aur humko sikhate" ("Where do they come from, trying to teach us?"). Farmers wouldn't attend meetings, or if they did, they were dismissive. Ashok was ridiculed. But he didn't give up. He went door-to-door with applications, speaking in Korku, trying to understand their problems. When people began to feel he was one of them, he started explaining government schemes. In the first two years, he managed to connect with just 100 farmers. Today, he works with over 400 farmers across five villages.

He acts as a bridge for them—connecting them to organic fertilizers, NADEP composting, Bio-Resource Centers (BRC), crop planning (Peak Vivek), and market opportunities.

Taking Flight with SPS

SPS didn't just provide him with information—they trained him in process. He received structured training in communication, counseling, sustainable agricultural practices, and leadership. Sessions in Dharni and Nimkheda broadened his perspective.

His work began to bear fruit. Farmers started seeing the benefits of organic farming. Ashok, once mocked, became someone people sought after. The same community that once doubted him now follows him eagerly. Today, he is a source of inspiration. Farmers call him to ask, "When will you visit? We need your guidance."

Through SPS, Ashok has gained not only financial stability and social standing but also deep personal growth. Once hesitant to even speak publicly, he now stands confidently before his community. Ashok has also brought other Korku youth into the work. Many are now following in his footsteps. He says, "I belong to their community. I'm a farmer too. I understand their challenges and dreams. That's why it's my responsibility to help answer their questions."

What if the project shuts down someday? When asked this, Ashok looks you in the eye—not with fear, not confused—and says:

"We won't let the project shut down, sir. We'll give it everything we've got."

And if the project does shut down? He pauses, thinks deeply, then says calmly:

"Sir, SPS hasn't sold us fish—they've taught us how to fish. Even if the project ends, we'll find our own way. I'll do organic farming. I'm connected to over 400 farmers—something or the other will work out. If nothing else, I'll set up a BRC and sell organic treatments. I'll do experimental farming myself. We'll do something—but we won't sit idle or lose heart."

Ashok's story is not just about his personal journey—it reflects the emergence of a new vision from within the tribal community. Today, he is not merely a representative of an NGO—he is a carrier of a movement. Just as crops need rain to grow, they also need dedication, self-confidence, and a sense of purpose. Ashok possesses all three in abundance, and he's safeguarding the future of the Korku community.

Today, SPS has empowered many like Ashok. Tomorrow, these individuals can contribute to diverse local projects and missions. These are not raw hands—they are trained, skilled, and ready to serve in government, semi-government, or private initiatives.

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Agriculture and Livestock

2 In the Shade of Fruit Trees, a Dream of Prosperity

The quiet determination of Laxmi Mawaskar from Berda Barda
Berda Barda, Dharni (Amravati)

Tucked away in the folds of the Satpura hills, seven or eight kilometers off the main road, lies Berda Barda—a tribal village where the soil still holds warmth in its womb, and farmers still look skyward with hope before they sow. This is where a quiet story of resilience is taking root, told by the hands of a smallholder couple—Laxmi and Kunjlal Mawaskar.

This isn't yet a tale of triumph. There are no headlines, no awards. But there is something sturdier taking shape: the roots of long-term income, planted under the tender shade of fruit trees.

A Different Kind of Farming

Their family has been farming on their seven-acre land—partly sloped, partly flat—for generations. Cotton was once the lifeline crop. But like many in this region, the Mawaskars bore the brunt of falling prices and pest attacks. The yield was always uncertain, and income fluctuated like the monsoon.

A few years ago, they crossed paths with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), an organisation working with tribal farmers on sustainable, organic farming. That's when things slowly began to shift.

They experimented—swapping some cotton for maize, tur, rice, and chickpeas. SPS taught them to use organic compost, prepare homegrown pest repellents, and manage water efficiently. It worked. Their yields remained steady, and farming felt less like a gamble.

Kunjlal recalls, "Earlier, if the cotton failed, the year was gone. Now, even if one crop doesn't work, another carries us through. At least we have something to show by the end of the season."

Planting for the Future

With that foundation of stability, SPS suggested another idea: "You have seven acres. Why not plant just five saplings each of a few fruit trees?"

It was a simple proposition. And yet, to the Mawaskars, it felt like a missed opportunity—something they could have

done long ago. With renewed excitement, they took the plunge.

Three years ago, they planted mango, guava, jackfruit, lemon, sapota, and custard apple—all provided by SPS at no cost. It wasn't a huge investment, but it was a long bet.

"We've decided our fruit orchard will be 100% organic," says Laxmi, with quiet pride. "The rest of the crops—some are still chemical-based, but not the trees."

Labour of Love

Watering. Weeding. Composting. Protecting tender saplings from grazing animals. This became part of their daily rhythm.

"The first year, there's nothing," Laxmi smiles. "The second year, the tree just grows taller. But this third year… now they're taking shape. The guavas and lemons have even started fruiting—just enough for home for now, but it's a sign. A sign that something real is beginning."

A Glimpse of Tomorrow

They're not selling anything yet—but the sparkle in Laxmi's eyes says it all. She sees golden mangoes drooping from branches, baskets of guavas ready for market, sacks of custard apples waiting to be weighed.

"Not this year," she says, "but in two years, we'll definitely be selling."

Kunjlal is a little more grounded. "Sahab, nothing in farming is certain. What if the whole crop fails one year? Then at least we'll have fruit to fall back on. That's the plan."

He pauses, then adds, "Like organic farming, I think this too will succeed. It just needs some patience."

And there, in his simple words, lies the wisdom of rural economics—of building backup plans, of not putting all your seeds in one field.

The Mawaskars aren't chasing quick riches. They're tending to a future—slowly, stubbornly, under the shade of saplings that will one day bear fruit, not just for their table, but for their livelihood.

Their story reminds us: resilience isn't always loud. Sometimes, it's just a woman watering trees and a man quietly counting years—not profits.

Agriculture and Livestock

3 Planting a Mango Tree in Old Age for Next Gen

The Organic Farming Journey of
Ram Singh Dhandey
Lakatu, Dharni (Amravati)

"My life is more than halfway over. I was taking risks with chemical farming anyway. So I thought — why not take a new risk? You plant a mango tree in old age not for yourself, but for your future generations to enjoy."

That quiet yet resolute voice belongs to Ram Singh Bhuriya Dhandey, a 68-year-old farmer from Lakatu, a small tribal village nestled deep within the forested hills of Maharashtra's Dharni taluka.

Located 27 km from Dharni, Lakatu is tucked away in a cluster of undulating hills and thick forests. The village, largely home to the Korku tribal community, may seem remote to an outsider, but for Ram Singh, this is home — the soil of which he's learning to rebuild, quite literally, in the twilight of his life.

We reached his farm mid-morning, after navigating a rough mud trail that veered off into the woods. Parking near a small rise, we spotted a wooden shelter under a mango tree — a resting spot. Ram Singh's son informed us, "Baba is in the field. He'll be back soon."

And sure enough, within minutes, Ram Singh emerged — climbing down the slope briskly, a cloth wrapped around his head, an axe in hand, and a smile on his face.

"Ram Ram Sahab... these wild boars are a menace, have to stay alert all the time!"

he said with a chuckle, setting the tone for what turned out to be an extraordinary story of change.

From Chemical Farming to Organic Wisdom

Ram Singh once relied entirely on chemical farming, mostly cotton. Over time, excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides degraded the quality of the soil. Yields dropped, costs soared, and the family faced food insecurity.

"There were times we survived on just one meal a day," he says, the memory still vivid.

It was during these difficult years that Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a grassroots NGO working across tribal areas of Maharashtra, started engaging with farmers in Lakatu. The organisation introduced him to the fundamentals of organic farming. But changing one's ways after decades of routine is never easy.

"Old habits die hard," he says, half-laughing. Still, at the age of 64, he took the leap.

"What did I have to lose? I'd already risked enough with chemical farming. This was a chance to leave behind something better. A mango tree planted in old age still gives fruit — maybe not to me, but to my children's children."

Compost, Crops, and a Kitchen Garden

Today, Ram Singh's farm looks remarkably different. A NADEF unit churns out organic compost. His soil is visibly richer, darker, and more moisture-retentive. He now grows a mix of crops — cotton, maize, soybean, chickpeas, sorghum, and paddy — on the same land that once barely sustained a single crop.

Behind his house, a narrow winding path leads to a neat little kitchen garden.

"Why spend money at the market when we have land?" he asks rhetorically.

The garden thrives with lemons, brinjal, spinach, fenugreek, and okra — enough to feed the family without buying vegetables for months.

Goats, a Shed, and a Guardian Dog

Another key shift has been livestock integration. SPS helped Ram Singh build a goatshed that now protects his animals from monsoon diseases — a major problem earlier.

"Last year, I sold a goat for ₹18,000. That's good money. And the breed I've raised now is strong and healthy," he beams.

To protect them from wild predators — the village lies close to leopard and tiger territory — Ram Singh keeps a strong, native watchdog.

"He's smarter than he looks, Sahab. Doesn't let crows near the goats, let alone a wild cat. Always stays close — to the animals and to me," he says fondly.

The bond between the man, his animals, his land, and the surrounding forest is unmistakable — deep-rooted and instinctive.

Healthier Land, Healthier Life

The transformation wasn't just agricultural. SPS supported Ram Singh with veterinary access, vaccinations, poultry care, and regular animal health check-ups at the nearby health post.

His animals are now healthier, disease-resistant, and yield better returns.

Ram Singh's is a story of practical wisdom meeting brave experimentation. He accepted change not only in his methods but in his mindset.

His home, farm, animals, goatshed, the dog, the kitchen garden — they all come together as part of a new life rhythm that values resilience and regeneration.

"Sometimes I wonder — what if I had known all this earlier?" he says wistfully.

"But then I think: better late than never."

Ram Singh Bhuriya Dhandey's story is proof that sustainability isn't a fad — it's a way of life, one that even a farmer in his sixties can embrace, and thrive in. His organic shift may have started late, but it is planting seeds for a future much richer than the past.

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Agriculture and Livestock

4 A Life Rebuilt by a Single Goat

The Inspiring Story of Jugru Dhandey
Lakatu, Dharni (Amravati)

"We had no land. But the goat gave our life a footing, Sahab. That's why we'll never sell her."

In a small corner of Lakatu village, tucked away in the forested interiors of Dharni taluka, lives Jugru Zungaru Dhandey — a tribal daily-wage labourer whose life took a dramatic turn, not with money or land, but with one goat.

This is a story of survival, loss, and quiet resilience. A story of how one animal became a lifeline — and ultimately, a legacy.

Jugru comes from a long line of goat herders. But after marriage, he wanted to try something different. He left his village to find work as a labourer and, trusting family, handed over all his goats to his sister's husband.

"I thought, my brother-in-law will take care of the goats. I'll earn wages. Together we'll manage," Jugru recalls.

But things didn't go as planned. The brother-in-law refused to return the goats. Fights followed, harsh words were exchanged — and Jugru was left with only one goat.

"From 20 goats, I was down to just one. It was the lowest point of my life," he says.

The Goat That Changed Everything

That one remaining goat, however, became his strength. Slowly, her offspring began to grow in number. Bit by bit, his courtyard began to fill again with the familiar bleats of goats.

It was around this time that Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) stepped in. They guided Jugru on building a proper goat shed — protecting the animals from monsoon illnesses.

"Earlier the goats would fall ill in the rain, some would even die. Now with the shed, they're safe," he says with visible relief.

Today, Jugru owns 27 goats. He sells the males when needed — recently fetching ₹13,500 for one. The income goes toward

household expenses and his children's education.

But his bond with goats goes beyond economics.

Not Just Livestock — Family

"The goat brought us prosperity. She brought Lakshmi into our home. How can I ever sell her?"

Jugru says firmly.

He never sells a female goat. He only sells bucks. Not even to SPS, which sometimes buys female goats for other families under their Goat Bank programme.

"I told them — take a buck if you want, but not the goat. I didn't raise her — she raised us," he says, emotion thick in his voice.

Nor does he eat goat meat. He eats chicken, yes — but goat meat is out of bounds for him and his family.

Poultry as a Second Pillar

Encouraged by SPS, Jugru also ventured into poultry. He built a modest poultry shed near his home, and now rears 20 indigenous hens. Their eggs fetch a good price at local markets.

"The hens are a steady source of income too. We get eggs regularly, and sometimes sell a hen for ₹1,000 or so."

The earnings help with groceries, school supplies, and medical expenses — smoothing the bumps of daily life.

From Labourer to Livestock Farmer

Jugru and his family still do manual labour. But now, they are no longer completely dependent on it.

"Earlier we survived only on wages. Now it's goats, hens, and labour — all three keep us going."

His goatshed, poultry pen, and sweat-drenched work ethic have transformed his life.

Today, Jugru Dhandey is recognised in his village as one of the first Korku tribal farmers to adopt goat and poultry farming at scale. His neighbours look to him for inspiration.

"People in the village say — if Jugru could do it, so can we," he says, smiling with pride.

Jugru regularly vaccinates his animals. With SPS's support, his goats and hens

are now healthier and disease-free. The protective shed has drastically reduced losses.

And every day, the bleating of goats and the clucking of hens echo through his courtyard — a vibrant, living soundtrack of a life slowly rebuilt.

"We don't own land. But the goat and hen have given us ground to stand on,"

he says — eyes gleaming, words filled with gratitude.

In the Korku community, animals are not just assets. They are family. They are stories. They are survival.

And Jugru Dhandey's story is living proof — that even a single goat can seed a whole new beginning.

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Hope in the Hills

Agriculture and Livestock

5 The 'Baba Brand': One Farmer, Five Frontiers

From organic farming to fishery, a tribal farmer's story of quiet innovation
Jutpani, Dharni, (Amravati)

Just before the road veers off into the forested village of Jutpani in Dharni taluka, a cheerful figure often sits under a shady tree, selling guavas, lemons, or seasonal fruits in a cane basket.

That's Baba Zholya Mawaskar — not a fruit vendor by trade, but a progressive and enterprising farmer, whose roadside stand is just a side hustle. In fact, locals have come to call his many experiments and earthy wisdom the "Baba Brand" — a symbol of farming that is diversified, organic, local, and quietly revolutionary.

At 60, born and raised entirely in the field, Baba is living proof that age is no bar to creativity. His story reflects how the seeds of innovation are taking root even in the tribal Korku communities of Melghat.

"I was born in the fields, and never left them."

That's how Baba sums up his life with a smile and then a profound silence.

"For me, it's always been farming. I was born in a field," he says, wiping sweat off his forehead with a turban cloth.

His early years were dominated by cotton — an expensive, chemically-intensive crop. "Cotton drained me. Every year I spent more, earned less. It was frustrating," he says.

That frustration led him to seek change. His turning point came when he connected with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a grassroots non-profit working in the region.

"They told me: don't rely on just one crop, and stop using chemicals. I listened. I turned my entire farm around," Baba recalls with a laugh.

Beyond Grain: Fruits, Vegetables, Livestock – and Fish

Today, the Baba Brand is more than a name — it's a multi-front model of self-reliant farming. Baba now grows a variety of crops: paddy, maize, pigeon pea, chickpea — all organically. His land, once depleted, has begun to regenerate. But he didn't stop there.

In 2008, despite a water crisis, he planted his first mango sapling. “There was no water then, but later we got a borewell through a government scheme,” he says. Soon he added lemon, guava, and ber (Indian jujube or berries) to the mix. Today, his farm blooms with fruit trees — and so does his small basket at the roadside.

“My farm is right before the village entrance. Travellers stop. I sell everything right here. No need to go to the market,” he says with pride.

He also grows leafy greens and vegetables — spinach, coriander, eggplant, desi tomatoes — in his backyard garden for household use.

“Fresh vegetables every day, no market cost. Our expenses have come down,” he says.

Resilient Chickens, Rain-Proof Coop

Baba always kept chickens, but monsoons brought disaster. “They’d die of disease. Sometimes a cat would grab one,” he says.

That changed when SPS helped him build a secure poultry shed. “Now they’re safe. They lay eggs. If needed, I can sell a rooster and get a good price.” He has 20 native chickens now. The eggs bring steady income.

Fish: A New Frontier

True to his brand of curiosity and courage, Baba even ventured into fishery — a first for his area. Initially hesitant, he was convinced by the SPS team.

“I thought — can I really raise fish? But once I understood, I gave it a shot,” he says.

He dug a small farm pond, stocked it with fingerlings provided by SPS, and used a homemade organic mix — maize, dung, and husk — to feed them.

“This was the first year. We got a good harvest of katla (a freshwater fish). I earned ₹7,000. First time ever,” he beams.

From grains to fruit, backyard vegetables to chickens and fish — Baba’s farm is a five-dimensional model of rural sustainability. All of it, organic.

“No chemicals. No pesticides. My soil has come alive again,” he says.

Other farmers in the village now look to

Baba for advice. “People come and ask — Baba, how did you raise the fish? What’s your mango like?” he says with a grin.

For them, he’s more than a neighbour — he’s a mentor. The Baba Brand has become shorthand for self-reliance, sustainability, and indigenous wisdom, rooted in soil and shaped by decades of hands-on experience. His story is not just about success. It’s about building a life with your own hands, nurturing good habits, and staying deeply connected to the land.

“I’ve turned my little world around,” Baba says, looking around his orchard and coop. And he truly has — one bold idea at a time.

Agriculture and Livestock

6 When Kitchen Gardens Bloom, Futures Blossom

Two marginal Korku farmers in Melghat are redefining self-reliance-growing organic vegetables in backyard plots not only nourishes their families but also empowers their daughters and boosts household income.
Bod, Dharni (Amravati)

When your kitchen garden blooms, your future flourishes.

In the remote hills of Melghat, two Korku farmers—Rajkumar R. Sawalkar from Bod village and Rajkumar T. Mawasker from Bardabalda—are reshaping their lives and communities one leafy green at a time. Their backyard gardens, once mere afterthoughts, now stand as symbols of dignity, nutrition, and economic stability.

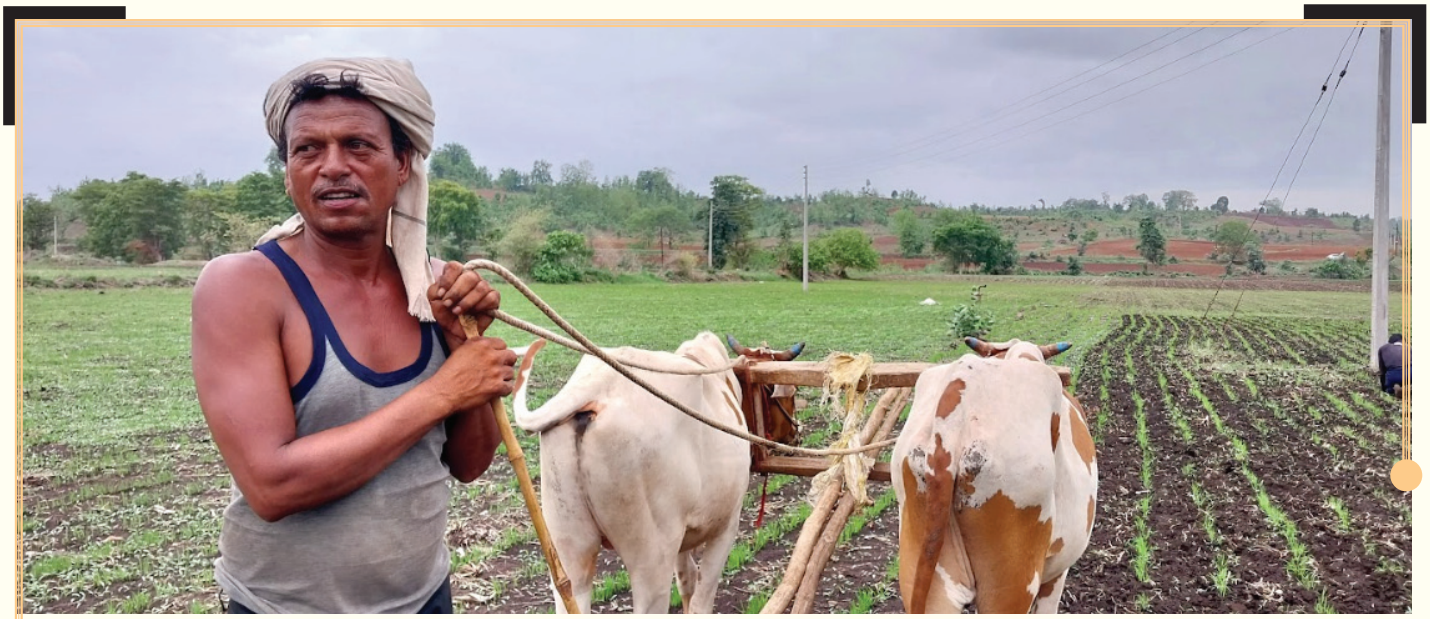
From Soil to Self-Reliance

Rajkumar R. Sawalkar (Bod) was once a conventional farmer relying on chemical-intensive farming. After connecting with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), he embraced 100% organic methods. Alongside staples like paddy, maize, pigeon pea, and chickpea, he has cultivated a thriving kitchen garden growing spinach, fenugreek, brinjal, onions, garlic, cabbage, and turmeric.

"We don't need to go to the market for vegetables," he says proudly. The garden not only nourishes his family but provides surplus for sale—a vital source of weekly savings for his twin sons' education. He adds, "If needed, I sell a goat or chicken, and top it off with savings from the garden to send them."

With support from SPS, he also keeps five goats and three chickens. The integrated system—staple crops + livestock + kitchen garden—is his formula for village-level self-reliance.

Rajkumar T. Mawasker (Bardabalda) strides down a similar path. His kitchen garden is fully organic, supplying his family



with spinach, fenugreek, brinjal, and chillies. He has experimented with organic maize on his fields, harvesting over 10 quintals this year. "There was maize everywhere! I sold it at good price. I'll do it again," he declares with a proud smile.

Although half his main crops are still chemical-grown, he plans a full organic transition soon—demonstrating how pockets of change can lead to complete transformation.

Backyards Enrich Lives—For Real

Pan-India studies confirm what these farmers experience daily:

- In Rajasthan's Pindwara, women's self-help groups nurtured kitchen gardens to diversify diets and reduce market dependency—with noticeable impacts on nutrition.
- WOTR's "Mandap Vidhi" model in Madhya Pradesh taught families to cultivate vegetables vertically, boosting nutrition and income—especially during crises like COVID lockdowns.
- A Krishi Vigyan Kendra pilot demonstrated that kitchen gardens could save families around ₹7,500 annually by reducing household food expenses.
- In Maharashtra's Amreli and Jharkhand's Gumla, nutrition gardens improved household vegetable consumption, income, and women's empowerment—spending just a few hours weekly on backyard cultivation.
- A study in Odisha found that home gardens boosted monthly per-adult-equivalent income by 37% and reduced poverty by nearly 12 percentage points.

These initiatives not only fill plates—they create lasting change: better diets, stronger economies, and elevated social status for rural women and farmers alike.

Kitchen Garden = Resilience, Choice & Dignity

For Rajkumars Sawalkar and Mawasker, the logic is clear:

When rains fail or pests strike, at least home-grown vegetables sustain them—no reliance on distant markets.

The regular income from surplus sales adds certainty.

And most importantly, they can confidently plan for their children's future.

They're living proof that a small patch of soil can sow seeds of hope.

Turning Soil into Gold

Two Korku farmers—two villages, two kitchen gardens, one shared vision. With community guidance, they took small plots and transformed them into powerful engines of nutrition, economy, and empowerment.

Their gardens are more than greenery—they're beacons: of food security, of educational opportunity, of rural dignity. In these patches of earth, they're growing not just produce, but independence and aspirations.

Agriculture and Livestock

7 Brewing Fertility: How a Village Bio-Resource Centre Turned Loss into Lifeblood

A tribal farmer who lost 33 of his 37 chickens bounced back by making—and selling—organic farm tonics. His story shows why Bio-Resource Centres are fast becoming the engine room of Melghat's new, chemical-free farm economy.
Laktu, Dharni, (Amravati) Bod, Dharni (Amravati)

Chandan Singh Tilaksingh Kachhwar, in his 40s, still remembers the smell of defeat.

One wet monsoon dawn in Laktu village, he walked into his poultry shed and found thirty-three of his thirty-seven chickens dead—struck by a fast-moving disease he could neither name nor cure. For a marginal Korku farmer, the loss was crushing: chickens were his savings, his grocery money, his children's school fees. "I felt the ground slip," he says.

But grief quickly turned to resolve. Months earlier, Chandan had begun volunteering at Laktu's newly minted Bio-Resource Centre (BRC)—a simple, shed-size facility where farmers learn to brew bio-pesticides and soil tonics from cow urine, tree leaves, and local microbes. He had helped bottle the pungent liquids, watched neighbours spray them, and seen pest attacks fall. "So after the chickens died," he recalls, "I thought: I still have the BRC."

He poured his effort into the centre—collecting neem leaves at dawn, stirring vats of jeevamrut at dusk, bottling fungal cultures that double as vaccines for crops and, as he discovered, poultry. Within six weeks, Chandan sold his first fifty litres of concentrate to nearby farmers. The income covered the poultry loss and financed a new flock. "The chickens were gone, but the farm survived," he says, grinning. "Now I sell medicine instead of buying it."

The Core Idea

Chandan Singh's turnaround captures the essence of a quiet revolution sweeping parts of Maharashtra's Melghat hills: Bio-Resource Centres—tiny, farmer-run hubs that convert free local biomass into high-value bio-fertilisers and natural pesticides—are redefining both ecology and economy. Initiated by Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) under its Water, Livelihood & Nutritional Security project, twenty-five BRCs now dot Dharni taluka. They help smallholders ditch costly chemicals, revive soil health, and earn up to ₹30,000 a year from surplus bio-inputs—turning sustainability into hard cash.

For decades, Melghat's tribal farmers watched yields stagnate while fertiliser prices soared. SPS field mentor Manoj Kuyate asked a blunt question at one village

meeting: “If the shop shuts tomorrow, can you feed your crops?” Farmers shrugged. “What if you made your own?” he persisted. Eyes lit up; a pilot began.

A BRC needs little more than a roof, a few drums, and discipline. Farmers ferment cow urine with jaggery and pulse flour to make jeevamrut; soak neem, dhotra, ruī, and wild custard-apple leaves in the mix for a week to brew a potent insecticide nicknamed ‘Pāch Patte Kādhā’ (Five-Leaf Decoction). Cost: about ₹30 per litre, versus ₹250 for a chemical spray. Each centre can churn out a thousand litres a year—plenty for home use and a tidy surplus for sale.

Science in a Clay Pot

There is rigour behind the rustic. Jeevamrut teems with living nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium microbes; entomopathogenic fungi target crop pests but spare beneficial insects. India’s National Mission on Natural Farming now endorses BRCs as the backbone of its plan to mainstream agro-ecology. According to the 2025 guidelines, 10,000 BRCs are to be established country-wide, each serving a 50-hectare cluster.

In Bod village, Sonai Dhande—whose own turnaround headlines this compendium—oversees a BRC beside her hut. Her women’s self-help group bottles and sells biopesticide to fifty neighbouring farms. “We never thought cow urine could pay school fees,” she laughs, tallying her ledger.

Start-up costs range from ₹10,000 for a basic shed to ₹1 lakh for a solar-powered, "Warkem" unit that cultures advanced fungal strains. Either way, farmers shoulder a fraction; SPS or government grants cover the rest. Payback begins in the very first season—through saved chemical bills and product sales.

SPS: The Catalyst

None of this would be possible without Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a grassroots non-profit that has worked in Melghat for decades. Combining technical support, participatory planning, and micro-investments, SPS’s model revolves around empowering farmers with tools and confidence—not subsidies.

The BRCs were seeded through dialogue, nurtured with mentorship, and handed over to local SHGs and individuals to own and run. SPS continues to play a crucial role in quality control, capacity building, and market access.

As project head Swami Durke puts it: “We don’t deliver services. We co-create solutions.”

Back in Laktu, Chandan Singh sees the BRC as insurance. Erratic rains? Pest flare-up? Poultry shock? “I can always brew more,” he says. His next goal: expand into seed treatments so neighbouring villages can cut chemical fungicides entirely.

Melghat is not alone. There’s a country-wide buoyancy of BRC innovation. In Jharkhand’s Gumla district, 40 BRCs support 11,000 farmers across 4,400 hectares. A Krishi Vigyan Kendra study in Rajasthan’s Hanumangarh found kitchen-scale BRCs trimmed household input costs by ₹7,500 a year. And Telangana’s community irrigation projects now mandate a cluster BRC before sanctioning drip networks—proof that bio-inputs and water efficiency go hand in hand.

Scaling will require three enablers:

One, quality control to ensure every bottle meets microbial standards. Two, market linkages so surplus bio-inputs reach chemical-dependent belts in the region. Three, continued hand-holding until farmer-run BRCs become self-funded micro-enterprises.

SPS project head Swami Durke is optimistic. “We didn’t give fish; we taught fishing,” he says, echoing an old proverb. “Even if the project ends, farmers will still have their BRCs.”

Chandan’s Verdict

Under a thatched awning, blue drums burble with the next batch of fermented brew. Chandan stirs the liquid with a bamboo pole, the air thick with the tang of neem and cow urine. He pauses, wipes his brow, and sums up the bio-business in one line:

“Nothing goes to waste here—not leaves, not labour, not hope.”

And for Melghat’s small farmers, that may be the most vital harvest of all.

Agriculture and Livestock

8 Poultry's Edge - And the Risk of Collapse

A badly timed disease can erase years of earnings overnight. Chandan Singh's resilience shows why community support and preventive care are vital.
Laktu, Dharni (Amravati)

In Laktū village of Dharni taluka lives Chandan Singh Tilaksingh Kachhwar, a Korku farmer approaching his sixties. With 16 acres of land, his life once felt secure—until the soils failed, yields fell, and family responsibilities mounted.

"Before I could understand the soil, I was already pouring chemicals into it," he reflects. Farming costs soared, returns dwindled, and debt tightened around a household of eleven.

It was when he saw Ramsingh Dhande's thriving organic farm, brimming with goats, birds, and lush crops, that Chandan decided to pivot. Inspired, he connected with Samaj Pragati Sahayog and began transitioning two acres into organic farming. "Our goal is all 16 acres someday—slowly, but surely," he says, determined.

Crop diversity replaced mono-cotton: maize, millet, pigeon peas, sorghum, pulses, rice.

Livestock Is the Foundation

But Chandan's real breakthrough came from livestock. "Cows and buffaloes are for the rich," he says. "I focus on goats and poultry—they're affordable and reliable." With support from SPS, he built a goat and poultry shed, ensuring shelter during the rains. From six goats three years ago, he now tends four dozen. Income from sales goes toward grandchildren's education and medical expenses. Eggs alone cover daily vegetable costs.

Chandan's poultry story is bittersweet: after starting with three birds, he scaled to 37—

but last year's storm brought disease. "In 36 hours, we lost 33 birds," he recounts, voice tight. Only four survived—because they were sheltered inside. Family and SPS helped rebuild.

Poultry's Fragile Power

Poultry can uplift rural households—especially women-led, backyard flocks—but outbreaks can dismantle their progress overnight. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN-FAO) KE Monograph and multiple Indian reports, smallholder families depend on backyard birds as vital income and nutrition.

Yet diseases like Ranikhet (Newcastle) and avian flu have repeatedly decimated flocks. In early 2025, a bird flu outbreak in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana killed over five lakh chickens—including more than two lakh backyard country birds—leaving rural families devastated. Many lost their entire livelihoods, dropping from ₹6,000 a month income to zero. Chicks are now costlier, chicks cost ₹100, eggs tripled in price, and recovery remains slow. Surveys show vaccination gaps and lack of veterinary access leave these farmers vulnerable.

Chandan's loss echoes this: without a healthy poultry unit or proper veterinary access, years of steady income vanished overnight.

To mitigate risk, Chandan's family now runs a Bio Resource Centre (BRC) at home. "We produce organic inputs—natural pesticides, soil conditioners—and sell to neighbors," says his son Vikas. This adds diversified, low-risk income beyond crops and livestock.

After the poultry collapse, he pledged: "This time, we'll vaccinate on time—no repeats. We'll rebuild to three dozen again." With SPS guidance, they now follow vaccination schedules and biosecurity protocols.

A Story of Learning and Resilience

This isn't merely a success story—it's a testament to learning from hardship. "Farming alone won't support us forever. Livestock—goats and poultry—are necessary. The risk is lower, profit steadier," Chandan explains.

"There've been setbacks, but we rise again," he adds, eyes bright. His story teaches that even a broken shell can carry hope.

Why This Story Matters

- Resilience built from loss: from losing flock and income overnight to strategic recovery.
- Poultry as economic lynchpin: small flocks lift rural women and households—but diseases can shatter them.
- BioResource Centres: a wise, low-cost innovation to sustain income and reduce dependence.
- SPS's role: from technical guidance to advocating vaccination and risk management.
- A broader lesson for marginal farming: diversification and preventive care are essential buffers.

GENDER

9 The Age of Renewal: How Late Bloomers Transformed Their Land and Lives

In their sixties, Sonai and Hiraman Dhande embraced a new way of farming, transforming their land — and lives — with care, courage, and compost.
Bod, Dharni (Amravati)

Sonai Dhande is a shy but deeply thoughtful woman farmer. She sits quietly behind her husband, Hiraman, during our conversation—listening intently, occasionally interjecting when she feels it's necessary. It's a telling arrangement: he speaks, she fills the gaps; he explains, she confirms. This isn't deference—it's rhythm. They are partners. "We are both farmers," they say. "And we both work from sunrise to sunset."

Now in their sixties, Sonai and Hiraman live in a modest thatch-roofed home—without doors—built right in the middle of their four-acre farm in Bod village, just ten minutes from Dharni town. Their house stands like a watchtower of change, surrounded by vegetables, fruit trees, and the quiet hustle of livestock. Their story is one of transformation, rooted in a new chapter they began after crossing their fifties—when they decided it wasn't too late to turn their lives around.

That turning point came when they partnered with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a grassroots nonprofit working across the tribal belt of Melghat, a hilly and forested region in Maharashtra infamous for chronic undernutrition and poverty. Under SPS' ongoing programme titled "Towards Water, Livelihood and Nutritional Security," Sonai and Hiraman took a leap of faith—and with support, guidance and a few key interventions, radically altered the way they farmed and lived.

From Debts to Diversity

"Earlier, I would fall into debt every year," Hiraman recalls. "We depended heavily on chemicals, and every season after farming, we'd have to migrate to other districts looking for work."

Like many impoverished Korku tribal households, the Dhandes lived a semi-nomadic life—half the year cultivating their land, the other half travelling hundreds of kilometers to work as low-paid migrant labourers. They thought this was their fate – a never-ending treacherous life.

Today, the couple live off their land year-round – they eat well and sleep well.

Their farm is lush and diverse—with fruit trees like papaya, jackfruit, guava, and mango

dotting the edges; goats and chickens adding movement and manure; and seasonal crops like paddy, maize, and millets now thriving without chemical inputs. "This summer," Hiraman chuckles, "I took my jackfruits to the market and made a neat little profit!" When the trees come of age in a couple of years' time, they will yield a steady harvest of jackfruits which they can sell in markets and make even better returns. Hiraman is thinking of multiplying his fruit-bearing trees, but he is also concerned about the weather aberrations in a changing climate. Earlier this year, he says, a storm and heavy

rain event nearly brought down his trees; some small trees got uprooted.

"The climate is definitely changing," says Hiraman, "we need to be aware of it." One, monsoons have become very moody, he says, unlike in the past when rain was more uniform and spatial.

He looks at the SPS field staff and notes: "These Sirs will help us tackle that problem too."

Sonai smiles quietly and stands up. Behind their house, she shows us the jackfruit saplings they planted—a gift from SPS' field staff as part of their effort to promote agroecology. The trees now stand proud and productive, symbols of a journey that began with simple faith in change.

A Model of Regenerative Farming

SPS's model is holistic. "We can't look at nutrition or crops or income in isolation," says Swami Durke, the organisation's project lead in Melghat. "Every intervention must complement the other."

Sonai and Hiraman's farm reflects this integrated approach. Through SPS support, they moved entirely away from chemical farming. Now, they rely on jeevamrut, a fermented organic concoction made from cow urine, jaggery, flour, and locally available plant leaves. "We make it ourselves," Sonai adds, showing us the blue drums filled with the bio-input. "It takes two weeks to mature and then it's ready to use."

They also use plant-based biopesticides, applying it thrice during a crop's growth cycle. "It controls pests and improves the soil," says Hiraman. "And the harvest is much better."

Savings on chemical pesticides and fertilisers now go directly into the household account. Meanwhile, income from goats, chickens, milk, fruits, and leafy vegetables sold at the Dharni market gives them steady support throughout the year.

What's more, the SPS helped them construct essential infrastructure—a cattle shed, a goat shed, a poultry enclosure—using locally available materials and cost-sharing with the couple. The impact is evident: their animals are healthier, their household income more stable, and their dependence on external inputs lower.

Women at the Helm: Sonai's Bio-Enterprise

Next to their home stands a small Bio-Resource Centre (BRC)—a one-room shed with barrels of jeevamrut and bottles of biopesticide. Sonai manages this. She's now part of a women's self-help group (SHG) that produces and sells bio-inputs to other farmers in the area.

"This will eventually become a full-fledged enterprise run by Sonai Ma and her SHG," says Manoj Kuyate, who coordinates agricultural and livestock initiatives under the project. "It's already generating demand."

With each litre of concentrated biopesticide diluted in 15 litres of water, it's a cost-effective solution. "This works better than anything we used before," Hiraman says. "And we can sell it too!"

A Temple, a Family, and a Future

Their sons, who live nearby in Bod, visit every day and help on the farm. The Dhandes have built a small temple for their village deity next to their house—a quiet corner of devotion amid the buzz of productivity.

They dream of sending their grandchildren to school—something they themselves never had the chance to do. Hiraman still remembers a time when they starved through the monsoons, cut off from the world, their village ravaged by hunger and illness.

"Today," he says, "we don't need to leave our village anymore. The land takes care of us."

And how did they manage this turnaround at their age?

Hiraman laughs. "It's never too late."

Sidebar: "The Power of Late Bloomers"

Why Sonai and Hiraman's story matters:

- Their journey highlights a few key lessons for development practitioners, policymakers, and farmer collectives.
- Age is no barrier to new beginnings—what's needed is opportunity, trust, and steady support.
- Diversification is key: Crops alone aren't enough. Adding livestock, fruits, and kitchen gardens can multiply resilience.
- Agroecology is practical: Low-cost, locally made solutions like Jeevamrut and biopesticides not only protect the land but also cut costs dramatically.
- Women are central: Sonai, like many tribal women in Melghat, is emerging as a leader. As these SHGs grow, so will rural women's confidence and economic autonomy.

10 : “Mahila Shakti”: How Self-Help Groups Are Transforming Women’s Lives in Melghat

In the forested hills of Amravati’s Melghat region, women like Suman Jambhekar are leading a quiet revolution — demanding water, building savings, shaping enterprises, and asserting their rights through self-help groups.
Bibamal, Dharni (Amravati)

Last summer, the women of Bibamal village tasted the fruits of their collective strength.

Fed up with the daily grind of fetching drinking water across miles and the inaction of local authorities, they marched to the village head — the sarpanch residing in neighbouring Rabang — and simply refused to leave until he responded.

“The sarpanch got so flustered that he immediately drew up a plan to dig borewells in our village,” says Suman Jambhekar, 40, a woman farmer from the Gond tribe in Bibamal. “We were tired of waiting. Women were very happy.”

Bibamal and Rabang are twin villages, about 40 km from Dharni, nestled in the Satpura foothills in Amravati’s tribal-dominated Melghat region. Inhabited by the Korkus, Gonds, and the nomadic Gawalis, Bibamal had long suffered from neglect. The water crisis was only one of many challenges.

While the borewell issue was resolved, the village’s only primary school remains without water. The borewell on campus lies defunct, and Bibamal’s women are once again contemplating another march — unless the sarpanch responds to their oral plea.

Engine: Self Help Groups

Mobilising women through self-help groups (SHGs) is a key pillar of the ongoing Tata Trusts-supported project ‘Towards Water, Livelihood and Nutritional Security in Melghat Region’, implemented by Samaj

Pragati Sahayog (SPS). Grounded in the belief that women's empowerment is essential to long-term transformation in regions of entrenched poverty, hunger and malnutrition, the initiative places women at the centre of social and economic change.

The impact is tangible. Close to a hundred SHGs with over 2,300 members have been formed across 40 villages in Melghat. Federated into a single institution, these groups have collectively saved around ₹45 lakh over three years, with loans worth over ₹1.5 crore circulated within the groups. For women like Suman, the SHG is not only a source of thrift and credit but also of confidence, identity and voice.

"For years, we spent our days just walking to fetch water," says Suman, who leads the 12-member Radhe Radhe Pragati SHG in Bibamal. "Now, we have a way to solve our own problems."

The initial goal was simple — come together, save small sums regularly, and create a safety net for tough times. But SPS has expanded that foundation, training the women in everything from accounting and bookkeeping to digital applications and government procedures. "We hand-hold and train them in procedural and bureaucratic ways — even in how to fill forms online," says Swami Durke, project head for SPS in Melghat.

In Sosokheda village, SHG members from the Gauri and Sharda Pragati groups did something unprecedented — they submitted a written application to the Gram Sevak and Sarpanch, demanding construction of a proper drainage system. Their persistence, guided at every step by SPS field staff, paid off: in 2024, the village panchayat sanctioned and initiated the work.

It was a small but significant victory, showing that democratic pressure and organised women's voices can indeed make the state respond.

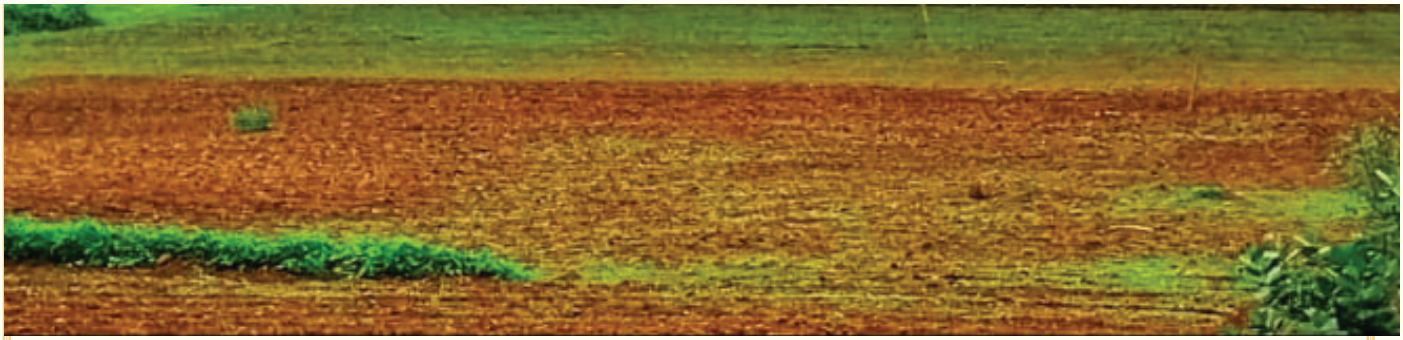
Small groups, big impact

The formation of women-led SHGs is a crucial part of SPS's institution-building strategy. Trainings have been intensive and innovative. From bookkeeping and by-laws to leadership and entrepreneurship, the SHG members are supported by SPS's cadre of field trainers and community resource persons. Training tools include night cinema screenings, pico projectors, and even podcasts to ensure learning reaches the remotest corners.

A 26-day skill-building programme on bamboo crafts, held recently, focused on turning Melghat's abundant bamboo into usable, marketable products. Women were taught both production and business skills — an early nudge toward sustainable enterprise.

Some of the SHG leaders even travelled to Madhya Pradesh to learn from the Maheshwar Mahila Pragati Samiti, a longstanding women's federation. They returned inspired, with insights into federation models, income-generation strategies, and leadership practices.

In April 2025, the SPS hosted a women's conference in Dharni to celebrate the leadership of rural women in development initiatives. Over 700 Self-Help Group (SHG) members and 15 dignitaries attended the event which symbolised the growing recognition



of women's roles in shaping rural progress. The conference highlighted contributions of women in agriculture, livestock rearing, watershed development, health, nutrition, and natural resource management. The program featured cultural performances, motivational speeches by SHG leaders, and testimonials of transformation that showcased how SHGs have enhanced financial resilience, promoted health security, and improved decision-making power among rural women.

Durke calls this approach the Hissedari Sabha — a process of ensuring women get their rightful share and space in village governance and economic development. A SHG is the foundational unit for a larger congregation of women. Local female resource persons now help SHGs organise meetings, maintain savings discipline, and take up social issues head-on.

It is through these congregation that the SPS pushes the programmes to generate awareness among women about menstrual hygiene, maternal and child health and prevention of mal-nutrition among infants – it also leads to vital exchange of community knowledge.

In Bibamal, the SHG is still in its early phase — primarily focused on savings and mutual lending. But conversations about possible income-generating activities have begun. Milk-based products are one option, given the Gawalis' traditional dairy knowledge. "We're discussing it actively," says one member. "But the challenge will be storage and marketing."

Suman, the SHG president, says the biggest gain so far is intangible. "The SHG has given us identity and voice. Our savings help us in bad times. Even a small loan makes a big difference."

Each SHG member now has a bank account. Monthly contributions range from ₹100 to ₹300. On paper it seems tiny — but cumulatively, it becomes capital that can seed enterprise, meet emergencies, or be lent at a modest interest to fellow members.

Supporting them is Mangala Jawarkar, a young Korku woman and athlete who now works as a full-time community mobiliser with SPS. "Ten years ago, we had no voice. Women just worked all day, raised malnourished children, and remained invisible," she says. "This mobilisation is a leap forward. It may seem small — but it lays the foundation for lasting change."

As more women express interest, SHGs are steadily expanding. "We are thinking of raising our monthly savings amounts," says Suman. "And more women want to join us."

Eventually, the SHG federation in Melghat will be linked to SPS's broader women's collective of over 45,000 members across central India — especially in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. "The goal is to link them into one strong institution," says Durke.

Locally, these women are also driving awareness around nutrition, health and organic farming. Many now grow vegetables in their backyard kitchen gardens, ensuring fresh, diverse, and nutritious food for their families.

The next phase, Durke says, is to transition these SHGs into sustainable micro-enterprises — from bamboo and dairy to value-added agriculture. "It's slow work," he admits, "but each step matters."

For the women of Bibamal and beyond, this journey may just be beginning. But they know they are no longer alone.

"We've walked miles for water," smiles Suman. "Now, we walk with purpose."

11 "No matter what, I won't leave my village again"

Mangala Jawarkar Leads Economic Empowerment for Korku Women Dharni (Amravati)

Mangala Jawarkar, who once dropped out in her second year of B.Sc. and worked as a cook, now guides a collective of 280 women across villages. In leading Korku tribal women from savings to microcredit, she has helped spark a new era of dignity and self-reliance. With her determination, Mangala is now sowing seeds of transformation across rural Maharashtra.

The region she works in is a tribal belt in Dharni taluka. Life here is rooted in the soil, still turning with the cycles of nature. And here, in the rain, dust, and blazing sun, you'll spot a woman walking with quiet confidence. A soft smile on her face, steady steps, and clear purpose in her stride.

That woman is Mangala Ramdas Jawarkar — modest, yet extraordinary. She is no longer just a "CRP" (Community Resource Person) who runs women's self-help groups (SHGs). She has become a change-maker — nurturing a new awareness of dreams, opportunities, and struggles in the tribal community.

"I wanted to study... but couldn't."

Mangala studied up to the second year of B.Sc., but financial constraints forced her to drop out. She got married and became a mother of two daughters. There were no jobs in the village, so she and her husband moved to Amravati. He worked as a peon in a tribal school, she as a cook. Later, they took up the same work at a local cow shelter (goshala). Their daughters began school.

Then came news from her village — there was a vacancy at the Anganwadi (rural childcare center). They returned, hoping to settle back home. But fate had more trials in store. The COVID-19 lockdown struck, bringing everything to a standstill. No work in the village, and they couldn't return to Amravati either — not that there was work there anyway.

A New Turn, A New Life

They say, "Every catastrophe hides an opportunity." Around this time, Mangala came into contact with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS). Her husband first joined an agriculture project. A few months later, people at the organization asked her:

"Would you like to work here too?"

She loved farming. At first, she worried — If both of us work outside, who will take care of our little farm we love so much? But she accepted the role. There was one thought in her mind: "I don't want to go back to the city for menial work again."

SPS trained her: how to communicate, form women's groups, cultivate a habit of saving, and explain government schemes.

She says, "Living in Amravati had given me confidence. I wasn't afraid to talk to people. That helped me settle into the work easily."

"I planted the seed of saving in women's minds."

Today, Mangala is connected to 22 SHGs across six villages, reaching over 280 women.

She often asks them, "Sister, you've reached a certain age. But how much have you saved? What about your children's education or weddings? How will you manage?"

At first, women would fall silent. Now they ask her, "Can I contribute another ₹50 to the group savings?"

She smiles and says, "We used to manage on ₹200 a month. Now many women contribute ₹400. Some still hesitate, but those who understand the value of saving also recognize its benefits."

These groups are no longer just about savings — today, they offer microloans of up to ₹30,000.

Mangala explains, "When women repay loans on time, it builds confidence — the belief that we can do something on our own. That belief becomes the foundation of the group's progress. Right now, we're working to link these SHGs with nationalized banks. That means women will soon be able to directly benefit from government schemes."

A Sense of Recognition

Mangala's village has finally started to recognize her work. Recently, the Gram Panchayat honoured her with the Ahilyabai Holkar Award.

"Earlier, hardly anyone noticed us. Now they call me 'Tai' with respect. In SHG meetings, they listen when I speak," she says proudly.

Today, in addition to her SHG work, Mangala continues to farm — she grows cotton, maize, and pigeon pea (toor). Her elder daughter studies in Amravati, the younger one studies with her in the village.

She reflects, "Earlier, I thought I'd have to leave the village to make anything of myself. Now I know — women can bring change while staying in the village itself."

Thanks to the income from her work, she no longer needs to migrate to cities for labor.

"I've proven to myself that I can manage my home, my farm, and my job."

And what if the project ends tomorrow? She laughs at the question — calm, unfazed, eyes steady. And then replies with conviction:

"Even if the project ends, sir, I'm not sitting idle. That confidence is with me now.

I never thought I could achieve so much. But today, I'm connected to so many women —

even if this ends, I'll still find a way forward."

Stories like Mangala Jawarkar's show the real value of self-help groups in rural India. Institutions may come and go. Projects may start and stop. But self-belief endures—and that is true sustainability.

Mangala's journey is not just the outcome of a policy—it's the outcome of a powerful idea:

"When women are empowered, villages are empowered."

12 Stitching hope… one thread at a time

With her quiet leadership and deep love for the land, Suman Bhilawikar turns a once-neglected hilltop into a thriving orchard—sowing not just amla trees, but pride and possibility in tribal Melghat.
Bhulori, Dharni, (Amravati)

Even today, Suman Ramesh Bhilawikar refers to the old almirah in her modest home by that name — tere baba ki almari. Her husband Ramesh's cupboard.

Five years after his death, his memory lingers not just in the black-and-white photo on the wall of their modest home, but in her every word, every routine, and every decision she makes for their small family.

We're in Bhulori village — a quiet tribal hamlet tucked away in the undulating hills of the remote Dharni block, Amravati district.

The dilapidated earthen path to Suman's house pierces through a few scattered homes with tiled roofs. Her home is small but neat — three rooms with a cow-dung floor, a thatched kitchen, and a single cot in the living space. She invites us in with folded hands and gestures toward the cot for us to sit. She herself settles cross-legged on the floor.

On the opposite wall hangs a faded portrait of her husband — Ramesh. He worked as a peon at a private firm. His earnings were meagre, but they sustained the family of four: Suman, Ramesh, and their two sons. When times became tough, Ramesh would also pick up daily-wage work to make ends meet. But everything came crashing down when a strange swelling appeared on his face.

"At first we thought it was from the summer heat… but it didn't go away. It grew," Suman says, her voice trailing off. "We went to many doctors. Eventually they said it could be cancer."

In a poor family, cancer doesn't just mean illness — it's a signal of an approaching ruin. Despite their efforts to get him medical care, a young Ramesh passed away in

2020, leaving behind a grieving wife, two young sons, and just half an acre of unirrigated land.

Grief, and a Turning Point

"I didn't know what to do," Suman recalls with a tremor in her voice. "What would we eat? What could I grow in that land? Where would I go?" Her world had collapsed.

That's when the Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) entered her life — a grassroots organisation working to support tribal women with information, access to rights, education, and livelihood security. Suman's case was identified as one needing desperate and immediate help.

"She didn't even know she was eligible for a widow's pension from the state government," says one SPS worker. With their support and help in preparing and submitting her documents to avail the

pension, Suman started getting that small but vital monthly pension of Rs 1500 a month under the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana directly in her bank account.

Four Pillars of Survival

Suman's elder son has cleared Class 12 this year, while her younger son is in Class 9.

"I decided that I would not let their education stop," she says. The SPS also helped her register under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and got her name added to the muster roll in the village.

Today, Suman works as a wage labourer on village worksites whenever work is available, doubles up as a farmer, and grows her own food – all due to the timely support from the SPS.

On a recent afternoon when we are visiting her, her elder son calls her out from inside, "Maa, I need to go to Dharni and Chikhaldara to collect the BA form!"

Suman answers gently, "Go take the money from your baba's cupboard."

The cupboard, five years on, still bears her husband's identity. His presence lingers in her language, in her home, in the way she continues to raise her children.

Beyond Wages: A New Livelihood

Suman's journey toward financial independence didn't stop with pension and wages. With the SPS support, she started rearing small ruminants -- goats and poultry.

A small wooden goatshed made out of the local resources at a modest cost stands in front of her house, and a small poultry unit in the backyard of her home. She now owns four goats and a small flock of hens that lay eggs regularly.

"If I fall short on school fees, I sell a goat," she says with remarkable calm.

A goat is like a liquid cash that she raises in any exigency. With her husband's death behind her, she is today a confidant woman, tied to the growing group of women mobilised by the SPS as part of their Mahila Sashaktikaran (women's empowerment) programme, with a practical mind and quiet resilience.

She is a proud member of a

women's self-help group weaved by the SPS in Bhulori. With their backing, she's taken loans of up to ₹50,000 — repaying ₹30,000 on time. From this, she purchased a sewing machine and paid for her sons' education. Now, in her spare time, she also stitches clothes for the villagers – particularly women and children – to earn a little extra.

A Life Rebuilt — Thread by Thread

Today, her life rests on four steady pillars: the monthly pension, MGNREGA wages, income from tailoring, and her small livestock business. Together, they hold up her household — and her children's dreams.

"There was a time when I felt like nothing was left," Suman says. "But now I feel… if you try, a life of dignity is still possible."

Her eyes still hold the memory of Ramesh, but she hasn't let the sorrow consume her. She's found a quiet bend in the road — where pain turns into purpose. A bend where her children's future waits.

In the remote corner of Bhulori, a village most maps would ignore, one tribal widow's courage lights up a household. She may only own one cot in her small house, but she shows a big heart in offering it to her guests while she herself prefers to sit on the floor — a quiet testament to her strength, grace and humility.

From tere baba ki almari to a life she's stitching together stitch by stitch — Suman's story is not just about survival. It's about making space for hope.

13

‘Now we ask, we demand, we decide’

The story of Bori — a tribal village reimagining work, rights, and dignity

Bori, Dharni, (Amravati) (Gender5)
Bhulori, Dharni, (Amravati)

It’s 8:30 in the morning, and Bori — nestled deep in the forested hills of Dharni block — is already wide awake. Most of the men have left for the fields; it's the sowing season. Women are finishing chores, cows are being milked, hearth fires are glowing to life. But within minutes, a call from a local Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) worker gathers a dozen tribal women under the banyan tree, their sarees pulled over their heads, ready for a meeting.

“Earlier, we didn’t know we could demand work. Whatever came from the gram panchayat, we accepted without question. But now, our names are on the muster roll. We get ourselves registered,” says Lalita Pannalal Sakom, a Korku tribal woman. Her eyes glint with clarity; her voice carries confidence.

A Village on the Margins

Bori is home to around 650 to 700 people — most of them from the Korku tribe. For generations, life here revolved around subsistence farming, forest produce, droughts, debt, and seasonal migration to cities like Amravati for daily-wage work. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) existed in theory, but in practice, the program barely scratched the surface: only four muster rolls circulated in the entire village, all controlled by the gram panchayat.

“No one asked questions. No one dared to demand anything. That’s how it had always been,” says an elder.

The Korkus, like many tribal communities, have long lived on the fringes — not just geographically, but socially and politically too.

The Turning Point: Dialogue and Inclusion

Change began in 2022, when SPS began working in Bori. Their first step wasn’t infrastructure or funding — it was dialogue. The team held meetings in the local dialect, patiently explaining rights, entitlements, and the purpose of schemes like MGNREGA. They especially focused on women’s literacy,

autonomy, and participation.

"Earlier, we just went when we were told. Now we ask: why isn't my name on the list? Can I work in the nursery? Can I help with construction?" says Lalita.

SPS encouraged women to recognize that they are not beneficiaries — they are rights-holders. And the results are striking.

From Four Muster Rolls to Sixteen

Sukden Punya Darshembe, the traditional Aadapaatil (village head from the Korku tradition), breaks it down: "Earlier, we only got work in winter. Now there is work year-round. From four muster rolls, we now have sixteen. Asking for work feels like our right now."

Women now take on equal responsibility — digging, nursery planting, watering saplings, stone-laying, cleaning worksites. In many households, every member has their name on the muster roll. Daily wages have gone from ₹270 to ₹321, and families are earning ₹25,000–30,000 annually through these jobs.

One woman proudly shares, "During the rains, our roof used to leak. From my wages, I bought tin sheets. Now our house is safe."

Collective Spirit, Shared Ownership

What's changed most is not just the income, but the attitude. Work is now seen as a shared resource, and unity is the new norm. People divide responsibilities, coordinate jobs, and ensure no one is left behind. SPS has built strong women's self-help groups, fostering solidarity and collective action.

"This isn't just about paperwork anymore. We believe the scheme is for us. And we are the ones who will make it work," says Lalita.

Through MGNREGA, Bori hasn't just gained jobs — it has found dignity. Earlier, migration was inevitable for many families. Now, people work in their own village, stay with their families, and tend to their own farms alongside wage work.

"We now farm and work as labourers both. It helps us run the household better," says Aadapaatil Darshembe.

The Korku community, often considered economically and socially vulnerable, has shown that with information, organisation, and encouragement, it can fight for its place — and win.

"Earlier, we were just surviving. Now, we are shaping our lives," Darshembe says quietly, but firmly.

The Power of 'Hissedari'

A quiet revolution is underway in Bori. Once unaware of their rights, villagers now actively engage with government systems, demanding what is rightfully theirs.

SPS has introduced a new concept here: 'Hissedari' — shared ownership in governance. Regular hissedari sabhas (stakeholder meetings) are held where villagers learn that paying taxes gives them a stake in the nation's wealth. They are taught that claiming scheme benefits, asking the gram panchayat for work, demanding accountability — these are their constitutional rights.

"Earlier, our people were like pebbles — still, silent," Darshembe says. "Now, they've learned to raise their voice."

Case in point: the village recently faced a severe drinking water crisis. Previously, people might have whispered about it among themselves. This time, they drafted a formal petition to the gram panchayat. Follow-ups are underway. A similar effort last year led to actual construction work on local drainage.

Even Korku women — once hesitant to speak — now participate actively in these meetings. They speak up, question, suggest — and carry themselves with quiet authority.

A Voice Raised Is a Future Claimed

Through hissedari, Bori is no longer just a beneficiary of government programs. It is becoming a citizen village — one that asks questions, holds systems accountable, and insists on its share.

This is the true measure of success: not just the wages earned, but the voices found.

In Bori, the government's vision for MGNREGA is not just an idea — it's a living, working reality.

Jobs rise from the soil. Wages are earned with dignity. And in the eyes of its people, the future has begun to take shape.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Food, Nutrition and Health

14 A Quiet Revolution in the Womb

Rakhi Mawaskar's journey from fragility to resilience in Lavada village
Lavada, Dharni (Amravati)

Tucked away in the green folds of the Satpuda hills, the tribal village of Lavada seems like a picture postcard: dense woods, narrow trails, scattered hamlets, and tiny seasonal streams flowing lazily around fields. From this idyllic setting emerges a quiet but determined story of change — that of 22-year-old Rakhi Sunil Mawaskar, who is currently expecting her third child.

At first glance, Rakhi's story might not appear extraordinary. A young woman awaiting childbirth in a tribal belt — what's new? But dig deeper, and you'll find it's not just a personal journey, but a mirror to the gradual transformation unfolding across the Korku-dominated villages, from a landscape marked by malnutrition and maternal mortality to one slowly gaining the language of care, dignity, and health, particularly in the villages where the SPS is well ensconced now.

In the Shadows of Malnutrition

Dharni has long carried the stigma of being one of Maharashtra's most malnutrition-prone blocks. Maternal deaths, infant mortality, underweight babies — these were not statistics from afar, but lived realities here. Inadequate nutrition, poor healthcare access, little awareness, and early marriages had turned the cycle of motherhood into a perilous journey for many young women.

Until recently, stories like Rakhi's would have been framed in despair. But change, though slow, has begun to stir.

Government schemes have trickled in, and alongside them, grassroots organisations like Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) have stepped in to fill the human and emotional

gaps — helping not just women, but entire families reimagine what safe motherhood could mean.

Rakhi's Home, Rakhi's World

Rakhi lives in a joint family — her in-laws, her husband, her brother-in-law's family, and two little daughters. Her husband tills six acres of land where they grow seasonal crops like tur, maize, paddy, and jowar. They own two bullocks and a handful of goats. In many ways, they are self-reliant and off the wage-labour radar — a rarity here.

When Rakhi was pregnant with her second child, SPS health workers connected with her. And from there, her journey — and that of her family — began to pivot.

"My weight was low at the time," she recalls. "SPS didi came home, spoke with me and my in-laws. They helped register me with the anganwadi. They guided me on food, supplements, check-ups — all of it."

But what stands out in the SPS approach is this: it isn't just the woman who is 'pregnant' — the whole family is gently roped into the process. Husbands, mothers-in-law, even younger siblings are sensitised, engaged, and encouraged to support.

A New Kind of Prenatal Care

The moment a pregnancy is identified, the cycle begins: immunisations, regular weight monitoring, nutrition guidance, and even counselling on food diversity — what to eat, what to avoid, how to listen to one's body. Rakhi, now a confident mother, speaks with calm assurance.

Interestingly, her Aadhaar card — which clearly states she's 22 — hints at another story. Her first daughter is already five. That means Rakhi became a mother at just 17. A child bride turned teenage mother — common in this belt.

"There was no guidance then," she admits. "But the second time was different. And now, with this pregnancy, I feel stronger, more aware."

A Shift in the Wind

Change in Dharni doesn't roar — it hums softly in stories like Rakhi's. The fact that

she knows her weight, understands what a balanced plate looks like, knows the importance of iron and calcium, and most importantly, feels seen — is no small victory.

There are still hurdles. Maternal deaths do still occur in nearby villages. Early marriages haven't stopped. Health facilities can be hard to reach. But the shift is happening — in kitchen conversations, in men sitting through health meetings, in grandmothers encouraging fruit instead of fasting.

And Rakhi stands as a quiet torchbearer of this change. Not with grand speeches or headlines, but in the small choices she makes each day: choosing a boiled egg over a fried snack, resting instead of working in the sun, reminding her husband about her next check-up.

She smiles and says, "Earlier, we thought only rich city women got all this care. But now, I know — every woman deserves it. Even me."

15 The Battle Against Malnutrition

From fragile beginnings to fragile hope – the story of little Shubham and his mother, Zhunki Ranamalur, Dharni (Amravati)

We set out to hear the story of Shubham Prakash Sheshkar – a child once caught in the grip of severe malnutrition, now smiling, playful, and very much alive. Our journey took us to Ranamalur, a small village tucked away in Maharashtra's Amravati district.

It was sowing season, and the entire village was out in the fields. The skies were overcast, giving relief from the usual harsh afternoon sun. As we reached the village square, a few children were laughing, shouting across a game of volleyball using a plastic ball. Sparrows chirped from branches near the Zilla Parishad school. The scene was unexpectedly heartening — one wouldn't guess this was once a severely malnourished belt.

A little ahead, we arrived at the home of Zhunki and Prakash Sheshkar.

A wooden door creaked open into a dim interior, even in broad daylight. Their small mud house — three rooms huddled together: a living area in front, kitchen to the right, a small sleeping area to the left. In this space lived Prakash, his wife Zhunki, and their two-year-old son, Shubham.

Zhunki sat cross-legged on the floor, gently rocking Shubham in a green sari hammock strung beside her.

"He always wants the swing to be right in the center. If it goes slightly sideways, he starts wailing!" she said with a soft laugh. Her eyes were full of affection, her voice full of relief. Once, they weren't even sure if the baby in that swing would survive. But today, Shubham weighs almost nine kilos. He's out of danger. At least for now.

A Village and a Verdict

Dharni, a tribal taluka in Amravati, is infamous not just for its forested remoteness but for the label that has long haunted it — a malnutrition hotspot. The numbers are grim, but behind them lie generations of mothers and children whose struggles have remained invisible.

But the tide may be turning. The story of Zhunki and Shubham is living proof — that with support, nutrition, and care, the battle against malnutrition can be won. Or at least, survived.

"He was just 1.7 kilos at birth. They

immediately put him in the ICU. The doctors said he would need intensive care," Zhunki recalls. For her, Shubham's birth wasn't the joyous moment most imagine — it marked the start of a long, anxious fight. He had no fever, no illness — just a body too small, too underdeveloped to sustain life on its own.

Zhunki belongs to the Korku tribal community. Her husband, Prakash, is a construction worker. They own a little land, but there's ongoing conflict in the family over its division. The young couple lives separately — in a dark, mud-walled house with no economic cushion, no food security, and limited access to healthcare.

When she first became pregnant, Zhunki herself was underweight — below safe thresholds. The fatigue, poor diet, emotional stress — all compounded an already fragile situation.

"I used to feel weak all the time. I didn't eat enough. I was always tired," she says.

The First Light

That's when Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) entered her life — a grassroots organization that has been working in Dharni for over a decade, addressing not just nutrition, but the underlying social and systemic inequalities.

"We identified Zhunki early," says Swami, an SPS field coordinator. "Her weight was dangerously low. We decided to prioritize both her and her unborn child."

SPS assigned a trained community health worker to support her throughout her pregnancy — ensuring regular checkups, nutrition counselling, connections to anganwadis and health centers. Her weight improved. And then came the delivery — and the ordeal.

A Second Birth

Shubham was born severely underweight and had to be placed in an incubator. "He gained a little in the first month — from 1.7 to 1.9 kg — but then stayed the same for six more months," Zhunki says.

Eventually, he was admitted to the Nutritional Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) — and that's where both mother and child were reborn. For 15 days, they received nutrient-rich meals: rice, dal, vegetables, roti, milk. Zhunki's own breastmilk supply improved with this care. Slowly, Shubham started gaining weight.

SPS ensured she was paid a daily stipend of ₹300 during her NRC stay. "That helped us a lot," she says. "But more than that, it felt like someone finally saw me as a mother. Gave me dignity."

Shubham's weight rose to 2.2 kg. Still low, but the worst had passed. Now there was hope.

Two Years Later: A Dawn Breaking

Back home, Zhunki left nothing to chance. She kept Shubham wrapped, warm, fed him frequently. Twice a day, she cooked him soft food — khichdi, sheera, dal water. SPS health workers continued regular visits. They tracked his weight, advised on nutrition, kept up the support system.

Today, Shubham is two years old and weighs 8.1 kg. "He walks, he talks. People say he looks fine now. I'm not afraid anymore," says Zhunki with a quiet pride.

But when she lifts him from the swing, there's a moment's pause. Shubham, though visibly healthier, still shows signs of possible neurodevelopmental delays. His head appears larger than usual, and his movements are a little behind for his age.

When asked, Zhunki says softly: "The doctor told us he'll need surgery. But they said it can only be done when he's five."

She seems unaware of what this means for Shubham's brain development — but SPS is not. They remain in touch, ready with paperwork and guidance for when the time comes.

A Second Beginning

Prakash, the father, wasn't home when we visited. But perhaps it is he who carries a silent awareness of what they've been through — because today, Zhunki is pregnant again.

This time, though, everything is different.

"I eat on time. I'm gaining weight. I understand what to do now," she says, smiling.

This isn't just a new pregnancy. It's a new chapter — one written with knowledge, support, and resilience.

Services

16 Partners in Care

A Korku Couple's Quiet Revolution in Animal Health
Bod, Dharni (Amravati)

Deep in the rugged, forested hills of Melghat, the tribal village of Bodi stirs to life with the sun — and so does the small, two-room animal health centre that stands at its edge. It's here that villagers from Bodi and surrounding hamlets bring their ailing animals, guided by worry, hope, and the quiet assurance that someone will help them — as they always do.

That someone is not one, but two: Santosh Budha Mawaskar and his wife Sagar — a Korku couple whose devotion to animals and their community has made them the heart of this humble veterinary post. This is a community-driven animal healthcare centre, among a few that run here.

The centre is not just their workplace — it's also their home. The local village panchayat donated the building to serve as a veterinary outpost, and Santosh and Sagar have embraced it fully, living and working within its painted walls as a matter of service and commitment. There are no shifts here, no clocking in or out. A goat in distress, a calf that won't eat, a hen with a fever — the doors open for all, any time.

On either side of the centre's main door, a local artist has created a mural — vibrant graffiti that captures the essence of this couple's world: a goat, a cow, and a hen standing tall against the vivid, undulating landscape of Melghat's forests. The scene is pastoral yet symbolic — a tribute not only to the animals but to those who care for them.

Inside, the couple has divided the space into a living area and a functional clinic. Medicines, syringes, bandages, thermometers, and vaccination kits share shelves with utensils, clothes, and books. "We've made a life here," says Santosh, arranging a tray of injections.

Quiet, but determined

But if Santosh is the head of this centre, Sagar is its quiet, determined heart.

She didn't plan on becoming a veterinary aide. When the two married during the COVID-19 lockdown, she had no formal education in animal care, and not much schooling either. But she was curious — and committed. Santosh began teaching her the basics. How to observe a sick goat. How to check temperature. How to calm a frightened calf. Gradually, she began assisting with treatments. Today, she gives injections, assesses symptoms, and talks confidently to the animal owners — especially women.

"I like doing this work," says Sagar, brushing a strand of hair away from her eyes. "But I also want to study nursing, so that I can deliver healthcare to both, people and their livestock."

It's an audacious dream in this remote part of Maharashtra. Pursuing nursing would mean two things: money — which the couple doesn't have in surplus — and mobility — Sagar would have to move to Amravati town, several hours away, to access proper training.

Santosh wants her to go. "She's a quick learner. If she studies nursing, she can help our villages in more ways. But it will be hard. We'll need

support," he says. Their journey together began, not in a clinic, but in the forests.

Santosh's ancestors lived in the core zone of the Melghat forest — part of the original Korku communities that survived off the land. When the government relocated forest-dwelling families to fringe settlements like Malur, it was a disorienting shift. The trees, the rhythm of life, the freedom — all seemed lost.

Santosh's parents, though uneducated themselves, knew education was the key to a new beginning. Santosh became the first in the family to attend school — a tribal residential ashram school near Rangobeli. He studied till Class 12, and later tried his hand at college in Chikhaldara. But family finances forced him to drop out and look for work. He trained at an ITI in Amravati and worked briefly at a hotel — cleaning rooms, replacing bedsheets, wiping down floors. A promotion to bellboy gave him a taste of dignity, but not fulfillment.

Livestock care, their calling

It was a twist of instinct that led him to veterinary work. He enrolled in a diploma course in Livestock Management and Veterinary Sciences — a decision that brought him back to the heart of Melghat, this time as a para-vet with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a non-profit working in tribal development.

His job: travel village to village treating animals, conducting awareness drives, and building trust in animal healthcare. At first, people were wary — "Who is this para-vet?" they'd ask. But being a Korku himself, Santosh spoke their language, literally and culturally. Slowly, he won them over.

When the pandemic struck, Santosh was declared an essential service worker. As lockdowns froze life everywhere, he moved tirelessly across villages treating livestock. Later, during the lumpy skin disease outbreak in cattle, his role was critical in debunking myths and encouraging vaccination. "People thought it was a curse from the goddess," he recalls. "They didn't trust the vaccine. I had to explain, again and again, in our own language, that it could save their animals."

Through all of this, Sagar remained by his side — first quietly observing, then slowly stepping into the work herself.

Today, villagers call them "Dada" and "Vahini" — brother and sister-in-law — a sign of affection and deep respect. Their centre sees a steady stream of villagers every day.

"Santosh bhau, my buffalo has stopped eating."

"Sagar vahini, our goat delivered early — please check."

Livestock as livelihood

For many in these villages, livestock is livelihood. A sick goat or cow can break a family's back. And so, the couple's work isn't technical — it's deeply personal. They aren't just treating animals — they're keeping fragile rural economies alive.

Newly established Livestock Healthcare Centers (LHCs) in the the SPS catchment villages under this project are playing a critical role in safeguarding animal health and promoting productivity. These centers serve as one-stop facilities, offering services such as treatment for sick animals, nutritional supplements, and expert advisory support for farmers.

The SPS has been conducting a series of vaccination and deworming camps in the villages. These interventions have helped control the spread of common diseases in goats and poultry, thereby protecting livestock assets. Health camps also provide opportunities for awareness-building among farmers on the importance of preventive healthcare. Collectively, these measures have resulted in improved animal productivity and enhanced household income security.

By providing timely veterinary care, the LHCs have significantly reduced mortality rates and disease outbreaks among livestock, preventing financial losses for farmers. These centers also function as hubs for community-based animal health education, encouraging preventive healthcare practices. Despite the challenges — living with minimal amenities, working in extreme weather, lacking professional recognition — Santosh and Sagar remain undeterred.

But they dream of doing more.

"People here don't have access to good healthcare. If I study nursing, I could help with childbirth, illness, and still help animals too," says Sagar. She smiles shyly, but the resolve in her voice is unmistakable.

It's a long road ahead. But if there's one thing their journey proves, it is this: deep roots and quiet courage can take you far — even from a two-room clinic in the middle of a forest.

In the fading twilight, the animal health centre in Bodi glows with soft light. On the wall, the goat, cow, and hen seem to watch over the village like guardians. Inside, Santosh checks a medicine tray while Sagar folds blankets for the night. Another day of service, another step in their shared journey.

"This is our life now," says Santosh. "And we're proud of it."

Water, Forests and Livelihoods

17 From Ruined Crops to Piped Dreams: A Tribal Village Turns the Tide

Part of a broader push for water and livelihood security, Nanduri's piped irrigation shows what participatory planning can achieve.
Nanduri, Dharni (Amravati)

Until just a few years ago, a minor canal that drew water from a neglected and crumbling dam near Nanduri village routinely overflowed and flooded the surrounding farms—ironically, just as crops were ready for harvest. What was meant to help, often destroyed instead.

"We suffered losses every year," recalls 48-year-old Nandkishor Tandilkar. "Water would leak from the broken channels and flood our crops—especially when we didn't need it."

Nothing was spared, he says. Maize, lentils, millets, cotton, and other crops routinely suffered from a sudden water inundation as the dam system had crumbled with age.

Today, as he walks us through his land, newly planted with maize, there's spring in his feet.

Tandilkar is a small farmer from the marginalised Korku tribe in Nanduri, a village of about 600 people, located 25 km from Dharni in Amravati district's remote Melghat region.

Like many others here, he had nearly given up on farming—until a timely intervention changed the course of his fields and future, this one came on the heels of many small, effective, changes.

Piped Distribution Network

An innovative Piped Distribution Network (PDN), introduced by Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), and supported by the principles of Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), has transformed the irrigation system and with it, the confidence of 134 farmers across 12 groups in the 150-hectare command area in Nanduri village of the 20-year-old dam. The total culturable command area of the dam is estimated to be around 400 hectare, but largely un-serviced due to poor maintenance.

While not every household in Nanduri owns land within the command area, the PDN's benefits ripple through the village. Once fully operational, it could even extend irrigation to farms outside the command area or those at higher elevations.

Though still a pilot, the PDN in Nanduri—part of SPS's broader "Water, Livelihood, and Nutritional Security in Melghat" project (supported by Tata Trusts)—holds promise for replication and scaling, within and beyond the region. Going forward, its structure may need to align with the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act, 2005.

Among SPS's many interventions in this malnutrition-prone, migration-affected region, this one stands out—for its tangible promise of better harvests, reliable irrigation, and reduced distress.

Tandilkar, like many others here, once migrated to Deulgaon Raja—a cotton-processing town in Buldhana district—to survive. His land couldn't sustain his family year-round. He now works as a supervisor at a cotton gin and helps others from the village find work. But things are shifting.

"Our group will operate and maintain the PDN ourselves," he says, showing us the newly laid underground pipes and individual outlets feeding each farm. His group of ten farmers—including women like Sunita Dharamraj Tandilkar and Babita Yogesh Tandilkar—forms the Birsa Munda Pani Vapar Sanstha, which oversees 18 hectares of contiguous farmland.

Focus on women

"The beneficiaries are mostly women," explains Sugat Bagade, the SPS technical resource person overseeing construction. Sunita and Babita, both relatives of Tandilkar, now understand how to clean and maintain the pipes. "This will be the first year we get a proper harvest," says Sunita, in her 30s, who dreams of growing diverse crops on her five-acre plot.

While women farmers are the main beneficiaries, their male companions are proud partners in the change. As Babita says, "We are in this work together."

The SPS's other interventions—organising women into self-help groups, promoting organic farming, and supporting kitchen gardens—complete the development arc around this PDN model. Most farmers are diversifying, growing organic, and keeping small ruminants to add to their income, something they did not have just a decade ago. Those are still the early years in what seems a long, arduous, and slow transformation of this marginalised community,

Technically too, the PDN is a leap forward.

The system runs parallel to a repaired cement canal, drawing water from a chambered outlet off the main canal. Each group now has a dedicated micro-PDN. This eliminates the losses caused by ruptured earthen channels. Water is filtered at the outlet, reducing blockages.

"The last two seasons have shown encouraging results," says Bagade. Of the 12 PDN groups, three are already operational and Tandilkar's is about to go full steam this year. "Because water pressure travels faster through pipes, tail-end farmers now get water first—unlike in the old system, where head-end farmers would draw more and leave little for the rest."

That small design detail—tail-to-head delivery—has resolved long-standing tensions around water access.

Every group maintains its system, shares the upkeep, and covers small repair costs collaboratively. "Come back after harvest," smiles Babita. "That's when you'll really see what this has done for us."

Sidebar – Why This Story Matters

- Fixes a Broken System: Transforms a leaky, dysfunctional canal into a reliable, efficient piped irrigation network.
- Empowers Women Farmers: Women are not just recipients but active managers of the new system—cleaning filters, handling valves, and maintaining flow.
- Builds Local Ownership: Farmers form self-managed water user groups that operate, maintain, and co-fund the PDN—ensuring long-term sustainability.
- Boosts Food and Income Security: Reliable irrigation enables farmers to grow more diverse crops, reduce losses, and cut migration for work.

Water, Forests and Livelihoods

18 Hope That Grew in Water

The story of Ganga and Sakharam Dhande's resilience and reinvention
Kara, Dharni (Amravati)

In the remote, forest-clad hills of Dharni taluka lies the village of Kara, nestled into the slopes, often overlooked—until now. Here, a quiet revolution is unfolding. It's not a tale of grand dreams or overnight success, but of how Ganga and Sakharam Dhande, a farming couple, turned standing water in their fields into a pool of possibility.

For over twenty years, the Dhandes have been cultivating their four acres of sloping farmland—growing maize, paddy, pigeon pea, chickpeas, and cotton. The variety was there, but the challenges loomed large: rocky land, rain-dependent farming, and increasing costs from chemical fertilizers. Whatever they harvested barely covered their expenses.

That's when they came into contact with Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), an NGO promoting sustainable and organic farming. Ganga, always curious about new techniques, took the lead. She gradually shifted from chemical-based farming to organic practices—learning everything from weed management to compost making. Over a few seasons, yields improved and costs dropped. Still, the income equation hadn't changed drastically.

The real transformation began not in the crops—but in a waterlogged corner of their field.

Where Others Saw a Problem, They Saw Potential

Every monsoon, rainwater would pool in one low-lying part of their land—rendering it unusable. For most farmers, it was a nuisance. But one day, an SPS field worker had an idea: "Why not try fish farming here?"

Ganga was stunned. She'd heard of fish farming, but never imagined doing it herself—let alone on her own land. Sakharam was skeptical. With farming already draining their time and energy, this felt like one experiment too many.

But SPS kept encouraging them. They offered guidance, support, and free fish seed. The couple finally agreed—half out of curiosity, half out of cautious hope.

A Small Experiment, A Deep Impact

In August 2021, as the rains tapered off, the Dhandes released Rohu and Katla fingerlings

into the natural pond that had formed on their land. Beneath the still water, they began nurturing something they hadn't known in years—expectation.

The first year was rough. They had to buy fish feed from the market, the expenses were high, and returns were almost nil. But they'd gained something invaluable—experience.

The following year, they took formal training. Instead of buying feed, they started making it themselves—mixing maize, dung, and chaff. They observed the fish closely, fed them regularly, maintained the water quality—and this time, their Katla fish reached up to 1 kg each.

That year, the pond brought in ₹60,000 in revenue.

Some fish they kept for themselves, the rest sold for ₹40,000 in the local market—all from an investment of barely ₹10,000, and in land that previously yielded nothing during monsoon.

Since then, they've stuck to a simple model: Release fingerlings in August, harvest in March.

Security in Uncertain Seasons

With fish farming now a steady source of income, it acts as a safety net against crop failure. If the rains fail or pests ruin the harvest, the fish still give them a fighting chance.

And all of this happened in a corner of their land they once couldn't even walk through during the rains.

Of course, the journey hasn't been without hurdles.

Wild boars and blue bulls still damage crops. And then there's human theft—people wading into the pond under cover of darkness, stealing fish. To protect their stock, Sakharam stays up some nights on guard. Still, Ganga says with conviction:

"Yes, there are problems. But fish are now vital to us. If the crops fail one year, the fish will keep us afloat."

From Laughter to Learning

Today, in Kara, people talk about the Dhandes. What started as a joke—"they're raising fish in a field!"—has become a source of inspiration. Others are digging their own

ponds. And when they do, it's Ganga and Sakharam they turn to for advice.

This couple has become more than just farmers — they are local champions of sustainable innovation.

Now in their fourth year of fish farming, SPS informed them there would be no free seed this time. Ganga looked at Sakharam for a moment. He smiled and said:

"That's fine. We'll invest ₹10,000 ourselves. If we're earning ₹60,000, what's the harm in spending a little? And there's a good market for fish in Harisal too."

That one line captures their journey—from uncertainty to understanding, from risk to reward.

This isn't just a story about fish farming. It's a story of rural innovation, of imagining alternatives when the old ways no longer work. Of using what you already have, to build what you never thought possible.

And in the quiet waters of a forgotten corner of Kara, hope is swimming free.

Water, Forests and Livelihoods

19 Sosokheda: A People's Village, A People's Revolution

A tribal hamlet rewrites its destiny through collective will and grassroots governance

Sosokheda, Dharni (Amravati)
Kara, Dharni (Amravati)

About 30 km from Dharni town, deep in the forested terrain of Maharashtra's Melghat region, lies a small tribal village with just about 700 people — Sosokheda.

The mobile network here wavers with the wind and is always patchy. Two shaky Jio bars on a good day, and BSNL if the stars align. But what the village lacks in connectivity, it makes up for in something far more rare: community-led transformation.

Once known for seasonal migration, depleted farms, and absentee development, Sosokheda today is whispered about in neighbouring talukas as a model of participatory governance. A quiet but powerful shift that began just four years ago when Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) first entered the village.

And what followed wasn't a handout — but a hand-in-hand journey.

From Schemes to Systems

In theory, everything that happened here was already available on paper — government schemes for forest rights, organic farming, employment, women's empowerment, livestock. But what Sosokheda did — and what few villages manage — was to bring it all together in one cohesive, people-driven system.

Gramsabhas became vibrant again. Women took the front rows. Men started talking about compost and soil health. The village turned towards organic farming, claimed its Community Forest Rights (CFR), and used MGNREGA funds to create jobs that kept people rooted in their land.

"Earlier, we would farm during the monsoon and then leave for cities like Amravati and Akola to work as labourers," says Narayan Mawaskar, a farmer. "But once MGNREGA started working here properly, and we learnt about forest rights, there was enough to do right here. Why go anywhere else?"

Forests of the Future

The CFR campaign gave the village legal rights over 10 hectares of surrounding forest land. It had once been barren, forgotten. But in 2023, through collective shramdaan (voluntary labour), the villagers planted over 5,000 saplings — useful native species like mahua, tamarind, custard apple, bamboo.

The plantation was backed by wages under MGNREGA — a rare, powerful blend of ecology, economy, and dignity.

"These trees are not just for us, but for our children and grandchildren," says Ramji Hirani Sawalkar. "We worked the land ourselves. Now we'll nurture it together."

Soil, not Chemicals

Sosokheda has also seen a quiet revolution in its soil. Once dependent on chemical inputs, many farmers began transitioning to Non-Pesticidal Management (NPM) under SPS's guidance. Half the village today farms organically.

"Our grandparents never used chemicals. But somewhere we lost our way," admits Sawalkar. "I harvested 6 quintals of tur this year, all grown organically. It fetched a good rate too."

Soil fertility has improved. Taste has returned to food. And pride has returned to farming.

Sawalkar even offered a patch of his land for the village's new nursery project, which is now being developed with support from SPS. The aim is to make it self-sustaining and eventually part of a government scheme.

Work at Home, Not Away

For years, people here had no choice but to migrate. Now, with names enrolled on MGNREGA muster rolls, jobs have come to them — road work, bunds, plantations, nurseries, and water conservation. "Our livelihood today runs on soil, water and forest," says Narayan Mawaskar. "No need to go anywhere."

The SPS didn't stop with land and jobs. Over 50 women have now been brought together in self-help groups. From savings and internal lending, many are now dreaming of micro-businesses — groceries, vegetable vending, food processing.

Once silent in meetings, women now talk money, margins, and marketing.

It's not just economic participation. It's power.

Alongside farming, the village has built robust systems for goat and poultry rearing. SPS helped set up well-designed goat sheds and poultry units under various schemes. These aren't token structures — they are thriving ecosystems. Many families now sell goat kids and eggs, generating steady supplemental income.

The Sosokheda Model: Built, Not Bought

What makes Sosokheda stand out is not that it received help — but that it took ownership. SPS worked with the people, not on them. Villagers attended trainings, held meetings, dug pits, planted saplings, switched crops,

started SHGs, and brought in other villagers.

Today, they take decisions through the gramsabha. They work their own land. Shramdaan isn't an occasional event — it's a culture.

Once mocked for going "organic," those farmers are now teachers. Once silent, Sosokheda now speaks — and others listen.

This isn't just a success story — it's a living model of what happens when communities rise, not in protest, but in purpose.

"Sahab," says a smiling elder, "we don't leave the forest anymore. We are shaping it — and it's shaping us."

Sosokheda's Five Pillars of Transformation

- Entry and engagement by SPS
- Organic farming and village nursery
- Forest rights via gramsabha and CFR
- Livelihood through MGNREGA
- Women's empowerment and livestock rearing

Water, Forests and Livelihoods

20 From forest to future: How Melghat's villages are reclaiming their rights

Once dismissed from their own forests as trespassers, adivasi communities in Melghat are now turning those same lands into lifelines. Guided by hard-won knowledge of the Forest Rights Act, villages like Sosokheda, Nanduri, Rangubeli, and Chethar are forging paths of unity, livelihood, and self-determination—one gram sabha at a time.

Dharni, Amravati

In the undulating forests of Melghat where the teak trees rise like sentinels over the tribal heartland of Maharashtra, change is rooted not just in the soil but in the collective spirit of its people. Here, four villages—Sosokheda, Nanduri, Rangubeli, and Chethar—have been quietly scripting a story of transformation. Their struggle and triumph over land rights, livelihood insecurity, and official apathy show how community, when united, can reclaim both its forest and its future.

Until just a few years ago, these villages were locked out of their own forests—by bureaucracy, ignorance, and decades of neglect. Migration was a necessity, agriculture was subsistence-level at best, and the forest, ironically, was a resource they couldn't touch. "We were thieves on our own land," recalls Somlal Hivne of Rangubeli, remembering the decades of stealth Tendu leaves collection under the threat of forest department fines.

But the tide began to turn around 2020, when Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS), a grassroots nonprofit, started working closely with local gram sabhas to awaken them to the potential of the Community Forest Rights (CFR) under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. The law had existed, but few knew how to use it. That changed, one village at a time.

Sosokheda: The Torchbearer

A Korku Adivasi village in the Dharni block, Sosokheda led the way.

After securing its CFR title for 405 hectares in

2012, the village had struggled with awareness and implementation. But when they finally took charge—forming a Community Forest Resource Management Committee (CFRMC), holding regular Gram Sabha meetings, and aligning the work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with soil and water conservation—they began to see change.

"In the first year itself, our deep CCT work increased water levels in borewells," says Krishna Khadke, the CFRMC secretary. "And the tree plantations we started, despite resistance from the forest department, turned the department's view when they saw our unity."

Over 5000 trees were planted by voluntary labour (shramdan), women made seed balls, and farming shifted gradually to organic practices. By 2021-22, migration had significantly declined. The village created 5680 MGNREGA man-days in a single year.

More than the numbers, it was the collective confidence that changed. Gram Sabhas moved from being festival-day formalities to active

governing bodies. The once-migrating youth stayed back to tend nurseries, attend meetings, and discuss village development.

Nanduri: The Inspired Follower

Just a few kilometers away, Nanduri watched Sosokheda's rise and felt its own moment stir. Though it had won 307 hectares of CFR land in 2012, the knowledge of its rights lay dormant until 2024. With SPS stepping in and CFRMC formed, Nanduri began its journey with a newfound sense of urgency.

"We had land but no clue what to do with it," says Amarlal Patil, CFRMC Sachiv. "When we saw Sosokheda, we knew we had to begin."

Today, Nanduri has started planning its own tendu patta collection and plantation drives, and is working to leverage MGNREGA to develop its land. Exposure visits to successful CFR villages like Mendha Lekha and Pachgaon gave its people a clear path forward.

Nanduri is also scripted a new success through the participatory irrigation management with the SPS replacing its dilapidated open canal system of an old irrigation project with the piped distribution system by building small micro-collectives over every outlet of the canal.

Yet, roadblocks remain. Bureaucratic red tape and uncooperative gram sevaks delay borewells and schemes. "Even with rights, we're made to feel like we're asking for favours," says a villager. Still, the resolve has grown. "At least now we know what we're entitled to," adds Amarlal.

Rangubeli: From Outlaws to Custodians

Rangubeli's transformation is perhaps the most symbolic. Sitting on the edge of the Melghat Tiger Reserve, its 300-odd residents had long been denied access to their forests. Even after getting 208 hectares under CFR, fear of the forest department kept them out.

But in 2020, led by a handful of determined villagers—and supported by SPS—they began reclaiming their rights. "We used to hide tendu leaves in our farms," remembers Somlal Hivne. "But now we get transit passes and fair prices."

In 2022-23, they planted 1600 trees. MGNREGA work like deep CCTs and farm ponds brought additional income. The forest department, once hostile, now occasionally attends their meetings. "When they saw us planting trees, they realized we weren't looting, we were protecting," Somlal adds.

Monthly gram sabhas have become routine. Women participate. "Before CFR, we didn't know what governance meant," says Sangita Durve, the CFRMC vice-chair. "Now we lead."

Still, climate change is catching up. Two years ago, both tendu and mahua yields drastically dropped. Wild animals disturb farming; crop losses due to wild animal raids are mounting with every passing year. Water and electricity remain scarce. But now, says Somlal, "we fight these challenges together."

Chethar: Late but Resolute

Chethar, near the Sipna-Tapi confluence, had been a ghost village during migration seasons. Entire families left, returning only for Diwali. Farming was erratic; the 118 hectares of CFR land lay unused.

Then came 2021.

With SPS's help, the village formed a CFRMC, visited Mendha Lekha miles away in Gadchiroli, and began its work—from demarcation to plantation. The most dramatic change came not in the forest, but in documentation. Nearly 300 caste certificates were issued, unlocking access to scholarships, solar pumps, and housing schemes. "We got three years of change in one go," says Suraj Kasbekar, with support from Mitaan (community resource person), Gulab Kasbekar.

Nine women's self-help groups have emerged. Tendu and mahua have fetched good returns—though not this year due to weather. Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) are being processed. And the once-migrating youth now see a future at home.

Challenges abound though. Roads are a distant promise; MGNREGA funding has dried up. But the gram sabha has crafted a ten-year roadmap which it is determined to follow.

Unity, Gram Sabha, and the Road Ahead

If one thread binds these villages, it's their rediscovery of the gram sabha, prompted by the SPS and its team of dedicated volunteers. Once symbolic, it is now central to their democracy and daily decisions. From tree plantations to tendu pricing, from borewells to committee elections, it is here that the future is debated and decided.

And behind it all stands the idea of unity.

"Ekta me takat hai," says Krishna Khadke of Sosokheda. "Without it, there is no change."

What began as isolated efforts in far-flung villages is slowly turning into a regional movement. Today, villagers from across Melghat come to Sosokheda, Rangubeli, and Chethar to learn. The forest, once the cause of their exclusion, is now the basis of their assertion.

Key Lessons

In documenting the lived experiences across some villages of Melghat where the Samaj Pragati Sahayog is deeply engaged in bringing a socio-economic and cultural transformation among the most underprivileged and poor people, a few key themes emerge—each pointing to actionable areas for policy refinement, institutional strengthening, and programmatic scale-up.

These stories are not only interventions, but invitations: to replicate, deepen, and sustain community-led transformation. Here are, therefore, some of the key lessons for consideration to sustain the work on the foundations laboriously built by the committed resource persons of SPS.

1. Strengthen Community Institutions

- Invest in federated Self Help Groups (SHGs) with leadership pipelines and enterprise-building support.
- Foster inter-village collaboration to expand collective bargaining, governance participation, and learning exchange.

2. Scale Bio-Resource Centres

- Treat village-level BRCs as infrastructure, not pilots—provide technical upgrades, working capital, and market linkage support. Alongside, document the people's local innovations and knowledge and the
- scientific evidence emerging out of it. Position them within agroecological clusters for soil restoration, income generation, and reduced chemical dependency.

3. Reinforce the Water–Livelihood Nexus

- Prioritize piped distribution networks using Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), especially in dam-serviced command areas within the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act, 2004, and Rules, 2005, to leverage the institutional and governance guidelines embedded in the law to leverage the government support.
- Support user associations under the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act to institutionalize local water governance.

4. Expand Livestock Extension Models

- Replicate para-vet and couple-led animal care centres with training, certification, and honorarium models.
- Create Goat Bank cooperatives that formalize social capital and facilitate asset rotation without loan-based pressure.

5. Elevate Nutrition and Health as Core Agendas

- Link kitchen gardens with targeted maternal and child nutrition programs.
- Enhance community health worker integration with SHGs and frontline data tracking.

6. Protect and Activate Forest Rights

- Streamline Community Forest Rights (CFR) implementation with convergence planning under Gram Sabhas.
- Incentivize village-level nurseries, seed banks, and native species plantations through MGNREGA.

7. Recognize and Replicate Local Champions

- Identify organic agriculture innovators, health volunteers, and SHG leaders for peer-to-peer training roles.
- Build micro-documentation hubs to preserve and scale grassroots knowledge systems.

8. Leverage the existing well-trained local resource persons

- The next phase of this project should look at the local resource persons as change makers, and not merely as the extension personnel; they have a stake in their own development.
- Their capacities need to be built – about the existing laws, statutory frameworks, and umpteen government schemes and programmes to be converged in their own villages.