

Grassroots

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Helping farmers can make a difference, and how

As the recent destructive floods in Chennai, Mumbai and other places have revealed clearly, urban planning has to be improved significantly to reduce the possibility of similar tragedies happening again in today's world of climate change and extreme weather. Unfortunately, there is a strong tendency to repeat the mistakes of the cities in outlying villages and peri-urban areas -- indiscriminate construction activity encroaching on open spaces and water bodies is happening in these places as well, which has a bearing on urban flood risk. An initiative in Gorakhpur District shows that if farmers are helped and open spaces are protected in peri-urban areas, there is likely to be harmony between man and nature

BHARAT DOGRA, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

If villagers are helped to improve farming, horticulture and animal husbandry in eco-friendly ways, the possibility increases that they will not sell out to builders, and instead protect open spaces and water bodies in their area. Such a premise has been validated by the initiative of the Gorakhpur Environment Action Group (GEAG), a leading voluntary organisation of Uttar Pradesh, in some peri-urban (outskirts or the hinterland) villages of Gorakhpur District. As a result of the initiative, farmers, well trained

in organic mixed cultivation, are determined to protect their land instead of selling out to builders and fostering indiscriminate construction.

Says Shiraz Wazih, overall coordinator of GEAG, "Of course it is very important to save the water bodies of Gorakhpur City. But given the sad fact that these have declined from 103 to 18 within the span of a few decades, the work in peri-urban areas to save more open spaces acquires added significance. While the enhancement of sustainable livelihoods of



Asha Devi (Maheva cluster) is a farmer of Simradeviprasad Village. She cultivates about two acres with her husband, Bajrangi (left).

farmers is a highly desirable objective in itself, the fact that it helps to keep more open spaces is an additional advantage at a time when there is greater need to save these spaces but less inclination to do so."

GEAG's efforts are concentrated in two clusters of peri-urban areas near Gorakhpur. The first, Maheva, is near Rapti River, while Moripur, the second cluster, is near Rohini River. The teeming, expanding city is located near the rivers. As with most such cities near rivers, embankments are raised to protect the more densely populated, heavily built and prosperous parts of the main urban settlement, putting at risk the nearby villages, which may face prolonged water-logging and other adverse effects due to the obstruction of the natural flow of water.

Talking of the GEAC initiative, Amit Kumar, a coordinator, says, "Some farmers are selected as model farmers

and what they achieve on their fields also serves as a motivation for others. Selected farmers are taken for training to places where good results have already been achieved, or training is imparted. They come back to tell other farmers what they have learnt."

While hearing the success-stories of various farmers, some common factors emerge (which are emphasised by the GEAG also in other areas of its work). Firstly, organic farming is encouraged. Training is given for preparing compost, vermin-compost and various improved types of composting, so that relatively less cow dung will be required as manure. Training is also given for preparing organic pest-repellents so that poisonous chemical pesticides may be avoided. The GEAG sees its work as providing essentials of organic farming training, and farmers are free to adapt

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Chanda proudly displays some of the vegetables she has grown in her field.

Photos: BD

FOCUS

Adapting to climate change and transforming lives

It's a looming crisis, one that families living in the numerous villages that dot Almora District in Uttarakhand are not entirely unused to now. Hardworking hill women, who are the backbone of local households and farms, have noticed the subtle changes in the seasons over the recent years – a factor that has made agriculture, their traditional livelihood, difficult to pursue. But there's one woman who is making a difference – Sudha Gunwant. She has adapted to newer, better ways of making farming feasible

ANURADHA SAHNI, Almora, Uttarakhand

As one hill woman put it, "I may soon have to stop using my farmland for anything other than growing fodder grass. The erratic rains destroy whatever I sow, be it paddy or potato. I just see no point in putting in so much effort if there is going to be no return in the end." Clearly, for agrarian communities in the region, the road ahead is only getting rougher owing to the variable weather patterns that have not just adversely affected their cropping cycles but also led to the destruction of the forests on which they are dependent for basics like fuel, fodder and water.

However, despite the obvious difficulties, there's one woman from Guna Village in Lamgara Block of Almora, who has turned her farm into a veritable hub of biodiversity. Unassuming and ever smiling, Sudha Gunwant, 47, enjoys taking visitors around her home and land holding. After all, it is a perfectly run, mixed farm – conventional grains are harvested seasonally along with a variety of vegetables, fruits and exotic flowers. Additionally, she also rears livestock for dairy and keeps bees for honey, which she sells on demand.

While Gunwant's farm is doing well these days, it does not mean that she is oblivious to the dangers of climate change. She

observes, "I remember when I had come to this village in 1980 after marriage, farming was the mainstay of most families. Unfortunately, the changing environment and weather has become a threat to our way of life. On my part, I am determined to overcome this challenge."

Help has come to Gunwant through the Central Himalayan Environment Association (CHEA), a non-government organisation that assists mountain communities to achieve sustainable development by adapting to climate change. According to Pankaj Tewari of CHEA, "Most agriculture in Uttarakhand is rain-fed. So the seasonal variations that have impacted rainfall and snowfall are extremely worrying. It has affected soil fertility and hence the yield. Of course, locals do still make an effort to grow some lentil or rice and fodder grass, but it's the bare minimum. At CHEA we have been working intensively for sustainable livelihood development in various villages around Lamgara and Sudha-ji has been an inspiration for everyone. She has successfully demonstrated how, given the right support, people can effectively adapt to climate change and transform their lives."

By Gunwant's own admission, although she has always been

a passionate environmentalist, becoming the able farmer she is today required effort. She needed to acquire the necessary expertise. Initially, her heart had been set on becoming a teacher, a dream that she gave up after marriage. But keen on making a mark within the community, she finally got the chance to prove herself when, about a decade ago, she was chosen to head the Guna Van Panchayat. Van Pachayats are village-level councils that are responsible for the day-to-day management of local civil forests.

Under the guidance of CHEA, she not only got the chance to fully understand what it was that was triggering climate change, but she was also introduced to the various government schemes that promote sustainable livelihood for hill folk, like cash crop cultivation, horticulture, floriculture and various non-farm activities like animal husbandry and bee-keeping.

Walking towards Gunwant's home the first thing that one notices are the fruit trees that encircle the yard. "These were planted in 2002. I got the saplings from the state horticulture department with CHEA's help," says the industrious woman, pointing towards the cluster of peach trees which, she proudly informs, have already yielded a crop for each over the last few years.

Then there are lemons, oranges, cucumber, colocasia (*arvi*), tomatoes, radish, French beans and corn growing on the farm. The surplus produce regularly makes its way to the *mandi* (wholesale market) in Almora, fetching her a decent income. Besides these, flowers such as gladiolas, chrysanthemums and marigolds that grow in a small poly shed built just off the courtyard, also find a ready market, especially during the festival seasons.

Strolling past trees of *kafal* (local wild berry), *bhimal* (fodder) and low hanging kiwi fruit creepers, one arrives at a tin-roofed open shed. This is the



In Guna village of Lamgara Block of Almora District, Sudha Gunwant, 47, has proved herself to be a passionate environmentalist and successful farmer.

vermi-pit that provides Gunwant with all the organic manure she needs for her crops and has also become a source of substantial revenue. Indeed, she "has taken full advantage of the government schemes and was one of first few farmers in the district to take up vermiculture by creating a pit in my own backyard".

It was her willingness to experiment with alternate sources of income generation that led her to undertake animal husbandry and apiculture (bee keeping) – and whatever added money she makes by selling milk or honey she simply ploughs back into the land. "I have several bee boxes.

Keeping them clean, ensuring the safety of the bees from the wasps, protecting them from the cold weather, and ensuring availability of food for them in the winter – all this requires tremendous time and energy," she says. Her hard work yields sweet rewards in the form of the honey which she collects from the apiary. Every season she gets about six to eight bottles of pure organic honey.

From dawn to dusk, Sudha Gunwant, who was conferred the state's Green Ambassador Award in 2012 for her significant contribution towards biodiversity conservation, is a busy woman. Says she, "The life of hill women is extremely difficult and in families where the men don't have permanent jobs they shoulder all burden as wives, mothers and even farmers. A farmer's life is intrinsically connected to nature – too little or too much sun, rain or snowfall is always bad for the land."

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Thirty-five apiary boxes line the courtyard of Sudha Gunwant's home and every season she gets about six to eight bottles of pure organic honey.



Gunwant's farm has several such plants that yield the delicious hill cucumber that is seen here.

It's a long, rough passage for fisherwomen, beset by problems

Economic hardship and poverty compel fisherwomen to step out of their homes to sell fish. Often they are staring at a debt trap brought on by borrowing during the lean season or to cover for the expense of buying a boat, a fish net and other accessories. It's a hard life for fisherwomen like Patricia and Mary, who live along the Kerala-Tamil Nadu coast in the district of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu. From dawn to dusk they struggle to keep their homes running and provide for their children as their husbands are either intoxicated or unconcerned

SREELEKHA NAIR, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu



Photo: Pamela Philipose/WFS

It is a hard day's work for most fisherwomen. They face the pressure to sell, if only to keep their homes running.

From the spot where she was sitting by the roadside, Patricia got up in a huff. With an expressionless tone she asked the customer to help her haul the heavy basket of fish on her head. As Patricia started to walk off the woman who was bargaining with her called out, "Why are you leaving? Let's work out a price. I need to buy fish as there is nothing for lunch at home." Turning back she said, "Madam, if I say anything to you, you will retort that Patricia is talking too much. I don't want to fight with you but if you have to feed your children then so do I. How can you expect me to sell the catch at a loss? I paid Rs 200 for this fish and cannot give it away for less."

Despite her rationale, when the customer still insisted on negotiating a lower price, Patricia had no choice but to give in. She knew that if she didn't sell at her quoted price then Mary definitely would. Mary is Patricia's direct competition and always waiting for her to make a mistake. Only the strongest threats and warnings from Patricia have kept Mary away from selling fish on her regular route. Moreover, a fisherwoman's relationship with her customers is like her community's relationship with

the sea. She can never be angry for too long if she has to ensure the survival of her family. That is the rule of the game. After all, Patricia is aware of the fact that when she comes to the neighbourhood again the next morning the same customer will be there waiting for her.

Patricia's normal working day starts off at 7 am and she is out of the house and on her feet till about 4 pm. She visits around 30 homes on her standard vending route and does not return home till she has sold off the entire basket-load. Fish is perishable and there is no place she can store it.

One of the most distinct features of the fishing industry is that it is a highly gendered vocation, which is contrary to some of the more romanticised ideas about this line of work, especially where women are concerned. The general feeling is that fisherwomen have a lot of freedom and face very little gender prejudice although the reality is very different. For instance, the very visible unrestricted movement of fisherwomen is actually their desperate attempt at making ends meet and should not be interpreted as women's liberation. Gendered division

of labour, according to some fisherwomen, is also a reflection of the reality of the biological differences between men and women. Venturing into sea to fish is entirely a male domain. Going to inner seas for fishing takes days and so it is difficult for women to share the same boat with men.

Although a few years back some fisherwomen near the coast of Irayanthura in Tamil Nadu did try to go to sea to challenge the male monopoly, a week later they came back completely exhausted and suffering from sea sickness. Further, in their absence their household chores were left unattended

and children had to fend for themselves. So the womenfolk of the community have been given the 'duty' of praying to Mother Sea to protect their husbands and sons. If something happens to a male member while at sea there is a direct implication on the woman's life. Her character is questioned and everyone assumes that it must have been her lack of faith that led to the tragedy. What about recognising their backbreaking work of selling the catch door-to-door to bring in much-needed income for survival? Well, that is simply seen as one of their responsibilities.

Economic hardship and poverty compels fisherwomen to step out of their homes to sell fish. Often they are staring at a debt trap brought on by borrowing during the lean season or to cover for the expense of buying a boat, a fish net and other accessories. Most men, on the other hand, do not share their earnings with the family and instead indulge in drinking hard liquor. On an average, among the fisher folk on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, only one-fourth of the men's earnings are given to family and that too at irregular intervals.

Women take to retailing fish as a feasible means of livelihood to pay for their children's education and meet the daily expenses. However, competition at every step of the way is very high. Patricia and Mary are fully aware of the importance of smartly negotiating a price with the contractor from whom

they source fresh fish. That is why they are quick to reach the coastal market in the morning. Then there is the turf war. Everyone has their demarcated vending areas and spots by the roadside. Some are even able to put up small stalls fashioned out of plastic sheets.

Yet, the uncertainties in this work are manifold and only add to their troubles. Of late, some of them have taken to setting up small commercial enterprises or stitching centres as an alternative.

Naturally, they largely deal in known areas - fish products and other allied small-scale industries such as fish processing and net knitting.

Patricia, Mary, and other fisherwomen are ready to compromise with their harsh existence but they want a solution to the problem of domestic violence, which is the direct result of the prevailing alcoholism among the men.

Unfortunately, the women report that even priests of the local parish as well as community leaders, whose word otherwise carries considerable weight, hesitate to intervene when they complain of ill treatment or beating. They feel that the men would retaliate and stop paying for the expense of the church. Of course, all the constant bickering, fighting and lack of money at home has a negative impact on the children, who often go astray and become local goons.

It is one of Mary's fervent wishes that she spend an entire day without shouting at anyone. She shared, "It would be a welcome change if I didn't have to shout at fish vending contractors in the morning, insensitive customers during the day and my husband and young son at night." But until the men learn to share their earning with them and give up drinking, this yearning will persist like an illusive dream. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photo: SN/WFS

A fisherwoman's relationship with her customers is like the community's relationship with the sea. She can never be angry for too long if she has to ensure the survival of her family.

They set a meaningful agenda for eradicating hunger

This is a success story. The backdrop: a small, dusty village in Madhya Pradesh; the protagonists: oppressed Dalit women, who managed to shed their inhibitions and overcome centuries old caste and class baggage to save their children from the curse of hunger and severe malnutrition. Poverty and severe hunger had threatened their very existence but they have now risen above their misfortunes

SHURIAH NIAZI, Sonkatch, Madhya Pradesh

Mundalana Village in Sonkatch Block of Dewas District is home to 800 Dalits, out of a total population of 2600. Owing to their backward social status, the community had been forced to live at the periphery of the village, they were denied access to common spaces such as the village well and temple, and often had no option but to work as bonded agricultural labourers without minimum wages. Poverty and severe hunger threatened their very existence but they could never rise above their misfortunes. Life would have continued in this dismal manner had it not been for a few courageous women and men who decided to seek change with the help of Jan Sahas, a local non-government organisation that has been working on issues of livelihood and food security in the region.

Says Rajendra Ahirwar, co-ordinator, Jan Sahas, "It's a well-known fact that Dalits in this area have no social status, no rights and no prospects. While on the one hand they are subjected to discrimination, on the other their superstitious beliefs hold them back.

However, over the last two years, the Dalits of Mundalana have been working hard to fight illiteracy, unemployment and hunger and it's the women who have emerged as the new voice of this community." Under the Fight Hunger First Initiative,

launched by Welthungerhilfe, an international development agency, Jan Sahas has been encouraging the Dalits of Mundalana to fight for their rights and improve the health and nutrition status of their children by ensuring equitable access to government schemes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and mid-day meals.

In 2012, it facilitated the formation of the 12-member Dalit Vanchit Vikas Manch to address critical problems and come up with workable solutions. From the word go, there were two issues that figured prominently on the agenda: securing work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and freeing children from malnutrition.

Even as they got down to the task of preparing an action plan to demand 100 days of unskilled employment under MGNREGA, their crusade against hunger started off with the six women members of the Manch taking on the local school authorities on the discontinuation of the mid-day meal programme. This government scheme not only assures impoverished children of one nutritious meal a day it also acts as a major incentive for them to attend school.

The mid day meals at the Government Primary and Middle School Mundalana had been stopped after Shanta Bai,

the woman in charge of cooking, retired in 2009.

States Seema Bai, 35, "When children go hungry or fall ill it's their mothers who feel the pain. So it was only natural for us to take up this issue with the authorities. Around 150 Dalit children attend the local school and when the mid day meal was discontinued they suffered immensely. Being poor, their parents used to count on that one meal to ensure some level of nutrition for the children but this facility too was snatched away from them. Once we constituted the Manch we got the confidence to speak out."

The task at hand was not easy and soon enough the women faced their first hurdle. When they approached their *sarpanch* (village council head) to look into the matter, he refused. He was not willing to extend himself for the well-being of children from the backward caste. Undeterred, they enlisted the help of Jan Sahas activists and directly took their demand to the State Department of Women and Child Development.

After hearing them out, the department officials suggested that they take on the responsibility of cooking and serving the meal. The women were instantly agreeable to this but they were informed that they would need to form a self-help group that would receive the required assistance from the administration to run the mid day meal service.

Their next challenge came when they went to the bank to open an account so that money to buy supplies and give out wages could be sought from the government. The bank officials told them that their application needed to come from the *gram panchayat* office. Once again they went back to the reluctant *sarpanch* and once again they came back disappointed. Despite repeated efforts when he did not agree to sanction their papers, the women approached the district collector, who expedited their work. The entire process took two months but thanks to the relentless spirit of the women Manch members, the mid-day meal scheme was back on track.

Today, the SHG women, working under the guidance of the Dalit Manch, are dishing



Articulate women members of the Dalit Vanchit Vikas Manch in Mundalana participate in gram sabha meetings and put forth the needs of the local Dalit Community.

out hot food for hungry children every afternoon. While the wheat, rice and lentils used to prepare the meals are sourced from the nearby PDS (Public Distribution System) ration shop, the money that is directly put into their account by the government is used to pay the wages of the cook. The SHG receives Rs 3.25 per primary school child and Rs 5 per middle school child, which helps them cover their expenses.

Apart from facilitating the resumption of the mid-day meal, in a bid to tackle the issue of severe malnourishment among the children in the community, the women members of the manch are keeping an eye on the functioning of the village *anganwadi* (nursery). They make sure that the centre is open daily and that the *anganwadi* worker provides the necessary nutritional supplements and other services to expectant women and children under six years.

Shares Padam Bai, 40: "There are several activities that the Dalit Vanchit Vikas Manch has undertaken to improve the nutritional status of our women and children. We get together with the Jan Sahas activists to organise regular nutritional *melas* (fairs) in the village where we give women information regarding locally available nutritious foods besides talking to them about the importance of hygiene, proper breast feeding and immunisation. Lately, we have been ensuring that the *anganwadi* worker refers the

severely malnourished children to the government-run Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) at Sonkatch so that they can get proper care and treatment."

Interestingly, female members of the Manch have learnt to effectively participate in the *gram sabha* meetings as well. "Earlier, the *gram sabha* meetings were a mere formality. But now we go there regularly to make sure that issues and pending matters related to the welfare of the village are discussed. We put up our concerns without fear and when it comes to our entitlements and benefits we do not compromise. In fact, we had first raised the issue of the mid-day meal in the Gram Sabha," informs Bhagwant Bai, 56. Incidentally, the manch members, too, meet up once a month to review their work and come up with future plans.

When it comes to demanding their rights, women like Bhagwant, Padam and Seema have understood that there is no alternative to speaking out. What has brought about this amazing transformation is the realisation that there is strength in unity. Explains Padam Bai, "Till a couple of years back, we used to approach officials individually but no one would acknowledge our presence. Now we go in groups of 20 or 30 and officials can't afford to ignore us anymore. Things are definitely looking up for us." ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photos: SN/WFS

As members of the Dalit Vanchit Vikas Manch in Mundalana, Bhagwant Bai, Padma Bai and Seema Bai (from left) have played a pivotal role in helping improve the nutritional status of the Dalit women and children in the village.

Forests are their lifeline, and they go all out to safeguard them

Travelling around Rayagada District in Odisha one can't help but appreciate the lush hilly terrain. The countryside in the Muniguda and Bissam Cuttack Blocks is like a never-ending stretch of green, all thanks to the hard work and diligence of local tribal women who have taken on the responsibility of protecting the forests, ably supported by Living Farm, a non-government organisation working in the region on issues related to food and nutrition security

SARADA LAHANGIR, Rayagada, Odisha

It was a couple of years ago that Living Farm started spreading awareness on forest protection in Odisha's Rayagada District as part of the Fight Hunger First Initiative funded by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (WHH) of Germany. The idea behind the exercise was to safeguard the forests and, at the same time, address the issue of malnutrition and hunger among the tribal populations. The dedicated efforts to regenerate a severely depleted green cover are paying rich dividends today.

Says Debjee Sarangi, founder and director, Living Farm, "A few years ago, the timber mafia was very active in the area. They were cutting trees indiscriminately and, in the process, destroying large chunks of the forest. For the tribal villagers, there was a marginal financial gain involved if they gave their tacit support for the transportation of the wood.

However, with the passage of time, the women started facing the adverse impacts of this illegal activity. They were forced to walk for miles to collect firewood for daily use. Gathering the all-important forest produce also became a tough chore. Already struggling to make ends meet, they were concerned about the health of their children as well.

That's when we talked to them about uncultivated foods and told them that if they included these in their diet at least their nutritional needs would be taken care of free of cost. When they realised that 90 per cent of the uncultivated foods come from the forest, it dawned on them that protecting the forest would save them from hunger and starvation."

Forests are a vital support system for tribal communities across Rayagada, providing them with food, medicine, fodder, fuel wood and water for sustenance. Any move to diminish them threatens the very existence of this otherwise impoverished lot. Once the women of Patangpadar, a small hamlet in Muniguda Block, understood this reality they got down to the task of creating a workable roadmap to renew their green cover. These

days they are literally enjoying the fruits of their honest efforts in the form of the Ghodasal Dongar (hill) that is flourishing with mango, jackfruit, guava, tamarind and *sal* trees that take care of their food requirements round the year.

Every day, Ratani Jakesika, 35, makes her way to the Ghodasala Dongar to pick edible greens, fruits, tuber and roots to feed her children. In the absence of suitable livelihood opportunities, especially during the rainy season, it is this forest that saves her family from going hungry. "The forest is protecting my children from starvation. So is it not my duty to protect it from extinction?" she states.

Like Ratani, Gutuli Saraka, 45, a mother of three, is fiercely protective of Ghodasala Dongar. There was a time she used to migrate for a few months every year in search of paid work. But ever since she joined Ratani and others in the conservation drive she hasn't felt the need to uproot the family as they are able to meet their nutritional and livelihood needs from the Ghodasala Dongar forest itself.

Since 2012, twenty women from Patangpadar have come together and formed four informal groups of five members each, who fan out in the jungles on a rotation basis, armed with *lathis* (sticks) and axes. Even as they safeguard the area from miscreants as well as the timber mafia, they have come up with certain informal rules for the community to follow while gathering forest produce and firewood. This has benefitted families, especially the womenfolk, in many ways – not only do they no longer have to traverse long distances to access forest goods but, like Gutuli, they are not forced to migrate as they are able to eke out a living from whatever is locally procured.

For instance, they make money by selling non-timber products, such as *tendu* leaves, char and *sal* seeds, *mahua*, *harida*, *kusum*, sisal, bamboo, mango and *jamun* in the market. Moreover, these also become raw materials for making goods like brooms, baskets, mats, ropes



Photos: SLAWFS

Members of the forest protection group of Patangpadar Village in Muniguda Block of Rayagada District in Odisha.

and leaf plates, which add to the household income.

It's been a long journey for the women's group in Patangpadar and they have bravely faced the challenges that came their way. "Initially when we started this movement the men did not support us because the timber mafia used to give them some money, which they spent on liquor. It took time but we were able to transform their attitudes with the help of activists from Living Farm. We have successfully regenerated three *dongers* - Ghodasala, Redagudi and Mundra – each spread over 60 acres," says Nandini Sikoka, a proud member of the forest



Ratani Jakesika and Gutuli Saraka are fiercely protective of the forests of Ghodasala Dongar which they have worked hard to regenerate.

protection group. Of course, the success of the women's initiative proved to be a catalyst for change in the region. Their good work inspired the women of Patharagarh, a village of 36 families in the Bissam Cuttack Block, to take the movement one step ahead. When in April 2013, the Forest Department talked about involving the villagers in the mass plantation of teak and eucalyptus, under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a livelihood scheme of the government, the women stood up in large numbers to oppose the move. Their argument was clear – besides the commercial trees they needed food and fruit plants in their forest as they enabled them to meet their nutritional needs.

Recalls Tamba Tuika, 67, "We told them that we don't want these useless trees in our forest. From the leafy greens, fruits and tubers we gather, we feed our families every day. If you want to regenerate the forest please plant trees that we want – those that will give us food, fodder and shelter." The entire village stood up to the Department, which was unable to convince the community to change their mind. Finally, they agreed to

provide saplings of mango, jackfruit, *mahua*, guava, black berry and *barada saga*.

According to Bichitra Biswal, project coordinator, Living Farm, "Tribal women have always been at the forefront of conservation drives. They are blessed with traditional knowledge of forest management practices and we simply enabled them to gain the confidence to help themselves. These days, 120 women across 60 villages in Bissam Cuttack and Muniguda Blocks are part of the forest protection movement."

Women like Ratani, Gutuli, Nandini and Tamba realise the significance of their work and are prepared to keep it going in spite of the hurdles that may come their way. They assert with confidence, "We have decided to protect our forests at any cost because we know that they are our lifeline." ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

Quiet homemakers once, 'empowered farmers' now

In the lush countryside of the northeastern state of Assam, women have discovered a new source of livelihood. With support from the Mushroom Development Foundation and the North East Institute of Science and Technology, wives and mothers have taken to mushroom cultivation in a big way. Indeed, a lot that has changed for women like Aroti, Jyoti and Gunoboti ever since they have become proficient mushroom farmers. They now have a regular income, and a standing in their family and community

AZERA RAHMAN, Guwahati



Photos: AB/WFS

A woman in the lush countryside of Assam's Golaghat District shows off the fruits of her efforts.

Aroti Devi is observant, hardworking and quite astute. Says the resident of Assam's Golaghat District, "Over the last few years, the rains have become quite erratic. Either we have incessant downpours that end up flooding the whole area or there are long spells of dry weather. This uncertainty has severely affected paddy cultivation, which initially had an adverse impact on our household income as well as our nutritional status. Fortunately, that's not the case anymore. We have a foolproof alternative now."

In the lush countryside of the northeastern state of Assam, women like Aroti Devi have discovered a new source of livelihood that has transformed them from quiet homemakers and agri-workers to 'empowered farmers'. With support from the Mushroom Development Foundation (MDF), which works closely with the North East Institute of Science and Technology (NEIST), the hardworking wives and mothers have taken to mushroom cultivation in a big way. "Ever since I have learnt mushroom farming, there is an assured sum - no matter how small - that I am able to bring home every month. At least I can now plan something concrete for the

future of my children," says the woman who harvests up to five kilos of mushroom on a particularly good day.

Like Aroti, her neighbour, Jyoti Moni Das, can't stop smiling these days. Her earnings from the mushroom bags she has nurtured over the last one year have given her tremendous happiness and peace of mind. "I, along with several other women from my village, who are part of a self-help group, have been trained in mushroom cultivation by the MDF. Over the past 12 months or so I have made Rs 40000. My mushroom bags have truly been a boon for my family," she remarks.

Mushrooms are delicate, delicious and nutritious. Whereas once they were not commonly used in traditional Indian cooking, these days consumption has increased manifold with people becoming more open to experimenting with their everyday meals. Of course, while Northeast India, including Assam, has the perfect climatic conditions for mushroom cultivation, it is only in the last couple of years that it has become popular with women's collectives, tea garden communities, farmers and entrepreneurs alike.

And why should it not? Experts reveal that mushroom

is a totally hassle-free crop. If the temperature and humidity is favourable, as is the case across the northeast, then all that is required is a little bit of seed money, information and a small patch in the backyard or a few polyethylene bags.

"Unlike in other parts of India, where mushroom cultivation needs good investment as it has to be produced in an artificially controlled environment, this is not the case in the northeast. The region is naturally blessed," points out Pranjal Baruah, founder of the MDF. According to him, Assam is well-suited for growing oyster mushrooms that require an optimum temperature of 20-30 degree Celsius, while button mushrooms, which thrive in 10-20 degrees, are perfect for Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland that are at a higher altitude. Shitake Mushroom, one of the most expensive varieties, sprouts at a temperature of 15 degrees Celsius and is ideal for a state like Manipur.

For the last couple of years, Baruah's MDF team has been assisting various women's groups in Assam to produce oyster mushrooms, with great success. In pockets where the temperature is slightly higher - like Nagaon and Dhubri - it has been encouraging the cultivation of the fleshier, Milky mushroom and in places that are at an altitude - like Diphu - growing button mushroom is more common. "Oyster mushrooms can be harvested throughout the year. And by way of initial investment, a farmer only needs a bamboo frame with flex (the kind used in hoardings) and some compost," states Baruah. With such an indigenous design, it takes a mere three days to start a mushroom farm, he adds.

So far, the MDF has provided training to more than 100000 people on mushroom cultivation. It's collaboration with the NEIST has resulted in the propagation of the best growing methods as well as the distribution of mushroom spawns. "We have adopted a cluster approach. Since 2010, we have developed 33 clusters in 28 districts of five northeast states. Each cluster has between 100 and 180 households. We train people, mostly marginalised

farmers and women, on cultivation techniques, distribute spawns and later help them sell the harvest as well. The idea is to remove the middlemen so that their hard-earned profit entirely comes to them," informs the Ashoka Fellow.

Oyster mushroom, for instance, sells at Rs 100 per kilo, and can go up to Rs 250 (maximum retail price). Dry mushroom is more expensive as 10 kilos of fresh mushroom makes up only one kilo of its dry version. The price of dry mushroom can range between Rs 800 and Rs 900 a kilo.

In Dibrugarh District, the most tea garden intensive area in the state, M.S. Manivannan, the district commissioner, wholeheartedly supports tea garden workers', mostly Adivasis or tribals, foray into mushroom cultivation. He says, "Mushroom is very much a part of the tea garden community's diet. It can be found in the wild and they know which variety is edible and which one is poisonous. Since it does not require any additional space to grow, I have been motivating the community to do this at home. They can sell and earn some additional money."

Everything Gunoboti Gogoi Patra and her husband, Pronob, from Dikom in Dibrugarh, know about mushroom cultivation they have learnt from the MDF team that came visiting over a year ago. Gunoboti describes the process in detail, "The first step is to cut straw, wash and boil it. After it cools down, the mushroom spawns have to be

placed by their sides and hung in polythene bags. It's important to keep the bags in a cool, dark place for 15 days. After this, the Oyster mushrooms flower within four-five days. Each bag typically yields two to three kilos." The couple then sells it for Rs 200 per kilo.

"We go door-to-door selling our produce and typically make around Rs 4000-5000 per month. I have two school going children and these earnings help in paying their school fees and buying other household necessities. Nowadays, I can also indulge them with some toys, something that was just impossible three years back when we were making barely enough to cover the basics," she reveals.

Clearly, there are multiple advantages to mushroom farming, which is often called "white-collar farming because the young and educated don't mind getting into it". Says Baruah, "I was a Commerce student and started my own business at a very young age. I developed an interest in mushroom farming more than two decades ago after I met a guy on a flight from Delhi who said that he was travelling to Dimapur (Nagaland) to buy mushrooms. He told me how they were exported and even used for medicinal purposes," he narrates. When he researched further, he found that in developed countries, five out of ten people consume two kilos of mushrooms a month.

"Mushrooms are good for health. They are packed with energy, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and are non-fatty. I realised that there is a huge market out there that farmers in the northeast can tap into," says Baruah. Incidentally, apart from the MDF and NEIST, the Assam Agricultural University and the Assam Science Technology and Environment Council have been introducing farmers to scientific ways of cultivating mushroom.



Pranjal Baruah and his team at the Mushroom Development Foundation have been assisting various women's groups in Assam to produce oyster mushrooms with great success.

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

Encouraging young women to realise their true worth

Here is an institution, Baala Mane, which encourages orphaned girls to maximise their potential and stand up for themselves and also provides a network championing the socio-economic advancement of women. The stories of Pallavi, Nandini, Sukanya and others nurture hope that women can indeed empower themselves and others regardless of personal, social, economic and cultural barriers rooted in caste, religion, class, disability and similar considerations

PUSHPA ACHANTA, Bengaluru



Photos: PPV/WFS

Young women of Baala Mane pose after a dance performance.

“Consider myself fortunate to be born and live (sic) as a girl. I want to be a woman again if we have another life,” says 20-year-old Pallavi. That’s a strong, positive statement, coming from someone from the underprivileged, and presumably gender-biased, section of Indian society.

The chirpy young woman is in the second year of an undergraduate course and one of the 70-odd residents of Baala Mane (Children’s Home) set up by a Bengaluru-based non-profit organisation.

“Even though some of my friends and I have either only one of our parents or none, we do not feel their absence, or that of a biological family, as we are happy to live with each other at Baala Mane,” says Pallavi. Her parents passed away when she was an infant, and she and her elder sister were brought up by their grandmother, who earned a living as a domestic worker.

When advancing age made it difficult for the old woman to support the two children, Pallavi herself went to work for

a while before the Child Welfare Commission took a hand, and placed her in Baala Mane over 11 years ago.

Established in 2001, the institution located in Hesaragatta Taluk of Bangalore Rural District, became autonomous in 2008. While girls between 10 and 18 years living there are sent to school, women are housed in ‘paying guest accommodations’ and sent to college to obtain diplomas or bachelor’s degrees in subjects of their choice. After that, they are encouraged to take up jobs so that they can be financially self-reliant. All expenses relevant to education, board and lodge, healthcare et al of the young women are borne by Baala Mane.

“We learn dancing, music and other forms of art at Baala Mane and are also given awareness on human rights and the role played by gender, class, caste and religion in society. Further, as girls and young women, we are urged not to be subdued. We are also taken for activities outdoors. Such encouragement has helped us become confident

in articulation and action,” says Nandini. A high school student, she was raised by her paternal aunt as she lost her parents during her infancy. However, as she was beaten regularly, she left her aunt’s house to find work. Fortunately, she was spotted by a social worker who referred her to Baala Mane.

Baala Mane’s emphasis on encouraging women to realise their true worth finds an echo in Swaraj, a network of individuals and groups that have been championing the socio-economic advancement of girls and women across 14 districts of Karnataka. Kavya, Teju and Greeshma, who hail from Channapatna Town in Ramanagara District close to Bangalore, are three bright teenagers who have been inspired by Sukanya, a member of Swaraj.

“Last year, a girl around 17 years of age in our town was trying hard to marry a man in his twenties, whose child she was expecting, even though the man denied being in a relationship with her,” recalls Teju. “I told her that getting married is not important even if she was expecting a baby. I asked her what the point was of being with someone who had let her down,” says the girl, who is herself only an adolescent. Teju even offered to get the betrayed girl one of the items of jewellery worn as a symbol of marriage, since that seemed to be of primary importance to her.

Sukanya takes up the tale, saying the man in question was booked under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and Child Marriage Act. Although he had used his social status and political connections to get away, local activists were pursuing the case relentlessly, and it would prove to be only a temporary respite for him, she is confident.

Nandini K., a poet-activist, who is also a member of Swaraj, talks of Aniketana and Varuni, a pair of energetic identical twins who turned four recently. Born with visual challenges, they were abandoned by their parents. However, through the efforts of Swaraj, they have been adopted by two couples. “Girls and women are marginalised not



Teenage role models from Channapatna.

just because of their gender but also because of other aspects such as disability, ailments and physical appearance. But we must continue to resist that to the best of our ability,” avers Nandini, who is herself visually challenged.

Nandini’s activism has changed the life of many women, including 28-year-old Anita, a resident of north Bangalore. Anita, who has completed her pre-degree course, married a relative, Prabhakar, and they have a visually-challenged eight-year-old daughter, Yukti. The child sings well and performs exceptionally in academics, yet, many relatives blame Anita for Yukti’s disability.

“During a radio interview, I heard Nandini speak about the need to treat all girls and women with dignity and provide them opportunities to live and grow irrespective of their disabilities,” says Anita. “Until then, I was distressed about Yukti’s sight impairment, probably a result of our consanguineous marriage. But after I realised that people with disabilities can achieve anything with suitable support and care, I made up my mind to back Yukti to do whatever she is interested in. At present, she studies in a school called Sneha Jyoti which trains children with varying degrees of visual problems in academics, sports, the arts and other activities. Prabhakar and I are proud and happy with her progress and will do our best to ensure that she is able to fulfil her aspirations.”

Another vocal member of the Swaraj network is Putti, a Dalit woman from Kollegal Taluk in Chamrajnagar District. A social worker at the grassroots, she has been campaigning for and

assisting survivors of gender and caste violence despite facing ostracism on these grounds herself. “My daughter Manasa, a college student, who has rejected efforts by fellow students to establish personal relationships with her, is not keen to get married as she is against patriarchal norms that force young women into marriage, motherhood and a life dictated by men. I back her decision as I have seen numerous marital relationships result in violence against women and girls,” says Putti. ■



Yukti, age 8, visually challenged, singing at a programme.



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Learning valuable life lessons from resilient six-year-olds

What happens when a big city girl steps out of the comfort of an urban milieu and decides to spend a few weeks in one of the most isolated regions in India? She ends up imbibing some of the most unforgettable lessons about life, strife, struggle and survival – and that too from a bunch of six-year-olds. The young teacher developed a bond with the children and in the end it turned out to be a remarkable, eye-opening experience for the young woman

KULSUM MUSTAFA, Ladakh



Photos: KM/WFS

Sumitra, a 20 something Mumbaikar, spent a month at the Jamyang Boarding School on the Indo-Pak border in Ladakh teaching English to six-year-olds.

When 20-something Sumitra set out from Mumbai to a quiet village on the Indo-Pak border in Ladakh, she was all geared up to teach English to second graders at the Jamyang Boarding School, home to over 300 children, a majority of whom have either been orphaned or are first-generation learners from poor families. A month later, the teacher ended up becoming the student, as she not only got a closer look into their hard life but also came to appreciate all the basics that city children take for granted – a safe and peaceful neighbourhood, running water, proper sanitation, nutritious food, and most importantly access to good education.

“After I arrived at Jamyang Boarding School, which takes in children from Nursery to Class Five, I saw that it was nothing like I had imagined it to be. From cheerful classrooms and dorms with weather-friendly wooden interiors to solar electricity, the school was fitted with all the modern amenities. But

what made this institution truly special were its bright students many of whom were orphans or came from impoverished homes. Despite the difficulties they had already encountered in their young lives, they were happy and eager to learn,” she recalls.

Sumitra was given the responsibility of introducing to a class of 25 youngsters the joys of learning the English language. “In the beginning, I thought I would get to know my students better by asking them to talk about their families and share their likes and dislikes. But whenever I tried to initiate such a discussion they would just clam up. That’s when I realised that besides imparting textbook knowledge I would have to work with them to boost their confidence and teach them some basic people skills that would come in handy as they grew up,” she elaborates.

With this in mind, Sumitra prepared lessons that focused on conversational English. Each day, after a short ice-breaking session, she’d take up a general

topic, like how to speak to a shopkeeper or how to conduct a telephone conversation in English, and engage with the children using audio-visual clips and attractive pictorial games. “Occasionally, I’d take classes on the terrace where they were free to talk on any topic of their choice. Those were really fun times as we discussed everything under the sun – from how rainbows are formed to where dinosaurs have disappeared in the process of evolution,” she shares.

To make the process of learning even more enjoyable Sumitra decided to conduct a few out-of-classroom sessions, too. For instance, one time she took them bird watching so that they would know all about the local avian life – “we managed to spot around 50 different species”. Another time, armed with telescopes, they did star gazing to gain practical knowledge of the solar system.

A couple of weeks into her tenure and the innovative teacher as well as her eager wards were finally comfortable in each other’s presence. For Sumitra, however, the real breakthrough came when she put forth the idea of producing a short fiction booklet with the second graders. She explains, “When I told them that we were going to work together to write and illustrate an original story they became very excited and immediately started giving ideas. I was quite taken in with their enthusiastic response. In no time, they had fleshed out the three main characters – a Chinese, a Pakistani and a Ladakhi man.”

In the action-packed adventure penned by the children, the three protagonists always fought with each other. But even as the all powerful Chinese and Pakistani made several attempts to kill the Indian, he managed to triumph in the end. The conclusion: the Chinese and Pakistanis are “evil” and should not be befriended.

“Though I was thrilled that my students had become so involved in the project, the story that finally emerged was based on violence and hatred and that disturbed me a great deal. I realised that this was the fall out of living in a heavily militarised



Students at the Jamyang Boarding School listen to their teacher in rapt attention.

region, under the constant threat of gunfire. It dawned on me how different my childhood had been and how much support, love and encouragement these children needed in their lives if they were to ever lead a normal existence,” she says.

Sumitra got another peek into the workings of their innocent minds when she asked them to form simple sentences expressing the one thing that made them happy, sad, scared and angry.

She recalls, “As they spoke, I perceived a range of emotions on their faces – from joy to mild resentment to outright fear. One boy said that he was the happiest when his parents visited him every second weekend. Another said that he became extremely sad when he ran out of money and couldn’t visit the local shop to buy biscuits. A few of them told me that they were scared of heights, even as others said that they were scared of darkness and of India and Pakistan fighting. Where any ordinary city child would have been troubled by not getting to watch their favourite show on TV or be able to throw a lavish birthday party for their friends, here were children who had been forced to contend with real issues related to conflict and survival so early in life.”

Time literally flew once Sumitra developed a bond with the children. “When my tenure came to an end I asked my students what they had liked best about our sessions together. Their honest feedback

will stay with me forever. They told me that they loved listening to me because the knowledge I was imparting to them was priceless. With me, they felt free – free to share their hopes and ask innumerable questions,” she recalls. On her last day at Jamyang, Sumitra and her students “sang and danced to our hearts’ content; they taught me a few Ladakhi folk tunes, we clicked infinite photos, hugs were exchanged and we laughed like there was no tomorrow”.

This was a remarkable, eye-opening experience for the young woman. “These resilient children have taught me valuable life lessons – always look forward, talk less, listen more and be a brave survivor no matter how difficult the circumstances,” she concludes. ■

(Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)



Making learning fun: Sumitra conducts a class using audio visual clips and pictures.

Helping farmers can make a difference ...

Continued from page 1



A special focus on women farmers (L-r: Phulpati, Shobha Devi, and Shanti Devi), particularly interested in reducing costs and improving the quality of their crops, has helped. They are willing to put in the extra work composting and organic farming requires.

in their own way. Farmers I spoke to had either adopted organic farming fully, or had significantly reduced the use of chemical fertilisers.

Secondly, the emphasis is on reducing costs, as almost all beneficiaries are small, low-resource farmers. The emphasis is on using local free resources, although a few cash inputs are also used. Thirdly, highly mixed farming systems are introduced, to grow a wide variety of crops on small plots of land. It is not uncommon for model farmers to grow 35 or more crops on a single acre of land. The diversity is particularly wide in the context of vegetables. The mixed farming system serves these farmers well, as a cycle is established so that some crop or the other is always available for sale in the nearby market. It also comes in useful while adapting to erratic weather, as some crops may survive even if others don't, thus avoiding a wipe-out situation.

There is also special focus on women farmers. They are particularly interested in reducing costs and improving the quality of their crops. They are also willing to put in the extra work composting and organic farming requires. As Chanda, a woman farmer, says pointing to her green field of less than an acre, "It is here that I keep working and it is about this that I keep thinking day and night."

My conversations with women farmers working with GEAG revealed their overwhelming enthusiasm about the changes they have introduced, changes which have improved their sustainable livelihoods and resilience in significant ways. Their inherent creativity has a better chance to flower now, less curbed by high costs and dependence on external inputs, and this makes it easy for them to put in more work on their fields without feeling stressed or tired. It is a joy to hear them talk about how many crops they have grown, how they made

better use of the bunds on their fields and how they defied the threat of water-logging by finding innovative solutions to grow crops. Sometimes crops are grown in jute sacks filled with soil, at other times on raised thatch roofs (*machans*), and sometimes on discarded thermocol.

The increase in creative opportunities is reflected in the increased tendency of the farmers to lease land from others so that they can grow more crops – far removed from the inclination to give up farming due to the overall deteriorating conditions in peri-urban areas.

Asha Devi (Maheva cluster) is a farmer of Simradeviprasad Village. She cultivates about two acres with her husband, Bajrangi. They also own an orchard which is bigger. She takes three crops a year – rabi, kharif and *jayad* – and each is full of diversity. She grows about 40 different things – vegetables, including spinach, soya, radish, carrot, cauliflower, cabbage, chilli, brinjal, okra and beans, and also fruits like bananas, blackberries,

lemons, guavas and mangoes. In her field she has units to make compost and vermicompost, a cow-pack pit and a *matka* (pitcher) for manure. The crops grown using the home-prepared manure is of better quality and less susceptible to disease, she says. It is also easier to market the produce.

Phulpati is a very small cultivator of Khilvaniya Village who owns just one *bigha* (indigenous measure of land) which she cultivates with her husband Toofani.

In addition she has leased one-and-a-half *bighas* on fixed amount payment basis. She grows a mix of over 30 crops on these small plots, including turnips, peas, coriander, spinach, tomato, brinjal, cauliflower, soya and chilli. She makes optimum use of available space. On the bunds, she grows root crops. In small vacant areas she has planted bottle gourd. Creepers like bitter gourd are planted intelligently to make land available for other crops.

Chanda has only one-and-a-half *bighas* but she cultivates

it so well that it is widely talked about as a model farm. It has composting and vermin-composting units as well as a cow-pack pit, and is divided into small patches on which green vegetables, other crops and fruit trees flourish. In addition, at times she has grown sugarcane, flowers and jackfruit. Chanda says that she and about 70 other women have formed a collective and help each other in marketing. When nearly 25 of them go together to the nearby market, they make an impact. She may not have studied math, but Chanda is quick with sums when it comes to selling her produce. "I've worked out my own system based on *panseri* (5 kg rates) and work accordingly," she says.

The initiative makes it clear that while some adverse relationships cannot be changed easily, significant improvements can definitely be made to ensure a harmonious relationship between the main city and peri-urban areas. ■

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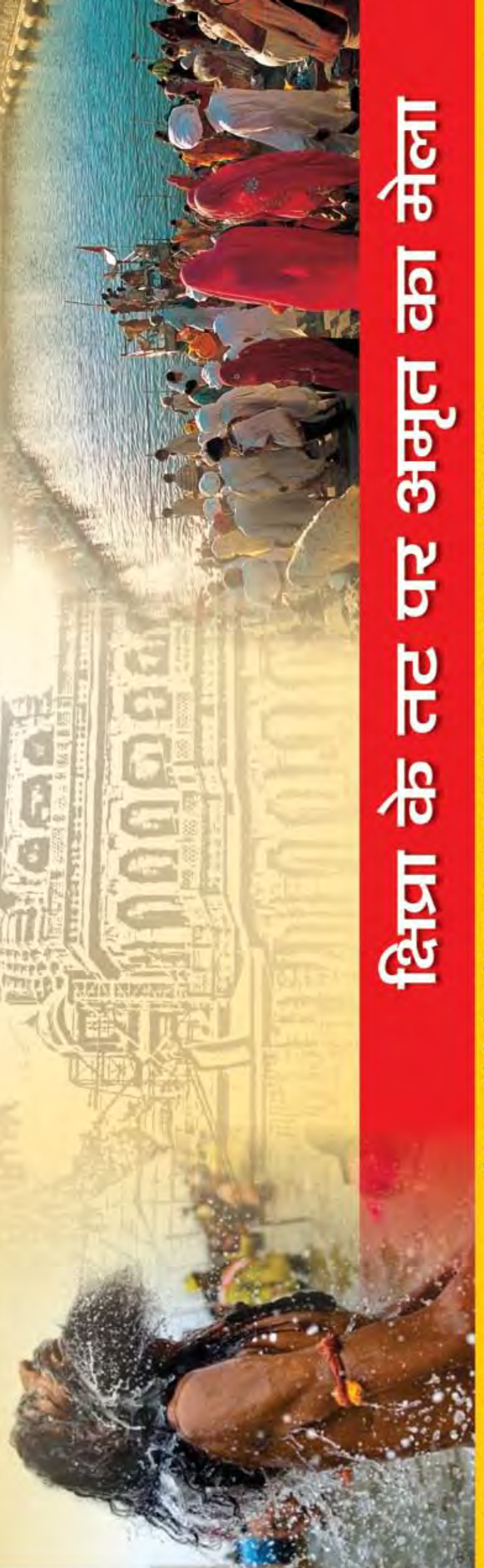
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