

Frontline workers left without hope, their voices unheard

The fight against COVID-19 is being led by 'frontline workers' across the world. Women are leading from the front and showing the way. This story is about women frontline workers (ASHAs) in Odisha's districts who find themselves neglected and vulnerable. Many of them are not trained adequately; many have contracted the virus and tested positive; and many are plain afraid. To add to their sad plight, little financial support for them has been announced considering they earn a pittance for all the hard work they do

RAKHI GHOSH Bhubaneswar

Sanjulata*, a 35-year-old ASHA (accredited social health activist) working in Kora Panchayat in Odisha's Kendrapada district leaves daily for work at 7 am. She begins by creating awareness among villagers, contact tracing and identifying outsiders, apart from her usual work. The past three months, her daily work time has extended to 12 hours.

While going for work, Sanjulata wears mask or wraps a shawl around her face, the only protective gear for her against the virus. The supervisor had provided two masks during March but they didn't last for long. Her daughter stitched four cotton masks which she now wears. "Where from will I buy a protective mask? Those costly masks are not available in rural areas and for me it is difficult to afford," she says.

Sanjulata then has duty at local temporary medical centre/quarantine centre near her village where she assists the auxiliary nurse midwife or the staff nurse in checking the health of inmates, where she conducts screening tests, provides medicines and check whether anyone has cough, fever or other symptoms – only with a face mask to protect her. "When the government has entrusted us to work as COVID-19 warriors at the grassroots level, we will continue," she says, but worried after hearing the news of an ASHA who tested positive in another block in the same district.

There are nearly 72000 ASHAs working at the grassroots in Odisha's remote villages. "We are worried because most of the cases in Odisha are asymptomatic and we come in contact with them without any protective gear," says Lilima Behera, 46, an

ASHA from Ganjam.

In 2005, the concept of health activists at the village level was introduced in India. The objective was to get semi-literate women from villages to work as health activists at the grassroots and act as a bridge between the community and health services. With time, however, their work has increased and, now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is far more work. So, what do the ASHAs do now? They conduct 'village health and nutrition day', assist pregnant and lactating mothers, monitor TB patients and also the family planning programme.

Says Latika Minz, 32, an ASHA in Sundergarh District, "Now we work for two shifts – 12 hours in a day, from morning 7 to evening 7; sometimes it also extends. This includes our regular health activity and COVID-19-related work." When asked whether they were given training on COVID-19-related work, she says: "The supervisor had conducted two to three trainings on the basics: hand wash, physical distancing and wearing mask while going out. But when villagers ask more about COVID-19, we avoid responding because we lack information."

After an ASHA and other service providers in Kendrapada tested positive, others are afraid. About 250 km away, Anima Sahu, 32, an ASHA working in Kabisurjya Nagar Block in Ganjam District, speaks about her fear and vulnerability: "Every day the number is increasing, so also the fear. I don't want to infect my family. We are moving without any protective gear; not only doctors and nurses, we also come close to inmates and some of them are asymptomatic."

Sabitri Dalei, 45, another



An ASHA (extreme right) in Nabarangpur conducts a handwashing awareness programme in the village.

Photo: sourced by RG by special arrangement

ASHA in Kabisurjya Nagar agrees that she has developed the fear of infection. "Every day I pray to God that all inmates should test negative. If a single person tests positive it will create a problem for me. Villagers will not understand that I am negative but they will stop interacting and it will restrict my mobility, affect my work as well as income."

Says Gouranga Mohapatra, national joint convenor, Jan Swasthya Abhijan, Odisha: "As they (ASHAs) are directly exposed to the inmates, they need to be provided with safety kits (masks, goggles, hair cover and gloves). This will help protect them against the coronavirus."

The average monthly income of an ASHA worker in Odisha varies between Rs 3500 and Rs 7000. Now they have been asked to carry out COVID-19-related work but no financial support has been announced. "The Odisha State Government had announced providing four months advance, that is Rs 1000 per month but we have not yet received the advance money. What are you asking about COVID-19 incentives," says

Sasmita Bhoi, 45, an ASHA in Komna Block in Nuapada District.

Sabitri explains her predicament. "My husband was working in a small shop which was closed after the lockdown. Now I am the only earning person at home. The burden of (looking after) family is totally on my shoulder. Considering our need and dedication to work, government should give some incentives." Lilima's husband is sitting idle at home. Her two sons, who had gone to Vishakhapatnam for work, have returned. With her meagre income she has many mouths to feed. "When I am working for 12 hours a day I should be given the remuneration for the extra work. This is my right," she says.

The Odisha Government had announced an ex-gratia assistance of Rs 50 lakh to those who die during COVID-19 duty, including ASHAs. "If we die we will get the money, but when we are alive there is no incentive. So, is it that government wants us to die while working.

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A mother learns to handle autistic children, shows parents the way

There couldn't be a more apt name than Inspiration for the 24-year-old centre for children with intellectual disabilities in New Delhi set up by Saswati Singh. Inspiring hope and confidence in children and parents and equipping them to be reasonably self-reliant is Inspiration's raison d'être, an approach which has paid rich dividends in the time of COVID-19. Seventy children have benefitted, with 80 per cent being from the underprivileged sections

SUDHA UMASHANKAR, Chennai

Says Saswati Singh, founder-director, Inspiration: "One hears of a Down Syndrome's child committing suicide and the siblings of such children having meltdowns. I insist on empowering parents by encouraging them to play an active role in their ward's behaviour modification program at our institution which has stood them in good stead."

Inspiration's other venture – the group home in Dehradun – was set up in 2005 to address the nagging question and possibly the biggest fear, 'after us what?', in the minds of parents. In a pathbreaking effort, it began focusing on vocational training with a bakery project (Cafe Canopy), with considerable success for over a year now

A microbiologist by qualification with an MED, Saswati, who began her career as a school teacher, saw life taking a completely different turn when her first born son Prasanna (name changed) was diagnosed autistic (considerable delay in reaching the hospital in pouring rain and resultant foetal distress raised the chances of neurological deficit). A couple of seizure episodes later at age four, and the diagnosis was confirmed.

What compounded problems for Saswati was the fact she also was caring for her live-in mother who had psychiatric issues after a severe family trauma. She knocked on the doors of over 40 schools, regular and for special

children, seeking admission for her son, only to be turned away in a short span of time "as they could not keep him".

Apart from being hyperactive, Saswati's son was inclined to jumping off from heights. "He had a tremendous sense of balance and no sense of danger," she recalls. The birth of a healthy second child, daughter Prerna, gave her hope and optimism. Then she began addressing issues one by one.

Having found that the drugs prescribed for her son were causing severe side effects, Saswati sought the opinion of doctors at NIMHANS, Bengaluru "which has a very good grounding for medical intervention". For training and rehab, she approached NIMH (National Institute for Mentally Handicapped) in Secunderabad. She hadn't done any formal course in Special Education as yet, so she did all the possible short courses. And learnt on the job.

While Saswati was briefly principal of a residential school in South Delhi where her son was admitted, she found that role modelling was an important factor. "When he found everyone else brushing their teeth my son would pick up his toothbrush and do the same." She also spent time training with the late Reeta Peshawaria, a well-known clinical psychologist who specialised in helping address challenging behaviour among persons with autism spectrum disorders and intellectual disabilities. "She gave me a lot of insights and I learnt what I could do better," Saswati says.

Saswati then opened a small school with little infrastructure (one mattress and her son's toys) in her third floor flat in Delhi. In three years, she had to use all the three rooms with four children in each room and the top-most special educators and speech therapists pitched in to help. "They were the pillars of support. It is because of them that I am standing tall today."

Due to an acute space crunch, Saswati applied for government space and was granted a community hall by the Slum



Picture taken at the inauguration of Inspiration.

Photos: SU

and Jhuggi Jhopri Department thanks to the initiative of Kiran Bedi, then special secretary to the lieutenant governor. Thus, was born Inspiration Centre in Delhi.

Till date, seventy children have benefitted with 80 per cent of the children being from the underprivileged sections.

An eager learner, Saswati picked up best practices from the schools where her son went for therapy. "If the early intervention window is lost, it is gone forever. Apart from tabletop activities, it is imperative to teach autistic children self-help skills. Otherwise when the child goes home the mother is at sea."

Inspiration is a parent-supported organisation. "I encourage parents to come to the school twice a week. So, they learn and get trained

alongside and soon come on board as staff." The Delhi centre is managed by a set of parents with her as the director.

Saswati also began following the gluten-free-casein-free diet at Inspiration and found it beneficial. This meant that her son couldn't eat with her husband as he would grab the rotis and milk from his father's plate and eventually get sick. Saswati believes that alternate healing methodologies such as pranik healing, Bach flower remedies, reflexology, besides brain gym and physical channelisation are very helpful.

When Saswati's son turned 16, he was feeling restricted at the Inspiration's Delhi centre. Saswati had put her daughter in Welham Girls School (a boarding school) in Dehradun early on and her mother in an

old age home close by, as both of them were soft targets for her son who was getting aggressive. Happily, in Dehradun to where Saswati has moved, she found her son was a changed person. "I attribute it to being out of the ambit of the Delhi syndrome, its dust and pollution."

In 2005, the Inspiration group home for autistic people became a reality with her daughter's school principal offering his house and her son was shifted there (they have since moved to a new location). "Likeminded parents should get together and start their own schools," says Saswati. According to her that is the only way care can be ensured for the autistic after the lifetime of the parents. For over a year and more, the focus at the group home is on vocational training. A gluten-free-casein-free bakery has been started and a variety of products such as cakes, breads, cookies and muffins are made and supplied to parents at Cafe Canopy.

With the lockdown imposed consequent to the outbreak of COVID-19, Inspiration has been managing with skeleton staff and the children have been sent home for now. Saswati, however, is available 24x7 on the phone for parents who often make SOS calls. "Society has to be sensitised and made aware of conditions like autism. People don't know enough. I keep the numbers small and want to do pucca (solid) work till my last breath," she says. ■



Saswati Singh at an awareness rally.

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What will happen to my family in my absence?" asks Sabitri. "Understanding their issues, present condition and commitment towards work, government should provide incentive to them," agrees Mohapatra.

ASHAs are facing many challenges at home and in the community, too. Many were attacked and some cases went unreported. After government came up with a zero-tolerance policy for violence and harassment against all health

personnel, attacks have reduced but the manifestation of violence has changed.

An ASHA with increased responsibility returns home late and is unable to give sufficient time to household work. "This creates violence at home. My husband uses abusive language, beats me and forcing me to quit the job," one worker says. Another, after being separated from her husband, is staying with her sister. When one health worker tested positive, her sister denied her entry to the house.

She was asked to stay in the store room and not allowed to enter the kitchen or meet her only son.

"Being women and hailing from a very poor section of the society, the frontline workers are forced to be voiceless. Understanding their vulnerability, government needs to frame a guideline to protect them from violence," says Mohapatra.

*All names of ASHAs changed on request ■

Women here bear the brunt but it seems their work counts for little

In the Kumaon Region, the onus of doing tasks required for survival is on women in the family. Despite successful interventions in place, the burden on the women is immense. There is a need to ensure that information related to all the available government schemes for the benefit of women must reach even the remotest of the villages in India. This will ensure that they not only participate in our nation's progress but move forward with the rest of us at the same pace

NARENDRA SINGH BISHT, Nainital, Uttarakhand

In the Kumaon Region, the onus of doing tasks required for survival is on women in the family. Despite successful interventions in place, the burden on the women is immense. There is a need to ensure that information related to all the available government schemes for the benefit of women must reach even the remotest of the villages in India. This will ensure that not only they participate in our nation's progress but move forward with the rest of us at the same pace

"Nothing has changed – I find myself and my younger generation going through similar challenges," says Kamla Devi, an elderly woman, hailing from a nondescript hamlet called Toli in the Kumaon Region of Uttarakhand. "I have spent a large part of my life collecting firewood, grass and water and bringing it to my house through this difficult terrain. The time left after completing these tasks is dedicated to other household chores – cooking, washing, cleaning and taking care of the men in the family. Today, I see the younger ones doing the same – nothing has changed for us," she adds.

In the hilly state, Kamla Devi isn't alone in thinking that she has spent her entire life in forests. When it comes to 'counting' their hard work in, they are often excluded from country's GDP. Not just their household work is taken for granted but the emotional investment in keeping the families together is also not taken into consideration.

In hilly areas, the onus of three most difficult and crucial tasks required for survival is on women in the family – collecting firewood, grass bundles as fodder for cattle and water for family and livestock. Every day, each woman dedicates 10-12 hours of her day to accomplish these three chores. Not that the rest of the time she gets for herself, but the 'workload' is tremendous in these hours. Carrying 30-35 kilograms of weight on their heads, they walk through the meandering trails of this hilly region risking their health and life. However, what hurts them the most is seeing



Photos: NSB

Women carrying on their head grass bundles which are used as fodder for the cattle.

their hard work being wasted in front of them.

"The grass that we bring is fed to our livestock as fodder. As we put it in open in front of the animals, this leads to unwanted wastage of the grass that we bring loaded on our heads from distant places. In a week, approximately 6 kilogram of grass is wasted by animals, which is not only a wastage of our hard work but also of the forest produce," shares women hailing from Lamgada Development Block in Almora District. The issue is despite having schemes to address the issue, women in this particular village are unaware of the solution.

Government, from time to time, ensures that information regarding relevant schemes must reach the target beneficiaries. However, owing to varied reasons, many remote villages are left out. The Department of Science & Technology (DST) has already identified the problem of fodder wastage and has been creating awareness among village women to construct cattle feed enclosures.

Villagers under the scheme are informed about the benefits of constructing such enclosures/

containers which allows animals to eat the fodder easily without wasting it. At the end of the day, it not only helps animals but saves the forests and the hard work of women that goes into bringing it, every day. When the concept was presented to women in different villages, they not only adopted it for themselves but shared it with their fellow villagers.

Success of the idea is reflected by the fact that three villages (with total 240 households) which earlier had no such structure have, at present, successfully constructed 160 cattle feed enclosures. Villagers, especially women, have not only constructed these structures but are using it efficiently. As compared to earlier situation, today, the amount of grass that is wasted is one kilogram instead of six. Under the scheme, other than spreading awareness, the government has made available good quality fodder, grass and seeds at village level with the intention of decreasing the workload on women.

"The number of rounds to the forest has decreased. 240 households are saving around 60000 hours every year. It is not just us and our peers who have

benefitted from the scheme, but our livestock has been receiving good quality fodder, grass and seeds as well. This has improved the quality and quantity of milk they produce. The end result is increase in our earnings," points out Beena Devi from Village Thaat.

Women are also utilising the time saved by getting involved in productive activities. Today, they have started eating on time and are participating in activities

organised by self-help groups. This is a small step towards making them financially independent. However, many women are left out of the process due to lack of information.

Note: This article was written under the Sanjoy Ghose Media Fellowship 2019-20. ■

(Courtesy: Charkha Features)



A cattle feed enclosure.

As the novel coronavirus strikes, weekly markets lie deserted

The *haat* or the weekly market is a vital nerve centre of tribal life. Already threatened by malls and supermarkets, and now thanks to the coronavirus, the *haats* are in danger of sliding into oblivion

PARESH RATH, from Malkangiri District, Odisha

The state of Odisha is home to a large number of tribal communities. Most of them live in forests and hilly terrain. These places are very hard to reach but many tribes have a cultural space, where they meet once a week to communicate and shop. Such places are called *haat* and facilitate tribal cultural integration. However, these marketplaces are slowly fading into oblivion.

The markets are traditionally organised on different days of the week at different places. In Koraput, the *haat* is a hub not only for trade but also for all communication. Even government and non-governmental agencies use them as an opportunity to address the people who gather there from interior pockets of the region.

Greater Koraput, which covered the districts of Koraput, Nabarangapur, Rayagada and Malkangiri before the administrative division was split into into four, has a number of tribal communities. It shares its borders with Chhattisgarh on one side and Andhra Pradesh on another. In the border villages of Andhra Pradesh, the weekly market is known as *santa* while in Bastar of Chhattisgarh, it is known as *mandi*.

Each of the markets is focussed on specific goods. For instance, the Friday market at Kunduli Village in Pottangi Block of Koraput District near the national highway which runs through Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, is a centre for vegetables sold at wholesale prices. Traders from all three states buy stock from the market for retail sale. Many cold storage units stock up from here on seasonal produce, and

later release the produce out-of-season. Over time, the market at Kunduli has become the largest vegetable trading market in the entire region.

Similarly, Ramgiri and Boipariguda markets are known for rare forest produce and tribal ornaments. Minor forest produce such as tamarind, *saal* seeds, incense, honey, arrowroot and mohua blooms, as well as medicinal plants and even brooms made of wild grass are available at specific weekly markets.

The market at Onkadelli in Govindapally Block of Malkangiri District attracts many tourists because of the Bonda women who come to sell their wares. The market of Kakirigumma Village under Laxmipur Block of Koraput District sells musical instruments, especially traditional drums. Every Tuesday, on the outskirts of the city of Jeypore, a cattle market pops up, with thousands of heads of cattle changing hands. Young girls buy new bangles at the Narayanpatna market.

Two days before market day, the traders and organisers put up makeshift shops and kiosks and make arrangements for the daylong cultural activities. People start coming from far and near, bringing goods for sale. Tribal people walk miles from their poorly-connected homes, starting out early in the morning, to reach these markets. The entire marketplace wears a festive look, with the men and women attired in traditional tribal costumes.

Local sweets such as *jalebis*, *muaan*, *gulgulla*, *arissa*, *khiragaja* and *mudhiare* are available, and parents buy them to take home to their children. Apart from shopping, the tribal

people also travel to these marketplaces to meet people, discuss agricultural operations and even scout for marriage alliances. Their culture is kept alive by such interaction.

Sadly, the markets have been gradually declining, as the government turns its attention to large complexes and shopping malls. The COVID-19 pandemic sweeping across India has brought further trouble to the tradition. The weekly markets have been discontinued. The marketplaces wear a deserted look, and the tribal people and villages have lost vital connectivity. ■



Photos: PR

The weekly market doubles up as a meeting point for friends.

Where men do not wish to give women equal rights

In Uttarakhand, women do not enjoy equal rights and status. In most of its villages, men are entitled to make each and every decision in the social, political, economic and cultural sphere.

NARENDRA SINGH BISHT, Nainital, Uttarakhand

On 6th February this year, passers-by found a newborn girl lying in a drain near the Mallital's Area Number Seven in Nainital District in Uttarakhand. The newborn was immediately rushed to hospital and was taken care of. Based on investigation, police registered a case against unknown persons under various sections. Days after the incident, local residents alerted the police about the body of another infant they found in Ramanagar Canal. According to police, the body, eaten by animals, was in mangled condition and they were unable to determine its gender.

The two cases represent only partially reflect the larger issue of deeply entrenched patriarchal tradition that upholds the discrimination of women. According to a 2019 report published by Al Jazeera News, "Official data revealed that 947 children were born across 500 villages in Uttarakhand State's Uttarkashi District. Among the 200 such births in 132 of the villages, none was a female child."

"Each woman in every single village works more than men. Right from maintaining the house, taking care of children, feeding livestock and working in the agriculture fields – the onus is on the women of the house. We are so involved in our work that we have no time for anything else," says Parvati Devi, a resident of Village Toli located 35 km from the district headquarter in Almora.

Talking about other village women, she says they have heard

names of few schemes such as Sukanya Samridhi Yojana and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao but are completely clueless about the detailed plan or how to benefit from these schemes. "Government officials visit us during our 'work hours' when we are mostly busy in fields or household chores. They want us to sit and listen to the information while there is no one else to share our workload. We are the first ones to wake up and the last ones to go to bed," she says. Not surprising that many women in these villages have not even heard the names of schemes such as Mahila E-HAAT, Ujjwala and Working Women's Hostel.

Putting all the responsibilities of household chores on women and not 'allowing' them to work and become financially independent are the typical characteristics of the patriarchy here. This way, they are able to restrict women inside the house and control their freedom. With education reforms promoting girls' participation, things have improved in the state but at quite a slow pace. Per 100 women, there are only 45 literate women in the hilly region.

The 45 women represent those who fought hard against gender discrimination while the remaining fell victim to it. They are tied into the nuptial knot at an early age. In 65 per cent of the villages of the state, girls are married by their parents between the age of 16 and 18, violating the law. They are not only burdened with marriage at a tender age but are made to spend

rest of their lives taking care of families. Their entire existence now becomes dependent on the well-being and sustenance of the male family members.

The women members of an active self-help group called Vaishnavi believe that government schemes meant for helping women achieve equal rights are restricted only to paper. On ground, the existence of such schemes is as weak as existence of women in this society. "We do not have access to telephone, television or radio in remote villages like ours. Arrangements should be made to publicise schemes meant for benefit of women through *gram* panchayat meetings, banks, self-Help groups and NGOs which are quite active in the rural areas," they say.

More than making women aware of their rights, government should equally invest towards making men sensitive towards equal rights of women. Instead of seeing women in their families as subordinate, they should treat them as equals. Both girl and boy child should be equally welcomed to this world ending the tradition of sex-selective abortions. Workload should be shared among all the family members irrespective of the gender, women should have the right to access education and to work.

Note: This article was written under the Sanjoy Ghose Media Fellowship 2019-20. ■

(Courtesy: Charkha Features)



The weekly market of Mudulipada in Malkangiri District and a woman from the Bonda Tribal Community (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) during a break.

Local procurement for local consumption – a mantra to lift the marginalised

A people-to-people social solidarity enterprise brings relief to locked-down villages in Gujarat, especially women farmers. If this can happen on a larger scale, where the government buys all the available stock at the local level and redistributes it in local communities, a number of benefits would result

NAFISA BAROT, PALLAVI SOBTI RAJPAL AND UTTHAN TEAM



Reshamben, Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan, Dahod Dist.

Reshamben, Manguben, Naseemben – strong women leaders of Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan and Ekta Mahila Sangathan – have been maintaining that government ration shops under the public distribution system (PDS) should purchase all essential food grains from the local area, to the extent possible. “Why should we have to sell our produce outside our village and then have it come back to us through the PDS? Why can’t the government think of strengthening the local economy?”

The same questions are asked about seeds, fodder and other such materials. The ‘procure locally and bring in from outside

only if needed’ recommendation has been echoed by many, including economists. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the government is trying its best to reach out to families across rural and urban areas, civil society groups find a huge gap in meeting the need for food.

The most vulnerable people have fallen into this ‘gap’. On the other hand, most of the food grains are stuck at the village level due to issues of transportation or doubts about getting the expected minimum support price in agricultural produce market committees.

Utthan is an organisation working for positive change among marginalised sectors for the past 40 years through a strong human rights-based approach. It has integrated gender equality and justice into its development and empowerment efforts at the grassroots level and advocacy work. Its work is supported by the Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives and EdelGive Foundation.

Utthan has been working in the drought-prone coastal districts of Ahmedabad, Amreli, Bhavnagar and Kutch and the poverty-stricken tribal districts of Dahod, Panchmahal, and Mahisagar. It has demonstrated a key ability to listen to people from vulnerable sections, especially women, and has tried to act on what it has learnt.

In its effort to respond to the current crisis, Utthan is trying to

provide about 5000 marginalised families in the districts with rations and essentials, and enable them to live with dignity. It was decided that all the food grain requirements of the identified families would be purchased from the village community itself.

To the extent possible, Utthan tries to make the purchases from women farmers and those who otherwise would have been forced to sell their produce at whatever rates offered at nearby markets, to overcome the funds crunch. Payments have been made into the bank accounts of women, who may not own the land but have toiled to grow the produce.

A simple model has been worked out. After estimating the food grains requirements of a particular village, women farmers are approached to ensure stocks are available, and they are ready to sell at a ‘fair’ price. They are then asked to weigh and pack the food grains (with help of local leaders and the Utthan team) according to certain specifications. Each kit contains 10 kg of wheat and 5-10 kg of *bajra* (millet)/maize. Farmers and local leaders ensure that the relief packs are collected by the families identified as beneficiaries.

Wheat (Rs 20/ kg), *bajra* (Rs 23/ kg) and maize (Rs 20/ kg) were bought from the women farmers at the village level. Market rates for the same would have been Rs.20-22/kg

for wheat, Rs 20/ kg for maize and about Rs 25/ kg for *bajra*. The costs would have been an average of Rs 2.25-5/ kg for transportation, labour, etc. The profits would thus have been around Rs 17.40/ kg for wheat, Rs 16.40/ kg for maize and about Rs 21.40/ kg for *bajra*.

From the pilot relief support to 1668 families across 56 villages, about 150 women farmers from both coastal and tribal villages have earned an income from food grains. They collectively earned Rs 612833. The grains (30000 kg of wheat, maize and *bajra*) bought from the farmers would have fetched them Rs 477496 (price minus travel and labour costs) if they had sold it in the market.

That works out to a 22 per cent net benefit for the women farmers, with the added advantage of avoiding the drudgery of travelling to markets and the uncertainty about prices. Single women especially felt that they were saved from all the drudgery and tension of travelling and selling their produce in the market during the lockdown period.

Over and above this, Utthan also purchased sanitary napkins from women’s federations (self-help groups). Calculations show that 27 per cent of the total relief package was infused into the local economy by applying the simple doctrine of local production and local consumption. Interestingly, an extremely important response from most of these women farmers was: “I am feeling satisfied and happy that our grains will help many in our own village. Hence, this is a more valuable earning for me.”

If this can happen on a larger scale, where the government buys all the available stock at the local level and redistributes it in local communities, a number of benefits would result. Such a model will reduce the insecurity about timely availability of food grains, save energy consumed in transportation, reduce the level of distress sale by farmers and ensure that communities enjoy local flavours.

By reducing the labour and transport costs, boosting the local economy and allowing



Shakuben, relief partner (left) and Valiben, farmer, in Raiyavan Village, Dhanpur Block, Dahod.

farmers to invest in a timely manner for the kharif (autumn crop) season, the model of people-to-people market is amazingly environmental and poor-friendly, as well as gender-just. It would make communities become secure not only in food but also in seeds. Of course, the surplus can go to fill gaps in other communities or to urban centres.

Stepping up its response, Utthan is planning a number of initiatives which may later emerge as producer-consumer social solidarity enterprises. Along with women’s federations and village-level women’s groups, ideas of making products which are relevant during the pandemic have been developed. These would be distributed amongst vulnerable communities/ populations.

Some ideas include, making *mung wadees* (green lentils cutlets), *sukhadi* (a sweet from flour, ghee and jaggery), *khakhraas* (thin crackers made with flour and oil), and soaps locally. Apart from this, there is a plan to reach out to a large number of families with kitchen garden kits that will allow them to grow vegetables not just for themselves but also for others. ■

(Nafisa is founder-trustee, Utthan; Pallavi is deputy CEO. With inputs from Hemant Shah, HoD, Economics, HK Arts College.)



Photos: NPU

About 150 women farmers from coastal and tribal villages have earned an income from food grains.

The rural poor face discrimination even as they lose their livelihood

With the already shaky support mechanisms coming under extreme pressure in the COVID-19 situation, poor and marginalised sections of society are facing extreme hardships and staring at an uncertain future as prospects of livelihood have further declined. Clearly, such marginalised communities are in need of urgent help, as existing survival mechanisms are under great pressure or have already broken down

BHARAT DOGRA, New Delhi

There are several rural communities in India that are precariously poised on the margins of society and economy. Besides having a weak livelihood base, several of such communities also face discrimination at the social level. Their problems have been accentuated greatly by the COVID-19 lockdown.

In Ghazipur District of Uttar Pradesh, villagers in Simraha, Shivrai ka Pura and Bachalpur, among others, have been hit in recent years by large-scale river erosion. The river has gobbled up their farmlands, their only livelihood, leaving them staring at an uncertain future. While short-term relief prevented immediate starvation, there is no long-term plan for their rehabilitation.

There are several other pockets of similarly affected people at the national level. Older folk are eking out a living on roadsides and river embankments while younger people have been migrating to cities in search of jobs.

Premnath Gupta, a social activist working with the communities, says earnings from migrants form an important part of the survival mechanism. But this year, the migrants did not return with money, and in fact came home more or less penniless. Hence, the survival mechanism has broken down. Those who do not have ration cards are hardest hit, as they are not getting ration supplies. There is a large gap between relief announcements and the ground reality, he alleged.

Sandeep is a migrant worker from this community who had left after Diwali last year to work in Surat. He had earned at normal rates for some weeks, but then work started getting scarce,

and when the lockdown was announced there was no work at all. He and some others were keen to return home but they were fleeced by middlemen who arranged their journey back in a special train. There was no food and very little water available on the long journey back.

Sandeep got down at Varanasi where he ate a few biscuits. Then a bus journey brought him to Ghazipur where he and other workers had to remain on the roadside while formalities were completed. Then he walked to his village. "As I was travelling around for work, I could not get a ration card or job card. Without a job card I cannot get NREGA work. So where will I get work and how will I survive?" he asks.

Sanjay Kumar is a graduate who had gone for a job interview in Ranchi and got stuck during the lockdown. His family had to eke out funds to send him for his survival in the city. Many other families have similar stories to tell.

Another highly vulnerable community is that of the Kuchbandiyas, semi-nomadic people who lost their traditional livelihoods and have been surviving as petty traders going from village to village to earn a precarious livelihood. Due to the ongoing pandemic, their entry into villages has become difficult as the Dalit Community is now facing more discrimination and hostility than normal. The lockdown has completely disrupted their petty trading.

In Masri Kherwa hamlet in Banda District (Uttar Pradesh) many Kuchbandiya households do not have ration cards or job cards, and faced hunger and extreme distress. They started a collective protest fast on May 20, which went on till May 23.

After the local MLA and some officials visited the hamlet, some grain was distributed and promises of providing job cards and ration cards were made.

Conditions are also serious in the nearby Kuchbandiya hamlet in Khamora. Vidyadham Samiti, a local voluntary organisation, has been rushing food grains there for some of the poorest households. The activists found that several people in the hamlet suffer from serious diseases like TB and their treatment has been disrupted because of the lockdown.



Scenes of a protest fast in Masri Kherwa Village (above and below).

Migrant workers toil to revive a dry river, succeed

Bhanwarpur Village is an extremely poor village in Uttar Pradesh's Banda District. Survival has become increasingly difficult, particularly for the Dalit landless or near landless households. Economic difficulties are accentuated by ecological decay. Here is a pointer to what constructive harnessing of the potential of hard-working labourers can achieve in rural areas

BHARAT DOGRA, New Delhi

Gharar River which flows near Bhawanwarpur Village in Uttar Pradesh's Banda District and merges with the Bagain River, a part of the Yamuna River system, had dried up due to a number of factors, including faulty policies followed by the administration. Full of weeds, villagers of Bhawanwarpur were denied irrigation. Farm animals could not quench their thirst.

Hence, survival in Bhawanwarpur and in 50 other villages served by the river became more difficult. During rains, the water which usually would have flowed into the river, changed direction towards the habitation, making the situation even worse. The result: increasingly, people in the villages, particularly the youth, now seek work as migrant workers. The money they earn in a normal year contributes substantially to the survival of the households.

This has not been a normal year and migrant workers have had to return in very difficult conditions without any money after the sudden imposition of the nationwide lockdown. They were extremely tired, without money and livelihood, and clueless about the future.

However, what was heartening was that instead of idling or even lapsing into depression, some of the workers decided to use the opportunity of being together to

make some long-lasting contribution to the development and welfare of the village. The focus – making efforts to revive the dried-up Gharar River, which was once the village's lifeline. The idea was encouraged by Vidyadham Samiti, a voluntary organisation that has been working with commitment for some years now in Bhawanwarpur and nearby villages.

Fifty workers who had returned volunteered to clean the river-flow area. They cleared the thick weeds (locally called *bes harm*) and then kept digging till they found water. A cry of joy rent the air as the water appeared. Cattle quickly gathered to quench their thirst.



Workers who returned recently to Bhanwarpur Village labour to get the river flowing.

Where children are protected and learn about their rights

Of the 152 million working children in the world between 5 and 17 years, 23.8 million children are in India. For most of these children, poverty and a lack of livelihood options for their families compel them to join the labour force to contribute to the family income. In the case of girls, they are additionally burdened with the responsibility of having to take care of their younger siblings. The Bal Mitra Gram (BMG) initiative started in nine villages in Agra is now making a huge difference

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR, New Delhi

Pooja was just 12 when she dropped out of school and began working as a house maid to augment her family's income. In her spare time she also stitched shoes at her home in Amarapura village in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, so that she could take care of her ailing mother's treatment and support her younger brother's studies.

Sounds familiar? Almost 50 per cent (4.5 million) of the 10.13 million economically active children in the 5-14 year age group are girls, according to the 2011 census. In fact, of the 152 million working children in the world between 5 and 17 years, 23.8 million children are in India. In other words, every 6th working child in this age group lives in India. In Agra, where Pooja lives, an estimated 40,000 children were engaged in some form of labour, according to the 2011 census.

For most of these children, poverty and a lack of livelihood options for their families compel them to join the labour force, both informal and formal, to contribute to the family income. In the case of girls, they are additionally burdened with the responsibility of having to take care of their younger siblings. So, either they are never enrolled or they drop out of school to help the family.

It was no different for Pooja. With her father staying away

from home and her mother unable to work because of illness, she was left with no option but to leave school and start working. According to recent data, nearly 12000 girls dropped out of school in Agra.

It was to give girls like Pooja a second chance to relive their childhood that the Bal Mitra Gram (BMG) initiative was started in nine villages in Agra. Aimed to make these villages free of child labour, the innovative programme launched by Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi, motivates communities to protect, educate, and provide a safe and healthy environment for the children.

Among the strategies adopted to achieve this objective has been the constitution of Bal Panchayats (children's parliament), mahila mandals (women's groups) and yuva mandals (youth groups). Trained by the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation (KSCF) and the Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE), the not for profit implementing the programme in Agra, all these three groups have played a crucial role in bringing girls like Pooja back to school.

In the past seven months, 103 of the 193 children enrolled in government school have been girls thanks to collaborative efforts between CURE, *bal* (child) panchayats, *mahila*

mandals (women groups) and *yuva mandals* (youth groups). Of these, 97 girls are between the ages 6 and 14 and six in the 15-16 age group. Additionally, 40 girls aged 3 to 6 years have been admitted to *anganwadis* (nurseries or childcare centres).

A big part of the success is due to the hard work by the girls in the *bal* panchayats and women's groups who have bolstered CURE's goal to identify and motivate out-of-school children to resume their education. The fact that girls garnered, through democratic elections, many of the top positions of the *bal* panchayats has given them the confidence and ability to stand up for their rights. With five of the nine deputy *pradhans* (chiefs) and five of the nine secretaries of the *bal* panchayats being girls, they have made it count.

They have been helped by CURE's innovative collation of village data based on GIS. Their involvement in the development of spatial maps of the village and spatial identification of areas of non-school going and vulnerable children has provided the panchayats information on where out-of-school children reside and the government school closest to them.

"We assessed the risks children in the villages face and thereafter discussed strategies that could be used to protect and empower them. Special attention was given to those children at risk. Learning about their rights has empowered the *bal* panchayats to become the voice of the children. They help to stop child marriages and child labour by making sure children are in school. They are officially recognised by the *gram* panchayat and the village communities and participate in the decision-making processes," says Jahnvi Aggarwal, BMG project coordinator, CURE, Agra.

Bal panchayats have used their collective voice to point out the need for better road connectivity and pumps for the water-deficient villages. In Doretha, one of the nine villages where the intervention is being implemented by CURE, the *bal* panchayat has been successful in

persuading the *gram pradhan* to order construction of a broken road leading to their school.

"We wrote letters to the village *pradhan* on the road as well as the water problem arising from the non-operational government submersible. He has now given the official orders for both. It is a big achievement for us," says Nitesh, *pradhan*, Doretha *Bal* Panchayat.

But Nitesh didn't stop at just improving the infrastructure in her village. As *pradhan*, the Class 8 student took the bold step of tackling the problem of gambling even though it involved her father and other family members. Although it took a while, Nitesh and her team along with the women's group was able to persuade them to understand its negative impact on children and stop the practice.

Not far away in Magtayi Village, 14-year-old Chandni, a student of Class 9, is learning how the tool of visual communications can be used to uphold and protect child rights. Last year, as a *bal* panchayat member, she managed to prevent the marriages of two underage girls and helped to bring back a number of out-of-school children. Seeing her confidence and leadership potential, Chandni was nominated by CURE's field facilitator Mangesh for further training given by the Kailash Satyarthi Foundation.

"Having completed the photography and videography course organised by CURE, I have learnt how to use the mobile phone to make videos and gather evidence against child rights violations. I know the power of social media as I have a Facebook account. Now, my friends and I are hoping to start a channel on YouTube where we can upload our videos on child rights. This way no one will be able to stop us from claiming our rights," contends Chandni.

(This story had earlier appeared in the National Herald.)



Girls are often forced to look after younger siblings.

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If we can be thrifty during adversity, why be wasteful during normal times?

In the wake of the coronavirus shutdown and consequent exodus of migrants, hundreds of packets of food are being distributed to the homeless and destitute people. If we can do it during adversity, why not during normal times? Why is it that we cannot follow thrift in the use of natural resources in normal times too without waiting for impending shortages?

SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN, Bengaluru

“Close that tap,” Shalini yells to her husband as he stands brushing his teeth. Like most middle-class citizens with the facility of running water indoors, he lets the tap run, but now there is a war on – almost.

Summers are perennially water-starved seasons, but this summer, the meteorological department has warned, will be even hotter than earlier years. And water shortages will intensify, with water tankers on strike in parts of Bengaluru. This metropolis (once known as Garden City) which used to be once a ‘summer haven’ for residents of ‘hot’ cities like Chennai, now has the same temperature as Chennai. In addition, there is also the coronavirus scare, urging people to wash their hands several times a day.

Water, clearly, is soon to become a scarce commodity in the coming weeks. No wonder Shalini is concerned. With tanker supplies too threatened, even middle-class residents are forced to save water. The threat of shortage actually makes them better citizens in terms of social responsibility and civic commitment.

Shalini’s neighbour used to hose down his car with generous use of water every morning, now she is trying to convince him to conserve water. She has also organised a joint meeting of the women of the colony, to advise about using the waste water from the kitchen – washing vegetables and rice – to water the plants in their balconies. “No tub baths,” the residents welfare association has decreed; and leaky taps are being repaired. A small committee has been formed, to oversee the measures for conservation.

Hundreds of litres of precious water are being saved through such measures. Why is it that we cannot follow such thrift in the use of natural resources, in normal times too, without waiting for impending shortages? After all, in every city and town, potable water is always in short supply; thousands of slum dwellers depend on just a bucket or two of water fetched laboriously from the roadside common tap,

to see them through the day. If we, the middle classes, can make do with thrifty use during adversity, why be wasteful at normal times, just because we can afford to pay?

I remember a visit to Sydney some years ago when the city was experiencing a shortage of water. In the university hostel that we stayed in, the faucet over the bathtub was disconnected, so only shower baths were possible. In addition, the shower heads were so programmed that they would shut down automatically after three minutes, so it had to be a quick shower. And this was a metropolis in Australia, not some Third World country.

In Japan, another developed country, weddings in the immediate postwar years (when the country was devastated) were voluntarily toned down to very simple and frugal celebrations; it was considered ‘anti-national, unpatriotic and vulgar’ to flaunt wealth or have ostentatious spending.

But we, with millions in poverty and the world’s largest population of malnourished children, have not resorted to such austerity measures driven by social consciousness, to reduce waste and profligacy. How many wedding celebrations among the affluent include poor feeding for a hundred destitute people? Ministers and VIPs draw up a list of over 3000 invitees, none of them in need of a meal.

In the wake of the coronavirus shutdown and consequent exodus of migrants, hundreds of packets of food were being distributed to the homeless and destitute people. If we can do it during adversity, why not during other times (when we do not see the destitute and hungry hordes)?

When some grocery stores ran out of essentials like sugar, oil and salt during the compulsory shutdown in March, Shalini’s cousin ordered her family to go easy on sugar. Healthy? You bet. Adversity was pushing them towards healthier lifestyles. When the power lines to their building got cut, the families sat on their terraces for fresh air instead of watching DVD movies cooped

up indoors under an overhead fan. Again, healthier.

The absence of autorickshaws, buses and taxis was, as another friend put it, “a forced health regimen, as I walked or cycled”. News reports also say that the air quality in metropolitan areas has shown a marked improvement with cars and autos off the roads. So, adversity can also be seen as delivering some ‘bonuses’.

Looking at the half full glass rather than the half empty portion, can also be a psychological bonus – some psychiatrists have warned that

watching depressing news (like the coronavirus updates on TV) for a long time can also trigger depression-related health problems and panic-based worries.

Says scientist Shyamala, “The best thing about the enforced shutdown and being housebound during March during the coronavirus scare was that for once I had to find things to keep myself occupied indoors, and got round to cleaning out the mountainous pile of papers on my desk, my clothes cupboard and my

kitchen; all needed to be done but kept getting shelved because there was always work related to my professional research to focus on, although I knew I just had to attend to the mess in my home.

Adversity in the form of an enforced shutdown turned out to be actually beneficial. Says Shyamala’s colleague and friend, “Actually I got to spend precious time with my two kids; with their schools shut, we had very enjoyable games and quality time together in the family.” ■

Information is just a call away for farmers here

During the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown, farmers moved to using ICT as a method to obtain useful information about issues related to farming. While phones provide information on various topics, there are areas where farmers need expert guidance. Considering the value of accurate information for farmers, the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) held a series of ICT-based programs on key issues including pest/ disease infestation, market and weather

The Village Knowledge Center established by MSSRF in Golaghat and Sivasagar Districts together with Assam Agricultural University, organised online plant clinics and phone-in programs during May 2020, under Project Resilience supported by NIBIO. There were more than 40 queries from various project villages and surrounding areas. The programme was carried out with expert support from Regional Agricultural Research Station, Titabar.

The most frequently asked questions were related to infestation of pests on crops while also examining few symptoms of tomato bacterial disease. They were addressed in detail and the farmers

were provided crop management advice. Besides concerns around marketing during lockdown, there were also calls regarding improved varieties of Assam lemon, short duration rice varieties, diseases of chilli and gourd. The solutions were immediately given to farmers regarding diseases and contacts provided to procure improved varieties.

Says Hemanta Das, a farmer, “The farmers are facing a lot of problems during this period of lockdown, especially the lack of proper advice, but with the help of the ICT... any detail I need is now just a call away. Therefore we are in constant contact with the workers and it has become very

convenient for us to acquire some knowledge about disease and pest in particular.”

Parinda Barua, junior scientist, Crop Protection, says: “This is a perfect forum for farmers to communicate directly with experts. It also helps us interact with answers and provide required information. It is good for grassroots-level problem solving.” ■

(Courtesy: MSSRF. Inputs from Pompi Dutta, development coordinator, Gargee Baruah, development associate, Resilience Project, Assam.)



Providing resilience during lockdown.