

LEADING FROM THE FRONT



This book is a small compendium of stories of hope and change in the lives of women living in select Aspirational Districts of India. Change which is a result of Government of India's strong efforts in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on women. The book includes a Story Series from 10 States of India on women's achievements in education, entrepreneurship, and grassroots leadership. Many more of the stories are waiting to be told.

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

STORIES OF WOMEN-LED DEVELOPMENT
FROM THE ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICTS OF INDIA



Leading from the Front captures the remarkable tales of women achievers and leaders from 12 aspirational districts in India. This coffee-table book is a testament to their inspiring journeys. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, who co-imagined this project with us. They have set us on a captivating journey to explore the transformative changes taking place in the lives of women in regions that have been lagging behind the rest of the country for decades.

The groundwork for this documentation took place between September and October 2022. The districts covered a wide range of regions, including North, Central, North-East, East, West, and Southern parts of the country, providing a pan-India perspective to the documentation. Our team of writers, photographers, and videographers ventured into some of the most remote and underserved areas, from Chamba in Himachal Pradesh to Dantewada in Chhattisgarh, and from Wayanad in Kerala to Balangir in Odisha and Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. They connected with women in their homes and workplaces, capturing authentic, first-person accounts for us to reflect upon and learn from.

Within the pages of this book, we present a comprehensive documentation of the successes achieved by the Government of India in localising the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular emphasis on women. This book is a collection of stories highlighting women's achievements in education, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and grassroots leadership.

The unwavering support extended by the District Magistrates, Chief Development Officers, and their diligent teams in the districts we visited has been invaluable. Their assistance facilitated our access to the most significant stories. They not only helped us learn about the remarkable accomplishments of women-led development initiatives in their respective districts but also provided essential logistical and liaison support whenever required.

I hope that the documentation conducted by UN Women across various parts of India will contribute to raising awareness and promoting 'women-led development' in India. To echo the sentiments of the Prime Minister of India who emphasised that the daughters of the country are leading development across all sectors, this book is our tiny contribution to showcase these extraordinary stories.

Susan Ferguson

Country Representative, UN Women India



* The Maps in this publication are for general illustration and graphic representation only.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|-------------------|---|----|
| Assam | Weaving A Happy Tale | 06 |
| Chhattisgarh | A District Collector's Plan To Fight Malnutrition With Communal Feasts | 10 |
| Chhattisgarh | Giving Women A <i>Brand</i> New Identity | 12 |
| Karnataka | Preserving Heritage While Earning A Living | 16 |
| Kerala | Kudumbashree: Old Mission, New Goals | 20 |
| Madhya Pradesh | From Landless Migrant Labour to Fierce Community Leader | 24 |
| Maharashtra | Building Livelihood, Fighting Social Ills | 28 |
| Maharashtra | Reaping The Fruits Of Community Forest Rights | 32 |
| Manipur | An Endangered Tribe's Walk To Prosperity | 36 |
| Meghalaya | This Teacher is Weaving A Business | 40 |
| Mizoram | She Rises: Single mom, Businesswoman, Politician | 44 |
| Odisha | Chronicling Grassroot Women Changemakers In Their Language | 46 |
| Odisha | When Second Chances Are All You Need | 50 |
| Odisha | There is Nothing Women Cannot Do | 52 |
| Rajasthan & Bihar | Re-connecting With Education | 54 |

ASSAM

Weaving A Happy Tale

DISTRICT

Darrang



POPULATION

9,28,500

Census 2011



Renu Barua was born in 1980, in an impoverished family that could not make ends meet most days. But she was fortunate that despite their poverty, her parents supported her dreams and did not rush her into marriage. She also married into a prosperous and supportive household in 2004.

“No sooner had I moved to my new home after marriage, than my husband helped me buy a handloom machine. After some years, he even brought me a jacquard machine that enabled me to create new designs on the fabrics,” she says. “We started a Self Help Group with ten women and started weaving *gamchas*.”¹

It all went very well and, soon, once demand peaked, as part of the support from the State Rural Livelihoods Mission and NABARD, Renu was ready to take a loan of INR 45,000 to purchase her second handloom machine.

Renu also trained herself in multiple aspects of sustainable livelihoods taking advantage of various skill-building programmes that were being offered by the Rashtriya Grameen Vikas Nidhi, an NGO that worked in the area. She even worked as an Animator with eShakti, a customised apparel designing brand.



Renu Barua and her SHG; women who used the traditional handloom to transform their lives



Pranati Deka stands tall with her husband in her handloom centre

Working with her as part of the SHG, I have seen my income double in the last few years.

“She received the training as a Master Trainer and in turn imparted the training to us. This has given us better skills and our products an edge in the local market,” says Pranati Deka, a member of Renu’s SHG.

“We are hungry for training in better designs so that our products can fetch better prices. We want access to modern technology for weaving so that our productivity increases and so does our income,” she says.

Renu says until recently, she would create designs with her own hands. “With machine-based training, we are able to create many more designs that can be easily replicated almost like a fax machine. It adds precision in the design and leads to a much faster completion of the products,” she says.

In the neighbouring village of Bhuktabari in Sipajhar Gram Panchayat, Hema Prabha hit hard times when her husband suffered a brain stroke and ended up with a chronic lung disease in 2018 that drained the family resources. Hema received a loan under the Assam Government’s Svayem Scheme that advanced loans to new entrepreneurs. “With the loan, I bought a loom and thanks to a

revolving grant of 25,000 rupees under the State Rural Livelihoods Mission, I set up a micro enterprise which would generate both regular revenue and small profits as well.” Hema’s small enterprise now has 10 looms. Each woman makes two gamchas a day and a piece of Mekhala, the Assamese women’s traditional attire. Through eShakti, the women had the opportunity to interact with 300 more women from 30 SHGs and exchange design ideas and innovative use of raw materials.

“I am happy with the little I have managed to achieve,” she says. “I hope other women can have the same opportunities to become financially independent, too.”

1 Traditional Indian towels that is more like a scarf in texture but is used to wipe off water and sweat by most Indians



The satisfaction of seeing the fruits of one's labour; the mekhla sari



A woman working on the handloom

A District Collector's Plan To Fight Malnutrition With Communal Feasts

DISTRICT
Kanker



POPULATION

7,48,941

Census 2011



It is '*Pitrapaksh*'² and Lakshmi Das Manikpuri's house in Anjani village of Kanker is buzzing with various activities to mark the first death anniversary of her husband.

Neighbourhood women have gathered in Lakshmi's house. Some are busy cooking for the occasion, while others are busy making arrangements for the guests that would soon arrive. This year '*Pitrapaksh*' coincided with the Rashtriya Poshan Maah (National Nutrition Month) and the district administration has quite innovatively used the occasion of the death anniversary of Lakshmi's husband to create awareness among the villagers on the correct nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers, as well as infants and children.

The district administration in September last year, made it mandatory to feed children, pregnant and lactating women, at all functions and occasions - be it weddings, engagements, birthdays, religious functions, even death anniversaries - to bring down the levels of malnutrition in the district.

This special nutrition initiative in Kanker, called 'Suposhan Bhoj' (Nutritious feast) was driven by the District Collector, Dr Priyanka Shukla, a doctor, who led the National Health Mission in Chhattisgarh before moving to Kanker.

"Anemia is a major problem in Chhattisgarh and I believe strongly that only a community-led initiative is sustainable," says Dr. Shukla.

Kanker, often referred to as the Gateway to Bastar, has 6,822 moderately malnourished children in the age group of 0-5 years, accounting for 13 per cent, and 916 severely malnourished children in the same age group, accounting for 1.83 per cent of the total number of children in the region.



'Suposhan Bhoj'; battling malnourishment and uniting the community



Serving the women and children

The initiative is an attempt to involve the community in reducing malnutrition. "The idea is to ensure that children, particularly malnourished children, get to eat as much nutritious food as they can. Several meals a day would be an ideal thing for under-nourished children," she says. "There is hardly a day in the village when the communities are not coming together for a collective observance of one kind or another. Feeding children on such occasions is a good way to supplement their nourishment."

The district administration has held several awareness campaigns

to make people understand the importance of *Suposhan Bhoj*. *Mitanins*³ and *Anganwadi*⁴ workers have been asked to ensure that every 'bhoj' is documented. So far, as many as 1,186 malnourished children participated in the 'Suposhan Bhoj' organised in 522 households of eight blocks of the district during *Rashtriya Suposhan Maah (National Nutrition Month)*.

Around 105 children made it out of the malnourished category within just one month.

Antagarh and Durgukondal blocks saw 24 children making it out of the malnutrition category, followed by Kanker and Bhanupratappur that saw 13 malnourished children joining the 'well-nourished' category within one month.

"Indians always have had a tradition of inviting people for meals to mark important days," says Tribhuvan Singh Dhruv, Project Officer, Integrated Child Development Services⁵. "We have just narrowed the focus on children and expectant or new mothers with the aim to make the district malnutrition free."

- 2 A 16-day period of paying homage to ancestors who have departed from this materialistic world, as per the Hindu calendar
- 3 Mitani in Chhattisgarhi means friend - a female friend. In most parts of this state there exists a traditional custom that a girl of one family is bonded to a girl of another family through a simple but enchanting ritual ceremony and from that time onwards they become Mitanins to each other. According to custom any girl can always count on her Mitani in times of need. It is this custom that was built on - to create a new type of Mitani - the Swasthya Mitani - the friend of the village for health care needs.
- 4 Anganwadi centres are community health centres that provide basic healthcare especially to children, new or expecting mothers. It is a part of the Indian public health-care system.
- 5 Integrated Child Development Services is a government programme in India which provides nutritional meals, preschool education, primary healthcare, immunization, health check-up and referral services to children under 6 years of age and their mothers.

Giving Women A *Brand* New Identity

DISTRICT

Dantewada



POPULATION

5,33,638

Census 2011



Dantewada, a beautiful district in southern Bastar region of the Chattisgarh state - flanked by mountain ranges and thick saal and teak forests, and numerous rivers - until recently, used to be known for being the worst-hit by Left extremism violence in the Bastar region. However, this remote Aspirational District is now a hub of garment manufacturing for several leading brands in the country.

Dannex - Dantewada Next -- Nava Dantewada Garment Factory, a state-of-the-art garment manufacturing factory that was inaugurated on January 31, 2021, at Haaram, close to the Dantewada district headquarters, brought new livelihood opportunities for the people of this impoverished and strife-torn region, especially the women.

Similar units were also set up in three other areas - Karli, Barsur, and Katekalyan. The four units together employ 750 women comprising 90 per cent of the work force. Men are employed only for heavy work. Women are selected based on their family income levels. Those who need the

job most are given preference. The eligibility criteria include being 18 years of age, having an Aadhar identification card and a bank account. They are given inhouse training for 45 days before being admitted on the factory floor. The average salary ranges between INR 8,000 to INR 12,000 per month.

All units hire women within 4 to 5 kms of their homes so that they do not have to travel long distances to work. The management also provides free transport facility for the staff.

So far, INR 3.5 crore have been disbursed by way of salaries and these units have produced 1,100,000 garment pieces. The turnover in the very first year was a whopping INR 66 crore.

“Many women are now running their family expenses,” says Kajol, the manager of the factory at Haaram. Women, she says, have used their earnings to better their lifestyle, be it buying a two-wheeler for the family, or a mixer-grinder and cooking gas cylinders for their kitchens.

“I have seen first hand how these units have changed the lives of women in the district,” she says.

“This job has come as a great help for me and my family,” says Kusum Nag, a finishing supervisor, who has been working here since 2021 and earns INR 8,000 per month. “I am the sole earning member but going too far away from home to earn was not an option for me.” “I knew nothing about being a salaried working woman before I joined this place,” says Dilli Markad, packaging supervisor. “Now I can express myself, talk to others, and am open to learning.”

The women are trained in cutting, stitching, ironing, finishing and then packing of the finished products. Dannex has tied up with well-known online brands who send the designs, colour schemes and raw material. The outfits are made as per the requirement of the designer.

The four factory units together employ 750 women comprising 90 per cent of the workforce.



The women of Dannex; taking charge and working hard



The determination of making a mark





Women leading different units and deciding the trajectory

KARNATAKA

Preserving Heritage While Earning A Living

DISTRICT
YADGIR



POPULATION

11,74,271

Census 2011



When her parents migrated to Bengaluru for work, Yashodha Pawar did not move with them – she chose to stay back in her home in Thanagundi tanda, a few kilometers from the town of Yadgir in north Karnataka, to learn the art of Lambani embroidery – a speciality of her community that is passed down through generations of women.

“I love the exquisite stitching patterns of this artform,” the 20-year-old says, while displaying the exquisite and colourful designs she had stitched at a small centre, run by Kalike, a Tata Trust initiative backed by the Yadgir district administration. “I want to make a living out of this traditional art and also help keep it alive and thriving by training others in this beautiful artform.”

The Lambani embroidery relies on 34 different exquisite stitching patterns that mimic insect-walk. For example, *Koso Teko* is a zig zag pattern, but resembles ants

walking in parallel lines, one going up, the other going down; or *Jali* – it resembles spider web; *Vele* – meaning creeper. *Ingli* is a pattern imitating an insect that walks backwards.

Yashodha is part of a 40-member all-women group of Lambani women, who have been skilling or re-skilling themselves in the Lambani embroidery art and designing a whole range of products, including purses, mobile phone holders, women’s clothes, doormats and dining table mats, wall hangings, and even friendship bands.

This all-women cooperative is perhaps the only one in India that is actively trying to conserve and revive the Lambani embroidery, while also providing livelihood opportunities to women.



Ensuring the quality that is adequate for the Kalike label



The different patterns of Lambani embroidery, representing different insect-walks

From raw material to training to market linkage – the Kalike initiative works on the entire value chain, backward and forward linkages, with outlets in Yadgir and in other cities.

“We rope them in, train them, and provide them with employment here,” says Pramila K., senior programme manager of Kalike, Yadgir.

During the three-month training, the participants receive a stipend and a travel allowance.

“This is a predominantly rain-dependent agriculture district with no industries or services, with heavy seasonal migration of people,” says Snehal R., the district collector. “So, we focus on skilling women.”

“I am merely passing on the skill from older generation to the new ones with an eye on the market,” Pramila, the master trainer says. She was taught the stitching patterns by two of the community’s oldest artisans, Devibai and Shantibai, who live in a village called Mundargi about 30 km from Yadgir town.

Apart from setting up a training centre and hub for the Lambani women, the Kalike initiative has also networked with Lambani women Self Help Groups, such as the Indira Gandhi Self Help Group in Allipur Tanda – a ten-member group that makes different artefacts and embroidered apparels for buyers.

“We can get hundreds of women from our community to join us,” says Chandabai of the Allipur Self Help Group. “All we need help with, is the market – leave the rest to us.”



A conglomeration of numerous elements that create a single product



The training centre for new members to take the first step

KERALA

Kudumbashree: Old Mission, New Goals

DISTRICT
WAYANAD



POPULATION
8,17,420

Census 2011



Remya, a 30-year-old newbie entrepreneur, wants to start her own bakery and cake shop, expanding her home baking skills to sell in the local markets.

Shinila, around 35 years of age, has a way with scrap papers; she turns them into usable paper bags.

Ebily, a 26-year-old, has a different plan. With her husband, Adiva, a travel agent, she is soon starting a playschool for the kids of working women from her neighbourhood.

Then there's another Remya, a middle-aged woman belonging to the economically and socially backward scheduled tribe called Uraly, who runs a small café from her home, but now wants to scale it up. Her friend Sushila has a catering business that she, too, wants to scale up.

There's also Surya, a musician who runs an all-woman musical band that plays bamboo-made instruments, from harmonium to flute to guitar. They are called the Malamuzhakki band.

The band now wants to go global – and so needs financial support and training.

Women leaders from these assorted initiatives from across Wayanad, the lone Aspirational District of Kerala, are closeted in a two-day entrepreneurship development programme. The workshop is hosted by the Kudumbashree community development society (CDS) at Kalpetta, the district headquarters.

“Every single woman in this training here has plans or ideas that they want to realise,” says Rekha K.K., a micro enterprise consultant at the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme of Kerala's widely acclaimed poverty eradication initiative called Kudumbashree. Rekha trains and helps these women develop their business plans.

Over the next year, the Kudumbashree collective, backed by the State Government, would help these members realize their dreams and start off on a journey of their own.

From running tens of micro-small-medium and large enterprises to delivery of services to leading social actions, from dealing with women's empowerment to tackling violence against women, to gender



The Kudumbashree centre of Wayanad; Kerala's only Aspirational District

discrimination, Kudumbashree addresses virtually every facet of life in Kerala.

As the assistant district mission officer Vasu Pradeep informs: “Kudumbashree collectives are also into constructing rural homes, some initial experiments have been encouraging.”

Kudumbashree in Malayalam means ‘prosperity of the family’; it represents the mission and Community Network. Set up in 1997, following the recommendations of a Task Force appointed by the State

Government, it came about following the devolution of powers to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kerala.

The focus is to invest socially and economically into women.

“Very rarely will you come across instances of loan defaults,” says Jayesh Vellery, the district project manager for tribal sector. Income generation apart, the collective lends impeccable social support to women.

Across India, Kudumbashree is like a role model for similar movements – Umed in Maharashtra, Sanjeevani in Karnataka, or Mission Shakti in Odisha.

Indira Sukumaran, chairperson of the Community Development Society in Kalpetta, a highly motivated leader and motivator, leads 570 neighbourhood groups. Her plan, she says, is to make all these groups productive and income-oriented so that every single member has financial stability.

“A rupee spent on women is a rupee earned,” she says.



Different women, different ideas



Women employing other women and supporting their aspirations

From Landless Migrant Labour to Fierce Community Leader

DISTRICT

BARWANI



POPULATION

13,85,881

Census 2011



“Till a few years ago, women in traditional tribal outfits would get up from their seats in a bus and offer it to a man in shirt and trousers. But now, we are aware that we have also paid for the ticket and have a right to remain seated,” says Sumli Bai Gangaram, a resident of Warla block of Barwani district.

This awareness is the result of tireless efforts by local Self Help Groups, which are part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission aimed at reaching out to rural poor families and link them to sustainable livelihood opportunities. For Sumli Bai, things began to change eight years ago when she had joined a self-help group. It was, however, not an easy journey.

“We had no money, not even INR 100, to pay for the SHG,” she remembers. “When we somehow managed to bring together 10-12 women they would not speak at the meetings because they had never spoken up in the house either.”

Over the next two to three years, she was appointed as the president of the SHG Lakshmi Sahayata Samooh. At present, she is the president of the Balwadi Advasi Mahila Mandal, Balwadi, a federation of 200 SHGs with a membership of close to 1,500 women.

Today Sumli Bai – fondly known as Sumli Didi – an unlettered woman, a former seasonal migrant, who would travel to the bordering Maharashtra to earn a living, has been instrumental in ensuring the financial literacy of women in her community by enhancing their knowledge on savings, credits, and loans, which resulted in better accountability of SHGs and easy loans for income generating activities, and reduced their dependence on exploitative money-lenders.

She has broken many taboos along the way – and is now also a member of the tribal justice committee of her village, a traditionally male-dominated entity, where women had no entry before.



A gleam of a brighter future seeps in through the window sills

“I found it very strange that men should decide on women’s issues without consulting women. So, I started protesting when justice was delivered without women having any say,” she says.

As the president, Sumli Bai has represented her Federation in various platforms and built a rapport with Janpad and Panchayat level officers, police station and the local administration ensuring her community members got their Aadhar Cards, Labour Cards, Health Cards, Soil Cards, Pension entitlements and other relevant government documents. She has also created an open

space where villagers, especially women, can bring their problems and challenges for a collective solution. “This has been particularly helpful in the case of domestic violence,” she says.

“Ever since we joined the SHGs, ghoonghat hat gaya, aur izzat badh gayi” (our veils are gone and respect has increased). We can now walk into a police station and can even question the District Collector, if need be,” she says. “Women never had money and were not respected; but now we are financially independent and everyone respects us,” she says.

Ensuring the financial literacy of women in the community by enhancing their knowledge on savings, credits, and loans.



The turmeric unit, 'Ajivika Masale'



The confidence to operate heavy machinery because of the training through SHGs

Building Livelihood, Fighting Social Ills

DISTRICT
OSMANABAD



POPULATION
16,57,576

Census 2011



After Sanjeevani Shinde lost her doctor husband in an accident in 2011, she rarely stepped out of her home.

She was grieving but also prevailing social norms that discriminate against widows, including not being able to take part in auspicious events such as marriages and other celebrations, kept her confined at home.

But things changed – a social transformation was sweeping western and northern Maharashtra to abolish such discriminations and brought Sanjeevani out of her home. She started offering private coaching to children in her native Sonnewadi village in Osmanabad's drought-prone Bhoom Tehsil to help them crack the entrance examination for Navodaya Vidyalayas and higher education institutions. Thus began her small enterprise of tuition classes.

Today, Sanjeevani is part of a growing network of Self Help Groups in Sonnewadi and other villages in this part, a federation that runs individual and collective income-generation enterprises.

What's more, the village Panchayat passed a resolution some time back that single women, especially widows like Sanjeevani, cannot not be kept away from celebratory events.

In the last few years, for a monthly fee, Sanjeevani's classes have helped several students from the village to enter higher education institutions.

If Sanjeevani is running an individual enterprise of tuitions, tens of other women from this and neighbouring villages are engaged in a slew of other activities – from dairy to poultry to running homestay and tiffin services for students studying in the local pharmacy college, to processing of milk, vegetables and other agriculture commodities.

Sonnewadi also houses a hand-glove manufacturing unit – run by an all-women group.



Women collectivising to discuss issues concerning gender, society, and personal strife

One group makes clay idols of different deities and sell those in the local and distant temples. Several groups run the catering and wedding 'bichayat' services. Many of these Self Help Groups rear cattle and make 'Khoa', the solid condensed milk that is used for making Indian sweets, specifically, the 'pedha', a local delicacy.

A broader movement is also taking shape in Osmanabad district's drought-prone Bhoom block where efforts are ongoing to transition women members from self-help groups to productive small enterprises - from self-help to helping others.

Over 3,500 Self Help Groups, with nearly 35,000 women members, spread across 285 villages in this region, are working on new livelihood sources for women but are also raising awareness about social ills such as dowry, gender discrimination, intimate partner violence and alcoholism among men.

"What's remarkable about these groups is their engagement in diverse non-competing activities," says circle agriculture officer of Bhoom, Nilesh Raykar. "Everyone has their own space."

"In a way, this is a natural progression - the SHGs turning into productive enterprises than merely running thrift funds," says Osmanabad collector Kaustubh Diwegaonkar.

Until a decade ago, most of these women would migrate to work as cane cutters at sugar factories in the neighbouring districts of western Maharashtra in low paid, labour intensive jobs. Today, they are working for themselves and others. They have become the faces of change in this region.



Proud owners of their own ventures





By women, for women

Reaping The Fruits Of Community Forest Rights

DISTRICT
GADCHIROLI



POPULATION

10,72,942

Census 2011



Packets of Jamun (Indian blackberry) and Sitafal (custard apple) pulp are stacked in the deep-freezer. The Blackberry has just been processed. Custard apples will be in season soon.

Meanwhile, there's an air of excited activity in the hall of a processing unit run by a federation of village level women's Self Help Groups, called Sangini, in the village of Ramgarh, in the tribal hinterland of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra.

"After two years of Covid-19 our sales prospect looks bright this year," Pratidnya Meshram, 33, says. "We are quite hopeful of good profits this year."

Pratidnya, an MA in economics, is the only post-graduate in the Sangini Mahila Gram-Sangh, of which she's Secretary and de facto accountant. Various other members handle the responsibilities for the machinery and the processes of pulping and packaging.

'Sangini', a part of the Maharashtra State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MSRLM) christened 'Umed' (or Hope), started a few years ago by bringing together around 32 Self Help Groups in Ramgarh. These Self Help Groups, along with those in the surrounding villages of Kurkheda and Korchi blocks, collect wild berries and custard apples from their forests, or the designated community forest areas (CFRs). Sangini buys them from the groups and process the fruits into pulp, before selling it to big buyers.

Sangini's pulp-making unit is one of the several such processing centres run only by women-led groups in Gadchiroli, leveraging the minor forest produce they harvest collectively round the year. Ramgarh works on Jamun and Custard Apple. Jambhulkheda, a village in another block, works on honey and Chironji. There are also units that process Tendu-Bamboo. Once the women have been mobilised and attended capacity-building trainings, the Livelihoods



The women of 'Sangini' labour hard for the collective

Mission programme provides funds and grants to start a unit.

Umed's institutional design is robust. A bunch of 10-11 women form a Self Help Group. A village would generally have more than one of these groups, which are then merged into a Gram Sangh, or village organisation.

Ramgarh for instance has 32 Self Help Groups, with 365 women members.

About 15 such Gram Sanghs federate to form a cluster. So, a larger group of 3,000-4,000 women become part of it, with a few members representing their Gram Sanghs on the clusters.

Finally, these clusters together float a Producers Company, to market the products of the Self Help Groups and their clusters. Sangini markets its pulp directly to the buyers and through the producers' company, under the brand name 'EcoOne'.

"About 1,450 villages in Gadchiroli have won the community forest

rights under the Forest Rights Act, and since forest occupies two thirds of the land, major livelihoods of people come from the minor forest produce," says district collector Sanjay Meena. As part of the Aspirational District initiative, the administration's focus on livelihood and community enterprise development therefore focusses on the forests with women as the driving force.

Ramgarh, which was once just an obscure dot on the map, has now become a case-study of women's grassroots leadership and empowerment.



The custard apples bud for the season ahead





The finished products at display

An Endangered Tribe's Walk To Prosperity

DISTRICT CHANDEL



POPULATION

1,44,182

Census 2011



Tabitha from Khuringmul village of Chandel district in Manipur from the Taro - also called the Tarao - tribe of Manipur, is a self-taught skilled artisan-entrepreneur, who works wonders with bamboo. She has two junior school-age sons and a husband who works as a mason. The income from bamboo traditional products like baskets and floor-mats is the main source of livelihood for the family. She learnt the craft when she was only around 15 years of age. In the early days, she worked small-scale, making products that she would sell in the local *haat*.

However, a chance encounter with experts from the National Institute of Design (NID), who were surveying the remote areas of Manipur to learn about the Taro craft, changed her and her tribe's fortunes and opened them up to the wider world. "The designers helped me envision an array of new designs for all the traditional products such as the *Phar*, *Ruupok*, *Bukkang*, *Lukpak*, *Luktong* and *Peishep* and think of markets beyond the local *Haat* in Chandel," Tabitha says.

In 2017, with 35 other women from the village of just 67 homes, Tabitha, registered a small cooperative society.

Soon, 10 of the cooperative women reached the Ahmedabad campus of NID for training in design and marketing.

Although the Taro tribe⁶ is said to have settled in Manipur since 1075 AD, the Government of India recognised Tarao as an aboriginal tribe of Manipur only in 2003. It is reportedly the smallest tribe in India.⁷ Some say that they came from erstwhile Burma and settled in parts of Manipur, mainly in Chandel. Some of them are also found in the Ukhrul region. The impoverished tribe mainly depends on the forest for their livelihood. Their exposure to education and the outside world is also low.

However, since their collaboration with NID began, Taro Bamboo products have travelled to places as far as Ahmedabad, Delhi, Mysuru, North Kerala, Rajasthan,

Tabitha, a Taro woman, proudly displaying the certificate of registration for her cooperative



Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The women now earn an average of INR 5,000 to 6,000 a month. Just about five years ago, when the women were still working through only a limited range of designs, this income used to be in the range of INR 1,000 to 2,000 a month.

The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited (TRIFED)⁸ has

also sponsored the Taro women members of the local cooperative from Khuringmul to participate in various exhibitions across the country.

However, Tabitha is not resting on her laurels – not yet. She has bigger plans for her community.

“Buyers take our products in a semi-finished form, then add

some lustre and style to these products and sell them at five times more than the prices they buy the products from us,” she says. “So, for example, a small size bamboo basket that we sell for INR 300 fetches the buyers as much as INR 1,500 in the markets outside Manipur. I want to take our products to a level where we can keep all that income in the village.”

- 6 Amid the concern and fear of their extinction in the face of a marginal increase in their population, the Tarao tribe under the Committee on Promotion of Tarao Community (COPTARC) has appealed to the governments, both the State and Centre, to take steps for saving the tribe from extinction and to include them under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in 2014.
- 7 As per reports, Toto, a primitive Indo-Bhutanese tribe hailing from Totopara in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, numbering less than 1500, is said to be the smallest tribe in the world. But going by the Population Census 2011, Tarao tribe numbers are smaller than Toto tribe. The population of Tarao is only 1,066, according to the census.
- 8 TRIFED was established in August 1987 under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act, 1984 by the Government of India as a National level Cooperative body under the administrative control of the then Ministry of Welfare of India, with the basic mandate of bringing about socio-economic development of tribals of the country by institutionalising the trade of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) & Surplus Agricultural Produce (SAP) collected/ cultivated by them.



The traditional Taro weave

An activity that unites the family



This Teacher is Weaving A Business

DISTRICT RI BHOI



POPULATION

2,58,840

Census 2011



laishah Rymbai was born in Kdonghulu, a matrilineal village dominated by the Khasi tribe. The Khasis - who account for the state's largest ethnic community - are one of the last existing matrilineal societies in the world.

"It is true that we Khasi women have the power but not nearly as much as you think," laishah, 45, says. The Khasi community is matrilineal and is often upheld as an example of a gender equal society.

The woman who got married at 20 and divorced at 32 because she felt repressed by her husband, laishah stands testimony to a woman who means business.


For over 19 years now, laishah has been a full-time teacher in a government-aided upper primary school in her own village. But like most Khasi girls of her generation, laishah had learnt to spin and work the loom to create the exquisite Eri silk fabric. Before long, she realised that while she could work magic with her fingers, she also had an entrepreneurial drive to mobilise other women from her village to

make a decent living from spinning yarn from the Eri silk cocoon.

"I wanted to be truly independent after wasting so many years in a bad marriage," she says.

Her first foray into business - when she took out a loan of INR 1.8 lakh under the Prime Minister's Employment Guarantee Programme - was not successful in the absence of a clear business plan. But the business was revived in 2018, when she received an order from the Bharat Scouts and Guide Organisation to supply them with 50 Eri silk scarves that they would use for the Republic Day march.

But when she began to look for yarn to weave the scarves - there was none because the villagers were selling the cocoon to buyers from across the north eastern states as a source material for yarn. "I realised with a pang that the death of the traditional local craft was not far away. And I resolved to revive Eri spinning in our village and Eri Weave was born."



laishah, the protector of traditional Eri silk craft

She reached out to other women weavers and with the help of block officials, raised awareness against selling the cocoon.

An INR 20 lakh grant allowed laishah to invest in creating a work-shed for 20 weavers where they could process the cocoons.

She also invested in 10 mechanised solar-powered spinning machines. These machines will train women to produce far greater quantities

per capita of the silk yarn than is currently possible with the hand spinner.

Isaiah also continues to advocate with the authorities for giving women weavers access to subsidised loans as part of the State Rural Livelihoods Mission. The Central Minister of Rural Development, Giriraj Singh, and the district collector, Arpit Upadhaya, visited Eri Weaves recently. “After these visits, there is hope that the government will do its bit to hold our hand and help revive the Eri business among the Khasis,” laishah says.



The Eri silk handloom



Spinning yarn from the cocoon

MIZORAM

She Rises: Single mom, Businesswoman, Politician

DISTRICT
MAMIT



POPULATION

85,757

Census 2011



There is hardly anyone in Mamit who has not heard of Seni, a 50-year-old single mom of three children and a successful entrepreneur and district-level politician.

Seni's parents were farm labourers in the region's jhum plantations and didn't have enough money to fund Seni's education. Seni's elder sister was married off when she was still in school, while her brother left home early for Aizawl, in search of a better future. A younger sister who was suffering from depression died before she turned 16, making Seni the only available child to care for their parents. "Father was a heavy smoker from his early days. He developed ulcers in his stomach and finally he succumbed to his illness. My mother turned blind out of a blue," Seni remembers.

Seni dropped out of school after grade 6 and started working by the time she was 16.

At 21, she married a man in faraway Lengpui, near Aizawl. She was

divorced at 29 when her oldest child was just eight years old. She left her husband's home, along with her three kids, to live with her mother and look after her, and took out an interest-free loan of 5,000 rupees from a distant relative. With the money, she set up a small pharmacy and grocery store. She also worked in the *jhum* plantation for INR 150 a day, to supplement her income from the shop.

In 2004, she took out a bigger loan of two lakh rupees from a rural bank to expand her business. She repaid the loan in two years and in 2008 took out a loan of five lakh rupees from the Mizoram Rural Bank.

Soon, she was made part of the Unit Committee by the local chapter of the Congress Party which was doing well in the state. "For 5 years, I represented the Congress party as a Village Committee Member. Then I moved to the Mizo National Front and I have continued to represent the MNF during the last two terms," she says.

Seni believes that there is a need for more women in politics, especially at the grassroots decision-making level.

There is also a need to get rid of gender stereotyping in village committees. Seni says women are often asked to oversee the work of the Anganwadis and the public sanitation. “Men, meanwhile, will lead bodies on civic infrastructure and public works at large. This must change,” she says.

Since 2010, Seni has been elected thrice as a member of the Village Council, the empowered local body that has the powers to formulate Village Development Schemes, to supervise proper maintenance of water supply, roads, forest, sanitation, education and other welfare activities. The council also supports various government agencies in carrying out development works in the village.

“I really have no idea if I am an inspiration,” she says. “But yes, I have always stood strong for myself, my family and my community.”



Seni, a single mother who pervaded all patriarchal spaces, from business to politics

ODISHA

Chronicling Grassroot Women Changemakers In Their Language

DISTRICT
BALANGIR



POPULATION
16,48,997

Census 2011



“I am living my dream.”

Thirty-two-year-old Pallavi Hota sums up in one line, her journey from her humble beginnings to becoming a celebrated TV news anchor, to spearheading a women-only You Tube channel.

Raised by a single mother in the remote village of Balangir in western Odisha, she completed her graduation, enrolled for a diploma in journalism at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) in Dhenkanal, nearly 300 km from her native village. She then took up a job when she was about to turn 22. Before long, Pallavi went on to become a popular television news anchor. But dissatisfied with her work in the mainstream media,

Pallavi quit and found a successful broadcast start-up, Paharaa, to tell stories of women’s courage and empowerment, grassroots leadership, and women changemakers, from her home town.

Paharaa’s stories focus on western Odisha, a relatively economically

backward region. The stories are told in the local language - Sambalpuri Kosli, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in western Odisha and also alternatively known as western Odia. From covering the story of a women’s collective running a successful dairy operation, to chronicling the stories of women’s empowerment through the state’s Mission Shakti initiative and talking about the hitherto unexplored traditions and cultures of the hinterland, Paharaa is at the forefront of capturing the region through a gender lens.

“Paharaa is today as much a story, as the ordinary women and their extraordinary stories it tells,” says Pallavi, adding that their stories receive tens of thousands of page-views, likes and shares, especially from the hinterlands of the state.

Shot on smartphones mostly, Paharaa’s stories are compact five to ten minutes long videos, interspersed with folk tunes and crisp interviews.

Pallavi works with a very small and young team that comprise six



Pallavi, the journalist who covers stories that inspires women

reporters, who are stationed in six districts in western Odisha, five editors and around three camera operators, who work from the channel's Bhubaneswar office.

"It is very difficult to work in male-dominated newsrooms these days," Sagarika Pradhan, in her forties, and perhaps the senior-most editor in the group, with nearly 15 years in industry, says.

"Paharaa is refreshingly different – this is our own space where we every day choose to tell stories of women changemakers."

The rest of the team is comparatively young. Harshita Jena is 21. She completed her diploma in film and video editing from an institute in Cuttack, she says. "This is my first job and I am so glad for it," she says. "I know I am doing something that matters."

Chandrakanti Mundari, 23, is the lead editor. "I want to start making my own documentaries soon," she says.

Slowly but surely, Paharaa is changing the perception of women's primary role as caregivers and portraying them as entrepreneurs, workers and leaders.

"We are telling our own stories through the stories of so many other women," Pallavi says. "These stories are writing a new narrative – slowly but surely."



Interviewing real grassroots changemakers



Ordinary women, extraordinary stories

ODISHA

When Second Chances Are All You Need

DISTRICT

DHENKANAL



POPULATION

11,92,811

Census 2011




Kalabati Dehury was just 20 but not having finished school or picked up any professional skills, she sat idle at home, depending on hand-outs from neighbours and friends.

But two years back, her fortunes changed when she was mobilised to enrol in the UN Women-supported Second Chance Education (SCE) and Vocational Learning Programme implemented by a local NGO partner called Aaina, in Odisha's Dhenkanal district. It is here that she learnt to sew. Very soon she qualified for a job as a sewing operator with a textile unit in Tamil Nadu. Today, Kalabati can not just dream of a better life and future, but actually has the skills to turn these dreams into reality.

Many other girls like her especially from marginalised parts of the country - who were sitting at home owing to a lack of professional skills and hence job opportunities - have been empowered by the Second Chance Education programme. Puja Patra, 22, chose to train as a nursing attendant. She had the opportunity to train at a hospital in Bhubaneswar, at the peak of Covid-19 pandemic, and now works as a nurse in a large private hospital in Andhra Pradesh, along with seven other women peers.



Learning skills and bringing generational change through UN Women's SCE programme



A better future brings broader smiles

Mila Nayak, a tall girl in her late teens is dreaming of becoming a police officer.

Kalabati, Puja, and Mila are among a whole generation of young women from among the most backward and poor communities in Kamakhyanagar block of Dhenkanal, one of Odisha's Aspirational Districts, who have turned their lives around by enrolling in the Second Chance Education programme and either completing their education or acquiring professional skills, or both. Many of them are now working out of Odisha in factories and hospitals. The programme enables women to re-enter formal education, access vocational

training, learn entrepreneurial skills, and connects them to employment and business opportunities.

"All they needed was an opportunity," says Biswa Ranjan Behera, Aaina's Project Coordinator for the UN Women's Second Chance Education programme at Kamakhyanagar. "When it came their way, they simply grabbed it with both their hands."

Over 300 women, between 16 and 50 years of age, enrolled for and passed their secondary and senior secondary examinations under the UN Women programme.

About 250 other younger women from the poor and vulnerable tribes of Mundo, Jo, Sahar, Juang, Gauda, and Dalit communities acquired new skills, and landed jobs across India, earning salaries that allowed them to expand their horizons.

Today they are supporting their families and are not financially dependent on anyone else. They are experimenting with their new lives, they are on social media telling their stories, posting entertainment short videos - that are immensely popular with today's young population, as well as videos of their lives on a closed Whatsapp group, facilitated by Aaina staff. They are living and loving every moment of their second chance.

ODISHA

There is Nothing Women Cannot Do

DISTRICT
BALANGIR



POPULATION
16,48,997

Census 2011



If you happen to be in Balangir, drop by at the Shakti Café at the Bus Station - and meet the ever-smiling women who run it.

Or make your way to Harishankar Panth Nivas, a tourist guest house in the remote corner of this thickly forested district. A block level federation of Self Help Groups, the Annapurna Sanchayika Mahasangh, manages the guest house like a professionally-run hotel.

In the Chudapali village, members of Harishankar Women's Self Help Group run an immensely popular handloom business, selling exquisite sarees, dhotis, and towels.

Travel to Madhiapali, and you will meet women members of the Kamala Self Help Groups - they make Nutrimix, ready-to-eat nutritious meals for children at Anganwadis.

These, and a thousand other enterprises in Balangir within the rubric of Odisha's Mission Shakti programme for women's empowerment are booming, and transforming the lives of women.

Every Self Help Group has a signature attire; they come in all colours. But their mascot is pink.

What began with a fistful of grain collection in 2002, today, Mission Shakti - a convergence of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), the State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) and Women's Empowerment Mission in Odisha - is a growing enterprise that has 8.5 million-strong membership in the state providing or producing 75 different services or products.

"Ask not what we can do," holds Suman Dwibedi, the Balangir district programme coordinator of Mission Shakti, "ask if there is anything we can't do."

It's an incredible and trailblazing all-women success story.

"You name it and we have it," Dwibedi says, as she lists out a wide array of activities that women members of the Mission Shakti self-help groups are involved in, just to demonstrate the amazing range of services and goods the groups are engaged in.



The women of the Shakti programme are sufficient in themselves to run all kinds of businesses

The advantages are manifold: you get into the formal institutional network; gain access to grants and loans; and hand-holding for building capacity and business enterprise.

In 2019, the Odisha Government took a decision to progressively hand over the goods and services required by its line departments to the Self-help Groups and created a separate department, headed by a principal secretary with a dedicated minister to oversee the Mission's progress.

Balangir – one of the Aspirational Districts in India – is a test case.

Like in all other districts of the State, women SHGs are handed over the services that would anyway be outsourced.

“About 8,000 Self Help Groups have been handed over services and responsibilities as income generating activities,” informs Chanchal Rana, the Balangir district collector.

In Balangir, Mission Shakti Self Help Groups – 250,000 women – are engaged in 34 different activities.

“Our goal is to build the capacities of women to run their own enterprises,” says Rana.

The Self Help Groups are organised into village, cluster, block and district federations and compete with each other to get the work orders.

“You can see the social and economic transformation already,” Dwibedi says, “Wait another five years – the contribution of Mission Shakti in our State's economy will be unparalleled.”

Re-connecting With Education

DISTRICT

BARAN, GAYA & MUZAFFARPUR



POPULATION

BARAN **1,17,992**

GAYA **4,68,614**

MUZAFFARPUR **3,54,462**

Census 2011



“There is no age for studying. Learning can happen anytime. It is an investment for the future,” says Nisha Chauhan, Ward Member of the local Gram Panchayat in Kishanganj block of Baran district in Rajasthan.

Nisha is one of the 350 women in Baran district, who re-connected with education after a long gap. Most of these women had discontinued their education for various reasons, including financial constraints, early marriages, and their caregiving burdens.

In 2019 NGO Manjari Foundation, with funding from the Second Chance Education through another non-governmental organisation PRADAN, started the adult education for women initiative in some districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

The programme allows re-entry into education for these women through the open schooling system. Support is also provided to those who want to pursue a professional course after passing their senior secondary exams.

“It was difficult to convince women to pick up their studies after over 20 years. There was resistance from families and even children. It required lot of counselling before they agreed to join the programme,” says Renu, an SCE educator.

The foundation has also trained women in professional courses. Priya, who is now in the first year of college, trained as a ‘business sakhi’ to help women small entrepreneurs with marketing and selling their products. She is also working part-time with a private telecommunication company and earns INR 5,000 a month. She hopes to get a regular job after completing her graduation.

In Gaya district of Bihar, as many as 300 women were re-linked with the schooling system in 2019

of which 213 managed to clear the Class 10 and 12th examination. In Saidapur village of Tankuppa block, a group of 10 to 12 girls are in the class. Here, the project is being implemented by PRAN

(Preservation and Proliferation of Rural Resources and Nature) with funding from Second Chance Education and overall implementation support from PRADAN. Of the 246 enrolled in 2019, as many as 213 gave exams.

“My son said that I will never be able to pass the exams,” says Lalita Devi, a programme participant. But she proved him - and the women who laughed at her for reconnecting with education at such an advanced age - wrong. Today, she works as the secretary of the Pragatisheel Jeevika Mahila Sangh, a Cluster-level Federation (CLF) and earns INR 3,500 per month. She also took a loan from the SHG to educate her children and opened a shop in her house to increase her income.

In Muzaffarpur, 324 women had enrolled for Class X but only 200 were actively studying. As many as 130 passed the examination in one attempt while others are re-attempting. Of these 130, more than 30 are gainfully employed. Similarly, of the 42 who had enrolled for Class XII, through the Bihar Board of Open School, 28 have passed, some of whom have expressed the desire to study further.



The different generations learn and grow together



शुभ

शुभ



UN Women India

UN House, 55 Lodhi Estate, New Delhi 110003 INDIA

Tel: +91 11 465 32250 | **Fax:** +91 11 246 27612

2023 Imprint

