

Pushkala- The Plentiful

The blossoming of the
Self-reliant Farming experiments
of rural women farmers



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Acknowledgements

A total of 250 women are participating in the eco-friendly Self-reliant Farming experiment. This booklet presents the stories of 12 of them in detail. We take this opportunity to thank all the women farmers who have participated in this experiment

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A promise from the woman farmer

What can you do for her?

Can you ensure that her tender emerging breaths will live without being hurt?

It's a simple promise to make...

Aruna Dhere (originally in Marathi)

It is tempting to get a little poetic while presenting you this booklet on behalf of SOPPECOM and MAKAAAM. After all, the sprouting and flourishing of a sapling is a poem itself. And this booklet is the poem of the sprouting and flourishing of the Self-reliant Farming experiment. This poem highlights the blossoming of rural women, the awakening of the slumbering seeds, and the stories of the fruits of that awakening. It underlines the place of women in agriculture.

The contribution of the agriculture sector to the GDP of India is about 18 to 19 percent. This clearly makes it a major sector in the Indian economy. About 80 percent of rural women are engaged in agriculture and yet only 13 percent among all the operational holders in India are women. These figures will give you some idea of why the stories of women in the self-reliant farming experiment of MAKAAAM have the potential to be nothing short of epics.

The sustainable Self-reliant Farming experiment began in 2021. In 2024, 250 women are involved in this experiment. Between them, they have turned 140 acres of land poison-free. It is well known that artificial fertilizers and pesticides have caused the depletion of soil quality, that agriculturists are burdened with this additional expense, and that farmers have been committing suicide due to the

debt burden. But this ugly face of agriculture can be redeemed. This booklet attempts to underscore the contribution to this effort made by women farmers.

With the help of MAKAAAM, SOPPECOM is implementing the Self-reliant Farming project in 6 districts of Maharashtra. This effort has been taken forward by Prakriti in Nagpur, Prerna Gramvikas Sanstha in Yavatmal, Ugam Grameen Vikas Sanstha and Sahyadhri Bahuddeshiya Sanstha in Hingoli, Rajalaxmi Prathishthan in Parbhani and Jagar Prathishthan in Beed, all associates of MAKAAAM.

Women have been farming since time immemorial, but their opinions, labour and intellectual abilities have never been given importance by society. In fact, their role has been taken for granted. But this can change. The NGOs held meetings in village after village, discussing these issues. Women were motivated to take the decisions about Self-reliant Farming themselves.

This was not easy for them. They were ridiculed and teased. But the women stayed strong. They communicated with their land, instinctively understood what was good for their fields. They made new discoveries and shared them with each other. Gaining strength from each other, some of them dared to get their names included in the land ownership documents, while others prepared to fight for this right.

Preserving and planting indigenous seeds is one of the important aspects of Self-reliant Farming. In the push for greater productivity, many indigenous varieties of crops have been destroyed or on the path to extinction. Alongside this loss is the degradation of the agricultural ecosystem. In this experiment, women were provided with indigenous

seeds, and understood their value and also the importance of organic fertilizers. Recognising the higher nutrient value of these varieties, women planted the indigenous seeds, and exchanged them amongst each other. This highlights the deep connection between women's freedom in decision-making and environment protection. Chetana Vikas, an organisation in Wardha that has worked on Self-reliant Farming for many years, took the responsibility of training the women in this experiment.

According to the Household Consumption and Expenditure survey 2022-23, a rural household spends 46.32% of its total daily expenditure on food. If half the income is spent on food, it leaves little for other critical expenses, and expenditure on education and health often pushes households into debt and destitution. The National Sample Survey of 2011-12 showed that rural households spent Rs.3773 on food each month. In the post-pandemic era, not only have incomes shrunk, but food prices have shot up substantially. It is obvious that managing that fine balance between income and expenditure has been a big challenge for most rural households. The Self-reliant Farming experiment has helped women farmers address this problem. Along with food crops, women planted vegetables, and also gathered wild-growing vegetables. This not only helped to balance the household budget, but also increased the nutritional value of the family meal.

The Self-reliant Farming experiment has many facets. But the most important facet is that of affirming the place of the woman in the decision-making process in a household. How women have firmly established themselves through this experiment will be apparent on every page of this book

At the beginning of this experiment, most women faced some ridicule. Some have got the support of their husbands. Some have gently convinced their husbands. The important point is that village women began to speak up. This speaking up, this questioning, this experimenting in the field like scientists, this is hard to quantify. This is an epic poem. The echoes of this epic will be heard in the stories in this booklet. That is why we have borrowed the title of this collection from P. S. Rege's poem:

**Vast is your form and your soul,
Plentiful within your abundance,
Boundless you are for me.**

(Translation from the Marathi original)

The women in this book would not stand out in a crowd. They would seem no different from others. But in their own independent land, they have planted enough to nourish their family and community, they have nurtured it and harvested it. If a woman's toil is recognised, she will contribute plentifully to the society. This is the promise of these women farmers. We are sure you will appreciate this gift from the 'plentiful'.

Agroecology based Self-reliant Farming programme

The mainstream agrarian model relies on the extraction of natural resources, replacing diversity with monocultures and prioritising chemical subsidies over investments in soil and human health. This approach neglects rainfed areas, marginalised communities, and women, shifting priorities from food and nutrition security to commercial agriculture. This commodification reallocates water from food crops to commercial crops or industries and leads to distress on farms.

Agrarian distress manifests in extreme forms such as migration and farmer suicides, yet its gendered dimensions receive little attention. Women from marginalised socio-economic groups are disproportionately affected. Mechanisation and technologies like weedicides displace women's labour, erasing traditional knowledge of seed diversity, conservation practices, and cultivation techniques. Additionally, the decline in paid employment, depletion of forests and water resources, and mounting debts exacerbate women's unpaid care burden.

We believe that farming based on principles of agroecology offers a transformative response to these challenges, contesting the corporate model's control over people's knowledge, nature and agro-food systems. It is not merely an alternative set of sustainable practices but holds the potential to build a movement that challenges existing power dynamics in the food regime. Agroecology emphasises food and nutrition security aligned with local cultures and ecologies, prioritising ecosystem health over productivity and profits. By addressing

social and ecological dimensions, agroecology has the potential to reshape agriculture into a more equitable and sustainable system.

The farm model described in the 13 stories across six districts of Vidarbha and Marathwada regions of Maharashtra prioritises the following:

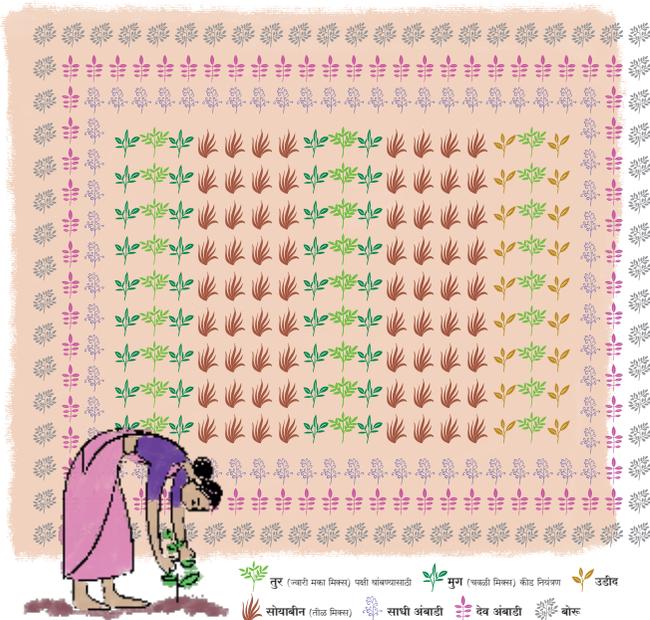
- Chemical-free farming: No chemical fertilisers, pesticides, or weedicides.
- Diverse cropping systems: At least 35 crops in varying proportions for food, fodder, fuel, and soil fertility.
- Mixed cropping with local varieties: Planting food and cash crops scientifically to increase soil productivity using interdependent crop mixes. Beneficial insects and microorganisms, along with high-resistance seeds, help manage pests and diseases organically.
- Local production: Chemical-free fertilisers and pest repellents are prepared on-site.
- Water and soil conservation: Using low-cost, appropriate seeds suited to soil type, pest resistance, and yield potential. Watersheds are developed innovatively on small farms.
- Ecosystem establishment: Sowing companion crops alongside cereals, pulses, and vegetables to create robust ecosystems. Cost-effective methods to safeguard crops from diseases and wild animals like boars, blue bulls, and monkeys.
- Empowering women farmers: Centring women's knowledge and providing exposure to specialised tools for faster and more efficient cultivation.

According to these principles, different crops are sown using a mixed cropping method. On the farm's boundary, Boru-Sadhi Ambadi and Dev Ambadi are planted. One row of moong is sown, mixed with

replace soybeans by soyabean

cowpea. Cowpea helps in pest control within the moong crop. Next, one row of tur is sown, mixed with bajra or jowar. Bajra and Jowar are planted as a Bird halt. Then, another row of moong is planted, followed by three to four rows of soyabean. After that, moong is sown again, followed by rows of pigeon pea. In this pattern, moong can be replaced with urad or matki, while soyabean can be replaced with cotton, bajra, or any other cash crop. The key point here is that after harvesting moong and urad, the remaining crops will benefit from the nitrogen these legumes fix in the soil.

Since moong and urad are nitrogen-fixing crops, they enhance soil fertility. Additionally, wherever space is available on the farm, vegetables are planted.



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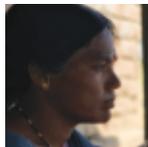
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Photo : Prashant Khunte



Sattubai Paikrao

Village Basamba, Block and District Hingoli

“I just have to see something once, and that's it! I know it fully!” says the sixty-plus Sattubai proudly. “My memory is phenomenal!” She uses the English word, 'memory'. She has not had a day of formal schooling, but has picked up that word somewhere, and uses it to emphasize her own intelligence. Usually, who ever calls an uneducated rural woman intelligent? Who ever praises her for her brains? After getting involved in the Self-reliant Farming experiment, Sattubai found the hidden core of her personality. She is surely allowed to pat her own back!

Outwardly, Sattubai's is an illiterate woman. But by nature she is an experimenter, a discoverer. She is adept at understanding the science behind what she learns at the training sessions, keeping it in mind, and then applying it. Once, all the women in Basamba village who



"I too used to do what everyone did, blindly follow. But since I have started doing Self-reliant Farming, I have totally stopped using chemical pesticides."

were part of the Self-reliant Farming group had the same question – the rains were late, and so the planting was delayed. If we plant moong this late, will we get any pods? Maybe we better not plant moong at all, was the general feeling. But Sattubai remembered something she had learned. “Whether we get pods or not, the moong will give us bio-mass for making manure. Plant moong for that, at least!” Sattubai had remembered what even the somewhat educated women had forgotten!

Farmers are usually a conservative lot. They like to plant what they always have, use the seeds and pesticides they always have. They don't like to break out of that mold. Sattubai was a pioneer of sorts. She completely stopped using chemical pesticides. “I too used to do what everyone did, blindly follow. But since I have started doing Self-reliant Farming, I have totally stopped using chemical pesticides. I make pesticide out of cow urine, neem pods, jaggery, and spray the crop with that.”

Self-reliant Farming is being implemented by 200 to 250 women in six districts. Sometimes they gather together, exchange stories of different women's fields and farming practices. Without negativity, with a positive attitude, they discuss someone's onion yield, or someone's brinjal crop, and have friendly gossip sessions. As they talk about the

other women and their practices, their own identification with their land increases, their fields become a part of their personalities. They find a new sense of self. Sattubai's confidence about her own knowledge and intelligence perhaps stems from such 'gossip' sessions. Her anecdote about her 'sight' having sharpened with Self-reliant Farming is a case in point.

She narrates, “Last year, even after spraying non-chemical pesticide, I saw these big fat caterpillars on the tur plants. I was at the end of my wits. Then I thought of a strategy. You know how tall tur grows. So I caught hold of each plant, and gave it a good shake. The caterpillars fell off. I ground them into the soil with my feet. Soon they were all dead.” Sattubai's face glows as she narrates this. It was a small experiment, which she could do because she kept a sharp eye on her crops. Besides, she saved money on pesticides.

Sattubai says, “I started, and a few others followed, now all the women are doing Self-reliant Farming.” In the first year, only six women joined the experiment. Sattubai was one of them. In the following two years, thirty women have started Self-reliant Farming. Thirty families of marginal farmers are now part of this movement.



"You know how tall tur grows. So I caught hold of each plant, and gave it a good shake. The caterpillars fell off. I ground them into the soil with my feet. Soon they were all dead."



Photo : Prashant Khunte

What is remarkable is that in spite of being from the neo-Buddhist community, she has been able to influence women from the wanjari, mali, charmakaar, pareet, and other communities. How did this happen? One of Sattubai's discoveries will help to understand this phenomenon. Hingoli district has a large population of nilgai. These antelopes can destroy crops on a large scale. Herds of nilgai come to fields to graze. They generally deposit their dung in a particular spot nearby. Sattubai collected this dung, soaked it until it began to decompose, and put it in a part of her garlic field. But in order to gauge its effects, she only put it in a part of the field. This was her comparative study experiment. She discovered that the garlic that had

“My mother-in-law is also my aunt. Her natal family had no land, and neither did mine. Her mother-in-law taught her farming, and she taught me. Now I teach my daughter-in-law.”

received the nilgai dung was much more full and healthy. Her experiment was successful.

No one usually collects nilgai dung the way they do cow dung. Nilgai are known to attack humans, and it was necessary to keep them away. As a result, nilgai dung is not

very easy to obtain. Sattubai recognized that if she shared its miraculous properties, her own access to the dung would be curtailed as there would be many takers. But she decided to be generous and shared her secret with the other women. Sattubai demonstrated her knowledge and practical sense, and this helped convert many women to the Self-reliant Farming experiment.

Farming is traditionally a male domain, and usually decisions about it are taken by men. How did Sattubai manage to break with this tradition? One day, her husband Shankarrao had an unfortunate accident. He got a severe electric shock when he went into their well into which the water pump had leaked a current. He became unconscious. He survived, but his spine had been affected, and he was weakened to a large extent. “He was the one doing all the organization, but now he was incapacitated. So I had to lift the heavier load.” Buying seeds, following up with the tractor owner to rent it for ploughing and planting, Sattubai slowly took over all the jobs. She took over the role of the main farmer in the family.

Her role in motivating women to implement Self-reliant Farming also taught her about leadership. She is at the forefront, experimenting in her fields, preserving seeds, using organic manure and saving money. She became a mobile guidance centre for what to do in the fields to maintain soil quality and get a good harvest. These days, the women in the village say, “Sattubai has gone crazy, she goes on and on about organic farming.” Of course, Sattubai wears this label proudly! 🙏

“For an upset stomach, mix chucha leaves with a little oil and salt and eat them, the loose motions will stop at once. Patharta with a bit of ghee will help for piles. To prevent stiff joints, tarhota is the best vegetable, and if you have a foul taste in your mouth, tandulkundra is best.”



Photo : Vidya Kulkarni



Chanda Ghodam

Village Warud, Ralegao Block, Yawatmal District

“I began to write a diary!” Chanda says proudly. “The sun rising as I went into the field, how the sky appeared, which caterpillar I saw in the soil, I began to write it all down”. This was Chanda's inception into Self-Reliant Farming. Learning in the training sessions and observing in the field, her field became her laboratory.

Once she noticed a strange growth on the rajgira plants (a leafy vegetable), a kind of infestation. “I love rajgira myself. What was to be done? Then I thought, clothes come out shining clean with detergent, so why not see if this infestation gets washed off too? I made a solution of the detergent powder, and sprayed it on the rajgira plants.” In the training Chanda had learned about spraying plants with neem oil as a protection against pests, and that detergent could be added to help the oil to dissolve better in water. She applied this knowledge in her own

way and made another discovery – that detergent itself can also be used for pest control.

Chanda had a passion for farming right from when she was little. “I used to trail behind my grandmother when she went to work in the field. Grandmother would grow vegetables, and I would go along with her to sell them in the market.” Chanda learned a lot about farming from her grandmother. To this day, many elderly women share their deep knowledge of farming with their daughters and daughters-in-law. But this knowledge, along with the skill and hard work, remain unacknowledged. Chanda goes on, “My father used to live like a patil (headman), having a good time with his friends. He paid no attention to the fields. That was entirely looked after by my grandmother. As I grew up, I had two options: farming like my grandmother, or continuing my education and getting a job.”

“I did want to continue my education, I dreamed of becoming a policewoman,” she says with a touch of nostalgia. But the school in her village was only a primary school. Sending a girl to another village for school was not really possible. So Chanda's schooling came to an end. Soon she was married. The policewoman dream receded further. But what about her other passion, farming? “My husband's family owned 36 acres of land, but there was no well for water. Imagine that, so much land and no water. How can you farm such land? I used to literally cry at my fate for having landed me in such a family.”

“We were given a lantern, a blackboard and chalk, some pencils. There were 30 women in my class. Even now, women call me 'teacher' sometimes.”



Photo : Madhuri Khadase

“We grew 17 different varieties of crops we had never seen before. And the tur plants, which used to dry up earlier remained green and did not dry up.”

With their land being barren, the family used to make ends meet by farm labour. They lived in a straw hut. In this situation, Chanda was looking for something different to do. And she got that opportunity in the same village. She was appointed the teacher in an adult education class. She began to teach the village women some songs and poems and how to sign their names. She recalls, “We were given a lantern, a blackboard and chalk, some pencils. There were 30 women in my class. Even now, women call me 'teacher' sometimes.” Her standing with the village women grew because of this activity. “But in a village, the real respect is reserved for the farmer. But if your fields don't yield much, then how will you get that respect?”

Input costs for farming were very high, including seeds, ploughing, weeding, spraying pesticides and so on. This was not tenable, so Chanda leased out half their land, where cotton and tur dal was being grown. In 2021, a well was sanctioned for her land, at the same time, she came in contact with MAKAAAM. She decided to try out Self-reliant Farming on half an acre of her land. But she was not really convinced. “Our land was hardened by using chemical fertilizers. Will I get any yield? Will it work or not?? Anyway, it was half an acre, so I decided to risk it.” “I used to think, our own seeds don't sprout, we have to buy seeds. Everyone does that. But because of this project I learned to keep some seeds aside for planting. Now I can manage to keep a substantial amount of seeds for the next planting. And oh god, what a lot of money I have saved!” In the first year, the yield was not great, but a lot of learning took place. Chanda recalls, “We grew 17 different varieties of crops we had never seen before. And the tur plants, which used to dry up earlier remained green and did not dry up.” Most farmers use dung manure as well as chemical fertilizers. There was always the fear that if they did not use urea and spray pesticides, they would lose the crop or get a low yield. But Chanda saw for herself that in her half-acre experimental field, she got a good yield even without chemical

fertilizers and pesticides. This gave her the confidence to double the land under the experiment, and now four years later she is implementing Self-Reliant Farming on 2 acres. Besides, she has stopped leasing out her land and is doing organic farming on the rest of the fields.

Chanda talks about how Self-reliant Farming has helped her to save money. “Earlier, for one sack of seeds, we needed 3 sacks of chemical fertilizer. Spraying pesticide 4 or 5 times, digging up the soil at the base of the plants, weeding, all this money was saved.” She also started creating bio-fertilizer by composting. All the women who were part of the experiment got together and dug a pit which they filled with leaf waste and earthworms. Chanda was the main motivator in this joint effort. Now this compost is saving them all money, and also rejuvenating their land. “The sarpanch (village head) called me to panchayat meetings twice, to tell people about this work. People began to say, everything she touches flourishes, she has green fingers.”

“The sarpanch (village head) called me to panchayat meetings twice, to tell people about this work. People began to say, everything she touches flourishes, she has green fingers.”



Photo : Vidya Kulkarni



Photo : Prashant Khunte

Another experiment she undertook was making pickle out of ambadi flowers, something no one in her village or even other villages nearby had ever heard of. “Fourteen or fifteen women came to learn how to make this pickle. I began to feel like a teacher again,” she laughs. The district agriculture department officials too took note of this experiment and invited her to an agricultural exhibition they arranged.

Soon a doctor from the village began to buy her vegetables, and that led to a greater demand for her organically grown vegetables. “Last year, just from selling brinjals I earned 10000 rupees,” Chanda says proudly.

It is often said that there is no market for organically grown products. But this experience shows that such a market can be created locally. It is said that women are passionate about jewellery, but Chanda has shown that a woman can be passionate about farming too! ♪

Photo : Swati Satpute



Meena Gore

Village Bori, Block Jintur, District Parbhani

When people look at a widow, they are either filled with pity, or they just avoid her. That's what used to happen with Meena. But ever since she started Self-reliant Farming, people's perspective has changed. She is no longer an object of pity. She says, “Now people come specially to see my fields. When they see the cucumbers and fruits, you think they can resist? I don't say no to anyone. If they eat or I eat, isn't it the same thing? Either way, the soul is satisfied”.

Meena shares the fruits of her labour with joy and generosity. According to her, this keeps their souls at peace. What could be her motivation? The farmer's life is hard: dependent on the market, she or he is always tense and worried. Trying to maximize yield in a limited space, plying the crop with expensive fertilizers and pesticides, the uncertainty of market prices, social and familial obligations,



“Now people come specially to see my fields. When they see the cucumbers and fruits, you think they can resist? I don't say no to anyone. If they eat or I eat, isn't it the same thing? Either way, the soul is satisfied”.

obviously the mind is always disturbed. Meena has been through this herself. And unable to handle it, her husband committed suicide.

Ajay Gore lost an eye due to a wooden spike piercing his eye while harvesting soybean. The doctor told them that his lens would need to be replaced. A large loan and two operations later, there was no improvement and Ajay was blinded in one eye. He was not able to work with one functioning eye. He began to get depressed. Like many men who do not have any faith in women's intelligence, Ajay too did not share his feelings with his wife.

The first time Ajay consumed poison, he survived because Meena took him to the hospital at once, and took good care of him after. But even then, he did not open up to her. He was also involved in some dispute with his brother, which added to his woes. The second time he swallowed pesticide, he was dead before he could be taken to the hospital. His restless soul had found peace, leaving a mountain of worries for Meena.

There were many obstacles for her to face: the children were still small, she had to face relatives and the community, and there was the growing loan burden. By nature, Meena is an introvert. She has only a minimal education. She lacked the courage to speak in front of people. “After my husband died, I began to do the farming myself. It's been 10

or 12 years now. I started planting cotton, tur, soybean, all on my own.” She got some money from a government scheme for families of farmers who had committed suicide. That helped a bit. She managed to repay the loan, but every year she had to take a loan again. Money was always short, and so the children's schooling had to be stopped.

“My daughter Anita is very bright. She would have studied further. But I could not afford the coaching class she would have needed for the board exam. The school fees, uniform, books and stationery, these too were becoming a burden.” Anita left school after Class 9. More hands were needed in the fields. Her sons Anil and Umesh too became irregular in school. All three begin to slog in the fields with their mother.

“Ploughing, preparing the fields, planting, mainlining the saplings, fertilizers, all these cost a lot, about thirty or forty thousand rupees a year. In a year I would make about a hundred thousand. You may say, well, sixty thousand profit is not bad, but that money went so fast, I can't even say where it all went.” Hard work, repaying loans, taking more loans, Meena was caught in a vicious circle.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, MAKAAAM had started its online workshops. This became the means for Meena to get connected to the larger world outside. She began to play a leadership role in the community. She began to organise women, to visit the government office to get employment guarantee cards. All these activities bolstered her confidence. She began to speak with government officials with firmness. She is a prime example that shows how important it is for women to take the lead in farming.

In the meantime, the government had announced some support of those affected by the ongoing drought. The officials were casual in their approach to disbursing the funds. “I told the Talathi, I only got one thousand rupees, I am supposed to get nine thousand. He said, I

“Keeping the field free of weeds is one of the biggest problems for a farmer. However much you pluck them, the grass keeps coming back. But I planted boru on the edges of the fields, and when it grew, the weeds stopped appearing.”

forgot to mention some of your land in the application, once that is noted, you will get the rest. I said, well I need it right now, I have to repay loans. He replied, do you take loans depending on government to help out? Well I gave it back to him. I said, are you paying out of your own pocket? The government has thought it out and given this money, hasn't it?"

Most people would have given up, but Meena did not let it go. She followed it up. In two days she checked in her bank account, and found the money had not yet come. She called the Talathi on the phone and argued with him. Finally, he completed the required documentation and Meena got her drought aid.

Would a male farmer have followed up the issue like this? Perhaps a man would find this demeaning in some way. The business of 'status' can prevent a man from demanding what is rightfully his. But Meena has no choice but to fight for her rights.

The decision to move to Self-reliant Farming was also a bold one for Meena. Farmers generally concentrate on cash crops. So planting pulses and vegetables for home consumption is not a priority. But women like Meena understand the importance of saving money rather than only making money. They see how Self-reliant Farming

"I used to think, how will I get a harvest if I don't spray pesticide? But chemical fertilizers are what ruined my life. My husband committed suicide by drinking the pesticide we used for bitter gourds. I just don't want to go near those pesticides again. I started this Self-reliant Farming, and that poison bottle went out of my door!"



Photo : Anil Gore

Photo : Swati Satpute



"With Self-reliant Farming, we can eat the vegetables we have seen growing right there in front of us. I don't need to go to the market, and the visits to the hospital too have gone down!"

brings substantial savings to the family expenses. This is why Meena took this decision, and also influenced other women in the village to do so too.

After getting involved with this project, Meena started observing her own fields carefully. She recalls, "Keeping the field free of weeds is one of the biggest problems for a farmer. However much you pluck them, the grass keeps coming back. But I planted boru on the edges of the fields, and when it grew, the weeds stopped appearing." Meena shared this finding with the other women in the village, and they found that this was indeed a reality. People began to look at Meena with a new respect. This respect is not something that a widow in a village gets very often.

Meena recounts, "My organically grown vegetables like cucumbers and pumpkin attract people. Earlier, no one came to meet me. Now many come." The produce from her farming has brought Meena into greater contact with people around her. Only someone who has been lonely can understand the importance of this interaction, what it means for calmness of the mind and peace for the soul. ☪



Photo : Swati Satpute

Padma Bhusari

Village Bramhapuri, Block Saoner, District Nagpur

“I failed in Class 9.” Padma's success story starts with a failure. She continues, “I would have passed, but I could not go for one exam. My teacher came home to find out why I had missed it, but how could I tell everyone?” Some girls experience excessive bleeding during menstruation. This is what made Padma miss the exam. She was declared fail, and so dropped out of school. Early marriage followed, and after this life had many more 'exams' for her to face.

Her husband's family had a lot of land. They grew oranges, sweet limes, tur, and cotton. Padma did not even know how to hold a sickle. Her husband Narendra was quite sensitive to the fact that his wife would find farming very hard. But though he was understanding, city-bred Padma knew she had to learn and adjust to this agricultural family.

Once her mother-in-law sent her to weed the soyabean field. “I didn't know which was soyabean and which was grass. I plucked out a lot of soybean!” she laughs. Another time, she was sent to plant groundnuts. All the seeds spilled out of her pouch, and were wasted. Her mother-in-law was gradually teaching her about farming.

Padma's first child, a boy, was born disabled. For many years she looked after him with great affection, alongside bringing up her second child and managing her home and fields. It was a balancing act, and she was tested time and again. But finally at age 12, the boy passed away. His death was felt very deeply by the family, especially her mother-in-law, who also passed away in the following year. But Padma recounts these happenings without a sense of hopelessness. She came in contact with the organisation Prakriti. She began to work to increase women's participation in the local Panchayat administration, as a 'Panchayat Sakhi'. Soon she was elected as a member of the Panchayat. She worked in the water supply committee. Seeing her enthusiastic nature, Prakriti encouraged her to participate in the Self-reliant Farming project.

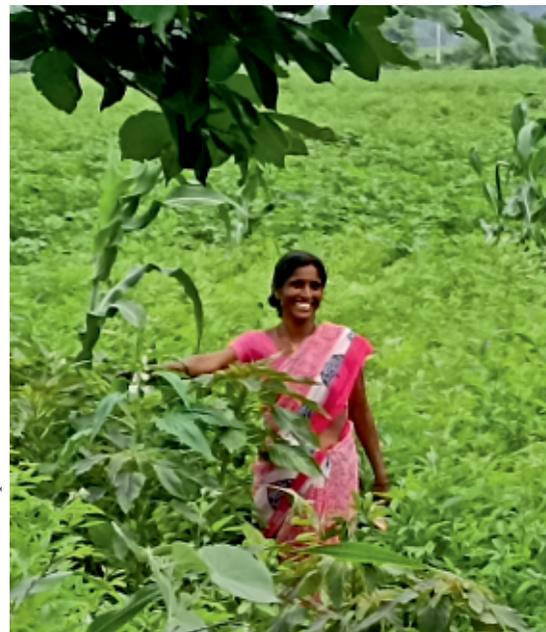


Photo : Swati Satpute

“In a farmer's heart, plants hold a special place. If something is growing, he will never have the heart to pluck it out. He begins to love it.”

“I kept an eye on the plants. After spraying chemical pesticides, the cotton plant dries up after exactly 21 days. But the organically grown ones don't, they remain green. I took videos and showed them to the other women. I convinced them about organic farming.”

Padma has always been keen on trying out new things. The family land had been divided when her mother-in-law was still alive, and Padma's share was quite small. She realized she had to do something to increase the yield, and so began to use manure in the fields. She did this for four years, and her yield was nearly double that of the neighbouring fields. But the pressures of market forces were hard to resist. She began to feel pressure to use chemical fertilizer.

“When everyone began to plant Bt Cotton, the norm was that chemical fertilizer has to be put four times in one season. Then the

ground began to harden, and the roots of the plants got exposed. People began to use pesticides too. But killing off all life forms reduced the fertility of the soil. Then I went back to manure, I insisted on it, and cut down on chemical fertilizers.” So far, Narendra had supported her decisions. But about Self-reliant Farming, he was skeptical.

His wife was attending meetings and workshops, bringing home all sorts of seeds, making decisions about what to plant and what not to plant. This could have perhaps hurt his self-image, in a society where men have always taken these decisions. Padma brought home seeds of urad, moong, sesame, turmeric, amaranth, maize. Narendra had never planted these before. Our soil is black, it is not suitable for this, how will we even run the plough? He began to make many excuses. Finally, he put his foot down – no means no! Here was another test for Padma.

Padma played it cool. After Narendra had gone home from the field, she quietly planted what she had planned. She says, “In a farmer's heart, plants hold a special place. If something is growing, he will never have the heart to pluck it out. He begins to love it.” Her strategy was effective. Seeing the saplings grow, Narendra's opposition melted

away. “Urad, moong, okra, the plants were putting out beautiful heavy pods. Then I asked him, you said don't plant these, but what about this harvest? How did that happen!” Narendra was silent, and Padma had passed yet another test.

A big change took place in Padma once she took on the Self-reliant Farming experiment. Earlier, she did not like farming, perhaps because she had not been given the opportunity to show any achievement. But with Self-reliant Farming, she began to take decisions herself. She showed that she could grow what had never been attempted before. Her confidence grew. She asked her husband to give her half an acre just for her experiments.

In a way, this half-acre became Padma's kingdom. She began to use organic fertilizer exclusively. It helped her to convince her husband



Photo : Prashant Khunte

“There is a belief that when you offer a pumpkin to the god Mahadev, then you don't eat it. But when pumpkins grew in my Self-reliant Farming field, I said, what is good for the body is good for god too. So first I ate some, and then my husband too began to eat it.”

did not enjoy coming here, we just came to work. But now, every time you come here, there is something to see, something to pluck and eat. It's fun to go into the fields now. You feel enthusiastic,” she says happily.

Self-reliant Farming also changed Padma in other ways. She decided to get rid of the stigma of school failure. She had learned how to study, because of the training sessions she had attended. She registered for the board exams, and passed with 60% marks. Life had thrown many challenges at her, set many exams. Padma laughs “I passed every single time!” ♪

and family. She narrates one wonderful experience. “I try to bring my daughter to the fields whenever I can, so that she too can develop a love for farming. One day she came over, stomping through neighbouring fields. When she reached our field, she asked me, how come our soil is so soft and the neighbouring fields are so hard? Then I told her, we use organic fertilizer and compost. We rotate our crops. That's what makes our land rich and soft.” Padmatai's family understood the importance of her experiments. Narendra was convinced too, and he decided to stop using chemical fertilizer and pesticides altogether. “Earlier, when the fields had only cotton and tur, we

Photo : Prashant Khande



Sarita Vairale

Village Shelu Bazar, Block Murtizapur, District Akola

“Some days I went to school, and some days I didn't,” laughs Sarita. “My brother was small, so I was the one who had to help our father in the fields. I even know how to drive the huge pair of bullocks for weeding!” This is usually men's work, and tough work, but Sarita learned how to do this at an early age. Her father was a farmer, and so was her husband, later on. Her father-in-law had incurred debts for farming, and expected his son to repay it. Sarita and her husband worked as farm labourers. They had two acres of land, but the yield was not substantial. Her husband was torn between repaying the debt and looking after his young family. In frustration, he committed suicide. So it was left to Sarita to face of all adversities, with her two young children by her side. To this day, a widow is considered inauspicious by some, and many refuse to even look at a widow. It was

“I used to be under constant tension – how will I even keep my children alive! I used to sell bundles of fuel wood, scrub people's pots and pans, anything. But when I got control of my own half acre, my life changed. My field has become my support”

hard for her to even leave her house. Quiet by nature, Sarita become totally silent.

“As a child, I used to be afraid to speak,” she confesses. “I could not pronounce the R sound. I would stammer. When the teacher called on me to answer a question, and I spoke, the other kids would laugh. So I avoided speaking.” After she lost her husband, her silence grew even deeper.

Sarita's husband had two brothers. After her father-in-law's death, the land was to be divided equally between his wife, and the three sons. The older brother lived in the city. With the help of the younger one, she began to farm the land. At the time, from her share of the

land, all she got was about 20 kilos of tur. She kept half of this for the home, and she began to work as a labourer to earn enough for household expenses. The organisation Prakriti helped her to access a widow's pension scheme. With all this, she barely managed to keep the family fed. But the real question was, how would this silent, suppressed woman find her voice.

In 2021, Shalinitai of Prakriti involved Sarita in MAKAAAM's Self-reliant Farming experiment. Hoping to get manure and seeds, her brother-in-law agreed to put 2 acres under this experiment. This one decision transformed Sarita's life and gave it a new direction.

It was during the Covid-19 pandemic that Sarita first came in contact with MAKAAAM. She began to attend the on-line meeting. Then came the meetings and trainings for the project. Attending these was Sarita's first experience of travelling by train. She was amazed by the fact that in a reserved compartment, a woman gets a whole berth and bedding for herself. It was a completely new experience to see how a woman could freely move in a public space. At the training sessions she met other women who had been widowed or abandoned by their husbands, and felt less alone. She made new friends, exchanged life

experiences, joys and sorrows. She blossomed.

She learned new techniques of farming, got new seeds. She planted moong, urad and vegetables, and also non-Bt cotton. The first harvest was nothing special, and other farmers commented that there was no alternative to Bt cotton, other seeds would not grow.

But a new window had opened for Sarita, with new knowledge and information. Faced with the options of emulating the other farmers or implementing Self-reliant Farming, she chose the latter. The first poor crop of non-Bt cotton did not deter her, she planted it again in the following year. This time she got four quintals. Besides, she saved a lot of money on fertilizers and pesticides. For the first time in her life, she earned 32,000 at a time. She had never seen this kind of money. But the elder brother-in-law demanded 20,000, because the land was still jointly owned. Was there to be no recognition of Sarita's hard work and smart strategies? She refused point blank. A woman standing up

“When I was a labourer, my brother used to feel, how can I lend money to this ignorant woman, how will she ever return it? Now that I have my own land, he doesn't hesitate to lend me money.”



Photo : Tanushree Vairale

Photo : Prashant Khunte



“After working in other people's fields, in the evening I would fill pots of water and water my vegetables. People would say, where does she go after dark? They would suspect the worst. I ignored them. I grew the vegetables for my children. I kept my field alive.”

to the older male in the family – this is not a small thing. What courage she must have mustered to do this!

As it was, her husband had committed suicide out of frustration with his family debt obligations. Now the family wanted a share of the earnings from her hard labour too. She stood firm in her refusal. Her brother-in-law retaliated by disallowing her to use his half acre of land. So now Sarita has only her own half acre. This is her world now. Feet firmly planted in her half acre of land, she faces the world.

Sarita's land adjoins that of her younger brother-in-law. He could not find anyone to plant in his small piece of land, and so he began to insist on planting what he wanted on both portions, his and Sarita's. Sarita found a good way out. She involved his wife, her sister-in-law, in the Self-reliant Farming experiment. This way, the two pieces of land, one full acre, could be ploughed and planted together, using a pair of bullock.

It has not been an easy journey. Sarita tried to make friends, take part in societal functions. At one such function where a mother-to-be was

Photo : Swati Satpute



being felicitated, someone insulted her for touching some flowers used for the ritual. As a widow, she was not supposed to do that. On top of the hard work of running her house on her meager income, these insults became hard for her to tolerate. And to make matters worse, family members cast aspersions on her character, always asking her about where she was going, whom she was talking to. Sarita had even attempted suicide a couple of times, but survived due to the support from her children.

Self-reliant Farming has given her a new confidence. She says, “When I go for the training sessions, people criticize me. ‘There! Off she goes!’ they say. I ignore them!” Sarita has shown her community what it means to be a woman who can “go off’ on her own two feet. And the people are left wondering, how can this happen with only half an acre? 🙏

“When I go for the training sessions, people criticize me. ‘There! Off she goes!’ they say. I ignore them!”



Photo : Prashant Khurte



Sanjeevani Salve

Village Ghodka Rajuri, Block and District Beed

“I didn't get to eat good food, at least my children should.” This was the thought behind Sanjeevani Salve taking up Self-reliant Framing. She had family land of two and a quarter acres. Of this, she started Self-reliant Farming on half an acre. When she was asked what change she found in that half acre, she straightens up with pride. Lovingly she picks up some soil and says, “How soft the soil has become. The very colour has changed!” Sanjeevani would know what it means to feel the softening of the soil – her life has been one of growing among hard rocks!

“I was married off, but I started menstruating only one year later! I was completely innocent. I was so afraid of my husband!” Sanjeevani recalls. She started off her married life in a construction workers' settlement in Mumbai. Once she had finished her household chores,

she would go to a neighbour's house to avoid her husband. This prompted him to regularly beat her. In six months, he sent her back to her parents' house. There she began to work as a daily labourer. Then in another six months, her husband came to take her back. At the age of twelve, she had her first daughter. This underage mother began to live in Mumbai again. Living in a straw hut, she looked after the baby, did all the household chores, and also worked at the construction site, carrying bricks and rubble. The strain became unbearable. She suggested to her husband that they should go to her home village. She felt that working on the land was preferable to this life, even if that too involved hard labour. The family moved to Sanjeevani's parents' village.

In the meantime, three more children had been born, another girl and two boys. The couple began to work hard, while also looking after the four little ones. For ten years, all went well with the family. Then suddenly her husband died in an accident. Sanjeevani's older brother supported her and her children, but in the very next year, her brother also passed away. How was she going to live now?

“For a year or two I continued with working as a labourer. But that work is not dependable. You don't get work every day. So I decided to start selling fruits and vegetables,” Sanjeevani recounts. “My aunt used to sell mangoes, so I started working with her. But I had no idea at all, how many quintals we bought, how much we sold, how much money we made. I could understand nothing. My sister's sister-in-law used to sell fruits too. I followed her and learned from her.”

Women support each other. Sanjeevani exemplifies this. She got support from other women, and saw it as her duty to support her widowed sister-in-law. She gathered her courage and got down to work. She saved bit by bit, and bought some hens. She began to sell eggs. She bought goats and a buffalo, and started a small dairy products business. Like her name, she became a 'lifegiver' for the household that had been falling

“I said to them, come on, do it. This food is good for our bodies, for our health. Our lives have gone by in pain and labour, let our children at least eat good healthy food”

“Now I have started preserving my seeds. At the crucial planting time, where will I go looking for seeds? And why! I preserve my own organic seeds.”

undaunted.

In spite of managing all this with so much skill and courage, her father was not convinced about her Self-reliant Farming experiment. With great reluctance, he gave her some land, but kept on grumbling and giving her advice: don't do this, don't do that, don't put so many seeds in this much land, he went on and on.

But her father was growing old, and increasingly, Sanjeevani was becoming the head of the family. She went for training and learned many new things. She took the decisions on what happened in their fields. But these new practices were very hard for other farmers to swallow, and especially those who came to do the ploughing and sowing. Sanjeevani was sowing mixed crops. The farmer who brought the bullocks for ploughing was used to the old style of sowing monocrops. On top of this, they perhaps were doubtful that a woman, that too of a 'lower' caste, knew more than them. Sanjeevani held her ground and insisted on the mixed sowing. But when the crop flourished, all the neighbouring upper caste women were full of wonder. They began to ask her where they could get such seeds, how to do this type of farming.

“What will people say?” This is one question Sanjeevani is now used to facing. Someone instigated her father, saying that a widow selling in the market marks her out as a woman of loose character. Sanjeevani says, “I used to sit in the market selling my produce. My father began to frequent the place, apparently to keep an eye on my behavior and

apart. Supporting her dead brother's family, educating her younger brothers, caring for her parents, bringing up her own four children: all these responsibilities she shouldered, and became 'Akka' (big sister) to everybody. She got her two daughters married. To pay of the debts incurred by the weddings, she worked cutting sugarcane. But she remained



Photo : Swati Sapure

character. Even now, when I go out, my father will ask me where I am going all dressed up in a good sari.” Her father is concerned about 'family honour'. He thinks of even his 50-year-old daughter as innocent and in need of protection. Sanjeevani is well aware of this. But as she says, how long can one keep thinking of what people will say?

She told her father, “Look, we will be able to get good organic healthy food. It doesn't matter how big the harvest is. As long as there is enough for us to eat.” With a good understanding of the benefits, and facing all the criticism from people around her, Sanjeevani started implementing Self-reliant

“I give seeds to the other women to. All the women who are doing organic farming take seeds from me now. Gradually, they too will begin to keep their own seeds for planting. All of us will save money that way.”



Farming. “In the first year there was not much, we got about a quintal of bajra. Then in the second year, along with the bajra came eight 'paayli' (traditional measure) of moong, about 50 kg of Chickpea, 25 kg of tur, five kg of urad. Then there were leafy vegetables like ambadi and kardai.” All the money that would have been spent on buying this was saved. Even before this, she had been using manure as fertilizer for her bajra. But now she also understood the value of planting mixed crops.

Inspired by her success, some more women wanted to start Self-reliant Farming. “I said to them, come on, do it. This food is good for our bodies, for our health. Our lives have gone by in pain and labour, let our children at least eat good healthy food” she says. What is noteworthy is that due to Sanjeevani's influence, nine women from Dalit communities began to do Self-reliant Farming on half an acre each. This means nearly 2.5 hectares of land became free of poison. Most Dalit peasants have small land holdings, and the land is usually of poor quality and yield. Because of Sanjeevani, these women are on the route to becoming independent farmers. Perhaps that is why, when she says, “Look how soft the soil is, it's very colour has changed”, Sanjeevani unconsciously straightens her spine and stands proud. ♀



Kalavati Sawandkar

Village Tembhorni, Block Vasmat, District Hingoli

Traditionally, women's self-help groups have been associated with providing loans to members for small home-based enterprises like making papads, pickles, masalas and so on. But Kalavati Sawandkar of Tembhorni has broken the stereotype and linked self-help groups to farming.

Kalavati has studied in school up to Class 7. At 16 she was married off to Tulshiram Sawandkar, and got absorbed into her role as a housewife, and soon a mother. They had 3 children, Nanda, Pandhari and Radha. In 2012 they arranged Nanda's marriage. The dowry and wedding expenses were met by a loan from the local moneylender. While it was still being repaid, Radha fell seriously ill with meningitis. All efforts to save her failed, and she passed away. Her treatment



“Does anyone care about the soil? It's the same about women. No one cares. That is why we all came together. We decided, if the soil improves, our lives will improve too.”

necessitated another loan from the moneylender. There was no way to repay both the loans now, and the interest kept mounting. Their fields too had been neglected. Finally, unable to bear the tension, Tulshiram committed suicide.

At this time, Pandhari was in Class 9. After his father's death he had to leave school, and share the responsibility for their fields with his mother. Kalavati was in reality quite isolated and lonely. If it had not been for a lucky encounter with MAKAAAM, she would not have been able to regain her confidence.

In 2018, Kalavati, through the organization Sahyadri, became associated with MAKAAAM. She was given the task of compiling a list of single women who were either separated or widowed. The survey held up a mirror for Kalavati, and she saw herself reflected in their

stories. She realized what some of them had to go through to get the widow's pensions they were entitled to, and began to help them for this. She helped them to fill relevant forms, tried to get them cooking gas through Ujwala, a government scheme. Her self-confidence grew.

In 2021, Kalavati became a participant of MAKAAAM's Self-reliant Farming experiment. She recalls those early days. “Women used to see my vegetables and ask for some. Then they would say, sister, how come your vegetables have this wonderful taste? I would tell them what I learned in the training. Our soil is dying with chemical fertilizers. Then, in order to grow something from this dead soil, we add even more fertilizers and pesticides. We may get a decent crop, but the taste of the produce is dying. Many women knew about this issue, but did not know there was a solution.”

One of the basic beliefs of the Self-reliant Farming project is that women can be effective in addressing agrarian distress. This belief began to take root in the women in Kalavati's village. Kalavati was also active in the self-help group. She linked the two initiatives, and some women in the group took loans to buy farming implements. Many of the women did not own a bullock for ploughing, and were dependent on hiring a bullock from another farmer. So the self-help group decided to buy a pair of bullocks themselves.

The group of women set off to the cattle market at the district headquarters. Women at a cattle market was not a sight people had seen, and there was a lot of staring and comments. Undaunted, the women bargained with the seller and bought a pair for Rs.60,000. Kalavati recounts, “People in the village found it strange, and made fun of us. Let's see how they manage, they taunted us. Even a husband and wife don't get along sometimes, how are these ten women going to share this pair of bullocks and get their farming done!” But these women managed very well. They divided up amongst themselves the task of feeding and grooming the bullocks, and covered for each other if one faced any difficulty when it was her turn.

“For the past three years, I have not had to take any loan for my farming.”



“Women used to look at the vegetables on my land and ask for some. Then they would say, sister, your vegetables taste so good. I would tell them, use organic fertilizer. Your crops will be tasty and nutritious too”.

This initiative saved the members a lot of money. They began to share ideas on who should plant what and when, to work in each other's fields. Kalavati was a leader in this evolution. A shy and lonely woman had transformed herself into a strong activist and advocate.

She now implements Self-reliant Farming on one acre of land. She has grown turmeric, various pulses, soybean, non-Bt cotton, and vegetables. From this one acre she made a profit of Rs. 1,20,000 in 2023. In the remaining two acres of her land, she grows turmeric, soyabean, Bt cotton, wheat and jowar using organic farming techniques. She applies her understanding of mixed crop sowing on this land too.

“For the past three years, I have not had to take any loan for my farming,” she says proudly. In fact she has now started investing in her fields. She has installed a pipeline from the well to her fields.

Kalavati encourages other women in the village to take up ecologically sound Self-reliant Farming. She believes that just information is not enough, but seeing is believing. As her fields are by the side of the road, people passing often ask about her crops. When they saw her planting pulses between rows of cotton, she was told her cotton crop would fail. They tried to discourage her, but she was adamant. But when she finally got a good yield of both cotton and pulses, people were

convinced, and decided to try the experiment themselves.

“The sorrow of the earth is like women's sorrows,” Kalavati says profoundly. “Does anyone care about the soil? It's the same about women. No one cares. That is why we all came together. We decided, if the soil improves, our lives will improve too.” In linking women's sorrows and the sad state of the soil, Kalavati has expressed the essence of the Self-reliant Farming movement. ♪

“Our self-help group got a grant of Rs.1,00,000. We discussed it and decided to put it into our Self-reliant farming project. So the self-help group, Self-reliant farming, and the women, all came together with one purpose”





Photo : Vidya Kulkarni



Nilima Renghe

Village Zadgao, Block Ralegao, District Yavatmal

When her husband committed suicide, she was just 27, and pregnant. Because his death was categorized as 'farmer suicide,' Rs. 100,000 was given as aid. But the in-laws were angry. "It's our son who has died, why should aid go to her?" was how they saw it and cut off all relations with her. Widowhood, a child on the way, and no one to turn to. Nilima was very much alone.

Depressed, physically weak, Nilima delivered by Cesarean section. That cost her Rs.25,000. The aid she got after her husband's suicide saved her at that time. But now there was one more life to worry about. The big question before her was, "Where do I find the courage to manage alone?"

Nilima's husband had committed suicide because he had been

overcome with debt. After a husband's death, the wife inherits his share of the land. But this was denied to her by her in-laws. She decided to confront them. She placed the baby in front of her father-in-law and demanded his right over the land. Ashamed and embarrassed, he agreed to recognize the child's right, though Nilima did not manage to get her own name on the land documents. However, she now had control of 3 acres of land, and in 2021 she began to implement the Self-reliant Farming project on half an acre. She had been associated with MAKAM even before this, and had gained confidence from the leadership development training conducted by them. Today Nilima stands in her fields and says with some pride, "Fear will not get you anywhere!"

Her field is four kilometers away from her house. Working alone in the field, hidden behind wild grass, is not without danger for a young woman. What if someone accosts her? What about wild animals? But Nilima says, "One has to get over the fear. There is the danger of wild boar. But I use my mobile phone to see behind me, and keep walking." In the field, she plays songs on the phone. That makes her feel more relaxed, and keeps wild animals away.

In the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, BT cotton is the most popular crop. This cash crop has become the norm for most cultivators. No one dares to try anything different. But the expenses are high, leading to



Photo : Asha Karrewar

"Can we afford to buy moong from the market and eat it? If we grow it in our own field, we can eat as much as we want."

debt, and the pesticides have had their own impact. Many pests have become resistant, and crops may fail. Drowning in debt, many farmers have taken their own lives in desperation. Self-reliant Farming is one way out of this trap. But very few cultivators take this unknown new path. It is not easy to resist the lure of the cash crop, even though it often turns out to be a mirage. Nilima dared to take this chance because of the support and guidance of MAKAAAM.

MAKAAAM gave her Sunhemp seeds to plant along the field edges. This fibrous crop makes good fertilizer when composted. "I had never even heard of boru" Nilima says, "but I planted it and made fertilizer. I got a very healthy harvest." MAKAAAM also helped her with manure and seeds. All this support gave her the courage to try out Self-reliant Farming. She planted non-Bt cotton, tur, moong, urad, matki and alongside these, she planted a variety of vegetables. Neighbouring farmers were convinced she had lost her mind. People would laugh at her, saying she had destroyed half an acre of land.

In the very first year, she got a very good harvest. Expenses fell, productivity increased. "Earlier I used to think, I'll spray pesticides,



Photo : Vidya Kulkarni

Photo : Swati Satpute



and get a good harvest. But if there is no life in the soil, how will it yield anything? Look," she says proudly. "look how rich and loose this soil is. I have decided now to extend this type of farming to all my land." Nilima saw for herself the difference between the soil and yield in her Self-reliant Farming land and the rest of her fields. She saw how it changed for the better. She is convinced now.

The other farmers in the village all grow cash crops. No one grows organic vegetables like Nilima. Women come to her for vegetables and pulses. "You should also do Self-Reliant Farming," she advises them. "Then you too will be able to eat like this." I have to spread out the moong and urad on tin sheets to dry. When women see it in my compound, they ask for at least a handful. They say, this stuff from your field is so tasty, please give us some!" Nilima has been a good motivator for the women in her village. In the beginning there were

"Earlier I used to think, I'll spray pesticides, and get a good harvest. But if there is no life in the soil, how will it yield anything? Look how rich and loose this soil is. I have decided now to extend this type of farming to all my land."

“Fear will not get you anywhere!”

very few willing to try out Self-reliant Farming. But Nilima started discussing these issues with the women. “Can we afford to buy moong from the market and eat it? If we grow it in our own field, we can eat as much as we want.” She did not give only advice, but also shared her indigenous seeds with them. Now ten women in the village are participants in the project.

When asked why she persists with Self-reliant Farming even though the income is less than that with cash crops, Nilima answers, “The income may be lower, but until you have done it you don't know its worth. I do mixed cropping. How much will we ourselves consume? So I share the rest. It feels good. And this decision is entirely my own, I did not ask anyone. When my husband was alive, everything was done according to his wishes. Now I go and get seeds, call the vehicle when I need it. The people at home say, how does she do this? She does whatever is needed, at any time. She alone knows where this intelligence comes from! (Nilima uses the English word, pronouncing it inteligen)

Nilima's intelligence has been recognized by her family and community now. Once devastated by her husband's suicide, Nilima is now an icon in her village. In her little world, she is now a rock star! ♀

Photo : Prashant Khunte



Sangeeta Tayade

Village Hatgao, Block Murtizapur, District Akola

Sangeeta recalls a conversation with her husband. One day, he said to her, “That acre is your land, do what you want there!” A husband saying 'that is your land' is a very significant happening. Sangeeta found this transformation in her husband since she joined the Self-reliant Farming experiment. It was not always so. She says, “He had never before said to me, this is your land. In spite of being the woman of the house, I was always treated like a daily wage labourer. I had to do what I was told. If I expressed an opinion, I had to face sarcastic remarks. For example, if I saw the sky overcast, I may suggest, let's cover up the onions. Then he'd respond, you know it all, why don't you do it, why ask me?”

Like many men, Sangeeta's husband too treated her as if she had no

brains, no thoughts of her own. And like many women, Sangeeta felt the hurt and sadness in her soul, but did not know what to do. “There was no such thing as going out, meeting people. What could I do? I used to recite the words of Tukdoji Maharaj to myself: Why are you sitting still, sister? Rise now, you are a woman of the soil of Hind! I used to get inspiration and solace from this song.” But she had no way of breaking out of this situation.

Sangeeta had to leave school after Class 7, because it was not done to send girls outside the village for high school. As soon as she reached the age of maturity, she was married off to Ramdas Tayade. Ramdas was a farmer, but his land was dry and not very fertile. He could get one crop a year, and after that he would work as a labourer. Sangeeta too began to do the same. They had three children, whom they sent to school. Money was very tight, with the household and school expenses. On top of that, Ramdas had a liquor habit. But Sangeeta stayed strong and managed the household

As they grew older, and the children grew up, the couple began to think about a change. “How long will we keep working for others? Let us move to horticulture.” With this thought, the couple tried to



Photo : Swati Satpute

increase irrigation for their land. . First they dug a bore well, but did not strike water. Then they dug an open well, and were luckier. They began to work in the fields in earnest. Sangeeta's contribution and support during this time was crucial. But during this whole process too, her husband did not consult her.

But things have changed. Sangeeta sees the difference in Ramdas. In 2021, MAKAAAM started the Self-reliant Farming experiment with the women of the village. Sangeeta too decided to participate. She planted the seeds given to her by MAKAAAM: vege-tables, pulses, grains. Ramdas was skeptical. He wondered how these minute seeds could be planted, and that too all together! He had never seen anything like this. But Sangeeta was full of enthusiasm. She had always enjoyed planting different things.

Sangeeta was happy to have some freedom in her own piece of land. All the seeds sprouted and plants grew. Ramdas was still full of doubt. “What is this hodge-podge?” he asked. He found it all very strange. A mixture of all sorts of plants, and no urea, no pesticides? He was not at all convinced.

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Photo : Swati Satpute

In the first year, wild boar destroyed most of Sangeeta's crops. That gave Ramdas another reason for criticism. "You planted this hodgepodge crop, so the boar destroyed it. Stop this nonsense now," he ordered. But a MAKAAM worker, Shalini, managed to convince him, saying wild boar come even into traditional fields." He could not deny that fact.

In the next year, though, Sangeeta got a great harvest. She had used an innovative trick to keep the boar away. When the moong pods, which the boar came for, began to ripen, Sangeeta plucked off the tender ones that were visible on top. There was nothing to attract the boar, and they did not come. The lower pods ripened and gave a good harvest, while the tender pods were sold whole in the market. Sangeeta's trick ensured the safety of her field and good earnings.

This idea came to Sangeeta because of what she learned in the MAKAAM workshops. She was meticulous in implementing whatever knowledge she gained there. She learned how to create a compost pit for the leaves and other bio-waste from the field, and used that compost to fertilize her crop. Earlier, she was just a farm labourer. She did not even know the price of a bag of fertilizer, because for all purchases to do with the fields, no one asked her or told her anything. Now she was taking her own decisions.

"Because my first two children were girls, I was not given a place of respect in wedding ceremonies and so on. You only get that if your first born is a boy. But ever since I started Self-reliant Farming, I have abandoned those superstitions. If crops bloom with my touch, how can I be inauspicious?"

In her own acre of land, Sangeeta grew cotton, tur, moong and vegetables without spending even a rupee. She saved the money that would have been spent on vegetables for the family. Recently her daughter got married. The pulses needed for the wedding feast all came from Sangeeta's field. She had always planted tur in the fields, but usually, half the crop would dry out. "Ever since I started making my own compost, and stopped using

Photo : Swati Satpute



"MAKAAM had said, the harvest is for home consumption, not to be sold. But the moong crop was so good, the plants were heavy with pods. So I asked Shalinitai and sold the pods I had plucked from the top of the plants. I earned some money too, and yet there was enough for the family."

chemical fertilizers, the crop remains fresh and green, no drying out." Sangeeta's initiative of using compost helped to save a substantial amount of money during the wedding.

The savings on pulses and vegetables for the family were substantial. Sangeeta's experiment was supporting the family. Her confidence grew. One day she said to her husband, "Will you water my field today?" He jokingly responded, "Will you pay me wages then?" Still in a lighter vein, Sangeeta countered, "I worked in your fields for all these years, did you pay me any wages?" There was a time when Sangeeta's opinion counted for nothing. Now, albeit in jest, she is able to highlight her own value to her husband. This has been the real success of her "hodgepodge" farming experiment. ☺



Photo : Prashant Khurte



Vandana Khandagale

Village Ghodka Rajuri, Block and District Beed

“You want to plant bajra? Do it! Do whatever you want. Let everything happen as you want.” Khandagale gave his wife Vandana full freedom to take decisions about farming. This looks like an ordinary happening. But if you look deeper, you see how this raises the status of a village woman. This is another facet of the work of MAKAAAM and the Self-reliant Farming experiment.

In 2018, MAKAAAM had conducted a study in Beed district. In this survey, it was found that the proportion of women who had undergone a hysterectomy was above average. Beed has the highest number of sugarcane workers, and now the highest proportion of hysterectomies. Could there be a correlation between these two apparently unrelated facts?

Sugarcane cutting is immensely hard work. The job is given to a pair –

husband and wife – and so early marriage is also very common. At the place of work, not even minimum facilities are available, and no health care at all. As a result, most women workers suffer from backaches, joint pains, heavy menstrual bleeding, stomach ache and so on. The women seek medical advice, and instead of addressing the problems, the doctors often advice hysterectomy. The women think, maybe this operation will solve all my health issues, and I can get back to work again. This has been the reason for the rise of hysterectomies in Beed. Many times, this procedure is not necessary. This was the finding of the MAKAAAM study. The basic cause of the health issues is the woman's hard labour in extremely hard conditions. The operation usually does not solve the problems but multiplies them. These women constantly report body ache and weakness. Vandana Khandagale is one such woman.

Vandana began cutting sugarcane at the age of twelve. “I used to feel drained,” she says, narrating last year's experience. “I was bleeding heavily during periods. I was feeling like my nerves and muscles were getting weak. One day I was loading sugarcane on to the tractor. I just could not take the weight. I fell down with a thud.” After this, Vandana went to a doctor. The doctor suggested hysterectomy. Cost: twenty thousand rupees.

Vandana spent her hard-earned money on the operation. But from then on, she did not lift any weight. Her weakness did not disappear. She could not do any work, and the couple stopped going for sugarcane cutting.

Vandana has never realized that she is a victim of the profit-driven sugar industry. She goes on, “After the operation I felt very weak, but there was no alternative to slogging. We had to borrow some money for the medicines and doctor. This on top of the twenty thousand for the operation.” It was not possible to repay

“Earlier my field was hard and tough. Trying to dig in it was tiring.

The constant spraying of pesticides had hardened the land. If you walked on it, you felt like you were walking on a road.

But now the soil is loose and soft.”

this loan, and so they decided to lease out their land.

For two years, she continued slogging in the farm, while the loan got paid off. Then she took charge of her own land and began to farm herself. Like other farmers around her, she harvested cotton and soyabean. “There may not have been a loss, but there was no profit either,” Vandana states recalling that experience. “After planting cotton, you need to spray pesticide at least five times, and fertilize the field twice. Then there is the expense of hiring the bullock for ploughing,”

MAKAAM's Self-reliant Farming alternative appealed to Vandana. “Organic food is good for health,” she says. “You save on seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and also on doctors!” She decided to join in the experiment.

But getting her husband's cooperation was essential. She started Self-reliant Farming in half an acre. Her husband did not object, but neither did he show much enthusiasm. In this form of farming, mixed cropping is essential. Vandana had prepared everything for this. But just as it was time for sowing, she was away selling dairy products. By the time she returned, her husband had planted soyabean on the



Photo : Prashant Khunte

“After my hysterectomy I was always ailing. I could not work at all. But now, with Self-reliant Farming, I have started growing vegetables. I have a buffalo. When I go to sell the curds, I also sell vegetables. I feel so supported now.”

Photo : Swati Satpute



“I grew soyabean on manure. Earlier we used to get just one sack of soyabean. But last year we got 2 quintals of soyabean. I had never seen such a harvest before. Then my husband said, no more chemical fertilizer now, we will make the whole field organic”.

whole land. Vandana was deeply disappointed, but she planted vegetables on a small patch, on organic farming principles. Even on the soyabean fields, she used only manure. They got a good harvest of both, and that convinced her husband. In the next season, they decided to use organic farming techniques on the entire land.

Vandana recounts the changes she sees in the quality of the soil. “Earlier my field was hard and tough. Trying to dig in it was tiring. The constant spraying of pesticides had hardened the land. If you walked on it, you felt like you were walking on a road. But now the soil is loose and soft.” Their income increased. The intake of vegetables in their food increased. The very face of the land changed. All this was a result of Vandana's decision to switch to Self-reliant Farming. When asked if her husband now appreciated her effort, Vandana laughs and says, “He doesn't say anything. But I am impressed by myself! I could hardly do any work. Now I feel I have become smarter.” This new energy can easily be seen, both in Vandana and in her farm. ♧



Kumudini Dhole

Village Champa, Block Saoner, District Nagpur

“I had never planted pulses before. But once I got involved with the Self-reliant farming project, I planted some. In the very first year, I got a good crop. I made different dishes from the pulses and gave them to the children. I told them, this is from our own fields, just taste and see.” Kumudini was narrating this with a happy smile. But the smile slowly faded as she added, “My son says, I don't want anything you make, you get out.” Kumudini is his step mother.

“I have slogged in these fields for 40 years,” she says sadly, “But still he does not think of me as his mother, and does not think these are my fields.” After the death of her husband, the family began to fall apart. Yet, Kumudini has taken on the project with the help of her younger son. “I never treated them any different from a birth mother. That's

why the younger one supports me. The older one is influenced by others and opposes me.”

Kumudini had never known a mother's tender touch. She cannot remember her mother, who died soon after Kumudini was born. She has four sisters and a brother, all older than her. Her father had ten acres of land. After the older sisters got married, Kumudini used to help her father and brother with the farming, and had to leave school after Class 4.

As soon as she was old enough, she was married off. In a year, she lost her husband. “We had been cheated, she said. The man already had kidney and liver problems before we were married. After his death I came back to my father's house.” A year later, she was married off again, to a widower with three children, Ramraoji Dhole. He needed someone to look after the little ones, and Kumudini took up the task. She treated the children as her own. Soon she too had a baby girl.

Kumudini took good care of all the children, and never let them feel that they were not her own. For 19 years, all went well. Then suddenly her husband died. Now his children were quite grown up. Some relatives poisoned the ear of the older one. He began to fight with his mother. He decided that after his father's death, Kumudini had no place in that household. He asked her to leave. “You, get out” is what he said, she recalls with pain.

While trying to apply for various pensions schemes of the government, Kumudini came in contact with the organisation Prakriti. While getting her papers together for the pension, she understood that she needs to register her claim as a legal heir. The village talathi was a woman, and she helped Kumudini to get her and her daughter's names on the legal ownership document of the land. During this time

“I had no idea that we could grow all this in our fields. Sometimes what we planted would not even grow. It never occurred to us to try to grow something else. From this project I learned so many things. It's as if I am not in the field, I am in school!”



Photo : Prashant Khunte

Prakriti also proposed to her that she participate in the Self-reliant Farming experiment.

The younger son is quite attached to Kumudini, and he encouraged his mother to join the experiment. She started implementing Self-reliant Farming on half an acre of their land. To understand the technical aspects, she began to attend the training sessions conducted by MAKAAAM. She began to travel alone, speak to other women. She lost some of her inhibitions. "I had no idea that we could grow all this in our fields. Sometimes what we planted would not even grow. It never occurred to us to try to grow something else. From this project I learned so many things. It's as if I am not in the field, I am in school! Earlier we used to buy a lot of what we ate. Now we get pulses and

"Earlier we used to buy a lot of what we ate.
Now we get pulses and other things from our own fields.
That makes me feel so good."

other things from our own fields.
That makes me feel so good."

The half-acre land under the Self-reliant Farming project gives Kumudini a lot of joy. Perhaps that hurtful remark can now be interpreted differently. Instead of "You, get out", Kumudini can now say to herself, "You get going, with or without support." ♀

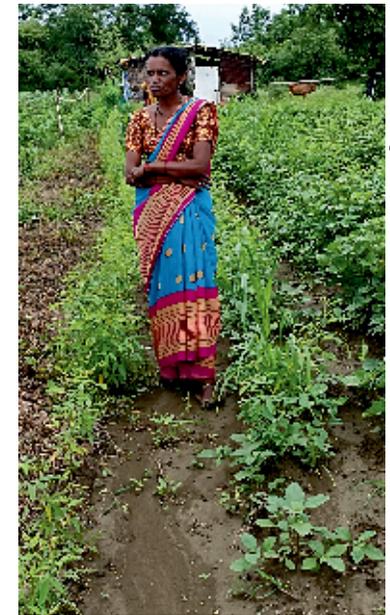


Photo : Swati Saipute



Photo : Prashant Khunite



Suman Ovhal

Village Kathoda, Block and District Beed

Dry rocky land on a hill slope. A meagre yield, even with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. And organic farming on such land? A sure recipe for disaster. Why go through all that?

Suman Ovhal has a clear and crisp answer to this question: We get to eat poison-free food! She is very clear in her understanding that chemicals used in agriculture poison the food that is produced. If one analyses the phrase 'poison-free food,' a world of meaning unfolds. Generations of caste discrimination borne, a body hardened and poisoned by hard labour in sugarcane fields, the need to 'detox' – these are the invisible aspects of Suman's Self-reliant Farming experiment.

Suman was born in a Matang community. As times changed, the role

of her community in society eroded. But hard labour remained their lot in life. Life became more precarious.

“My natal home is in Khutewadi,” Suman says. “I have two brothers, two sisters. My father had no land. He was a labourer. Carrying stones, building small dams, things like that. Then later he learned carpentry. For his work, he would get a little grain.” Even this work was not regular. There was no alternative to working in sugarcane cutting. She narrates, “When I was ten, I started going for sugarcane cutting with my father. My parents thought, we have three girls, if we get them married quickly, our responsibility will be over”. Families are always worried about the safety of girls who go for sugarcane cutting. For this reason, they are married off as soon as they begin to menstruate, sometimes even sooner. Then they become the husband's responsibility.

Her parents were in no position to even think about her education. For them, getting her married into a farming family was the highest ambition. Then their daughter would be secure. An opportunity for such a match was not to be rejected, and Suman was married of when she was 12 years old. The parents thought, the Ovhal family from Kathoda has some grazing land. The girl will not have to go for sugarcane cutting. The boy plays in a wedding band. She will not have to slog.

But wedding band work is also seasonal. There is no escape from farm labour for Dalits. Suman too had no alternative, even after marriage. The young bride of 12 was soon slogging away in fields. Suman says, “It was a huge family, my husband had 4 sisters,

“Earlier, we needed five hundred rupees each week for vegetables. Now, during the monsoon, we never have to buy vegetables. All we buy is mutton, oil, groundnuts, sugar. Vegetables are available from our own fields. Last year I got a chili crop, which I had enough to share with relatives. I planted papaya and drumsticks. Doctor says, your platelets were low. I don't need to take medicines to increase it, there is papaya and drumsticks right at my doorstep.”

an elder brother and his wife, the two of us, and his parents. We had to work hard. I started going for sugarcane cutting again. Barely two or three hours sleep”. Describing the work conditions, Suman says, “You would have to sleep with your footwear and head-load ring next to you. When you heard the horn, you would get into the tractor. That tractor was the boss. You had to slog all day to fill that tractor.”

Further describing the situation, she says, “Each farm has its own rules. How long to make the labourer work, when to give breaks, it is all at the whim of the boss. If the time to start is 10, you would be expected to report at 9.30. No break until nightfall. If you are thirsty, you cannot help yourself to water – when they give you water from the pot, only then can you drink, from the jug you brought from home. And to eat, you would have to sit separately.” This experience of discrimination is recent, this is not about a long time back. Suman was deeply unhappy with this life. She was eager to do something better, show people she was something more than this. This led her to become a part of the self-help group in her village. From then on, her life took a new turn. In the self-help group meetings, she was exposed to new thoughts and ideas

These self-help groups were initiated by Manisha Tokale. Manisha has been working on Dalit issues and women's empowerment in Marathwada. She is on the forefront in involving Dalit women and sugarcane workers in MAKAAAM's Self-reliant Farming experiment. The self-help group brought Suman in contact with Manisha, who soon involved her in the experiment. She also became active in MAKAAAM.

Earlier, the family did not grow anything but jowar and bajra on their dry, rocky land. Now Suman started mixed cropping. She began to see

“Earlier when I planted bajra, I would use urea. I've stopped that now. I plant organic bajra. Now the yield is less, but one bhakri of this organic bajra is more satisfying than two of the hybrid kind. It's really tasty. A dish made from organic moong, with just a little bit of spice, is so tasty and satisfying!”

Photo : Prashant Khunte



that sugarcane cutting or farm labour were not her only options. She became confident that even their grazing land could yield different types of crops. In the village, Dalits are always looked upon as labourers. Though she had grazing land, she did not have the self-confidence of the upper caste farmers. As she started experimenting successfully in her land, she began to think of herself as a farmer. Women from different communities in the village began to praise her experiments.

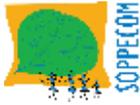
Suman recalls one incident. “The people in the village would say, hey you, woman, what is this, where did you get these seeds? What on earth are you planting? They would look at my ambadi and marvel. The ASHA (health) worker is an upper caste Maratha. She asked me what seeds I got at the training sessions. I showed her: spinach, onion, chillies, coriander, methi. She said, give me some spinach seeds Suman, and when it grows, I'll give you some back. So I gave her some.” Normally, upper caste people in the village avoid interactions with Dalits. But Suman's successful experiments in her field impressed people. This exchange of seeds continued with other women. This would have been impossible earlier.

Suman's Self-reliant Farming enterprise has not yet increased her income. But her place in her community has changed. She has become a human being, a person. Her phrase, 'poison-free food' has multiple layers of meaning, and the status she has earned in her community is one of them. ☺

Glossary

1. **Bajra** – Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) is one of the most important nutritious and drought-resistant cereal crops grown in India. It is widely consumed in rural and urban areas.
2. **Bhakri** – Bhakri is a traditional Indian flatbread made from coarse flours like jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet), nachni (finger millet), rice, etc.
3. **Boru** - Sunhemp (*Crotalaria juncea*) is a fast-growing, nitrogen-fixing leguminous plant widely used as a green manure, fodder, and fibre crop. It improves soil fertility and prevents erosion, making it valuable for sustainable agriculture.
4. **Charmakaar** – A caste belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) category.
5. **Chucha** – Jute Mallow (*Corchorus olitorius*), a green leafy vegetable.
6. **Dev Ambadi** – Roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) is a species of Hibiscus. Roselle flowers are bright red, fleshy, and cup-shaped, primarily known for their edible calyces, which are widely used in food, beverages, and traditional medicine.
7. **Jowar** – Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) is a highly nutritious cereal crop known for its drought tolerance, high fibre content, and versatility in food and fodder. It is a staple food in many regions, especially in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Rajasthan.
8. **Kardai** – Safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*) is an oilseed crop known for its nutrient-rich oil, medicinal properties, and drought tolerance. It is widely grown in dry and semi-arid regions for its edible oil and as a substitute for saffron in food colouring.
9. **Mali** – A caste belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) category.
10. **Matki** – Moth bean (*Vigna aconitifolia*) is a drought-resistant legume crop widely grown in arid and semi-arid regions. It is highly nutritious and is commonly used in sprouts, curries, and traditional Indian dishes.
11. **Methi** – Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) is a nutrient-rich herb, spice, and vegetable widely used in cooking and Ayurveda. It is known for its distinctive bitter taste, medicinal properties, and health benefits.
12. **Moong** – Green gram (*Vigna radiata*) is a highly nutritious legume crop widely grown for its edible seeds and sprouts. It is valued for its high protein content, digestibility, and multiple health benefits. Moong is also valued as a cover crop and green manure crop that improves the health of the soil.
13. **Nilgai** – Blue Bull, an antelope found in India.
14. **Paayli** – It is a traditional unit of measurement used in agriculture and trade, especially for measuring grains, pulses, and other dry commodities.
15. **Pareet** – A caste belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) category.
16. **Patharta** – Prickly Lettuce (*Launaea procumbens*), a wild leafy vegetable and medicinal herb from Maharashtra, which is especially found during the monsoon season. This vegetable is rich in calcium and other nutrients, making it beneficial for health.
17. **Rajgira** – Amaranth (*Amaranthus* spp.) is a highly nutritious plant known for its edible leaves and seeds. It is commonly grown as a leafy vegetable, grain crop, and ornamental plant in various parts of the world. It is widely used in fasting recipes and is known for its high protein, fibre, and mineral content.
18. **Talathi** – Village-level revenue official responsible for maintaining land records, collecting land revenue, and assisting in rural administration at the village level.

19. **Tandulkundra** – Wild Amaranth (*Amaranthus viridis*) is a nutrient-rich leafy green. It is a wild variety of amaranth and is often used as a vegetable in traditional Indian cooking.
20. **Tarhota** – Foetid cassia (*Cassia tora*), a wild leafy vegetable, and medicinal plant that grows abundantly in wastelands, roadsides, and agricultural fields.
21. **Tur** – Pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan*) is a leguminous crop widely grown for protein-rich seeds, primarily used in dals, soups, and stews. It is an essential food crop in tropical and subtropical regions.
22. **Udid** – Black gram (*Vigna mungo*) is a highly nutritious pulse crop widely cultivated in India and other Asian countries. It is valued for its high protein content, rich taste, and culinary versatility.
23. **Wanjari** – A caste belonging to the Nomadic Tribes (NT) category.



SOPPECOM

Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation working in the area of Natural Resource Management (NRM) primarily in the rural areas. It is committed to the principles of sustainable and rational use of natural resources, equity and social justice in the distribution of benefits especially to the disadvantaged sections like Dalits, landless, and women, and to the democratic and decentralised governance of these resources.

As an organisation committed to these principles, SOPPECOM extends its support to grassroots groups working on NRM issues through training, resource literacy, participatory planning, research and policy advocacy.

Gender, understood in its diversity, and natural resources is a core pillar of SOPPECOM's work. It seeks to encourage, participate in and support interventions that can help bring gender concerns to the centre of policy, practice and research in the area of natural resource management, specifically land and water management.



MAKAAM

Established in 2014, MAKAAM, or Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (Forum For Women Farmers' Rights) is a nationwide informal alliance of more than 120 individuals and organisations of farming women, of women farmers' collectives, civil society organisations, researchers and activists, drawn from 24 states of India, to secure due recognition and rights of women farmers in India.

The mission of MAKAAM is to visibilise women farmers – especially smallholder marginalized women, from the Dalit and Adivasi communities with a development vision led by social justice, plurality of knowledge systems and sustainability driven by ecological approaches – and to create and secure rights over productive livelihood resources (land in particular) as well as entitlements over a variety of support systems, with equal participation of these women in decision-making in various institutions, starting with the family, to ensure empowered, self-reliant, sustainable women's livelihoods