

# WOMEN FARMERS CULTIVATING CHANGE: STORIES OF STRUGGLE, RESILIENCE, AND TRANSFORMATION



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Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM)  
May 2025

## Women Farmers Cultivating Change: Stories of Struggle, Resilience, and Transformation

This series brings together tales of women farmers rewriting their stories against all odds. From irrigated fields in Pune to rainfed areas in Yavatmal and Gairan lands in Beed, these women are challenging deep-seated socio-economic barriers, climate uncertainties and exploitative systems to reclaim their agency over land and livelihood. These stories embody the resilience of women farmers who toil under difficult conditions. Despite their struggles, these women are not just survivors but changemakers. Their stories reflect the realities of many farmers like them striving for dignity, independence, and a future rooted in sustainability.

### About the T2GS project:

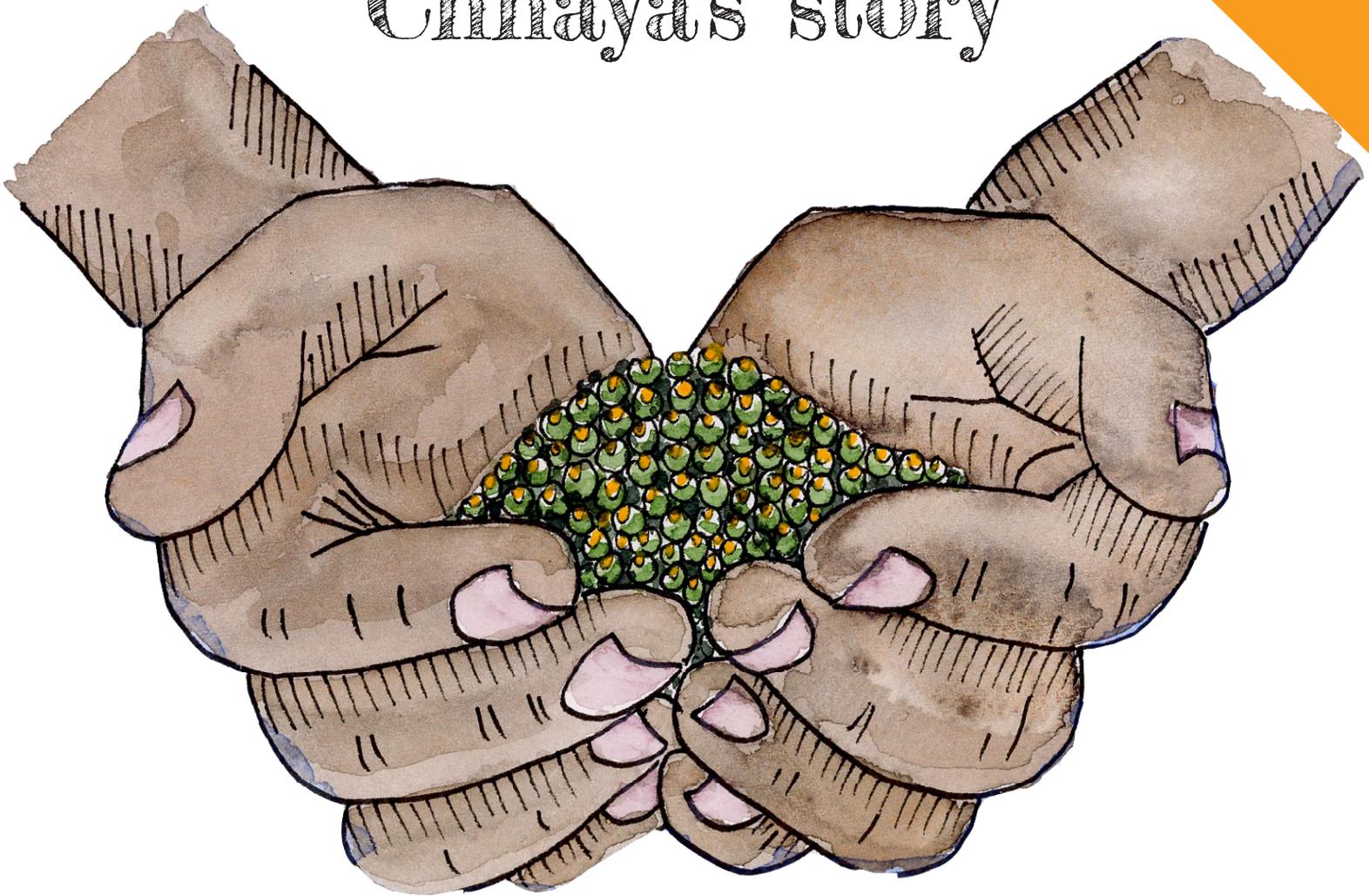
Billions of people around the world rely for their everyday existence on groundwater. Its invisibility, however, makes groundwater notoriously difficult to govern, also complicating efforts to avoid depletion or pollution. This project sets out to comparatively study promising grass-roots initiatives of people organizing around groundwater in places where pressures on the resource are particularly acute (India, Algeria, Morocco, USA, Chile, Peru, Tanzania). As these often defy or challenge conventional wisdom, the project's hypothesis is that these initiatives contain creative insights about ways of dealing with the intrinsic tensions that characterize groundwater governance: between individual and collective interests and between short-term gains and longer-term sustainability.

Focusing on groundwater practices - of knowing, accessing and sharing - we combine qualitative ethnographic methods with hydrogeological and engineering insights to explore the knowledges, technologies and institutions that characterize these initiatives. Our aim is to enunciate and normatively assess their logic and functioning in view of tracing overlaps or patterns that allow them to serve as more generic models for transformations to groundwater sustainability. This effort is inspired by theorizations of water as simultaneously social and natural, builds on recent critical scholarship on institutions, and has a particular sensitivity to how the distribution and use of groundwater is mediated by technologies. Our overall aim is to create global action-research collaborations to generate new inspirations for thinking about and dealing with interconnections and interdependencies between humans and groundwater.

[www.t2sgroundwater.org](http://www.t2sgroundwater.org)

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AMID A CHANGING LANDSCAPE:  
THE STORY OF A WOMAN FARMER FROM THE CANAL  
COMMAND AREA

# Chhaya's story



## Navigating challenges amid a changing landscape: The story of a woman farmer from the canal command area

In the shadow of a dying irrigation canal in rural Pune, Chhaya's life has unfolded like the unpredictable and unyielding seasons. Married young into the same village she was born in, she has memories of diverse crops like millets, pulses, and some sugarcane for the local gur or jaggery makers in the village on her family farm. But decades later, the canal's promise has dried up, and sugarcane—a thirsty crop has taken over the fields.

Her husband, bedridden for years, left her to manage their land. From dawn till dusk, Chhaya sows, weeds, and sprays pesticides alone, defying the norms of the village where a woman is expected to manage the home and not the farm. And yet when the harvest arrives, Chhaya must depend on her male kin to navigate the male-centric market.

The canal, now erratic, compels the farmers of the village to drill borewells and buy pumps, depending more and more on large companies while depleting the water. Chhaya, shackled by debts from her daughter's wedding, shares a depleting dugwell with her relatives. Most of her sugarcane income goes into loan repayments, leaving her to exchange labour with a group of women, exploiting herself to save on wages.

To save on costs for hiring labour, Chhaya sprays her sugarcane farm with weedicides, knowing its harmful effects on soil and humans. But for the Jowar and Bajra that her family eats, she relies on traditional knowledge: seeds stored in clay pots, methods passed down through generations. Some nights, she gazes at the dry silt-filled canal, remembering when water flowed freely and diverse crops dotted the fields. Now, survival dictates the farming choice—balancing risky loans, bartering labour and small produce like eggs for meeting daily needs, praying the borewell doesn't fail. Yet, she knows that her local knowledge and seeds will come to her rescue!



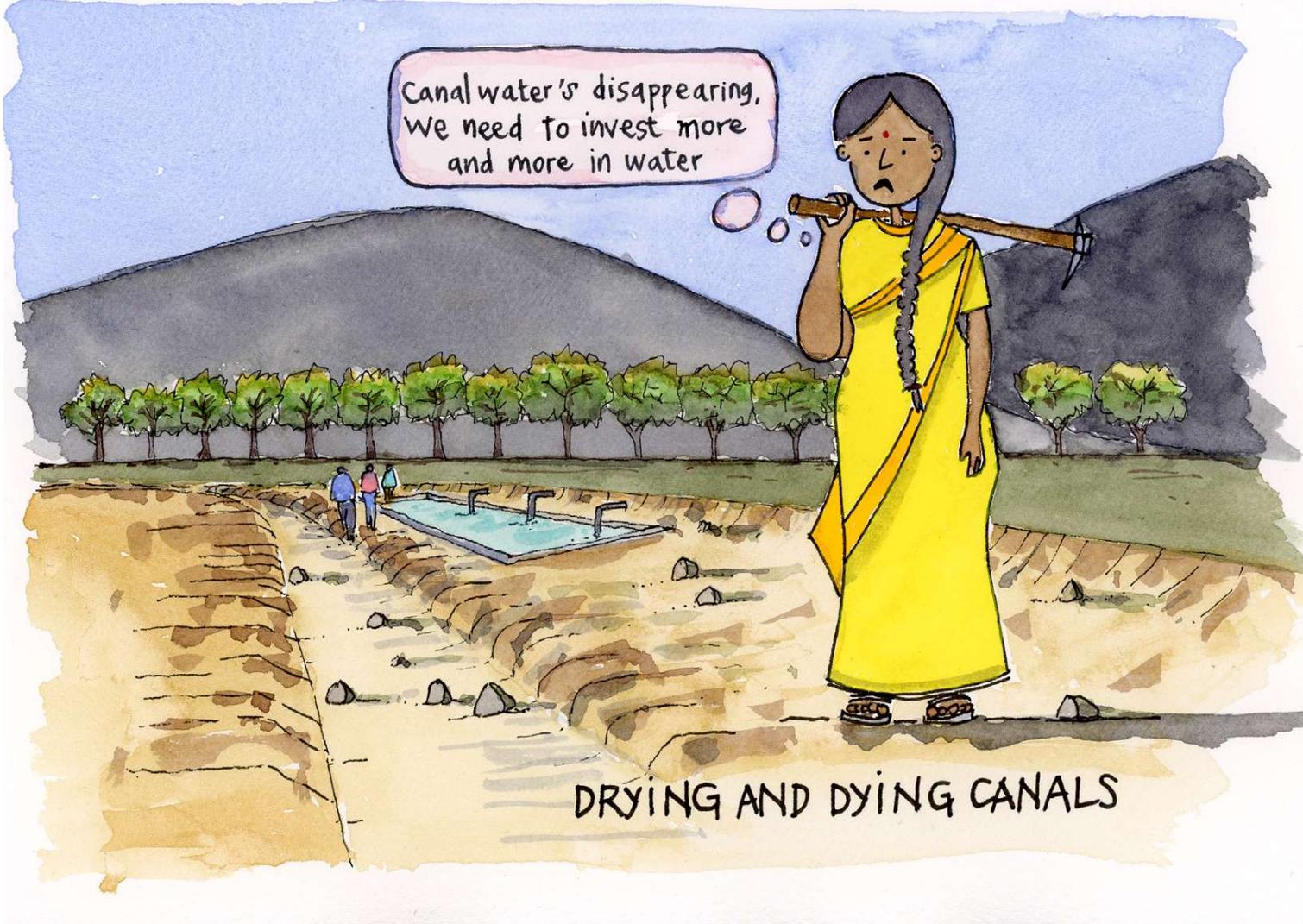








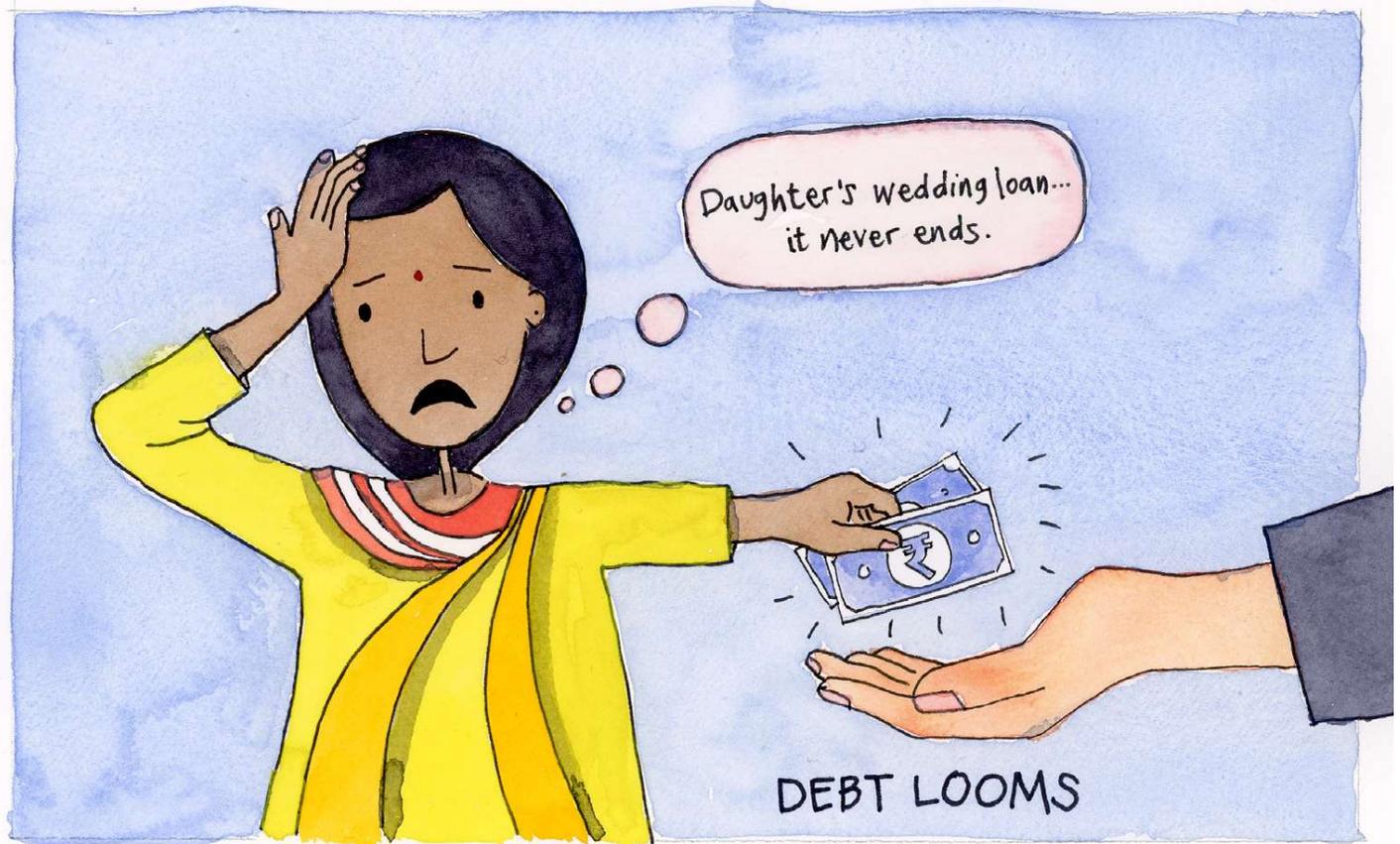




Canal water's disappearing,  
We need to invest more  
and more in water

DRYING AND DYING CANALS











An illustration showing four hands, two on the left and two on the right, cupped together and holding a large quantity of small, green, round seeds. The hands are rendered in a simple, sketchy style with brown skin tones and pinkish fingers. Above the hands is a large, light blue, irregularly shaped area that serves as a background for a thought bubble. The thought bubble is a pinkish-red rounded rectangle containing the text "I use local seeds. Keep our traditions alive". Below the main thought bubble are three smaller, pinkish-red circles of decreasing size, leading to the main bubble.

"I use local seeds.  
Keep our traditions alive"

TRADITIONAL WISDOM



## Against all odds: The story of a woman farmer from farmer suicide affected household

In the rainfed village of Tirzada, Yavatmal, where cotton fields stretch like unspoken grief, Usha's story mirrors the soil—cracked, yet defiant. Tirzada village, haunted by over 20 farmer suicides, once tied her to a violent and abusive marriage. When her husband took his life in 2016, his family denied her the six acres rightfully hers. After years of struggle, the land became hers.

But inheritance came with liabilities: his unpaid bank loans barred her from formal credit, trapping her in a spiral of microfinance debts and moneylenders. Male labourers demanded higher wages; her brother-in-law siphoned water from her pump, yet she remained silent for her children.

Life took a positive turn when Prerna Gram Vikas, with the help of MAKAM, supported Usha and many like her from Tirzada. With that support, Usha rebelled. She installed her irrigation pump, joined in the natural farming experiment regenerating the much-neglected farm and freeing herself of debts. With support from Chetana Vikas and SOPPECOM, today her fields defy monoculture: local organic cotton sways alongside pulses, cereals, and vegetables. The once-critical villagers now applaud her courage. In Tirzada's fields of distress, her farm stands out, rooted, resilient, and defying patriarchal norms.







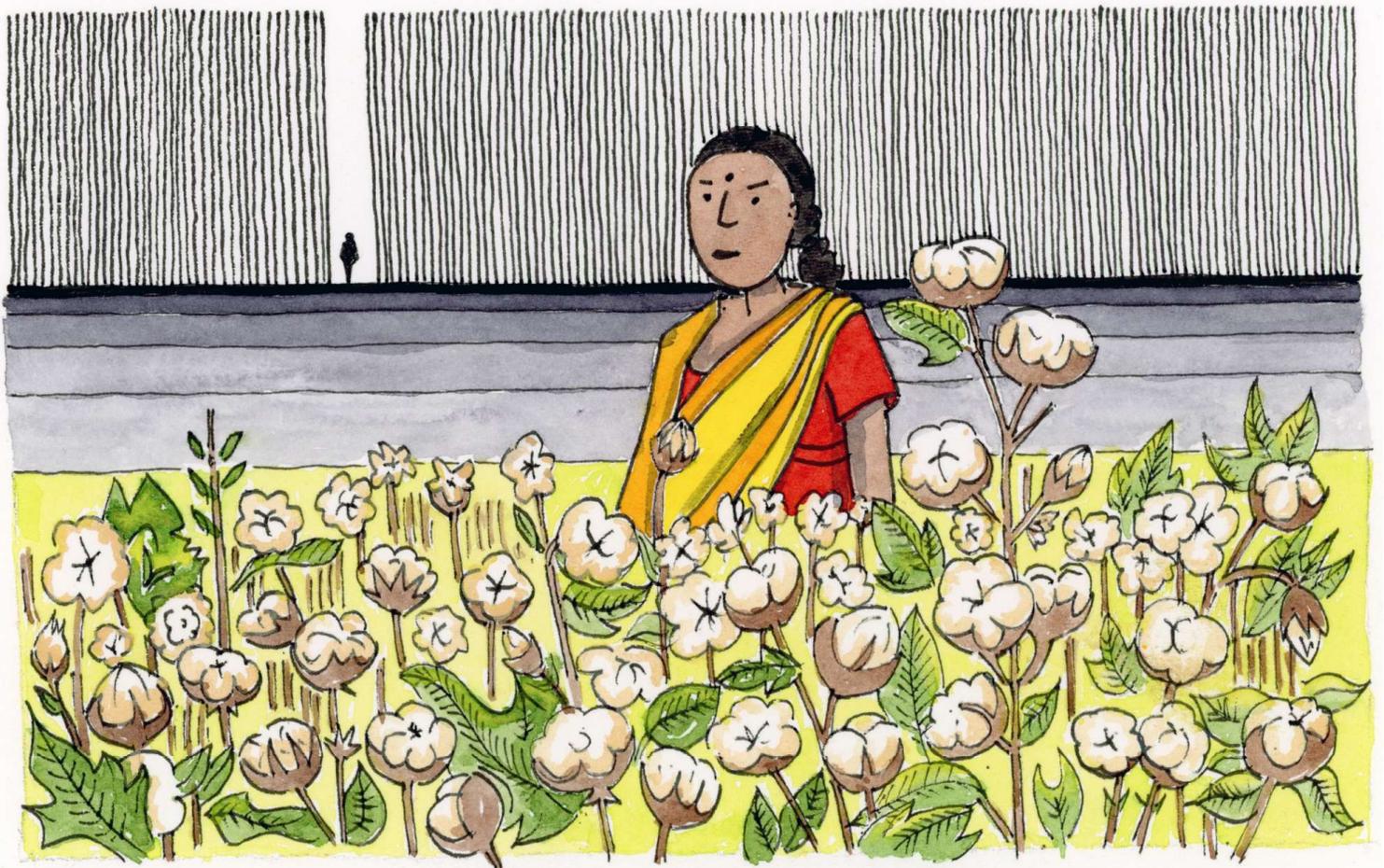
USHA FROM TIRZADA VILLAGE



MARRIAGE BROUGHT HOPE, BUT ALSO HARDSHIPS



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A DARK CHAPTER ENDS,  
AND ANOTHER OBSCURE EPISODE STARTS



## THE FIGHT FOR HER HUSBAND'S LAND

Against all odds: The story of a woman farmer from farmer suicide affected household







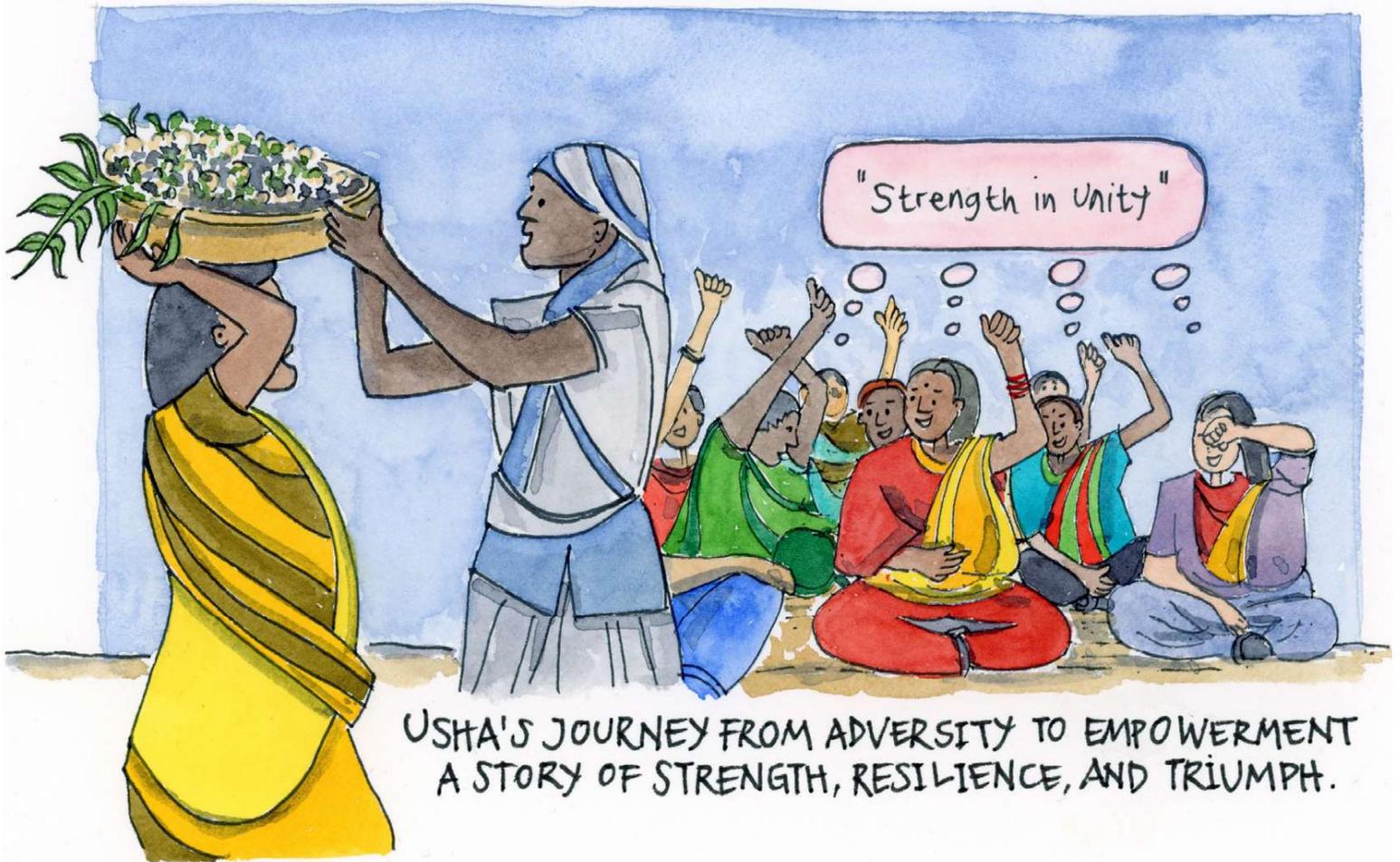
## STRUGGLES OF HIRING MALE LABOURERS



## UNFAIR EXPECTATIONS FROM FAMILY

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USHA'S JOURNEY FROM ADVERSITY TO EMPOWERMENT  
A STORY OF STRENGTH, RESILIENCE, AND TRIUMPH.

**BEYOND THE SICKLE:  
STORY OF A MIGRANT SUGARCANE HARVESTER**

# Anita's story



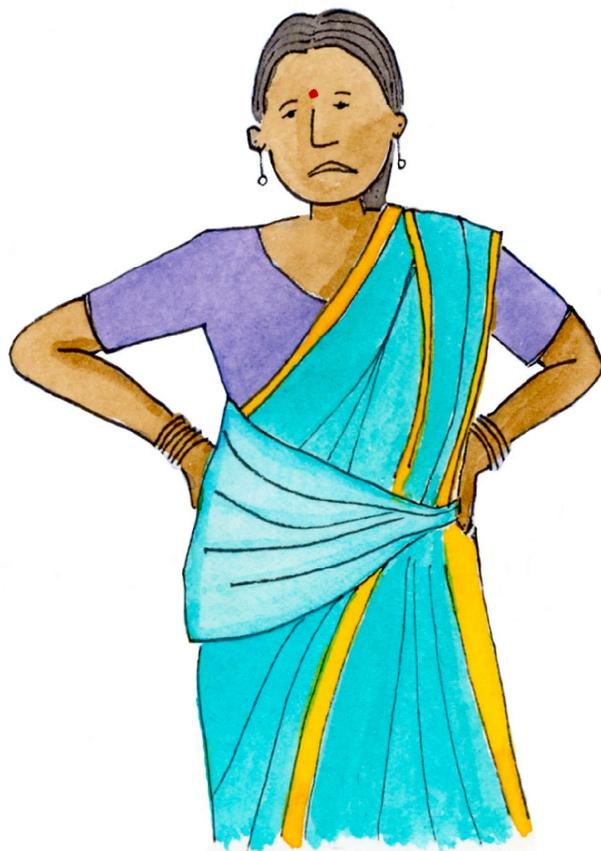
## Beyond the sickle: Story of a migrant sugarcane harvester

At 13, Anita was married, her childhood traded for a sickle and the relentless cycle of sugarcane cutting in scorching fields far away from home. For years, she laboured under contractors who exploited their labour as the children cried on the farm's edge.

But hope took root three years ago. Anita joined a pioneering group of 12 women from Kathoda village of Beed district, trading exploitative labour for natural farming. With guidance from MAKAM, Chetana Vikas and SOPPECOM, they learned to cultivate a diverse set of crops reviving indigenous seeds and building soil health.

Her two-acre plot now has 20 different crops—enough to reduce her dependence on the market for food, nutrition and agricultural inputs. Despite the challenges posed by humans and animals she persists. Anita's success inspired neighbours. From what started as a small experiment in 2021 with a few women is now a movement. They gather seeds, share bio-sprays (neem and cow urine mixtures), and reclaim dignity.

Her fields, once symbols of hardships, now blossom with resilience, sowing hope for Beed's sugarcane workers—One seed at a time!





IN THE CANE FIELDS, DALIT WOMEN ENDURE YEARS OF LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION



## YOUNG BRIDES - A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEAL



No more cane-cutting.  
It's time for something better

ANITA BREAKS FREE FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE





Our hard work... gone in a night.  
Nature can be both cruel and caring

NATURE'S CHALLENGE - ANITA FACES LOSS FROM UNINVITED GUESTS

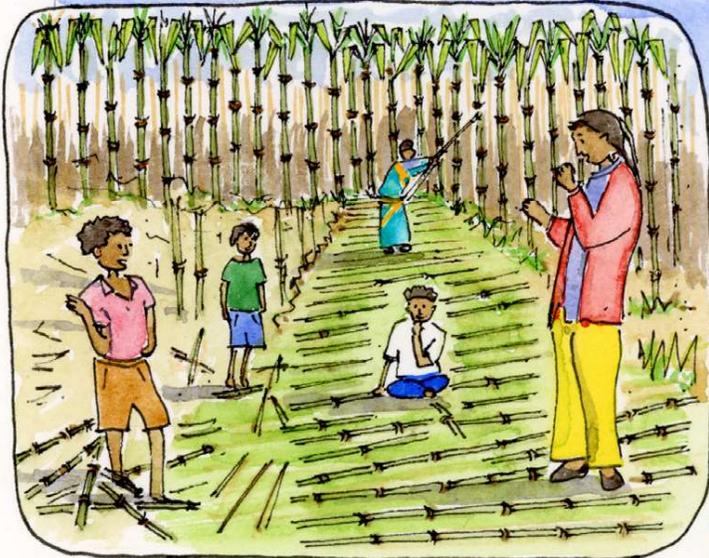


HEARTBREAK IN THE FIELDS -  
ANITA'S RESILIENCE TESTED

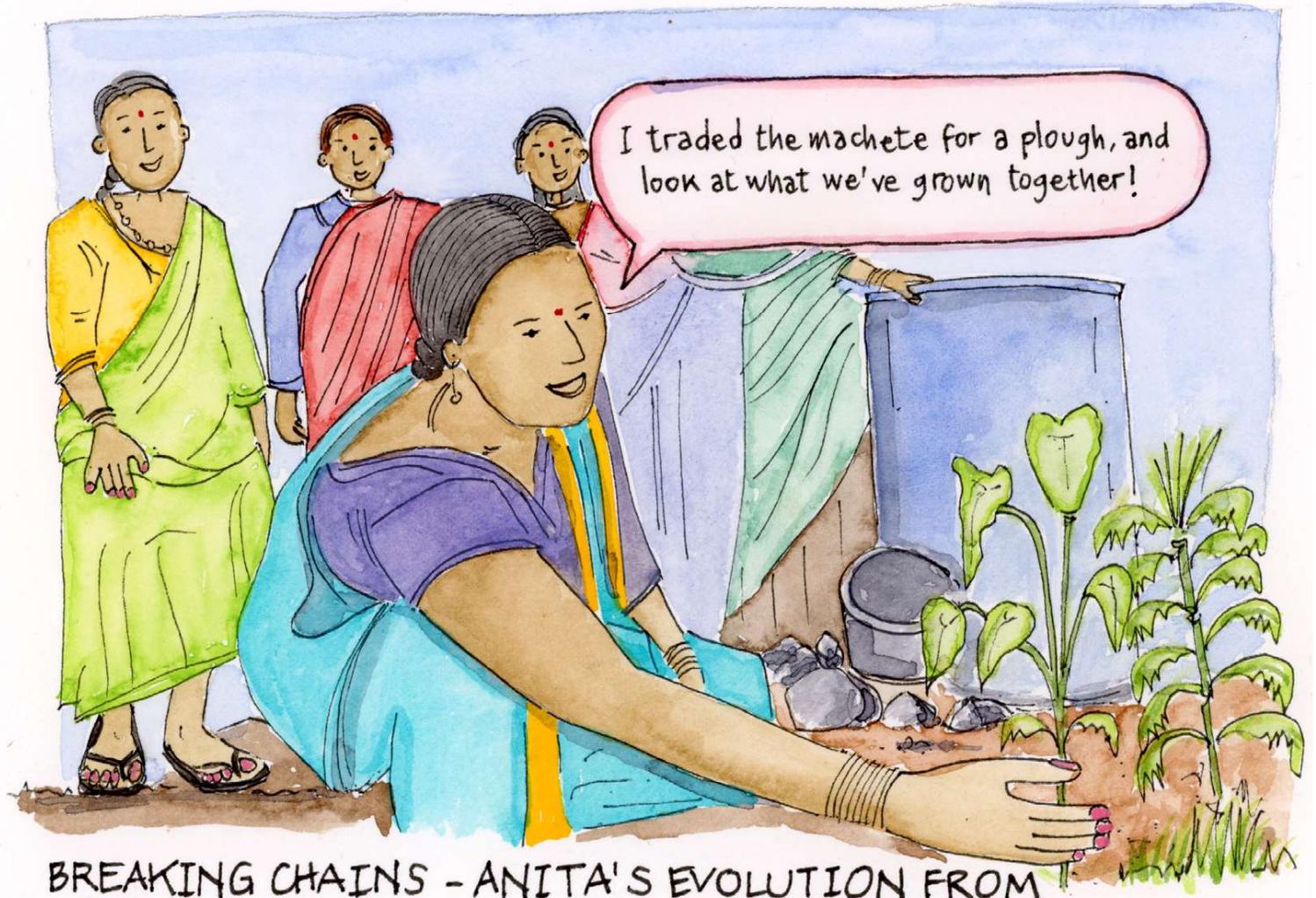


HARVEST OF HEALTH -  
ANITA'S FAMILY ENJOYS ORGANIC ABUNDANCE

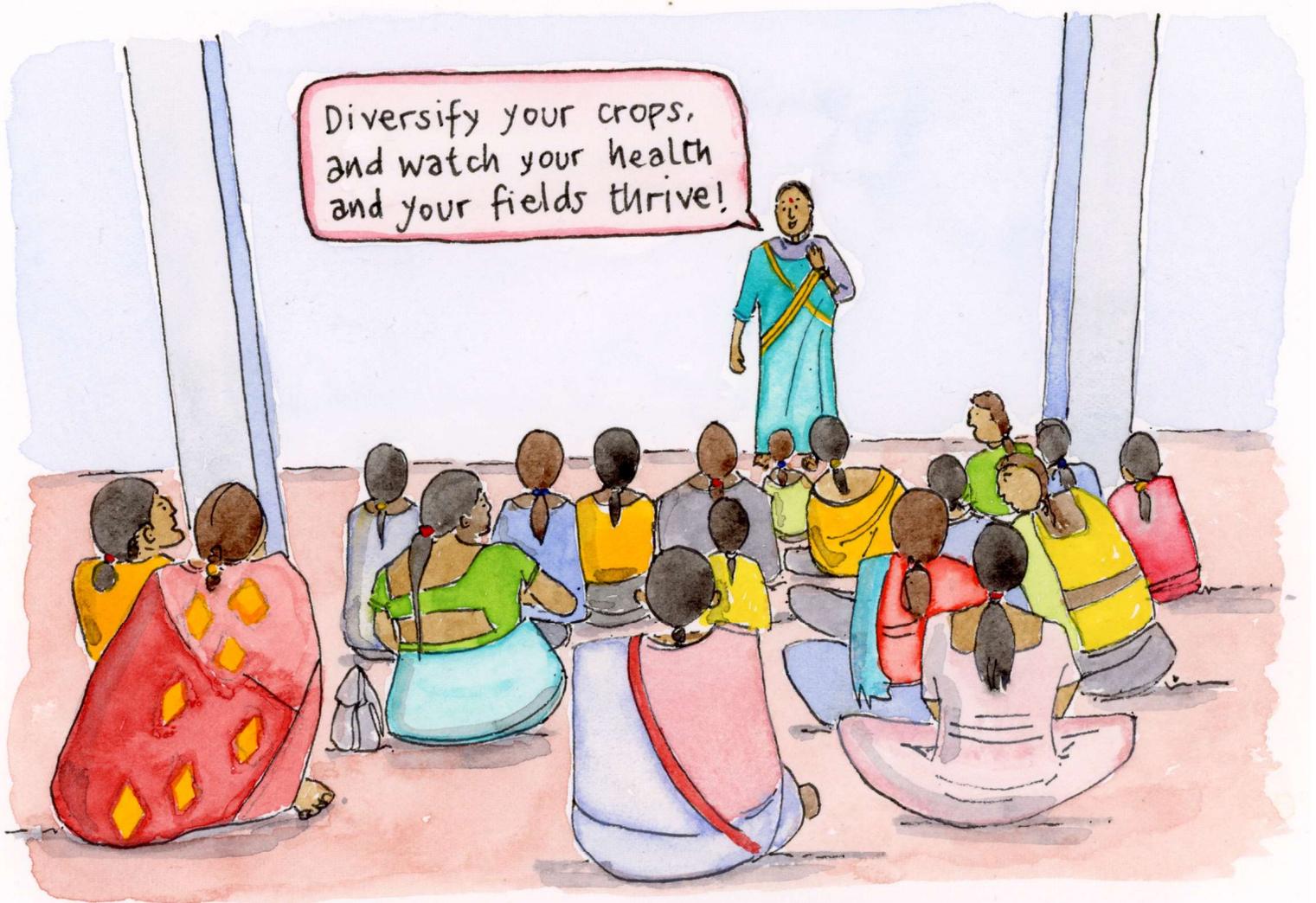
We worked with our children on the field's boundary, hoping for a better life.



CHILDHOOD SACRIFICED - ANITA REMEMBERS THE STRUGGLES.

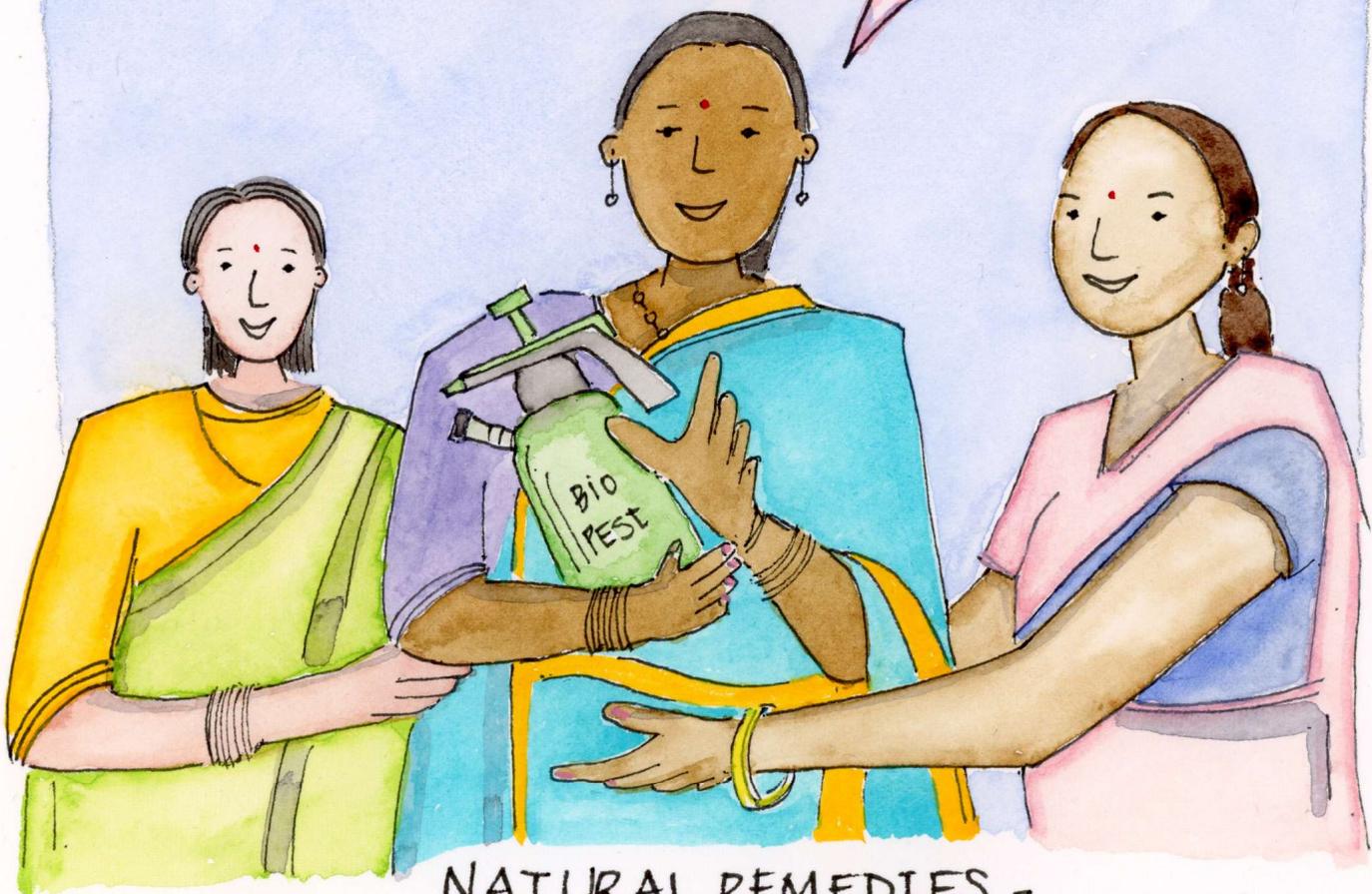


**BREAKING CHAINS - ANITA'S EVOLUTION FROM A DALIT MIGRANT LABOURER TO A CULTIVATOR.**



KNOWLEDGE BLOOMS - ANITA LEARNS THE ART OF SELF-RELIANT NATURAL SUSTAINABLE FARMING.

No more harmful chemicals.  
Nature has its way of balance.



## NATURAL REMEDIES - ANITA'S BLEND FOR A HEALTHY HARVEST



## Credits:

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, women, and democratic and decentralised governance of these resources.

'Gender and Natural Resources' forms a core pillar of SOPPECOM's work, aiming to integrate gender concerns into policy, practice, and research on land and water management. A diverse team of researchers and activists engages in field interventions, capacity building, feminist research, documentation, and policy advocacy. SOPPECOM also supports civil society groups and networks to strengthen grassroots movements. Through these efforts, the organization strives to promote gender equity and social justice in rural livelihoods and resource governance.

This series of graphic stories was done as part of the programme 'Transformations to groundwater sustainability (T2GS)'. To learn more, visit: [www.t2sgroundwater.org/](http://www.t2sgroundwater.org/)

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Usha's story - Rucha V S

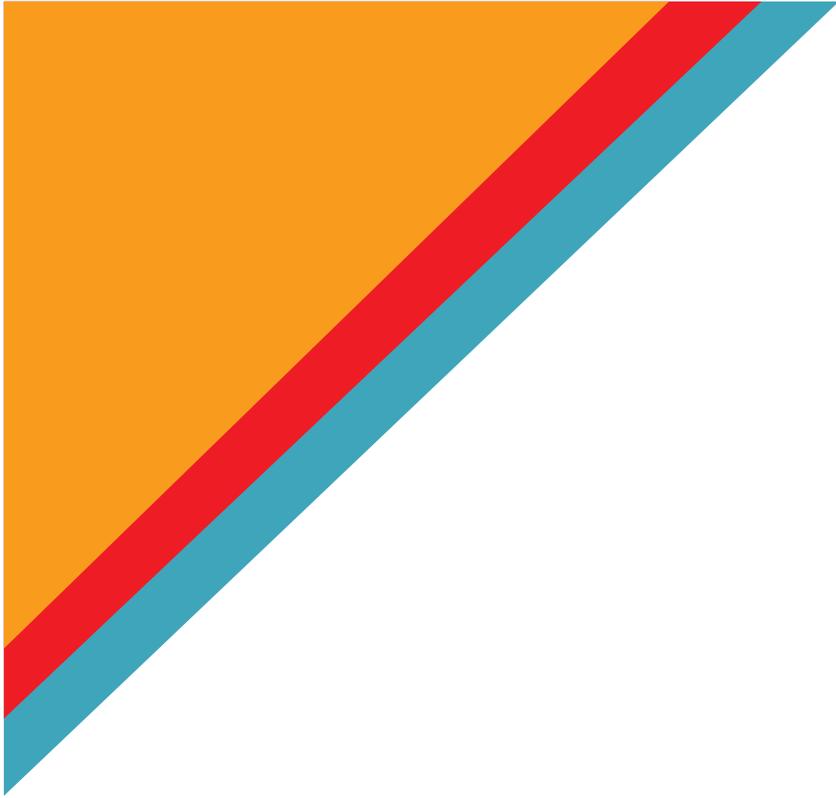
Anita's story - Swati Satpute

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