

50 SUCCESS STORIES OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE PANDEMIC

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कनेक्शन
YOUR CONNECTION WITH RURAL INDIA



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PREFACE



Far away from the sensational primetime headlines and the trending hashtags and the reels, the real India lives in its humility and anonymity, facing its everyday challenges and winning its everyday victories. Transformative stories that are changing lives -- for better or worse -- are unfolding in India every day. Nearly all of them never make it to the mainstream media.

At Gaon Connection, it is our duty to document with honesty and empathy these tales that give us inspiration and courage -- wherever we might live, in a city or a village, and whatever we might be pursuing in life. The stories of these 50 women inspire us, provoke us, and tell us far more about rural India than hundreds

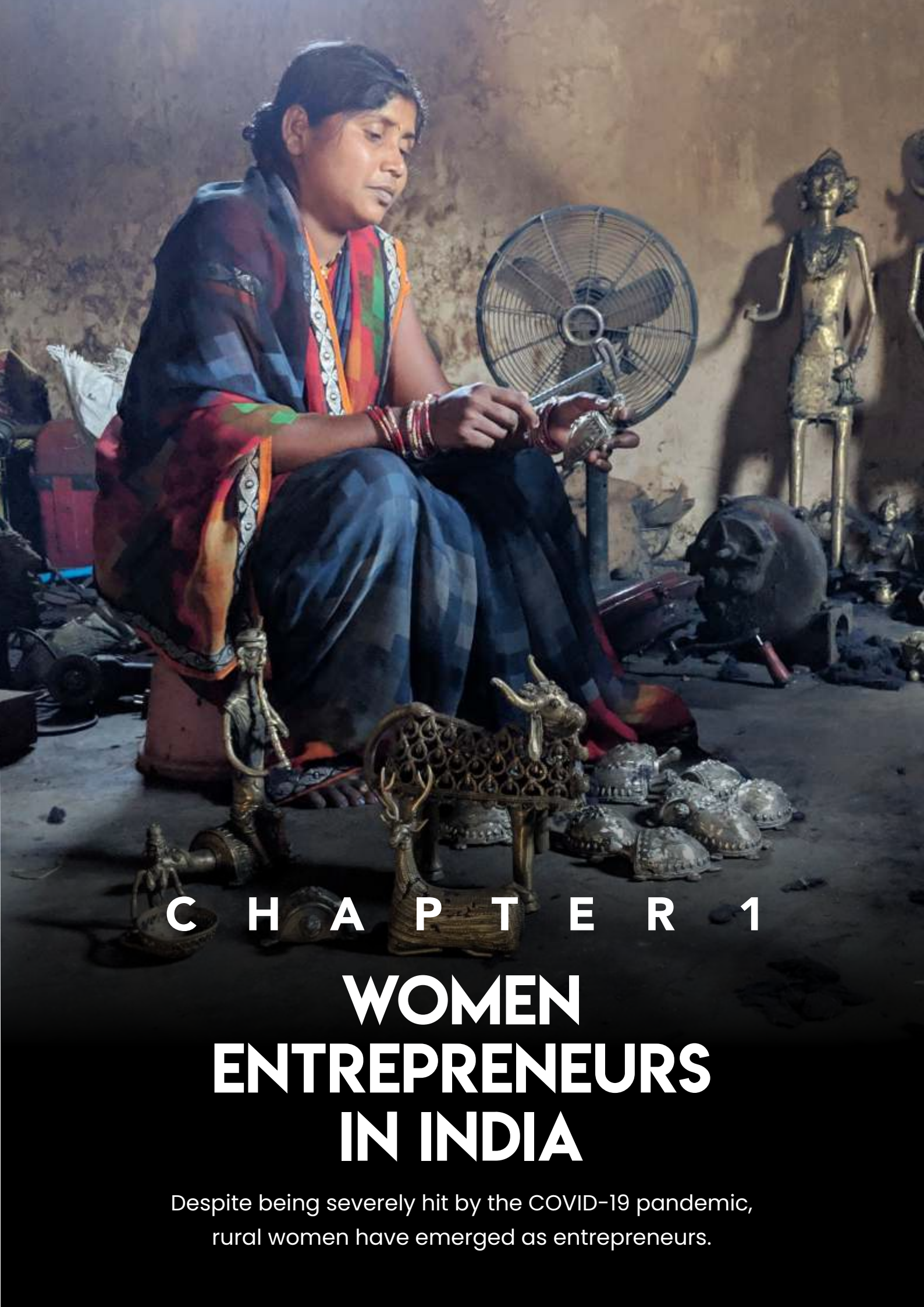
of thick books will.

Managing Editor Nidhi Jamwal and her tiny but incredible team has created a document that shall have a relevance for millions of Indians.

Thank you, and congratulations.

Neelesh Misra

Founder
Gaon Connection



C H A P T E R 1

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA

Despite being severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic,
rural women have emerged as entrepreneurs.

The economic activity in India took a severe hit in the year 2020–21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to data published by the World Bank, the Indian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 6.5 per cent in 2018–19, which went down to 3.7 per cent in 2019–20 and further declined to minus 6.6 per cent in 2020–21 during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

In comparison, the rate of decline in GDP globally was 3.3 per cent in the financial year 2020–21.² Additionally, the unemployment rate in India in 2020–21 was 7.1 per cent while the global average stood at 6.5 per cent.³

Another impact of the COVID-19 lockdown was the decrease in individual income. As per the Economics Observatory, individual income in India decreased by nearly 40 per cent during the first COVID-19 lockdown between April 2020 and May 2020.⁴

Households belonging to the economically weaker section of the society lost nearly three months worth of income during this period, according to the report — *State of Working India 2021* — published by Azim Premji University.⁵ This period marked the worst decline in the financial income of the country since independence, noted Swati Dhingra and Maitreesh Ghatak of the Economics Observatory.⁶

A study published by Pew Research Center in 2021 estimates that after the pandemic, India has witnessed a stark rise in poverty.⁷ The number of people belonging to the middle class (people with incomes of Rs 795 — Rs 1,591 a day) decreased by 32 million in 2020.⁸

Meanwhile, the number of poor people (with incomes of Rs 159 or less a day) in India increased by 75 million during the COVID-19 recession in India.⁹

The Government of India and the Reserve Bank of India have taken several measures to support households and firms who have been deeply affected by the pandemic.¹⁰ These measures not only include financial aids and fiscal policy measures but also measures to ensure health and social protection.¹¹

With the application of these measures, the economy is expected to grow back to pre-pandemic levels in the financial year 2022–23 and the GDP is expected to stabilise at 7 per cent growth, according to the World Bank.¹²

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN INDIA

Despite being severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, India witnessed an upward trend in entrepreneurship activity in the year 2021, as per a study by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.¹³

The Total Early Stage Entrepreneurship Activity (TEA) rate in India was marked as 5.3 per cent in 2020 which increased to 14.4 per cent in 2021.¹⁴ The TEA rate represents the percentage of population between the age group 18 and 64 years who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business.¹⁵

According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, the Established Business Ownership Rate (EBO) rate in India increased from 5.9 per cent in 2020 to 8.5 per cent in 2021.¹⁶

The EBO rate is defined as the percentage of population between the age group 18 and 64 years who are currently an owner-manager of an established business, i.e., owning and managing a running business that has paid salaries, wages, or any other payments to the owners for more than 42 months.¹⁷

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA

According to the Start Up India initiative launched by the Government of India, an increasing number of women have taken up entrepreneurship in the past decade.¹⁸ Women entrepreneurs have made an important contribution to the Indian economy, which has generated a significant number of employment opportunities.¹⁹



According to the Sixth Economic Census published in 2013 by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, out of 58.5 million enterprises in India, 8.05 million (13.75 per cent) were owned by women.²⁰ Out of these 8.05 million women-owned enterprises, 2.76 million (34.3 per cent) were agricultural establishments while 5.29 million (65.7 per cent) were non-agricultural enterprises.²¹

These women-led establishments were concentrated in these top five sectors, namely, agriculture (34.3 per cent), manufacturing (29.8 per cent), trade (18.23 per cent), other services (5.38 per cent) and accommodation & food services (2.77 per cent).²²

Women-owned enterprises see an urban-rural divide. The Sixth Economic Census, conducted between 2013 and 2014, stated that out of the 8.05 million women-owned enterprises, 5.24 million (65.12 per cent) were located in the rural regions and 2.80 million (34.88 per cent) were located in the urban areas.²³

These women-owned enterprises employed 13.48 million (10.24 per cent of total employment) people in India during 2013 and 2014.²⁴ Out of these employed persons, 8.2 million people (61.46 per cent) were employed in rural establishments while 5.18 million (38.54 per cent) were employed in urban establishments.²⁵

Women-led enterprises had a mixed nature as 89 per cent establishments were perennial, nine per cent were seasonal and remaining two per cent were casual.²⁶

The Indian Brand Equity Foundation observes that women-run businesses are more inclusive and employ three times more women than men.²⁷ The Indian Brand Equity Foundation also notes that 20.37 per cent of women are owners of micro, small and medium enterprises which add up to 23.3 per cent of the female labour force of India, the rest being men.²⁸

Since 2019, more than 138,000 (approximately 30 per cent) enterprises have been set up by women under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation

Programme (PMEGP), according to the Ministry of Small, Medium and Micro-Finance.²⁹

It is worth noting that 79 per cent of the women-owned businesses were self-financed, according to the Sixth Economic Census.³⁰ The other sources of income for these establishments were donations from other agencies (14.65 per cent), financial support from the government (3.4 per cent) and loans from financial institutions (1.1 per cent).³¹

Several government-sponsored initiatives such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Stand Up India, Mission Indradhanush, Mudra Yojana Scheme, TREAD (Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development) Scheme, Mahila Udyam Nidhi Scheme, Annapurna Scheme, Stree Shakti Package for Women Entrepreneurs, Bhartiya Mahila Business Bank Loan, Dena Shakti Scheme, Udyogini Scheme, Cent Kalyani Scheme have provided support to women entrepreneurs in India, according to Ministry of Small, Medium and Micro-Finance.³²

STARTUPS IN INDIA

According to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), in a five year period from FY 2016-17 to FY 2021-22, the number of registered startups in India went up from 726 to 65,861.³³ Spread across 640 districts, these

registered startups have created more than 700,000 jobs in India.³⁴

As of today, 30 states and union territories in India have implemented specific policies to support startup businesses.³⁵ Government of India has launched the Government eMarketplace (GeM) to enable startups to participate in e-marketplace to grow their businesses.³⁶

By 2022 March, 12,756 startups were onboarded on GeM which received with 1,19,407 orders from public entities worth Rs 6,128 crore (Rs 61.28 billion).³⁷

The startup enterprises in India are spread across 56 diversified sectors.³⁸

According to Statista, the top five sectors include enterprise technology, health technology, educational technology, financial technology and retail technology.³⁹

IT services, finance technology, technology hardware, enterprise software, artificial intelligence, computer vision, nanotechnology, etc. contribute to 26 per cent of these startups.⁴⁰ Healthcare, life sciences and the agricultural sector contribute to 14 per cent of the startup businesses.⁴¹

A substantial number of startups also work in the climate action sector, renewable energy and green technology.⁴²



PROBLEMS FACED BY FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Despite the growing number of women entrepreneurs, the overall number still remains low in comparison to male-owned enterprises in India as only 13.76 per cent enterprises in India are owned by women, according to the Sixth Economic Census.⁴³

Several reasons have been cited for this low number of female entrepreneurs in India.⁴⁴ The Observer Research Foundation notes that one of the primary reasons is the gender discrimination faced by women.⁴⁵ Women founders do not receive the same treatment and recognition as their male counterparts while running their business.⁴⁶

Additionally, women find it difficult to gain an entry into the male-dominated business networks with an aim to further their businesses.⁴⁷

Access to finance is another constraint that women entrepreneurs face.⁴⁸ Many funders are reluctant to invest in business ventures started by women.⁴⁹ As a result many women entrepreneurs have to self-finance their businesses.⁵⁰ Since the majority of the women entrepreneurs do not own property, loaning money from financial institutions by using property as a collateral becomes difficult.⁵¹

Women often have to struggle with receiving support from their families as care work is still primarily considered to be women's domain.⁵² Women are more often threatened by the lack of safety in workplaces and public places that potentially hinders their chances to successfully run their own enterprises.⁵³

Despite these challenges, in the past two years of the pandemic, a large number of rural women have emerged as entrepreneurs. *Gaon Connection* has been documenting such stories from the villages of the country.



- Out of 58.5 million enterprises in India, 8.05 million (13.75%) were owned by women.
- Women-led establishments were concentrated in these top 5 sectors, namely, agriculture (34.3 %), manufacturing (29.8 %), trade (18.23 %), other services (5.38 %) and accommodation & food services (2.77 %).
- A rural-urban divide is seen in establishments owned by women as 5.24 million (65.12 %) were located in the rural regions and 2.80 million (34.88 %) were located in the urban areas.
- The Indian Brand Equity Foundation observes that women-run businesses are more inclusive and employ three times more women than men.
- 79% of the women-owned businesses were self-financed.

Source: Sixth Economic Census, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation



STORY 1

BUILDING FENCES: WOMEN IN BAREILLY MAKE WIRE AND METAL NETTING TO PROTECT FARMLANDS

In Uttar Pradesh, 560,408 SHGs across the state have helped rural women become economically independent. In Bareilly district, women in more than 7,000 SHGs make barbed wire fences, masalas and more to become self-reliant.

Ramji Mishra
Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh



Outside a house in the corner of a road in Bhagwatipur village is a banner that reads – Vishram Prerna Mahila Gram Sangathan. Step inside, and there are women standing around a piece of machinery making wires and metal netting.

In 2019, Sangeeta Devi formed a self help group (SHG) in Bhagwatipur village and along with a few other women began manufacturing barbed wires. Now, farmers from across Bareilly and neighbouring districts buy the wire and netting from them to fence their fields.

In the Bhagwatipur gram panchayat in Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh, miles of barbed wire and metal netting are required to protect agricultural lands from stray cattle, and they are all made right here by the women of this self-help group.

“I learnt how to make these [barbed wire and metal netting] in Chennai when I lived there. On coming to Bareilly, I formed the self help group and trained women in the job too,” Sangeeta Devi told Gaon Connection. “We earn about three and a half lakh rupees a year,” she added.

Stray cattle is a growing problem in the state where farmers lose their standing crops to the chhutta pashu (stray cattle). While the population of stray cattle in the rest of the country has reduced by 3.2 per cent between 2012 and 2019, in Uttar Pradesh their numbers have registered a 17.34 per cent increase.

According to Sangeeta, their earnings grow in the sowing season when hundreds of wheat and paddy farmers in the area need fencing for their land.

The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) has enabled many such SHGs to be

set up and that has helped many women into self employment and economic independence.

According to data from NRLM, in Uttar Pradesh, there are 560,408 SHGs across the state's 75 districts. In Bareilly district alone, there are more than 7,000 SHGs across its 15 blocks.

On December 21, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an address in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh to women coming under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission, said that he considered the role of women in the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan as invaluable. And women were contributing to an increase in income in families in rural India.

"I work for about four hours a day making barbed wire and metal netting and earn about ten thousand rupees a month," Preeti Kumari, who is part of the Vishram Prerna Mahila Gram Sangathan, told *Gaon Connection*.

GENERATING INCOMES, SECURING LIVELIHOODS

In Giridharipur village in Bithri Chainpur block, women of the Adarsh Lakshmi Swayam Sahayata Samuh (SHG), prepare vermicompost and natural fertilisers with the cow dung as most of them have cows at home.

From manufacturing wire and net fencing and tailoring clothes to preparing vermicompost and masalas, the women in the SHGs are engaged in a range of activities.

"A packet of vermicompost weighs a kilogramme and can sell at anything up to twenty five rupees each. In a day we manage to sell about six packets," Madhu, a member of the SHG, told *Gaon Connection*. Besides vermicompost, several women are engaged in apiculture.

"The SHGs provide a platform for the women to become independent earners and there has been a marked change in their economic state," Sanjay Dwivedi, assistant development officer of the co-operative in Bithri Chainpur, who also discharges the duties of the Block Development Officer, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to Tejawant Singh, deputy commissioner, NRLM, Bareilly, women are encouraged to become self-reliant in the district. "From manufacturing wire and net fencing and tailoring clothes to preparing vermicompost and masalas, the women in the SHGs are engaged in a range of activities," Singh told *Gaon Connection*.

“Some of the products they make are even being exported. The women have liberated themselves from a life of poverty and want, and are contributing to nation building,” the deputy commissioner added.

STITCHING UP A SECURE FUTURE

Taking advantage of the fact that many rural women are adept at embroidery, sewing and knitting, sewing units have been set up in villages where the women work for a few hours for a salary.

“There are eleven sewing machines in our SHG and the women earn about Rs 3,000 a month. While before they got paid per piece of what they tailored, now, because we are getting a lot of orders they get a monthly salary,” Pooja Varma who heads the SHG Aparajita in Faridpur Inayat Khan village, told *Gaon Connection*.

Another SHG in the same village called Gulab, tailors school uniforms for several schools nearby. “During the pandemic we made about ten thousand masks and many PPE kits,” Mithilesh Kumari, a member of Gulab, told *Gaon Connection*.

The women can look forward to better things now, said Manshi Patel from Faridpur Inayat Khan village. “Earlier we were either daily wage labourers or just unemployed. In 2019, through the SHG we



began to make masalas. We gradually began to make profits. We work from ten in the morning to five in the evening and earn up to Rs 250 a day,” Patel told *Gaon Connection*. The advantages of being part of an SHG, added Patel, was that in times of need, the SHG and banks provide financial help.

In December 2021, the central government made it possible for members of self help groups to avail of an overdraft up to Rs 5,000 if they held an account in the Satyapit Mahila Bank. According to the government, more than five crore women have benefitted from this scheme.



STORY 2

RURAL WOMEN IN CHHATTISGARH BAKE AND SELL COOKIES MADE OF TRADITIONAL GRAINS

The women of Jay Maa Kali self-help group bake cookies with little millet, kodo, finger millet and other traditional grains, scented with mahua blossoms. The group has earned about Rs 20,000 in two months.

Deepanwita Gita Niyogi
Bastar, Chhattisgarh



At one in the winter afternoon, Lili Thakur, president of Jay Maa Kali self-help group (SHG) in Kudalgaon village in Bastar block of Bastar district, is busy. She and 10 others, sit inside a room baking fresh batches of hand-made cookies for the day.

The women, ranging in age from 25 to 42 years, work every day from 11 am to 5 pm in the village's community hall, to make nine varieties of cookies — including the popular multigrain version made with grains such as kodo millet (koden), little millet (kutki) and finger millet (ragi) as well as refined flour and whole wheat flour.

Some of the members sit on a thin mattress to knead millet dough while others press small balls of ready dough between their palms to shape the cookies. Finally, the cookies are placed on a baking tray and baked at 180 degrees centigrade.

It's been over a month since this group of women in Bastar began baking cookies to sell at Bihan Bazaar, which retails products made by self-help groups in Chhattisgarh, and other retailers.

So far, they have made 750 packs of 250 grams each (priced between Rs 80 and Rs 120), sold them for Rs 75,000 and earned a group profit of Rs 20,000. This has provided them a source of income at a time when the pandemic has hit most livelihoods.

"I help make about thirty to forty packets every day. Sometimes, we use tutti frutti, cashew and dried mahua flowers, which we are very fond of, for added flavour and crunchiness," Mamta Thakur, a group member told *Gaon Connection*.

These women have earned a lot of appreciation for making nutritious cookies this festive season. Such snacks made with

millets are in tune with the Centre's efforts since 2018 to promote millets through its nutri cereals initiative.

The cookies are marketed under the brand name of Tribal Taste through Tribal Tokni, the marketing platform of non-profit Arya Prerna Samiti, based in the district headquarters of Jagdalpur.

According to Mohit Arya, who runs the non-profit Arya Prerna Samiti, which trained the women, 20 to 30 per cent of the cost of the cookies goes to the group — between Rs 20 and Rs 30 a packet. The retailer gets about 15 to 20 per cent. The money directly goes to the group's account. "We are yet to calculate the pace at which they make cookies, since they are still new to the job. Once we do that, we wish to give them a full thirty per cent as their share," Arya added.

HOW THE COOKIE CAME TOGETHER

The Jay Maa Kali group was formed on February 2, 2016. However, this is the first time the group has attempted to collectively earn a livelihood by making a value-added product. This SHG was registered as part of the Indian Government's National Rural Livelihood Mission, which envisaged the formation of women's SHGs.

"We came to know about the initiative to make cookies through the district

The Jay Maa Kali group, a women's SHG, is as part of the Indian Government's National Rural Livelihood Mission.

administration in October last year and were trained later that month. It is a godsend opportunity, for money is tight after the pandemic. After the initial fifteen-day training, we started making cookies," Lili told *Gaon Connection*.

Arya arranged for the training to bake cookies after being approached by the district administration. The women were trained by Gaurav Kushwaha, an engineer turned baker based in Bastar.

TRAINING THE RURAL WOMEN

Kushwaha introduced the women to the basic ingredients needed to make cookies — all-purpose flour, whole wheat flour, fats (ghee, vanaspati and margarine), flavours such as vanilla and chocolate and milk solids. Then he told them about the proportions.

"I have not used any chemical additives in these cookies. The women use a hand

blender for making cookie dough. I have also taught them how to add flavours. I still sometimes go and check the end quality," he said.

"As of now, sales are good and there are repeat customers, since we use quality ingredients and there is no palmolein, artificial colours and preservatives in the cookies," Arya added.

Arya's wife Preeti, oversees a part of the operations. "Cookies are a much-loved item and sold on a daily basis. The women were trained for five hours and picked up the skill very fast," she told *Gaon Connection*. Since most women could not come in the morning due to household work, the training was held in the afternoons.

PROJECT FUNDING AND FUTURE PLANS

Since 2012, several self-help groups have been formed in Bastar; it now has 9,385 groups. As people have become more aware, newly-married women arriving in the villages are urged to form groups with 10 to 15 members each.

The funding of Rs 1,25,000 for the cookies project has come from the start-up village entrepreneurship programme of the district administration. Jay Maa Kali group contributed Rs 32,000 and the Arya Prerna Samiti contributed about Rs one lakh.



Currently, the group is not charged for using the community hall, but in future, they will have to pay rent and foot the electricity bills, district programme manager Raj Kumar Dewangan said.

The group hopes to shortly introduce imli or tamarind cookies. "The local grains, especially koden and kutki, are high in nutrition. The cookies' initiative can help promote nutritious grains, especially millets, through value addition. People like the products and the response is good," Arya explained.

With cookies already finding a ready market, other items such as cakes, chocolates and khakra are in the offing. Seeing the success of Jay Maa Kali group, other self-help groups are looking forward to learning to bake cookies too. In neighbouring Dantewada district, a group is being trained to prepare premium mahua cookies.

And so, in a terrain so far scented just by mahua, the local people are getting used to the heady aroma of molten butter and cookies.



STORY 3

TAMIL FISHERWOMEN SET UP A RESTAURANT AND FREE THEIR HUSBANDS OF DEBT

In Poompuhar village where women aren't even allowed to sit with men in public, five of them break gender stereotypes and start their own restaurant, where their vatha kuzhambu and rava kesari wow their customers.

Eva Badola
Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu



They have to work harder than ever. Their day starts at the crack of dawn and after toiling at home they set off to work at their restaurant they call Dolphin.

Five fisherwomen from Poompuhar, a small fishing village in Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, about 275 kilometres from the state capital, Chennai, are rewriting their stories, by daring to be innovative.

Stella Gracy, Silvarani, Rajkumari, Uma, and Pushpvalli got together and started a small seaside restaurant in 2016, where they serve fresh and local vegetarian and non vegetarian specialities to their guests on banana leaves. These include idlis, vada, puri, chapati, and of course curries made from freshly caught fish served with rice.

FROM POVERTY TO SELF RELIANCE

Five years ago, each of the women was leading a hand to mouth existence. "I had no money to pay my children's school fees," Stella Gracy told Gaon Connection. The 35-year-old and her husband were in debt.

"My husband was catching fewer and fewer fishes and was selling the catch to middlemen at throwaway prices," she said.

Today, these women not only own a business but are also earning Rs 10,000 each a month from their restaurant. They are in the process of expanding and will

soon be delivering up to 200 orders a day to nearby towns.

It was a difficult journey. The women come from a small fishing village that is tradition bound, has very rigid notions of what a woman should and should not do, and very patriarchal. Most women in the village work long hours, earn a pittance and invariably watch helplessly as their men take to drinking.

"We live in a conservative society where women are expected to cook tasty food from birth till death, but never empowered to enter professional kitchens," said Stella.

But that thought stuck in her head and the more she thought about it, the more determined she was to cook professionally and earn an income from that.

"It means we have to multitask more than usual, but we are used to that," she smiled.

A STRONG BUSINESS PLAN

The idea for the restaurant came about when they realised that the many fishers and traders who came to Poompuhar to do business had no place to eat in. "We decided to look for a place near where they did business," Silvarani, one of the partners, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India,

"We called our restaurant Dolphin, because it is a unique creature, different from other fishes."

there are schemes to empower fisher women. On paper, in the last seven years, approx. Rs 31,000 lakh has been set aside to help them in Tamil Nadu.

But, Stella and her partners have not been able to access any of the schemes that provide loans for start-ups at subsidised interest rates.

But that did not deter them and they managed Rs 75,000 from relatives and another lakh of rupees from private moneylenders to set up the restaurant and the kitchen. "We called our restaurant Dolphin, because it is a unique creature, different from other fishes," smiled Stella.

BREAKING THE MOULD

They managed to rent 1,250 square feet of land for which they pay Rs 1,000 a month. They cleared the land of its undergrowth themselves, and constructed a hut with bamboo walls and a thatched roof.

It was a bumpy start. Especially when they had to contend with disapproval from fellow villagers. "Women are not even allowed to sit with the men, and the fact that we had dared to start a business on our own without any male involved did not go down too well," Silvarani laughed.

But the five fisherwomen put their heads down, cooked and served food at their restaurant and even managed to repay their debts.

Soon, they were doing brisk business and were catering for several functions in the villages from celebrating birth of babies, weddings and even funeral feasts. And they kept the price point reasonable.

Initially they were getting orders for at least 60 meals a day. Now it is almost 200 orders a day. It is Rs 60 for a vegetarian meal and Rs 120 for a non-vegetarian one.

Rajkumari, the 42-year-old head chef of the restaurant, told Gaon Connection. "A housewife's cooking skills are often under-valued. But, even at home, I used to experiment with new dishes and standardise the recipe so that the dish would taste the same every time I made it. I apply the same techniques professionally now for bulk orders," she added.

Rajkumari said that their Vatha Kuzhambu (a spicy tamarind curry) and



their Rava Kesari (a semolina halwa) were popular.

"Earlier I was hesitant to come out and serve strangers, especially men," Uma, who serves food at the restaurant and packs the takeaways, told *Gaon Connection*. The 38-year-old said she had gained confidence working in her own enterprise.

The oldest partner is Pushpavalli who at 65 years of age is responsible for procuring ingredients and fresh seafood that she gets at the harbour every day.



A RIPPLE EFFECT

“If we want to alleviate poverty at grassroots level, low-income women need strong training and funding for small enterprises,” Stella said. “We learnt by trial-and-error method as there was no one to guide us or support us financially,” she pointed out.

A Nagapattinam-based non profit called SNEHA (Social Need Education and Human Awareness) helped them out with equipment for their kitchen, such as a rice grinder that made their lives so much easier. The five fisherwomen freed their husbands from debt.

While in the lean season the fishing activities of the village slow down and often stop entirely, Dolphin remains active supplying takeaway orders, and vending hot fish snacks on a cart to nearby areas.

“We worry non stop when our men are out in the sea,” Stella said. There are times the sea claims their lives, leaving their families helpless. “So, I motivate women to become independent so they can become independent and face any adversity life throws at them,” she said.





STORY 4

A WELL-OILED ENTERPRISE OF RURAL WOMEN IN MADHYA PRADESH

Twelve women from a self-help group in Pipal Kheda village, Madhya Pradesh, make cold pressed oil out of the locally grown Karera peanuts, which has found a market in Malaysia and the United States.

Shyam Dangi

Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh



Phoolwati Lodhi of Pipal Kheda village is a happy lady, and a busy one. She, along with 12 other women from her village that falls in the Khaniyadhana block in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh, are engaged in making cold pressed peanut oil.

“We own an acre of land. And some of our family members work as daily wage labourers in order to make ends meet,” 35-year-old Phoolwati told Gaon Connection. While her family lived on the acre of land and the Rs 200 a day they earned as daily wages, things have changed for the better, she said.

It is all thanks to the peanuts cultivated in Karera, Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh. They are renowned for their taste and are often referred to as Karera ke kaju (cashews of Karera).

The Karera peanuts, also considered extremely nutritious, recently got a fillip as cold pressed oil made from them was exported to Malaysia and the United States. Nearly 400 litres of oil from Pipal Kheda was exported.

“The women from a self help group in Pipul Kheda are working at Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooh, giving them an extra source of income,” Pramod Srivastav, district manager, NRLM, Shivpuri, told *Gaon Connection*.

“The Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooh provides employment to 65 people from the area including peanut farmers. Even the dregs of the peanuts, left over after extraction of oil, is used to generate additional income,” he said.

AN AUGMENTED INCOME

The women of Pipal Kheda who once depended on wages that they earned as labourers, are now making an added Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 a month.

Around 50 local peanut farmers in the area supply the Karera peanuts to the SHG. The women clean the peanuts, extract the oil and then pack it.

The peanut oil has brought a smile to the face of Siya Lodhi too. Like Phoolwati, she too struggled to make ends meet till she became involved in the oil-making enterprise. The 42-year-old barely managed with the yield from her acre of land and worked as a daily wage labourer.

Phoolwati's 22-year-old son Prasendra Lodhi helps the women run the cold-press. "I am confident that the way the demand for oil is increasing, our income will increase too," he told Gaon Connection. According to him, he makes up to Rs 5,000 a month at the cold-press.

In days gone by, the oil extraction would take place with the help of big crushers turned by bulls. The same kind of method is used now, only instead of bulls, the press is run by electricity.

"We got the cold-press from south India at a cost of nearly two lakh rupees. The

Around 50 local peanut farmers in the area supply the Karera peanuts to the SHG. The women clean the peanuts, extract the oil and then pack it.

women extract about forty litres of oil from it every day," Srivastav explained. The quantity will be increased, the district manager said.

FINDING A FOREIGN MARKET

The oil from Anand Moongphali Tel Utpadan Samooch sells at Rs 240 for a one litre pack and Rs 1,180 for a five-litre pack. The group earns anything up to Rs 40,000 a month from the oil.

"About three to four thousand rupees are credited to each woman each month and efforts are on to increase the amount to eight thousand rupees per woman," Srivastav said.

"Ninety litres of oil have been exported to the United States and forty five litres to Malaysia with the help of a private company, Ma Reva Vaidik Food Research and Producer Company, based in

Bhopal,” Srivastav informed.

“We have also sent samples of the oil to Germany and Dubai. We may also get orders from there. There is a good demand for the oil that the rural women are making,” Varun Singh, co-founder of Ma Reva Vaidik Food Research and Producer Company, told *Gaon Connection*.

PEANUT CULTIVATION IN INDIA

After China, India is the largest cultivator of peanuts in the world, with Gujarat leading the production. The other states that grow peanuts in significant amounts are Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

Peanuts are cultivated in both the rabi and kharif seasons. According to the Union ministry of agriculture and farmers welfare, in 2019-20, the production of peanuts stood at approximately 9.95 million tonnes that increased to 10.12 million tonnes in 2020-21.

In 2020-21, India exported about 638,000 tonnes of peanuts earning Rs 53.81 billion in foreign exchange.

India exports peanuts mainly to Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Russia, Ukraine, China, Nepal



and the United Arab Emirates. The Agriculture and Processed food Production Export Development Authority (APEDA) is going all out to give peanut exports a boost.





STORY 5

BEEKEEPING GIVES SANTHAL TRIBAL WOMEN A BUZZ OF HOPE

Bee keeping is scripting sweet success for tribal women in south Bihar who have formed the Banka Madhu Farmers Producer Organisation and are transforming their lives.

Nidhi Jamwal
Taruniya (Banka), Bihar



Draped in a bright pink sari, with a helmet firmly strapped to her head, Seema Hasda sat astride her scooty and rode off towards a farm of flowering sesame where some Santhal tribal women from Taruniya village were already there.

Their faces protected with nets, the women carefully pulled out frames from inside the neat row of boxes to check on the honey production.

“Soon the til flavour of honey will be ready for sale. I already have a quintal [100 kgs] of honey with me,” Seema smiled.

“Last year, during the mahamari (pandemic), we sent about nine quintals of madh (honey) to Mumbai,” she added.

Taruniya village is in Banka district of

south Bihar, where these women are part of the Farmers' Producer Organisation (FPO) – Banka Madhu Farmers Producer Organisation. The FPO was registered in 2020 with 350 members. More than 60 per cent of them are tribal.

Of the total annual honey production of 50 tonnes in Banka district, 40 tonnes is produced by this FPO alone.

Maria Tutu, a young Santhal from Taruniya village, who is the co-director of the Banka FPO, encouraged other rural women to take up bee-keeping.

In 2019, she herself took it up with 15 boxes. She received technical guidance from the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra and financial support from the government. Today she has 65 boxes.

“These boxes, including the bees, were provided at a subsidy of 90 per cent. I had to contribute only ten per cent of the cost (about Rs 500),” Maria told *Gaon Connection*.

Maria encouraged four other women from her extended family and together these five Santhal women started bee-keeping. Now, women from all the 15 households in Maria's village are into bee-keeping and earn a regular income by selling honey in a variety of flavours – sheesham, mustard, litchi, palash and mahua.

“Right now as the til crop is getting ready, there is til honey. By December, it will be time for mustard honey as farmlands will be covered in yellow mustard flowers,” said Seema, from Sarlaiya village.

“January to March is the best time for honey as there are multiple flowers, so honey production gets a boost. On an average, one honey box helps earn Rs 2,000–2,500 per year,” said Seema who now has 150 boxes.

“Last year, despite the pandemic and the lockdown, Banka district produced 50 tonnes of honey. This year, if the season favours us, we will produce a lot more honey,” said Ripusudan Singh, CEO and co-director of Banka Madhu FPO.

A farmer from Bindi village of Banka, Singh works with the tribal women in the district

training them in bee-keeping and helping them access government schemes and benefits.

WHEN DREAMS TAKE SHAPE

Soni Murmu of Rasuiya village, told *Gaon Connection* about how she started off. “Last year, before the lockdown was announced, I attended a training programme on bee-keeping at the krishi centre. After that, I felt confident enough to bring 50 boxes home,” she added.

“Even during the lockdown, our work did not stop as flowering continued and the honey bees kept working. A large chunk of my honey was purchased by the local villagers and traders,” said Soni, who sells the honey at anything between Rs 300 and Rs 500 a kilo.

HONEY PRODUCTION AND BOX MOVEMENT

“Depending on the season and wind direction, per box honey collection is two to two-and-a-half kilos every 15 to 18 days,” Beena Murmu, a bee keeper from Taruniya village, who has 20 boxes, informed *Gaon Connection*.

“February and March are the best months for honey due to large scale flowering. In the monsoon, there is no production. Also,

if there is purva hawa [east winds], we get 2.5 kilo honey per box. But a pachiya hawa [west winds] reduces it to two kilos per box only," she added.

"During the litchi season, we send boxes to Amarpur [about 50 kilometres away]. We hire labourers who travel with the boxes and harvest the honey," said Seema. "We pay close to three hundred rupees per day to them," she added proudly.

The district administration is actively helping them out. "We have identified a honey corridor, which passes through Purnea, Bhagalpur, Banka, Godda, and Dumka. By moving the boxes along this route, honey production can be boosted," Suharsh Bhagat, district magistrate of Banka, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Honey production has gone up from two to three months to six to seven months a year in Banka. We have trained tribal women in honey keeping and results are promising," he added.

The state government is also finding new markets. "We have launched a web portal to sell products made by rural women and Jeevika didis. The women can now directly sell to the consumers anywhere in India and get a good profit," Balamurugan D, chief executive officer of Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (JEEViKA), told *Gaon Connection*.

"Only if our children study, will they succeed in life. I am funding my daughter's education in an English medium school through my honey sale."

QUALITY OF LIFE

The money these women are earning by selling honey is transforming their lives and that of their families too.

Sabina Murmu's daughter studies in standard 9 in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. "Only if our children study, will they succeed in life. I am funding my daughter's education in an English medium school through my honey sale," said the proud mother.

Seema Hasda's 15-year-old daughter wants to become a nurse. "The honey business is helping me save money for that. I also bought the scooty with my earnings," she beamed.

Seema who has herself only studied till class 5 always wanted to do something. "Madhumakkhi ne rasta dikha diya [The honey bees showed me the way]," she smiled, as she turned the key to her scooty and sped off.



STORY 6

IRULA TRIBES IN TAMIL NADU MAKE FURNITURE OUT OF THE INVASIVE LANTANA

Women of an Irula tribal settlement, in the foothills of the Western Ghats in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, make furniture out of the invasive Lantana Camara, one of the world's ten most invasive species.

Pankaja Srinivasan
Senguttaiyur (Coimbatore) Tamil Nadu



The scattering of thatched homes lining either side of immaculate pathways in Senguttaiyur village, basked in the sun.

Rangamma sat in the shady thinnai (sitout) of her home, watching over the bright green aruppu (albizia amara) spread out to dry. Arappu is used as a skin scrub and to wash hair.

"We collect the leaves, dry it out in the sun and powder it," Rangamma told Gaon Connection. The powder is then packed and sold as a minor forest produce (MFP).

Senguttaiyur, the Irula village falls in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. The tribal women in Senguttaiyur augment their family livelihood by collecting, processing and selling MFP such as arappu and

But today, there is a certain impatience amongst the women who have been kept away from the forests by lingering elephants. The delay in going into the forests has meant an interruption in a 45-day training course kicked off earlier this year.

The course trains women to make furniture out of Lantana Camara, (rated as one of the world's 10 most invasive species) from the forests, and turning it into furniture.

Lantana has debilitated large tracts of forest lands in India threatening the nutrient cycle in the soil, and not allowing the local flora to grow, thereby posing a threat to the forest-based livelihoods of the Irula tribe.

training," 27-year-old Selvi, told Gaon Connection. They are learning how to make chairs, tables and shelves out of the lantana wood, but they have almost exhausted the stock of wood, and are waiting to go into the forests for more.

"The elephants have been walking right through the village too," Vendhiamma, another resident of Senguttaiyur, told *Gaon Connection*.

Senguttaiyur nestles on the lower slopes of the Western Ghats within the Perianaickenpalayam Range of the Coimbatore Forest Circle falling in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve in Tamil Nadu. It is home to 40 families belonging to the Irula tribe. The Karamadai town panchayat it comes under is more than 20 kilometres away.

The Irulars are identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. According to the 2011 Census, there are 23,116 Irular households in Tamil Nadu, and their numbers are depleting. They are a denotified tribe.

The lantana project aims to add value to non-timber forest produce. It was the outcome of seven years of work put in by social worker Kamini Surendran.

"I was doing my PhD and my research paper was on Empowerment and sustainable development of Senguttaiyur village Irular tribal women. I surveyed many

Senguttaiyur is home to 40 families belonging to the Irula tribe. The lantana project aims to add value to non-timber forest produce by working with the tribal community.

villages in this area, and found this village to be really remote and underdeveloped... and all the families here were below the poverty line," the 57-year-old told *Gaon Connection*.

Surendran approached Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham that had initiated similar projects in other tribal villages in the Siruvani Hills in Coimbatore.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change funded the Senguttaiyur project through ENVIS, its Environmental Information System, in partnership with the Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham in Coimbatore. ENVIS disseminates scientific, technical and semi-technical information on various issues related to the biological invasion (invasive alien species).

One of its objectives is to promote Green Skill Development Programmes (GSDP) to skill people in the environment, forests and wildlife sectors, and create sustainable livelihood options for tribal communities

and at the same time contribute to forest and biodiversity conservation.

"We have worked with seven Irula settlements around Coimbatore since 2011," Maya Mahajan, centre co-ordinator for ENVIS and associate professor at Amrita University, told *Gaon Connection*.

"Using chemicals to control or eliminate the invasive lantana is tedious, time consuming, expensive and not good for the environment. So, we experimented with the help of local artisans, and found that the lantana was strong enough to be made into furniture, and began the programme," Mahajan said.

Each training capsule gets a fund of about six to seven lakh rupees, and this includes a stipend of Rs 300 a day for all those being trained. "It is a win-win situation that provides a sustainable livelihood for the tribals and at the same time conserves forests," Mahajan said.

There are plans afoot to replicate the lantana project in tribal communities in Dahanu in Maharashtra, and Wayanad in Kerala, she said.

Meanwhile, in Senguttaiyur, master trainers Rangasamy Kumara and Veerasamy from the Irula villages of Singampatti and Mullamkadu respectively in the Siruvani Hills teach the women how to measure and cut twine that will be wrapped around the legs of the chairs.

"We are divided into five groups of four members each and each group is responsible for learning and then making one piece of furniture," 27-year-old Selvi explained, pointing to a couple of arm chairs, a centre table and some peg tables, in different stages of completion. "We are yet to finish the three-seater sofa," Selvi said.

The women go into the forests looking for lantana and it takes them two to three hours to pick and cut them, after which they bring back all that they can carry as a head load.

MARKETING THE LANTANA FURNITURE

"The environment ministry ordered nearly a lakh and a half rupees worth of lantana furniture from a tribal community in the Siruvani Hills," Mahajan said.

The ladies wing of the Federation of Indian Commerce and Industry, the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Coimbatore Chapter, has taken the onus of marketing the finished furniture that is made here through a furniture outlet.

"We will inform you when it is ready. Please come for the exhibition we will have then," Lakshmi beamed. "Of course, it all depends on when we complete the three-seater sofa, and that depends on what the elephants decide," she said.