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# SAMNAPUR: Cultural Change in Agriculture

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Initiating new techniques in farming, the women of Samnapur have started taking the lead in agricultural practices such as introducing the cultivation of vegetables, growing paddy through SRI, going to the market to sell vegetables and asserting their identity as farmers in their families and in society, thereby bringing about a sea change in the way they are perceived and in their confidence as decision-makers.

**I**T IS RAINING HEAVILY. THE SUN HAS NOT SET YET. THERE is no one in sight but one person. Far away, in the distance, there is a person ploughing the land, despite the heavy rain. This might not be an unusual sight in a village. In a culture that recognises the land as the mother, ploughing is done only by men so that the land becomes more fertile. However, in Kureili village in Samnapur block, despite the rains, the person ploughing the land is a woman.

Chandrakali is the determined and fearless farmer.

The story goes back a few years. Chandrakali was waiting in the field for her husband to plough the land. But her husband was nowhere in sight. It was about to rain, and she decided to plough the land herself. She put on a raincoat and ploughed the land for the first time. She was apprehensive at first, because she did not know whether she would be able to do it. Once she started, she got the hang of it. It was no rocket science. She did not fear anyone. If at all someone were to catch her, she was ready to pay the fine or face the consequences. She finished ploughing the land before her husband returned home.

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On his return, her husband realized, that after he had left someone had continued to plough the land. He asked Chandrakali later in the night and she told him the truth. To her surprise, he was not angry with her. He was glad to know that she could plough the land. He jokingly told her that from now on he need not worry about ploughing because she too could do it. However,, because there are certain rules of the village, he himself would have to do it. At that moment, she was glad that such rules existed, otherwise the entire burden of agricultural work would have fallen upon women.

She presumed that perhaps these rules were actually created to give women some rest. Mercifully, that year, they didn't face any loss in agriculture yield despite the superstition that if a woman ploughed the land, the crops would fail. It was an eye-opener for her. Chandrakali realized that women were definitely not restricted from ploughing because that would cause the land to become infertile. It became clear to her that some norms were made to relieve women from certain activities.

She never ploughed the land again. She believed that instead of bringing a change in these norms,

which could be seen as a blessing for women (though not always), she would like to bring changes in the culture of agricultural practices.

We'll talk about these changes in a while.

There are many others, who share the same view and have worked towards bringing a change in their lives through agriculture in Samnapur block of Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh. The principal tribe here is Gond, and the others are Baiga, Kol, Agariya, Bhariya and Pardhan. The people's major occupation is agriculture and daily wage earnings.

PRADAN has been in Samnapur since 2005. At that time, the role of women in agriculture was very different. Women have come a long way today by asserting their role in decision-making and claiming recognition as farmers. Even though women are intensively involved in agriculture, usually it is a man's picture that comes to mind when one thinks of a farmer. Women are regarded only as labourers, not farmers. They are not involved in deciding which crops to grow, which method to use and so on. Women, it is assumed, have no knowledge about these things. However, some of the

women have started to break this perception in Samnapur.

Ansuiya's story is one such example. Her family's main source of income is agriculture. Earlier, during the *kharif* season, the family used to grow paddy using the broadcasting method. In one of the agricultural trainings, conducted at the block level, the women were shown a video on growing paddy through the SRI method. Ansuiya was fascinated by it. She couldn't believe that one could produce 40 quintals of rice out of 1 kg of seeds. Even though she was apprehensive about the soil quality, she thought of trying it once.

She believed in learning by doing. Her father-in-law was not happy with this idea. He asked her to stay out of decisions on agriculture as she had no past experience in it. However, she remained firm on her decision and used SRI in around 30 decimals of land. In the beginning, the field looked empty. Her father-in-law mocked her saying, "*Iss baar humari bahu bela phikwayegi* (This time our daughter-in-law will incur losses in agriculture)." His mockery made her even more determined to work in the field. She worked day and night, just to prove her father-in-law wrong. After 15

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days, the field was filled with green paddy. She brought a weeder from the PRADAN office and did the weeding and cutting all by herself.

Earlier, the family used to produce 250–300 kg of paddy from five acres of land. Ansuiya's determination and hard work gave the family a produce of 10 quintals from 30 decimals of land. Everyone in the family was very happy and proud of her, especially her father-in-law. The following year, a few other members also started growing paddy through SRI or improved paddy methods. Today, most of the families in her village, Newsa, grow paddy using this technique. She has become an inspiration to many in her village. Her firm determination has motivated other members of her SHG to adopt this new technique in agriculture. Ansuiya is a trend-setter in her village and has inspired and given confidence to other women to become decision-makers in agriculture and not just be the labourers.

Ansuiya strongly believes that there is no work that women cannot do. Even though social norms restrict them from carrying out certain activities such as ploughing, it does not mean that they are not capable

of doing it. She shared a very recent instance that was an eye-opener for her. Her husband was not home and it was time for milking the cow. She had never done it before. It was her husband who milked the cow every time. However, it was getting late and her husband was nowhere to be seen. So, she tied the cow and milked the cow herself. When her husband came back, he was amazed. He had not expected her to be capable enough to do it.

The next morning, her husband got ready to leave the house when Ansuiya stopped him. She reminded him that it was time for milking the cow. To this, he responded that now she also could do it because she had the experience now. His presence was no longer required, he said. This made her angry and she told him that she had taken the responsibility only for one day and not for every day. At that moment, she realized that it was good that some work was meant only for the men. Otherwise, the women would have to do all the work whereas the men would spend the whole day roaming around freely.

Many women, like Chandrakali and Ansuiya, are of the view that if men realize that the women can

do all the work and that there will be no consequences in their lives or on the agricultural produce, the men would take a backseat and not do any work, including the heavy and strenuous work. They would want the women to do all the work—both at home and in the fields.

Lalita's journey is yet another inspirational example. After being involved with her SHG for some time, she got to know about vegetable cultivation. She wanted to grow vegetables in her land and placed this suggestion to the other members of her SHG. However, the others were not as enthusiastic as she was. None of them showed any support. Even though she was angry with the members, her motivation did not become less. She took a loan of Rs 7000 from the SHG. She grew brinjal, tomato, ladyfinger and long bean (*barbatti*). She hired a few women as labourers and worked very hard in the field.

Owing to a lack of support in the market linkage during that time, she couldn't sell all the vegetables she had grown. However, she managed a no-profit no-loss return. Her father was very happy. He began to tell everyone, "*Pehle toh khet mein ghusti bhi nahi thi, aur ab dekho*

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(Earlier she would not even enter the fields and now look her).” Her fellow SHG members were also impressed. This raised her spirit and enthusiasm. Earlier, she could not even go to the market alone. Today, she has become an entrepreneur by starting her own *papad* business. With the help of five SHG women, she makes and sells different varieties of *papad* in and around Samnapur.

Lalita proudly states, “*Pehle mein zero thi, ab sau pe sau hun* (Earlier I was zero and now I am hundred out of hundred).” She ensures that whatever work she does, she involves the other women as well. She would like it to be beneficial to the other SHG members as well. She includes them in the vegetable cultivation and in her *papad* making business. Her wish is that all the other women become self-dependent and confident just as she is today.

Along with enhancing the livelihood of the household and reaffirming the women’s role as farmers and decision-makers, efforts have been taken to reduce their drudgery as well. Women are involved in most agricultural activities, which are tedious and painful. Activities such as weeding, transplanting, etc., involve continuous bending of the

body, affecting the women in the long run. In order to reduce this drudgery, various equipments have been introduced recently, such as the weeder. This not only reduces the amount of energy required in weeding but also saves a lot of time.

Over the years, women have started to break norms and set new trends, wherein they are the norm-setters. There have been many cases in which women have played a very influential role in enhancing the income of the family by engaging in livelihood activities, using innovative techniques and ideas. They have

also taken the lead in the family to initiate activities (such as vegetable cultivation) that was alien to them earlier.

In Kureili, entire households are occupied in vegetable cultivation at present. After much persuasion by PRADAN, almost a decade ago, one family in the whole village agreed to experiment with vegetable cultivation. The family had more land than the others. They cultivated tomato and the result was unbelievable. Seeing the result, many others started vegetable cultivation from the following year. Farmers also brought about changes in the



**Kumhari Bai using weeder in her maize field, Gaura Kanhari village, Samnapur**

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techniques of paddy cultivation. They started cultivating improved paddy, using SRI methods.

In 2006, when some farmers in Kureili tried the SRI method for the first time, the neighbouring villagers made fun of them. They were told that the yield would not increase because there was too much space between plants. To everyone's surprise, however, the yield was more than twice the usual. Today, every household in Kureili that owns land is involved in vegetable cultivation and has adopted the SRI method. All the villagers brought about changes in the culture of their agricultural

practices; earlier, they were only involved in the broadcast method of paddy and maize cultivation. Also, earlier the women did not have much say in the agricultural practices. Today, one can see women taking the lead in decision-making, with regard to agriculture and going to the market to sell their produce.

Chandrakali is one such inspirational farmer in Kureili. She was awarded the 'Best Farmer Award' from the block, this year. Through hard work and determination, she managed to earn more than Rs 1.5 lakhs from the six acres of land she owned.

Along with vegetable cultivation and SRI, she experimented with more techniques, such as growing lentils alongside the boundary of the paddy field (*medh*). She has utilized the land resource available to her optimally.

Another inspirational farmer is Sukarti from the Bamhni village in Samnapur. Her family was involved in cultivation of only paddy and pulses. None of her family members in the village grew vegetables. She used to see farmers from other villages coming to Bamhni market and selling vegetables. One of the very few women sellers was her friend, Premvati, whom she became close to during the collective meetings at the block level.

Inspired by Premvati's story, Sukarti decided to grow vegetables one season. She was the first woman to grow tomatoes in Bamhni. She had no measuring equipment; therefore, she gave the tomatoes to her friend to sell them in the market. Seeing this, the *thekedar* started arguing with both of them. He told Sukarti that she could not sell her vegetables through someone else. She would have to set up her own stall. She requested him to allow her to sell her vegetables for that week and that from the



**Farmers celebrate International Day of Rural Women in Samnapur**

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One can see a visible change in most of the villages (if not all) with regard to the culture in agriculture in terms of changes in the crops grown or adding new crops, adoption of new techniques for cultivation, change of perspective regarding agriculture from subsistence farming to commercial farming and also the role of women in initiating these changes in their families and asserting their identity as farmers.

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next week onwards she would set up her own stall. After prolonged pleading, the *thekedar* agreed.

The next week, Sukarti set up her own stall. This time, the *thekedar* created another fuss. He asked them for more money than the fixed rate. Both the women stood firm and fought with him. They told him that they would not give him a single rupee more than the fixed rate. The *thekedar* got furious and frustrated and left them. Seeing their determination, a few of the other sellers also fought with him for asking for more money. "Today, almost everyone in the market pays him the fixed rate," says Sukarti with a proud smile on her face.

She shared that in order to earn more profit she would take her vegetables to Jabalpur because the profit margin was less in the Dindori and Mandla markets. Seven to eight years ago, when she was new to this sector, she found very few women selling vegetables in the market. This was a struggle as she had had to remain strong when dealing with the *thekedar* and other men. Now, the number of women has increased. Yet, it is not all satisfactory.

Recently, when Sukarti went to Baigachak to sell vegetables there were only two women in the vehicle, Premvati and herself. She has motivated some more women in her village to grow vegetables and to sell them in the market. She wishes to inspire many more. This year, she went to Bengal to understand and learn about the *machan* (trellis) technique. She also bought thread from there and plans to set up one in her field. She dreams that, one day, women will come to her village for exposure visits. And with her strong determination and willpower, we do not doubt her a bit.

We have come a long way today. We understand that this is not the end. Farmers are bringing about major changes in their culture. Earlier, the area witnessed cultivation of only cereals and pulses. The method of cultivation was broadcasting. Also, the role of women in agriculture was limited to just working as labour. However, today the picture has changed. Women have started taking the lead to initiate new farming techniques in agricultural practices such as introducing the cultivation of vegetables, growing

paddy through SRI methods, going to the market to sell vegetables and in a way asserting their identity as farmers in their families and in society.

Earlier, many of the farmers did not take much interest in new agricultural techniques. Agriculture was regarded just as an occupation to feed their families. It was not seen as a commercial activity but was a means of sustenance. Now, agriculture is seen as a means to enhance their quality of life. It is being seen as an occupation through which they can earn sufficient income. Farmers have started to go to the markets and sell their produce. In a few villages, people from the *thakur* caste have also started practising vegetable cultivation. Earlier, this caste used to demean this activity.

Take Kureili, for example. The whole scenario of the village has changed because of one farmer's decision to experiment with cultivating vegetables. Most of the changes have taken place due to a ripple effect, wherein, people learned by seeing others and then following in their footsteps. One can see a visible change in most of the villages (if not all) with regard

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to the culture in agriculture in terms of changes in the crops grown or adding new crops, adoption of new techniques for cultivation, change of perspective regarding agriculture from subsistence farming to commercial farming and also the role of women in initiating these changes in their families and asserting their identity as farmers.

In the beginning there were challenges. Even though there were some farmers ready to experiment with a few changes in agricultural techniques and practices, the conviction and confidence was not high. Moreover, the sarcastic remarks

from the relatives and friends did not help. The outcome, however, boosted the energy and confidence of the farmers. The attitude of taking a risk and the readiness to accept consequences helped bring about these changes. Women, specifically, had to face extreme disapproval from family members. Today, the attitude has changed. Women have started going out to sell their produce in the market. In one of the conversations, the women said, *“Hum jab jaate hain sabji bechne tab jaldi bik jaata hai kyunki jaan-pehchan ki didiyan humse hi kharidti hain* (When we go to the market to sell vegetables, all the *didis* we know buy our produce and the vegetables get sold fast).”

Sarcastic remarks have now changed to appreciation.

For sure, there are many more miles to cover. Changes in agricultural patterns and perspectives can be seen in all the villages that PRADAN is working in but this is not so in all the households of those villages. In some cases, it has percolated into a majority of the village and in some cases into some households in a village. Overall, the change across the villages is yet to be seen.

A spark has definitely been lit; the fire is yet to be ignited.

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