

Empowering Women, Elevating Communities





Introduction

Walmart Foundation's support of PRADAN's work in enhancing rural livelihoods has been catalytic in building sustainable communities by creating income and livelihoods opportunities for marginalized people. Support for Project LEAP (Livelihoods Enhancement through market Access and women emPowerment), helped empower women farmers from remote geographies to set up FPOs (Farmer Producer Organizations), and participate in the modern economy via robust and fair commodity value-chains. This initiative facilitated small and marginal farmers realize their aspired goals, and in doing so rejuvenated rural economies that had been devastated by the pandemic.

To maintain and grow the momentum created through social mobilization and formation of economic groups like FPOs, efforts were required to ensure that these FPOs become self-sustaining business entities who are able to interact and negotiate with various market actors, community institutions, and the local administration on their own.

Walmart Foundation supported 'PROWFIT' (Prowess of organized ResOurces & Women-farmers for transforming FPOs into Independent insTitutions), an initiative launched in October 2022, which is a concerted effort in that direction. The 30-month project is nurturing 60 women-led FPOs in PRADAN and its NGO partners' work areas, with membership of women from small, marginal farm holders and mostly tribal households in the poverty pockets of eastern India. This would empower nearly 120,000 women, creating viable smallholder businesses with a total cumulative annual turnover of Rs 2,400 million (US\$ 29 million) (base average additional earnings unlocked US\$ 266 per woman small and marginal farm holder). The long-term vision for the project is to bring a new functional and aspirational

approach to improving rural livelihoods for per woman small and marginal farming households in the Tribal regions of the eastern states of the country, potentially making villages much better places to live in, with women having equal say in livelihoods decision-making and control over income.

The support from Walmart Foundation for the LEAP and PROWFIT projects is very significant, for not only creating the identity of marginalized, rural women as 'women farmers' but also for helping to establish them as business leaders and entrepreneurs, with the registration and support to more than 60 women-led FPOs. The stories captured in the book bear ample testimony to the impact that support from Walmart Foundation and other like-minded donor partners has effected on the ground. These are also stories of community resilience, the commitment of PRADAN teams, and convergence with Government development programs to double smallholder farmers income and lift them irrevocably above the poverty line, on the path to prosperity and well-being.

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Foreword

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FOREWORD

The agriculture sector plays a very important role in both economic development and Nation building. India is globally in the forefront of development of agriculture. Given that more than 86% of farmers in the country are small and marginal, there is a need to facilitate our farmers with access to improved technology, credit, better input and more markets to incentivize them to produce better quality commodity. For this, aggregation of small, marginal and landless farmers into FPOs will help enhance economic strength and market linkages of farmers for enhancing their income.

It is very encouraging to see Civil Society Organizations like PRADAN working extensively to help in registering and functioning of women-led FPOs in the Central India Tribal Belt with support from Walmart Foundation and other CSRs and private philanthropies.

The stories captured in this book are glowing examples of how women-led and women-owned institutions like FPOs are not only positively impacting the income levels of small and marginal farmers, but also improving their nutrition status, general well-being and providing them greater voice in matters of local area and overall rural development. It is also very encouraging to see that these institutions and women groups are adopting regenerative and sustainable farming practices which maintain and improve soil health for the future generations to benefit from.

I congratulate the communities, Walmart Foundation and PRADAN for their efforts and support to transform many of the FPO and SHG members into Lakhpati Didis by helping them access the provisions of the relevant State and Central Government Schemes, and strengthening farm and off-farm value chains with inputs, technology and productivity to harvest, post-harvest services and market access interventions.

My best wishes to the teams for fostering strategic partnerships and scaling up livelihood interventions, to empower rural women, break the cycle of poverty, and build resilient communities across India.



(CHARANJIT SINGH)

Foreword



While agriculture remains the primary source of income for India's population, most of India's farmers are small and marginal farmers that own less than 2.0 hectares of farmland. They inherently face numerous challenges, including lack of access to information, infrastructure, and resources, impacting their ability to support and by participating in market activity.

Market access is a key deciding factor in unlocking change for agricultural communities and enhancing their incomes. As more women formally join smallholder farming and start to act as torchbearers to prosperity for their families and communities, adopting a gendered approach to agricultural interventions, including through collectivization, is key.

Recognizing the significance of addressing these challenges, the Walmart Foundation prioritizes investing in grants that support smallholder farmer livelihoods, particularly focused on empowering women.

In India, the Walmart Foundation invests in grants that aim to enhance smallholder farmer livelihoods and value chains, encourage the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices, unlock access to finance, grow formal market linkages, strengthen Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and empower women farmers in FPOs.

This book shares inspiring stories of resilience, hope and transformation that are a testament to women farmers, who have emerged as a key player and changemakers in India's agriculture sector.

Such narratives resonate deeply with the Walmart and Walmart Foundation commitment to funding projects in India designed to help build capacity and advance the economic livelihoods of one million smallholder farmers by 2028, with at least 50% women.

By prioritizing these approaches, the Walmart Foundation has made grants designed to reach thousands of smallholder farmers across India. According to an impact review conducted by Sambodhi, Walmart Foundation grantees aim to help smallholder farmers to diversify their incomes, build capacity and invest in sustainable practices

Over the years, PRADAN projects like Livelihoods Enhancement through market Access and women emPowerment (LEAP) and Prowess of organized ResOurces & Women-farmers for transforming FPOs into Independent insTitutions (PROWFIT) have been instrumental in building crucial market linkages and paving the way for expanding access, connecting farmers to markets and steering the way for economic growth. These projects aim to mobilize over 120,000 women into agricultural value groups and promote women's leadership in the agricultural sector.

A Sambodhi impact report has underscored this approach and paved the way for grantees and organizations working in the sector to encourage more women to take ownership and participate in the rural economy.

Gender-sensitive agricultural programs can be instrumental in driving

economic growth. Organizations like PRADAN aim to empower a generation of women farmers in India, transforming them from participants to decision-makers in the agricultural sector. Through this work, PRADAN aims to narrow the gender gap, strengthen rural communities, and pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

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Aspiring Lakhpati Farmers

Henry Ford's immortal words, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success", are exemplified by the Mahila Krishi Baghbani Swawlambi Sahkari Samiti in Torpa block, Khunti district of Jharkhand. Through a collaborative effort, this Farmer Producer Company (FPC) is sparking an agricultural revolution in remote rural areas.

Before PRADAN established the FPC, farmers had limited knowledge and skills in modern agriculture practices, making it difficult to improve crop yields. Quality inputs were scarce, local vendors exploited them, and they encountered challenges in marketing their produce for optimal returns.

Nirmala Bengra, a farmer from the Dorma village of Torpa block, says, "With the support of the FPC in production techniques and quality inputs, I started growing different crops. I harvested nine tons of watermelon last year on a one-acre farm and sold it for Rs 50,000. Through MGNREGS support, I converted one-acre of upland into a mango orchard."

The FPC, under the PROWFIT project, has leveraged resources amounting to Rs 78.59 million from different government programs to develop essential infrastructure like solar lift irrigation, canals, and farm ponds enabling farmers to grow three crops in a year. Additionally, the FPC's assured guarantee to farmers to purchase their produce has empowered women farmers to grow and scale their cash crops of vegetables, pulses, and mustard.

Under the 'Kisan Pathshala' scheme, the FPC has acquired a 16-acre farm, nurturing it into a learning hub featuring cattle sheds, training centers, and crop demonstration plots. With a shareholder count of 3,167 representing some of the most marginalized groups in this country, the FPC has already achieved an annual turnover exceeding Rs 16 million.

Member of the Board of Directors of the FPC Itwari Devi declares, "Some of our farmers have already become Lakhpatis due to our collaborative efforts. However, our goal is for all Didis to achieve the same success."



Beej Se Bazaar Tak

When the Manonnati Mahila Kisan Producer Company Limited (FPC) started operations in 2020 in the Gola block of Ramgarh district in Jharkhand, it was a leap into the unknown.

Rina, a board member, says, “Women were not recognized as farmers, let alone expected to run a company. I recall that during training, we were asked to draw a picture of farmers, and everyone depicted a man with a plow.”

Women were excluded from decision-making roles, lacked knowledge and information, and had limited exposure to agricultural technologies and markets.

Supported by the PROWFIT project, the FPC can now deliver quality services to empower women farmers. Pushpa Devi, a technical supervisor appointed by the FPC, mobilized women farmers in her village to grow green peas as cash crops; her regular inputs led to increased production. Other supervisors have enabled farmers to improve the productivity of maize, pulses, and different vegetables.

Farmer Mamta Devi highlights the vital role of the FPC in her life, stating, “I am no longer dependent on my husband for seeds or market access. Women farmers can handle the hoe; women farmers can also reach the haat bazaar (main market).”

With over 3,000 shareholders and a business turnover of Rs 5.6 million in 2023-24, the FPC is today a vibrant institution recognized and supported by NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) and other government departments.

Significant efforts have been invested in capacitating the Board of Directors, who actively engage in planning, demonstration of crops, establishing market linkages, and reviewing staff’s work.

Rekha Devi, secretary of the FPC, says with a tinge of pride, “This all-women-run FPC is enabling farmers at every step, right from accessing quality seeds to linking to the market.”

“Hum Beej se Bazaar tak kaam karte hain!”

(“We work from seeds to market!”)





Nourishing Self and Soil

Usha Mahata from the Chhatardoba village in the Ranibandh block of Bankura district in West Bengal, painfully recalls an ordeal from 2018. “I had harvested the watermelon crops after a deal with a local vendor. But then he did not show up. We waited and waited, called him a hundred times. But to no avail. The scale of loss was immense,” she says.

In addition to such market challenges, she also faced other issues, such as poor-quality seeds, the rising cost of agricultural inputs, and access to credit to invest in winter crops after the paddy harvest.

She joined the Ranibandh Mahila Farmer Producer Company (FPC) in 2021.

She states, “The FPC ensures my access to quality inputs ranging from organic concoction to mustard seeds, and I don’t have to immediately worry about payment. Marketing is no longer a struggle; a vehicle from the FPC picks up the produce of the village.”

One significant transformation brought by the FPC in the area is the widespread adoption of organic practices and indigenous paddy. “As a member, it gives me immense pride that we have revived good quality indigenous paddy like Kala Champa, Badshah Bhog, and Sathiya which are now extensively grown by farmers through scientific organic methods. I was the first farmer in the village to come forward for the demonstration. I got a bumper production of 19 quintals per acre.”

Transitioning to organic indigenous paddy has substantially reduced the cost of production for farmers. Having attended several training sessions and received support under the PROWFIT project, farmers in Chhatardoba are now aware of the adverse effects of chemical farming on soil health, the environment, and human health.

“Our FPC has enabled us to eat healthy while sustaining soil health.”





Plowing New Paths: The First Woman Oxen owner

“I am the first woman in the village to purchase oxen with my own money,” happily exclaims Lalita Mahata, a woman farmer from Ladda village in the Ranibandh block of Bankura district in West Bengal.

This, along with many such stories, is part of a wider socio-economic change being driven by the Ranibandh Mahila Farmer Producer Company (FPC) in this part of rural India. The FPC has facilitated women to stay informed and updated about market trends, enabling them to make critical decisions with greater deliberation.

“I now grow a variety of crops across all seasons, aligning with the potential market demand. Our FPC provides us with quality inputs and continuous support throughout the cropping cycle for any disease or pest attack.”

The FPC has significantly eliminated the role of middlemen and with increased marketing support from the PROWFIT project, women farmers have expanded their cultivation areas for vegetables, watermelon, and other cash crops. Moreover, payments from the FPC are directly transferred into the accounts of the women shareholders.

“We (women) now have better control over the household income. For the very first time, I can spend money on purchasing items like clothes, small jewellery, or sometimes even eating out without my spouse’s permission. I also have Rs 10,000 in my bank savings account.”

She smiles and adds, “For bigger items, the decision is a joint one. It was my idea to buy a pair of oxen for the farm. We bought them for Rs 50,000 from the proceeds of watermelon and vegetable sales. And, of course, I take extra care of the oxen!”



Aspirations of a Budding Entrepreneur

“If more women venture into mushroom growing, I can sell more spawns (mushroom seeds). Everyone will earn more, and we will grow together. Hence, I go around villages training farmers,” says Shanti Badanayak, sharing her business philosophy.

Supported by the PROWFIT project, the aspiring entrepreneur hailing from the Paraja tribe in the Debagandana village of Koraput district in Odisha is now widely acknowledged for her efforts in promoting mushrooms to empower marginalized farmers. She purchases spawns from the Koraput Nari Shakti Farmer Producer Company (FPC) and sells them to farmers, maintaining a small margin.

Shanti underwent extensive sessions on entrepreneurship and technical know-how in Bhubaneswar, which equipped her with the skills and vision necessary to expand her enterprise.

However, her journey to entrepreneurship was far from smooth. Initially, she faced resistance from her in-laws, and the first batch of mushroom seeds proved to be of poor quality, leading to discontent among farmers. Shanti took responsibility and returned most of their money.

Things started to turn around when she established a mushroom seed production unit, thanks to the support provided by APICOL (Agricultural Promotion and Investment Corporation of Odisha Limited) and the Government of Odisha. In the last three months alone, she has successfully sold spawns worth Rs 20,000.

The ripples of Shanti's success extended beyond her personal earnings. She is now invited to cultural festivals, community meetings, and Gram Sabhas to inspire other farmers to grow mushrooms. The Agriculture Department supports her mushroom business by providing her space in different village level training and district level departmental forums.

This budding entrepreneur has aspirations beyond the confines of the village and block, stating, “Our FPC is striving to make mushrooms a staple item across Koraput and Odisha with our villages as the hub of supply!”



We Don't Migrate Anymore

“Even just five years back, I sold ginger for Rs 10 per kg. Imagine! People in town purchased 100 grams of ginger for Rs 10, and we sold it for a pittance to local vendors,” remarks Ullash Khinbudi from the Khurji village in the Koraput district of Odisha.

Supported by the Koraput Nari Shakti Farmer Producer Company (FPC), she adopted modern cultivation techniques that doubled her production on an acre farm. The other crucial intervention by the FPC was in ginger processing within the village, using wind and solar dryers. This innovation enabled farmers to store the commodity instead of distress selling it. In 2023, farmers successfully sold ginger for Rs 130 per kg.

“I sold ginger for a lakh (Rs 100,000),” happily exclaims Ullash.

Similar to Ullash, another 300 farmers, supported by the FPC under the PROWFIT project, are now engaged in cultivating diverse crops using modern technologies in fifteen villages in the Koraput district.

Sushila, a tribal farmer, is cultivating different vegetables like pumpkin and cabbages, along with ginger employing scientific practices. Her pumpkin production has jumped from 8 quintals to 20 quintals in half an acre of farm. Instead of relying on the open market or local vendors, she now sells her produce to the FPC, ensuring fixed optimum prices and receiving timely payments.

“I used to migrate to nearby towns along with my family after the paddy harvest. Now, with the support of the FPC, we cultivate crops year-round. The FPC pays a higher price for the pumpkins compared to local vendors, and they are processed in solar dryers, enhancing their shelf life,” she smiles and adds, “Many families now cultivate crops year-round instead of migrating.”



The Potato Woman!

“Paisa maang maang ke thak jaate the,” complains Rama Guntha, narrating her harrowing experience with vendors in the open market. (“We would be tired of asking for our dues for the produce sold.”)
“But we had no choice.”

For farmers in the Nilodoraput village of the Koraput district in Odisha, this dire exploitative situation took a positive turn when they joined the Koraput Nari Shakti Farmer Producer Company (FPC). The FPC, under the PROWFIT project provides crucial support to farmers like Rama, with access to high-quality inputs, timely cash payments, and marketing. This has helped Rama to expand her cultivation areas for potato and other crop.

“We also get one rupee more per kg for potatoes compared to the rates offered by vendors.”

In 2023, Rama cultivated 60 quintals of potato on three acres of her farm.

“I sold 30 quintals for Rs 45,000, while the other 30 quintals were used to feed devotees from six villages during a social ceremony at my home.”

Laughing, she says, “I was called a potato woman even before, but the event sealed my name!”

Rama’s expertise in potatoes has now gained widespread recognition in the district, and she provides training organized by the Horticulture Department to farmers in different villages. Her engagement with farmers has generated so much demand for the crop that the department has launched a 10,000-acre potato cropping scheme for the district and has already supplied 6,000 tons of subsidized potato seeds in six blocks.

“Even the Collector visited us to understand the supply chain of potatoes,” she recollects happily.

The other transformation due to the FPC is that even the vendors are now regular with their payments.

“Our FPC has brought about changes that seemed improbable even five years back!”





From Naya Gram to Nayi Delhi!

“Since we shifted to organic farming three years back, the colour of the soil has changed; earthworms, fish, and crabs have returned to our paddy fields,” says farmer Geeta. Facilitated by the Aamon Mahila Chasi Farmers Producer Company (FPC) in the Nayagram block of Jhargram district in West Bengal, 5,500 women from marginalized groups are cultivating, packaging, and selling various indigenous paddy, turmeric, and pulses.

Anjali Murmu, a member of the Board of Directors of the FPC, says, “In 2023, we sold 2000 quintals of black rice to different retailers. The rice from Naya Gram has even reached Nayi Delhi!”

Geeta adds, “With support from the FPC, I earned Rs 26,000 by harvesting organic bitter gourd in just 0.1 acre of land. I also earned Rs 31,000 by selling indigenous rice. My husband and in-laws appreciate my knowledge of different crops.”

Anjali nods, “I am no longer just someone’s wife. I have an identity today. Everyone knows our family because of me.”

Another shareholder of the company, Ambika, shifted from hybrid paddy to organically grown indigenous black rice and Badshah Bhog, a popular aromatic rice variety. She sold the paddy for Rs 51,000 which is Rs 18,000 higher than the return from hybrid paddy from the same piece of land.

“I not only received higher returns, but my family now consumes healthier food.”

The FPC is also running a rice and turmeric processing unit alongside a leaf-plate-making unit. Ambika is also employed as a stitcher in the leaf-plate-making unit.

“I earn Rs 6,000 per month working here. Some years back, my husband used to harass me whenever I went out. Now, I earn more than him. I want women from our FPC to break barriers and achieve financial independence.”



A New Hirawati

"It feels surreal, almost like a dream. When I reflect on what I used to be and what I've become now, this change sometimes seems unthinkable," says Hirawati from the Dhirol Baligeriya village in the Jhargram district of West Bengal.

Before joining the Aamon Mahila Chasi Farmers Producer Company (FPC) in 2022, Hirawati was like a labourer on her own farm. "I simply followed orders and did what my spouse and father-in-law said."

"Once I joined the FPC, I learned new agricultural techniques and insights. More importantly, I also met other women farmers who were creating a niche for themselves in their villages. I was so inspired."

To convince her father-in-law, she initially cultivated indigenous paddy through organic practices in a small patch. The results were so outstanding that the following year, the family shifted from hybrid to organic on all 2.5 acres of the farm.

"We sold the paddy for Rs 69,000. This provided us with an additional income of Rs 29,000 compared to previous years. I have also diversified into other cash crops like turmeric and bitter melon."

Capacitated under the PROWFIT project, with the help of different training sessions, interactions with other progressive farmers, and exposure to markets and new agricultural techniques, Hirawati is today a different person. Hirawati now has a say in all major decisions in the household, including agriculture. She not only manages the family's finances but also provides regular pocket money to her father-in-law!

"I have also invested in five insurance schemes and pay a yearly premium of more than Rs 50,000."

She jovially adds, "One of the insurances is for my spouse's auto! And this giant leap began with a baby step of cultivating indigenous paddy on a small plot of land."



Woman Farmer Facilitates Nature's Resurgence

"The extensive use of chemical inputs in farms had led to the disappearance of earthworms from our village," says Sandhya Rani Mahata from the Chhoto Khakri village in the Jhargram district of West Bengal.

Through exposure and training under the PROWFIT project, Sandhya adopted scientific organic practices including soil treatment with jeevamrit, ghanjeevamrit, and cow dung manure. She also embraced seed treatment with culture/beejamrit and regular pest management with neemastra and agniastra applications.

In the initial days, there was skepticism from her neighbours and even family members.

"I demonstrated the significance of indigenous seeds and organic inputs through initial trials on a small plot. The positive outcomes had a considerable impact on the entire village."

The cost of production in organic farming is much lower than in chemical farming. With marketing support for the produce provided by the Aamon Mahila Chasi Farmers Producer Company (FPC), incomes increased. This was pivotal to weaning farmers away from chemical farming.

Supported by PRADAN, the family also gained access to year-round irrigation via a solar submersible. "With the stress of water availability gone, I could also diversify into pulses and vegetables. So, have other families in the village." Today, over a third of the village has converted to organic farming.

As more and more farmers switched to organic agriculture in the village, nature began to regenerate. Homestead and paddy fields during monsoons now abound with earthworms, fish, snails, and crabs.

Sandhya says, "For me, the challenge is to convert the whole village to organic farming. I aspire for Khakri to become a green organic village."





We Are the Change Agents

Bhutudi, in the Rayagada district of Odisha, is an idyllic Adivasi village: remote, scenic, and thickly forested. Twenty-four families of the Kondho tribe live here and agriculture is the primary occupation. However, the returns on the farm produce, used to be low.

Rajeshwari Pirbaka says, “We were in a vicious trap of vendors; they provided inputs on credit at the time of sowing cotton. We then had to sell our produce to the same vendor at low prices. Many a time even the payment was delayed.” She adds, “Even if we grew commercial vegetables, vendors would siphon the major profits earned from it.”

The Mahila Pragati Farmer Producer Company (FPC) formed in September 2020 provided a lifeline to farmers through doorstep delivery of seeds and inputs on credit, marketing support, and timely cash payments.

“With the support of the PROWFIT project, I finally invested in growing vegetables as cash crops. Last year, I sold around 4,513 kgs of brinjal for Rs 64,000,” explains Rajeshwari.

Inspired by her success, other women farmers in the village have also diversified to grow brinjal and other vegetables.

“In the last few years, our small village has emerged as a hub of brinjal production in the block. Brinjal is a plant of prosperity.”

This intervention has enabled a transition from high-input, unpredictable returns in cotton farming to a more reliable and sustainable vegetable cultivation.

“The crucial change today is better access to the market. Unlike in the past, we are no longer dependent on exploitative vendors.”

Rajeshwari laughs and says, “Every time an FPC vehicle comes to our village to pick up vegetables, there is a spring in the steps of women farmers. We are the change agents.”



Awakening Nida Hathi

Situated atop a hill and surrounded by abundant upland, the tale of the name of the village goes back to a time when elephants would frequent the area, finding solace and rest in the peaceful surroundings.

“Our ancestors called it Hathi (Elephant) Nida (Sleeping),” says Malti, who belongs to the indigenous Adivasi community in the Baghmundi block of Purulia district, West Bengal.

“And for a long time, we were sleeping like the elephants from our legends. Women used to carry heavy loads of wood from the jungle to sell in nearby market areas. The world had progressed, but we were still dependent on rain for agriculture. Everyone in our village was very poor.”

Under the West Bengal Accelerated Development of Minor Irrigation Project (WADMIP), there was a significant investment in irrigation infrastructure improving access to vital irrigation.

Another crucial development under the PROWFIT project followed. Adivasi families were trained to diversify into the cultivation of mustard, lentils, and commercial vegetables.

Namita Hembram says, “In a matter of few years, we were growing crops round the year. We now grow, consume, and sell vegetables, pulses, and mustard. The Jungle Mahal Mahila Farmer Producer Company (FPC) supports the marketing of vegetables and fruits from our village.”

Saraswati Mandi remarks, “Last year, I sold vegetables and mangoes worth Rs 100,000.”

Skilling and economic empowerment have catalyzed numerous positive changes in the village.

Malti says, “Every household in this isolated village has a unique story to tell. I have learnt a new language, Bengali, and can now talk fearlessly to strangers.”

Individuals from all walks of life including farmers, government officials, and even interns come to the village to learn about their transformative story. Notably, a delegation from Bangladesh also paid a visit.

“We use maps, photographs, and guided tours around the village to narrate our journey. And teach them how to build a resilient village,” says Malti proudly.

The sleeping elephant has truly awakened!



Ambition Replaces Hunger

"Securing two square meals a day proved to be a persistent challenge for numerous years. Our dietary choices were confined to rice and saag (leafy green vegetables), and the luxury of meat was a rare indulgence," laments Kanti Oraon, an Adivasi woman farmer from the village of Teliya in the Gumla district of Jharkhand.

Her spirits lift as she returns to the present. An extrovert, Kanti enthusiastically declares, "Meat and fish are no longer occasional luxuries. Our children, now, enjoy them regularly. Isn't it amazing how things can change?"

Kanti now rears livestock, not just for cash needs but from a consumption perspective. Supported by the Gumla Mahila Kisan Swawlamban Trust, under the PROWFIT project, she diversified into commercial vegetable crops.

"I learnt to follow a Package of Practice and grow vegetables targeting the market. This has helped me get an additional income of Rs 60,000 every year," she says.

This additional income has helped her to invest in livestock rearing and strengthen other farming endeavors. The return from these investments has led to other economic changes; the family now possesses a solar submersible, power-tiller, TV, mobile, and motorbike. She also has a bank account with a saving of Rs 100,000.

Beyond tangible benefits, there has been a transformative change in her personality.

"I am a confident person now and can take a stand whether at home or in public." It has also fuelled other ambitions.

"I have invested in a rice milling machine. I want to establish a system for collecting paddy from households and delivering freshly milled rice," she confides.

And for the first time, she is looking at life, beyond the daily grind.

"I see people on Facebook travel to cities and hills. It would be nice to travel outside Jharkhand," muses Kanti, signing off.





I Want to Be the Biggest Goat Rearer in Town

In Jharkhand, mutton delicacies are cooked at family gatherings, social events, and during holidays. This is why, goat meat is in high demand, across the state.

Bandhni Oraon, an enterprising Adivasi goat farmer, from Anjan village in Gumla, says, “I always understood the potential of goat rearing. However, I did not have the technical knowledge to expand my brood. Goats, therefore, were just sources of additional cash income.” Herd sizes were small, due to high mortality rates, owing to poor and unhygienic practices of rearing.

The Gumla Goat Farmer Service and Welfare Trust, under the PROWFIT project, supported goat-rearing families with timely vaccination, deworming, castration, healthy feeding, and management and care practices. Regular visits by para-vets were the backbone of unprecedented growth with over 2,000 underprivileged families engaging in goat farming in Gumla.

Bandhni enthusiastically says, "In just three years, I have gone from having six to sixty goats." The Trust supports marketing, and this has enabled Bandhni to increase the herd size without the stress of sale.

A sharp entrepreneur, she says, “In Jharkhand, goat business has real money. Agriculture can be unsteady, but the market of goats is always expanding.”

In the last two years, on an average, she has sold more than Rs 100,000 worth of goats. Equally impressive is the fact that she is now recognized in her village and beyond as an enterprising goat farmer.

“I have become an expert on goat rearing. People, even men from other villages, come to me to seek advice on the nuances of rearing.” But Bandhni wants to soar higher.

“My next target is 100 goats. In five years, I want to rear 500 goats. I want to be the biggest goat rearer in Gumla.”





Naimi's New Avatar

"People consider my potato curry, 'alu jhol', absolutely irresistible," says Vesli Tirki.

In a slow but remarkable social transformation, men like Vesli and others in the Raghunathpur village of Gumla are taking up roles defying long-standing patriarchal norms. Vesli not only cooks but also helps in other household work like cleaning and childcare. "What you see today is different from the past," he chuckles.

When women's community institutions like SHGs were formed in the village, there was stiff resistance from men. Through collective efforts, women brought successful models of development in agriculture and participated actively in the grassroots-level governance systems.

Eventually, men joined the journey.

Naimi, Vesli's spouse, humorously reflects on this evolution, stating, "From jeering, they begun cheering us."

Vesli nods, "Women SHGs were taking significant strides to bring prosperity to the village. We also needed to play our part and not be just bystanders. Whether it is household chores or work on natural resource management, we have ably supported the SHGs."

This spirit of collaborative journey was strengthened by the PROWFIT project. As men and women came together to adopt improved agriculture practices, it has led to increased returns due to the sale of vegetables and mangoes through the Gumla Mahila Kisan Swawlamban Trust.

Vesli says, "We got an income of Rs 115,000 in 2023 by selling fruits and vegetables."

Enhanced incomes have resulted in material improvements within the village. Today, a majority of the 60 families own assets like motorbikes, water pumps, and televisions.

Other tangible changes are functioning toilets and bathrooms in every household.

Naimi says, "These days, I don't have to brood for weeks to buy a sari or household goods. We earn enough to lead a nice life."





This Home Won't Leak

“The house leaked when it rained. We also lacked adequate clothing, bedding, and blankets, and faced food scarcity,” says Manjula Gidhi from the Raghunathpur village in the Gumla district of Jharkhand.

Agriculture in Raghunathpur was underdeveloped.

“Everyone in the village cultivated vegetables but only on small patches and there was not much surplus. And we were not organized; so, we sold to traders who came to the village,” she mutters.

Manjula’s fortunes have taken a turn for the better since she became a part of the PROWFIT project. Her work as an agriculture entrepreneur is also reshaping her own life and the lives of thirty other women from her village.

Assisted by the Gumla Mahila Kisan Swawlamban Trust, farmers in the village have significantly expanded their vegetable area. They now also grow commercially profitable vegetables such as tomato, cauliflower, bitter gourd, and pumpkin to cater to the market.

Manjula says, “As an agriculture entrepreneur, I support and train my fellow farmers on harvesting and post-harvest management techniques such as sorting, grading, weighing, and standardized packaging. With this quality check in place, the Trust vehicle then picks up the produce in the evening and ensures timely delivery at the designated ‘mandi’ (large market) the next morning.”

This arrangement has brought significant prosperity to the families.

“Our vegetables, which are of excellent quality, are in high demand in the market. I earned Rs 90,000 selling vegetables in 2023. My fellow women farmers too are earning very good incomes.”

Manjula receives an additional Rs 30,000 every year for her work in the agriculture supply chain. The improved income has brought many changes, all for the better, in her life.

“For the first time, I bought earrings worth Rs 15,000. Actual ones, not trinkets!” she laughs.

But the most amazing change is the new house she is building.

“Brick by brick, with my own hard-earned money, I am constructing a house. This home won't leak.”



Goats for Greater Good

Renu Devi has an interesting anecdote to share, “I was so worried that goats would die that I had a restless night after I injected the first vaccines.”

She laughs, “But they did not. Today that herd is healthy with many broods.”

Supported by the PROWFIT project, the Gumla Goat Farmer Service and Welfare Trust is promoting 35 Pashu Sakhis (paravets) like Renu to support 2,000 goat-rearers from the most marginalized households in the district. A self-sustainable service model is emerging, wherein women goat-rearers are offered doorstep consultation services for the vaccination, deworming, and health-and-hygiene management of their livestock.

Lalo Oraon, an Adivasi woman from the Anjan village, who lost her spouse during the COVID-19 pandemic, says, “Due to the extensive support of paravets, goat-rearing is my primary means of livelihood, enabling me to take care of my family’s education, health, and daily expenses. I also pay my annual insurance premium of Rs 24,600 from this income,” she says.

As Renu would vouch, this change has not been an easy one. There was initial skepticism within the community about preventive approaches to disease control including vaccination, investment in feed, and better hygiene practices. The Trust conducted numerous community meetings and capacity-building exercises. Local Black Bengal breed was introduced.

“Black Bengal has high demand in the market due to its tender meat. In 2023, I made an annual income of Rs 110,000 by selling Black Bengal goats,” says Lalo.

Paravets like Renu have played a catalytic role in strengthening the livestock-based livelihood of villagers and contributing to the well-being of marginalized families.

“If done well, goat rearing can bring greater good to the entire community,” says Renu.





I Will Tell You a Secret

"Let me share a little secret known to everyone in rural areas," chuckles Anima Mahato from the Kudna village in West Bengal's Purulia district.

"For their own consumption, farmers grow food using cow-dung manure; for the market, they extensively use chemical inputs." Her friend and neighbor, Binarani Mahato, looks discomfited and counters, "But that's only because we were unaware, until now, of modern organic practices that can rejuvenate the soil and improve productivity."

Urmila Mahato, the third member of this close-knit bellwether group, says that a transition to sustainable farming is now underway. She explains the reason for this change, "The cost of agriculture inputs was rising. Moreover, the spillover from the chemical patch to our consumption patch meant that unless we adopted organic farming practices across the entire village, there would always be health implications."

Under the PROWFIT project, supported by the Jungle Mahal Mahila Farmer Producer Company (FPC), farmers in the village of Kudna are adopting a spectrum of sustainable practices, including green manuring; the application of farmyard manure during plowing; and the use of homemade bio-pesticides, Jeevamrit, multivitamins, and various cultures.

"There is no reason to fear productivity loss if we follow all the suggested steps. It also significantly brings down the input costs," says Binarani.

"I used to get 1.5 quintal chili per plucking from 1 Bigha (0.33 acres) before. Now with improved agricultural practices, I get close to 2 quintals per plucking."

Urmila says, "The per acre input cost in chemical farming touches around Rs 10,000. In our method, it is one-tenth of that."

"And following our example, 85 families (out of 145) in the village have shifted to complete organic practices."

Once the harvest is ready, the FPC links the organic produce of Kudna's farmers to the market.

Anima says, "Now everyone knows about our vegetables. They are snapped up as soon as the pick-up reaches the Mandi (bigger market)."

