

Bands of Security

A project supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency in north India is educating small farmers and rural women to earn better incomes and develop new livelihoods.

*“Jo anpadh hai naari, vo dukhiya bechaari, Jo padhti hai naari dekhe duniya saari
Aao behena sun lo ye gana, Hai Ram, sikhsha ka hai zamana”*

(An illiterate woman has to face miseries, while the world respects an educated woman. Come, sister, listen to what the song says...It's the time for education)

A dozen women sing aloud in unison in a small room with minimum furniture – a wooden string cot by the side and a bright blue plastic sheet spread on the dirt floor. It is the small hamlet of Bhiskuri, near Maida village, 30 km from the nearest city of Allahabad in north Indian state Uttar Pradesh.

The song describes the importance of education for women and their children without being preachy. The women, with neatly oiled hair and in colourful saris, sway to the catchy tune, fashioned on a popular Bollywood number.



The sense of unity and zeal is unmistakable. The women are a part of the *Lakshmi Swayam Sahayata Samuha*, a seven-month old Self Help Group (SHG) run by Japan based NGO Asian Sustainable Holistic Approach (ASHA) as part of the **Practical Farmers' Education Project**.

Photo: Maharani counts the month's savings.

The women raise 10 rupees (\$0.22) from their monthly savings to contribute to the group's fund, which in turn is distributed as micro-loans to members for livelihoods and income generation activities.

Maharani, 50, the treasurer, counts the collections for the month. She is illiterate, and is helped by the SHG animator Jagdish in noting the amount in the savings register. She then places the money in an aluminium box and locks it up in a bigger trunk along with the register and other notebooks.

Support networks

The Practical Farmers' Education Project is supported by JICA and is run in partnership with ASHA and the Makino School of Continuing and Non-Formal Education (MSCNFE), Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture, Technology & Sciences

(SHIATS), formerly the Allahabad Agricultural Institute. The project aims to cultivate rural leadership by educating marginal and small-scale farmers and women in income-generation activities to improve their quality of life.

Lack of livelihoods, migration and poor status of women were the key areas to address. In 2009 the project identified women in Kanjasa, Maida, Haldi and Bargohna villages and other hamlets in Allahabad district to set up SHGs that would help them beat poverty by saving.

At the start, the local project coordinator Namita Singh encouraged the women to save as low as a rupee a day from their earnings. Over a period of 2 years, the project grew from ten to 40 in 2010. This year there are 65 fully operational SHGs, comprising 700 women and 50 youth members. Each SHG has a president, a secretary and a treasurer to smoothly administer its functions.

Enterprising growth

In neighbouring hamlet Khurji, the houses are wall painted with slogans by MSCNFE to raise awareness on gender equality and education. The petite Janaki Devi, 30, here balances the dual role of a community health worker and the secretary of the *Radha Swayam Sahayata Samuha*.



Janaki and her husband set an example of small-scale entrepreneurship for the local community. “I borrowed 700 rupees from the SHG for an ice cream business and we made good profit,” she shares. In the future, she would like to start a business of spices and poultry rearing with some training from ASHA.

Photo: Janaki (right) at the SHG meeting with Namita (extreme left) and Urmila.

Tara Devi, 35, is a member of the oldest SHG in the district – the *Saraswati Swayam Sahayata Samuha* in Bada Kanjasa since almost two years. She has seven children and she and her husband rely on fishing to make ends meet.

By saving rupees 65 each month, she has been able to borrow a large sum of rupees 8,000 from the SHG fund at a low interest to make a new boat. Unlike earlier times, she did not have to go to the local moneylender and pawn her possessions for a loan.

Urmila Kushwaha, the project supervisor visits Janaki, Tara and the other women in each of the villages to understand their problems and make them aware of their rights. For the women, the ASHA team's presence has been certainly life changing.

“We aim to make these women self-reliant so that they can stand on their feet and shape their lives,” says Namita. And the results are showing. By dipping into their savings in times of need, these women feel empowered to lead better lives. They now command respect from fellow villagers and have a stronger say in their family matters.

Training centres in the four main villages also tutor the SHG members in income generation activities such as sewing and stitching, and beauty care.

Linking the rural and urban

Apart from training women to save and generate income through SHGs, ASHA also focuses on raising awareness on organic farming among small and marginal farmers. The Allahabad Organic Agricultural Cooperative (AOAC), located at the MSCNFE complex, is the project's one-stop training centre for the various related income generating activities.

Ram Milan, 40, a farmer from Bhiskuri, was trained in organic farming and poultry rearing at the AOAC by ASHA. “I now own half an acre of Japanese rice,” he says proudly. His poultry business also earns him an extra 1,400 rupees as chickens are sold to the cooperative for making processed meat products such as smoked chicken and sausages.



The fresh produce from Ram Milan's farm also finds a place at the AOAC where they are sold afresh or processed as squashes, pickles and sauces to be sold locally and in new markets in Varanasi, Delhi and other cities. Even as it thus builds a lasting demand for rural produce through its processing activities, ASHA creates income opportunities for rural youth and women at the centre.

Photo: Shubh sets up the machine to process pork meat.

Shubh Narayan, 22, from Bargohna village, is among the six workers at the AOAC food processing unit. After being trained in meat processing by ASHA, he earns a decent income and feels confident.

Through the AOAC, farmers like Ram Milan can also raise loans at minimal interest to invest in their livelihoods. India ASHA Project Coordinator Takaya Machigami envisions a future where farmers and SHG members come together to build a large scale rural industry funded by the cooperative.

Dr Teruo Miura, Project Manager, ASHA, sums up best as he says, “We believe nurturing local workers who continue to work here will lead to their empowerment.”

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