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VOICES FROM THE
FIELD



Image courtesy: Pradan

RISE FROM THE MARGINS: REAL STORIES OF MAHADALIT EMPOWERMENT IN BIHAR

**NAVIGATING CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER BARRIERS THROUGH
LIVELIHOODS, EDUCATION, AND COLLECTIVE ACTION**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is with immense gratitude and deep appreciation that we present this Edited Volume—a collective reflection of the lived experiences, resilience, and transformative journeys of the Mahadalit communities in Bihar. This compendium was developed **with the intention of generating grounded insights and cross-sectoral learning on interventions** among ultra-poor, most vulnerable, and marginalized communities, **particularly the Musahar, Nat, Mehtar, and other Mahadalit subgroups**.

The purpose of this volume is not to offer **a conventional research-driven analysis, but rather to bring together practitioner voices from the field**—many of whom are frontline staff with limited formal training or habit of writing case studies or articles. Despite this, their contributions carry authenticity, immediacy, and depth that emerge from direct engagement with the communities they serve.

This compendium is the outcome of a carefully designed, rigorous, and inclusive process that sought to encourage meaningful participation from a diverse group of field practitioners. The journey began with the dissemination of a concept note and a call for participation, inviting organizations to nominate individuals with firsthand experience of working with marginalized communities. This was followed by a series of virtual orientation meetings where the objectives, expectations, and protocols were collectively discussed and agreed upon. A detailed case study protocol was developed and shared with all participating authors to guide the writing process and ensure consistency in structure and depth. Throughout the process, authors received continuous mentoring and feedback from thematic experts and technical editors. From their initial drafts to the final versions, each case study went through several iterations, often requiring four to five rounds of revisions. A four-day residential writeshop served as a critical milestone in this process, offering a collaborative space for peer learning, real-time feedback, and focused editorial support. This enabled each author, many of whom were writing such case studies for the first time, to refine their narratives and bring clarity and coherence to their lived observations. The final product reflects not only the content of the stories but also the spirit of collective learning and co-creation that shaped this volume.

This volume would not have been possible without the unwavering commitment and collaboration of many individuals and teams who contributed at every stage of its development.

First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all the **case authors**, representing **4S India, PRADAN, SSEVS, SAMVET, PHIA Foundation, SWEA BHARAT, NACDOR and Musahar Manch** whose rich and thoughtful narratives have formed the foundation of this book. Your dedication to capturing the voices from the margins and presenting them with clarity and compassion is truly commendable.

MIHIR SAHANA & DR. MAHUA GHOSH SENGUPTA,
SARVA SEVA SAMITY SANSTHA (4S INDIA)
18th JULY 2025

We are especially grateful to our **guide and mentor, Dr. Tabrez Nasar**, whose vision, critical insights, and steadfast guidance have been instrumental throughout this journey. From shaping the initial concept to developing the case study protocol and facilitating meaningful engagement among contributors, his involvement ensured that the process remained focused, inclusive, and grounded in the lived realities of the communities we sought to represent. His intellectual leadership not only provided the necessary direction and depth to this collaborative effort but also helped uphold the integrity and purpose of the compendium at every stage.

Our sincere thanks go to the **Technical Editors, Mr. Avinash Kumar, Mr. Navin T., Mr. Vivek Kumar, and Mr. Mihir Sahana**, whose rigorous reviews and constructive feedback greatly enhanced the quality and coherence of the case studies.

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We are thankful to the **Central Coordination Team of 4S India** for providing seamless logistical support throughout the process, and **to all other staff members of 4S India** whose visible and invisible contributions—be it through field support, communication, or encouragement—made this collective endeavor possible.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, we offer our warmest thanks to everyone who walked with us in this journey. This volume is not just a documentation of experiences—it is a tribute to the power of community voice, collaboration, and grassroots change.

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FOREWORD NOTE

It's a pleasure to write this Foreword.

The Acknowledgement section by the editors, Mihir Sahana and Mahua Ghosh Sengupta, is much more than that. It's a Preface. As they put it, it is a collective reflection of the lived experiences, resilience, and transformative journeys of the Mahadalit communities in Bihar. This compendium brings together practitioner voices from the field with the intention of generating grounded insights and cross-sectoral learning on interventions among ultrapoor, most vulnerable, and marginalized communities. I would therefore ask readers to expend greater attention to this section than they would have done in the normal course.

This is followed by Navin T's cover article, "Role of CSOs in addressing challenges of Mahadalits" which not only provides an overview of the fourteen case studies in the compendium and but the logic of classifying them under the three domains of ecological, economic, and empowerment & social justice.

Pertinently, the first thing that the Preamble to our Constitution seeks is "to secure to all its citizens Justice, social, economic and political". It is therefore no coincidence that in a recent interview with The Indian Express (August 26, 2025) Justice (retired) B Sudershan Reddy made a telling observation: "My ideology is the Constitution... The order of social justice, economic justice, and political justice is prescribed by the Preamble. I am a votary of social justice. If it means Leftism, I'm nobody to brand it, whether it is Left, Right, or Centre."

The need for social, economic and political justice would be most relevant for Mahadalits. But 75 years after our Constitution was adopted, the condition of Mahadalits remains appallingly dismal. Mihir Sahana's review article – which should have been the opening article in this compendium – provides a clear, quantitative overview of the severe multi-dimensional deprivation faced by Mahadalits across seven indicators of landlessness, literacy rate, housing, access to sanitation, access to piped water, health and nutrition, and financial access.

To that extent, each of the fourteen case studies chronicled in this compendium is a reflection of the efforts made by Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha and other civil society organisations to address the foremost concern laid down in our constitution. While this by itself is something to be proud of, the significance is more. Each of the interventions – that have been classified into three domains of ecological, economic, and empowerment & social justice – is a success story. But these "stories" are not PR exercises; they are backed by evidence. There's baseline data against which improvements on multiple parameters are observed.

The significance of these achievements may also be examined from another dimension. While the Bihar government can be credited with initiating multi-pronged programmes to uplift the status of Mahadalits, research studies such as by Archana Singh from the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and

Inclusive Policy in JNU and Pushpendra Singh from the Department of Humanities at IIT Roorkee found over 73 percent of the 96 households surveyed during fieldwork were below the poverty line. Even the CAG Report of March 2019 found ineffective financial management, financial irregularities, and inadequate manpower at state, district and block levels – factors that had severely undermined programme effectiveness.

Even otherwise, as Mihir Sahana has noted traditional, top-down development strategies have frequently fallen short in addressing the specific and complex needs of these deeply marginalized communities. Such approaches often fail to account for the unique socio-economic and cultural barriers faced by Mahadalits, leading to uneven development outcomes and persistent disparities. What's required is a targeted, community-level inclusion strategy, built on participatory approaches and comprehensive support. This is indispensable for sustainably uplifting Mahadalits from ultra-poverty.

But a key question arises. If the top-down approach doesn't work, if there are inefficiencies and corruption in otherwise well-intentioned government schemes, and if the Mahadalits are as good as a disenfranchised lot, then on whose mantle does the responsibility fall?

The concern for "people centeredness" in development practice is not a new thing. First, it is not just a question of "whose voice", but to what extent do these local voices have any influence in shaping their lives, much less if these local voices are heard by policy makers? Second, who has to change to increase the impact of the local voices: the local people or development professionals? Decades of experience suggest the uncomfortable truth that the quality of development depends on what sort of people the development professionals are, and what they do.

I have felt it necessary to emphasise the above – especially the "who changes" aspect – because in our overriding concern for "locally led development", we may defocus the role of donor and implementing agency. It is critical to emphasize this symbiotic relationship, especially in the emerging environment where development organisations face restrictive funding support.

Finally, as an academic who has also expended significant time and effort in field research, I'd like to point out that this compendium is a goldmine for scholars who are interested in grounded research. While individual case studies have their own merit, scholars can integrate the data from across these fourteen case studies to develop grounded theory. What better way than to bridge the chasm between theory and practice. And in the same vein, I would call upon the editors to embark on their next project: to conduct research "writeshops" to covert at least some of the case studies into first rate research articles fit for publication in refereed journals.

-Prof. Somnath Ghosh; Founding Dean of IIM Kashipur, Professor at IIM Indore, and MDI Gurgaon

FOREWORD NOTE

Over the course of my research among the Musahar community, I encountered various Mahadalit settlements that left an indelible impression on me. Despite lives forged by hardship and circumscribed by cycles of intergenerational poverty, their demeanour has an understated resilience. This compendium arrives at a timely juncture, more than fifteen years after the term Mahadalit was introduced, urging us to pause and reflect on the predicament of those who continue to dwell at the margins.

The prefix 'Maha' was affixed to the 'most deprived', 'most marginalised', 'poorest of the poor' Dalit caste groups by the State Mahadalit Commission, constituted by the Government of Bihar in 2007. This term connoting 'massive', 'mighty' or 'grand', in my view captures three inter-related yet contrasting dimensions: first, the enormity of deprivation and the persistent entrapment of a subset of the Dalit population in conditions of abject poverty and underdevelopment; second, a recognition of the uneven trajectories of socio-economic mobility within Dalit communities; and lastly and most importantly, an aspirational vision of 'maha' transformation through targeted, scheme-based interventions. Mahadalit, thus, is not a constitutional category but an administrative construct, a reminder of profound internal diversity within Dalit communities. By naming the 'most excluded within the excluded', the term foregrounded those who had been left behind, even within the emancipatory frameworks of affirmative action.

What I encountered in Mahadalit households is that poverty is not merely material but also carries the unspoken stigma of being considered responsible for their own condition. Their struggles echo long histories of being seen as 'lesser', where opportunities for land, education, or secure work seemed always out of reach. What remains visible today is their continued confinement to the most precarious and stigmatised segments of the labour market, where livelihood remains deeply uncertain and dignity is continually negotiated.

This compendium by Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha (4S India) revisits the question of why Mahadalits have remained entrapped in cycles of deprivation and marginalisation despite decades of welfare policies and constitutional guarantees. This question underscores the need for analysis through the lens of the 'ultra-poor', where poverty is multidimensional

and marginalisation is compounded. Drawing on frameworks such as BRAC's Targeting the Ultra-Poor program and J-PAL's multidimensional poverty indices, Mahadalits display all the hallmarks of extreme deprivation: over-representation in the bottom decile of income distribution, chronic food insecurity, absence of productive assets, caste-based segregation and stigma, low educational attainment and fragile integration into both economic and civic systems. Their condition thus represents a structurally reproduced intersection of ultra-poverty, caste oppression, and systemic misrecognition. Addressing such entrenched marginality requires a holistic and intersectional approach, and this volume presents a triad of interventions—ecological, economic, and empowerment and social justice—to uncover the multiple facets of the everyday lives of Mahadalits. In doing so, it challenges the narrow understanding of development by suggesting that development should be seen as a multidimensional socio-economic process.

Within ecological interventions, there is a case story of Vinoba Nagar situated in Gaya, where the installation of a solar lift irrigation system reconfigured access to water. Another instance from Bankey Bazaar and Imamganj shows how farm bunding reshaped landscapes to protect and enhance cultivation. Lastly, in the account of Kalo Devi, the adoption of soilless nursery farming not only sustained her household but also inspired a collective of women farmers to join her in Bankey Bazaar. These stories not only detail technical solutions but also exemplify how community-driven agricultural innovations can diversify income generation, enhance resource ownership, mitigate ecological vulnerability, and foster sustainable pathways of empowerment.

Under economic interventions, there are examples from the Musahar community, which has long been reduced to the identity of wage labourers and is stereotyped as lacking leadership qualities, who began to redefine that imposed identity. In Bahuarwa village, Musahar women, tired of living in incongenial conditions, entered the Gram Sabha for the first time, while in another instance in Bahuarwa tola, Musahar refused to remain bound to the vulnerabilities of wage labour, leasing land and venturing into cultivation, pig and poultry rearing with support. In another story of Jehanabad, documented in this section, women of the Chamar community demonstrated entrepreneurial skill

by adopting mushroom cultivation, a resource-efficient practice that not only improved their livelihoods but also repositioned them as change agents. Together, these accounts illustrate the transformative power of community-driven strategies in reimagining livelihoods and challenging entrenched stereotypes.

Thirdly, under the category of empowerment and social justice interventions, the compendium includes cases that unveil facets of Mahadalit lives often obscured. One of the stories tells us about the long and arduous struggle of a Musahar woman in Maharajganj, Uttar Pradesh, who, through peaceful resistance, claimed her ownership over land, which is a testimony of how Musahars, trapped in systemic barriers, have remained landless till today. Another case story highlights the overlooked lives of people with disabilities from marginalised communities, whose exclusion is compounded by social perceptions that reduce them to mere 'labouring bodies.' As they are unable to contribute to physical labour, their vulnerability is doubled, emphasising the need for initiatives that foster self-dependence, dignity, and confidence. A further case from Gaya reveals the disengagement of Mahadalit children from formal education, a reality underacknowledged yet crucial to address in shaping inclusive socio-educational policies.

Together, these interventions reflect not isolated acts of assistance by 4S and allied organisations but underline how targeted interventions can disrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty. The case stories documented in this compendium extend far beyond what I have briefly summarised, offering a deeper understanding of the diverse facets of life at the margins. What stands out is the paradigm shift they suggest: development, especially in the context of Mahadalits, cannot be approached through one-size-fits-all frameworks. These interventions, grounded in community participation, remind us that those facing layered marginalisation at the intersections of caste, class, and gender require responses attuned to their specific circumstances.

The spirit of the compendium lies in rendering the multi-layered experiences of Mahadalit lives legible, and insisting that these experiences should inform policies and programmes. I hope readers, through these case stories, will engage with the complexity and layered nuances of Mahadalit poverty. These narratives also illuminate a profound paradox that the possibility of dissent often arises from these spaces of marginality. Above all, it emphasises that Mahadalits are not passive beneficiaries but active agents shaping their own futures. They embody not merely strategies of survival but assertions of dignity and collective empowerment, pointing towards pathways that resist reductive narratives of victimhood.

-Priyanandini; School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

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Mahadalits of Bihar – Role of CSOs in addressing challenges of Mahadalits

1. PROBLEM CONTEXT OF MAHA-DALITS IN BIHAR

Maha Dalits as a socio-economic category within Dalits and seen as the poorest within this segment was coined by Government of Bihar in 2007. A commission set up by the name Maha-dalit commission in 2007 recommended the inclusion of 18 and later 21 of the 22 Dalit castes in this category. The castes that were included were Bantar, Bauri, Bhangi, Bhogta, Bhuiya, Chaupal, Dabgar, Dom/Dhangad, Ghasi, Halaka, Hari, Kanjar, Kurariar, Lalbegi, Mahtar, Musahar, Nat Pan, Sawasi, Rajwar, Turi, Dhobi, Pasi and the Chamar. As per Bihar Caste Census, SCs constitute 19.65% of the total population. 69% of the SCs except Dusadhs were categorised as Maha Dalits initially. In a later phase, even Dusadhs were included under this category.

Though it is difficult to categorise Maha-dalits as a sociological concept, as a category they represent one of the most marginalized communities in Bihar. For generations, they have witnessed social exclusion and discrimination. Being at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, they have been subjected to oppression, stigmatized as being those who are into traditionally 'unclean' occupations. The socio-economic conditions are that of severe deprivation, with limited access to education, healthcare, land, livestock, livelihood assets and other essential resources. Exclusion from mainstream has resulted in entrenched poverty, low literacy rates, poor health outcomes and minimal political participation.

This disadvantaged group continue to rely on traditional occupations such as agricultural labor, work in brick kilns, informal sector jobs. Many of these jobs are low wage paying and provide insecure employment. Ownership over land is lacking, further limiting their ability to come out of poverty. Access to livelihood assets such as land, livestock, agricultural implements, finance is minimal. Participation in cooperatives and collectives is rare. Seasonal migration in search of work is highly prevalent, particularly during agricultural off-season. They work in urban areas or in other states during off seasons.

The conditions under which Maha-dalits live continue to be harsh. Housing conditions are inadequate. Many reside in kucha structures. Access to basic amenities like clean drinking water or

sanitation is lacking. Malnutrition is highly prevalent. This is more so in the case of children, thus resulting in high rates of illness and even early mortality. On health indicators, such as infant mortality rates (IMR) and maternal mortality rates (MMR), the situation continues to be poor, thus indicating inadequate access to healthcare services. The overall life expectancy continues to be shorter, and quality of life is marked by deprivation and neglect. They are not just limited to economic sphere, but also in the social and political sphere, thus being marginalized across. Denial of access to public services such as healthcare, education, social security programs are common. Economically, they continue to be exploited through poor labor practices both on farm and off-farm with low wages, which only perpetuates poverty. Politically, they are under-represented making it further difficult to assert their rights and influence state and local governance structures.

Demographically, while they form a sizeable portion of Bihar's population though in social, political and economic spheres, they are marginalized. Their population is estimated to be about 2.07 crores in Bihar which is more than the population of Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Greece etc. As an ultra-poor category, this disadvantaged group faces challenges in benefiting from development interventions due to their marginalization. Thus it is important to empower them through creating access to education, healthcare, livelihoods. Political representation is also key to breaking the cycle of poverty and marginalization which has affected them for generations.

Parameters set for ultra-poor defined by BRAC's Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) program and J-PAL's multidimensional poverty indices, include extreme income poverty (lowest income decile), chronic insecurity (fewer than two meals daily), lack of productive assets, social exclusion due to caste or ethnicity, limited access to education and health services, high vulnerability to shocks, and weak integration into economic and social systems. (BRAC, 2002) (Hashemi S.M. & Umaira, 2007)(Banerjee, 2015) (JPAL, 2020). These criteria are directly applicable to Mahadalits, who are over-represented in the bottom 10-20% of income distribution, own minimal or no land, and rely on irregular, low-wage labor (SECC 2011). NFHS-5 (2019-21) data shows elevated

malnutrition in Mahadalit-dense Bihar districts, reflecting chronic food insecurity, while their low literacy rates (below 40% for females, Census 2011) and restricted access to PDS or MGNREGA due to administrative barriers highlight multi-dimensional deprivation.

The applicability of these ultra-poor criteria to Mahadalits is further evident in their systemic social exclusion, as they are confined to segregated tolas with poor access to water, sanitation, and infrastructure. (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2018)(Studies, 2019). Their vulnerability to floods exacerbates this deprivation. Given their collective, identity-based marginalization, community-level interventions—beyond household targeting—are essential, incorporating bundled support in assets, skills, health, and empowerment, as advocated by BRAC and J-PAL. Recognizing Mahadalits as ultra-poor under these criteria enables tailored programs, prioritizing governance representation and disaggregated data collection to address structural barriers.

Beyond the economic parameters defined by ultra-poor parameters, historically, caste system has influenced the socio-economic conditions of this segment and relegated them to the bottom rungs of society. This is despite constitutional provisions aimed at improving their status. They continue to face systemic discrimination. Various papers have indicated on their status.

Ankit in his paper discusses how caste politics in Bihar evolved with political parties mobilizing identities including Dalits. Despite the emergence of 'Bihari' identity, the socio-economic upliftment of Maha Dalits remained limited. Despite the policies of the State under the leadership of Nitish Kumar aiming at achieving broad-based economic growth, it still lacked targeted interventions of its most marginalized groups namely Maha-dalits. (Ankit, 2018, 12(2), pp. 115-136)

Gautam in his paper found that economic conditions of Maha-dalits are characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment. They are being pre-dominantly poor face significant barriers to economic mobility. (Gautam, 2021). Discrimination at various levels socio-economic, political, administrative sphere only exacerbates their conditions, thus reproducing cycle of poverty which is difficult to escape. Kumar highlighted correlation between socio-economic status and development indicators such as health outcomes. He noted that poorer households become more susceptible to malnutrition and health related

issues. More so is found in the case of Maha-dalits, who lack access to basic health services and nutritious food. (Kumar, 2021)Despite the legal framework of enhancing access to education, education is a critical area where this segment faces challenges. They face barriers in accessing education. Gordon found that girls from marginalized groups including Maha-dalits face exclusion from educational opportunities due to financial constraints and cultural norms. Lacking access only perpetuates the cycle of poverty, as it limits employment prospects and economic independence. (Gordon, 2021)

Health disparities are also seen among this marginalized group. As a result they continue to experience higher rates of malnutrition and related health issues. Yadav points that Maha Dalits suffer from inadequate nutrition, limited access to healthcare services due to health inequalities. The poor socio-economic status makes them less likely to seek medical care. Financial constraints and social stigma come in the way. (Yadav, 2020)

The geographical context, the disaster prone nature of Bihar adds further to their vulnerabilities. Natural disasters such as floods affect the marginalized communities more than anyone. Sahani shows how flood vulnerability further marginalize marginalized groups during disaster events. This only further worsens the already impoverished socio-economic status. The coming together of socio-economic and environmental factors compound their challenges. (Sahani, 2023)

Political representation is necessary for articulating the voices faced by marginalized groups and calling for addressing the socio-economic conditions of Maha-dalits. Jha is of the view that democratic decentralization can be an enabler and enhance political inclusion of marginalized communities including Maha Dalits. Effectiveness depends on how low leaders accept the issues and the political will to prioritize the needs of these communities. (Jha, 2021)

Though challenges have been encountered from time to time, there have also been instances of agency among them. These voices from below have taken up community led initiatives and participated in grassroots movements challenging the status quo, advocating for their rights and entitlements. Bhoi emphasized the importance of creating cultural capital of Dalits and Adivasis, which can enable in navigating socio-political landscape more effectively. Such initiatives are found essential for raising a sense of agency and promoting socio-economic development among this community. (Bhoi, 2024).

As can be seen the conditions of this marginalized group are influenced by factors such as the historical discrimination, barriers to education, health, political dynamics and environmental vulnerabilities. A multi-pronged approach that targets policies, community empowerment initiatives are needed to address the systemic barriers. This marginalized group should be prioritized and made integral to achieving social justice in Bihar.

2. APPROACHES ADOPTED BY THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY FOR INCLUSION OF MAHA DALITS

At different points of time, interventions have been taken up by state and civil society organizations to improve their conditions.

The interventions undertaken by the State include that of Maha Dalit Vikas Mission and Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS). This Mission has aimed at targeted interventions. BRLPS has played a key role in enhancing access to resources and livelihood opportunities for this community. Other interventions include that of MGNREGA which have provided employment, housing schemes, food security schemes which have reduced their economic vulnerability. There have also been land redistribution efforts, rural development schemes to create access to productive assets. Healthcare, sanitation and education initiatives also work to bridge critical gaps.

Civil Society organizations (CSOs) have taken up community mobilization, capacity building and livelihood support programs with the Maha Dalits. They aim at promoting livelihood diversification, through interventions in agriculture, agri-allied livestock activities, natural resource management (NRM) interventions and skill development. To enhance human capital, leadership development programs have been taken up so that they get capacitated to access rights and entitlements. This is for their greater socio-political and economic inclusion.

Community led initiatives include those that promote collective action such as self-help groups (SHGs), Cluster level federations (CLFs), cooperatives and Farmer producer organizations (FPOs). The grassroots organizations advocated for their rights, implementation of rights & entitlements and development projects aimed at achieving economic and social transformation. They have targeted at achieving community solidarity, negotiating for resources and driving development from within.

The Maha Dalit Commission which was launched in 2007 by Nitish Kumar made extensive recommendations, for uplifting Maha Dalit communities, including eliminating gaps in BPL lists, improving key government schemes like Public Distribution System (PDS), Indira Awas Yojana, MGNREGA, ICDS and Mid-Day meal schemes. Infrastructure development included toilets, primary health sub-health centres, hand pumps, Anganwadis and schools in their localities. The commission emphasized reservations in education, vocational training, uniforms and cycles for students, homestead land, and ending manual scavenging. It also proposed appointing a local 'Vikas Mitra' in each hamlet to link communities to government programmes. (Somanathan, August 2015). Its multi-faceted interventions addressed challenges in education, employment and social inclusion, aiming to eradicate discrimination and improve economic opportunities.

This mission emphasized holistic development to enhance living conditions and social integration of Maha Dalits. (Singh, 2018).

Health initiatives in Bihar have targeted at improving maternal and child health outcomes, particularly benefitting marginalized Maha Dalit communities. Ananya program, a collaboration of Government and Bihar and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, promoted maternal and newborn health during the critical 1,00-day window, with ASHAS playing a vital role in facilitating access to healthcare. (Mc Dougal, 2017). (Patel, 2018). Mobile Nurse Training under the Integrated Family Health Initiative enhanced nurses skills in the maternal and neonatal care, reducing mortality rates. The AMANAT mentorship program improved neonatal care quality, addressing barriers in rural areas. (Das A. N., 2016).

Apart from health interventions, economic empowerment interventions have also been crucial in improving the conditions of Maha Dalits. The Jeevika program, focused on self-help groups was instrumental in promotion financial inclusion and entrepreneurship among women in Bihar, including the ones from Maha Dalit backgrounds. (Singh., 2023). Through providing access to micro-credit and also enhancing skills, Jeevika enabled many women to start their own businesses, thus enhancing their economic independence and social status within their communities. (Singh., 2023) .

Educational initiative too have been prioritized by Maha Dalit Vikas Mission which has aimed at increasing literacy rates and educational attainment

among children of this segment. (Singh, 2018). Through focusing on inclusive education policies and providing scholarships and incentives to send their children to school, it aimed to create a more equitable educational landscape that empowers future generations of Maha Dalits. (Singh, 2018).

The coming together of health, economic empowerment and education is critical for holistic development of Maha Dalits in Bihar. The various interventions indicate a comprehensive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges of this marginalized community. However, still the challenges such as inadequate healthcare infrastructure, social stigma and discrimination, economic disparities continue to hinder progress. (Mohan, 2016). Addressing the systemic issues needs a sustained commitment from governmental and non-governmental organizations with active participation of this community.

Thus the interventions have improved the conditions of Maha Dalits in Bihar. While considerable progress has been made through initiatives such as Maha Dalit Vikas Mission, Ananya and JEEVIKA, persistent efforts are necessary to overcome the barriers that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. While a degree of literature exists on the role of the state, there is a need to capture the role of civil society in contributing to improving the conditions of this segment in Bihar. The upcoming section delves into this.

3. PURPOSE AND STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF THE COMPENDIUM

This Edited Volume has been conceptualized and curated as a collaborative effort to build a common platform for individuals and organizations working with the Mahadalit communities of Bihar. It serves as a powerful repository of lived experiences, field interventions, and community-driven transformations. By bringing together voices from grassroots organizations, the volume documents diverse case studies highlighting ecological, economic, and empowerment initiatives that address deep-rooted caste, class, and gender barriers.

The primary objectives of this compendium are-

- **Capacity Building & Learning Resource**

First, it acts as a powerful tool for capacity building. The volume, with its diverse and grounded case studies, can be used as a training and orientation resource for development professionals, community workers, and grassroots leaders. It provides real-life examples and practical insights that can strengthen the capacities of those working directly with

marginalized groups, particularly the Mahadalit communities.

- **Evidence Base for Policy Influence**

It functions as an evidence base for policy influence. The cases documented in the volume showcase field-level interventions, community-led innovations, and programmatic gaps, which can inform government schemes and donor strategies. This kind of experiential evidence plays a critical role in bridging the disconnect between top-down policy frameworks and ground realities, especially in the context of social exclusion and poverty.

- **Documentation for Funding & Partnerships**

The volume can be an important tool for resource mobilization and institutional partnerships. The organizations featured in the compendium can use these well-documented success stories to demonstrate impact to funding agencies, CSR partners, and governmental stakeholders. By showcasing what works in challenging contexts, the volume helps build credibility and fosters collaboration.

- **Academic Reference & Research Material**

It holds potential as a valuable academic resource. With its integration of field narratives and references to relevant secondary literature, the volume contributes to the literature on Dalit studies, rural development, and inclusive governance. Scholars, students, and researchers can draw upon these case studies for further analysis, comparative studies, or action research.

- **Tool for Community Empowerment**

Finally, the compendium is a means of community empowerment. When shared back with the communities—especially in local languages—it can inspire other Mahadalit families to initiate similar actions in their own areas. These stories of resilience and change foster a sense of collective identity, encouraging people to assert their rights, organize around issues, and build solidarity.

4. KEY INTERVENTIONS ADOPTED BY CSOS: 3 E STRATEGY – ECOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC, AND EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES

In Bihar, organizations such as Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha (4S), Samagra Sikhhan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SSEVS), Musahar Manch, SAMVET – Bhagalpur, Professional assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), Partnering Hope into Action (PHIA), National confederation of Dalit Organizations (NACDOR), Self-employed Women Association (SEWA Bharat) have been at the forefront of the work with Maha Dalits.

The interventions undertaken can be categorized into the following triad strategy: -

This section discusses the ecological, economic and empowerment interventions taken up by the CSOs.

4.1 Ecological Interventions

The ecological interventions included promoting sustainable agriculture, system of rice intensification, solar powered irrigation systems, farm bunding and water management, agro forestry and organic farming.

The case study titled “Solar lift Irrigation System: Mahadalit Families marching towards prosperity” by 4S highlights the transformative impact of renewable energy on the lives of the marginalized communities. Implemented at Vinobanagar hamlet of Bankey Bazaar, Gaya district, it focused on installing solar-powered lift irrigation to address water scarcity and enhance agricultural productivity. Through creating such an access, the project improved livelihoods in the village. The outcomes included enhanced irrigation capacity, reducing dependence on diesel pumps leading to lessened CO2 emissions, improved crop yields and enhanced community participation.

The case study titled “Strengthening Rural Livelihoods Through Bunding: Impact, Inclusion, and Transformation among Dalit and Mahadalit communities” by 4S displays the effectiveness of farm bunding in conserving soil and water, leading to increased agricultural productivity. The intervention aimed to address soil erosion and poor water retention, enhance soil moisture and increasing water availability. Through constructing the farm bunds, the project successfully achieve these. Soil moisture improved, soil erosion reduced, and crop yield increased. However, the challenge of the need for integrated water management, sustaining community interest and ensuring economic viability were identified. The case emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach to agricultural development, combining multiple strategies and ensuring sustained community involvement.

The case study titled “Livelihood Advancement Through Soilless Farming: A Case Study from Gaya, Bihar” by 4S India highlights the potential of polyhouse-based soilless nursery cultivation as a sustainable solution for marginalized communities in water-scarce and low-resource settings. The intervention aimed to address challenges such as poor soil quality, inadequate irrigation, and low technical knowledge by introducing sapling production techniques that minimize water use, reduce soil-borne diseases, and improve cultivation efficiency in limited space. The initiative led to increased productivity and environmental resilience, enabling women like Kalo Devi to earn income through climate-adaptive farming. While the intervention successfully demonstrated reduced resource dependency and improved livelihoods, it also revealed challenges related to market access, post-harvest handling, and initial community hesitation. The case underscores the importance of combining ecological innovation with community training and support to ensure long-term sustainability.

4.2 Economic Interventions

The case studies on economic interventions emphasized the efforts undertaken in livelihood diversification into economic activities such as livestock rearing, mushroom cultivation, vegetable cultivation, getting access to microfinance services such as SHGs.

जब जागो तभी सबेरा: मुसहर महिलाओं के सफल संघर्ष की कहानी (Awakening to a New Dawn: The Inspiring Struggle of Musahar Women) highlights the inspiring struggle of Musahar women from Bahuarwa village in Bihar, who overcame deep-rooted marginalization and asserted their rights to land, housing, and basic infrastructure. With support from Samagra Shikshan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SSEVS), the women formed self-help groups, raised their voices collectively, and successfully obtained land titles under the housing scheme for 130 families. Their continued efforts led

to the installation of solar lights, water pumps, community infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities through MGNREGA. The women's active participation in gram sabhas marked a shift from exclusion to empowerment. Through consistent advocacy and community mobilization, they have become agents of change—challenging caste barriers, ending child labour, and ensuring access to government welfare schemes. Their journey reflects how grassroots leadership and collective action can bring systemic transformation to marginalized communities.

The case study titled "Empowering Dalit Women: A Case Study on Mushroom Cultivation as a Pathway to Economic and Nutritional Security in Jehanabad, Bihar" highlights a successful economic and empowerment intervention by 4S India in Jehanabad, Bihar, where Dalit women from the Chamar community were introduced to mushroom cultivation. Facing severe poverty, malnutrition, and social exclusion, these women took up mushroom farming with training and support, leading to significant improvements in their income and self-confidence. With limited resources, they cultivated mushrooms in small spaces and earned an average income of ₹9,289 per season. The initiative not only enhanced their financial independence but also improved household nutrition and fostered entrepreneurship. The women now plan to expand cultivation, explore value-added products, and form mushroom clusters—demonstrating how resource-efficient farming can be a tool for economic transformation and social empowerment among marginalized women.

The case study titled "Bringing the Invisible and Excluded into the Light: Empowering the Musahar Community through Vegetable Cultivation" highlighted the intervention in vegetable cultivation which enhanced food security and contributed to income generation of Maha Dalits. The intervention was taken up by PHIA foundation in the Nautan and Lauriya blocks of West Champaran district, Bihar. Aiming to economically empower the Musahar community, historically excluded from mainstream opportunities, it provided training, extended technical support and access to resources. The project enabled Musahar farmers to cultivate vegetables, enhance their income and overall quality of life. The initiative also built community capacity, leadership and advocated for the rights of the Musahar community. It helped the Mushar community improving their economic status.

The case study titled "Land of Resilience: Agri

Innovation on 2 Katha of Hope" by PRADAN explored the transformative impact of the Indus Bank flagship program in Begusarai district of Bihar. The intervention focused on empowering small and marginal farmers through innovative agricultural techniques. It cites the success story of Draupadi and Karilal, who with the support of the program adopted shed net farming. This technique along with training and handholding support significantly increased their agricultural productivity and income. The intervention has not only improved the livelihoods of farmers but has also contributed to the overall development of the community by creating employment opportunities, strengthening local economies and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

The case study मुसहर परिवारों को रोजगार के मार्गदर्शन से मिला आर्थिक आधार (Economic Foundation Through Livelihood: Empowering Musahar Families) describes the transformation of Musahar families in Bahuarwa village, Bihar—once trapped in generational poverty and bonded labor—through sustained livelihood interventions by the NGO Samagra Shiksha Evam Vikas Sansthan (SSEVS). During the COVID-19 crisis, when families faced acute hunger and loss of work, SSEVS collaborated with Goonj to provide emergency food and essential supplies. Beyond relief, the organization promoted long-term livelihood options like vegetable farming, pig and poultry rearing, and micro-enterprises. With access to leased land, training, and market linkages, families began earning ₹7,000–₹8,000 monthly. Women like Chanda Devi became symbols of change and received district-level recognition for their achievements. The intervention also revived education, with children returning to school. Through collective action and persistent guidance, the community moved from vulnerability to self-reliance, turning Bahuarwa from a neglected settlement into a thriving, economically active village.

4.3 Empowerment and Social Justice

In the interventions for empowerment and social justice involved, community mobilization and advocacy, land rights and social justice, disability rights and inclusion, women's empowerment, capacity building and leadership development for accessing rights & entitlements.

The case of Titri Devi titled "Triumph of Justice: Landless Titri Devi's Continued Journey to Become Landowner" depicts her long 28-year-old struggle

from a landless to a landowner. It depicts the power of collective action and advocacy for land rights supported by Musahar Manch, which continued to provide educational and legal assistance.

In spite of the threats coming in from upper caste landowners and resistance, Titri continued her and battle of 23 other families. This was under the Uttar Pradesh Land Ceiling Act of 1960. The legal setbacks and constraints could not stop and the community finally in April 2023 was able to reclaim the land. Now Titri is an owner of 30 decimal plot.

The case study बाल श्रम से निरंतर शिक्षा तक: एक प्रभावी हस्तक्षेप (From Child Labour to Continuous Education: An Effective Intervention) narrates the transformative journey of Savita Devi, a woman from the marginalized Chamar community in Agrail Khudgawan village, Bihar. After her husband's sudden death during the COVID-19 period, she was forced to engage in brick kiln work with her young children to survive, pushing them into child labour and out of school. Through timely intervention by Samagra Shikshan Evam Vikas Sansthan under the PCTS project, her children were re-enrolled in school, and the family was connected to livelihood support via SHGs and the JEEViKA program. Savita eventually received support to start a grocery shop, which stabilized the family's income. She became an active member of the Child Protection Committee, advocating for children's rights in her village. Her journey showcases how timely institutional support and integrated interventions can pull marginalized families out of crisis and foster sustainable change in education and livelihoods.

The case study titled "Disability Awareness Campaign through Technical Empowerment" highlights the importance of empowering persons with disabilities through education, vocational training and social support. The intervention was led by SAMVET team during April 2022 to December 2023 in 15 villages across Jagdishpur, Nathnagar and Goradih blocks of Bhagalpur district. Conducted in partnership with PEC (Peace and Equity cell, Ahmedabad), through detailed surveys, 765 beneficiaries were identified, facilitation provided for getting pensions, UID cards, medical certificates and assistive devices. 227 children were enrolled into specialised education programmes. Through community sensitization meetings and formation of 15 village level organizations, societal biases were reduced and PWDs enabled to advocate for their rights. The intervention led to improvement in financial security, vulnerabilities and living standards of PWDs were enhanced. This resulted in

greater dignity, independence and community respect while establishing a sustainable model for disability inclusion and empowerment.

The case study titled "Seeds of Change: Emergence of Sustainable Community Leadership through MGNREGA in Bihar" highlights a transformative initiative led by NACDAOR and CADAM under the DFID-supported PACS programme (2011–2015), aimed at empowering Dalit and Muslim communities in Bihar to claim their entitlements under MGNREGA. Implemented across 200 villages in 8 districts, the intervention focused on building grassroots leadership, forming worker collectives, conducting social audits, and strengthening the Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union (ABMMU). As a result, over 55,000 marginalized households accessed wage employment, job cards, and timely payments. The leadership journeys of Namita Devi and Khushilal Ram illustrate how local voices, especially those from excluded communities, evolved into powerful advocates for rural rights and accountability. Despite structural challenges, the initiative fostered sustainable social leadership and built a replicable model for inclusive rural governance and livelihood security.

The case study titled "सामाजिक सम्मान और पहचान की तलाश में: घरेलू कामगार की कहानी (In Search of Social Respect and Recognition: The Journey of a Domestic Worker)" highlights the work of Sewa Bharat with migrant workers in Patna. Sewa Bharat's program with migrant women domestic workers program has been going on since 2014. Many of the domestic workers belong Maha Dalit community. They face issues of caste discrimination, lack of respect and low wages. It organized them to build bargaining power, improve dignity and working conditions. One aim of Sewa Bharat was to ensure fair wages through negotiation with employers, safety at workplace and respect for work. Sewa Bharat formed a collaborative organization Seva Sanghini Mutual Benefit Trust, to further the goals set by the project. It advocates for ensuring decent work conditions under International Labour Standards under ILO C-189. Under the program was also launched "Mera Pyaar nyayukt ghar" to raise awareness among both domestic workers and employers. Despite the challenges faced such as the fear of losing employment, SEWA Bharat's consistent efforts brought about positive changes. A greater recognition and respect for domestic work was ensured. A reduction was brought about in caste-based discrimination. Through training workshops and collective action, SEWA is helping domestic workers understand and claim their rights, while challenging societal

prejudices.

The case study titled "Re-engaging Mahadalit Children in Education: A Case Study of 4S India's Learning Centre" highlights an empowerment initiative focused on addressing educational exclusion among Mahadalit children in Rajan village, Gaya. 4S India established a community-based learning centre that uses joyful, culturally relevant teaching methods and employs local educators to build trust and engagement. The initiative promotes community ownership through parental involvement via Siksha Samity and integrates education with broader livelihood and social empowerment strategies. This holistic approach fosters dignity, inclusion, and sustained participation in education among marginalized communities.

Thus, as depicted by the case studies, the interventions by incorporating ecological, economic and empowerment-based approaches, the challenges faced by the Maha Dalit communities were sought to be addressed. It helped them deal with socio-economic and environmental challenges. These interventions enhanced livelihoods of these communities, ensured dignity and respect for work, promoted ecological sustainability.

5. IMPROVED OUTCOMES AND IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTIONS

The following outcomes were seen due to the interventions undertaken: -

5.1 Improved Ecological base

The interventions led to achieving important ecological outcomes which included improved soil health and conservation, enhanced water management, increased agricultural productivity and biodiversity, reduced carbon footprint and enhanced climate resilience,

- **Agricultural Productivity Enhancement:** Access to solar irrigation, bunding, and soilless farming improved soil moisture, reduced erosion, and enabled multi-cropping. These interventions boosted yields and optimized the use of land, water, and inputs.
- **Climate Resilience through Sustainable Practices:** Renewable energy and low-input farming methods reduce carbon emissions and chemical use. This promoted long-term ecological balance and adaptability to climate variability.
- **Livelihood Diversification for Economic Stability:** New income opportunities like sapling production and better farm outputs improved

household earnings. Women and landless farmers gained financial independence through skill-based agriculture.

- **Community Empowerment through Local Leadership:** Collective planning and training fostered ownership and local leadership. Community-based models strengthened social capital and sustained adoption of eco-friendly practices.

5.2 Improved Livelihoods and Economic Security

The interventions helped in improving livelihoods and economic security of Maha Dalit communities. Following outcomes were seen in relation to livelihoods. It led to: -

- **Increased agricultural Productivity:** Introduction of solar technologies such as solar powered irrigation systems and techniques such as SRI led to significant increase in crop yield of farmers.
- **Diversified income sources:** Income sources of households were diversified through facilitating them to get into goat rearing, pig rearing, poultry, mushroom cultivation, sesame etc. Thus the income sources were supplemented. Dependence and sole reliance on agriculture and also to limited crops in agriculture was reduced.
- **Enhanced market access:** Promotion of farmer producer organizations (FPOs) and cooperatives has facilitated in improving market linkages and improving bargaining power of farmers.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Microfinance services through SHGs provided access to credit which helped the households to invest in their businesses and improve their livelihoods.

5.3 Social Empowerment and Dignity

- **Community mobilization and leadership development:** The importance of bottom up community level leadership was seen important. Capacity building programs were conducted and community mobilization initiatives taken up. The communities were empowered to take control of their own development.
- **Gender equality and women's empowerment:** Initiatives led to economic and social empowerment of women. Women participated in various aspects of development including agriculture, livestock rearing and micro-enterprises, leading to increased gender equality and empowerment.
- **Reduced social discrimination and exclusion:** Interventions challenged the status quo, social norms and practices that perpetuate social discrimination and exclusion, particularly against Maha Dalits. A greater space was created in asserting their rights as a disadvantaged community.

- Improved social capital: Collective actions in the form of SHGs, FPOs, Domestic Worker's organizations, MGNREGA workers union, Musahar Manch built up the social capital of Maha Dalits. It strengthened social network and collective action.

These outcomes demonstrate the transformative power of community-driven development initiatives, which have not only improved the economic well-being of marginalized communities but also empowered them to take control of their own destinies.

6. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CASE STUDIES

- Multi-faceted interventions achieve greater results: Interconnectedness of problems need to be identified, and challenges need to be addressed at various levels. In this case, ecological, economic and social factors were addressed. A holistic approach that combined these elements was crucial.
- Addressing power dimension and systemic change necessary: Political economy and

dimension of power perpetuated and reproduced poverty and inequality among the Maha Dalits. Hence to address the challenge, the issue had to be addressed systemically. Organizing them around issues such as land rights, rights of domestic workers, MGNREGA workers rights helped in negotiating with those in power, bargain and achieve increased access to rights.

- Empowerment of marginalized communities critical: The capacity building was not merely limited to acquiring technical skills or managing a CBO operation, but also focused on leadership development. They were made key parts of decision making process. This had an empowering effect.
- Building social capital, necessary for long term sustainable achievement of results: Building social capital and strong social networks of community organizations can play a vital role in addressing local challenges. SHGs, Musahar Manch, Domestic works groups, MGNREGA workers groups helped in building long term social capital. The social capital thus built can go on to fetch long term benefits for the community.

7. POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Based on the case studies, the following policy measures are suggested: -

Approach	Policy Measures	Rationale
Ecological	Promote agroecological farming practices tailored to needs of the segment such as organic farming, crop rotation, mixed cropping, agroforestry	Enhances soil fertility, reduces input costs and improves resilience against climate variability
Ecological	Ensure access to community managed natural resources like water, forests and grazing lands	Provides equitable resource access, prevents over-exploitation and ensure community participation
Ecological	Introduce schemes such as renewable energy use (solar, biogas) to households	Reduces dependency on non-renewable resources and cuts household energy expenses
Ecological	Implement afforestation programs providing employment and ecological benefits for Maha Dalit areas	Combines environmental conservation with job creation and improved local climate
Economic	Expand access to affordable credit for entrepreneurship through microfinance, SHGs and banks	Encourages self-employment and economic self-reliance, reducing poverty and dependence on usury.
Economic	Promote skill development centres with focus on trades suited to local economic conditions	Builds employability among them aligning with market demands
Economic	Strengthen their access to livelihood schemes such as MGNREGA and enhance job quality and wages	Ensures stable incomes, reduce distress migration and promote dignity of labor
Economic	Provide subsidies for farm inputs, livestock and small-scale enterprises for the households	Encourages productivity and diversification in income sources for sustainable economic growth.
Empowerment	Facilitate leadership development programs for disadvantaged youth and Women	Develop leadership skills and ensures active participation in decision-making processes

Empowerment	Strengthen self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives and producer organizations in Maha Dalit areas	Encourages collective action, economic solidarity and improved access to resources and markets
Empowerment	Ensure representation this segment in local governance institutions like Panchayats	Promotes inclusion, amplifies voices in policy decisions and ensures equitable resource allocation
Empowerment	Launch awareness campaigns on legal rights, land ownership and government entitlements, organize them around collective to assert for these rights	Empower communities with knowledge to claim their rights, enabling self-reliance and accountability

8. CONCLUSION

Mahadalits as an ultra-poor category needed multi-layered interventions to come out of impoverishment. As can be seen from the cases demonstrated, through following a 3E strategy, the civil society organizations were able to achieve benefits for Maha Dalit communities. The holistic approach and 3E strategy around ecological, economic and empowerment interventions not only addressed the systemic barriers that prevented them from accessing institutions, the rights entitled but also helped in gaining access to five capitals – physical, finance, social, natural and human. Through addressing the dimension of power and also facilitating access to livelihood capitals, changes occurred in the lives of these communities. This broader approach needs to be strengthened further and integrated into policy for development of this community.

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A CALL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION

A Review Article on Empowering Mahadalits to Break the Cycle of Ultra-Poverty

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ABSTRACT:

India has made significant strides in poverty reduction, with 135 million people lifted out of multidimensional poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21 (NITI Aayog, 2023). However, this progress masks persistent, deeply entrenched deprivation among historically marginalized communities such as the Mahadalits in Bihar. Designated as the most disadvantaged sub-groups within Scheduled Castes, Mahadalits continue to face multidimensional poverty driven by systemic exclusion, caste-based discrimination, and intergenerational disadvantage. Despite Bihar's reduction in poverty headcount, it still records the highest proportion of multidimensionally poor population in the country (33.76%). This review article critically analyzes the limitations of conventional, top-down development approaches in addressing Mahadalit ultra-poverty. It highlights key barriers in policy implementation—ranging from poor financial management and inadequate human resources to structural hurdles that restrict access to entitlements (CAG, 2019). Drawing from secondary literature and policy evaluations, the article underscores the promise of community-led interventions, particularly the Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana (SJY), which adopts the globally acclaimed Graduation Approach. SJY provides integrated support through asset transfers, capacity building, and social protection mechanisms, facilitated by locally trained community cadres—demonstrating measurable improvements in livelihoods and women's empowerment (J-PAL, 2020). The article concludes with strategic policy recommendations for inclusive development. These include decentralizing program delivery, investing in infrastructure and financial inclusion, strengthening community institutions, and ensuring sub-caste disaggregated data for better targeting and accountability. Recognizing Mahadalits as an ultra-poor community requiring a differentiated strategy, this review advocates for a paradigm shift—from fragmented schemes to holistic, community-based solutions. Such an approach is critical for ensuring that India's development trajectory leaves no one behind.



1. INTRODUCTION: INDIA'S UNFINISHED AGENDA: ADDRESSING ULTRA-POVERTY AMONG MAHADALITS

1.1. Setting the Context of Persistent Poverty in India

India has demonstrated remarkable progress in its fight against poverty over the past decade. A significant achievement highlighted by the NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Progress Review 2023 is that approximately 135 million people transitioned out of multidimensional poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21 (NITI Aayog, 2023). This reduction reflects concerted efforts across various sectors. However, despite this encouraging national trend, a substantial segment of the population, particularly in rural areas, continues to experience acute deprivation. In 2019-21, nearly one-fifth (19.28%) of India's rural population remained multidimensionally poor (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Within this national context, Bihar stands out as a state facing persistent and profound challenges. While Bihar recorded the most substantial decline in multidimensional poverty (an 18.13 percentage point reduction from 51.89% in 2015-16 to 33.76% in 2019-21), it still holds the unfortunate distinction of having the highest proportion of multidimensionally

poor population nationally (NITI Aayog, 2023). This situation underscores a critical observation: while broad poverty alleviation efforts have yielded results, the depth and concentration of poverty among the most vulnerable groups remain exceptionally high. This suggests that general programs, while beneficial, may not fully penetrate or adequately address the complex, multi-faceted deprivations experienced by the ultra-poor. This calls for highly targeted and nuanced interventions that go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

1.2. Defining "Mahadalits" and their Unique Vulnerability

The term "Mahadalit" was specifically introduced by the Government of Bihar in 2007 to identify and categorize the most disadvantaged and marginalized Scheduled Castes (SCs) within the state. This designation initially excluded four larger SC communities—the Dusadhs, Chamars, Pasis, and Dhobis—but was later expanded in 2008 and 2009 to include Pasis, Dhobis, and Chamars, ultimately encompassing approximately 69% of Bihar's total Scheduled Caste population (Centre for Equity Studies, 2019).

Within the broader Scheduled Caste community, Mahadalits, particularly groups such as the Musahars

Bhuiyas, and Doms, occupy the very lowest rung of both the ritual and economic hierarchies. They are consistently identified as the "most backward castes among the scheduled castes." Their extreme vulnerability stems not just from low income, but from a pervasive system of discrimination that restricts their access to basic amenities, limits employment opportunities, and impedes social mobility. The very presence of these communities is often stigmatized. This structural disadvantage, deeply rooted in historical oppression and ongoing social exclusion, means that poverty among Mahadalits is not merely an economic issue but a profound societal challenge. Any effective development strategy must explicitly acknowledge and address caste-based discrimination and its compounding effects across all dimensions of poverty (Borooah et al., 2014; Gang et al., 2008).

1.3. The Central Argument: Why Community-Level Inclusion is Critical

Traditional, top-down development strategies have frequently fallen short in addressing the specific and complex needs of these deeply marginalized communities. Such approaches often fail to account for the unique socio-economic and cultural barriers faced by Mahadalits, leading to uneven development outcomes and persistent disparities.

This report posits that a targeted, community-level inclusion strategy, built on participatory approaches and comprehensive support, is indispensable for sustainably uplifting Mahadalits from ultra-poverty. Such a strategy aligns with the overarching principle of "Leaving No One Behind," a core tenet of global development agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach is designed to tackle the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, which extends beyond mere income deficits to encompass severe deprivations in health, education, and living standards. By focusing on empowering communities from within, this strategy seeks to create lasting change that resonates across all facets of their lives.

2. THE ENDURING DEPRIVATION: A PORTRAIT OF MAHADALIT ULTRA-POVERTY IN SOUTH BIHAR

Empirical data and field observations consistently demonstrate that Mahadalits exhibit all the defining characteristics of ultra-poverty, often in an exacerbated form due to the intersection of economic deprivation with caste-based discrimination (BRAC, 2002; Hashemi & Umaira, 2007; J-PAL, 2020).

2.1. Detailed Analysis of Socio-Economic Indicators

The Mahadalit communities in Bihar, particularly in regions like South Bihar and Gaya district, face a pervasive and multi-dimensional cycle of deprivation. Their socio-economic indicators

consistently place them at the very bottom of the development spectrum.

- **Extreme Income and Asset Poverty / Landlessness and Livelihoods:** A defining characteristic of Mahadalit ultra-poverty is widespread landlessness and reliance on precarious daily wage labor. Communities like the Musahars are overwhelmingly landless agricultural laborers. In Gaya district, 86% of farmers are classified as marginal and small, indicating that low land size is a significant constraint to improving agricultural livelihoods. National data from the 2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC 2011) reveals that 5.37 crore (29.97%) of rural households across India are landless and primarily derive their income from manual labor. For Musahars specifically, 92.5% were identified as landless agricultural laborers in 2001, and they often endure periods of unemployment for up to eight months a year. This chronic lack of productive assets and stable employment traps generations in poverty (ResearchGate, 2025; SECC 2011).
- **Low Access to Basic Services and Human Development / Literacy and Education:** Educational deprivation is severe among Mahadalits. Literacy rates are drastically lower than the overall Scheduled Caste average in Bihar. For instance, the Musahar community had a literacy rate of merely 9% in 2001, significantly below the state's SC average of 28.5%. By 2011, their literacy rates remained under 30%. The overall Musahar literacy rate stands at a shocking 3%, plummeting to an abysmal 1% for women (ResearchGate, 2025; Census 2011). This educational marginalization is compounded by economic necessity, as children are frequently forced into labor, leading to high school dropout rates. Across Bihar, only 85% of children aged 6-17 attend school, with this figure dropping sharply to 69% for those aged 15-17 (NFHS-5, 2021).
- **Chronic Food and Nutritional Insecurity / Health and Nutrition:** The health status of Mahadalit communities is alarming. As many as 85% of residents in some Musahar villages suffer from malnutrition. Access to healthcare facilities is severely limited, with over 74% of households reporting that the nearest health center is more than 5 kilometers away (NFHS-5, 2021; ResearchGate, 2025). This geographical barrier contributes to the prevalence of diseases like malaria and kala-azar. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) for Bihar indicates that 43% of children under the age of five are stunted (too short for their age) and 23% are wasted (too thin for their height). High rates

- of undernutrition are also observed among women and men (NFHS-5, 2021).
- **Housing and Basic Amenities:** Housing conditions reflect deep poverty, with many Mahadalit families residing in kutchra (mud) or semi-pucca houses. Sanitation is a critical issue, as nearly 39% of households in Bihar lack access to proper sanitation facilities and resort to open defecation. Access to piped drinking water is also extremely low, particularly in rural areas, where only 8% of households have this facility (NFHS-5, 2021).
- **Financial Exclusion:** The lack of access to formal financial services forces Mahadalit households into exploitative debt cycles. They frequently rely on local money lenders, often incurring very high interest rates, such as 10% per month, due to their inability to access affordable credit from mainstream institutions (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2018).

2.2. The Pervasive Impact of Caste-Based Discrimination

The extreme poverty experienced by Mahadalits is inextricably linked to pervasive caste-based discrimination. These communities face ingrained notions of impurity and untouchability, leading to discrimination not only from upper castes but also from other non-SC/ST communities (NCDHR reports; IDSN reports). This discrimination manifests in various forms, including denial of access to basic amenities, limited employment opportunities, and restricted social mobility. Their very presence is often stigmatized, and they have historically been at the receiving end of negative public attitudes, even from other Scheduled Castes. This deep-seated social exclusion compounds their economic vulnerability, making it exceedingly difficult for them to break free from the cycle of poverty (Centre for Equity Studies, 2019; Borooah et al., 2014).

2.3. Specific Challenges Faced by Mahadalit Communities in Gaya District

Gaya district in South Bihar exemplifies the acute challenges faced by Mahadalit communities.

- **Environmental Health Hazards:** In Churaman Nagar, a village predominantly inhabited by the Musahar community in Gaya, residents are compelled to use groundwater with dangerously high fluoride content. This environmental hazard has led to severe health consequences, including physical deformities, stiffness in joints, and stained teeth (fluorosis) among the villagers. Despite the severity of the issue, reports indicate a significant lack of financial support from the government for those suffering from these conditions.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Basic public infrastructure is severely lacking. For instance,
 - primary schools in villages like Sati Sthan in Gaya district are reported to be without boundary walls and functional toilets, hindering educational access and creating an unhygienic learning environment.
- **Exploitative Labor Practices:** Many Mahadalits in Gaya are trapped in unfair Bataya (sharecropping) systems, primarily due to their inability to access affordable credit. Home-based workers, such as Agarbatti rollers—a significant industry in Gaya—face low returns on their labor, lack credit linkages, and have no collective bargaining power to demand fair wages. This perpetuates their economic marginalization.
- **Misuse of Law:** Members of the Musahar community in Gaya have reported being unfairly targeted by police with false cases under Bihar's liquor prohibition law. This misuse of legal provisions not only leads to harassment but also reportedly impacts their eligibility for and access to other critical government welfare schemes, such as free cooking gas cylinder connections (Ujjwala gas).

The persistent and multi-faceted nature of poverty among Mahadalits, particularly in regions like Gaya, reveals a profound intergenerational cycle of deprivation and discrimination. The extremely low literacy rates, especially among women, coupled with the necessity for children to engage in labor, ensures that the cycle continues across generations. The absence of land ownership forces these communities into precarious daily wage labor, often under exploitative conditions, preventing any meaningful accumulation of assets or upward mobility. This situation highlights that interventions must be holistic, addressing not just immediate economic needs but also the fundamental structural barriers to education, health, and asset building to truly break this cycle.

Furthermore, the geographic and social isolation experienced by Mahadalit communities, often residing in segregated hamlets on the outskirts of villages, exacerbates their economic deprivation. This isolation contributes to poor access to essential services, including healthcare facilities located far from their homes, and limits their ability to access formal credit, forcing reliance on exploitative informal lenders. This pattern of marginalization, confirmed by ethnographic evidence of enduring hierarchy and negative public attitudes, underscores that development strategies must actively bridge these spatial and social divides, ensuring physical access to services and fostering genuine social inclusion (MCRG, 2012).

The disproportionate engagement of Mahadalit women in the primary sector, often as agricultural laborers with minimal land ownership, and their

even lower literacy rates, points to a significant gendered dimension of ultra-poverty. Girls are frequently compelled to undertake domestic chores and care for siblings, further hindering their educational opportunities. This means that any effective strategy for Mahadalit upliftment must explicitly prioritize women's empowerment,

recognizing their central role in household well-being and the unique, compounding barriers they face due to the intersection of gender and caste. A detailed summary of the key socio-economic deprivations faced by Mahadalit communities in South Bihar is presented in **Table 1**, highlighting the multidimensional nature of their ultra-poverty.

Table 1: Key Socio-Economic Deprivations of Mahadalits in Gaya/South Bihar

Indicator	Specific Data for Mahadalits/Bihar (Source)	Implications for Ultra-Poverty
Landlessness	92.5% of Musahar workers identified as landless agricultural laborers (2001 Census). 80.4% of Bhuiyas and 87.2% of Musahars are agricultural laborers (2011 Census). 5.37 crore (29.97%) of rural households in India are landless and derive income from manual labor (SECC 2011). In Gaya, 86% are marginal/small farmers.	Extreme vulnerability due to lack of productive assets, dependence on precarious daily wages, and susceptibility to exploitative labor practices.
Literacy Rate	Musahars: 9% (2001), under 30% (2011). Overall Musahar literacy: 3%, women: 1%. SCs in Bihar: just under 49% (2011).	Severe educational disadvantage perpetuates intergenerational poverty, limiting access to better employment and information.
Housing	Families often reside in kutchra or semi-pucca houses.	Reflects extreme poverty and lack of secure, dignified living conditions.
Access to Sanitation	Nearly 39% of Bihar households lack access to sanitation, resorting to open defecation.	Significant public health risk, dignity issues, and environmental pollution.
Access to Piped Water	Only 8% of rural households in Bihar have access to piped water. In Churaman Nagar (Gaya), fluoride-heavy water causes fluorosis.	Critical health hazard (e.g., fluorosis in Gaya), time burden on women/girls for water collection, and increased disease vulnerability.
Health & Nutrition	85% of some Musahar villages suffer from malnutrition. 43% of children under 5 in Bihar are stunted, 23% wasted (NFHS-5). Over 74% of Musahar households have nearest health center >5km away.	High disease burden, reduced physical capacity for labor, and compromised child development.
Financial Access	Reliance on local money lenders at very high interest rates (e.g., 10% per month). Absence of credit linkage for home-based workers.	Traps households in debt, prevents investment in livelihoods, and limits economic mobility.

This table provides a clear, quantitative overview of the severe, multi-dimensional deprivations faced by Mahadalits, particularly in South Bihar. It serves as an empirical foundation for understanding the problem's scale and complexity, enabling policymakers and donors to grasp the urgency and specific areas requiring intervention. For academic purposes, it grounds the discussion in verifiable data, illustrating the depth of poverty beyond simple income metrics.

3. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION REALITIES: BRIDGING THE GAP FOR MAHADALITS

3.1. Overview of Government Initiatives Targeting Mahadalits in Bihar

Recognizing the extreme vulnerability of certain Scheduled Caste communities, the Government of Bihar initiated the "Mahadalit" category in 2007, followed by the launch of various schemes aimed at their upliftment. These programs have included provisions for housing, scholarships, educational loans, and school uniforms, reflecting a policy intent to address their multi-faceted deprivation (Centre

for Equity Studies, 2019). The Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission (BMVM) was established as the primary implementing agency, tasked with overseeing these programs and appointing Vikas Mitras (development friends). These Vikas Mitras, drawn from Mahadalit families and residing in the respective Gram Panchayats, were envisioned as crucial "agents of change" and direct links between government programs and Mahadalit households. A significant policy objective has also been to tackle the pervasive issue of landlessness through initiatives like the Mahadalit Awas Bhoomi Yojana, which

aimed to provide small plots of land titles to these communities (IGC, 2013).

3.2. Critical Assessment of Effectiveness and Implementation Challenges

Despite the stated objectives and allocation of resources, the impact of these government schemes on the ground has been notably limited. Reports indicate that the "poor implementation of the schemes has meant that being counted as Mahadalits has helped these groups only marginally" (ResearchGate, 2025).

A critical audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) for March 2019 exposed significant systemic weaknesses within the Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission (BMVM). The audit highlighted "ineffective financial management," characterized by unrealistic budget allocations, persistent non-submission of Utilization Certificates (UCs), a lack of cashbook reconciliation, and the operation of multiple bank accounts. These financial irregularities were explicitly noted as posing a "risk of mis-utilization and misappropriation of money" (CAG, 2019). This finding reveals a substantial gap between policy intent and operational capacity, indicating that even with dedicated funds, poor financial governance can severely undermine program effectiveness.

Furthermore, the CAG report pointed to "inadequate manpower at the state, district, and block levels" within the BMVM, which "adversely impacted the monitoring and execution of schemes" (CAG, 2019). This human resource deficit represents a critical bottleneck in translating policy into tangible on-ground impact. Without sufficient and well-trained personnel, the ambitious goals of upliftment programs struggle to reach the intended beneficiaries effectively. The slow pace of construction of community halls and the poor maintenance of existing ones, attributed to a lack of funds for upkeep, further illustrate these infrastructure deficiencies. Such physical infrastructure gaps directly affect community gathering points and potential service delivery centers, hindering local development efforts.

Beyond administrative shortcomings, the implementation of laws has also presented challenges. Reports from Gaya indicate that the liquor prohibition law in Bihar has been reportedly misused, with police targeting Musahars with false cases. This enforcement issue not only leads to harassment but also reportedly impacts their access to other government schemes, creating an additional layer of exclusion for already vulnerable communities.

3.2. Analysis of Exclusion from Broader Entitlement Programs

The challenges extend beyond specific Mahadalit schemes to broader entitlement programs. The CAG audit report on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) revealed significant gaps in coverage for vulnerable groups, including landless casual laborers, a category that heavily comprises Mahadalits. Despite Bihar having the highest number of landless casual laborers (8.86 million), only 6.09 million (69%) were surveyed, and a mere 3.34% (3,007 out of 90,161 willing landless households) were actually issued job cards. In test-checked districts, this figure was even lower, less than 1% (CAG, 2019). This indicates a systemic failure in ensuring that even basic employment entitlements reach the most vulnerable populations, suggesting that bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, or discriminatory practices prevent access. Issues with disability allowance, such as discrepancies in Aadhaar cards or the inability of beneficiaries to visit block offices, further highlight these systemic barriers.

The assessment of existing policy interventions reveals a significant gap between policy intent and implementation capacity. While the Bihar government has demonstrated political will by creating the "Mahadalit" category and launching specific schemes, the CAG report points to fundamental operational and financial weaknesses within the implementing body, the BMVM. This suggests that the mere existence of policies is insufficient without robust administrative capacity, effective financial oversight, and adequate human resources at the grassroots level. Therefore, future interventions require not just new schemes but a fundamental strengthening of governance, accountability mechanisms, and local administrative capabilities to ensure effective delivery.

Furthermore, the low issuance of MGNREGS job cards to landless laborers and bureaucratic hurdles related to disability allowances demonstrate that even when programs exist, systemic barriers often prevent the ultra-poor from accessing their entitlements. This includes issues such as lack of awareness, complex application procedures, or discriminatory practices at the local level. This implies that policy must shift its focus to simplifying access, strengthening grievance redressal mechanisms, and actively reaching out to marginalized communities, rather than relying on them to navigate complex and often exclusionary systems. The Vikas Mitra concept, while well-intentioned to bridge this gap, appears to be hampered by these broader systemic issues, underscoring the need for a more proactive and accessible delivery model.

Table 2: Challenges in Implementation of Government Schemes for Mahadalits in Bihar

Scheme/Area	Type of Challenge	Specific Findings/Evidence (Source)	Impact on Mahadalits
Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission (BMVM)	Financial Mismanagement	Unrealistic budget allocation, non-submission of UCs, non-reconciliation of cashbooks, multiple bank accounts risking mis-utilization (CAG, 2019).	Undermines effectiveness of targeted schemes, reduces actual funds reaching beneficiaries.
BMVM Operations	Inadequate Manpower & Monitoring	Insufficient staff at state, district, and block levels adversely impacting scheme monitoring and execution (CAG, 2019).	Slows down program delivery, leads to poor oversight, and reduces accountability.
Community Infrastructure (BMVM)	Infrastructure Deficiencies	Tardy construction of community halls; poor maintenance of existing halls due to non-provision of funds (CAG, 2019).	Limits community gathering spaces, hinders local service delivery and social cohesion.
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)	Exclusion from Entitlements	Only 3.34% of willing landless households issued job cards (Bihar). Less than 1% in test-checked districts (CAG, 2019).	Denies guaranteed employment, perpetuates income insecurity, and prevents asset creation.
Disability Allowance	Bureaucratic Hurdles	Individuals with fluorosis unable to collect allowance due to worsening condition or Aadhaar discrepancies.	Blocks access to critical financial support for vulnerable individuals.
Public Infrastructure (Gaya)	Non-functional Amenities	Primary schools in Sati Sthan (Gaya) lack boundary walls and functional toilets.	Hinders children's education, creates unhygienic conditions, and impacts school attendance.
Bihar Liquor Prohibition Law	Misuse of Law	Police targeting Musahars with false cases, impacting access to other government schemes (e.g., Ujjwala gas).	Leads to harassment, legal vulnerability, and further exclusion from welfare benefits.

A consolidated overview of these implementation challenges across key schemes is provided in Table 2, illustrating the systemic gaps that hinder effective outreach to Mahadalit communities. This table outlines the critical implementation challenges faced by government schemes targeting Mahadalits in Bihar. By presenting specific findings from audited reports and journalistic investigations, it provides concrete evidence of where and how policies are failing on the ground. This detailed breakdown is crucial for policymakers to identify systemic weaknesses and for donors to understand the need for more effective, accountable, and community-responsive interventions.

4. COMMUNITY-LED PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERMENT: THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

4.1. Introduction to the "Graduation Approach" as a Globally Recognized Model

In the pursuit of sustainable poverty alleviation, the "Graduation Approach" has emerged as a globally recognized and highly effective model. Pioneered by BRAC, a Bangladeshi non-governmental organization, this multifaceted livelihood program is specifically designed to enable ultra-poor households to transition out of extreme poverty. The strength of

this approach lies in its comprehensive and integrated nature. Over a period of 18-24 months, it combines six complementary interventions: a productive asset transfer, tailored training, consistent coaching, facilitated access to savings, temporary consumption support, and essential health education and access (BRAC, 2002; Hashemi & Umaira, 2007).

Rigorous evaluations conducted across seven countries by researchers affiliated with J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) and Innovations for

Poverty Action have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of the Graduation Approach. These evaluations have shown "large and lasting improvements in consumption, food security, asset holdings, savings, and in some contexts, improved psychosocial well-being" among participating households (Banerjee et al., 2015; J-PAL, 2020). The model has achieved impressive "graduation rates" ranging from 75% to 98%. This robust evidence base underscores that for the ultra-poor, a fragmented approach to aid is less effective than a coordinated, multi-component "big push" that addresses their diverse deprivations simultaneously, thereby enabling them to break free from the poverty trap.

CASE STUDY: SATAT JEEVIKOPARJAN YOJANA (SJY) – A MODEL FOR BIHAR'S MAHADALITS

Program Design and Scale

The Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana (SJY), launched by the Government of Bihar in 2018, represents the world's largest government-led scale-up of the Graduation Approach. With an initial budgetary outlay of INR 840 crores (approximately USD 120 million), the program initially aimed to cover 100,000 women-headed ultra-poor households and has since expanded its target to 200,000 households, reaching approximately 1 million people. This ambitious scale demonstrates a significant commitment to addressing extreme poverty in the state.

Components and Implementation

SJY's implementation is characterized by several key components, reflecting the holistic nature of the Graduation Approach:

- **Participatory Identification:** The program employs a participatory identification process, actively involving Village Organizations (VOs) to ensure accurate targeting of the poorest households within communities. This bottom-up approach helps overcome the targeting errors often seen in top-down schemes.
- **Asset Grant Transfer:** SJY provides productive assets, such as livestock or capital for micro-enterprises, with an average value of INR 60,000, disbursed in multiple tranches. This direct transfer of productive capital empowers households to initiate sustainable livelihoods.
- **Training and Coaching:** Beneficiaries receive comprehensive entrepreneurship training, business development coaching, and general life skills education. This capacity building is essential for ensuring that asset transfers translate into viable economic activities.
- **Consumption Support:** To buffer households during the initial phase of their new livelihoods, SJY provides livelihood gap assistance, such as INR 1,000 per month for the first seven months, until they generate their own income. This

temporary support prevents distress sales of assets and allows for a stable transition.

- **Access to Savings and Health:** The program facilitates access to formal savings accounts, health information, and crucial insurance schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMJSBY). This builds financial resilience and addresses health vulnerabilities.
- **Community Cadres:** A cornerstone of SJY's success is its emphasis on community ownership and decentralized decision-making. Local women are trained as Master Resource Persons (MRPs) and Block Resource Persons (BRPs), forming a dedicated community cadre. Each MRP supports 30-35 households, providing continuous mentorship and culturally sensitive guidance. This contrasts sharply with the manpower shortages observed in other government programs and underscores the effectiveness of local leadership in last-mile delivery.
- **Convergence with Government Schemes:** SJY actively facilitates linkages with existing government entitlements, including Public Distribution System (PDS) cards, housing schemes, and pensions. This integrated approach maximizes the benefits for ultra-poor households by connecting them to a broader safety net.

The Imperative for Community-Level Inclusion: Beyond Household-Centric Approaches

Traditional poverty alleviation programs, including some graduation models, often employ proxy indicators or participatory wealth ranking to identify ultra-poor households. However, in India's deeply stratified, caste-based society, Mahadalits experience poverty and exclusion as a collective, identity-based, and spatial phenomenon, not merely an aggregate of individual household deprivations. Therefore, a strategic shift towards community-level targeting and interventions is imperative:

- **Geographic and Social Segregation:** Mahadalits are not randomly distributed but predominantly live in segregated tolas, physically separated from dominant caste villages. These settlements often lack basic infrastructure (roads, drainage, electricity, sanitation) and direct access to mainstream services. Consequently, interventions must be settlement-level, focusing on shared infrastructure, collective sanitation, and bringing services to the doorstep of these communities. For instance, providing individual toilets is insufficient if the hamlet lacks a functioning sewage system or consistent water supply.
- **Collective Dispossession and Intergenerational Deprivation:** Mahadalits face historical and intergenerational disadvantages stemming from their collective identity and the systemic denial

of rights and opportunities. This deeply embedded disadvantage cannot be undone solely through household-level asset transfers or individual skill development. As academic literature on caste and poverty emphasizes, structural barriers perpetuate collective disadvantage, making individual upward mobility difficult without broader social change (Borooah et al., 2014). For example, providing a Mahadalit family with land may not be enough if they face social ostracism or violence when attempting to cultivate it, as seen in land disputes in Bihar (MCRG, 2012).

- **Social Norms and Discrimination:** Even economically "less poor" Mahadalit households often remain socially excluded, denied equal access to public spaces, social networks, and leadership roles. This persistent social marginalization can undermine individual economic gains, highlighting the limitations of purely economic interventions. The collective nature of caste discrimination necessitates a collective response to build agency and dismantle discriminatory social norms.
- **Collective Empowerment and Resilience:** Sustainable poverty reduction in such contexts is intrinsically linked to collective empowerment. Organizing Mahadalit communities into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), federations, or other community-based organizations (CBOs) can enhance their collective voice, bargaining power, and access to resources. This collective action can help overcome individual vulnerability, foster mutual support, and challenge discriminatory practices, leading to more resilient and sustained development outcomes (TheCSRUniverse, 2025; IJSI, 2025).

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing Mahadalits as an ultra-poor community rather than just a collection of poor households necessitates a multi-pronged, comprehensive, and rights-based policy framework.

For Policymakers:

- **Dedicated "Mahadalit Ultra-Poor Graduation" Programs:**
 - **Bundled Support:** Implement large-scale, dedicated graduation programs for Mahadalit communities, offering a comprehensive package of interventions: asset transfers (e.g., livestock, tools, small land parcels), livelihood training, consumption support during the initial phase, access to healthcare, financial literacy, and intensive handholding for a sustained period (18-24 months).
 - **Contextualized Design:** Programs must be designed with deep understanding of local Mahadalit sub-caste specific needs, customary

livelihoods, and social dynamics. For example, specific interventions for Musahar communities might focus on non-traditional livelihoods that bypass social stigma. The success of SJY serves as a strong model for government-led scale-up.

- **Recognition of "Mahadalit Development Zones" and Area-Based Planning:**
 - **Targeted Infrastructure Development:** Formally recognize Mahadalit tolas as special development zones eligible for focused investment in basic infrastructure – all-weather roads, safe drinking water sources, community sanitation complexes, electricity, and reliable public transport links. Address issues like fluoride contamination proactively.
 - **Integrated Service Delivery:** Ensure saturation coverage of government services (Anganwadi, PDS, health sub-centers, banks) within or immediately accessible to Mahadalit habitations, potentially through dedicated outreach camps or mobile units that address documentation barriers.
- **Strengthening Community Institutions and Participatory Governance:**
 - **Promotion of Mahadalit SHGs and Federations:** Actively promote the formation and strengthening of Mahadalit-exclusive SHGs and their federations. These can serve as platforms for collective savings, credit, skill development, and advocacy.
 - **Ensuring Representation:** Mandate and facilitate Mahadalit representation and active participation in local self-governance bodies (Gram Panchayats), Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs), and other program implementation committees to ensure their voices are heard and needs are met. This could involve reserved seats or proactive capacity building for elected Mahadalit representatives.
- **Data-Driven Policy: Enhanced Disaggregation and Monitoring:**
 - **Sub-caste Disaggregated Data:** Move beyond broad SC categories to collect and analyze socio-economic data specifically disaggregated for Mahadalit sub-castes. This granular data is crucial for precise targeting, understanding specific deprivations, and evaluating program impact.
 - **Regular Poverty Monitoring:** Establish robust mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation of multidimensional poverty indicators within Mahadalit communities, allowing for adaptive management of programs. The NITI Aayog MPI can be refined to include Mahadalit-specific indicators.

- **Addressing Systemic Discrimination and Legal Reforms:**
 - **Strengthened Enforcement of Rights:** Ensure stringent enforcement of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and other relevant laws to counter social discrimination, land grabbing, and denial of rights. Address issues of misuse of laws impacting Mahadalit communities.
 - **Documentation Drives:** Launch targeted, simplified, and sustained campaigns to ensure all Mahadalit households possess essential identity documents, caste certificates, and bank accounts, resolving issues like Aadhaar discrepancies for vulnerable groups.
 - **Land Rights and Access:** Expedite the identification and transfer of land titles for landless Mahadalit families, coupled with support for agricultural inputs and market linkages.

For Donors:

- **Invest in Scalable Community-Led Models:** Prioritize funding for proven models like the Graduation Approach, specifically tailored to Mahadalit communities. Support the scaling of initiatives like SJY through co-financing, technical assistance, and capacity building.
- **Support Data and Research:** Fund rigorous, disaggregated research on Mahadalit communities to generate granular data that informs effective policy and program design. Support longitudinal studies to track long-term impacts.
- **Strengthen Local Capacity:** Invest in building the capacity of local Mahadalit community-based organizations (CBOs) and local government bodies to effectively implement and monitor programs. This includes training for community cadres (like SJY's MRPs/BRPs) and strengthening financial management systems.
- **Advocate for Policy Reform:** Engage with government stakeholders to advocate for policy reforms that address systemic barriers, enhance accountability, and promote the adoption of evidence-based, community-centric approaches.
- **Foster Long-Term Partnerships:** Commit to long-term funding and partnerships that allow for sustained interventions and adaptive programming, recognizing the deep-seated nature of Mahadalit ultra-poverty.

For Researchers:

- **Conduct In-Depth Ethnographic Studies:** Undertake qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Mahadalits, the nuances of caste discrimination, and the social dynamics within their communities that impact development outcomes.

- **Evaluate Program Effectiveness:** Conduct rigorous impact evaluations (e.g., RCTs, quasi-experimental designs) of Mahadalit-focused interventions to build the evidence base on what works and why. Focus on measuring not just economic, but also social, health, and psychological well-being outcomes.
- **Analyze Policy Implementation Gaps:** Research the systemic and administrative bottlenecks in government scheme implementation, particularly for Mahadalits, to provide actionable recommendations for improving delivery mechanisms and ensuring last-mile access.
- **Explore Gendered Dimensions of Poverty:** Conduct research specifically on the intersection of gender and caste within Mahadalit communities to identify unique vulnerabilities faced by women and girls and inform gender-responsive interventions.

CONCLUSION

The socio-economic conditions of Mahadalits undeniably classify them as ultra-poor, a condition exacerbated by pervasive caste-based structural discrimination. While India has made commendable progress in poverty reduction, the case of Mahadalits underscores that a purely household-level approach is insufficient to address deeply entrenched, identity-based marginalization. By recognizing Mahadalits as an ultra-poor community and implementing a rights-based, holistic, and community-level inclusion strategy, India can move towards truly equitable and just development outcomes, ensuring that no one, especially the "furthest behind," is left behind. The Satat Jeevikaoparjan Yojana (SJY) stands as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that government-led, community-centric approaches, built on sound evidence and robust implementation, can indeed transform the lives of India's most vulnerable. It is time to learn from such successes and ensure their widespread application to truly fulfill the promise of inclusive development.

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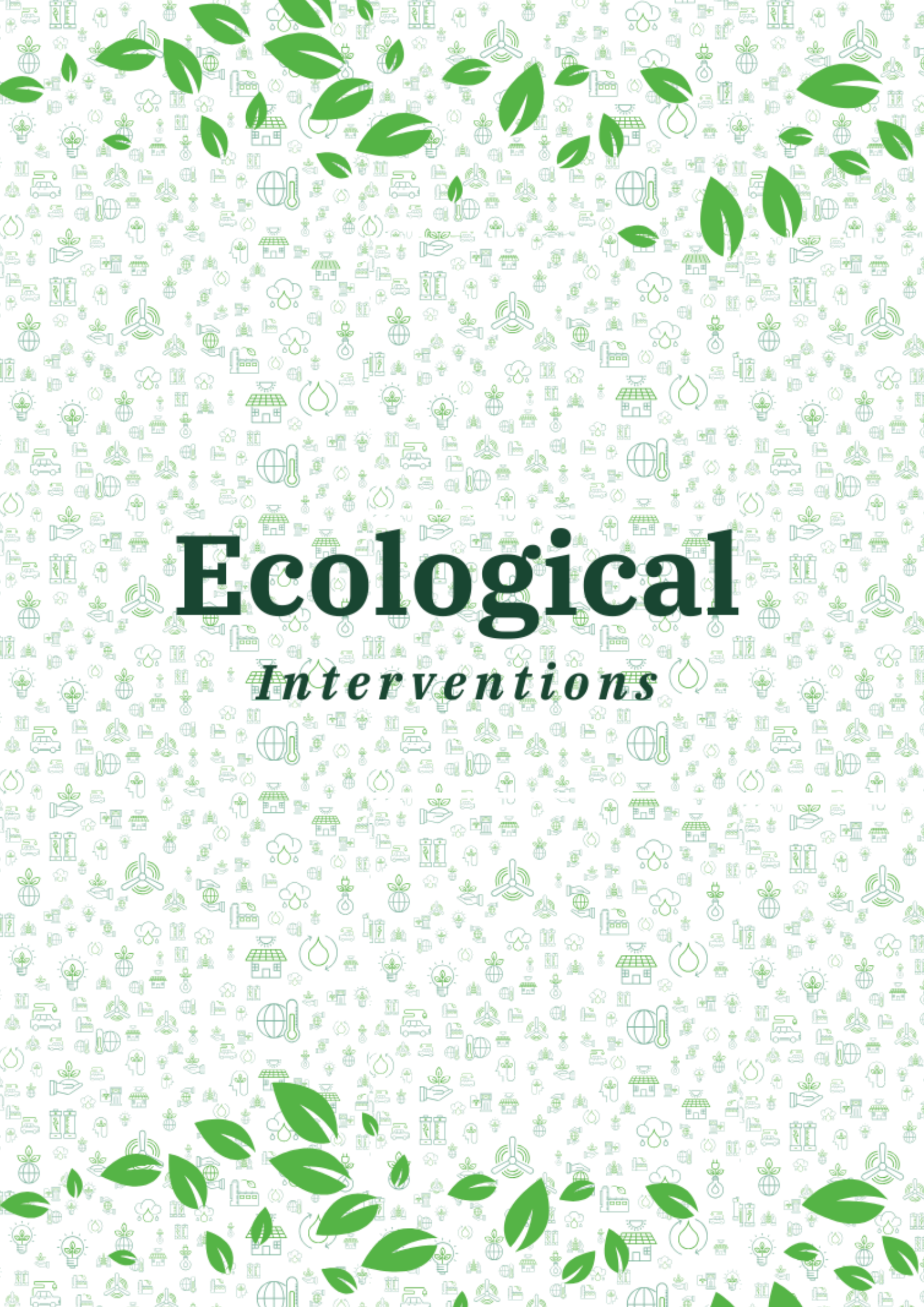


AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Mihir Sahana is an accomplished development professional with over 30 years of experience in rural development, farm-based livelihoods, and natural resource management, with a strong focus on watershed and value chain development. He holds a Master's in Development Studies from the University of Manchester (UK) and a Post Graduate Diploma in Rural Management from IRMA. Throughout his career, Mihir has held senior leadership roles in renowned organizations such as PRADAN, IDE International, BASIX Group, Indian Grameen Services, and Basix Krishi Samruddhi Limited, where he played a pivotal role in designing and implementing large-scale livelihood programs, promoting over 100 Farmer Producer Organizations across 16 states, and pioneering microfinance and business correspondent models with leading banks. Currently serving as Executive Director of Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha (4S India), he leads integrated development initiatives across Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, while also advising government and donor agencies on policy, strategy, and program design. With extensive expertise in project planning, monitoring and evaluation, team leadership, and policy advocacy, Mr. Sahana brings a unique blend of grassroots experience and strategic vision, supported by global exposure through professional engagements in the UK, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, Geneva, and Canada.



CASE ARTICLES

The background of the entire image is a dense, repeating pattern of small, light green icons. These icons represent various ecological and environmental concepts, including leaves, water droplets, recycling symbols, wind turbines, solar panels, and industrial buildings. Large, solid green leaves are also scattered across the top and bottom edges of the image, framing the central text.

Ecological *Interventions*



SOLAR LIFT IRRIGATION SYSTEM

Mahadalit Families marching towards prosperity

By Ramesh Ranjan, Team Leader, 4S India

ABSTRACT:

Vinoba Nagar Tola, a Maha Dalit settlement in Parsawan Khurd village, Gaya district, has faced persistent challenges related to land security, livelihood, and irrigation. Historically, families in this community relied on subsistence farming and agricultural labor, struggling with financial instability and water scarcity. In 2022, 4S India, with support from Axis Bank Foundation, initiated the Deep-Dive project to enhance agricultural productivity and economic resilience among Maha Dalit families. A critical intervention under this project was the installation of a solar lift irrigation system in Vinoba Nagar. Despite initial reluctance due to financial constraints, community mobilization efforts led to the formation of the Jal Upbhogta Samuh (Water User Group) and successful fundraising for a borewell. The system, operational since August 2023, significantly improved irrigation access, enabling year-round farming. As a result, farmers adopted multi-cropping practices, cultivating paddy, wheat, vegetables, and pulses, leading to increased production and income. Between August 2023 and September 2024, Baijnath Bhuiya, a key beneficiary, expanded cultivation on two bighas of previously barren land, producing 3,200 kg of paddy, along with vegetables such as tomatoes and chilies. Similarly, 19 households in the Water User Group saw substantial improvements in agricultural yields and earnings. However, challenges remain, including inadequate water storage infrastructure and the need for integrated water management solutions like pond construction and Ahar-Pyen renovation. This case study highlights the transformative impact of community-driven irrigation solutions in marginalized rural communities. It underscores the importance of sustainable water management, participatory governance, and institutional support in fostering long-term agricultural development and resilience among Maha Dalit families. Future efforts should focus on strengthening water retention structures and expanding irrigation facilities to sustain these gains.



BACKGROUND

Vinoba Nagar Tola is located at the foothills of Brahmanwa Mountain. It is bordered by the Morhar River to the north, mountains and barren lands to the south, Anjan village to the east, and Meghnadih to the west. The tola is part of Parsawan Khurd village, which falls under the Parsawan Khurd Gram Panchayat in the Banke Bazar block of Gaya district.

As per the 2011 Census, Parsawan Khurd village has a total of 609 households, with a population of 3,920, of which 1,456 belong to the Maha Dalit community. The village is home to people from various communities, including Yadav, Koeri, Bhuiyan, Ravidas, Paswan, Chaudhary, Saav, Pandit, Thakur, Kumhar, Kahar, Lohar, Badai, Teli, Muslim, and Sonar. Educational facilities include one middle school, one 10+2 school, and four Anganwadi centers. However, the village lacks a hospital, and residents must travel to Banke Bazar or Gaya for medical treatment. For Maha Dalit families, agricultural labor remains the primary source of livelihood.

Vinoba Nagar Tola consists of 25 households, all belonging to the Maha Dalit community. Around 25 years ago, 10 families from Barwadih and Karamdih Tola of Parsawan Khurd village—comprising one Paswan household and nine Bhuiyan households—settled in Vinoba Nagar. They migrated to cultivate paddy on land allocated under the Bhoodan movement.

CHALLENGES OF BAIJNATH BHUIYA – A MAHA DALIT FAMILY

Baijnath Bhuiya, now 58 years old, migrated from Barwadih Tola, approximately 1 km from Vinoba Nagar, and settled there with his family. He was married in childhood to the late Lalita Devi and has three children—two sons, Rajesh Bhuiya (38 years) and Ranjan Bhuiya (35 years), and a daughter, Asha Devi (30 years). Due to financial difficulties, all three children had to discontinue their education after Class 6. Both sons moved to Chennai to work in a thread factory, where the company provides accommodation and food. They manage to save ₹15,000 per month to support their household.

Baijnath Bhuiya often reflects on his family's past with deep emotion. Nearly 80 years ago, his father, the late Bartu Bhuiya, received two bighas of land as a donation from Anulal Sinha's maternal grandfather. Despite owning land, Baijnath's father, like his ancestors, worked as an agricultural laborer on Anulal Sinha's 30-acre farm in Parsawan Khurd. Baijnath himself worked as a farm laborer from 1985 to 1995, spending his entire childhood and youth in bonded labor due to his family's poor financial condition.

Baijnath's father, Bartu Bhuiya, had eight daughters and was the only son in the family. As a result, he was forced to work for Anulal Sinha for ten years. His two brothers, Moti Bhuiya and Gansu Bhuiya, sought alternative livelihoods. Moti worked as a

laborer in a coal mine in Raniganj, West Bengal, eventually earning ₹10,000 per month until retirement. He used his savings to purchase one bigha of land in their village. Gansu Bhuiya worked in a private company at the same coal mine, earning ₹5 per day and later acquiring two bighas of land.

Late Bartu Bhuiya, however, remained an agricultural laborer, earning meager wages. During the paddy season, he received 30 kg of paddy for harvesting one bundle of paddy, while his wife received 7 kg. The primary crops at the time included khesari, batura, mustard, paddy, mahua, sesame, urad, pigeon pea, barley, and sugarcane. As wheat was cultivated in smaller quantities, their staple diet consisted of rice and chakod greens. To supplement their income, they sold firewood in the local markets of Saif Ganj, Tandwa, and Jaundhi, earning ₹10 per sale, which they used to buy essential rations like rice, oil, spices, and salt. A portion of their earnings was spent on mahua liquor, which cost 50 paise per serving.

STRUGGLES FOR LIVELIHOOD AND LAND SECURITY

In 1995, Baijnath Bhuiya left farm labor and moved to Delhi, where he worked as a mason, earning ₹200 per day. After five years, he returned to his village, resuming work as a farm laborer while also selling firewood for ₹20 per bundle to buy household essentials. By 2001-02, he began cultivating paddy on the Bhudan land in Vinoba Nagar. However, due to erratic rainfall, his one bigha of land yielded only 400 kg of paddy—insufficient to sustain his family throughout the year.

Recognizing the urgent need for irrigation, Baijnath and ten other villagers took the initiative to dig a well (10x10 feet) in Vinoba Nagar. They divided their work into two groups—one collecting firewood (such as mahua and palash) from the forest and the other engaged in well-digging. In the evenings, they sold the firewood at the Saif Ganj market for ₹20 per bundle, ensuring they had enough cash for daily rations. After 25 days of relentless effort, the well was completed.

With the well ensuring year-round farming, the group decided to build small houses on their respective Bhudan lands. Using mud and straw, each family constructed a one-room house. However, this development triggered opposition from the Yadav community of Meghnadih village. They issued threats, demanding that the families vacate the land and even attempted to burn down their houses. Fearing for their safety, the families began patrolling their village at night, armed with stones, wood, and logs for protection.

Beyond human threats, the settlers also faced challenges from wild animals that frequently entered their homes and harmed their livestock. In response, they started worshiping Mahadaniya Baba at the foot of the mountain, offering sacrifices such as goats, milk, paan, beedis, and cigarettes. This ritual has continued annually since then. The threats and fear persisted for nearly three years before the families were able to settle in peace.

WATER SCARCITY AND AGRICULTURAL CHALLENGES

Despite some progress, including the establishment of a primary school (2003-04) and the construction of wells for drinking water (2007-08), the community continues to face severe water shortages for irrigation. This problem has particularly affected small and marginal farmers, most of whom belong to Dalit and Maha Dalit families. Due to limited access to water and agricultural resources, large portions of land remain barren, and cultivation remains heavily dependent on unpredictable rainfall.

Scientific studies and environmental reports, including publications by Down to Earth, have highlighted the acute water scarcity in this region. The lack of irrigation facilities has led to decreased crop production, exacerbating food insecurity and economic hardships for vulnerable communities like the Maha Dalits of Vinoba Nagar.

PROJECT INTERVENTION BY 4S

Initiation of the Deep-Dive Project

In July 2022, 4S India, with financial support from Axis Bank Foundation, launched the Deep-Dive project to uplift Maha Dalit families across 120 villages in Banke Bazaar and Imam Ganj blocks. In November 2022, the organization's team visited Maha Dalit Tola in Misri Chak, Parsawan Khurd village, and held a meeting with key community representatives, including the ward member, Vikas Mitra, and Tola Sevak, along with the residents. The project was introduced, and a village map was created.

The next day, a survey of Maha Dalit families began. However, many families hesitated or refused to provide their identity documents, such as ration cards, job cards, and voter ID cards. To address their concerns, a general meeting was held with village leaders and residents, reassuring them that the project aimed solely at their upliftment. It was explained that 4S India would establish **Farmer Producer cum Consumer Groups (FPCG)** in 120 villages, ensuring the participation of all Maha Dalit families without any financial burden. A Kisan School was also planned, where villagers would receive training on modern farming techniques, crop protection, seed treatment, line sowing for paddy

and wheat, vegetable cultivation, mushroom farming, livestock rearing, health, nutrition, and environmental conservation. The importance of forest preservation and tree planting was also emphasized. The meeting concluded with unanimous agreement to cooperate in the survey.

“

FPCG (farmer producer cum consumer group) is a hamlet level institution (as feasible to specific demography and situations), that caters to both the needs of the participant households, keeping seasonality, weekly Savings and commodity in focus. Bulk/collectivized purchase of community food needs, with nutrition security awareness and collective selling of their commodities is undertaken.

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Introducing Solar Lift Irrigation in Vinoba Nagar

One evening, Baijnath Bhuiya met the Mukhiya at Saif Ganj market, who informed him about the solar irrigation facility being provided in Maha Dalit Tola. Encouraged by this, Baijnath discussed the idea with other farmers and approached the 4S India office in Banke Bazaar to request a meeting on installing a solar lift irrigation system in his village.

Initially, a meeting was held in Misri Chak Tola, but the residents showed little interest due to land ownership issues. However, during a subsequent meeting in Vinoba Nagar, villagers learned that the system would include a 5HP solar-powered motor, 16 solar panels generating 5,082 watts of electricity, and a 500m-long pipeline network with valves every 100m for controlled water distribution. The cooperative organization would oversee operations, but the villagers needed to fund a 10-inch borewell, estimated to cost ₹60,000-70,000.

Concerned about the financial burden, most villagers hesitated, and the meeting ended without resolution.

A week later, another meeting was held, urging villagers to form a Water User Group for sustainable operation and maintenance. A governing body (President, Secretary, Treasurer) was to be elected, and each farmer was required to contribute ₹250 per katha of land for the borewell. Discussions also took place about appointing an operator and setting an irrigation fee of ₹20 per katha to cover maintenance costs.

Despite multiple meetings, only ₹3,000 was initially collected. Realizing the need for stronger mobilization, Baijnath Bhuiya called another meeting, persuading villagers to contribute. Gradually, the community raised ₹48,000 over four months, enabling the borewell installation. Following this, the Jal Upbhogta Samuh, Vinoba Nagar was formally established with elected representatives and a set water usage fee of ₹50 per household for domestic use. In August 2023, the solar irrigation system became operational, bringing water to the fields through a 500m pipeline.

This success created a buzz in nearby villages, attracting visitors eager to learn from the intervention. Inspired by the availability of water, Baijnath Bhuiya cultivated previously barren land, growing wheat, tomatoes, and chilies. From just 1 katha of land, he harvested 30kg of chilies and tomatoes, earning ₹4,203 after household consumption. Encouraged by his success, he expanded farming on 2 bighas, adopting multi-cropping methods and producing 3,200 kg of paddy for the first time using line sowing.



OUTCOMES OF THE INTERVENTION

Baijnath Bhuiya and other members of the Water User Group benefited significantly from improved irrigation, increasing their agricultural production and income. Below are the results from August 2023 to September 2024:

Bajnath Bhuiya's Crop Production (Aug 2023 - Sept 2024)

Crop Name	Total Land (In Katha)	Input cost	Production (In Kg)	Selling Price (Rupees)	Self-consumptions (in kg)	Quantity sold (in kg)	Total income
Paddy	40	18,000	3,200	18	2,000	1,200	21,600
Wheat	20	8,000	800	25	600	200	5,000
Green Gram	20	9,000	100	70	50	50	3,500
Maize	1	400	90	20	40	50	1,000
Pigeon Pea	1	200	40	90	20	20	1,800
White Radish	0.5	150	10	50	3	7	350
Brinjal	1	400	100	40	50	50	2,000
Potato	2	2500	240	19	188	52	988
Sweet Potato	0.25	200	40	20	5	35	700
Tomato	2	500	160	20	20	140	2,800
Chilli	1	400	30	100	5	25	2,500

Similarly, the members of Water Users group started earning income from crop and vegetable production.

Water User Group (19 HH) Crop Production (Aug 2023 - Sept 2024)

Crop Name	Total Land (In Katha)	Input cost	Production (In Kg)	Selling Price (Rupees)	Self-consumptions (in kg)	Quantity sold (in kg)	Total income
Paddy	180	81,000	12,600	18	9,450	3,150	56,700
Wheat	160	64,000	6,400	25	4,800	1,600	40,000
Green Gram	80	36,000	400	70	190	210	14,700
Pigeon Pea	10	2,000	400	90	190	210	18,900
Maize	10	4,000	900	20	450	450	9,000
Potato	20	24,000	2,400	19	1,920	480	9,120
Onion	10	13,000	1,000	50	700	300	15,000
Chilli	5	2,000	150	100	38	112	11,200
Tomato	10	5,000	400	20	100	300	6,000
White Radish	5	1,500	125	40	45	80	3,200

Green leaves	3	600	90	60	30	60	3,600
Coriander	1	200	30	400	20	10	4,000

ISSUES ADDRESSED: CONSTRAINTS TO BE ADDRESSED IN FUTURE

Following the completion of the solar lift irrigation system installation and the renovation of the Ahar, the Bankey Bazar Block PO, MGNREGA, AE, and JE visited the site. This intervention significantly enhanced water retention and ensured a steady water supply for farming throughout the year. However, it also highlighted key constraints that need to be addressed for a more comprehensive water management strategy.

Additionally, farm bunding was implemented in the village to retain rainwater in the fields. However, the absence of ponds limited the overall effectiveness of this initiative. This underscores the necessity of an integrated approach that includes multiple water management structures, such as ponds, renovation of Ahar and Pyen, to maximize water retention and distribution across the fields. Applications have been submitted to the block authorities to support the construction of ponds and further enhance water conservation efforts.



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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ramesh Ranjan is a seasoned development professional with over a decade of experience in grassroots program implementation, team management, and stakeholder coordination. With a B. Tech in Electrical and Electronics Engineering from Biju Patnaik University of Technology, he transitioned into the development sector driven by a strong commitment to social change. Ramesh has worked with reputed organizations such as 4S India, PRADAN, SUPPORT, Badlao Foundation, and Mahila Vikas Mandal, leading initiatives focused on poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and rural livelihoods. In his current role as Lead of the Ultra Poor Program under Axis Bank Foundation at 4S India, he spearheads project planning, capacity building, and convergence with government schemes across agriculture, livestock, health, and nutrition. His expertise lies in mobilizing communities, mentoring large field teams, and ensuring effective delivery of welfare schemes at the grassroots. Fluent in Hindi, English, Oriya, and Bengali, Ramesh brings strong communication skills and cultural sensitivity to his work. Known for his hands-on leadership and strategic coordination, he remains dedicated to uplifting marginalized communities through inclusive development.



STRENGTHENING RURAL LIVELIHOODS THROUGH BUNDING

Impact, Inclusion, and Transformation among Dalit and Mahadalit communities

By Bikram Kumar, Former Team Leader, 4S India

ABSTRACT:

Agriculture remains the backbone of rural livelihoods in India, yet smallholder farmers, particularly from marginalized communities, face persistent challenges due to soil erosion, declining soil fertility, and erratic rainfall. In response, 4S India implemented a farm bunding intervention in Bankey Bazaar and Imamganj, Gaya, Bihar—home to Dalit and Mahadalit communities struggling with land degradation and low agricultural productivity. The initiative aimed to enhance water retention, reduce soil erosion, and improve farm yields through the strategic construction of bunds. Supported by Axis Bank Foundation's financial assistance of Rs 34,65,000, the project mobilized local farmers, with 90% of the workforce comprising women and full participation from Dalit and Mahadalit groups. The intervention was designed through a participatory approach, ensuring technical precision in bund placement and long-term sustainability through community engagement. Key achievements included improved soil moisture retention (by 20%), reduced soil erosion (by 15%), and the transformation of 108 acres of farmland. Additionally, it created immediate economic benefits, generating Rs 300/day in wages for local workers. The project also led to an attitudinal shift among farmers, who initially resisted bunding but later became advocates for its benefits. Lessons from the intervention highlight the importance of integrating water conservation techniques, maintaining continuous community engagement for sustainability, and addressing economic disparities by promoting diversified income sources. Despite challenges, the initiative stands as a replicable model for sustainable land and water management, demonstrating the transformative power of community-driven agricultural solutions in strengthening rural livelihoods.



BACKGROUND

Agriculture remains the backbone of rural livelihoods in India, yet smallholder farmers continue to struggle with soil erosion, water retention, and declining productivity due to erratic rainfall and land degradation (Bhattacharya et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2022; Matthan 2022). In rain-fed regions, particularly in undulating and semi-arid landscapes, improper land management leads to excessive water runoff, soil depletion, and reduced crop yields.

Farm bunding, a traditional yet effective soil and water conservation technique, has emerged as a crucial intervention to address these challenges. By constructing earthen embankments along field contours, farm bunding helps in reducing soil erosion, improving moisture retention, leading to healthier crops and ultimately enhancing overall farm productivity. Despite its proven benefits, many smallholder farmers lack the technical know-how, financial resources, and institutional support to implement it effectively.

The intervention targeted Bankey Bazaar and Imamganj in Gaya, which is marked by barren land, soil degradation, and limited water resources. The region is mainly inhabited by smallholder farmers, from marginalized Dalit and Mahadalit communities (including Bhuinya, Manjhi, Paswan and Bharti), who are traditionally engaged in informal labor and livestock rearing. Struggled with soil erosion, poor soil moisture, and low agricultural productivity, they are forced to follow their traditional practices only.

Keeping the situation in mind, 4S identified farm bunding as a practical solution to mitigate soil degradation and enhance agricultural sustainability. Through technical guidance, community mobilization, and innovative financing mechanisms, 4S India has been working with farmers to adopt and scale this practice.

INITIATIVES TAKEN BY 4S INDIA

A thorough assessment was conducted to design effective soil and water conservation measures, taking into account key factors such as land slope, bund spacing, and rainfall intensity. In steeper areas, bunds were placed closely together to prevent rapid water runoff, while in flatter regions, wider spacing was maintained. The spacing of these bunds was carefully planned based on the terrain and the volume of water runoff, ensuring optimal water retention. In high-rainfall areas, sturdier bunds were constructed to withstand the intensity of water flow.

The construction of these bunds adhered to the standards set by MGNREGA, ensuring both effectiveness and durability. Standing at a height of two feet, the bunds helped slow down water flow, allowing better soil infiltration. Their width was also meticulously planned—two feet at the top to support vegetation growth and three feet at the base for structural stability.

The implementation of this initiative was deeply rooted in community participation. Building trust and spreading awareness through educational workshops played a crucial role in mobilizing local

engagement. Experts provided hands-on training to local laborers, equipping them with the skills needed for bund construction and long-term maintenance. The project was further strengthened through MGNREGA funding, which not only facilitated labor mobilization but also provided financial support to community members. The construction process itself was methodical—land contours were carefully marked, trenches were dug, and bunds were built under strict quality monitoring. To enhance sustainability, grass and shrubs were planted along the bunds, stabilizing the soil and aiding in water retention.

Regular monitoring became a shared responsibility between 4S India and the community. Before each monsoon, inspections were conducted to assess functionality, ensuring timely repairs and reinforcements where necessary.

This intervention was built upon previous efforts by 4S India in promoting sustainable agriculture. Over time, the organization had introduced improved agricultural inputs and training programs, supported livestock management for income diversification, and encouraged horticulture through high-value crops. Additionally, preventive health and nutrition programs were implemented to improve overall community well-being. However, despite these initiatives, persistent challenges such as soil erosion and water scarcity continued to hinder agricultural productivity and economic stability. The bund construction project emerged as a critical solution, directly addressing these issues and reinforcing the foundation for long-term agricultural growth.

STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR ROLES

The bunding project was a collaborative effort driven by multiple stakeholders, each playing a crucial role in ensuring its success.

4S India: At the forefront, 4S India took charge of planning, execution, and monitoring, ensuring the project was implemented efficiently and met its intended goals. Their expertise in rural development and water conservation guided the entire process.

Axis Bank Foundation: ABF provided critical financial support, granting Rs 34,65,000 to fund the initiative. A significant portion of this funding covered labor costs, ensuring that each worker received Rs 300 per day, making the project both impactful and economically beneficial for the community.

FPCG (Farmer Producer and Consumer Group): On the ground, FPCG played an essential role in mobilizing farmers and spreading awareness about the importance of bunding. Their efforts helped create a strong support system among farmers, encouraging active participation.

Panchayati Raj Institution members: PRI Members facilitated local resource allocation and encouraged community involvement. Their role was instrumental in bridging the gap between project implementers and local governance, ensuring smoother execution.

Community Members: They themselves were the backbone of the project. They contributed their land, labor, and support, demonstrating a strong commitment to improving their agricultural landscape. Their involvement not only ensured the project's success but also strengthened the community's resilience against soil erosion and water scarcity.

Together, these stakeholders worked in harmony, transforming the vision of bunding into a reality, bringing long-term benefits to the farming community.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND AGRICULTURAL OUTCOMES

Axis Bank Foundation's investment played a pivotal role in the project's success, funding construction materials and labor wages. This not only facilitated infrastructure development but also provided immediate income opportunities, boosting rural economies and fostering financial stability within the community.

Immediately, the following achievements were found-

- **Building Community Trust:** Initial skepticism was overcome through transparency and active engagement.
- **Expanding Reach:** The project impacted 15 panchayats, 60 villages, and 1,200 landholders, creating widespread benefits.
- **Land restored:** A total of 108 acres of previously degraded or underproductive land were treated with bunding structures, improving their capacity for water retention and soil health. While modest in scale, this intervention marks a significant ecological restoration in a severely drought-prone landscape.
- **Economic Support:** A total investment of Rs 34,65,000 directly benefited local workers, ensuring a Rs 300/day wage, injecting resources into the rural economy. With an average investment of Rs 300 per day per worker and a total land treatment cost of Rs 32,083 per acre, the intervention yielded a 20% increase in soil moisture and 15% reduction in soil erosion. Early estimates from farmers suggest a 10-15% increase in crop productivity post-intervention, indicating a positive cost-benefit outlook when considering both environmental gains and livelihood outcomes.

The outcome were-

“

“हमलोग ये सब नहीं करवाएँगे, इससे कोई फायदा नहीं होगा, मोटा आरी बांधने से खेत छोटा हो जाएगा। (We won't allow this; it won't help. Large bunds will reduce my field size)”

”

This was Devanti Devi's initial reaction when farm bunding was introduced in her village. Like many others, she feared that the practice would take away valuable farmland without providing tangible benefits.

However, after participating in community discussions and training sessions, she decided to give it a try. Today, her perspective has completely changed.

“

“भैया, इससे तो बहुत फायदा हुआ... पहले हमारे खेत में नमी नहीं रहती थी लेकिन अब बारिश के कुछ दिन बाद भी खेत में जाते हैं तो खेत में पैर धँसता है। (Brother, this has been very beneficial. Earlier, my fields lacked moisture, but now even days after rain, my feet sink into the soil.)”

”

Devanti Devi's experience is a testament to the power of awareness and sustainable practices. What once seemed like a loss turned into a gain—improving soil moisture, enhancing productivity, and securing a better future for her farm.

Increased Engagement in Soil Conservation and Agriculture: (a) Enhanced Soil Moisture: Increased by 20%, reducing the impact of dry spells (b) Reduced Soil Erosion: Declined by 15%, preserving fertile land. (c) Improved Crop Yields: Better water retention boosted agricultural productivity, enhancing food security.

Economic sustainability: While the Rs 300/day wage provided immediate relief during the project's implementation phase—supported by ABF funding with training in land development and water conservation. These skills have since been used in allied works such as orchard development, fencing, and silt-trap maintenance, laying a foundation for ongoing income generation beyond the project timeline.

Gender and Social Inclusion: (a) Women's Leadership: Over 90% of the workforce comprised women, as documented in the Project Report on Person-Days Generated. (b) Dalit and Mahadalit Participation: 100% inclusion in the workforce ensured equitable participation. (c) Economic Empowerment: Consistent Rs 300/day wages provided financial stability for marginalized communities. (d) Skill Development: Training in sustainable farming techniques improved

long-term employability and self-reliance.

Community Transformation: (a) Shifting Attitudes: Once hesitant, farmers now champion bunding as a key agricultural practice. (b) Sustained Participation: The success of the project sparked community-led initiatives in irrigation and land conservation, demonstrating long-term commitment and self-sufficiency.

By integrating financial investment with community-driven action, the project not only strengthened rural livelihoods but also fostered a culture of sustainable land management and social inclusion.

“Earlier we did not understand how water was being wasted. Now we monitor bunds before every rain. My children help plant trees along the bund,” shared Anita Devi from Imamganj, indicating a shift towards collective ownership and intergenerational learning.

LESSON LEARNED

- **Holistic Water Management is Key:** Complementary structures like ponds and canals significantly enhanced the effectiveness of farm bunding, highlighting the need for an integrated approach to water conservation.
- **Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability:** Ongoing community engagement and capacity-building are crucial for maintaining bund structures and ensuring lasting impact.
- **Addressing Economic Disparities:** While immediate soil improvements were visible, long-term agricultural and economic benefits depend on diversifying income sources and strengthening rural livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

The farm bunding intervention by 4S India significantly enhanced water retention, soil fertility, and agricultural productivity in Gaya, Bihar. Beyond its environmental impact, the project fostered economic resilience and social inclusion, particularly among marginalized communities. While challenges persist, the initiative stands as a replicable model of sustainable land and water conservation, demonstrating the power of community-driven solutions in transforming rural livelihoods.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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LIVELIHOOD ADVANCEMENT THROUGH SOILLESS FARMING

A Case Study from Gaya, Bihar

By Anuva Mondal, Executive- MEL & KM, 4S India

ABSTRACT:

This case study documents the journey of Kalo Devi, a Mahadalit woman from the Bhuiyan community in Bankey Bazar block of Gaya, Bihar, who improved her family's livelihood through soilless nursery farming. With support from 4S India and Axis Bank Foundation, she adopted polyhouse-based sapling cultivation—a technique suitable for water-scarce and low-resource settings. Through regular training and support, she completed four production cycles in a year, growing and selling 3,640 saplings per cycle at ₹1 each. She earned a total of ₹14,560 annually.

With her earnings, she purchased a cow creating a new income and nutrition source. Her success encouraged other women to adopt similar practices. This illustrates how small-scale, sustainable interventions can lead to income generation, resource ownership, and community-level empowerment for marginalized rural women.



HISTORY OF SCHEDULED CASTES AND MAHADALIT COMMUNITIES IN BIHAR

Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India have long faced systemic exclusion, formalized as “untouchability” until outlawed by Article 17 of the Constitution; Article 341 subsequently recognized SCs to protect their rights (National Human Rights Commission, India, 2021). Bihar—a state often characterized by high poverty and low development—SCs comprised 15.9 % of the population in 2011, compared to 16.6 % nationally (Choudhary, 2018). In 2007, the Bihar government designated 21 of the most deprived Dalit sub-castes as “Mahadalits,” including the Bhuiyan (Choudhary, 2018).

By 2022, SCs’ share in Bihar rose to 19.65 %, with Mahadalits still concentrated in districts like Gaya (29.6 %) and Vaishali (20.7 %) (Hindustan Times, 2023). Yet SCs hold only 8.61 % of India’s agricultural land despite accounting for 11.91 % of operational holdings (Agriculture Census 2015–16). In Gaya, over 72 % of SC households work as agricultural labourers; fewer than 9 % are cultivators, and most who do cultivate hold under one acre of often infertile land (Kumar, 2017).

These communities depend overwhelmingly on the primary sector—78 % of livelihoods—while only 4 % work in manufacturing or construction and 18 % in services (NABARD). Women are particularly vulnerable, with 7 out of 8 entirely reliant on primary-sector work. Coupled with water scarcity, soil degradation, and climate pressures, these factors underscore the urgent need for sustainable agricultural interventions to break cycles of landlessness and poverty.

KALO DEVI’S EARLY LIFE AND CHALLENGES

Kalo Devi belongs to the Bhuiyan community, one of the most marginalized groups within the Scheduled Castes (SC). Historically, the Bhuiyan community, along with the Musahars, has been placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy among SCs. According to the SC and ST Welfare Department, Government of Bihar (2012), the Bhuiyan community constituted 4.36% of Bihar's population, with a literacy rate of only 8.9%, the second-lowest after the Musahars. This poor access to education, land, and opportunities has been a major barrier to the community's development, and Kalo Devi's life reflects the struggles and deprivations common to her people.

However, significant changes have occurred in recent times. According to the caste census 2022, the Bhuiyan population in Bihar has decreased to 0.89%, amounting to 1,174,460 people (Kumar, 2024). Despite this reduction in their share of the population, economic challenges persist. The report highlights that 53.55% of Bhuiyan families live in poverty (Ray, 2023), underscoring the continuing hardships faced by this community. The struggle for access to basic resources, education, and economic opportunities remains a pressing issue for Kalo Devi and her community.

At 16, Kalo Devi married a daily wage labourer working under the bataya (sharecropping[1]) system in Dighasin village, Bankey Bazar block, Gaya district. Their household of six depended on irregular farm wages and government rations.

[1] Sharecropping is a type of tenant farming where the landowner provides most of the resources, such as capital and other necessary supplies, while the farmworkers contribute their labor. In some cases, the landowner may also cover the workers' expenses for food, clothing, and medical care, and supervise their work. The farmworkers pay the landowner by giving a portion of the produce, paying in cash, or using a combination of both methods. (Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sharecropping>)

Seasonal cultivation of rice, potatoes, and vegetables on rented land provided some food security, but off-season unemployment or illness could leave the family with no income. Annual earnings averaged ₹62,000—barely enough for basic needs. Before marriage, Kalo Devi lived in neighboring Dukhatpur village with her mother and siblings. Neither she nor her brother or sister received formal education beyond learning to write their names. After her father's untimely death, her mother arranged Kalo Devi's early marriage to alleviate financial pressure—a common practice in communities where daughters are viewed as economic burdens.

Despite these hardships, government assistance eventually granted the couple 0.093 acres (3 katha) of land and enabled them to build a small mud house. This plot remains their only productive asset. Kalo Devi's husband supplemented household income by migrating to Punjab and Ludhiana for truck-driving work during lean agricultural months, but the revenue was unpredictable. By 2022, financial strain forced Kalo Devi to withdraw her daughter from school after eighth grade and arrange her marriage—mirroring her own experience. Her three sons, now in grades 4 and 9, attend the local government school when fees and supplies permit. Each day, Kalo Devi worries that without additional income, her sons may also leave school to support the family.

INTERVENTION BY 4S INDIA AND IT RESULT ON KALO DEVI'S LIFE

4S India, a non-governmental organization, has been actively working in the Bankey Bazar and Imamganj blocks of Bihar, with a focus on forming Self-Help Groups (SHGs) among women. In 2022, with support from Axis Bank Foundation, the organisation started a targeted initiative to empower marginalised communities in these blocks by enhancing their economic participation and resilience. A significant proportion of the population in Bankey Bazar and Imamganj relies on agriculture, but most households are landless and work as seasonal wage labourers on others' fields. Their earnings are minimal and inconsistent, often supplemented by vegetables grown in exchange for labour. This income is insufficient to support household needs on a sustained basis.

In addition to economic insecurity, both blocks face ecological constraints that hamper agricultural productivity. Factors such as inadequate irrigation, unproductive land, and climate-related risks have made conventional farming increasingly unreliable.

Recognizing these barriers, 4S India designed an innovative approach aimed at equipping marginalized women with practical agricultural solutions that require minimal land, water, and financial inputs. The objective was to enable them to generate income independently while contributing to household food security and community-level economic resilience.

The intervention focused on introducing polyhouse-based cultivation and soilless nurseries—methods particularly suitable for resource-scarce settings. Polyhouses, constructed using polythene sheets, provide a controlled environment for growing crops, while soilless nurseries allow seedlings to be cultivated in nutrient-rich media without soil. These techniques are highly relevant for areas like Bankey Bazar and Imamganj, where water shortages and poor soil quality pose major challenges. Benefits include reduced water use, controlled seedling growth, minimization of soil-borne diseases, and increased output in limited space. These methods also enable women like Kalo Devi who have no prior farming experience and limited land access to engage in productive agricultural activities. However, her inclusion did not come easily.

During the initial community survey, 4S India reached out to several women in marginalised hamlets, encouraging them to adopt this new method. But there was considerable hesitation due to unfamiliarity with soilless farming and concerns over financial viability. For communities with little exposure to scientific agriculture, the idea of growing saplings without soil appeared impractical. Kalo Devi, declined participation multiple times. She was particularly apprehensive due to the absence of prior experience, limited savings, and uncertainty about the inputs involved. It was only after she observed a neighbour successfully implement the method and begin generating income that she reconsidered. Motivated by these visible results, Kalo Devi agreed to participate after the fourth approach by the facilitators.

The implementation process began with village-level meetings involving Farmer Producer Company Groups (FPCGs), which served as community platforms for participant selection. FPCGs, structured at the hamlet level, are designed to strengthen household-level food security and market linkages by enabling collective purchase of inputs and bulk sale of produce. The selection criteria focused on individuals owning less than one acre of land, those dependent on wage labour,

women-headed households, and individuals demonstrating willingness to participate in community initiatives. Kalo Devi met all the criteria and was selected to receive a polyhouse unit.

A series of orientation sessions and practical demonstrations were organized to build awareness and introduce participants to vegetable seedling production. These sessions were delivered through the Farmer Field School (FFS) model, which emphasizes experiential learning and continuous mentoring. FFS meetings focused on essential areas such as improved seed selection, pest control using non-chemical methods, water-efficient irrigation, and safe handling of inputs. Consultants and subject matter experts provided technical guidance throughout the crop cycles, ensuring farmers like Kalo Devi could gradually adapt to the new method.

To ensure infrastructure readiness, site selection and planning were conducted by assessing availability of land and water sources. Each polyhouse was designed as a 10x10 sq. ft. unit and fitted with two Jalkunds (water tanks) for irrigation. The Bihar Government's 'Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal' scheme also facilitated access to piped water, ensuring that irrigation needs could be met reliably. Following the site setup, materials such as GI pipes, green nets, and polythene sheets (220 mm) were procured and installed. The total setup cost of ₹39,000 per polyhouse was fully financed by 4S India, removing the initial financial burden from the participant. The infrastructure has an expected functional life of 5–8 years, allowing for long-term use.

In January 2023, Kalo Devi initiated her first crop cycle by planting chilli, tomato, brinjal, and watermelon seedlings. Over the course of the year, she successfully completed four production cycles—planting in January, March, July–August, and October–November. She cultivated and sold 3,640 saplings per cycle at ₹1 each, generating a total annual income of ₹14,560. Her polyhouse accommodates 35–40 trays, each capable of holding 104 saplings. The input cost per cycle includes ₹400 for seeds and ₹100 for coco peat (or manure-mixed soil). Trays, priced at ₹15 each, are reusable over a year. The average cost per sapling is 30–40 paise, while the selling price ranges from ₹1 to ₹2 based on market conditions. For Kalo Devi, the total annual input cost across all cycles was ₹2,500, yielding a net profit of approximately ₹11,500.

“When I held the money, I earned with my own hands for the first time, I couldn't believe it. Now, I can support my husband and children. It makes me so happy.”

Adopting this new method came with its challenges. In the beginning, Kalo Devi encountered difficulties in setting up the polyhouse, maintaining internal temperature and humidity, and managing timely irrigation. She also had to understand plant health requirements and implement suggested practices. These hurdles were gradually addressed through repeated field visits, personalized support, and problem-solving by the project team. Marketing was another critical hurdle. Although she was able to produce high-quality saplings, approaching buyers and selling her produce in the open market was initially intimidating. Like many women in her community, she had limited exposure to public spaces and commercial transactions. Over time, and with repeated exposure, she gained the confidence to travel to Bankey Bazar market to sell her saplings directly.

Household-level support during this transition remained minimal. While her husband occasionally assisted with watering and basic upkeep, most responsibilities were borne by Kalo Devi herself. Changing traditional attitudes and building acceptance within the family required time. However, as the benefits became visible—both financially and socially—her family gradually began to support her efforts. Kalo Devi now travels to the Bankey Bazar market to sell saplings. With each sale, her confidence grows, and she feels encouraged to pursue even more opportunities. However, she also faces a challenge since the saplings are grown in small trays, resulting in delicate roots. By the time she reaches the market, the saplings often begin to dry out, making it difficult sometimes to maintain their quality.

With the income earned from nursery sales, Kalo Devi made a significant step forward by purchasing a cow for ₹19,000—partly using her savings and partly through a ₹10,000 loan from her SHG. She now repays the loan through weekly instalments from her nursery income. The cow serves multiple purposes: it provides milk for household consumption, generates income through sale of milk and dung, and reduces dependency on external sources of nutrition and fuel.

In Kalo Devi's words: **"A cow is everything... I can now give my children milk, and I'll sell the milk and cow dung too."** The cow is not insured, as livestock insurance services are largely unknown and inaccessible in the area. Nonetheless, Kalo Devi takes great care in maintaining the animal's health and hygiene, seeking advice from experienced members of the community. She is especially

cautious as the cow is expected to calve soon, opening further opportunities for income generation and food security. As for Kalo Devi's children, although they are still young, they have witnessed a significant shift in their family's situation. When they saw the cow brought into their home, they were thrilled. For the first time, they realized that the family would have fresh milk to drink, something that had once seemed like a distant dream. The excitement and joy of this new addition to their household reflect not only the improved economic situation but also the hope for a brighter future. Through her efforts, Kalo Devi teaches an essential lesson: women's financial independence is crucial for lasting change.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Kalo Devi's journey shows how one person's success can light the way for an entire community. When she learned soilless nursery methods, she not only improved her own income but also invited her neighbors to learn alongside her. By openly sharing tips on seed selection, pest control, and watering schedules, she turned a solitary effort into a shared opportunity.

Today, groups of women meet regularly to discuss their nurseries, exchange ideas, and solve problems together. These gatherings have become more than

just training sessions—they are safe spaces where confidence grows, friendships form, and new business ideas emerge. As a result, households are diversifying their crops, earning extra income from sapling sales, and building stronger social ties that cut across old divisions.

To build on this momentum, 4S India will focus on three key areas. First, we will help these growers reach better markets by forming small producer groups, arranging collective sales, and connecting them with buyers in nearby towns. Second, we will identify experienced growers like Kalo Devi to mentor newcomers, host demonstration plots, and lead field visits. Third, we will introduce low-cost, climate-smart practices—such as simple rainwater harvesting and shade nets—to protect nurseries from extreme weather.

In combining hands-on training with peer-to-peer support and market access, 4S India is creating a self-sustaining cycle of growth. As more women take the lead and share their knowledge, they not only improve their own livelihoods but also strengthen the economic and social fabric of their villages. This approach promises a future where rural communities in Bihar can confidently shape their own path to prosperity.



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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Anuva Mondal is a development professional currently working with Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha in the field of documentation and action research. She is involved in sanitation, livelihoods, and gender-related initiatives, engaging in community mobilization, conducting baseline studies, and developing case studies. With fieldwork across Kolkata, Gaya, she focuses on understanding grassroots challenges and translating them into reports and interventions. Anuva holds a Master's in Development from Azim Premji University and is currently working on research, documentation, and communication with a reflective approach.



Economic *Interventions*





जब जागो तभी सबेरा

मुसहर महिलाओं के सफल संघर्ष कि दास्ताँ

By Munna Yadav, Gender Coordinator, SSEVS

प्रस्तुत केस स्टडी में समाज में अति उपेक्षित मुसहर समुदाय के जीवन संघर्ष, उससे पार पाने कि जट्टोजहद, इसमें एक गैर-सरकारी स्वैच्छिक संस्था का मार्गदर्शन और इस संघर्ष के उत्साहजनक नतीजों का वर्णन है। जब से मुसहर समुदाय का अस्तित्व है तब से आज तक उनकी स्थितियों में बहुत सुधार नहीं हो पाया है। इस समुदाय की एक ही संपत्ति रही है और वो है उनकी कड़ी मजदूरी करने कि क्षमता जिस वजह से वो खेतिहर मजदूर के तौर पर काम करते चले आ रहे हैं। इस केस स्टडी में भी मुसहर समुदाय की आजीविका को उनके खेतिहर मजदूर के तौर पर ही दर्शाया गया है। उनसे काम लेने वालों कि मानसिकता तो यही है कि मुसहर बच्चे भी मजदूरी करें, स्कूल ना जायें ताकि यह प्रथा पीढ़ी दर पीढ़ी चलती रहे। कई वर्षों के संघर्ष और अपने हक की आवाज़ नहीं उठा पाने कि विवशता, साथ ही अपने अधिकारों के लिए योजनाओं की जानकारी का अभाव इन्हें निर्भर बनाता है उचित मार्गदर्शन के लिए। मुसहर समुदाय में नेतृत्व लेने की क्षमता की कमी भी दूसरों पर इनकी निर्भरता बनाता है। समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान, बेतिया के कार्यकर्ताओं का मार्गदर्शन पा कर मुसहर समुदाय के महिलाओं के पहल पर आवास भूमि के अधिकार पाने का सफल प्रयास और उसके बाद ग्राम पंचायत में अपनी सुविधाओं की मांग कर उन्हें भी पाना यह दर्शाता है कि मुसहर समुदाय में संघर्ष करने की क्षमता को यदि सही दिशा मिले तो उनकी स्थिति में सुधार की सम्भावना दिखती है।

बहुअरवा गाँव में बसंत ऋतु में मनोहारी मौसम का खुशनुमा माहौल है। चारो तरफ पेड़- हरे-भरे दिख रहे हैं। कहीं कोयल अपनी मीठी-मीठी आवाज से मानो बसंत के आगमन में कुहु बोलकर मधुर गीत सुना रही है। पेड़ों ने अपना पुराना पत्ता जमीन पर बिखेर दिया है, नये कोमल पत्तियां लेकर कई रंगों में मन मोहने लायक आनन्द बिखरने लगे हैं। किसान अपनी रबी फसलों की कटनी -दवनी में लगे हैं। कुछ लोग तो अभी से ही होली की भी बात करने लगे हैं। रंगों का त्योहार मनायेंगे। बढ़िया - बढ़िया पकवान बनायेंगे। ढोल मजिरा के साथ होली गीत गावेंगे। जहाँ बहुअरवा गाँव में खुशी का माहौल था वहीं Highway के दूसरी ओर बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला की चंदा देवी और उन जैसे 150 मुसहर परिवारों के लिए बसंत ऋतु में भी चुनौतियां वही थीं जो मुसहर समुदाय कई पीढ़ियों से झेलता आया है- खेतिहर मजदूर के तौर पर हर रोज कमाना खाना, बच्चे स्कूल जा सकें इसकी चिंता, अपना जमीन और मकान हो इसका सपना, सरकारी योजनाओं का लाभ मिल सके, समाज की मुख्य धारा में शामिल हो सकें इत्यादि। अभी कल शाम की ही तो बात थी जब चंदा देवी के बेटे करण ने अचानक आ कर कहा- माँ, आज रामू ने मुझे मार कर बगीचे से भगा दिया है। बोलता है, तु नहीं खेलेगा हमलोगो के साथ, तूहमारे बराबरी का नहीं है, बोलते- बोलते करण के आँखों से आँसु छलकने लगा। मुसहर टोला के बगल में कोइरी और नोनिया समुदाय के बच्चे बार-बार मुसहर समुदाय के बच्चों से उलझ जाते हैं, कमजोर समझ कर मार भी देते हैं। एक साथ नहीं मिलना चाहते हैं। चाहे रोज का खेलना-कूदना हो, गाँव में पर्व-त्योहार का समय हो, शादी-ब्याह बारात का मौका हो मुसहर समुदाय के बच्चों को आने से रोकते हैं।

बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला, बगहा-1 प्रखण्ड (बगहा-1 प्रखंड, प० चंपारण जिला में) अवस्थित है। पुरे प्रखंड में इससे बड़ा मुसहर टोला नहीं है। वैसे तो मुसहर समुदाय को बिहार सरकार द्वारा महादलित वर्ग में रखा गया है लेकिन मुसहर समुदाय अन्य दलित समुदायों की तुलना में ज्यादा उपेक्षित हैं। हुनर के नाम पर इन्हें बस मजदूरी करना ही आता है जिससे कि लोगों से बहुत बात-चीत करने का अवसर इन्हें ना के बराबर ही मिलता है। इस वजह से अपनी बात दूसरों के सामने आत्मविश्वास पूर्वक रखना, अपने हक की मांग करना ये सब इन्हें नहीं आता है, नतीजा यह कि यह समुदाय हमेशा चुनौतियों से घिरा रहता है।

कई सालों पहले, बहुअरवा गाँव का यह मुसहर टोला बसाया गया था रामनगर चीनी मिल के मालिक द्वारा कि मुसहर समुदाय के लोग उनके खेतों में खेतिहर मजदूर के तौर पर काम कर सकें। इन्हें कभी भी चीनी मिल में मजदूर के तौर पर काम करने का अवसर नहीं दिया गया। और तो और बच्चों को भी खेतों में खेतिहर मजदूर के तौर पर काम करवाया जाता रहा है जिससे कि बच्चों कि पढ़ाई ना हो और वो पीढ़ी दर पीढ़ी खेतिहर मजदूर की तरह काम करते रहें।

चंदा देवी के बेटे करण को जब दुसरे समुदाय के बच्चों ने खेलने से मना किया और मार-पीट कर भगा दिया तो चंदा देवी के मन का दर्द छलक पड़ा। उन्होंने सोचा आखिर ऐसा कब तक चलेगा, आपस में बात तो करनी पड़ेगी। अगले दिन, गाँव का छोटा सा चौपाल जहाँ चंदा देवी कुछ और कुछ महिलाएँ बैठकर आपस में बात कर रही है- पदाधिकारी तो कभी आते नहीं, हाँ पाँच वर्षों पर नेता जरूर आते हैं, पैसे एवं दारु के बल पर वोट लेकर चले जाते हैं, हम वहीं के वहीं रह जाते हैं। जब तक हम जागेंगे नहीं, सरकार इसी तरह हमारे हक को निगलती जायेंगी, बोलते-बोलते चंदा देवी ने सबके सोयी अंतरात्मा को जगा दिया। सभी महिलाओं ने एक स्वर में कहा लगी हम लड़ाई लड़ेंगे, आज नहीं तो कल जीतेंगे। हमें भी चाहिए आवास की भूमि, हमें भी चाहिए इंट सोलिंग, हमें भी चाहिए स्वच्छ जल, हमें भी चाहिए तारा पम्प (बड़ा वाला चापाकल जो बहुत गहराई से पानी निकालता है), हमें भी चाहिए सामूहिक भवन, हमें भी चाहिए आवास, हमें भी चाहिए चबूतरा, बोलते-बोलते सारी जरूरत की चीजों को बोल गयी। यह सब सुनकर देखते ही देखते मुसहर टोला के सैकड़ों लोग इकठ्ठे हो गये।

अगले दिन, सुबह के नौ बज रहे हैं, चारो तरफ से लोग चौपाल की ओर जा रहे हैं। सभी में एक अलग ही उत्साह दिख रहा है, ऐसा हो भी क्यों न पहली बार इतने लोग जो एक साथ बैठे हैं। आपस में बातचीत कर ही रहे थे तभी "समग्र शिक्षण एवम् विकास संस्थान (SSEVS) बेतिया के कार्यकर्ता अनिरुद्ध महतो एवम् मुन्ना यादव भी वहां आ पहुँचे। SSEVS द्वारा मुसहर टोला में महिलाओं का स्व-सहायता समूह बनाया गया है और उन्हें बचत तथा उद्यम के लिए प्रेरित किया जाता है। चंदा देवी ने अनिरुद्ध महतो और मुन्ना यादव को बताया कि टोला के लोग अब अपने हक के लिए संघर्ष करना चाहते हैं। अनिरुद्ध महतो और मुन्ना यादव ने पूछा कि समस्याएं तो कई हैं सभी समस्याओं पर एक साथ तो आपलोग काम नहीं कर पाएंगे तो किस समस्या पर पहले काम करना चाहते हैं। इस पर सभी लोगों ने कहा सबसे बड़ी समस्या तो हमारे आवास की है, जैसा हमारा घर है वो तो किसी भी मौसम में रहने लायक नहीं, बरसात में खुली छत से घर पानी से सराबोर हो जाता है, गर्मी में तपती धुप में राहत नहीं और कड़ाके की ठंड इस घर में बर्दाश्त हो नहीं पाती। इस पर संस्था से आये प्रतिनिधियों ने कहा कि प्रधानमंत्री आवास योजना का लाभ लेने के लिए आपको जमीन के कागजात चाहिए जो आपके पास नहीं है। चौपाल में बैठे सभी लोगों ने चर्चा किया और कहा, तो पहला संघर्ष जमीन के कागज़ हासिल करने का ही रहेगा। इस पर संस्था के प्रतिनिधियों ने पूछा, यह बहुत बड़ी लड़ाई है, क्या आप सभी एक साथ अंचल कार्यालय, जिला मुख्यालय तक जा पायेंगे। सबने एक स्वर में हामी भर दिया। फिर क्या था पहली बार बिना दरखास्त (आवेदन) दिये अपनी बात अंचलाधिकारी बगहा-1 से रखने की सहमति बनी।

समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान बेतिया की एक गैर सरकारी स्वैच्छिक संस्था है जो ग्रामीण क्षेत्र में आजीविका, बच्चों की शिक्षा, महिलाओं के लिए उद्यम पर काम करती है। बगहा क्षेत्र में संस्था ने वर्ष 2020 से काम शुरू किया। इस क्षेत्र में संस्था द्वारा महिलाओं का स्व-सहायता समूह

बनाया गया है और जीविका[1] के सहयोग से उन्हें तरह तरह के उद्यम के लिए प्रोत्साहित किया गया है। बच्चों की शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता बढ़े इसके लिए स्कूल के बाद बच्चों के लिए Bridge Course का संचालन किया जाता है।

[1] जीविका बिहार सरकार द्वारा ग्रामीण विकास के लिए गठित एक सोसाइटी है जो दीनदयाल अंत्योदय योजना - राष्ट्रीय ग्रामीण आजीविका मिशन (DAY-NRLM) के समन्वय से राज्य में ग्रामीण विकास का काम करती है।

बेतिया- बगहा हाईवे 728 के किनारे बसा बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला से सैकड़ों की संख्या में महिला, पुरुष यात्री बस आने के इन्तजार में हाइवे किनारे खड़े हैं। मानो किसी आन्दोलन के लिए जा रहे हैं। तभी रोड़ के दुसरी तरफ एक गाड़ी रुकती है। उसके उपर लाल बत्ती जल रही है, आगे एक चमकदार प्लेट पर कुछ लिखा है। एक व्यक्ति सादे वेशभूषा में गाड़ी से उतरते हैं। पुछते हैं ये सब क्या हो रहा है- क्यों भीड़ लगी है रोड़ किनारे। तभी चन्दा देवी उस व्यक्ति को प्रणाम करती है। और अपने गाँव की कहानी बताती है। वह भला व्यक्ति चन्दा देवी के साथ मुसहर टोला में पश्चिम से पूर्व तक संकीर्ण रास्ते के सहारे घूमकर गाँव की बदहाली को देखते रहे। जाते- जाते गाँव वालों से बतलाये कि मैं बगहा के अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी शेखर आनन्द हूँ। जमीन के मसले पर मैं सरकार से बात करूंगा आपलोग घर जाइये, आपकी बात जरूर सुनी जायेगी। सभी अपने-अपने घर चले गये। अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी एक मोबाईल नम्बर माँगते हैं। तत्क्षण चंदादेवी कागज पर लिखे एक मोबाईल नम्बर दे देती है। वह नम्बर SSEVS संस्था के अमित कुमार का होता है।

इस पूरी घटना की जानकारी चन्दा देवी, संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं को बतलाती है। लोग आपस में बात कर रहे हैं, पता नहीं आगे क्या होगा अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी क्या वाकई हमारी समस्या पर ध्यान दे पाएंगे, पता नहीं अब क्या होगा तभी अमित जी का फोन बजता है,

:उधर से आवाज आई, आप कौन बोल रहे हो??

मैं अमित, समग्र संस्था से जुड़कर बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला में इनके उत्थान के लिए काम करता हूँ, प्रणाम सर, मैं आपको पहचाना नहीं।

:दूसरी ओर से फोन पर आवाज़ आई - मैं अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी बगहा बात कर रहा हूँ, बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला के परिवारों की सूची लेकर कल आइये।

फिर क्या सर्वे की सूची लिए संस्था के सचिव सिद्धार्थ कुमार, कार्यकर्ता नदीम अहमद, अनिरुद्ध महतो, अमित कुमार, मुन्ना यादव, अच्छलाल मुसहर, चन्दा देवी, लालसा देवी अनुमण्डल कार्यालय पहुँचे तो देखा सभी विभाग के कर्मचारियों के साथ, अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी बैठे हैं। हमलोग भी बैठे। सभी कर्मचारियों को निर्देश दिये बहुअरवा में योजनाओं को धरातल पर लाने की। फिर सर्वे सूची 150 परिवारों का लिये तथा हल्का कर्मचारी को मिलान करते हुए, कार्य योजना तैयार करने का आदेश दे डाले।

धीरे-धीरे समय बीतता गया, इसी बीच शेखर आनन्द जी का तबादला हो गया। अब तो गाँव वालों में और निराशा दिखने लगी थी। ऐसा पहली बार हुआ था कि किसी ने मुसहर टोला में उनकी दशा देखी थी। अब आगे क्या होगा यही चिन्ता खाये जा रही थी। कहा गया है न हौसला बुलन्द हो तो कामयाबी कदम चुमेगी। और यहीं हुआ नये अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी दीपक मिश्रा आते ही बहुअरवा का फाईल देखे, सरकार को चिठी लिखे - मुसहर टोला के करीब हरिनगर (रामनगर) सुगर मिल के फार्म से जमाबंदी रद्द कर मुसहर टोला को वास भूमि मुहैया कराने की अनुमति बिहार सरकार ने दे डाली। अब क्या अंचलाधिकारी महोदय द्वारा अंचल अभिलेख संख्या- 02/2022-2023 दिनांक 15/10/22 को तैयार करके खाता-53 खेसरा नं० - 153 से पहली बार 130 परिवारों को 05-05 डीस्मल जमीन के लिए अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी को भेज दिया गया।

अनुमण्डल अभिलेख सं.- 41/2022-2023 अंकित करते हुए बन्दोवस्ती पर्चा तैयार कर लिया गया था, तभी अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी दीपक मिश्रा की तबादला की चिठी बिहार सरकार में जारी कर दिया था। पाँच दिन का समय था, इस पुण्य कार्य का भागीदार बनना भी अनुमण्डल पदाधिकारी दीपक मिश्रा का सौभाग्य था। आनन्दित हो रहे थे कि मेरे हाथों गरीबों को पर्चा मिल जाय। सभी कागजातों को तैयार कराये। शाम का समय था कुछ ग्रामीण चौपाल पर थे। समाजिक कार्यकर्ता अनिरुद्ध महतो, अमित कुमार, मुन्ना यादव भी वहीं थे। SDM साहब का तबादला हो जाने पर ही बात हो रही थी। तभी- SDM साहब का फोन आया, आज रात मैं निकल जाऊँगा। अभी मैं बहुअरवा आ रहा हूँ। गरीबों के बीच आवास भूमि का पर्चा वितरण करना है। यह सुनते ही गाँव वालों में खुशियों का लहर दौड़ने लगा। किसी ने झाड़ू उठाकर सफाई किया, किसी में कुर्सियाँ लाई, किसी ने सोलर लैंप में रौशनी जगमगायी। तभी लालबत्ती की गाड़ी रुकी, उनके साथ अंचल के सभी कर्मचारी भी आये थे। पाँच व्यक्ति को पर्चा देकर आश्वासन दे गये 10 दिनों में सबको पर्चा मिलेंगे। टोला में तो मानो सबके साथ आज दिवाली का माहौल था।

धीरे - धीरे समय बीतता गया और लड़ाई का परिणाम उस दिन मिला, जब 4 नवम्बर 2022 को जिला पदाधिकारी पश्चिम चंपारण द्वारा हरिहर उच्च विद्यालय पतिलार में 130 परिवारों को मिला आवास भूमि का बंदोबस्ती पर्चा। आज सभी परिवार जमीन का रसीद भी कटा लिया है। मुसहर समुदाय की महिलाओं ने अपनी पहली लड़ाई में विजय पा चुकी है। आज बड़े ही धूम धाम से हर घर में पकवान बनाकर मानो आज होली मना रहे हैं।

इस पहले संघर्ष की सफलता से प्रोत्साहित हो कर SSEVS के कार्यकर्ताओं ने सोचा देखते हैं महिलाओं की दूसरी हकदारी की लड़ाई कैसे लोगों को ग्राम सभा तक पहुँचाई जाए? सरकारी योजनाओं के लाभ नहीं मिलने से चिंतित महिलाओं के बीच काफी आक्रोश दिख रहा है न सड़क, न नाली, न लाइट, न नल जल, नही बैठने के लिए कोई चबूतरा समूह की बैठक में बातें हो रही थी, तभी समग्र संस्था के कार्यकर्ता सुनीता देवी व मुन्ना यादव द्वारा बताया गया, जब तक आप सभी अपने टोला या वार्ड स्तर पर प्रस्तावित योजना तैयार करके ग्राम सभा में नहीं जायेंगी अपनी बात नहीं रखेंगी तब तक कोई भी विकास कार्य गाँव में संभव नहीं है।

बरसात का मौसम चारों तरफ कीचड़ भरा पड़ा है, रोड़ से गाँव में आना मुश्किल हो रहा है, यह स्थिति अब लोगों की मनोदशा बदलने लगी थी। 10 अगस्त 2023 का समय था। गाँव के महिला पुरुष एक साथ प्रस्तावित योजना तयारी में लगे थे। सुनीता देवी ने भी मदद किया आवेदन तैयार हुई, सभी अपना अंगूठा लगायें, मानो पढाई किसी ने सपनों में भी नहीं देखा हैं। एक साथ 40 - 45 महिलायें 15 अगस्त 2023 को पंचायत कार्यालय करजनिया पहुँची, ग्राम सभा के नाम पर मात्र वार्ड सदस्य, पंचायत सेवक, रोजगार सेवक, आवास सहायक के साथ मुखिया जी रौशन तिवारी बैठे थे। एक साथ इतनी महिलाओं को बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला से आते देख थोड़ा आश्चर्य हुआ। ऐसा हो भी क्यों नहीं मुसहर समुदाय आज पहली बार ग्राम सभा के लिए जो आई थी। संस्था कर्मी मुन्ना यादव मुखिया जी से बात किये। आनन् फानन में ग्राम सभा का कोरम पूरा किया गया। महिलाओं द्वारा अपने गाँव की समस्या रखी गयी तथा चंदा देवी, लालसा देवी, विपति देवी, ललिता देवी, सुमित्रा देवी द्वारा प्रस्तावित योजना का आवेदन मुखिया जी को सुपुर्द किया गया। महिलाओं की बढ़ते कदम, उनकी ग्राम सभा में बड़ी संख्या में भागीदारी एवं जागरूकता ने मुखिया जी को सोचने पर मजबूर कर दिया तथा ग्राम सभा में ही आश्वासन दे डाले कि अगली ग्राम सभा से पहले दो ब्लाक सड़क, तारा पंप, सोलर लाइट, नल जल योजना को बहुअरवा में पूर्ण करने का काम करूंगा। ठीक वैसे ही हुआ, सितम्बर में काम होना शुरू हो गया। 9 सोलर लाइट गाँव को जगमगाने लगा, तारा पंप भी लगा, बंद पड़े नल जल को ठीक कराया गया, पर सड़क का काम अभी नहीं हुआ था।

दो अक्टूबर गाँधी जयंती सामने दिखने लगी थी, फिर ग्रामीणों ने आवेदन तैयार करवाया, जिसमें SSEVS के कार्यकर्ताओं का बहुत सहयोग रहा, 02 अक्टूबर की ग्राम सभा में आवेदन देकर, चबूतरा, पानी सोखता, सामुदायिक स्नान घर, सामुदायिक भवन तथा मनरेगा में काम की मांग कर बैठी, पुनः मुखिया जी द्वारा इस काम को पूरा करने को विश्वास दिलाया गया | महिलाओं का हौसला, चंदा देवी की पहल करना रंग लाया है | आज दो फेवर ब्लॉक लगभग 300 फीट चौपाल के लिए चबूतरा, पानी सोखता बनकर तैयार हो गया | 20 मजदूरों को मनरेगा से पौधारोपण सुरक्षा के लिए काम मिला है| इस कार्य में समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान के कार्यकर्ता पीछे रहते थे और लाभार्थियों का मार्गदर्शन करते थे, जब भी किसी कार्य को करना होता तो लाभार्थियों विशेषकर महिलाओं को आगे कर दिया जाता था जिस कारण सारी प्रक्रिया आसन हो जाती थी एवं अधिकारी गण भी लाभार्थियों से बात कर पाते थे|



अब सामुदायिक भवन, स्नानघर, नाली निर्माण के लिए भी मुखिया जी द्वारा आश्वासन दिया गया है| आयुष्मान भारत कार्ड के लिए गाँव में शिविर लगाया गया 65 परिवारों का आवेदन हुआ, 56 को तैयार होकर मिल भी गया है |

मुसहर महिलाओं के संघर्ष के सफ़र ने बदलाव तो लाया है | ग्राम सभा में समुदाय की भागीदारी बढ़ी है | महिलाएं बैठक कर अपने मुद्दों को संस्था के सामने रख रही हैं | बच्चों द्वारा मजदूरी बंद होने से बाल-मजदूरी मुक्त टोला दिखने लगा है | सरकारी योजनाओं तक पहुँच बनाने के लिए लोग आधार कार्ड, राशन कार्ड, आयुष्मान भारत कार्ड, इ-श्रम कार्ड, बैंक खता और जॉब-कार्ड लोग बनवाने लगे हैं | इस प्रकार बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला की महिलायें अब सरकारी योजनाओं तक अपनी पहुँच बनाकर लाभ लेने लगी है | कहा गया है – “ जब जागो तभी सबेरा ” इसे चरितार्थ कर रही है मुसहर समुदाय की महिलायें |



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Munna Yadav is a grassroots development practitioner with over two decades of experience in literacy, community mobilization, and poverty alleviation. Beginning his journey in 1996 as a teacher and coordinator at the Khalilabad Literacy Hostel, he has since worked across Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. His work has focused on literacy promotion, SHG formation, adolescent empowerment, and training for marginalized communities. Between 2004 and 2009, he contributed to the literacy movement and various development programs, including those supported by CRS. From 2019 to early 2020, he worked on the Timely Childhood Development initiative, engaging with families on early childhood care and adolescent support. Since 2020, he has been associated with Samagra Shikshan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SSEVS), implementing the Ultra Poor Programme in Bhagalpur district under the UDC initiative. Munna currently leads field implementation, community training, and the mobilization of over 1300 ultra-poor families in 130 villages. His deep connection with communities, commitment to inclusive development, and hands-on experience make him a valuable asset in rural development work.



मुसहर परिवारों को रोजगार के मार्गदर्शन
मिला आर्थिक आधार

By Munna Yadav, Gender Coordinator, SSEVS

प्रस्तुत केस स्टडी में समाज की मुख्य धारा से छूटे हुए मुसहर समुदाय की दयनीय स्थिति और उन्हें उस स्थिति से बाहर निकालने में संस्था के संवेदनशील हस्तक्षेप का वर्णन किया गया है। पीढ़ियों से शोषित और अपनी आजीविका के लिए दूसरे किसानों के लिए खेतिहर मजदूर बन कर किसी तरह अपनी आजीविका चलाने वाले मुसहर परिवार भी, सही मार्गदर्शन और सहयोग मिले तो अपनी स्थिति बदल सकते हैं ऐसा इस केस स्टडी में कई घटनाओं के द्वारा बताया गया है। जमीनी स्तर की हकीकत जमीनी स्तर के कार्यकर्ताओं को ही पता होती है। संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं में यदि जमीनी सच के प्रति संवेदनशीलता हो और परिवर्तन लाने का जज्बा हो तो समुदाय भी बढ़-चढ़ कर सहयोग करता है। अंततः इन सभी प्रयासों का लाभ तो समुदाय को ही मिलता है जैसा कि इस केस स्टडी में मुसहर परिवारों को मिला लेकिन इन प्रयासों और उनके नतीजों से समुदाय और संस्था दोनों ही प्रोत्साहित हुए।

बहुअरवा टोला (पश्चिमी चम्पारण जिला के प्रखण्ड बगहा-1 के बसवरिया पंचायत) के निवासियों जो कि मुसहर हैं, के आजीविका का मुख्य साधन, मुख्यतः रामनगर चीनी मिल के खेतों में काम करना रहा है, कहा यह भी जाता है कि मिल के ही लोगों ने इन लोगों से कार्य करने के लिए कहीं से ला कर बसाया था तथा उनके रहने की जमीन दी थी, जिसके कागजात भी रामनगर चीनी मिल के पास ही है।

मुसहर समाज की उन पिछड़ी जातियों में से हैं जो अभी भी समाज कि मुख्य धारा से बाहर हैं। इन्हें समाज की मुख्य धारा से जोड़ने के लिए कई प्रयास होते रहे हैं, कई योजनायें भी लागू हैं लेकिन अपेक्षित परिणाम के लिए अभी भी बहुत संघर्ष है।

रामनगर चीनी मिल बहुअरवा टोला से 35 Km की दूरी पर है। मिल ने मुसहर परिवारों को जमीन दे कर बसाया तो जरूर है लेकिन केवल अपनी खेती के जमीन में कम पैसे में दैनिक मजदूरी करने के लिए और हर वक्त काम के लिए उपलब्ध रहने के लिए। रामनगर चीनी मिल ने 150 मुसहर परिवारों में से किसी भी व्यक्ति को आजतक नियमित मानदेय पर नौकरी नहीं दी है और ये सभी मुसहर परिवार एक तरह से गुलामी की जिन्दगी जीने को मजबूर रहे हैं।

जून का महिना तपतपाती धूप ने लोगों का जीना दुभर कर दिया है। लोगों का घर से बाहर आना-जाना मुश्किल कर दिया है। मन-ही-मन में बुदबुदाते हुए बहुअरवा मुसहर टोली के 70 वर्षीय सिंहासन मुसहर चिन्ता में डूबे जा रहे थे। भीषण गर्मी आमजनों को तडपने पर मजबूर कर दिया है। यह ऐसा समय है जब गरीबों को काम मिलता है, मजदूरी करके थोड़ा पैसा कमा लेते हैं। एक तरफ भरी गर्मी में मेहनत कर परिवार चलाना तो दूसरी तरफ सामने आ रहे बरसात के मौसम कि चुनौतियाँ, सिंहासन मुसहर मन-ही-मन सोचते हैं अब क्या होगा 150 मुसहर गरीब परिवारों का, एक तरफ पेट की भूख तो दूसरी तरफ जून की तपतपाती धूप, और तो और बरसात की चुनौतियों की कोई तैयारी भी नहीं है। गरीबों के लिए यह सब झेलना बड़ा मुश्किल लगने लगा है।

काम न करें तो भूख से मरेंगे, काम पर गये तो भीषण धूप से मरेंगे। इसी व्याकुलता में उदास मन बैठे सिंहासन मुसहर के मन में विचार आ रहा था- क्या होगा उन 10 परिवारों का जिनके घर आंधी तुफान के कारण गिर गए हैं। अभी तो वे दूसरों के घर में गुजारा कर रहे हैं। उनकी सोच टूटती है जब धुनिया, (शर्मा मुसहर की बेटी), मुनिया, (हरेन्द्र मुसहर की पत्नी), रम्भी (स्व० सुखाल मुसहर की पत्नी, रानी, (राधेश्याम मुसहर की पत्नी) आकर बोलती है बाबा अब क्या होगा, बरसात आने वाला है, अब कहाँ रहेंगे, यह बात बाबा को रुला दिया। सब ठीक हो जायेगा, ऐसा बोल कर समझाये। भगवान सबकी सुनते है, तुम्हारी भी सुनेंगे। बरसात के मौसम में छोटा घर एवं जनसँख्या अधिक होने से, सबको एक साथ घर में रह पाना मुश्किलें बढ़ा देती हैं, ऐसे में कई परिवारों को किसी पड़ोसी के घर में आसरा लेना पड़ता है।

गर्मी में काम करने की दिक्कत और बरसात में रहने का आसरा, ये दिक्कतें तो मुसहर परिवारों के लिए थी हीं तभी दुखों का पहाड़ लिये 2020 में "कोरोना" महामारी आ गया। अब काम की बात कौन करें, लोग खुद से दूर भागने लगे, रिश्तेदार छूटने लगे, परिवार के सदस्य भी दूरी बनाने लगे। अब लगता है, कि अपना कौन, पराया कौन है। लोग कहते हैं न - "जब समय होला खराब, सबै साथ छोड़ देला" यही काम "कोरोना" ने करके दिखाया है। "अब तो जून की भीषण गर्मी को कौन पुछता है" कोरोना" अपना डर सबों में व्याप्त कर चुका था। 150 मुसहर परिवार अब अपनी बदहाली का रोना रो रहे हैं।

मुसहर समुदाय के बुजुर्ग होने के नाते यह चिन्ता सिंहासन मुसहर को खाए जा रही थी। अब काम माँगने भी कोई कहाँ किसके पास जाये। सभी लोग लॉक डाउन में अपने अपने घरों में छुपे हुए हैं मानों किसी अपराध के जुर्म में सभी को कैद करके रखा गया हो। कोरोना ने सामाजिक और आर्थिक संकट पैदा करके मुसहर परिवारों को भूख से मरने पर मजबूर कर दिया है। काम नहीं तो पैसा नहीं, पैसा नहीं तो भोजन कहाँ से मिले। बड़े तो कुछ देर भूख सहन करेंगे, पर बच्चों का क्या होगा। बच्चे क्या जाने रोजगार, क्या जाने परिवार का हालात, क्या जाने "कोरोना" महामारी उन्हें तो सिर्फ और सिर्फ खाना चाहिए वो भी जब-जब भूख लगे सिंहासन मुसहर मन-ही-मन सोच रहे थे- लोग कहते हैं विपत्ति में कोई-न-कोई सहारा देने वाला मिल ही जाता है। वो यहीं सोच रहे थे, तभी वहां समग्र शिक्षण एवम् विकास संस्थान, बेतिया के कार्यकर्ता, मुन्ना यादव और परियोजना समन्वयक अनिरुद्ध महतों गाँव में पहुँचे और सिंहासन मुसहर से मुलाकात हो गयी। वो काफी दुःखी मन अपनी व्यथा सुनाने लगे। इनकी व्यथा एवम् गाँव की स्थिति, बच्चों का रोना ने अनिरुद्ध जी को भी व्यथित कर दिया। अनिरुद्ध जी ने, एक दूसरी संस्था गूँज जो दिल्ली से थी एवं ज्यादाकर बाढ़, सुखाड़ एवं प्राकृतिक आपदा पर कार्य करती है, से बात करके उनसे मुसहर परिवारों को सहारा देने का आग्रह किया। गूँज ने भी सभी 150 परिवारों को दो-दो बोरी किट तैयार कर दिया जिसके पहली बोरी में खाद्य सामग्री जैसे चावल, दाल, सरसों तेल, नमक, चीनी, सब्जी मसाला एवं दूसरी बोरी में, मच्छरदानी, चादर, दरी, बाल्टी, जग, चप्पल इत्यादि। यह मदद गूँज संस्था ने दो बार किया। समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान के द्वारा पर्ल परियोजना (प्रमोटिंग इंटरप्राइजेज एंड रूरल लाइवलीहुड) का हस्तक्षेप वहां शुरू हो चुका था। पर्ल परियोजना के तहत, समय समय पर, सभी मुसहर परिवारों को खाद्य सामग्री, टूटे घरों की मरम्मत के रूप में तीन बार सहयोग किया गया, साथ ही साथ, अभियान के रूप में टीकाकरण में सहयोग किया गया जिससे उस क्षेत्र के कोई परिवार नहीं छूटे। वो भी तबतक, जबतक की कोरोना का डर खत्म हो नहीं गया।

कुछ समय बाद की बात है, एक दिन दोपहर के में ग्रामीण आपस में बात कर रहे होते हैं तभी अनिरुद्ध जी पहुँचते हैं और सभी एक दुसरे का हाल-सामाचार लेते हैं। मोतीचन्द्र मुसहर ने अनिरुद्ध जी को कहा आपने हमें काफी मदद दिया। अनिरुद्ध जी ने कहा, कब तक किसी के आशा पर टिके रहोगे? खुद का कोई व्यवसाय करो, आज नहीं तो कल को बेहतर करो। आज एक आगे बढ़ेगा, कल सौ उसके पीछे खड़े नजर आयेंगे, नहीं तो दूसरे के पास हाथ पसारते कई पीढ़ियाँ बीत जायेगी। एक व्यक्ति को कभी भी विपरीत परिस्थितियों से घबराना नहीं चाहिए बल्कि उससे लड़ने और विजय पाने की रास्ता ढूँढ़ना चाहिए। आप लोग सब्जी लगाना, सुकर पालन, मुर्गी पालन, बकरी पालन, दुकानदारी करके आत्मनिर्भर बन सकते हैं। आज नहीं तो कल सफलता मिलेगी, अपना एक रोजगार होगा। सब्जी की खेती करनी हो तो हम लीज पर जमीन दिला देंगे, एक वर्ष बाद आप उससे आमदनी कमाकर खुद आगे बढ़ाते जाओगे। इसमें समय बीतता जायेगा तथा "कोरोना" का डर भी दिल से निकलता जायेगा। आज का छोटा सा रोजगार, कल आपके जीवन का सहारा बनकर काम करने लगेगा।

अनिरुद्ध जी की बात मुसहर परिवारों को समझ में आयी। एक दिन गाँव वालों ने बैठक करके तय किया कि अब केवल मजदूरी करने से काम नहीं चलेगा। मजदूरी के साथ-साथ अब छोटे-छोटे रोजगार भी करना चाहिए। इसके लिए भी अगुआ बने वहीं 70 वर्षीय बुजुर्ग सिंहासन मुसहर। 20 महिला-पुरुषों का एक समूह बनाये, समग्र संस्था से बात किये। समग्र ने पास में ही 90 हजार रुपये में 02 एकड़ जमीन लीज पर दिलाया। सिंहासन मुसहर, चन्दा देवी, सुनिता देवी, अच्छेलाल मुसहर, सुशिला देवी, मोतीचन्द्र मुसहर, लालसा देवी इत्यादि 20 परिवारों ने मटर, बैंगन, मुली, पालक, नेनुआ, कटू लगाया। आज उनके खेतों में सब्जी लहलहा रही है, सबका चेहरा खिला-खिला दिखने लगा है। बच्चों में अलग खुशी दिखने लगी है। अब रोज सब्जी खाने को मिलेगी ऐसा वो आपस में दोस्तों के साथ बातें कर रहे हैं।

खेतों से सब्जियां निकलने लगी है। बाजार में बिकने लगी है। अब इसकी चर्चा अगल-बगल के गाँवों के साथ सरकारी महकमें तक पहुँचने लगी। 20 परिवार अब प्रतिमाह 7 से 8 हजार रूपए की सब्जियां बेचने लगे हैं। फिर क्या था, कृषि विज्ञान केंद्र, नरकटियागंज के वरिष्ठ वैज्ञानिक डा. राजेन्द्र प्रताप सिंह (R.P.SINGH) अपनी टीम के साथ मुसहर परिवारों द्वारा लगायी सब्जियों का अवलोकन किये। वैज्ञानिक तरीके से खेती के लिए तीन बार प्रशिक्षण दिलाये। कृषि यंत्र ग्रबर तथा दवा छिड़काव के लिए, 12 स्प्रेयर मशीन देकर गरीब परिवारों का हौसला बढ़ाये है। जर्मनी की संस्था “अंधेरी हिल्फे” जिनके द्वारा पर्ल परियोजना वित्तपोषित है, के रौशन मिंज द्वारा भी यहाँ भ्रमण किया गया तथा निः शुल्क सब्जी बीज उपलब्ध कराने की बात कही गयी। अब मुसहर समुदाय रबी, जायद तथा खरीफ के तीनों मौसमों में वैज्ञानिक तरीके से सब्जी लगाकर आमदनी प्राप्त करने लगे हैं।

कहानी यहीं खत्म नहीं होती इस प्रयास को लोगों के सामने लाने में “प्रभात खबर” अखबार भी कहाँ पीछे रहा। 15 अप्रैल 2023 को “प्रभात खबर” की टीम बहुअरवा पहुँची तो लोगों में उत्साह का ठिकाना नहीं था। टीम ने मुसहर किसानों से बात की, चन्दा देवी के बेहतर खेती को देखकर उन्हें “अपराजिता” पुरस्कार देने के लिए चयन किया। गाँव के लोगों को तो विश्वास ही नहीं नहीं हो रहा था कि जिला के बड़े-बड़े किसानों के सामने लीज पर खेती करने वाले किसी मुसहर परिवार को जिला स्तर पर सम्मानित किया जायेगा। कुछ लोग खुश हो रहे थे तो कुछ लोग चन्दा देवी का मजाक उड़ा रहे थे। आखिर वह समय आ ही गया 24 अप्रैल 2023 दोपहर में मोबाइल की घण्टी बजती है-

: आप चन्दा देवी बोल रही हो,

: हाँ मैं चन्दा देवी बोल रही हूँ

: कल 25 अप्रैल को दो पहर 4:00 बजे महाराजा पुस्तकालय बेतिया में पहुँचना है। जिले के बेहतर महिला किसान के रूप में आपको सम्मानित किया जायेगा।

बात सुनते ही लोगों में खुशियों का ठिकाना नहीं था।

चन्दा देवी 25 अप्रैल 2023 को कार्यक्रम स्थल पर पहुँची तो देखा जिला पदाधिकारी से लेकर सभी छोटे बड़े अफसर मंच पर बैठे हैं। कुछ देर देखने सुनने के बाद एक आवाज आयी बहुअरवा के चन्दा देवी मंच पर आये, चन्दा देवी बिना डर के मंच पर गयी, नगर परिषद् के सभाध्यक्ष (सभापति) गरिमा देवी सिकारिया तथा MLC सौरभ कुमार द्वारा उन्हें अंगवस्त्र तथा “अपराजिता” पुरस्कार का शिल्ड देकर सम्मानित किया गया। इस उपलब्धि के बाद सभी मुसहर किसान बड़े लगन से खेती करने लग गए हैं।

मुसहर किसानों के लिए यह खेती की यह सफलता आसान नहीं थी। उन्हें यहाँ तक पहुँचने में कई चुनौतियों का सामना करना पड़ा: जो

- मजदूरी करने वाले मुसहर परिवार के सदस्यों को खेती की कोई जानकारी नहीं थी ना ही खेती के लिए उनके पास संसाधन उपलब्ध थे
- वैसे किसान जिनकी अपनी जमीन थी वो मुसहर परिवारों को खेती के संसाधन नहीं देना चाहते थे क्योंकि उनकी सोच थी कि यदि मुसहर खेती करने लगे तो उनके खेतों में मजदूरी कौन करेगा, उनकी सोच थी कि मुसहर परिवार खेतिहर मजदूर ही बने रहे
- वैसे मुसहर परिवार जो खेती करने के इच्छुक थे उन्हें उन्त बीज और नर्सरी लगाने की विधि नहीं मालूम थी इस वजह से जब संस्था ने उन्हें kitchen garden के लिए प्रोत्साहित किया तो उन्हें बिलकुल ही भरोसा नहीं था कि वो ये काम कर पाएंगे।
- सिंचाई के समुचित साधन नहीं होने से कई बार सब्जियां सूख जाती थीं।
- बाज़ार तक जा कर सब्जी बेच पाने में एक हिचक और डर था।



समग्र संस्था द्वारा इन चुनौतियों को दूर करने के लिए कई उपाय किए गए:

- मुसहर समुदाय के महिला एवं पुरुष किसान तथा संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं की सामूहिक बैठक में समाधान निकाला गया।
- कृषि विज्ञान केंद्र के वैज्ञानिकों द्वारा खेती के गुण, नर्सरी लगाने के और देख-भाल के तरीकों पर बार बार प्रशिक्षण दिलवाया गया।
- समग्र संस्था की और से सिंचाई के लिए चापाकल और मोटर पाइप उपलब्ध करवाया गया।
- कृषि विज्ञान केंद्र द्वारा मुसहर किसानों का बार बार परिभ्रमण करवाने से उनके सोच में बदलाव आया।
- स्थानीय बाज़ार में पहुँच बनाया गया। गरीब मुसहर किसानों द्वारा उगाई गयी सब्जियां में सिर्फ गोबर खाद का ही इस्तेमाल होता है अतः यह उत्पाद पूर्णतः जैविक है ऐसा ग्राहकों को बताया गया।

सुकर पालन

अब धीरे-धीरे मुसहर परिवारों में आजीविका से जुड़ने की समझ बढ़ने लगी है, समूह की बैठकों में समग्र संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं के द्वारा अलग अलग तरह के रोजगारों, जैसे सुकर पालन, बकरी पालन, सब्जी की खेती, मुर्गी पालन इत्यादि की जानकारी दी जाती रहीं हैं। रमुन्ती देवी ने छः महिलाओं के साथ सुकर पालन की मन बनाया पर सोच यह भी था कि सुकर रखेगी कहाँ- खुद को रहने का घर नहीं फिर सुकर के लिए भी घर चाहिए। समूह की बैठक में इसकी चर्चा हुई। अनिरुद्ध महतो जी द्वारा समग्र संस्था के सचिव सिद्धार्थ कुमार तथा नदीम अहमद से सहयोग की माँग की गयी। 60 हजार की लागत से सामूहिक सुकर बाड़ा का निर्माण मोतिचन्द मुसहर के जमीन पर कराया गया। बेहतर नस्ल के सुकर पालन के लिए सविता देवी, रमुन्ती देवी, कुन्ती थी, मानती देवी, सीता देवी, तथा गीता देवी गाँव से बहुत दूर लगभग 50 किलोमीटर चम्पापुर दोन में जाकर सफेद वाला सुकर बच्चा खरीद कर लायी, इसकी जानकारी संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं ने दिया था। प्रति बच्चा 3000 की दर से लाया

गयाजो पर्ल परियोजना के तहत दिया गया था। आज वह बच्चा बड़ा हो गया है। इसकी चर्चा जीविका[1] दीदियों ने जीविका के BPM के साथ की। मुसहर महिलाओं द्वारा सामुहिक रूप से सुकर पालन एवम् सुकर बाड़ा देखने बगहा BPM (ब्लाक प्रोजेक्ट मैनेजर, बगहा ब्लाक) बहुअरवा में आये। महिलाओं से बात कर उन्हें हर सम्भव मदद करने की बात कही। छः महिलाओं के अलावा अब 15 परिवार और सुकर पालन करके अपनी आमदनी बढ़ाने लगे हैं। सुकर पालन में एक सुकर को दस माह तक पाला गया तो उस पर 5000 रूपया का खर्च दाना खिलाने में लगा। इस प्रकार उसे बेच कर 25000 का शुद्ध मुनाफा हुआ।

[1] "जीविका" गरीबी उन्मुलन के लिए बिहार सरकार की एक पहल है। जीविका - बिहार ग्रामीण आजीविका परियोजना, विश्व बैंक द्वारा सहायता प्राप्त बिहार सरकार की एक परियोजना है। इसका उद्देश्य स्व-प्रबंधित सामुदायिक संस्थान बनाकर और स्थायी आजीविका के माध्यम से आय में वृद्धि करके ग्रामीण गरीबों को सशक्त बनाना है।



मुर्गी पालन

मुसहर परिवारों को विभिन्न प्रकार के आजीविका से जुड़ते देख मैना देवी, सुनिता देवी जैसी महिलाएँ भी अब चुप-चाप बैठे रहना पसन्द नहीं कर रही हैं। खुद के पैसे पर खड़ा होना चाहती हैं। इसी उम्मीद के साथ 4 - 4 हजार की लागत से जालीदार मुर्गी दरबा बनवायी है। पहली बार हजार-



हजार रूपये के चूजे रखने की मन बनायी। बड़े ही लगन के साथ मुर्गी पालन की दरबा में दाना रख दी, काम पर चली गयी। लौटने पर फिर दाना रख दी, इसी तरह पांच माह बाद मैना ने 13,000 तथा सुनिता ने 12,500 की मुर्गियाँ बेची। 1,500 रूपये की लागत से पांच माह में 10,000 रूपये से ज्यादा मुनाफा कमाई। अब पैसे आने लगे हैं। परिवार के बच्चों का विद्यालय में नामांकन भी हुआ है। मैना देवी बताती है कि मेरी बेटी रूपा अब पढ़ाई के साथ-साथ कपड़े की सिलाई भी करने लगी है। अब धीरे-धीरे सब कुछ बदलने लगा है, बहुअरवा मुसहर टोला की महिलाएँ रोजगार से जुड़ने लगी हैं। सुनिता देवी का कहना है "बाबु ना भैया, सब बा रुपईया" पैसा के बिना परिवार चलाना बच्चों को पढ़ाना काफी मुश्किल लग रहा था। रोजगार इसमें सहायक बनकर हमारी समस्याओं को सुलझाने में मदद देने लगा है।

बहुअरवा मलिन बस्ती अब सुन्दर बस्ती दिखने लगा है। अब हर परिवार में किचन गार्डन, सब्जी की खेती, सुकर पालन, मुर्गी पालन, बकरी पालन, किराना दुकान जैसा रोजगार हो रहा है। रोजगार मुसहर परिवारों की सूरते हाल बदल रहा है। जहाँ समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान के पर्ल परियोजना के हस्तक्षेप से पहले उस टोले के एक भी बच्चा विद्यालय नहीं जाता था जबकि सारे बच्चे विभिन्न विद्यालयों में नामांकित थे। वहीं अब सभी बच्चों के कंधे पर किताबों से भरा बैग रहता है एवं लाइन से सभी बच्चों को विद्यालय जाते हुए देखा जा सकता है। पुरुषों के हाथ कुदाल, महिलाओं के हाथ में बकरियाँ, सब्जी लेकर बाजार जाती महिलाएँ, चूजों को दाना खिलाती महिलाएँ, मानों सभी अपने कामों में व्यस्त हैं।



कल का धूमिल पड़ा बहुअरवा आज विभिन्न रोजगारों के बदौलत चमकने लगा है। अब उचाईयों को छूने में लगी है मुसहर समुदाय की महिलाएँ। बहुअरवा गाँव के मुसहर परिवारों के लिए अब आजीविका के कई रास्ते खुल गए हैं। रामनगर मिल के मजदूर बन कर रहना अब उनकी मजबूरी नहीं रह गयी है। मुसहर परिवारों में बेहतर जीवन की चाह तो जरूर थी लेकिन उसके रास्ते नहीं मालूम थे। समग्र संस्था ने मुसहर परिवारों को बहुत कठिनाइयों के समय तब मदद किया जब कोरोना महामारी से सभी त्रस्त थे और रोजी-रोटी के लाले पड़े थे। ऐसे में संस्था की मदद मिलने से मुसहर परिवारों में संस्था के प्रति बहुत विश्वास बना। ऐसे में जब संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं ने मुसहर परिवारों को अपना रोजगार करने के लिए प्रोत्साहित किया तो वो इसके लिए तैयार हो गए। इस कार्य में चुनौतियाँ तो कई आईं लेकिन मुसहर परिवारों और संस्था में परस्पर भरोसा होने के कारण संस्था द्वारा किये गए सभी प्रयासों में सफलता मिली।



EMPOWERING DALIT WOMEN

***A Case Study on Mushroom Cultivation as a Pathway to Economic and Nutritional Security
in Jehanabad, Bihar***

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ABSTRACT:

The caste system in India, deeply rooted for over 3,000 years, continues to shape the socio-economic realities of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and Mahadalits. The Chamar community, traditionally associated with leatherworking and classified as "untouchable," faces extreme poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to resources. This case study explores a transformative intervention by 4S India, a non-governmental organization, that introduced mushroom cultivation as a sustainable income-generating and nutritional strategy for women in the Chamar community in Jehanabad, Bihar. The initiative, despite initial resistance, led to the empowerment of a group of women who took up mushroom farming and, through this, were able to secure financial independence, improve household nutrition, and foster a sense of entrepreneurship. The study details the process of mushroom production, the women's economic gains, and the impact on their community. With an average yield of 59.93 kg of mushrooms per participant, generating an income of Rs. 9,289 per season, the women of Jehanabad have proven that even the most marginalized communities can thrive when provided with appropriate resources and training. Moving forward, the women are not only continuing their mushroom farming efforts but are also advocating for value-added mushroom products, expanding their entrepreneurial potential. This case exemplifies the significant role of small-scale, resource-efficient farming practices in improving the lives of rural Dalit women and highlights the power of community-driven change.



BACKGROUND

Caste remains one of the most deeply entrenched and enduring forms of social stratification in India, profoundly shaping access to resources, dignity, and livelihood opportunities. Rooted in ancient Hindu texts like the Rig Veda, the caste system has historically divided society into four hierarchical Varnas—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra—each associated with specific roles and levels of social privilege (Deshpande, 2010). Those outside this framework, referred to as Avarna, Ati-Shudra, or Untouchables, were historically assigned the most stigmatized and "polluting" occupations such as leatherwork, manual scavenging, and the disposal of the dead (Thorat & Joshi, 2015; Goghari & Kus, 2023).

Over time, this system evolved into a complex network of sub-castes (Jatis), estimated at around 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes across India (Goghari & Kus, 2023). Among the most marginalized are the Chamar community—traditionally associated with leatherwork and classified as Mahadalits in Bihar—who continue to face structural exclusion, poverty, and limited access to health, education, and land ownership (Kumar, 2023).

According to the 2022 Bihar caste-based survey, Scheduled Castes (SCs) make up 19.65% of the state's population, with 5.25% belonging to the Chamar community. Alarming, 42% of Chamar families live below the poverty line (Government of Bihar, 2022). Despite constitutional protections and slow occupational mobility in recent decades, Dalit communities—especially women—remain at the lowest rungs of rural India's socio-economic hierarchy (Ambedkar, 2014; Kumar, 2023).

JOURNEY: A GROUP OF WOMEN

A group of women from the Chamar community in Jehanabad, Bihar, has shown extraordinary resilience despite enduring numerous hardships. Living in extreme poverty with large families averaging 7 to 8 members, they face limited access to land, education, employment, and healthcare—challenges worsened by a male-dominated society and lack of family planning. Many men migrate seasonally or permanently for work, with 61.1% leaving Jehanabad for states like Kolkata, Jharkhand, Hyderabad, and Varanasi (Baseline Survey Report, 2023). Some children also migrate for labor. This places added pressure on women, who are left behind to manage households and provide for their families.

A tragic case highlights these challenges: Chanchala Didi's husband fell while working and needed a leg amputation. Although they held an Ayushman Bharat card, their inability to navigate the system denied them assistance. The family could not afford the Rs. 50,000 needed for surgery, exposing the vulnerability faced by many.

Malnutrition is widespread among children and mothers. Diets consist mostly of cereals and occasional vegetables, with many families excluded from government rations due to lack of ration cards. Illiteracy is common, preventing access to basic rights and government services.

These families live in cramped single-room houses, often on government land, with labor as their primary livelihood. Women work as agricultural laborers for upper-caste households, often earning

only 4–5 kg of rice or wheat (worth Rs. 125–150) for long hours. Due to overpopulation, even such work is hard to find.

Children frequently skip school to support family farming efforts. Some women engage in sharecropping, receiving half the yield, though this remains insufficient. Natural disasters—floods, storms, droughts—further jeopardize their fragile subsistence. In Jehanabad, where over 84% of the population depends on agriculture or allied labor (ATMA Jehanabad, 2024), these women continue striving for sustainable livelihood solutions. To address these systemic constraints, Sarva Seva Samiti Sanstha (4S India) has initiated grassroots programs focusing on inclusive agricultural practices. Among these, mushroom cultivation emerged as a viable pathway to secure livelihoods, nutritional improvement, and women's economic agency.

4S INDIA'S INTERVENTION

In July 2023, a glimmer of hope emerged when 4S India arrived in Kurtha. Initially, the group was skeptical, fearing that 4S India would be just another organization making empty promises. Past experiences with fraudulent organizations had made the villagers wary, and many refused to attend the initial meetings organized by the 4S India team.

Despite this initial reluctance, over the next few weeks, the community began to communicate amongst themselves and slowly convinced one another to participate. The 4S India team, facing significant resistance, persisted and gradually earned the villagers' trust. They began introducing ways to help the community establish stable incomes, even on borrowed land. The team explained methods to safeguard crops, organized discussions on accessing government support, and provided guidance on alternative ways to increase agricultural productivity.

4S India actively engaged with the community to understand their needs and aspirations. The villagers expressed a strong desire for economic enhancement, with the goal of establishing a sustainable and healthy livelihood. In response, 4S India proposed mushroom farming as a viable solution. The organization emphasized that button mushrooms not only provide a potential source of income but also offer significant nutritional benefits to the community.

While the community showed interest, there were challenges. 4S India set a condition for participation: each member would need to contribute Rs. 500, while the organization would provide Rs. 3,500 in

support. For many women, Rs. 500 was a substantial amount, and they were hesitant, fearing potential financial loss if the initiative failed.

To address these concerns, the 4S India team held several meetings to explain the program's benefits and potential outcomes. Over time, they succeeded in convincing five women from the 30-member group—Premlata Kumari, Rekha Kumari, Rajmati Devi, and Chunchun Devi—to participate in mushroom farming. One of the women, Asha Devi, shared her perspective on the initiative, emphasizing her hopes and concerns regarding the potential impact it could have on her family's livelihood.

Why Mushroom?

What sets this mushroom cultivation initiative apart is its low-resource, high-return model that aligns well with the extreme landlessness and nutritional insecurity of Dalit women in Jehanabad. Unlike traditional agricultural livelihoods that require significant land, water, and male labor, mushroom farming is space-efficient, women-led, and nutritionally rich, making it uniquely suitable for marginalized households. Moreover, this is the first time many of these women engaged in commercial farming of any kind—let alone a crop they had never consumed before. Their success in mastering the complete value chain, from production to marketing, demonstrates the transformative potential of targeted, community-owned innovations. The fact that women contributed their own savings, overcame social stigma, and are now planning collective scale-up and value addition positions this as a model case of bottom-up entrepreneurship in a deeply caste- and gender-stratified rural economy.

“

“ऐसा हमनी के बड़ा पैसा इधर से उधर खत्म हो जाते हैं। एकरो में हो सके है कुछ पैसा जाईति, हमनी ए काम करके देखबे।” (Our money gets spent here and there.

Maybe through this, maybe we earn some money through this intervention. We will try doing this work.)

”

This statement became a turning point, boosting the group's confidence. Encouraged by the possibility of earning some income through this new initiative, the five women decided to give mushroom farming a try, agreeing to cultivate mushrooms on a demonstration basis. Their willingness to take this step marked the beginning of their journey toward exploring new avenues for economic improvement.

Mushroom cultivation has become a vital economic driver for Dalit and Mahadalit families, offering them not only a sustainable income source but also a means to improve their nutritional intake. This practice has proven to be beneficial for both economic empowerment and the overall well-being of these communities. The manure used for cultivating mushrooms serves as a valuable compost for agricultural lands, contributing to improved crop yields and sustainability.

Globally, the demand for edible mushrooms is on the rise, with China leading in production and consumption. Among edible mushrooms, button mushrooms hold the fourth rank in terms of global production, signifying the vast market potential for mushroom cultivation (Grimm & Wosten, 2018). This creates an opportunity for sustainable, year-round income generation, especially for communities with limited resources.

Traditional agriculture requires significant land and water resources, but mushroom farming offers a more resource-efficient and space-efficient alternative. It requires little space and water to maintain optimal conditions for cultivation, allowing it to thrive in environments where conventional farming may struggle. The return on investment is also fast, as mushrooms can yield profits in just two to three months, making it an ideal solution for Dalit and Mahadalit families with limited access to land and capital.

The benefits of mushroom cultivation for Dalit and Mahadalit families include:

- **Alternative Income Stream:** For Dalit and Mahadalit families, mushroom farming offers a significant opportunity to increase income. By transitioning from manual laborers to entrepreneurs, they can generate better earnings with limited space and resources.
- **Space-Efficient and Women-Friendly:** Mushroom farming requires minimal space, which makes it particularly well-suited for women. This allows women to establish small-scale cultivation hubs, promoting entrepreneurship and enhancing economic independence within their communities.
- **Environmental Benefits:** Mushroom cultivation is an environmentally sustainable practice that uses water and other resources efficiently. It offers a low-impact alternative to traditional farming, making it an attractive option for sustainable agriculture.
- **Year-Round Production:** Due to its minimal space requirements (a 50 sq. ft. room is enough for installing 100 kg mushroom bags), mushroom cultivation allows for continuous, year-round production. This ensures a steady income stream throughout the year, which is especially valuable for families in rural areas.
- **Nutritional Benefits:** Mushrooms are rich in proteins, B vitamins, and essential nutrients. They are high in protein and fiber, low in sodium, calories, and cholesterol, and provide 40-60% carbohydrates. Furthermore, mushrooms are a good source of vitamin D, contributing to a balanced and healthy diet.

GROUP INNOVATION OF LEARNING

The group decided to take up mushroom farming as they were the first learners in their community to explore this new form of agriculture. Interestingly, none of them had ever eaten mushrooms before, so they were eager to understand the process not only as a potential income-generating activity but also as a way to familiarize themselves with this new food source.



In response to the group's request for training, the 4S India team arranged a training session led by Rajesh Singh, an expert in mushroom cultivation. This training session aimed to equip the women with the necessary skills and knowledge to start farming mushrooms successfully. The training was crucial for building their confidence and ensuring they were well-prepared for this new venture.

Mr. Rajesh Singh is a successful entrepreneur who have more than 10 years experiences over Mushroom production in Gaya Region. He is not only an entrepreneur but also become a great business man from this intervention. He provides training on it over 3 years in various state like Jharkhand, Bihar, Chattishgardh, Uttar Pradesh etc. His turn over in year around 1 crore and above.

PROCESS FOR MUSHROOM PRODUCTION

- **Preparation of Growing Space:** A cool, dark room of approximately 50 sq. ft. is needed to cultivate 100 kg of mushroom bags. Proper ventilation is crucial to prevent mold growth while maintaining the required moisture levels. The space should be free from direct sunlight, ensuring an ideal environment for mushroom growth.
- **Preparation of Manure:** Manure serves as the growing medium for mushrooms and must be sterilized to remove harmful pathogens. A common choice is a mix of organic materials like straw or sawdust. The manure must be pasteurized to ensure it's safe and nutritious for the mushroom mycelium to thrive.

- **Forming Mycelium:** The mycelium, which is the root structure of mushrooms, is introduced into the sterilized manure. This is done by inoculating the prepared manure with mushroom spawn. The mycelium then grows through the substrate, eventually producing mushrooms after colonizing the material.
- **Sanitization and Bag Preparation:** The next step involves filling sterilized bags with the pasteurized manure and spawn mix. The bags are sealed to prevent contamination and placed in a dark space where they can incubate. This ensures the mycelium colonizes the substrate properly.



- **Incubation:** The sealed bags are kept in a dark, humid environment with controlled temperatures for 2-3 weeks. During this time, the mycelium grows and spreads throughout the substrate. Monitoring temperature and humidity is crucial to avoid contamination and ensure healthy growth.
- **Monitoring Growth:** After incubation, the bags are moved to a space with more light to encourage mushroom fruiting. Regular checks are important to ensure proper conditions for the mushrooms to grow. This includes observing humidity, temperature, and preventing fungal diseases or pests.



- **Harvesting:** Once the mushrooms have matured, they are carefully harvested. Timing is key: mushrooms should be picked when the caps have opened fully but before they release spores. This

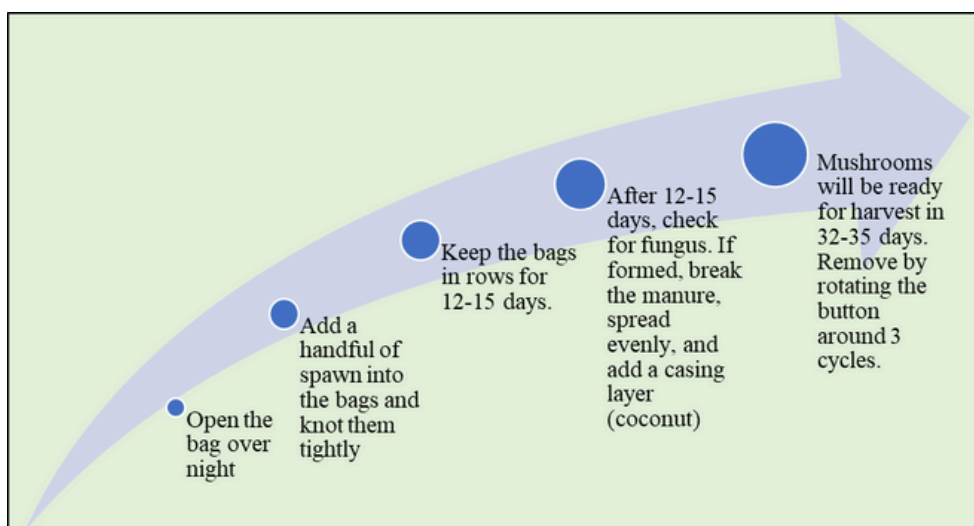
ensures the mushrooms have the best texture and flavor for consumption or sale.



- **Processing and Packaging:** After harvesting, the mushrooms are cleaned and either packed fresh or dried for preservation. Dried mushrooms have a longer shelf life and can be sold at markets or used for home consumption. Proper packaging ensures that the mushrooms stay fresh during transportation.
- **Selling the Produce:** The harvested mushrooms are sold in local markets. Effective marketing strategies are taught to the farmers, including packaging and display techniques. Regular visits to the market and establishing connections with vendors help ensure consistent sales at fair prices.
- **Continuous Support and Monitoring:** Trainers conduct follow-up visits to ensure that participants are implementing the process correctly. Ongoing support is provided to troubleshoot any issues and improve yields. This helps maintain the sustainability of mushroom farming as a source of income.



This comprehensive training ensures that the participants understand each step and are well-equipped to successfully engage in mushroom farming as an income-generating activity. The practical approach with hands-on experience during the process gives them the confidence to continue cultivating mushrooms independently.



MONEY: THE SOURCE OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Rekha Didi's words reflect the joy and pride that came with the successful mushroom harvest. Her family's first experience of tasting the mushrooms was not just about the food but also about the empowerment that came from their own efforts. This was not just a meal; it was the beginning of a new economic opportunity for Rekha and the other women in the group.

The mushroom cultivation process, which initially seemed uncertain, soon became a source of income and a pathway to economic empowerment. For women like Rekha, the money earned from mushroom farming could make a significant difference in their lives. It offered a chance to be financially independent and contribute to their family's well-being in ways they hadn't experienced before. The success of their first harvest reinforced their belief in the potential of this initiative.

With the mushroom cultivation program, these women are not only earning money but also gaining a sense of pride and self-reliance. This newfound economic stability allows them to invest in their families' education, health, and future, breaking the cycle of poverty that has historically held them back. The empowerment that comes with controlling their own finances can change the trajectory of their lives and those of their children.

“

"हम सोचली हल एकरा में कुछ न उगतई लेकिन एकरा में जब उजर नियत आहलई हम बड़ी खुश हलीवाई, जब हमनी के परिवार पहिले बार खाएलथीनतब सब कहलथी एकर स्वाद मांस नियत है।"(I thought nothing would grow, but when I saw the mushrooms, I was so happy. When my family tasted them for the first time, everyone said the flavour was really good.)

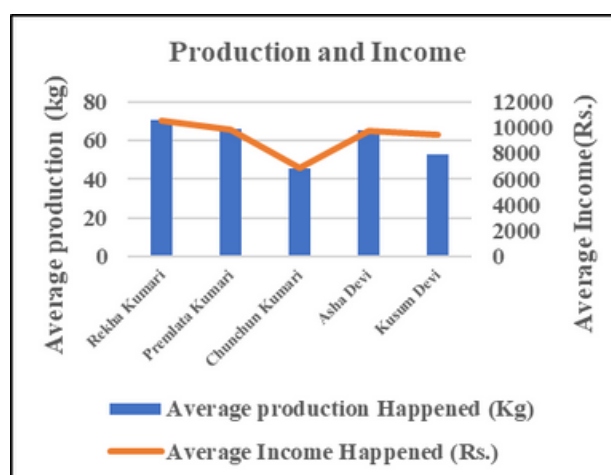
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The women cultivated an average of 59.93 kg of mushrooms from 50 ready-to-fruit bags, each

yielding 5 kg. They earned an average of Rs. 9,289 from three harvests, which boosted their confidence in mushroom production. Among them, Rekha Kumari achieved the highest yield, producing 70.25 kg and earning Rs. 10,537. This income reinforced their interest in continuing the cultivation, and they saved the money for personal use, empowering them to manage their finances.

Source: - Data collection during field work

Sl. No	Beneficiaries Name	Average production Happened (Kg)	Average Income Happened (Rs.)
1	Rekha Kumari	70.25	10537
2	Premlata Kumari	65.8	9870
3	Chunchun Kumari	45.7	6855
4	Asha Devi	65	9750
5	Kusum Devi	52.9	9435



MARKETING: A WAY OF PRODUCT STANDARD

The mushrooms are sold in the nearby Teheta market, where they face no challenges in selling their produce. The women gather the mushrooms and sell them at an average price of Rs. 150 per kg. Before starting, they had confirmed the market with Rajesh Singh, who assured them of a purchase agreement. The high demand in the Teheta market has ensured steady sales.

WAY FORWARD: DIDI'S THINKING

- The women have adopted oyster mushrooms as a consistent source of nutrition and income.
- They plan to cultivate button mushrooms again for commercial production and marketing.
- Their success has motivated others in the community to start mushroom production in the next season.
- They are considering establishing a mushroom cluster with Rajesh Singh's support to improve marketing channels.
- They have received training from the government's horticulture department to set up household-level mushroom hubs and are encouraging others to participate.
- They have proposed a training session on mushroom value addition to the department and the 4S team, as they see potential in value-added products for improved economic sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Mushroom cultivation is a highly profitable venture for Dalit and Mahadalit families with limited land access. With minimal space and support, farmers can cultivate mushrooms year-round, generating enough income to sustain their livelihoods. Mushrooms, being nutrient-rich and in high demand, offer

significant potential for value addition. This enterprise is especially beneficial for Dalit women, requiring less labor-intensive effort and providing opportunities for increased profits, as demonstrated by Rekha Didi and others.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ganesh Mondal is a development professional with hands-on experience in community-based agriculture, livestock promotion, and livelihood enhancement. Currently serving as Assistant Coordinator and Agriculture Anchor at CInI, Tata Trusts in Keonjhar, Odisha, he plays a key role in implementing the Lakshapati Kisan Programme, focusing on asset creation, agricultural interventions, producer group formation, and market linkage for tribal communities.

He holds an M.Sc. in Agriculture and Rural Development from Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute and a B.Sc. in Geography from the University of Calcutta. Ganesh has also interned with Sundarini Naturals and Nayantara Memorial & Charitable Trust, contributing to projects on organic farming, milk value chain management, and community-based planning.

In addition to his professional engagements, he volunteers with "Helpp... The Ray of Hope," supporting educational initiatives for children in the Sundarbans. Ganesh is passionate about grassroots transformation, sustainable livelihoods, and inclusive development, with a strong commitment to working for underprivileged communities.



BRINGING THE INVISIBLE AND EXCLUDED INTO THE LIGHT

Empowering the Musahar Community through Vegetable Cultivation

By Pankaj Kumar, State Lead , PHIA Foundation

ABSTRACT:

This case study highlights the intervention in the Musahar community of West Champaran, Bihar, focusing on transforming their socio-economic conditions through vegetable farming. The Musahars, traditionally marginalized and oppressed due to caste-based discrimination, were trapped in a cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and lack of livelihood opportunities. The intervention, initiated by PHIA Foundation and Karuna Trust, addressed these challenges by promoting sustainable agricultural practices and providing training on vegetable cultivation, livestock rearing, and financial literacy.

Key figure Dukhi Manjhi, despite initial skepticism, embraced vegetable farming as a viable livelihood. The project facilitated land leasing, overcoming systemic barriers, and initiated a comprehensive training program. Over time, Dukhi and his community began to see improvements in income, nutrition, and social engagement, leading to enhanced school enrollment and reduced dependency on exploitative labor. The initiative expanded to 160 families across three panchayats, increasing their monthly income by ₹3,000 on average. Additionally, the establishment of Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) ensured long-term sustainability.

The intervention's success highlights the importance of trust-building, leadership development, and continuous guidance. It demonstrates that empowering marginalized communities through dignified livelihoods can foster lasting socio-economic and cultural change, offering a replicable model for other disadvantaged groups in India.



BACKGROUND

Bihar remains the poorest state in India, ranking last in all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators. A staggering 33.74% of its population lives below the poverty line (1), with West Champaran experiencing an even higher rate of around 70%, making it one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in the country (2). Marginalized communities, such as the Musahars, face even greater hardships.

[1]Source:NITI Aayog, SDG India Index & Dashboard 2020-21

Link: <https://www.niti.gov.in/sdg-india-index-dashboard-2020-21>

[2]This figure is drawn from RBI's 2012 Handbook of Statistics on Indian Economy

The Musahar community, a subgroup of Dalits, is primarily found in rural areas of India and Nepal. Known for their traditional occupation as "rat catchers" or "rat eaters," Musahars have faced severe discrimination, social exclusion, and economic exploitation for generations. They endure extreme poverty, limited access to education, healthcare, and basic amenities, and continue to struggle for equal rights and opportunities. The 2022 Caste Census reveals that Musahars make up 3.1% of Bihar's population, yet only around 0.26% hold government jobs, indicating their limited access to opportunities.

At the bottom of the caste hierarchy, Musahars frequently face caste-based discrimination and untouchability. In intervention villages, they mostly depend on wage labor, an unstable and vulnerable

source of income that increases their social and economic vulnerabilities. Generational oppression has normalized their current circumstances, fostering hopelessness and despondency within the community.

The Musahars suffer from illiteracy, chronic malnutrition, and economic insecurity, exacerbated by limited access to land and basic services. Engaging with the community is challenging due to entrenched beliefs, low self-esteem, and a lack of confidence. Many Musahars are excluded from skill enhancement programs, and their low literacy rate of only 9% further limits their opportunities for advancement (3). They also lack awareness of social security schemes and have no voice or asset ownership, deepening their marginalization.

[3]According to Caritas India, based on the Bihar State Mahadalit Commission's interim report:

"literacy rates among this community is only 9.8%, the lowest among Dalits in the country"

Their reliance on degrading, low-opportunity employment like manual scavenging, coupled with landlessness and lack of agricultural knowledge, perpetuates a cycle of poverty and exclusion, making it extremely difficult to improve their socio-economic conditions.

LIFE OF DUKKHI MANJHI

The life of Dukkhi Manjhi was marked by hardship and struggle, much like many others in the Madhuaha Musahar Tola. Dukhi lived with his wife, two sons, two daughters-in-law, and five

grandchildren in a joint family, within one of the 50 families in the community. The family's financial difficulties prompted his elder son to migrate to Punjab for work as a daily laborer. After returning with some money, the son chose to live separately, leaving Dukhi heartbroken. He had hoped that his elder son would provide support in their old age. Without any skills, the younger son struggled to find stable work, further deepening the family's financial woes.

Life may be fraught with challenges, but individuals who confront these hardships with resilience and determination can become inspiring figures in their communities. Dukhi Manjhi embodies this spirit of perseverance, becoming a symbol of hope and hard work for those around him.

For communities like the Musahars, the path to dignity and financial stability lay in attaining 'dignified livelihoods.' This meant moving beyond traditional, unstable sources of income and breaking free from the cycle of despair and hopelessness. It was essential to find economically viable livelihood options that would allow them to take pride in their work and defy the social constraints imposed by caste-based discrimination.

The idea of working on the vegetable value chain with the Musahar community was envisioned within this framework. The goal was twofold: to provide clear economic returns while simultaneously challenging and breaking down the caste-based social barriers that had long confined them. By pursuing an alternative livelihood that went against the grain of established norms, the community would not only improve their economic standing but also initiate lasting social change, fostering pride, dignity, and a new sense of empowerment.

PRE-INTERVENTION SCENARIO OF THE VILLAGE

Madhuaha, located around 35 kilometers from the district headquarters of West Champaran, is a village in the Wardha Panchayat that frequently faces the devastating effects of natural disasters like floods and droughts, due to its proximity to the Gandak River. The local economy is largely dependent on sugarcane farming, which, unfortunately, often leaves poor families with insufficient work opportunities. As a result, about 15 to 20 of the 50 Musahar households are forced to migrate to other states in search of labor. The lack of agricultural prospects, compounded by the fact that ancestral lands are controlled by local landlords, has left the Musahar community mired in poverty, overshadowed by 160 families from the Muslim and Rajput castes in nearby villages.

In February 2021, Afroz Alam, a member of PHIA, visited Madhuaha Musahar Tola under the guise of an outsider, seeking to understand the situation of the villagers. Surprised that anyone would take an interest in their community, Dukhi Manjhi questioned Afroz. This interaction led to a conversation that introduced the Musahar community to the initiatives that PHIA intended to implement. During the discussion, Dukhi Manjhi voiced several pressing concerns about the challenges faced by the Musahar community. He asked, "You talk about developing Musahar families, but where can we plant vegetables when we have no land?" He emphasized the community's poverty, stating, "We are poor and cannot afford seeds." He also highlighted the problem of landlords refusing to provide land for sharecropping and noted the community's lack of farming skills. Dukhi lamented, "Government officials never visit our settlement," underscoring their neglect. He concluded by saying, "Without land, we can't even raise livestock; the fear of loss looms large."

To address these challenges, PHIA Foundation and Karuna Trust began an intervention in the Nautan and Lauriya blocks of West Champaran, an area marked by both historical and economic difficulties. This intervention sought to address the community's needs, create viable livelihood options, and support the Musahars in overcoming their entrenched socio-economic challenges.

INTERVENTION

As conversations with the villagers grew more frequent, small meetings were held to address a variety of challenges. Topics such as farming, government schemes, and the importance of vegetable cultivation for improved nutrition led to a gradual shift in mindset. Workers from PHIA assured the community that they would receive support in learning farming techniques and encouraged impoverished families to become self-sufficient.

At nearly 60 years old, Dukhi found it hard to sleep after hearing Afroz's words, which resonated deeply with him. That night, he began to imagine a healthier, more sustainable future for his family through vegetable farming. The next morning, filled with renewed hope, he eagerly shared his vision with his neighbors. "I may no longer be able to carry heavy loads," he said, "but I can still earn a living through vegetable farming. By growing my own vegetables, I could save the money I usually spend on buying them. If I can secure a piece of land, I am determined to become a farmer." His newfound hope sparked enthusiasm among those around him, inspiring them to envision similar possibilities for their own futures.

EMBRACING CHANGE: DUKHI'S JOURNEY INTO FARMING

During an especially hot month, Dukhi and a few villagers sought shade under a tree when Afroz arrived. With renewed determination, Dukhi declared, "I want to farm now. I understand your point." Although some nearby farmers laughed at his ambition, Dukhi remained steadfast in his decision to cultivate the land.

In his pursuit of opportunities, Afroz reached out to several large landowners about renting land for vegetable cultivation. While many initially showed interest, they hesitated, concerned about potential disputes and complications arising from involving Musahar farmers. However, persistence paid off when Afroz met with the sarpanch of a nearby village. After discussing the proposal over tea, they agreed to rent five katthas of land for vegetable farming.

With the support of Sheikh Izhar, a prominent farmer, Afroz shared the news with the Musahar community during a small meeting. This led to the formation of a group called Suraj Kisan Hitkari, which was dedicated to supporting vegetable cultivation. Dukhi took the lead, preparing 0.9 acres of land for planting. Under Afroz's guidance, they began nurturing seedlings of eggplant, cauliflower, tomatoes, and peppers. Within about 20 days, they started planting in the fields, carefully monitoring irrigation and weeding, and taking their first steps toward a brighter future.

A comprehensive survey was later conducted in the Natuan block to identify other Musahar families interested in vegetable farming. The survey aimed to assess the community's needs, land availability, and willingness to participate in the project. Based on the survey results, 120 more families were selected and organized into small groups of 10-15 members. Each group was trained on the economics of vegetable cultivation, including cost-benefit analysis, seasonal planning, and market linkages.

The goal was to improve the financial stability and quality of life for the Musahar community by promoting sustainable vegetable cultivation practices, offering them a dignified livelihood. The initiative focused on developing the skills and knowledge of community members, empowering them to manage and sustain producer collectives, and enhancing their ability to engage in profitable and sustainable agricultural practices. Ultimately, the aim was to economically empower the Musahar community by increasing their income and improving their overall well-being.

LAND MOBILIZATION

Landlessness posed a major barrier for the Musahar community, as most families lacked land ownership and faced challenges in leasing land due to mistrust from landlords and deep-rooted systemic discrimination. However, through persistent efforts and the mediation of a trusted intermediary, Afroz Alam, the project was able to successfully negotiate the leasing of one acre of land for vegetable farming. This breakthrough marked a crucial step forward, offering the Musahar community an opportunity to break free from the cycle of poverty and dependency, while gaining access to a sustainable livelihood option.

UPSKILLING OF DUKKHI MANJHI

Dukhi Manjhi underwent comprehensive training sessions that covered various essential aspects of vegetable cultivation, including seed selection, land preparation, sowing/transplanting, water management, and nutrient management using jeev amrut. The training also focused on weed control, pest and disease management, crop protection, harvesting, post-harvest handling, and marketing of the produce. Key topics included bed preparation, nursery establishment, organic pesticide usage, pest management, and the use of low-cost farming tools.

Technical support from Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) was utilized to facilitate the training and exposure programs, further enhancing the community's knowledge and skills in innovative farming practices. The sessions were a blend of theoretical and practical approaches, including online demonstrations, exposure visits, the establishment of demonstration plots, and experience sharing through interactive discussions. These methods helped to reinforce the practical application of the techniques and foster a deeper understanding of sustainable farming practices.

VEGETABLE PRODUCTION

Dukhi's 0.9-acre plot began yielding vegetables, initially producing modest quantities that the family consumed at home. Gradually, the sense of satisfaction grew, as they could now eat their own produce instead of spending money on vegetables. With the help of his younger son and daughter-in-law, Dukhi started selling the excess vegetables in nearby markets, earning prices between ₹15 and ₹60 per kilo. Over the course of the season, he diligently recorded his profits. By the end of the year, Dukhi's vegetable cultivation across all three seasons brought him a total income of ₹1,08,675, marking a significant improvement in the family's financial situation.

Sl. No.	Vegetable name	Production in Kg			Total (Kg)	Selling price per quintal	Total Income (₹)	Total Expense (₹)	Net profit (₹)
		Kharif (Kg)	Jayad (Kg)	Rabi (Kg)					
1	Pea	0	0	520	520	3000	15600	2000	13600
2	Radish	0	130	175	305	2500	7625	1200	6425
3	Coriander	0	50	0	50	3000	1500	300	1200
4	Spinach	0	185	0	185	2500	4625	1200	3425
5	Red Spinach	150	0	0	150	2500	3750	1200	2550
6	Green Spinach	165	0	0	165	2500	4125	1200	2925
7	Tomato	160	0	0	160	4000	6400	1500	4900
8	Cauliflower		0	540	540	3000	16200	2500	13700
9	Sponge Gourd	650	0	780	1430	2000	28600	4000	24600
10	Pumpkin	480	0	740	1220	1000	12200	2500	9700
11	Bitter Gourd	270	0	190	460	35000	16100	2500	13600
12	Lady Finger	150	0	280	430	3500	15050	3000	12050
Total-							131775	23100	108675

Dukhi Manjhi reflects on how the improvements in their economic situation have had a profound impact on his family's life. They were able to make their home more livable, purchase a bicycle for easier access to the market, and start sending their children to government schools. His daughter-in-law, who had little time for the fields due to household chores, began raising chickens and goats. Now, she manages feeding and caring for them, earning around ₹35,000 to ₹40,000 annually. This progress has also inspired other Musahar families in Bardha Madhuaha to adopt vegetable farming practices.

A significant event changed the fortune of the Musahar community. The ancestors of the Madhuaha Musahar families had once owned land nearby, which was later taken by wealthy farmers from a neighboring village. These landowners even discouraged the Musahar children from coming near the land. When disputes arose, the landlords took legal action against the Musahars, resulting in the arrest of Dukhi and three other families while they were selling vegetables at the market. Dukhi's eldest son, who had been working outside, saw the family's financial struggles and chose to separate, leaving them behind.

Despite these setbacks, Dukhi's hard work has now secured employment for him, and his younger son has also started selling vegetables. His daughter-in-law's poultry and goat rearing business contributes to their income, creating multiple income streams for the family. In contrast, the elder son remains idle at home. Dukhi encourages other families to follow the guidance of PHIA to transform their futures. Today, all the families in the community are engaged in farming, leading to better nutrition, improved living standards, and more educational opportunities for their children. The Musahar community now regards Dukhi as an inspiring figure, seeking his advice as they take steps toward change with PHIA's guidance. As Dukhi says, "I set out alone, and now a caravan has formed."

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The intervention with Dukhi Manjhi was a multi-pronged approach, focusing on agriculture, livestock, kitchen gardens, and increasing school enrollment. In agriculture, the emphasis was on promoting sustainable farming practices and providing agricultural inputs. In livestock, support was extended to goat rearing and poultry farming to diversify income sources. Kitchen gardens were promoted to improve nutritional intake.

School enrollment was increased through active community engagement and awareness programs. Additionally, the project organized camps to assist Musahar families in applying for various social protection schemes. This support included addressing documentation issues and facilitating online applications, saving families time and money while improving their access to government assistance.

OUTCOMES

Paradigm Shift: The intervention has facilitated a significant shift for Musahar families, transitioning them from agricultural labor to entrepreneurship. This has empowered them to take charge of their economic future, providing them with opportunities for growth and self-sufficiency.

Geographical Reach: The project has successfully expanded its impact across three panchayats, involving 160 Musahar farmers. This demonstrates the scalability and replicability of the model, paving the way for broader adoption in similar communities.

Economic Impact: On average, each participating family has earned an additional ₹3,000 per month from vegetable farming. Diversifying into crops like millet has further boosted income and enhanced food security, creating a more stable economic foundation for the families.

Social Benefits: The intervention has led to improved literacy rates, better nutritional intake through kitchen gardens, and increased participation in social protection schemes. These changes have contributed to the overall well-being and empowerment of the Musahar community, supporting their journey toward a more prosperous and equitable future.

IMPACT

Financial Independence: The intervention has significantly improved income security for Musahar families, reducing their dependence on daily wages or debt bondage. This shift has empowered them to lead a more dignified life, free from the cycles of poverty and financial insecurity.

Nutritional Improvement: Through the adoption of kitchen gardens and goat rearing, families have improved their dietary practices, resulting in better nutritional outcomes, especially for women and children. This has enhanced the overall health and well-being of the community.

Education: There has been a noticeable increase in school enrollment among children from Musahar families, contributing to long-term socio-economic upliftment. This focus on education is expected to break the generational cycle of poverty and create new opportunities for the next generation.

Long-Term Sustainability: The establishment of Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) has provided a platform for continued engagement, advocacy, and collective action. These groups are crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the intervention, as they facilitate ongoing support and collaboration among farmers.

Community Empowerment: The project has led to a shift from marginalized labor roles to dignified livelihoods, offering better opportunities for future generations. This transformation has fostered a sense of community empowerment and pride, with families now actively participating in shaping their future.

LEARNINGS

Trust Building: A key factor in the success of the intervention was the establishment of a committee to build trust with landlords for leasing land. Trust-building efforts need to be maintained through ongoing dialogue, transparency, and mutual understanding. Sustaining this trust is essential for long-term success.

Consistent Guidance: Continuous mentoring and sensitization have proven critical to keeping the community engaged and motivated. Long-term efforts require sustained support to ensure that the community remains committed to the changes introduced.

Leadership Development: Training leaders within the Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) was vital for ensuring effective engagement with government institutions and securing ongoing support. Leadership development is crucial for the sustainability of the intervention, as these leaders will continue to advocate for the community.

Behavioral Challenges: One significant challenge was the Musahar community's tendency to give up easily when faced with adversity. Building resilience and a long-term vision required consistent support and effort. Overcoming this behavioral challenge has been a key aspect of the project's success.

Community Engagement: Ensuring active participation in FIGs and maintaining momentum, particularly in the absence of external support, is critical for the long-term success of the project. Engaging the community in the process is vital for ensuring the continuity of the intervention.

CONCLUSION

The intervention to strengthen the Musahar community through vegetable cultivation has brought about significant socio-economic and cultural impacts. By addressing critical issues such as landlessness, lack of skills, and limited access to resources, the project has helped the community transition from marginalized labor roles to dignified livelihoods.

The intervention's success can be attributed to a holistic approach that incorporated capacity

building, trust-building, technical support, and social protection. Moving forward, it is essential to focus on sustaining the gains achieved, scaling up the intervention to reach more communities, and fostering resilience, empowerment, and dignity for the Musahar and Dom communities in Bihar.

The lessons learned from this intervention provide a valuable model for similar initiatives aimed at uplifting marginalized communities across India, highlighting the importance of trust, leadership, and community engagement in driving sustainable change.



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Pankaj Kumar is a seasoned development professional with over 17 years of experience in managing and implementing multi-sectoral programs aimed at uplifting the most marginalized communities in Bihar. With a Master's in Rural Development and Management from Patna University, he has consistently championed issues related to WASH in institutions, climate adaptation, sustainable livelihoods, child protection, youth leadership, and Dalit human rights.

Currently serving as State Lead at PHIA Foundation, Pankaj has led strategic initiatives to build climate-resilient infrastructure through MGNREGA, enhance access to social protection schemes, and strengthen farm-based livelihoods among vulnerable groups. His leadership has been pivotal in institutionalizing the Bihar Swachh Vidyalaya Puraskar and fostering collaborative governance with civil society and government bodies.

His past roles include impactful contributions at Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion and PACS, where he focused on education equity, social inclusion, and youth empowerment. He has demonstrated expertise in grants and partnership management, policy advocacy, capacity building, MIS reporting, and financial compliance.

Recognized for his critical thinking and effective communication, Pankaj excels in team leadership, stakeholder engagement, and program design that integrates gender and social inclusion perspectives for sustainable development outcomes.



LAND OF RESILIENCE

Agri Innovation on 2 Katha of Hope

By Deepika Kumari, Former Training, MIS and Documentation In-Charge, PRADAN

ABSTRACT:

Draupadi Devi and Karilal Paswan, smallholder farmers from Alapur village in Begusarai, Bihar, exemplify resilience in the face of agricultural challenges. Begusarai, one of India's 112 Aspirational Districts, is characterized by small landholdings, erratic weather, pest infestations, and poor market access, leading to economic instability among farmers. Additionally, women farmers often lack recognition and decision-making power in agricultural activities. To address these challenges, PRADAN, in collaboration with IndusInd Bank and Kheyti Pvt. Ltd., introduced the Shed Net intervention, a protected farming technique designed to enhance productivity, reduce crop loss, and promote high-value crop cultivation. The initiative also aimed to empower women farmers by recognizing their contributions and facilitating asset ownership in their names. Draupadi and Karilal, struggling with poor yields and financial distress, participated in the intervention, dedicating 2 Katha (0.062 acres) of land to net shed farming. Through comprehensive training, exposure visits, and financial assistance, they transitioned from traditional potato cultivation to high-value crops like seedless cucumbers, capsicum, vine tomatoes, and radishes. The impact was transformative—annual income from the same land increased from ₹2,000 to ₹30,000, significantly improving their household's food security and financial stability. Moreover, Draupadi emerged as a confident advocate for modern farming, inspiring other women farmers in her community. This case study highlights the potential of targeted interventions in improving livelihoods, particularly for small and marginalized farmers. The Shed Net model, while effective, requires financial and institutional backing for large-scale replication. PRADAN's ongoing efforts to integrate this approach into government programs like NRLM's Lakhpati Didi initiative underscore the need for policy-level support to ensure sustainability and scalability. Draupadi and Karilal's journey stands as a testament to the power of knowledge, support, and innovation in transforming rural agriculture.



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE INTERVENTION

Draupadi Devi and Karilal Paswan are diligent farmers of the Alapur village in Begusarai, where life is often a daily struggle. The spouses' story truly reflects the journey of resilience through agricultural transformation. Begusarai is one of the poorest states of Bihar and comes under India's 112 Aspirational Districts. The farmers in the area faced several significant challenges viz- they lacked knowledge of advanced agricultural practices and technologies, resulting in low productivity, which was further exacerbated by crop losses due to weather conditions, pests, and animal attacks. The farmers relied on traditional cultivation methods, primarily focusing on grains, pulses and potatoes, as there was lack of awareness of cultivating high-value crops in controlled environments, contributing to economic instability and uncertainty in agriculture. 98% of farmers in the district are small and marginal, with an average landholding of just 0.33 acres, the farmers are grappling with increased rainfall, pest and animal attacks, inadequate storage facilities for agricultural products, and poor price realization, all of which severely impacted agriculture-based livelihoods (Srivastava et. al., 2021). All these left many farmers struggling to meet their basic families' needs and address urgent situations due to poor economic conditions.

Additionally, there is less recognition and lack of distinct identity of women farmers in agricultural activities. Many women farmers were hesitant to attend meetings or communicate with outsiders, while Dalit and other small farmers lacked the confidence to engage in advanced farming techniques or take risks in their agricultural practices (Srivastava et. al., 2021). In response to these challenges, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action[i]), in collaboration with IndusInd Bank (IBL), initiated a flagship program to improve agricultural practices, enhance livelihoods, and provide better support to Begusarai's small farmers. This program aimed to address the district's agricultural problems while empowering women and strengthening the overall agricultural ecosystem.

[i] PRADAN is one of the leading non-governmental organizations in the development sector founded in 1983 as a society. Given its founding belief that 'the brightest must work with the poorest', PRADAN has pioneered an approach to identify, equip and deploy young qualified people with an empathetic and long-term commitment, and provide them the right blend of techno-managerial and socio-behavioural skills, to orchestrate change in the poorest areas. PRADAN is dedicated to bringing about rural transformation, systematically engaging with communities to help them transform their lives and supporting them on their journey to emerge from poverty.

OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Although IBL Flagship program focuses on the holistic development of the district, but the current study majorly focused on its intervention around improving the small farmer's income (who own small or fragmented land) through Net House intervention. Land fragmentation is the major issue of agriculture in Bihar, as farmers face challenges to expand any crop production on the small land size. Also, they were unaware about the importance of producing high value crops. Thus, PRADAN introduced the Net House or Shed Net intervention in partnership with Kheyti Pvt Ltd. Company[ii].

The Shed Net intervention was introduced to address the multifaceted challenges faced by small and marginalized farmers of Begusarai. The intervention sought to transform traditional farming practices by introducing innovative Net House farming techniques. This strategic shift aimed to overcome key obstacles such as low crop productivity, erratic weather conditions, high input costs and low-price realization.

[ii] Kheyti Tech Pvt. Ltd. is a non-profit organization which design, adapt and implement low-cost farming solutions that helps the smallholder farmers in increasing yield.



The key objectives of the intervention were-

- a. To make farmers aware on the advanced agricultural practices and motivate them to adopt it for enhancing productivity and sustainability.
- b. To mitigate crop loss caused by weather, pests, and animal attacks, thereby improving overall yield and economic stability of farmers through protected cultivation technology.
- c. To promote production of high-value crops in the area for increasing profitability and market competitiveness thus stabilizing farmers' economic status.
- d. To advocate women's recognition as farmers, by creating assets in their names and acknowledging their contribution
- e. To build the confidence of Dalit and other small farmers to engage in advanced farming practices and enhance their status.

The intervention envisioned to impact approximately 1000 Household (HH) of Begusarai by 2027 with the aim to create widespread changes in farming practices and enhance community livelihoods. Till now, around 200 HH have been benefited through this intervention Draupadi Didi is one of them.

PRADAN team extended support in the Teghra block by conducting daily visits and some community meetings. In year 2022, PRADAN professionals conducted a community meeting in which 50 farmers were oriented on the benefits of advanced agricultural methods especially, the Net House. The promise of a net shed and training in high-value crops cultivation seemed like a distant dream, yet it was a beacon of hope for many farmers like Draupadi Devi. Draupadi Devi and her spouse Karilal were very hardworking farmers but due higher inputs cost, unavailability of quality inputs, crop loss due to weather, pest and animal attacks, low productivity and uncertainty about agricultural profit brought their life at risk. Karilal shared with Mr. Abhinav Kumar (Subject Matter Specialist, PRADAN),

“Kheti-bari bahut samay se kar rahe hai Bhaiya, lekin koi fayda nahi mil raha hai, hamlog koshish kar rahe hai koi Chhota business karne lekin paise ka abhav bahut hai.”

The spouses worked harder to achieve their shared goal of living a better life. The family's struggle took a devastating turn in 2016 when they lost their elder son due to brain tumour. Their dreams were shattered as they watched him suffering, unable to afford the treatment he desperately needed. They shared with heavy hearts how their dire financial condition prevented them from saving their son. Mr. Abhinav console them for their hardship and convinced about the benefits of this model. The team showed them videos of successful farmers of different states in India. The interested farmers were assured to have exposure visits to those sites. The session was a glimmer of hope and an opportunity to rewrite their story.

Draupadi and Karilal embraced this new opportunity with cautious optimism. They owned 27 Katha (0.84 Acre) of land in Alapur among which they dedicated 2 katha (0.062 Acre) for tailoring net shed, a symbol of their hope for a brighter future.

The spouses received comprehensive trainings, exposure visits, and financial assistance. Residential trainings and field demonstrations by PRADAN's experts provided hands-on learning, while exposure visits to successful farms offered practical insights. The total investment for their Net House amounted

to ₹70,000, covering infrastructure, materials, and support services. PRADAN contributed ₹15,000 and Kheyti Pvt. Ltd. provided ₹50,000 for the Net House infrastructure, facilitating the installation and set-up of high-quality facilities. Farmers themselves contributed ₹5,000 towards labour and additional materials, which helped foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. PRADAN's promoted Gangotri Farmer Producer Organization[iii] facilitated access to quality inputs and increased the farmer's network. Continuous support from PRADAN helped them to manage the farming with advance technologies. It enhanced their technical know-how and confidence also. Draupadi Didi was equally active in farming activities but initially she was hesitant to speak with outsiders, but these trainings and exposures help her to be confident.

[iii] Farmer Producer Organization (FPO) is a Central sector scheme launched in 2020 with a target to form and promote 10,000 FPOs. PRADAN has formed four such collectives in Begusarai.

Crops Name	Total Investment	Quantity of Production (In	Rate of Crops (₹/Kg)	Returns from the crop (In ₹)	Duration (Month)
Capsicum	3000	250	55	13000	7 Months
Vine tomatoes	1000	50	60	3000	3 Months
Seedless Cucumber	3000	1000	20	16000	3 Months
Radishes	2000	300	25	7000	2 Months

IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION

Draupadi Devi and Karilal Paswan's decision to cultivate their 2 Katha land under a Shed Net turned out to be a game-changer, leading to outcomes beyond their expectations. Instead of relying on traditional crops, they introduced radishes, seedless cucumbers, capsicum, and vine tomatoes, significantly increasing their productivity and income.

Previously, the same land was used to cultivate potatoes, yielding barely ₹2,000 in returns. However, with their new approach, they saw a remarkable transformation. By selling approximately 1,200 kg of cucumbers, they made a profit of over ₹13,000. The 250 kg of capsicum brought them an additional profit exceeding ₹10,000. While the production of vine tomatoes and radishes fell slightly below expectations, they still managed to earn ₹7,000 from both.

Draupadi Devi proudly shares that their annual income from the same piece of land has increased from ₹2,000 to ₹30,000, proving the immense potential of modern and diversified farming techniques.

The transformation wasn't just financial; but deeply emotional and personal. Creating asset (the shed net) in the name of Draupadi Devi has increased her recognition and contribution and further hand-hold from PRADAN's team capacitated her in terms of communication and technical know-how as well. She was so hesitant to participate in meetings and communicating with outsiders earlier, however now she confidently engages with officials and shares her experiences. Karilal shared, more than 30 JEEViKA Didis along with officials visited our farmland and Draupadi herself highlighted the field and shared our experience with them which is a bigger achievement for us.

Apart from this, the higher income from Net House enriched their lives, as previously they subsisted on basic maize rotis, but they now enjoy a varied diet of pulses and vegetables. This has become possible because of their increased income and varieties of crop production. They are eagerly anticipating utilizing the net shed for year-round cultivation and are excited to grow capsicum once more, this time taking extra precautions.



This endeavour symbolizes their revitalized hope and ambition. Initially sceptical about the benefits of farming, she has come to appreciate its value through PRADAN's support. Draupadi's words capture the essence of their transformation: **"Pehle hame lagta tha ki kheti-bari mein koi fayda nahi hai, isliye ham ise chodne wale the, lekin jabse PRADAN se jude hain, kheti ka mahatva samajh aaya hai"** (Earlier, we thought farming had no benefit and were about to abandon it, but since joining PRADAN, we have understood the value of agriculture).

Observing the impacts of Shed Net in improving income of small farmers more farmers are gaining interest in it and even 2 more Dalits have taken support of PRADAN for adopting this technique. Till date more than 200 HH have adopted this intervention among which 40 HH belong to Teghra block itself. The journey has not been very easy and the challenges given significant leanings to PRADAN. It highlighted the potential of small farmers, showing how even those with limited land, like Draupadi and Karilal, can achieve significant financial gains with the right knowledge and support. The initial challenges of spouses with crop failure due to negligence of some protocols emphasize the need for personalized approaches viz- promoting high-value crops for progressive farmers and low-risk crops for cautious ones, can ensure better and sustainable. Additionally, their success serves as a powerful example for the community, demonstrating the influence of role models in encouraging the adoption of innovative agricultural practices and inspiring other farmers community.

Since the model costs high which farmers can't afford and the partner organizations have limitation of fund, they're trying to collaborate with

Horticulture Department and JEEViKA for replicating this in their Agriculture policies and programs like NRLM's Lakhpati Didi initiative^[iv] or others. PRADAN has facilitated visits of these departments, and they've appreciated the model, but further approval is under discussion.

[iv] The Lakhpati Didi (meaning an annual income of over one lakh rupees) initiative launched under the DAY-NRLM seeks to survey households to create customized plans for income augmentation, with a focus on diversifying activities and identifying potential livelihood opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intervention has made remarkable strides in transforming agricultural practices and improving the livelihoods of small farmers like Draupadi and Karilal. By embracing advanced techniques and cultivating high-value crops, approx 200 households have seen increased productivity, reduced crop losses, and substantial financial growth. The rise in women's asset ownership and the development of strong social networks through FPOs further demonstrate the model's success in fostering both economic and social development. Financial sustainability is evident through the profitability of crops and the lasting infrastructure of the Net Houses. Collaborations with institutions like Kheyti Pvt. Ltd., IndusInd Bank, and FPOs have provided crucial support and resources.

Draupadi and Karilal's journey exemplifies more than just agricultural success—it is a powerful story of resilience, hope, and transformation. With PRADAN's support and their unwavering determination, they have not only transformed their own lives but have also inspired their community, showing that even small-scale farmers can overcome adversity and achieve lasting change.





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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Deepika Kumari is a dedicated development professional with over three years of progressive experience in project management, knowledge management, & implementation across diverse developmental projects. She holds a Master's degree in Development Studies from Central University of South Bihar, and Bachelor's in Sociology from BHU. She has been rewarded with Gold Medal by Central University for her academic excellence. Working with some renowned NGOs viz.- Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3), & Population Foundation of India (PFI) in the past 3 years, she has contributed in their multiple projects at block, district and state level. She presented her research on Women's Empowerment at the prestigious International Conference on 'Development with Justice – The Bihar Experience' in Patna, which was subsequently published in the Indian Journal of Human Development. Specialising in gender and community engagement, Deepika is passionate about working on Gender Equity and women's Empowerment issues.



Empowerment & Social Justice Interventions





TRIUMPH OF JUSTICE

The 28-Year Legal Struggle of Titri Devi from the Musahar Community in Uttar Pradesh

By Bhushan Kumar, Project Coordinator, Musahar Manch

ABSTRACT:

This case study presents the 28-year legal struggle of Titri Devi, a landless woman from the Musahar community in Maharajganj, Uttar Pradesh, who fought relentlessly to claim her rightful ownership over land allotted under the Uttar Pradesh Land Ceiling Act (1960). Belonging to one of India's most socio-economically excluded communities, Titri's battle highlights the systemic barriers faced by Scheduled Castes, especially women, in accessing land, justice, and dignity. Despite the 1996 government land allocation, dominant caste landowners challenged the distribution and secured a stay order, leaving Titri and 23 other Musahar families in prolonged legal uncertainty. With no institutional support in the early years, her journey began with solitary visits to government offices and courts. Things shifted in 2004 with the formation of Musahar Manch, a community platform supported by ActionAid, which provided legal aid, leadership training, and solidarity. By 2022, the families secured a court victory, but implementation was stalled by another appeal and stay order from the opposition in the Prayagraj High Court. In response, in 2023, Titri and her supporters initiated a symbolic civil occupation of the land, asserting their dignity through peaceful resistance. Her case is emblematic of the broader failure of land reform in India, where over 70% of Dalit and Adivasi households remain landless. It also reflects how community-based advocacy, legal literacy, and grassroots leadership can challenge entrenched caste hierarchies. Titri's journey is a story of resilience, demonstrating that even the most marginalized voices can claim space and justice through sustained collective effort.


INTRODUCTION: THE MUSAHAR COMMUNITY AND THE QUESTION OF LAND RIGHTS

The Musahar community, classified under the Scheduled Castes (SC), is one of the most marginalized and disenfranchised communities in India. They are predominantly found in the states of Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, North Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Assam, and West Bengal (Sharma, 2011; Government of India, 2021). Socially considered “untouchables,” Musahars are believed to have entered the Hindu caste fold around 300 years ago. The term ‘Musahar’ is derived from the Bhojpuri words *musa* (rat) and *aahar* (food), signifying their historical association with subsistence on rodents during times of extreme poverty and exclusion. Some scholars suggest the term was imposed, not chosen, reflecting the social stigma attached to the community (Singh, 2009).

Traditionally forest dwellers, Musahars were dependent on natural resources for survival. However, with the nationalization of forests, ecological depletion, and the transition to a land-based economy, they were gradually displaced and rendered landless (Jha, 2012; Rawat, 2020). This resource-deprived community came under the control of landed upper castes, often forced into bonded labor and agricultural servitude for meagre returns. Their traditional roles in cleaning fields, weeding, and harvesting were often repaid with grain salvaged from rat burrows—contributing to their derogatory naming (Oxfam India, 2022). Musahar settlements are typically located on the

fringes of villages, near forests, rivers, and ponds, often disconnected from infrastructure and public services. They are socially and spatially segregated not just from dominant castes but also from other Dalit groups (Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2021). Most families live in single-room mud houses or makeshift shelters on unregistered or government land, lacking secure tenure. Their literacy rates remain alarmingly low—just 15.27% in Maharajganj district as of 2013—with female literacy rates far below the average (Census of India, 2011; PACS, 2015).

In Maharajganj district, the community resides across 72 hamlets in 30 village panchayats, comprising 2,732 households with a population nearing 90,000. Despite targeted land distribution efforts under the Uttar Pradesh Land Ceiling Act, 1960, more than 75% of Musahar families did not gain actual possession of their allotted land. Legal hurdles, such as stay orders secured by dominant caste landowners, and the allocation of barren or distant land, rendered most such policies ineffective (NCDHR, 2021). The land they do receive is often agriculturally unviable or located far from their homes, making it difficult to assert control or generate livelihoods. As a result, landlessness remains pervasive, and Musahars continue to work as daily wage laborers in agriculture, brick kilns, markets, and construction sites, earning subsistence wages with no job security or protection from exploitation. These conditions create a vicious cycle of poverty and dependency, with land ownership remaining a distant dream for most.

LIFE AND STRUGGLES OF TITRI DEVI

Titri Devi was born into this layered context of deprivation and exclusion in the village of Barheya Mustakil near the Nepal border. Her village is home to several caste communities—Musahar, Muslim, Ahir, Koiri, Chamar, Rajput, Mallah, and others. Despite being numerically significant, the Musahars are politically sidelined, especially by dominant agrarian castes like the Koiri. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) rarely represent Musahar interests, rendering them voiceless in local governance.

Titri's family, like most Musahars, survived on seasonal agricultural labor and migration to Nepal. Locally, they earn as little as Rs. 130 per day; in Nepal, where they go during peak agricultural seasons, the wage is Rs. 250–350 per day. However, this work is only available 15–20 days a month, leading to chronic underemployment. Her husband also migrated regularly for manual work. Their domestic economic insecurity was compounded by their lack of land and legal awareness.

Musahar women, including Titri, take on physically demanding and precarious jobs in brick kilns, marketplaces, and fields. Gender-based wage disparities, verbal and sexual harassment, and work without contracts or protective measures are common experiences. Titri also participated in brick kiln work, where her labor was exchanged for grain or delayed cash payments. Her family lived in a single-room mud structure built on government land without ownership rights, exposed to flooding, lack of sanitation, and absence of basic services.

Despite these conditions, Titri showed remarkable perseverance. Over the years, she became a voice for women in her tola (hamlet), encouraging others to speak up about land rights and access to food and health schemes. She continued to demand her rightful land, drawing support from a few progressive villagers and relatives who contributed to her legal expenses. Her efforts would later become central to a wider community struggle.

A FLICKER OF HOPE: LAND ALLOCATION AND RESISTANCE (1996–2003)

In 1996, the Uttar Pradesh government, under the Land Ceiling Act, allocated agricultural land to 400 landless Musahar families, including Titri Devi's. However, powerful upper-caste landowners such as Ganga Prasad Jagadhari challenged the land allotment in court. They quickly secured a stay order from the Allahabad High Court, initiating a prolonged legal deadlock. Titri and 23 other families were left in legal limbo.

At the time, no NGOs were active in her village, and the families navigated the hostile terrain of bureaucracy alone. They made frequent visits to the tehsil, police stations, and district offices, petitioning for justice. Titri personally visited a local MLA but was dismissed without support. The officials often mocked or ignored their requests, treating them as nuisances rather than rightful claimants.

In 2001, her husband and two other men were imprisoned under false charges, allegedly for “harassing officials.” In reality, their only “crime” was persistently demanding the land they had been legally allocated. The arrests aimed to intimidate the community and halt their mobilization. Still, they refused to back down. The families would often pool resources to hire tractors to reach the district court and attend hearings—despite missing wages, fear of arrest, and social threats. This early phase of resistance laid the foundation for more organized action.

RISE OF THE MUSAHAR MANCH AND LEGAL MOBILIZATION (2004–2022)

The year 2004 marked a pivotal turning point with the formation of the Musahar Manch, a grassroots platform initiated with the support of ActionAid and its local partners. The Manch was created in response to the growing need for organized legal and social support among Musahar families across multiple blocks in Maharajganj district. At its core, the Manch focused on mobilizing community members, building leadership among women, and equipping local residents with the tools needed to understand and claim their constitutional rights.

The Musahar Manch functioned through a network of tola-level (hamlet) committees, each comprising 10–12 active members, including at least 50% women. These units met regularly to discuss local grievances, track the progress of legal cases, and plan joint action. Leadership development workshops, paralegal trainings, and exposure visits to similar land rights movements across Bihar and Odisha were conducted, fostering peer learning and confidence among the community. With facilitation from ActionAid, members also began accessing legal aid services, connecting with sympathetic lawyers, and preparing affidavits and documentation for their stalled land cases.

Titri Devi quickly emerged as one of the most respected leaders in her tola. She played an instrumental role in rallying other women, not only from her own village but from neighboring hamlets. Her soft-spoken demeanor, combined with an

unwavering commitment to justice, made her a natural choice for community representation. She participated in district-level public hearings, interacted with media, and met with officials from the revenue and land departments. Through Musahar Manch, community members submitted memorandums, organized protest marches, and held sit-ins at tehsil offices to draw attention to their unresolved land cases. These actions gradually attracted media coverage and pressure from human rights networks, increasing the visibility of the issue. In 2019, after sustained campaigning, the district administration agreed to revisit several pending claims, including Titri's. The final ruling in 2022, which favored Titri and 22 other families, was a testament to the resilience and strategic community organizing led by the Musahar Manch. Yet, this success was short-lived, as the opposing parties appealed to the Prayagraj High Court, once again suspending enforcement.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND COMMUNITY ASSERTION (2023)

After nearly three decades of legal battles, the continued inaction despite a favorable court ruling pushed the Musahar families to the brink. In early 2023, as the Prayagraj High Court stay order indefinitely stalled the implementation of the district court's decision, frustration turned into collective resolve. Titri Devi and her fellow community members decided they could wait no longer for justice to arrive through official channels.

In April 2023, more than 100 individuals—mostly women, elderly residents, and youth from the Musahar and Muslim communities—mobilized to occupy the disputed land. The act was bold and symbolic: they carried handmade banners, ration sacks, and tarpaulin sheets. With quiet determination, they began to erect temporary huts, demarcate their plots, and cultivate small patches with seasonal crops. This assertion of their claim through peaceful occupation was a form of Gandhian civil disobedience—nonviolent, direct, and morally grounded.

The occupation was not without risk. Local musclemen attempted to intimidate the group with threats of violence, and there were rumors of police action. Yet the presence of women at the forefront deterred any immediate backlash. Titri's words captured the spirit of defiance: "28 साल लड़ाई किया है इस जमीन के लिए, अब और इंतज़ार नहीं करेंगे" (We have fought for this land for 28 years; we will not wait anymore). Her statement resonated across tolas and became a rallying cry for landless families in nearby hamlets.

The action drew the attention of sympathetic local media and civil society allies. Volunteers from Musahar Manch began documenting the occupation, collecting testimonies, and circulating visual evidence online to pre-empt any forced eviction. Though legal ownership remained suspended, the land—tilled by their hands, sheltered by their tarpaulin roofs—had finally become a space of belonging and dignity.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS

Titri's 28-year struggle reveals the deep-rooted challenges of enforcing land reform in caste-stratified rural India. The 1960 Land Ceiling Act, while progressive on paper, remains ineffective without political will and judicial enforcement. Caste continues to mediate land ownership, access to justice, and state responsiveness. Women like Titri also defy the stereotype of passive beneficiaries—they are active agents of change. Their leadership needs to be recognized in policy design and implementation.

CONCLUSION

Titri Devi's journey stands as a powerful emblem of marginalized resilience. Her story offers vital insights into how caste, gender, and land intersect to produce generational cycles of poverty. Through sheer perseverance, community organization, and legal tools, landless women from the most oppressed backgrounds are pushing the boundaries of justice. The state must act decisively to honor such verdicts and protect the constitutional rights of SC families across India.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Bhushan Prasad is an experienced social development professional with over 14 years of grassroots experience, research, and institutional engagement across multiple states in India. Hailing from Jangal Kurmaul village in Padrauna block, Kushinagar district (Uttar Pradesh), Bhushan has consistently worked with marginalized communities, especially the Musahar community, focusing on issues of social justice, education, rights, and governance.

He holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BASW) from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Tuljapur, Maharashtra, and a Master's degree in Social Work (MASW) from TISS Mumbai. His academic foundation is complemented by rich field experience across several development themes.

Bhushan began his journey with MJNS Varanasi, contributing to the Right to Food Campaign. He then took up a TISS fellowship project in Kushinagar, working extensively on education and institutional strengthening within the Musahar community. At TISS Patna Centre, he contributed to an ethnographic research project exploring Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and migration in Bihar, deepening his understanding of rural governance and mobility.

His work with ASPIRE in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, addressed key issues such as child education, child labour, child marriage, and PRI capacity building. Currently, Bhushan is associated with Musahar Manch in Maharajganj, Uttar Pradesh, where he is leading efforts to strengthen the Musahar Manch institutionally and financially, while also addressing land rights, livelihood opportunities, and the community's access to government schemes and entitlements.

Bhushan's long-standing engagement with community-based organizations and research institutions reflects his deep commitment to inclusive development, policy advocacy, and grassroots empowerment.



बाल श्रम से निरंतर शिक्षा तक एक प्रभावी हस्तक्षेप

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प्रस्तुत केस स्टडी में समाज के पिछड़े वर्ग की एक महिला के जीवन की विपरीत परिस्थितियों में संघर्ष और उस संघर्ष से पार पाने में संस्था के हस्तक्षेप का वर्णन है। इस केस स्टडी के माध्यम से यह दर्शाया गया है कि आज भी समाज में पिछड़े समुदाय के लोगों के लिए विशेषकर महिलाओं के लिए जीवन कितना कठिन है। कठिनाई इतनी है कि परिवार के अस्तित्व के लिए परिवार का भविष्य, जो बच्चों की शिक्षा है, उससे ही समझौता करना पड़ता है। केस स्टडी में इस बात के महत्त्व को रेखांकित किया गया है कि किसी संस्था को एक पिछड़े वर्ग की गरीब महिला को विपरीत परिस्थितियों से बाहर निकालने में यदि मदद करनी हो तो उस परिवार की परेशानियों को समझना, उन्हें आत्मविश्वास दिलाना बहुत जरूरी है साथ ही संस्था के लिए यह समझना भी बहुत जरूरी है कि परिवार को कब तक सहयोग की जरूरत है जिससे कि वो आत्मनिर्भर बन कर आगे अपना देखभाल कर सकें।

वैशाली जिला मुख्यालय हाजीपुर से 60 Km की दूरी और प्रखंड कार्यालय पातेपुर से 11 Km की दूरी पर स्थित अग्रैल खुर्द पंचायत का गाँव अग्रैल खुर्द है। देखा जाए तो यह गाँव चारो तरफ चौर[1] से घिरा है, बरसात और बाढ़ के मौसम में चारो ओर बस पानी ही पानी नज़र आता है। इस गाँव में मुख्यतः अनुसूचित जाति के लोग निवास करते हैं जिनमें चमार, मुसहर, मल्लाह हैं। यहाँ के लोगों का मुख्य कार्य चिमनी पर कार्य करना, ईटा ढोना, तम्बाकू के खेत में मजदूरी करना और मछली पकड़ना है। [1] यह वह क्षेत्र है, जहाँ कृषि योग्य भूमि में पानी चार से सात महीने तक जमा रहता है

इसी गाँव के एक कोने में करकट के एक छोटे से घर में एक महिला सविता मुस्मात (39 वर्ष), जो चमार समुदाय से हैं, अपना जीवन व्यतीत करती है। आज भी समाज के कुछ वर्गों में सविता दीदी के समुदाय की स्वीकार्यता कम है जो दुर्भाग्यपूर्ण है। वर्ष 2020 सविता दीदी के जीवन का बहुत ही कठिन समय था, कोरोना काल के इस वर्ष में उनके पति दिलीप कुमार राम का असामयिक निधन हो गया क्योंकि इलाज़ के लिए समुचित पैसों का अभाव था और समाज से भी कोई मदद नहीं मिल पाया था। उस समय सविता दीदी की बड़ी बेटी 14 वर्ष की थी और कक्षा 8 में थी, दो छोटे बेटे कक्षा 6 और 5 में थे। पति के आकस्मिक मौत के बाद छोटे-छोटे बच्चों के साथ जीवन बिताना आसान नहीं था। जीवन-यापन के लिए सविता दीदी ने चिमनी पर ईट ढोने का बहुत कठिन काम करना शुरू कर दिया। गर्मी की तपती दुपहरी हो या जाड़े की कड़ाके की ठंड, हर मौसम की परेशानियों को झेलते हुए उन्होंने चिमनी पर ईट ढोने का काम जारी रखा जिससे कि उन्हें प्रति दिन Rs.200 मिलता था। इतने में परिवार चलाना बहुत ही मुश्किल था इस वजह से सविता दीदी ने अपनी बच्चों की पढ़ाई छुड़वा दी और उन्हें भी अपने साथ चिमनी पर ईट ढोने के काम में लगा दिया जिससे Rs.100 प्रति दिन की अतिरिक्त आमदनी हो सके। अब बच्चे भी हर दिन सुबह से शाम तक अपनी माँ के साथ चिमनी पर ईट ढोने लगे। जो उम्र होती है बेफिक्र हो कर खेलने-कूदने की उस उम्र में बच्चे रोजी-रोटी के इंतज़ाम में लग गए। ना तो सविता दीदी को और ना ही उनके बच्चों को उम्मीद थी कि अब जीवन में कोई बदलाव होगा। बात मार्च 2022 की है जब समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्थान द्वारा संचालित परियोजना PCTS (Preventing Child Trafficking in Bihar) के अंतर्गत वार्ड स्तरीय बाल संरक्षण समिति[2] की बैठक में संस्था के कार्यकर्ता एहसान आलम तथा सामुदायिक कार्यकर्ता रंधीर कुमार सहनी के द्वारा बाल सुरक्षा और बाल अधिकार पर बैठक में चर्चा चल रही थी। तभी बैठक स्थल के एक कोने से किसी बच्ची के सिसकने कि आवाज़ आई। देखा गया तो पता चला कि एक मासूम सी बच्ची का पूरा चेहरा आंसुओं से सराबोर था।

[2] बाल संरक्षण समिति: यह एक ऐसी समिति है जो बच्चों के सुरक्षा पर काम करती है जिससे कि 18 वर्ष से कम उम्र के किसी भी बच्चे के अधिकार का हनन ना हो तथा किसी बच्चे का शोषण ना हो। इस समिति का कार्य सरकार के मार्गदर्शन के अनुसार होता है जिसका कार्य वार्ड स्तर, पंचायत स्तर, प्रखंड स्तर, जिला स्तर और राज्य स्तर पर होता है।

संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं ने कई बार सविता दीदी से मुलाकात की और उन्हें आश्वस्त किया कि संस्था द्वारा बच्चों के पढ़ाई-लिखाई का सारा खर्च उठाया जायेगा। इसके साथ ही संस्था के कार्यकर्ताओं ने सविता दीदी को एक सच्ची घटना बताई जिससे उनकी आंखें खुल गयीं। पश्चिमी चंपारण के मनौलिया प्रखंड के घोडहिया गाँव में एक महिला अपनी बेटी का पढ़ाई छुड़वा कर उसे बाल श्रम में अपने साथ मजदूरी करवाने लगी। शिक्षा से दूर होने के बाद जल्द ही उसकी 16 वर्ष की उम्र में उसकी शादी भी करनी पड़ी। कम उम्र में शादी होने और उम्र से पहले गर्भवती होने कि वजह से उसकी मृत्यु हो गयी। इस घटना को सुन कर सविता दीदी ने मन बना लिया कि अपनी बेटी को बाल श्रम से हटा कर नियमित पढ़ाई करवाएंगी और समय पर ही उसकी शादी करेगी। साथ ही अपने दोनों बेटों को भी नियमित शिक्षा दिलवाएंगी जिससे कि वो आगे चल कर सम्मानपूर्वक जीवन जी सकें। इसके लिए उन्होंने संस्था से सहयोग और मार्गदर्शन माँगा। बच्चों के किताब-कॉपी, बैग, tuition fees, raincoat के खर्च कि व्यवस्था करवा कर संस्था द्वारा बच्चों का नामांकन कुंवर उच्च विद्यालय भरथीपुर में करवा दिया गया। निशा का नामांकन 9 वीं कक्षा में, सुनील राम का 7 वीं और अविजित राम का 6 ठी कक्षा में करवा दिया गया। तीनों भाई बहन खुशी खुशी एक साथ प्रतिदिन विद्यालय जाने लगे।

बच्चों की पढ़ाई तो फिर से शुरू हो गयी अब सवाल था कि परिवार कि आर्थिक स्थिति कैसे मजबूत की जाए, कैसे परिवार को 'जीविका[3]' परियोजना से जोड़ा जाए। इसके लिए संस्था के कार्यकर्ता रंधीर सहनी द्वारा जीविका के Community Mobiliser और Cluster Coordinator से मिल कर सविता दीदी को स्व-सहायता समूह से जुड़ाया गया। समूह से जुड़ने से सविता दीदी को समय समय पर परिवार की छोटी-मोटी जरूरतों के लिए समूह से सहयोग मिलने लगा। समय बीतता गया और सविता दीदी समूह में नियमित बचत और नियमित लेन-देन करती रहीं।

[3] जीविका, गरीबी उन्मूलन के लिए बिहार सरकार की एक पहल है, यह राज्य की राज्य ग्रामीण आजीविका मिशन है जो केन्द्रीय ग्रामीण आजीविका मिशन से जुड़ी है, इस परियोजना द्वारा समुदाय आधारित स्व-प्रबंधित संस्था बना कर (स्व-सहायता समूह, किसान समूह इत्यादि) बना कर स्थाई जीविका के माध्यम से आय में वृद्धि करके ग्रामीण गरीबों को सशक्त बनाना है।

सविता दीदी के अच्छे वित्तीय अनुशासन के आधार पर सतत जीविकोपार्जन कार्यक्रम[4] के अंतर्गत एक गुमटी किराना दुकान हेतु दिलवाया गया। वैसे तो सतत जीविकोपार्जन के अंतर्गत किराना दुकान, परचून की दुकान, नाश्ता का दुकान, पशुपालन के लिए सहयोग का प्रावधान है लेकिन सविता दीदी को लगा कि उनके गाँव के ज्यादातर पुरुष रोजगार के लिए गाँव से बाहर दूसरे जिले या राज्य में प्रवास में चले जाते हैं और वहाँ से पैसे कम कर घर भेजते हैं। गाँव में किराना दुकान नहीं होने से घरों की महिलाओं को दूर जा कर किराना का सामान खरीदना पड़ता था जिससे असुविधा होती थी। सविता दीदी द्वारा किराना दुकान खोले जाने से गाँव में सभी को बड़ी सुविधा हो गयी।

[4] सतत जीविकोपार्जन कार्यक्रम: इस कार्यक्रम का मकसद है लाभार्थियों को आर्थिक रूप से सशक्त बना कर उन्हें आत्मनिर्भर बनाना है। इस योजना के तहत लाभार्थियों को आजीविका कि गतिविधियों से जोड़ा जाता है और उन्हें सरकार की अन्य योजनाओं से भी जोड़ा जाता है।

पहली किश्त के तौर पर सविता दीदी को Rs.20,000 प्राप्त हुए। इसके नियमित भुगतान के आधार पर उन्हें तीनो किश्त मिला कर Rs.60,000 मिला जिससे उन्होंने दुकान में सामान बढ़ाया और बिक्री भी बढ़ गयी। समय के साथ साथ दुकान से होने वाली आमदनी बढ़ने लगी, अब सविता दीदी अपने घर का सारा खर्च दुकान से होने वाली आमदनी से ही चलाती हैं।

दुकान का सामान वो जातेपुर प्रखंड से लाती हैं और Vendor भी दुकान पर सामान दे कर जाता है। दुकान से प्रतिदिन Rs.500 की आमदनी होने लगी है जिसमें खर्च के बाद सविता दीदी उसमें से प्रतिदिन Rs.100 बचा लेती हैं। पिछले दो सालों से अब बच्चे प्रतिदिन विद्यालय जा रहे हैं, घर के सभी खर्च किराना दुकान से होने वाली आमदनी से पूरे हो रहे हैं। निशा अब कक्षा 12 वीं में हैं, सुनील राम 10 वीं और अविजित राम कक्षा 9 वीं में पढ़ाई कर रहा है।

सविता दीदी आज बाल संरक्षण समिति की सक्रिय सदस्य भी हैं और हर माह नियमित रूप से बैठकों में शामिल होती हैं। बाल संरक्षण समिति से जुड़ कर वो समुदाय के बच्चों को विद्यालय से जोड़ने का काम करती हैं, नियमित विद्यालय जा कर बच्चों के मध्याह्न भोजन देखने का कार्य भी करती हैं। बाल संरक्षण समिति के माध्यम से और सविता दीदी के सक्रिय भागीदारी से आयुष्मान योजना के तहत गाँव के 112 लोगों को स्वास्थ्य कार्ड दिलवाया गया।

बाल संरक्षण समिति के सदस्यों द्वारा अब सविता दीदी के बच्चों के लिए Sponsorship Form भर दिया गया है, इसके तहत वैसे परिवार जो आर्थिक रूप से कमजोर हैं उन परिवार के बच्चों को प्रतिमाह Rs.2,000 बच्चों के 18 वर्ष होने तक मिलता है। आज सविता दीदी खुशीपूर्वक अपना खुद का दुकान चला कर अपनी आजीविका चला रही हैं, उनके बच्चे जो एक समय घर कि जिम्मेदारी के लिए पढ़ाई छोड़ चुके थे अब खुशी से नियमित विद्यालय जा कर शिक्षा ग्रहण कर रहे हैं,

सविता दीदी इसके साथ साथ अपने समुदाय में एक प्रेरणा स्रोत के तौर पर समुदाय के लोगों को प्रोत्साहित करती हैं और उनकी मदद भी करती हैं। इसके साथ ही वह समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्था के साथ मिल कर समाज के जरूरतमंद लोगों के मदद के लिए बढ़-चढ़ कर काम करती हैं। अपने जीवन में आये इस बदलाव के लिए सविता दीदी समग्र शिक्षण एवं विकास संस्था को तहे दिल से धन्यवाद देती हैं।

सविता दीदी के जीवन के घटनाक्रम के माध्यम से इस केस स्टडी में यह बताने कि कोशिश की गयी है कि ग्रामीण परिदृश्य में विपरीत परिस्थितियों में समय पर हस्तक्षेप होने से परिवार की स्थिति में अपेक्षित सुधार हो सकता है। संस्था द्वारा ना सिर्फ बच्चों की परेशानी समझी गयी बल्कि परेशानी के मुख्य कारणों को समझते हुए उस पर कार्य किया गया और परिवार को तब तक सहयोग दिया गया जब तक कि परिवार आत्मनिर्भर नहीं हो गया। इसके लिए परिवार को आत्मविश्वास दिलाया गया और उन्हें विभिन्न सरकारी योजनाओं से जोड़ा भी गया। संस्था द्वारा किये गए प्रयासों से ना सिर्फ सविता दीदी की वर्तमान स्थिति में सुधार हुआ बल्कि उनका और बच्चों का भविष्य भी संवर गया। निश्चित तौर पर एक संस्था द्वारा ग्रामीण परिवेश में परिवार की परेशानी को समझते हुए हस्तक्षेप की योजना बना कर काम किया जाए तो परिवार की आजीविका और भविष्य बेहतर बनाया जा सकता है।



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ahsan Alam is a dedicated development professional with over 16 years of experience in community mobilization, child protection, livelihood promotion, and public health. Hailing from Gurchurwa village in Majholia block, West Champaran, Bihar, he holds a graduate degree in Geography from BRABU, Muzaffarpur, and is currently pursuing a Master's in Climate Change and Sustainable Development (MSCGG) from IGNOU.

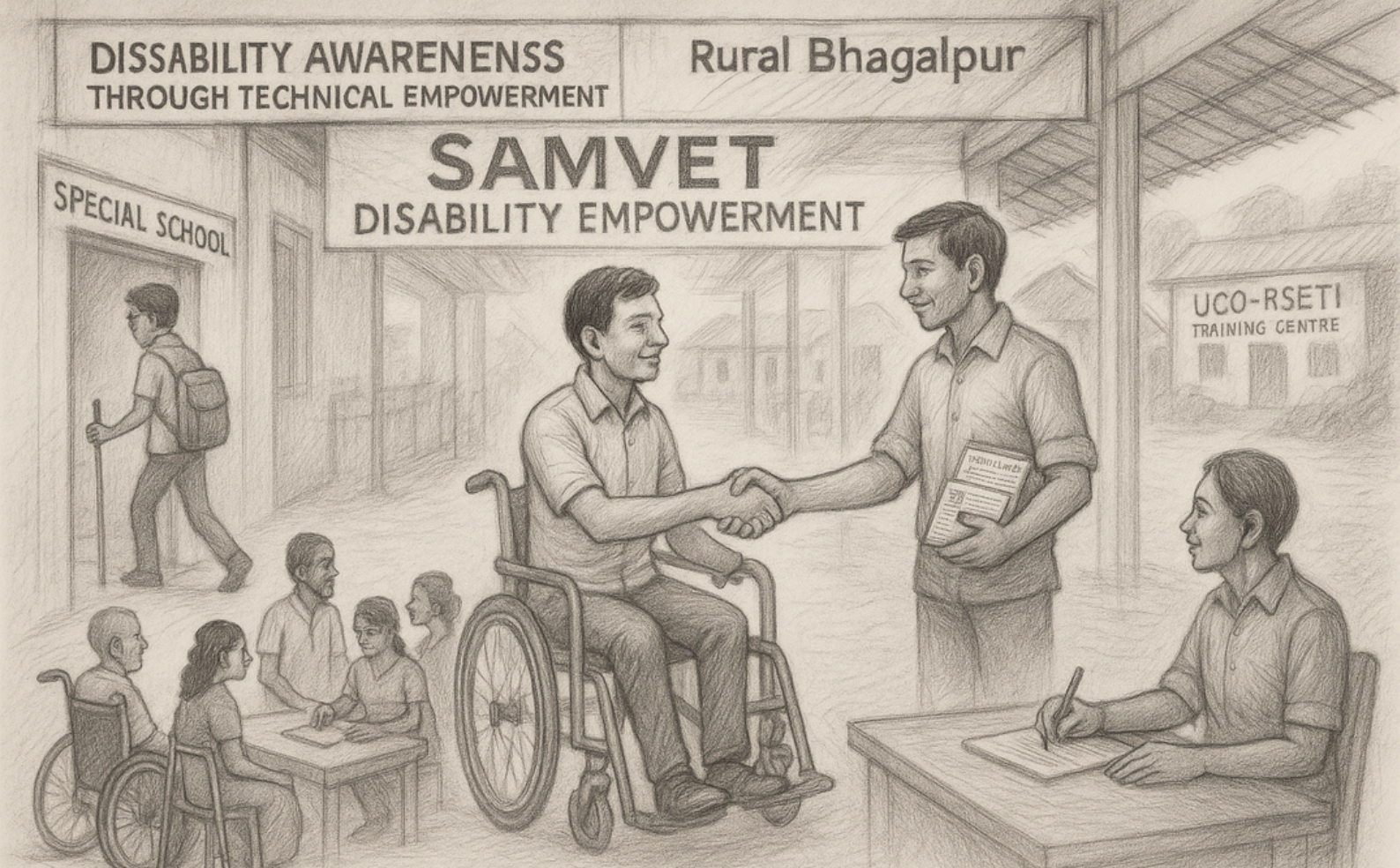
He began his journey with FSS Bettiah, where he contributed to strengthening self-help groups, promoting kitchen gardens, forming farmer clubs, and engaging adolescents through group-based interventions. His work at BVHA, Patna, focused on critical health issues such as SRHR, menstrual hygiene management, maternal and child health, life skills education, and child marriage prevention.

Currently associated with SSEVS Bettiah, Ahsan leads initiatives aimed at eradicating child labour, providing skill development training, and fostering educational access and leadership among children from marginalized communities. He has played a vital role in supporting the economic empowerment of Bhangur families through sustainable farming practices.

His work spans across West Champaran, Vaishali, and Muzaffarpur districts of Bihar, contributing significantly to grassroots development and social transformation.

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EMPOWERMENT

यदि हो सही मार्गदर्शन, तो अवसर कई हैं दिव्यांगजनों के लिए भी

By Bikram Kant Mishra, Founder, SAMVET Bhagalpur

इस केस स्टडी में सामाजिक आर्थिक एवं सांस्कृतिक रूप पिछड़े, अनुसूचित जाति, अल्पसंख्यक समुदाय में दिव्यांगजनों की स्थिति तथा जीवनदशा का चित्रण है। यह सहज ही समझा जा सकता है कि जिस मेहनतकश समुदाय में शरीर और स्वास्थ्य ही एकमात्र धन हो, दैनिक मजदूरी ही जीवन यापन का एकमात्र विकल्प हो, वहां दिव्यांगता कितना बड़ा अभिशाप होगा। इस समुदाय के पास शिक्षा और संपत्ति तो सदियों से नहीं रहा, परिवार के भरण पोषण के लिए भी परिवार के हर सदस्य को काम करना पड़ता है। यहां तक कि बच्चे भी होश संभालते ही काम करने लगते हैं। ऐसे में दिव्यांग का शारीरिक एवं आर्थिक रूप से परिवार पर आश्रित होना बहुत बड़ा बोझ हो जाता है जिस पीड़ा को वह दिव्यांग हर दिन हर क्षण महसूस करते हैं। यह निर्भरता उन्हें न केवल हीन भावना से ग्रसित करता है बल्कि असुरक्षित और संकटग्रस्त भी करता है। समवेत संस्था के प्रयास से दिव्यांगजनों के जीवन दशा में बदलाव, आत्मविश्वास, सशक्तिकरण, संसाधनों तक उनकी पहुंच तथा आत्मनिर्भर बनने की यात्रा दर्शाती है यह केस स्टडी। यह केस स्टडी यह भी सिद्ध करता है कि सफलता किसी शारीरिक अक्षमता अथवा विशेषता की मोहताज नहीं।

यह सच्ची कहानी भागलपुर जिला के नाथनगर प्रखंड स्थित रत्तीचक बैरिया गांव की है। यह एक दलित पिछड़ा समुदाय आबादी वाला गांव है। प्राकृतिक आपदा और चुनौतियों से भरा यह गांव। यहां हर साल गंगा नदी से आई बाढ़ गांव से लोगों को साल के 4 महीने दर-दर भटकने को मजबूर करती है। रहने का ठिकाना तो दूर खाने तक के लाले पड़ जाते हैं। बरसात के समय ही अपने-अपने घरों से उजड़े लोग दीपावली में घर लौटते हैं और फिर कोशिश करते हैं अपना आशियाना बसाने का।

इस समुदाय में किसी के पास अपनी खेती की जमीन नहीं है। भागलपुर शहर यहां से 10-12 किलोमीटर है। वहां जाकर पुरुष लोग मजदूरी की तलाश करते हैं और गाँव में महिलाएं दिनभर चूल्हा जलाने के लिए लकड़ियां इकट्ठा करती हैं। अशोक कुमार इसी गांव के निवासी है वह दोनों पैरों से दिव्यांग है। अशोक ने तमाम विपरीत परिस्थितियों के बावजूद 2015 में अपनी स्नातक तक की पढ़ाई पूरी की। अशोक के माता-पिता बुजुर्ग हो गए हैं। परिवार का जीवन यापन एकमात्र बड़े भाई के मजदूरी से हो जाता है। समवेत के साथी के सर्वे के दौरान अशोक से मुलाकात हुई थी। अशोक अक्सर ही अपनी पीड़ा उनसे साझा करते थे। वह घर की आर्थिक स्थिति को लेकर बहुत चिंतित थे।



उनकी सबसे बड़ी चिंता खुद कुछ ना कर पाने की थी। साल 2020 में बातचीत के दौरान अशोक ने तय किया की नौकरी पाने के लिए वह आईटीआई की डिग्री लेंगे। परिवार की लचर आर्थिक व्यवस्था के बावजूद उन्होंने आईटीआई की डिग्री प्राप्त की। अशोक लगातार समवेत के कार्यकर्ता को कहीं नौकरी पर रखवाने को भी कहते रहते थे। उस समय संस्था यूकोआर सेटी UCO Bank Rural Self Employment Training Institute -UCO RSETI) से समन्वय करके बकरी पालन, मशरूम की खेती, चूड़ी निर्माण, दुकान चलाने आदि के प्रशिक्षण में लोगों को जोड़ने का काम कर रही थी।

मगर दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों के लिए प्रशिक्षण की कोई विशेष व्यवस्था नहीं थी। साथ ही सामान्य रूप से संचालित प्रशिक्षण में दिव्यांग की भागीदारी सुनिश्चित करना भी चुनौती पूर्ण था। संस्था के निदेशक इस समस्या को लेकर यूको आर सेटी के निदेशक से मिलकर तथा संस्था द्वारा दिव्यांग मुद्दे पर किए जा रहे कार्यों से उन्हें अवगत कराया। निदेशक ने संस्था के कार्यों की सराहना की तथा कहां की वे स्वयं इस समुदाय तक जाकर दिव्यांगों के साथ बैठक में शामिल होंगे तथा उसी अनुसार आगे की कार्य योजना में उनके लिए विशेष रूप से उचित प्रशिक्षण आयोजित करेंगे। यूकोआर सेटी ने दिव्यांग लोगों के साथ मीटिंग की। इसी बैठक में उन्होंने जानकारी भी दिया कि कानपुर में वैसे दिव्यांगों के लिए कार्यशाला आयोजित है जो शिक्षित हैं। इस कार्यशाला से अशोक के लिए संभावनाओं के रास्ते खुलेंगे।

बिहार में दिव्यांगजनों के लिए योजनाएं हैं - विकलांगता पेंशन, संबल योजना (ट्राई साइकिल), विकलांग छात्रों को छात्रवृत्ति योजना, दिव्यांग विवाह प्रोत्साहन योजना, बिहार विकलांग सशक्तिकरण योजना (शिक्षा, रोजगार वित्तीय सहायता) आत्मनिर्भर बनने के लिए ऋण, नौकरियों में आरक्षण आदि।

अशोक के लिए रास्ते खुले जो वो बहुत दिनों से चाह रहे थे। अशोक ने न केवल प्रशिक्षण में भागीदारी के लिए तैयार हुए बल्कि कानपुर में जाकर सफलतापूर्वक प्रशिक्षण भी लिया। इस प्रशिक्षण के पश्चात उनका placement भागलपुर जिला स्थित आश्रय केंद्र में हो गया। आश्रय केंद्र समाज कल्याण विभाग द्वारा संचालित एक उपक्रम है जहां दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों के जीवन को सुगम बनाने वाले उपकरण जैसे ट्राई साइकिल, बैटरी वाली स्कूटर, दिशा सूचक छड़ी आदि का वितरण किया जाता है। साथ ही उसमें आई तकनीकी समस्या को भी दूर किया जाता है। आज अशोक की आंखों में चमक और साहस है तथा चेहरे पर संतुष्टि का भाव। वे स्वयं तो आत्मनिर्भर हैं ही आश्रय केंद्र से जुड़कर खुद जैसे अन्य लोगों की मदद भी कर पा रहे हैं। अशोक उनका online सारा कागज/कार्य आदि भरते हैं उन्हें दिशा देने का काम करते हैं।



"समवेत" एक सामाजिक सांस्कृतिक संस्था है। यह संस्था प्रमुख रूप से बाल अधिकार के मुद्दों पर कार्यरत रहा है। संस्था आर्थिक, सामाजिक एवं सांस्कृतिक रूप से पिछड़े एवं वंचित वर्ग के स्थिति परिवर्तन के लिए प्रयासरत हैं। इसके लिए समवेत सेवा प्रदाता, सरकारी संस्थाएं, जन प्रतिनिधि, मीडिया एवं नागरिक समाज संगठन के साथ एकिकृत कार्यक्रम चला रहे हैं। समवेत भागलपुर के पांच प्रखंड जगदीशपुर, नाथनगर, गोराडीह, खरीक एवं सन्हौला के 50 गांव तथा बेगूसराय जिला के दो प्रखंड भगवानपुर एवं बरौनी के 10 गांव में नियमित रूप से काम कर रही है। संस्था के एक और सफल हस्तक्षेप का एक उदाहरण है एक नेत्रहीन बालक बिट्टू की कहानी। भागलपुरके जिला के नाथनगर प्रखंड गाँव रत्तीचक बैरिया में बिट्टू कुमार एक नेत्रहीन बालक है। वह 10 साल का है तथा जन्म से ही नेत्रहीन है। उसके पिता विजय साह सब्जी बेचकर परिवार का भरण पोषण करते हैं तथा मां निशा देवी गृहिणी है।

रत्तीचक बैरिया में बैठक के दौरान कुछ महिलाओं ने बिटू की मां को यह जानकारी दी कि संस्था समवेत दिव्यांगता के मुद्दे पर काम कर रही है तथा दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों को सरकारी योजनाओं से जोड़ने में मदद करती है। वहीं बिटू के बारे में भी उन्होंने संस्था के कार्यकर्ता को जानकारी दी। बिटू के माता-पिता बिटू को लेकर काफी चिंतित रहते थे। किसी व्यक्ति के कहने पर वह बिटू को किसी के हाथ सौंपने जा रही थी। उनकी मां को कहा गया था की वह पढ़ाएगा लिखाएगा। परंतु जितनी भी बात वह उसके बारे में कहा गया था वह झूठ साबित हो रहा था। यह उड़ती खबर संस्था के कार्यकर्ता तक पहुंची। घटना की सत्यता जानने के लिए जब वह गांव गए तो पता चला कि बिटू को किसी अच्छे जगह पर रखवाने के बदले में एक अपरिचित आदमी, जो संभवत दलाल ही था, बिटू के माता-पिता से ढाई हजार रुपए की मांग कर रहा था। बिटू के माता-पिता इसके लिए तैयार भी हो गए थे। समवेत के कार्यकर्ता सुनील जी ने इस मामले में हस्तक्षेप किया तथा इस घटना को रोका। उन्होंने तय किया की बिटू को उचित जगह पर पहुंचाएंगे। बिटू के लिए समुचित जगह जहां वह समाज की मुख्य धारा से जुड़ सकता था वह जगह विद्यालय ही थी। नेत्रहीनों के लिए विशेष विद्यालय में उसका नामांकन करने की प्रक्रिया शुरू की गई। यह सुनकर बिटू काफी खुश हुआ वह पढ़ना चाहता था।

अपने माता-पिता को हमेशा कहता था कि वह स्कूल जाना चाहता है, लेकिन सामान्य स्कूलों में वह जा नहीं सकता था, लेकिन असल चुनौती अभी शुरू ही हुई थी क्योंकि बिटू के पास ना तो आधार कार्ड था ना ही कोई अन्य जरूरी कागजात। सबसे पहले बिटू का जन्म पंजीयन कराया गया और उसके आधार पर आधार कार्ड बनवाया गया। तत्पश्चात नेत्रहीन विद्यालय भीखनपुर भागलपुर में उसके नामांकन की प्रक्रिया चली। इस लंबी प्रक्रिया में कई बार बिटू के पिता परेशान हो जाते थे। उनका कहना था कि घर के एकमात्र कमाने वाले वही हैं वे दूसरों से सब्जी उठाकर घर-घर जाकर सब्जी बेचते हैं और ऐसी प्रक्रिया में उनके उलझे रहने से परिवार का भरण पोषण मुश्किल हो जाएगा। उन्होंने कहा कि उन्हें संस्था और कार्यकर्ता सुनील जी पर पूरा विश्वास है वह कृपया उनके बच्चे को एक उचित जगह भेज दें। नेत्रहीन विद्यालय समाज कल्याण विभाग द्वारा संचालित स्कूल है। करीब 2 साल पहले उसका नामांकन सफलतापूर्वक राजकीय नेत्रहीन विद्यालय भीखनपुर भागलपुर में कराया गया। अभी बिटू यहां तीसरी कक्षा में पढ़ाई कर रहा है। यहां आठवीं कक्षा तक की पढ़ाई के बाद आगे की पढ़ाई के लिए उसे पटना स्थानांतरित कर दिया जाएगा। आज बिटू शिक्षा से जुड़ चुका है और अपने जीवन के बदलाव से बेहद खुश है। ऐसे कहीं उदाहरण है जो अपने आप को मजबूर ना मानते हुए समाज में मजबूत सशक्त उपस्थिति दर्ज की।

इन 15 गांव में 1500 परिवार में 3234 घरों और कुल 21,750 आबादी में शारीरिक रूप से दिव्यांग 560 तथा मानसिक रूप से अस्वस्थ 88 पाया। करीब 90% व्यक्तियों के पास किसी भी प्रकार की कोई सरकारी सुविधा नहीं है।

दिव्यांगजनों के साथ काम करने के लिए संस्था ने भागलपुर जिले के तीन प्रखंड जगदीशपुर, नाथनगर और गोराडीह प्रखंड के 15 गांव को चुना। संस्था द्वारा वैसे गांव का चयन किया गया जहां अनुसूचित जाति अथवा अल्पसंख्यक बहुल आबादी थी। इन समुदायों में दिव्यांग दोहरी रूप से प्रतिकूल परिस्थिति में हैं। लक्षित समुदाय में दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों को चिन्हित करने के लिए सर्वे किया तथा उनकी प्राथमिक आवश्यकताओं के आकलन के लिए "Need Assessment" किया ताकि इस आधार पर संस्था अपनी कार्य योजना तैयार कर पाएं। काम करने के दौरान संस्था ने पाया कि समाज और समुदाय में आज भी दिव्यांगजन गरिमा पूर्ण जीवन और विकास के समान अवसरों से वंचित हैं। वह या तो दया के पात्र हैं या अपने परिवार के लिए बोझ हैं। उनके पास आर्थिक गतिविधि या रोजगार का साधन नहीं है। दिव्यांग लोगों को समाज में एक दोगम दर्जे का व्यक्ति माना जाता है।



उनकी आर्थिक, सामाजिक और राजनीतिक भागीदारी समान रूप से नहीं है। इस बात पर संस्था ने समूह में चर्चा की तथा यह जरूरत महसूस की हमें इन मुद्दों पर काम करने की जरूरत है। इस काम में अहमदबाद की संस्था Peace and Equality Cell ने आर्थिक सहयोग किया।

5 से 10% व्यक्ति ऐसे थे जिन्हें पेंशन का लाभ मिला तो था लेकिन उनमें से भी आधे लोगों की पेंशन (UDID CARD) विशिष्ट विकलांगता पहचान पत्र नहीं होने के कारण अथवा बैंक में आधार, KYC, खाता अपडेट नहीं होना आदि कारणों से कुछ महीने मिलने के बाद से बंद पड़ी थी। लक्षित समुदाय में दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों को मिलने वाले दिव्यांगता पेंशन के अलावा अन्य किसी भी प्रकार की सुविधा अथवा लाभ उन्हें मिलना और लेना तो दूर की बात उन्होंने सुना भी नहीं था। 348 वयस्क दिव्यांग जनों का (UDID CARD) विशिष्ट विकलांगता पहचान पत्र, दिव्यांगता पेंशन, वृद्धावस्था पेंशन, बैंक खाता, आधार अपडेट आदि सुनिश्चित कराया गया। कई शिविरों के माध्यम से संबंधित व्यक्तियों को ट्राई साइकिल, व्हीलचेयर, श्रवण यंत्र और अन्य आवश्यक उपकरण दिलवाए गए। 11 बच्चों का सामान्य स्कूल समेत विशेष स्कूलों में भी नामांकन कराया गया। 83 बच्चों को जन्म प्रमाण पत्र, बैंक खाता, विकलांगता प्रमाण पत्र एवं विकलांगता पेंशन आदि से जोड़ा गया। वे अपने अधिकारों को लेकर वकालत कर सकें इसके लिए संगठन निर्माण की प्रक्रिया भी चलाई गई जिसके फलस्वरूप विकलांगों के 15 संगठन बनाए गए। इस संगठन के कुछ युवा अपने समूह के अन्य लोगों को तकनीकी सहायता प्रदान करने में सक्षम हुए और उन्हें मदद करने लगे।



इस पूरी प्रक्रिया के बाद लाभार्थियों को हर महीने पेंशन मिलने लगी जिससे उन्हें सम्मान के साथ अपना जीवन जीने में मदद मिली। उनके अपने परिवार के सदस्य भी उनके प्रति सम्मान और देखभाल की भावना दिखाने लगे। वह अपने स्वयं के खर्चों और कुछ छोटी बचतों का भी प्रबंध करने में सक्षम हुए। समुदाय में सबसे बड़ा परिवर्तन यह हुआ कि वे सभी तरह के दस्तावेज के कार्य से लेकर संबंधित विभाग के साथ जुड़ाव तक की पूरी प्रक्रिया के बारे में जागरूक हो गए हैं।

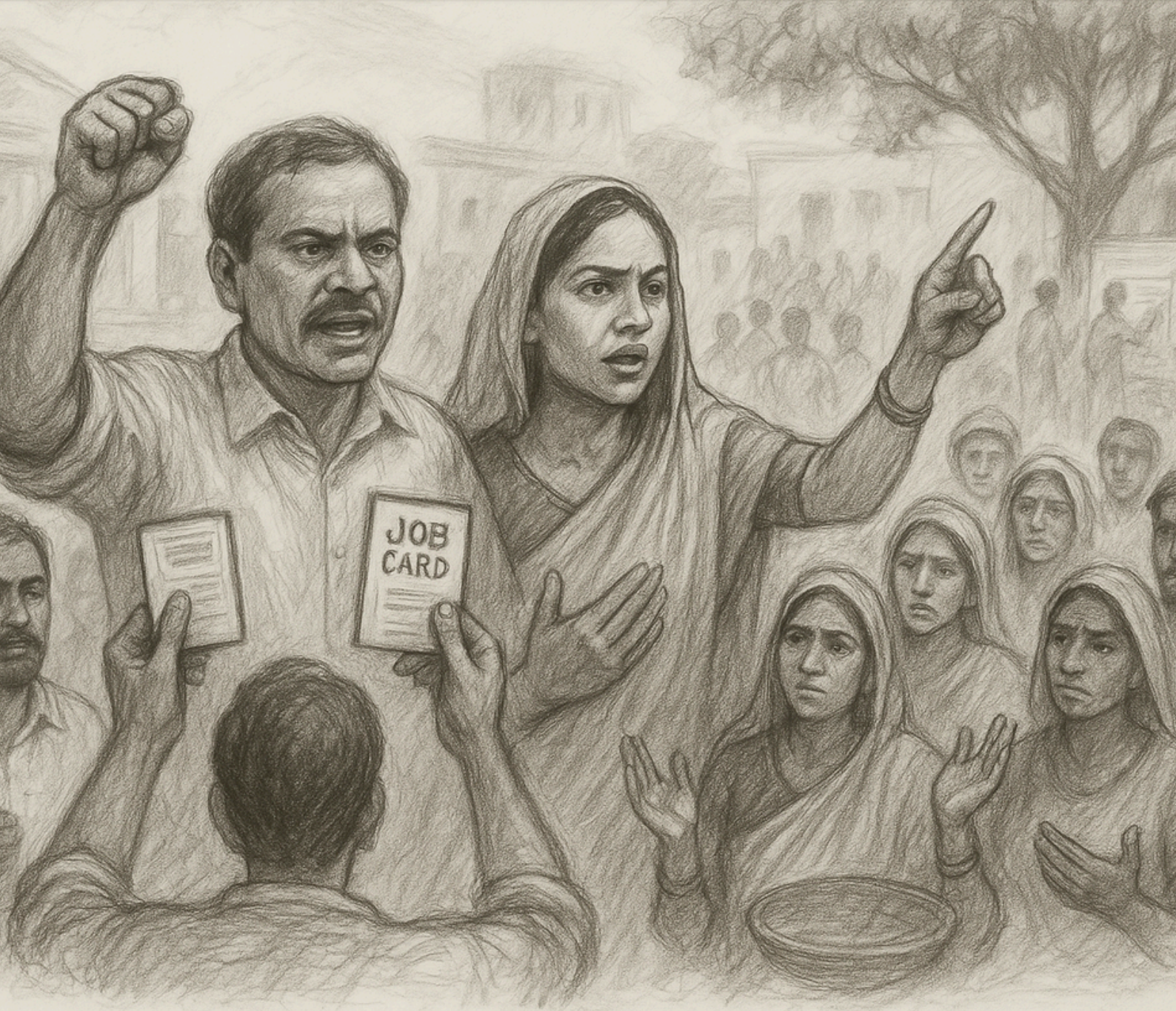
दिव्यांगजनों की आकांक्षाएं उतनी ही महत्वपूर्ण होती हैं जितनी किसी और की। उन्हें सहारे की नहीं मार्गदर्शन की जरूरत होती है। आत्मनिर्भर होना न सिर्फ उनके स्वयं के लिए ताकत है बल्कि इससे उनका परिवार भी चिंतामुक्त हो जाता है। इस प्रयास में संस्था का हस्तक्षेप बहुत महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका निभाती है।

वैसे तो दिव्यांगजनों के लिए कई योजनाएँ हैं, सुविधाएँ हैं लेकिन अफसोस कि बात यह है कि उन तक ये जानकारीयों पहुँच ही नहीं पाती क्योंकि ना तो उन्हें ना ही उनके परिवार वाले को इनकी जानकारी होती है। संस्था का मार्गदर्शन और सहयोग दिव्यांगजनों को न सिर्फ आत्मनिर्भर और आत्मविश्वासी बनता है बल्कि समाज में उनके समावेशीकरण में भी महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका निभाता है जो बहुत ही जरूरी है।

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

विक्रम कांत मिश्रा समाजकर्म और संस्कृतिकर्मी हैं। उन्होंने टाटा इंस्टीट्यूट ऑफ सोशल साइंसेज से बाल संरक्षण में डिप्लोमा और सामाजिक कार्य में स्नातकोत्तर की डिग्री प्राप्त की है। वे भागलपुर में बाल कल्याण समिति के अध्यक्ष रहे हैं।

पिछले 25 वर्षों से वे विभिन्न जनांदोलनों जैसे कि झुग्गी-झोपड़ी निवासी संघर्ष समिति, गंगा मुक्ति आंदोलन, जल श्रमिक संघ, आवास अधिकार मंच आदि में सक्रिय रूप से शामिल रहे हैं। वे गंगा नदी, पर्यावरण, विस्थापितों, बाल अधिकार, दिव्यांगता तथा और शिक्षा के मुद्दों पर सक्रिय रूप से काम कर रहे हैं। उन्होंने बिहार के विभिन्न जिलों में बाल अधिकार, शिक्षा और रंगकर्म प्रशिक्षक के रूप में भी काम कर रहे हैं। वर्तमान में हुए सामाजिक सांस्कृतिक संस्था "समवेत", भागलपुर के संस्थापक सदस्य व निदेशक हैं। समवेत संस्था भागलपुर व बिहार के विभिन्न जिलों में बाल अधिकार, महिला अधिकार, दिव्यांगता के मुद्दे पर सशक्त सामाजिक सांस्कृतिक अभियान चला रही है।



SEEDS OF CHANGE

Emergence of Sustainable Community Leadership through MGNREGA in Bihar

By Ashok Kumar Sinha, Development Consultant, NACDAOR

ABSTRACT:

This case study explores the transformative journey of sustainable community leadership that emerged during the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Bihar. Against the backdrop of systemic exclusion, economic vulnerability, and social constraints, the intervention led by NACDAOR and CADAM—supported under Phase II of the DFID-funded Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme—empowered Dalit and Muslim communities to claim their entitlements under MGNREGA. The initiative was implemented across 200 villages in 8 districts of Bihar between 2011 and 2015. It focused on building grassroots leadership, forming worker collectives, conducting social audits, and federating community-based organizations under the Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union (ABMMU). Through a rights-based approach, the project enabled over 55,000 socially excluded households to access work, demand accountability, and engage directly with governance structures. This case study documents the emergence of leaders like Namita Devi, who transitioned from a homemaker to a changemaker, and Khushilal Lal Ram, who rose from the margins to mobilize and advocate for SC wage workers. Their stories illustrate how sustained community engagement, leadership development, and strategic advocacy can break cycles of marginalization, strengthen social capital, and institutionalize participatory governance. In the broader context of Bihar—where rural distress, delayed payments, and caste-based discrimination continue to challenge MGNREGA delivery—this intervention showcases a replicable model of how organized community action can address structural barriers, build resilience, and catalyze inclusive rural development.



MAHATMA GANDHI NREGA IN BIHAR: PROMISE, PERFORMANCE, AND PERSISTENT GAPS:

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aims to enhance rural livelihood security by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment annually to rural households with willing adult members for unskilled manual work. It focuses on empowering marginalized groups—Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women-headed households, and others—by strengthening their livelihood base. The scheme promotes decentralized, community-driven planning through Panchayati Raj institutions and fosters the creation of durable, productive assets. It also emphasizes environmental sustainability and rural infrastructure. Transparency and accountability are central to its implementation, ensured through social audits, grievance redressal mechanisms, and proactive public disclosure of information.

Bihar, with over 88% rural population, faces deep-rooted poverty, dependence on agriculture, and high marginalization (SCs: 16%, STs: 1.3%). MGNREGA, launched statewide in 2007, has been a critical lifeline—generating 16.45 crore person-days, building 5.6 million+ assets, and engaging over 9.1 million active workers.

In this context, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) plays a vital role in securing livelihoods. Launched in Bihar in 2006 with central funding across 22 districts

(and BREGS in 16 districts with state funding), it was expanded statewide in April 2007. MGNREGS is a critical tool for economic support and social inclusion in Bihar, particularly for marginalized communities. Its role remains vital in addressing rural unemployment, reducing migration, and empowering local governance through decentralized planning.

Key Stats (Bihar):

- Districts: 38 | Blocks: 534 | Gram Panchayats: 8377
- Job Cards Issued: 136.65 lakh | Active Job Cards: 82.78 lakh
- Active Workers: 91.87 lakh (SCs: 18.93%, STs: 1.89%)
- Approved Labour Budget (in lakh person-days):
 - FY22-23: 2500 | FY lakhs, 23-24: 2250 lakhs | FY24-25: 1700 lakhs
- Actual Person-days (Central liability):
 - FY22-23: 2364.48 | FY23-24: 2205.15 | FY24-25: 1645.97 (till date)

SOURCE -
[HTTPS://NREGASTREP.NIC.IN/NETNREGA/HOMESTCITI.ASPX?STATE_CODE=05&STATE_NAME=BIHAR&FLAG=ENG&LABELS=LABELS](https://nregastrep.nic.in/netnrega/homestciti.aspx?STATE_CODE=05&STATE_NAME=BIHAR&FLAG=ENG&LABELS=LABELS)

The implementation of MGNREGA in Bihar has faced several challenges, including allegations of corruption, unfavorable working conditions, limited work availability, and delayed payments.

Operational Gaps:

- Delayed payments, inadequate workdays, erratic job allotment.
- Written applications often ignored; workers denied promised 100 days.
- Complex procedures, poor information access
- Due to low digital literacy, beneficiaries are unable to access online platforms for information and payment tracking

Social Constraints:

- Gender bias, caste-based exclusion, workplace harassment.
- Lack of awareness and trust in the scheme.
- Seasonal migration affects continuity of work.

Psychological Barriers:

- Demotivation due to delays, low wages, and corruption perceptions.
- Absence of skill development and respect for work.

Institutional Shortcomings:

- Inadequate facilities, job delays, lack of transparency.
- Poor grievance redressal and implementation gaps.

INTERVENTION OF NACDOR:

This case study highlights how a project supported by NACDAOR and implemented by CADAM—titled “State-level Networking and Capacity Building of Dalit and Muslim Community Leaders for Effective Implementation of MGNREGA in Bihar”—successfully enabled socially excluded groups (SEGs), especially Dalits and Muslims, to access wage employment and create community assets through MGNREGA. The initiative also showcased the critical role of community-led institutions in effective implementation and accountability.

Implemented under Phase II of the DFID-funded Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme, the project covered 200 villages across 12 blocks in 8 districts of Bihar, running from July 2011 to December 2015. Its overarching goal was to improve the functioning of MGNREGA to benefit approximately 60,000 households from socially excluded communities. By the end of the project, it directly impacted 55,649 households from SC and Muslim communities.

Key objectives and focus areas were as follows—

- Building leadership among socially excluded communities.
- Organizing MGNREGA workers into collectives
- Mobilizing SEGs to collectively engage with and pressure service providers.
- Federating SEGs and networking their community-based organizations (CBOs).

- Advocating with state and central governments for policy change and effective implementation.

NACDAOR has been successfully mobilized Socially Excluded Groups (SEGs) and nurtured grassroots leadership among Dalits and minorities in due course of the project implementation. The leadership promotion strategies helped in developing base at the community levels, which ultimately helped in formation & strengthening of the Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union (ABMMU). It is a state-level network of MGNREGA job card holders of SEGs. Over the year, ABMMU emerged as a prominent platform for advocating for the rights and dignity of MGNREGA workers. It continues to champion their cause beyond the project period.

The project intervention helped in gaining followings results under the leadership & ownership of ABMMU during the project duration—

- 83,569 job cards issued.
- 75,213 of these issued to households from socially excluded groups.
- 41,350 households accessed wage employment due to project efforts.
- 41,501 SEG households received jobs under MGNREGA.
- 66 was the average number of workdays per household in the project area.
- 296,258 households (including all SEG households) received timely wage payments within 15 days.
- 508 social audits, public hearings, and community interface meetings were conducted.

Rights-based approach of the project contributed significantly in increasing the participation and ownership of SEGs in MGNREGA processes. Strategic facilitation by leaders of ABMMU enabled SEG families to apply for job cards, demand 100 days of employment, and pressurize panchayats and service providers for job allocation and timely wage payments.

The community members especially SEGs proactively demanded their entitlements, held service providers accountable, and brought local issues to state and national platforms under the leadership of ABMMU. Public campaigns and collective actions—such as wage demand drives and grievance redressal applications—proved to be cost-effective and highly engaging. In the project areas, community members reported tangible improvements resulting from collective social action.

It emerged clearly that the project contributed in increasing the visibility and recognition of ABMMU and its leaders at local, district, state, and national

levels. Despite significant achievements, the project encountered several structural and operational challenges:

- Dominance of upper castes in Gram Panchayats made multi-stakeholder participation difficult. Regular interface meetings with PRI leaders helped ensure inclusivity.
- Low motivation among government officials to support poor and marginalized communities was overcome through continuous engagement and sensitization efforts.
- Resistance at the local level from MGNREGA functionaries and PRI representatives was tackled through volunteer involvement and community youth mobilization.
- State government apathy, delays in wage payments, and lack of accountability were mitigated by persistent advocacy and pressure from organized community structures.

Despite these challenges, sustainable social leadership emerged through the initiative. ABMMU, now federated at the state level, continues to advocate with both state and central governments, sustaining the momentum generated during the project period.

Caselet-1

From Homemaker to Social Leader: The Transformal Journey of Namita Devi

Introduction - Namita Devi, a 35-year-old resident of Gandhi Gram village in East Barinagar Gram Panchayat, Barari Block of Katihar district, Bihar. A graduate in Arts and the wife of a small and marginal farmer, Jitendra Prasad Chaurasia, Namita is also a proud mother of two children who are pursuing professional education to become self-reliant. Her story is one of inspiration, determination, and the transformative power of community mobilization.

Early Life and Background - Before her journey into social activism, Namita led a modest life centered around her household and limited engagement in local Gram Sabha activities. Her aspirations were confined by social expectations—until 2011, when destiny knocked in the form of the MGNREGA campaign led by NACDAOR (National Confederation of Dalit and Adivasi Organisations) under the leadership of Ashok Bharti.

A Spark Ignited - Namita's first interaction with the Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union (ABMMU) came during this campaign. Inspired by the vision of community empowerment and rights based advocacy, she became a member of ABMMU and began taking up leadership roles with growing confidence and skill.

Becoming a Media Advocate - In 2013, NACDAOR recognized Namita's potential and nominated her as a video volunteer under Phase II of the PACS

Programme. She underwent extensive training in Delhi and Lucknow, including a 14-day intensive course in video production. A learning visits to Goa further deepened her understanding of social leadership and media activism. Armed with a camera and a purpose, Namita went on to document over 300 local issues and produce around 100 impactful videos highlighting the voices of the excluded—Dalits, women, and rural workers. Through the lens of her camera, she brought hidden injustices to light and gave visibility to community victories.

Emergence as a Leader - Initially reserved and introverted, Namita gradually evolved into a confident public speaker and community mobilizer. She led membership drives for ABMMU, especially among Dalit women job card holders, overcoming local hesitancy through tireless advocacy and action.

Key Contributions - Namita's grassroots leadership has led to tangible outcomes:

- Organized Dalits and women into ABMMU collectives.
- Facilitated new job card applications and ensured access to employment under MGNREGA.
- Resolved wage delays and advocated for timely job allocations.
- Built strong working relationships with Panchayat Rozgar Sewaks and block officials.
- Championed person-days monitoring and employment transparency.

A Story of Impact - One notable success was helping five job card holders who wished to take up plantation work on their own land. Lacking awareness, they had not accessed MGNREGA support. Namita intervened, approached the Panchayat Rozgar Sewak, and within a month, the work commenced. Though initial payments were delayed, she persistently followed up with the accountant and Program Officer until the workers received their full dues—a total of INR 1700 per person for two months.

Ongoing Advocacy Focus - Namita continues to focus on:

- Wage work demand generation.
- Job card issuance and deletion.
- Employment tracking and average person-days calculation.
- Strengthening grassroots accountability systems.
- She actively raises concerns about:
 - Insufficient employment days under MGNREGA.
 - Delayed and irregular wage payments.
 - Lack of transparency in work processes.
 - Limited involvement of women and Dalits in planning and implementation.
- Weak community awareness and trust in the system.

Vision for Change - Namita strongly advocates for the institutionalization of Panchayat Rozgar Diwas and the increased role of Mahila Mats (women supervisors) to create a more inclusive and dignified rural employment ecosystem.

Recognition and Continuing Journey - Namita's journey is a testament to how community engagement can transform lives. In 2024, she proudly represented ABMMU from Bihar at the World Social Forum in Kathmandu, Nepal—an international platform that recognized her efforts and vision. Even though the project concluded nearly a decade ago, Namita Devi remains an unwavering advocate for Dalit and women's rights under MGNREGA. Her commitment continues to inspire a new generation of rural change makers.

Caselet-2

From Margins to Movement: The Journey of Khushilal Lal Ram

Case Study: Khushilal Ram - Championing the Cause of Marginalized Workers in Kishanganj

Background - In the remote village of Shapur under Kochadhaman Police Station in Kishanganj district, Bihar, lives a quiet yet determined leader—Khushilal Ram. A father of five and once among the most marginalized families in his area, Khushilal emerged as a passionate advocate for labor rights under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). His journey is not just a personal transformation but part of a larger wave of grassroots change sweeping across Bihar.

The Beginning of a Movement - Khushilal's activism began in 2012 when he joined the Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union (ABMMU). Drawing from his own experiences of poverty and exclusion, he began mobilizing Scheduled Caste (SC) wage workers in Bahadurganj village, located in Kochadhaman block. His leadership grew organically as he stood up for the rights of his peers—people who had long been excluded from fair access to work and wages.

A Relentless Advocate for Workers' Rights - As a former District Coordinator of the Hind Khet Mazdoor Union, Khushilal brought both insight and urgency to his work. His key interventions include:

- Assisting community members in applying for job cards, a first step to accessing wage work.
- Organizing collective demands for employment under MGNREGA, ensuring work requests were submitted timely and in a coordinated manner.
- Monitoring wage payments and holding officials accountable for delays.
- Creating opportunities for women to participate in wage work, challenging gender norms and enhancing household incomes.

- Preventing mechanization of rural works to safeguard manual labor jobs essential for the poorest families.
- Providing legal and technical support, helping workers understand norms like land measurement for wage calculations.

Khushilal maintained regular dialogue with Rozgar Sewaks and Programme Officers, bridging the gap between local administration and marginalized workers. His ability to simplify processes and demand accountability made him a trusted figure in the community.

Winds of Change: Bihar's Positive Shift in MGNREGS Implementation -

Khushilal's journey, along with that of leaders like Namita Devi, reflects a broader transformation in Bihar's approach to MGNREGA. Once riddled with inefficiencies and limited outreach, the program is now evolving into a powerful tool for economic security and social inclusion.

Key Positive Developments in Bihar:

• **Empowered Labor Groups:** The state is promoting the formation of labour collectives and encouraging women as worksite supervisors, leading to enhanced ownership and empowerment.

- **Revival of Panchayat Rozgar Diwas:** These community forums are helping resolve local employment issues, boosting transparency and dialogue at the grassroots.
- **Awareness and Entitlement Education:** Campaigns and community engagement activities are ensuring that citizens know their rights and how to access them.
- **Livelihood-Oriented Planning:** MGNREGA is increasingly being used to create sustainable livelihood assets, particularly for SC/ST and ultra-poor households.
- **Institutional Strengthening:** There's a growing focus on functional village organization offices, ensuring smooth delivery of services and stronger support systems.
- **Asset Creation for the Poorest:** By linking wage work to productive asset creation, Bihar is helping households move from dependency to self-reliance.

The stories of Khushilal Ram and Namita Devi stand as shining examples of how MGNREGA, when implemented with dedication and community participation, can become more than a safety net—it can be a platform for justice, dignity, and empowerment.

Their grassroots leadership has influenced not only policy discussions but also inspired countless others across Bihar to raise their voices, claim their rights, and build a future where no one is left behind.



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ashok Kumar Sinha is a Development Professional. Mr Ashok has done his PG Diploma in Rural Development with Project Management Specialization from Xavier Institutes of Social Service, Ranchi, Jharkhand. Since 1997, he has been working and brings with him over 26 years experiences in managing multiple social, economic & development project / programs with leading non-profit organizations, government agencies and the corporate sectors across Asia. Mr Ashok's core competencies and professional interests are in the areas of Organic & Natural Farming, Skilling & Entrepreneurship, Livelihood Promotion, Food & Nutrition Security, Water Sanitation & Hygiene, Micro Credit & Financial Inclusion, Climate Change & Clean Energy, Natural Resource Management, Dalits Human Rights & Dignity, Women's Rights & Gender Equality and Good Governance. Presently, He is contributing as PMU team member at KPMG Advisory Services Pvt Ltd for Department of Agriculture, Government of Bihar.



सा मा जि क सम्मान और पहचान की तलाश में
घरेलू कामगार

By Anupriya Suman, Program Associate, SEWA Bharat

उन्हीं में से एक हैं। इसलिए घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं के मध्य काम करने के लिए मिन्नता बेन का चुनाव हुआ, क्योंकि बदलाव की चाह और सभी को साथ लेकर चलने की भावना उनमें औरों से अधिक प्रबल थी।

अपने प्रभावशाली गुणों के कारण ही मिन्नता बेन घरेलू कामगारों की चुनौतियों का सामना करने लिए सबसे उपयुक्त थीं। घरेलू कामगारों की मुख्य चुनौतियां रहीं हैं: - आपसी एकता और संगठन का अभाव, उनके काम का कोई सम्मान नहीं, मोल-भाव की शक्ति का (bargaining power) का अभाव, असुरक्षा की भावना, काम अधिक वेतन कम, अशिक्षा, गरीबी; आदि।

मिन्नता बेन ने ना केवल स्वयं पर काम किया बल्कि विभिन्न स्तरों पर उन्होंने घरेलू कामगारों की स्थिति और मांगों को सभी के समक्ष रख ध्यान आकर्षित कर सोचने पर मजबूर किया। उन्होंने विभिन्न प्रशिक्षणों में भाग लिया और वहां से प्राप्त जानकारीयों को अन्य महिलाओं तक भी ले कर गई, फिर चाहे वो वेतन की मांग हो, स्वास्थ्य से जुड़ी कोई बात हो या काम पर हुई दुर्व्यवहार के खिलाफ आवाज उठाने के लिए प्रेरित करना और पीड़ित के साथ खड़े रहना हो, धरना देना, स्थानीय सरकारी निकायों के समक्ष अपनी व अन्य कामगार बहनों की बात रखना, आदि। मिन्नता बेन सेवा के घरेलू कामगार कार्यक्रम से जुड़ कर घरेलू कामगारों की स्थिति में बदलाव लाने के लिए अनेकों प्रयास किए और ऊँच-नीच की भावना पर भी प्रहार कड़ा प्रहार किया। वर्तमान समय में सेवा पटना के साथ लगभग दस हजार - घरेलू कामगार महिलाएँ जुड़ी हैं। जिसमें से लगभग 50% कामगार महादलित, अनुसूचित जाति जैसे कमजोर वर्ग से आते हैं।

इनके लिए कोई स्पष्ट समाजिक सुरक्षा नीति नहीं है, और इस बात को स्वयं श्रम विभाग भी स्वीकार करता है। इनका पंजीकरण - असंगठित क्षेत्र समाजिक सुरक्षा अधिनियम के तहत राज्य द्वारा किया जाता है, लेकिन इसका कोई स्पष्ट लाभ नहीं दिखता है। 2020 में केंद्र सरकार द्वारा अपनाए गए नए श्रम और सामाजिक सुरक्षा संहिता को अब राज्य स्तर की विधायिकाओं में अनुकूलित किया जा रहा है, जो घरेलू कामगारों को शामिल करने के लिए नई नीति के अवसर प्रदान कर सकती है।

घरेलू कामगारों को सामाजिक सुरक्षा प्रदान करने वाली योजना बिहार शताब्दी असंगठित कार्यक्षेत्र सामाजिक सुरक्षा योजना बोर्ड 2011 है। इस योजना के तहत, सभी असंगठित श्रमिक, जिनमें घरेलू कामगार भी शामिल हैं, बिना किसी पंजीकरण के एक लाख रुपये (USD 1,401) तक की सामाजिक सुरक्षा लाभ प्राप्त कर सकते हैं। योजना के तहत आकस्मिक मृत्यु के दावे पर 30,000 रुपये, आंशिक विकलांगता के दावे पर 37,500 रुपये, और पूर्ण विकलांगता के दावे पर 75,000 रुपये तक का लाभ मिलता है। अस्पताल में भर्ती होने पर 5,000 रुपये तक का दावा किया जा सकता है। इन लाभों को प्राप्त करने के लिए श्रमिकों को अपनी पहचान पत्र और पते का प्रमाण प्रस्तुत करना आवश्यक है। यह योजना केवल बिहार के निवासी श्रमिकों के लिए उपलब्ध है। अन्य राज्यों से आने वाले श्रमिकों को एक अलग प्रवासी श्रमिक योजना पर निर्भर रहना पड़ता है।

घरेलू कामगार महिलाएं को संगठित कर उनके जीवन स्तर में सुधार लाने के अपने इस उद्देश्य की प्राप्ति हेतु सेवा ने मिन्नता बेन व उनके जैसे कई अन्य महिलाओं के सहयोग से 3 प्रमुख स्तरों पर प्रयास प्रारंभ किया -

i) ट्रस्ट की सहायता से (जुड़ने वाली महिलाओं और नियोक्ताओं के साथ) - वर्ष 2016 में सेवा के अंतर्गत एक सहयोगी संगठन - “सेवा संगिनी म्यूचुअल बेनीफिट ट्रस्ट” की स्थापना की। जिसका उद्देश्य घरेलू कामगार बहनों को आई.एल.ओ (ILO) c-189 के अंतर्गत वर्णित मानकों को दिलाना था। ट्रस्ट घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं और नियोक्ता के बीच एक मध्यस्थ का कार्य करती है जिससे घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं और



<http://toi.in/gFhGfY5/a31g>

नियोक्ताओं दोनों के हितों की पूर्ति हो। यह घरेलू कामगार बहनों का, घरेलू कामगार बहनों के लिए, घरेलू कामगार बहनों द्वारा बनाया गया एक ट्रस्ट है।

- इसके द्वारा सर्वप्रथम जुड़ने वाली घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं का प्रशिक्षण द्वारा क्षमता विकास किया गया। जिसके तहत महिलाओं को उनके कार्य संबंधित बारीकियों के अतिरिक्त, संगठन, समानता, एकता, हिंसा कि घटनाएं, काम के प्रति सम्मान (कोई काम छोटा-बड़ा, उच्चा-नीचा नहीं होता), आपसी सद्भावना, आदि विषयों पर बात करना शुरू किया।
- साथ ही ट्रस्ट से जुड़ने वाले नियोक्ता के साथ बातचीत की शुरुआत की, जिसमें घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं के साथ सम्मानजनक व्यवहार, उचित वेतन (न्यूनतम वेतन), आराम के लिए समय, भोजन, आवासीय कामगारों के लिए रहने की उचित व्यवस्था; आदि प्रमुख हैं।



ii) क्षेत्र में विभिन्न बैठकों व विभिन्न स्तरों द्वारा कामगार महिलाओं के साथ - क्षेत्र की घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं के साथ मिन्नता बेन सेवा के कार्यकर्ता के साथ मिलकर निरंतर मोहल्ला व ट्रेड बैठकों के माध्यमों से क्षेत्र, जिला, राज्य व राष्ट्र स्तर पर इन विषयों पर चर्चा की जाती रही।

iii) क्षेत्र के नियोक्ताओं (जिस क्षेत्र में फील्ड की महिलाएं काम करती हैं) के साथ बातचीत हेतु - “मेरा प्यारा न्याययुक्त घर कैम्पेन” की शुरुआत। यह एक एडवोकेसी कैम्पेन है जो जमीनी स्तर पर घरेलू कामगार और नियोक्ता के साथ बातचीत कर आई एल ओ (ILO) के कन्वेंशन-189 में वर्णित मानकों की मांग रखता है नियोक्ताओं के समक्ष।



मेरा प्यारा न्याययुक्त घर कैम्पेन के दौरान - घरेलू कामगार अपने मांग के साथ



इसके अतिरिक्त घरेलू कामगार की एक प्रमुख माँग – कार्यस्थल की माँग – निजी घरों को कार्यस्थल के दर्जा देने की माँग है (घरेलू कामगारों के संदर्भ में) क्योंकि इनके काम की जगह आमतौर पर दूसरों का घर है।

कन्वेंशन-189, आई एल ओ (अन्तराष्ट्रिय श्रमिक संगठन) द्वारा घरलू कामगारों के सम्मानपूर्ण जीविकोपार्जन लिए बनाया गया एक दिशा-निर्देश है, जिसे आई एल ओ ने 16 जून, 2011 में पास किया था। यह घरेलू कामगारों के लिए एक बड़ी उपलब्धि है इसी कारणवश इस दिन को प्रत्येक वर्ष अंतराष्ट्रीय घरेलू कामगार दिवस के रूप में मनाया जाता है। हलकी भारत सरकार ने इस कन्वेंशन पर हस्ताक्षर नहीं किए हैं जिसके लिए वर्तमान में अनेक संस्थाएं, यूनियन संघर्षरत हैं और इसी उद्देश्य हेतु राष्ट्रीय स्तर पर एन पी डी डब्ल्यू (घरेलू कामगारों का राष्ट्रीय मंच, 2012) व आई डी डब्ल्यू एफ (अन्तराष्ट्रिय घरेलू कामगार महासंघ, 2013) के साथ मिलकर प्रयासरत हैं।

चुनौतियाँ:-

- ट्रस्ट – नियोक्ताओं के साथ
- ट्रस्ट – घरेलू कामगार के साथ
- क्षेत्र में महिलाओं के मध्य चर्चा के दौरान
- मेरा प्यार न्याययुक्त घर कैम्पेन के दौरान

• ट्रस्ट के अंतर्गत – नियोक्ताओं के साथ:-

1. कम पैसों में घर के सभी काम करवाने की माँग (इतनी पढ़ी-लिखी तो होती नहीं है फिर भी इतना पैसा क्यों दे? या हम फलाना विभाग में काम करते हैं तो हमको कम पैसे में काम वाली चाहिए")
2. एक समय का भोजन भी कामगार को प्रदान ना करने की माँग("हम भी अपना लंच लेकर ऑफिस जाते हैं, हमको तो नहीं मिलता ऑफिस में खाना तो हम काम करने वाली को क्यों दे?
3. आराम का समय ना देना (इतना पैसा देगे तो हम कपड़े हाथ से धुलवाएंगे, हमे कपड़े हाथ से धुले पसंद हैं – वाशिंग मशीन होते हुए भी)
4. कामवाली, दाई, आया, मेड, झाड़ू-पोंछा वाली, बुढिया जैसे शब्दों का प्रयोग
5. साप्ताहिक छुट्टी ना देने की माँग – "हम पैसा भी दे और काम भी खुद करे, हम छुट्टी तो नहीं दे सकते"
6. जाति विशेष की माँग – बुजुर्गों के नाम पर – जो कामवाली होगी वो किस जाति की होगी; हमे छोटे जात के लोग नहीं चाहिए; या हमे जाति से कोई दिक्कत नहीं पर हमारे घर के बुजुर्ग "खाना-पीना बंद कर देंगे अगर हमारे घर छोटे जात के लोग रसोई में आएंगे तो"

• ट्रस्ट- घरेलू कामगार के साथ:-

1. जातिगत पहचान बताने से घबराना या स्वयं से सवाल करना – "हमसे काम करवाएगा न दीदी कोनों दिक्कत नहीं ना होगा, कहीं नहीं रखा तो"।
2. स्वयं के काम का सम्मान ना करना – आपस में एक-दूसरे को स्वयं भी दाई,मेड आदि से संबोधित करना। काम का परिचय देने में शर्माना, आदि
3. जातिगत प्रभाव – "हम उचा जाति से आते हैं हम किसी का जूठा नहीं साफ करेंगे"

- 4.नियोक्ता को मैडम, साहब, मालिक-मलकिनी ; जैसे शब्दों का प्रयोग
5. नियोक्ता द्वारा किसी प्रकार के गलत व्यवहार करने पर चुप-छाप काम छोड़ देना

• क्षेत्र में महिलाओं के मध्य चर्चा के दौरान

- 1.काम छूटने का भय – दीदी, पईसा बढ़ाने बोलते हैं तो मालिक/मैडम – काम से निकालने का धमकी देता हैं, पेट का सवाल हैं; आज निकाल देगा तो जोहउ कमा रहे हैं उभी नहीं होगा त खाएंगे क्या?
- 2.अपनी जातिगत पहचान छुपा कर काम करना – का करे दीदी झुट नहीं बोले त; नीचा जात वाला से कोई काम करवाएगा? झुट बोलके काम करते हैं तनी अच्छा से पहन-ओढ़ के जाते हैं"।
- 3."एकता का आभाव – ईहाँ सब ओइसन नही न हैं आज एगो दु हजार में काम करेंगे त चरगो हजार मे आ आठे सौ में करेला पहुच जाएगी; दुसर के पेट पे लात मारेला"
- 4.आपस में जातिगत और काम के आधार पर भेद-भाव – हमनी सब ई सब काम नाही करते हैं दीदी (मरीज के मल-मूत्र की सफाई या घरों के बाथरूम की सफाई) या आपस एक दूसरे को जूठ खोरनी (जो जूठे बर्तन साफ करती हैं) –जैसे शब्दों से संबोधित करना

• मेरा प्यारन्याययुक्त घर कैम्पेन के दौरान:-

- 1.बिना पैमप्लेट पढे लौटा देना या मुँह पर दरवाजा बंद कर देना
- 2.समाज के प्रतिष्ठित वर्गों द्वारा टिप्पणी करना – इतना पईसा केकरों नहीं मिलता हैं ईहाँ, आपनी काम लगावे के जगह काम छुड़ाए वाला काम कर रहे हैं। इतना पईस मिलता हैं पर ओकरे जे कामवाली के साथे- साथे घरवाली के काम करती हैं"
- 3.घरेलू कामगारों द्वारा अपने नियोक्ता को पैमप्लेट देने पर उसका मजाक उड़ाना – "इस पर लिखा हैं की आंटी को पार्क में घुमाइए और रोज़े चाट-समोसा खिलाइए और डाट देना, आदि।
- 4.भेदभाव के मुद्दे पर – इतना समय से जो चलते आ रहा हैं आप लोग उसको थोरे बदल दीजिएगा; होगा वही जो होते आ रहा हैं।
- 5.कामवाली, दाई, आया, मेड, झाड़ू-पोंछा वाली, बुढिया जैसे शब्दों का प्रयोग या बिल्डिंग/अपार्टमेंट्स के लिफ्ट के प्रयोग से वर्जित रखना कामगारों को

*इसमे एक प्रमुख बात यह भी है की सेवा की टीम के कुछ सदस्य भी इन जातियों से आते हैं, जिस वजह से उन्हे स्वयं भी कई बार असहजता का सामना करना परत हैं जब नियोक्ता द्वारा अनावश्यक जातिगत मांगे प्रस्तुत की जाती हैं; हालांकि नियोक्ता कार्यकर्ता से उनके जाति के बारे में नहीं पूछते। परंतु जातिगत भेदभाव की भावना उन्हे सोचने को मजबूर कर देती हैं। इन चुनौतियों से निपटने के लिए कुछ योजना भी बनाई गई। सेवा को यह आभास था कि जो हम चाहते हैं वो इतना आसान नहीं है। साथ ही सिर्फ किसी एक समूह के साथ बात करने से कोई सफलता नहीं मिलएगी अपितु ऐसा ना हो कि वह स्वयं को और अधिक असुरक्षित महसूस करने लगे। अतः अधिक असर लाने के लिए सेवा ने मित्रता बेन और उनके जैसे अन्य महिलाओं के सहयोग से प्रत्येक स्तर पर सभी समूह को एक-साथ ला कर बातें करने का प्रयास किया। मित्रता बेन और उनके जैसे कुछ अन्य महिलाओं ने ना केवल बहनों को समझाने, जागरूक करने, अपने हक के लिए लड़ने का काम किया बल्कि इसके साथ-साथ नियोक्ता व सरकार के समक्ष भी निसंकोच अपनी बात रखी और अन्य कामगार का मनोबल बढ़ाने का भी काम किया।





ट्रस्ट के स्तर पर: -

- विभिन्न स्तरों पर नियोक्ता और बहनों के साथ बातचीत करने की पूर्ण कोशिश की
- सेवा "श्रम शक्ति मानती है जाति नहीं" को नियोक्ता व कामगार दोनों के मध्य स्पष्ट रूप से प्रस्तुत किया [संदेश हेतु पोस्टर का भी प्रयोग]
- ऐसे नियोक्ता और बहनों को ब्लैकलिस्ट किया जो जातिगत भेदभाव या आपत्तिजनक शब्दों का प्रयोग करते हैं |
- कामगारों के साथ विभिन्न प्रकार के प्रशिक्षण किए जिससे क्षमता विकास हो सके

फील्ड में बहनों के मध्य: -

- विभिन्न मुद्दों पर लगातार बातचीत की मोहल्ला मीटिंग, ट्रेड मीटिंग आदि द्वारा
- विभिन्न कामगार संगठनों के संघर्ष की कहानी पर चर्चाएं की | साथ ही बिना भेद-भाव के सबको के लिए एक समान मांग की
- स्वयं के काम की पहचान और सम्मान के महत्व पर निरंतर चर्चा की, स्वयं के काम का रेट-चार्ट स्वयं निर्धारण हेतु निरंतर प्रेरित करना (क्षेत्रीय स्तर पर-सहभागीदारी द्वारा)

रेट-चार्ट - क्षेत्र के अनुसार स्थानीय कामगार महिलाओं द्वारा काम के स्वरूप, काम के घंटे और मकान व सदस्यों की संख्या के अनुसार न्यूनतम वेतन को ध्यान में रखते हुए अपने क्षेत्र के लिए तैयार किया गया एक दाम/मानदेय

- क्षेत्रों की बैठकों में विभिन्नता लाने का प्रयास किया अर्थात् बैठकों में सभी धर्म-जाति की बहनों को सम्मिलित कर - संयुक्त चर्चा की, ताकि कोई भी समूह स्वयं को अवांछित ना समझे |

मेरा प्यार न्याययुक्त घर कैम्पेन के माध्यम से: -

- निरन्तरता बनाए रखा, अधिक बहनों के साथ से अपनी बात रखना
- कैम्पेन से प्राप्त सकारात्मक व नकारात्मक दोनों प्रतिक्रियाओं को

बैठक में कामगार महिलाओं के समक्ष रख चर्चा करना और उनकी राय लेना (सोचने)

मिन्नता बेन ने न केवल घरेलू कामगारों की जानकारी बढ़ाई बल्कि अन्य कामगार महिलाओं को भी जागरूक किया, उन्होंने अपने प्रयासों से अपने क्षेत्र में अपनी एक अलग पहचान बनाई | साथ ही अपने कर्मठ , जिज्ञासु, सूझ-बुझ, बदलाव लाने की भावना और निस्वार्थ भाव के कारण सेवा में वो राष्ट्र स्तरीय घरेलू कामगार धंधा समिति की सदस्य चुनी गई और वह इसके एक सक्रिय सदस्य भी हैं | जहां वे अन्य सदस्यों के साथ मिल कर एक-दूसरे से सीखते हैं और अपने राज्य के घरेलू कामगार बहनों के हित के लिए संघर्ष की रूपरेखा भी तैयार करते हैं |

इन निरंतर प्रयासों का कुछ सकारात्मक प्रभाव पड़ा और कुछ हद तक इस स्थिति में परिवर्तन आया -

- स्वयं के काम की पहचान और अपने काम को सम्मान से देखना - स्वयं को घरेलू कामगार जैसे शब्दों से संबोधित करना
- नियोक्ताओं द्वारा भी मैड, दाई, काम वाली, जैसे शब्दों का प्रयोग ना कर दीदी, आंटी, बहन जैसे सम्मानजनक शब्दों का प्रयोग करना
- घरेलू कामगार के मन से गंदा काम/जातिगत भावना के स्थान पर सेवा का काम आदि भावना का विकास
- घरेलू कामगार महिलाएं पहले से अधिक जागरूक और संगठित हुईं, जिससे उनकी मांग को बल मिला | उनमें अब हम अकेले नहीं हैं की भावना के कारण विश्वास बढ़ा है
- 1200 से अधिक बहनों के आय में निरंतर प्रयासों से मासिक आय में 500/- की वृद्धि (बिना भेदभाव के)| माह में कुछ क्षेत्रों में 4 व अन्य में 2 वेतन सहित अवकाश घरेलू कामगारों को प्राप्त हुए हैं |

अर्थात् 1 घरेलू कामगार के प्रति घर से अर्जित आय में मासिक 500 और सालाना 6000/- की वृद्धि

- बदलाव के लिए किए जा रहे इस संघर्ष में मिन्नता बेन जैसी अनेक घरेलू कामगार महिला का साथ मिलना

हालकी यह एक बहुत छोटी सी सफलता है, परंतु बदलाव के दृष्टिकोण से यह एक बहुत बड़ी चिंगारी है अब घरेलू कामगार महिलाएँ अपने श्रम का सम्मान भी करती हैं वो अपने मांगों के लिए जागरूक हो रही हैं | अभी एक लंबा संघर्ष बाकी है जहां c-189 को रेटिफाई (ratify - अनु समर्थन/अनुमोदन करना) करना हो या उनके लिए एक कामगार के तौर पर समाजिक सुरक्षा, यह संघर्ष तीन स्तर है जिसमें नियोक्ता और सरकार के अतिरिक्त स्वयं घरेलू कामगार बहने भी एक बड़ा हिस्सा हैं; जिसमें मिन्नता बेन भी सभी के साथ कदम से कदम मिल कर संघर्ष कर रही हैं और एक घरेलू कामगार के तौर पर उन्हें उनका हक मिले यह मिन्नता बेन जैसे कई घरेलू कामगार महिलाओं का एक बड़ा सपना है |

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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RE-ENGAGING MAHADALIT CHILDREN IN EDUCATION:

A Case Study of 4S India's Learning Centre

By Dr. Mahua Ghosh Sengupta, Dy. Director- MEL & KM, 4S India

ABSTRACT:

In Gaya, Bihar, the Mahadalit community is historically a socio-economically disadvantaged group with limited access to education, and culturally relevant learning spaces, coupled with limited access to employment opportunities and significant barriers to social mobility and basic rights. While various government and institutional efforts have attempted to address school dropout rates, they often fail to engage with the lived realities of Mahadalit children, resulting in persistent disengagement from formal education. In response to these systemic gaps, 4S India adopted an integrated and community-rooted approach that simultaneously addresses educational, economic, and social barriers. Its Theory of Change is grounded in the belief that meaningful education can only thrive when communities experience both economic stability and social inclusion. To this end, 4S has implemented livelihood initiatives such as mushroom cultivation, livestock development, and capacity building through Farmer Field Schools (FFS) to enhance household income and reduce child labour pressures. At the same time, it has strengthened community leadership through platforms like Mushahar Manch and SHG federations, promoting dignity, voice, and collective action among marginalised groups. The establishment of the learning centre in Rajan village is a strategic part of this holistic vision. The centre adopts a culturally responsive and joyful learning approach, integrating games, music, and interactive tools to foster a sense of belonging and motivation among children. Employing teachers from the Mahadalit community further enhances trust and cultural connection, while a strong focus on parental involvement through Siksha Samity ensures community ownership. This initiative has led to notable outcomes—improved attendance, behavioral changes, and the reintegration of over one-third of the enrolled children into formal schools. More importantly, it challenges conventional remedial education models and offers a framework that centres dignity, participation, and context-specific pedagogy. The experience invites a critical rethinking of how education systems can be reimaged to truly include and uplift the most marginalised communities. For 4S India and the wider development sector, this case signals a compelling direction for inclusive and transformative socio-educational strategies.



CONTEXT

The Mahadalit community is one of the most marginalized groups in India, particularly in Bihar, where systemic discrimination and socio-economic challenges have kept them on the fringes of mainstream development. Mahadalits are considered among the most vulnerable within the Scheduled Castes, often facing issues like high poverty rates, illiteracy, lack of access to basic amenities, and low social mobility. Historically, Mahadalits have been excluded from many social, economic, and educational opportunities, leaving them caught in cycles of poverty that perpetuate poor educational outcomes.

For children from Mahadalit communities, the barriers to education are severe. Families often rely on their children for supplementary income, and formal education is seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. Many Mahadalit children drop out of school at a young age due to a combination of economic necessity, a lack of family support for education, and systemic barriers in the education system that fail to engage these students.

The Musahar community, recognized as one of the most marginalized Mahadalit in India, faces significant educational challenges. According to a study supported by the National Human Rights Commission, the literacy rate among Musahars is alarmingly low, with only 6% literacy overall (NHRC, 2014), which is the lowest literacy rate among all SCs in the state. Further research indicates that merely 6% of Musahar men and 2% of Musahar women can read and write (Smile Foundation India, 2021). This severe educational deprivation is

compounded by socio-economic hardships, including extreme poverty and limited access to government development programs. The community's traditional engagement in menial labor and the pervasive discrimination they face further hinder educational advancement. Children from Musahar families often drop out of school early to contribute to household income through manual labor. Additionally, inadequate school infrastructure, absence of supportive learning environments, and systemic discrimination further discourage school attendance. Despite various governmental initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes, the Musahar community continues to grapple with systemic barriers that impede their progress (NHRC, 2024).

THEORY OF CHANGE

4S India believes that sustainable educational change in marginalised communities requires a holistic, integrated approach that addresses the interconnected issues of poverty, social exclusion, livelihood insecurity, and lack of community participation. The Theory of Change is grounded in the following logic:

- If Mahadalit communities are empowered through strong grassroots institutions such as SHG federations, Farmer Field Schools (FFS) and community platforms like Mushahar Manch,
- And if their livelihoods are improved through initiatives like mushroom cultivation, livestock development, and others
- And if children are engaged through joyful, culturally responsive education, led by community educators,

Then there will be increased trust in formal systems,

improved household income and stability, and a deeper community commitment to education. This integrated strategy enhances the enabling environment for children's learning and helps disrupt the cycles of marginalisation. The success of the Rajan learning centre is a direct outcome of this synergy—not an isolated intervention, but a product of 4S India's long-standing, multi-sectoral engagement with the community.

4S INDIA'S INTERVENTION:

- **Addressing economic issues:** 4S India recognises that educational progress for Mahadalit children is deeply linked to their families' economic stability. To tackle this, 4S has implemented a range of livelihood initiatives in this area alongside education, including supporting mushroom cultivation, livestock development, and capacity building through Farmer Field Schools (FFS). These activities enhance household incomes and reduce the economic pressure that often forces children into labor. As families gain financial security, they are more likely to view schooling as a worthwhile investment, thereby improving enrolment and retention rates.
- **Addressing social issues:** On the social front, 4S India actively works to dismantle caste-based stigma and exclusion that hinder access to education. It does so by strengthening grassroots platforms such as formation and strengthening of SHG federations and developing a platform-Mushahar Manch, and fostering collective identity and local leadership. By employing teachers from the Mahadalit community and engaging parents through Siksha Samities, 4S builds community trust and relevance in its education efforts. These socially embedded strategies foster belonging, dismantle skepticism, and cultivate a local culture that values and sustains learning.
- **Establishing the Learning Centre:** Recognizing the educational challenges, 4S India launched a learning centre aimed at providing educational support specifically for Mahadalit children, hoping to reverse dropout trends and encourage a sustained interest in learning. 4S India initiated this learning centre in Rajan, Gaya, with a core objective to motivate Mahadalit children who had dropped out of school to re-engage with formal education. This project focused on not only bringing students back to school but also creating a sustainable interest in learning through a supportive and inclusive environment. However, upon establishing the centre, 4S India encountered initial resistance from families hesitant to send their children. This reluctance stemmed from a mix of socio-economic

priorities, skepticism about the benefits of education, and a lack of trust in external interventions. Through persistent engagement with the community, the centre's staff gradually built rapport with the villagers, eventually convincing a few families to enroll their children. By employing teachers from the Mahadalit community, 4S India strengthened cultural relevance and relatability, enhancing trust and rapport with students.

METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE SIZE

To assess the effectiveness and outcome of the learning centre initiative in Rajan, Gaya, both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted. Primary data was collected through:

- Interviews and discussions with teachers, parents, children, and community members.
- Classroom observations to assess student engagement and teaching methods.
- Monthly attendance records to track participation.
- Feedback sessions held through Siksha Samity meetings.

A total of:

- Out of the 105 currently enrolled students, 35 (approximately one-third) were considered as the core sample for student-level data.
- 12 parents, 3 teachers, and 10 community stakeholders were selected purposively for in-depth interviews and feedback collection, based on their regular engagement with the learning centre.

This mixed-method approach helped triangulate findings and ensured a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's outcomes and challenges.

APPROACH AND STRATEGY:

Joyful Learning model: Once children began attending, teachers quickly recognized that traditional classroom methods would not work for students who lacked both the habit and the interest in learning. In response, 4S India introduced a "joyful learning" approach, designed to make the educational experience positive and engaging.

The centre's staff, all hailing from the Mahadalit community, crafted a welcoming environment through a curriculum enriched with play-based learning. They began by engaging the children with football games and outdoor activities, which drew them to the centre regularly. By establishing consistency through play, teachers could then introduce educational content in an enjoyable and accessible manner. Educational games, songs, and Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) became the primary tools in the centre, creating a seamless

blend of play and study.

Indoor and outdoor games such as Ludo, carrom, and football were provided to promote teamwork and social skills while stimulating students' interest in attending the learning centre. Through these interactive methods, children developed a routine of daily attendance and grew comfortable with the centre as a place for both learning and enjoyment.

Community Engagement through Siksha Samity:

Recognizing the importance of parental and community support in sustaining children's education, 4S India established a **Siksha Samity**, a local educational committee that included both teachers and parents. This committee provided a platform for parents to participate actively in their children's educational journey. Monthly parent-teacher meetings were organized to discuss not only academic performance but also health, hygiene, and overall well-being.

These meetings allowed parents to express their concerns and expectations, while also reinforcing the value of education. By involving parents in these discussions, the centre helped to shift community perceptions about education and underscored the transformative potential of sustained school attendance.

Building Local Capacity through Training for Teachers:

The learning centre's staff included three teachers (one male and two female) and one female maid, all from the Mahadalit community. These teachers, selected for their ability to connect with the children, possess educational backgrounds that equip them for the role. Notably, one of the teachers holds a graduate degree, while others are 12th pass, reflecting a commitment to higher education within the local community. This integration of local expertise with formal education strengthens the sustainability of the intervention, fostering a supportive environment where Mahadalit children can thrive academically and personally. This also enhances the centre's credibility and reinforces its goal of providing relatable role models. To empower them with essential skills, 4S India partnered with the Pratham Foundation to provide basic training in remote learning, equipping teachers with the knowledge and tools necessary to guide children effectively, even in challenging circumstances.

KEY OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS:

The centre's inclusive, culturally sensitive approach yielded several noteworthy outcomes:

- **Increased Attendance and Consistent Engagement:** The centre now serves over 100 students from nearby villages, with an impressive attendance rate of over 80%. These students

attend the centre every evening from 4-6 pm, eagerly participating in the engaging learning activities.

- **Behavioral and Academic Improvements:** Surveys showed children became more disciplined and engaged, demonstrating improved reading and math skills.
- **Reintegration into Formal Schooling:** Over 38% of the students (40 students out of 105) who had previously dropped out have shown renewed interest in formal education and have begun attending their regular schools consistently.
- **Empowerment Through Localized Staffing:** By employing teachers and staff from the Mahadalit community, 4S India has not only created local employment but also fostered a sense of pride and connection among the students, who see relatable role models within the centre.
- **Community Ownership and Support:** The establishment of the Siksha Samity has deepened community engagement, allowing parents to take an active role in their children's education and growth. Siksha Samity's monthly meetings fostered parental involvement, enhancing community ownership. Discussions around health and hygiene further emphasize the centre's holistic approach.
- **Enhanced Learning Environment:** Equipped with two classrooms and one large hall, the centre offered a conducive learning environment and safe space for children to learn, play, and socialize.

FEEDBACK OF THE STAKEHOLDERS:

- **Feedback of the students:** The centre now serves 105 students, reflecting an increase from previous reports. Students emphasized the centre's emphasis on games, storytelling, and interactive learning, with all respondents stating that the centre improved their reading, math skills, and classroom confidence. Daily attendance patterns suggest strong engagement, with a majority attending regularly. And students reported that the safe and joyful environment has been a key factor for increasing their motivation.
- **Feedback from the teachers:** Teachers emphasize play-based methods as most effective, using games, storytelling, and songs alongside traditional books. They reported that students show improved behavior and no longer loiter after school, demonstrating increased interest in learning. On the other hand, while teachers received basic training, they highlighted the need for advanced resources and additional support. Major challenges they are facing include children balancing education with agricultural labor and a lack of study materials like books and notebooks.

- **Feedback from the parents:** Parent engagement in Siksha Samity meetings has been crucial for sustaining the centre's impact. According to responses from 10 parents, all families reported positive changes in their children's interest in learning, behavior and school attendance. Suggestions for improvement include increasing teacher capacity, offering technical skill programs, and providing better learning materials and infrastructure, reflecting the growing aspirations tied to the learning centre's success.
- **Feedback from the community:** Community members noted visible changes in children's hygiene, living standards, and enthusiasm for education. They suggested integrating technical skills and expanding the centre's reach to include non-SC students. Parents appreciated the Siksha Samity's role in encouraging educational dialogue

KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Cultural Relevance:** Teachers from the Mahadalit community have been integral in establishing trust and rapport, allowing the students to feel a strong sense of belonging.
- **Joyful Learning as an Effective Strategy:** The use of play-based learning methods helped students overcome initial disinterest in education, transforming the centre into a space where learning is an enjoyable experience.
- **Empowerment through Local Leadership:** Hiring teachers from within the community and equipping them with the necessary skills has fostered a sustainable model of education delivery.
- **Parent-Teacher Engagement for Sustained Impact:** Monthly meetings with parents have strengthened community ownership of the centre's goals, and regular updates help parents appreciate the long-term benefits of education.

CHALLENGES STILL FACING:

- **Limited Funding:** The learning centre operates

solely on 4S India's internal resources without external funding support, which poses sustainability challenges.

- **Inadequate Learning Resources:** Teachers reported a shortage of essential materials, including books and notebooks. Supplying these resources would significantly improve the learning environment and outcomes.
- **Need for Advanced Teacher Training:** While teachers received basic training, expanding professional development programs would enhance their instructional quality and pedagogical skills.
- **Balancing Education with Labor:** Many students combines schooling with agricultural work. Implementing flexible learning models can better accommodate their dual responsibilities and support consistent attendance.

CONCLUSION:

The learning centre in Rajan, Gaya, has shown promising outcomes in re-engaging Mahadalit children with education. Its inclusive and context-specific approach is rooted in joyful learning, community participation, and local staffing, which has led to improved attendance, behavioral changes, and renewed interest in formal schooling.

However, it would be premature to conclude that this intervention is a definitive success model. While the initiative has yielded encouraging outcomes within this specific community context, its broader effectiveness remains to be tested. Replicating similar interventions in other areas with comparable socio-economic conditions is essential to assess the model's scalability and relevance. Such efforts would provide deeper insights into its potential for addressing educational exclusion among Mahadalit and other marginalized communities across diverse settings.





Subject: Niwas Kumar
Parents: Father - Uday Mandal, Mother - Laxmnia Devi
School: Madhya Vidyalaya Rajan, Class 4

Background: Niwas Kumar, a student of Madhya Vidyalaya Rajan, was enrolled in class 4 but was struggling significantly with his academics. Due to a lack of interest and parental guidance, he stopped attending school and spent his days playing games like gulli danda and goli. Despite his parents' efforts to send him to school, Niwas would leave home but avoid attending classes.

Identification of the Issue: One day, during school hours, Niwas was spotted playing by Chandan Ji, the Teacher In-Charge of the learning Centre. Sensing an issue, Chandan Ji engaged him in conversation. Niwas revealed that he lacked support at home—neither his parents guided him with his studies, nor did they supervise his homework. This neglect left him feeling unmotivated and disinterested in school.

Intervention: Recognizing the importance of intervention, Chandan Ji introduced Niwas to the concept of a nearby learning center. He explained that the center not only provided academic support but also had facilities for playing, which might interest Niwas. Despite this encouragement, Niwas was reluctant to attend initially. To ensure Niwas's participation, the teacher at the learning center took a proactive approach. They visited Niwas daily, encouraging him to join and even accompanying him to the center. Gradually, Niwas began attending the learning center regularly.

Outcomes: With the consistent support of the learning center, Niwas started completing his school homework. After two months of attending the learning center, Niwas resumed going to school regularly. Niwas not only continued his school attendance but also became a regular participant at the learning center, balancing his education with recreational activities.

Conclusion: This case highlights the transformative impact of community-based learning initiatives and the importance of personalized attention for children struggling with education. By identifying the root cause of Niwas's disengagement and addressing it through targeted intervention, Chandan Ji and the learning center team successfully reintegrated Niwas into the formal education system. Such efforts underscore the importance of collaborative support from educators, community workers, and families in ensuring every child's right to education.



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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Dr. Mahua is a seasoned development professional with over 20 years of experience across livelihood, public health, gender, and water & sanitation. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology and has served in senior advisory and leadership roles in reputed organizations. Her career reflects a strong blend of academic rigor and practical field experience, with significant contributions in program design, implementation, research, monitoring & evaluation, and capacity building. Dr. Mahua has provided technical support to various national and international development programs. She has a strong publication record in various reputed journals.

Her core competencies include evidence-based program planning, participatory research, and institutional capacity strengthening. She has worked across multiple Indian states and has a deep understanding of socio-cultural dynamics affecting development outcomes. Additionally, she has led large-scale evaluations and contributed to baseline and endline studies for development programs.

Dr. Mahua is known for her analytical acumen, strategic thinking, and commitment to equity-focused development. Fluent in English, Hindi, and Bengali, she continues to be an influential voice in India's development landscape.

ABBREVIATION

4S: Sarva Seva Samity Sanstha

ABF: Axis Bank Foundation

ABMMU: Akhil Bhartiya MGNREGA Mazdoor Union

AE: Assistant Engineer

BPL: Below Poverty Line

BRAC: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

BRLPS: Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society

CBOs: Community-Based Organizations

CLFs: Cluster Level Federations

CSOs: Civil Society Organizations

DAY-NRLM: Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission

DFID: (UK) Department for International Development

Dy.: Deputy

FFS: Farmer Field School

FIGs: Farmer Interest Groups

FPCG: Farmer Producer cum Consumer Groups

FPOs: Farmer Producer Organizations

FY: Financial Year

GI: Galvanized Iron

HH: Household

HP: Horsepower

IBL: IndusInd Bank Limited

ICDS: Integrated Child Development Services

ILO: International Labour Organization

ILO C-189: International Labour Organization Convention No. 189

IMR: Infant Mortality Rate

ITI: Industrial Training Institute

JEEViKA: Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society

J-PAL: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab

JE: Junior Engineer

KVK: Krishi Vigyan Kendra

MEL & KM: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning & Knowledge Management

MGNREGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

MMR: Maternal Mortality Rate

MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly

MLC: Member of Legislative Council

MIS: Management Information System

NABARD: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development

NACDOR: National Confederation of Dalit Organizations

NCDHR: National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

NFHS-5: National Family Health Survey – Round 5

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations

NHRC: National Human Rights Commission

NRLM: National Rural Livelihoods Mission

NRM: Natural Resource Management

PACS: Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme

PCTS: Preventing Child Trafficking in Bihar

PDS: Public Distribution System

PHIA: Partnering Hope into Action

PO: Programme Officer

PRI: Panchayati Raj Institution

PWDs: Persons With Disabilities

RO: Regional Officer

SCs: Scheduled Castes

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

SDM: Sub-Divisional Magistrate

SECC: Socio-Economic and Caste Census

SEG(s): Socially Excluded Group(s)

SEWA: Self-Employed Women's Association (in SEWA Bharat)

SHGs: Self-Help Groups

SSEVS: Samagra Sikhhan Evam Vikas Sansthan

TLM: Teaching Learning Materials

TUP: Targeting the Ultra-Poor

UCO RSETI: UCO Bank Rural Self Employment Training Institute

UID: Unique Identification

USD: United States Dollar

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VOICES FROM THE
FIELD

From Margins to Momentum

This compendium brings to light real stories of courage, struggle, and transformation from Bihar's most marginalized Mahadalit communities. Through narratives of grassroots action and lived experiences, it chronicles pathways of dignity, inclusion, and empowerment.

Curated by 4S India in collaboration with committed partners, this volume stands as a testament to the power of community voice, local leadership, and the pursuit of social justice. It offers not only insight—but also inspiration—for those working toward a more equitable and inclusive future.



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