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BY SAYANTANI NATH
MARCH 5, 2020

In 22 Years, Prema Has Helped Over 5 Lakh Women Become Organic Farmers, Mentors

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CHANGEMAKERS
WOMEN
As a mother of two, 24-year-old Rajshree from Andur village in Osmanabad, Maharashtra, was at her wit's end. Her children, aged 3 and 5, were falling sick almost routinely every two or three weeks. The nature of the ailments was common, and the parents were incurring heavy medical expenditure.

Rajshree's husband was the sole breadwinner for the family who practised chemical farming in a small landholding of around 4.5 acres. Frequent droughts and erratic climate in Marathwada had affected the cash crop yield in his fields.

Lack of proper nutrition and consequent ill-health had affected his small family of four.

It was at such a juncture in 2018 that Rajshree came across Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) – a non-profit organisation in rural Maharashtra run by Prema Gopalan, who was recently crowned by World Economic Forum as 'Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Year'.
At the SSP centre in Andur, Rajshree learnt the nitty-gritty of organic farming and started growing organic pulses, legumes, vegetables and leafy greens in a small portion of the family land, as per the one-acre farming model preached by SSP. Her family started consuming only the organic food crops cultivated by her and there was a drastic improvement in their health and income.

“In the last 6 months, my children haven’t gotten sick at all,” Rajshree beams with happiness.

**SSP has Empowered Over 5 Lakh Women**

Across 2000 villages of Maharashtra and some parts of Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Odisha as well, over 5 lakh women like Rajshree have benefitted through varied livelihood options – from organic farming to running small businesses. And they unanimously thank one person for being the messiah in their lives – Prema Gopalan.

The rural crusader has ushered in a new era in women empowerment through her organisation Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP), which she officially founded in 1992.

With a Master’s Degree in Social Work, Gopalan had been actively working in the poverty spectrum since 1984.

It was after the devastating Latur earthquake in 1993 that Gopalan started working closely with affected rural women. To rehabilitate the survivors, she created a network of women-led groups that focus on ‘Swayam’ (self-empowerment) and ‘Shiksham’ (education).

**From Silent Housewives to Feisty Entrepreneurs**

The women-led self-help groups and rural cooperatives Gopalan had seen so far mostly focused on empowering women through some very basic skill sets – like tailoring or handicrafts. But, Gopalan always wanted women to become community leaders and participate in the decision-making process – both in their own households and the community.

“I felt that the focus should not be simply earning money, but overall empowerment in all aspects,” shares Gopalan.
Within the first few years, SSP involved women from nearly 2 lakh families in 1200 villages of Latur and Osmanabad districts. These women were stuck in the daily rigmarole of managing the kitchen, kids and the household. But now they were emerging as faces of change.

“We trained these women to become village-level facilitators. The women were taught the basics of managing household finances, saving and investing. They brought forth a flurry of changes in the villages in farming, education, social enterprising and even housing! Not only would they bring in other women into the process but also act as mediators between the local government and the villagers – thereby increasing the prospect and credibility of our operations by volumes.”

Following years of good work and persuasion by these newly emerged women leaders, the State Government of Maharashtra finally agreed to welcome them on board as consultants for change in the remote interiors. And it was in 1998 that SSP finally registered as an official organisation, after over five years of groundbreaking impact.
Climate-Efficient Organic Farming

At present, farming and social entrepreneurship are the two key sectors where women of Swayan Shikshan Prayog are chiefly involved. In fact, their one-acre farming model has ushered in strides of transformation in the drought-prone Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

“The prevalent socio-cultural norms in Marathwada never allowed women to be agricultural decision-makers. Meanwhile, their husbands were toiling away their days on growing climate-dependent cash crops like cotton and sugarcane. The recurring droughts often led to crop failure, leaving the families in an abyss of debts and losses. So we decided to start the one-acre farming model involving the womenfolk. They were advised to practise organic farming of food crops like pulses, legumes, millets and seasonal vegetables which they can consume at home,” informs Gopalan.

SSP trained these women in water-efficient mixed farming, drip irrigation, water harvesting, recycling and reuse of water for their backyard kitchen gardens. In around one acre of the family land, the women were now cultivating even up to 25 crops in a year, thereby securing the household consumption and also earning some extra by selling the surplus in Mandis (local markets).
With increased food security at home, the women felt more confident and started diversifying into other sectors as well, like social entrepreneurship and healthcare, with unfailing support from SSP.

“We work with women in vulnerable locations because I believe women can play multiple roles in achieving sustainable development goals. In fact, some of our women have emerged as climate change champions in their villages!”

Village Women as Business Leaders & Job-Creators

30-year-old Sheela, a mother of two from Solapur has been running a social enterprise of pickles, chutney, jams, papad and spices for the past 6 years. At SSP, she underwent a basic training course on household financial management and was educating women about savings and finances, before she ventured into her own business.

“Today, around 10 women are working in my business – which was once impossible in our remote hamlet. We periodically put up stalls in Pune and Mumbai and easily earn between Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000 in a month, depending on the season. It helps provide a decent livelihood for our family of five. After seeing my example, many women in the village are coming forward to become financially self-dependent. It is indeed empowering for all of us,” shares Sheela.
“We train the women to think, act and be like a complete entrepreneur. They undergo 3 months of rigorous training with lots of exercises on developing business plans, market-mapping and managing their own enterprises. Some of these women proceed on to become mentors or even job-creators for their counterparts. More than 8,000 women involved in this programme have experienced a 33 per cent rise in the family income,” Gopalan reveals.

SSP follows a multi-pronged approach to rural women empowerment which even includes mapping the behavioural changes in power dynamics at the household level. “By empowering over 5 lakh women, we have indirectly impacted nearly 50 lakh people in their families,” informs Naseem Sheikh, the associate programme director in women’s leadership & empowerment at SSP.

**Healthcare initiatives by SSP**

Preventive healthcare is another domain where Gopalan’s organisation has charted an unprecedented success. The women and girls in a village are meticulously educated on personal and menstrual hygiene, acquainted with sanitary products and monitored to follow healthy eating habits. The accentuated focus on pregnant women, newborn babies and children have helped to tackle malnutrition problems to a considerable extent.

The Arogya Sakhis are female medical volunteers trained by SSP who are equipped with primary health devices like blood pressure machines, glucometers, thermometers etc. They visit door-to-door conducting basic medical tests periodically and store the data on mobile and tablets. The records are later screened by doctors who prescribe medications and treatment accordingly. Serious cases are referred to nearby hospitals for further diagnosis.

Away from all the limelight, Prema Gopalan has built an extensive rural network of women-centred development and thereby redefined women empowerment in India. Gopalan’s unique and vehemently successful approach towards women empowerment should serve as a model for like-minded social workers and organisations across the country.

Also Read: ‘We Earn More Now’: Couple Quits UK Jobs For Organic Farming in Native Village (https://www.thebetterindia.com/217393/nri-couple-organic-farming-earns-lakhs-quit-uk-jobs-native-village-gujarat-goals-say143/)
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