

# Swayam Shikshan Prayog

Centering Women Leadership in Social Development

**R**esilient women lead to resilient communities, which are the foundational backbone of a resilient society. Only a resilient society can make a resilient nation which will keep progressing and developing to its optimum potential.

The only way to make women resilient enough is through education and learning. It could only be achieved when women themselves believe in learning and acquiring knowledge. However, they need to be made aware of it, access to and all the opportunities available to them so they can build their resilience, problem-solving abilities, and leadership skills.

What is necessary in this regard is forging social relationships and creating a self-empowering ecosystem of learning and education. Just like one created by **Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP)**, the name of which itself stands for *Experimenting Self-Education for Empowerment*.

SSP was **founded** by the great visionary **Ms Prema Gopalan** with a dream of *centering women's leadership in community development*. She completed her Master's Degree in Social Work from the prestigious TATA Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Her search for economic alternatives for women belonging to poor communities led her to pioneer work with savings and credit for grassroots women in rural Maharashtra.

*“Envisioned by the beloved Ms Gopalan, our approach at SSP is bringing vulnerable and marginalised women to the centre of leadership in addressing disasters and climatic risks across India. Although, Ms Gopalan is no more in physical form with us, her blessings, love, compassion, and enduring spirit will live forever in our hearts.”* Says **Mr Upmanyu Patil**, Director - Programs at Swayam Shikshan Prayog.

Upmanyu has had expertise in disaster management and resilient development for the last two decades. He is a highly committed and innovative socio-technical

development professional with an engineering and management background.

His work has been committed to designing, developing, and strengthening large-scale interventions that involve community institutions and PRIs in water and environmental sanitation energy and rural development across climate-threatened communities.

## Fostering A Women Entrepreneurial Leadership Network

Grassroots women as innovators and changemakers are demonstrating community resilience strategies through climate resilient farming, sustainable livelihoods, and entrepreneurship development.

SSP widely advocates for changing public policy in favour of recognizing grassroots women's collectives in their new roles as community resource persons/community level facilitators, and leaders and shares these learnings widely with peer networks and institutions globally.

To connect the growing network of women entrepreneurs to the mainstream institutions, SSP in its role as an ecosystem builder, *promoted*:

- A federated network of women's collectives;
- Women-led Agricultural Value Chain
- Six women-led Farmer Producer Organization (FPOs)

Together, these enterprise entities provide access to enterprise finance, business support and links to global and domestic market players that women need to succeed in remote and opaque markets.

## Women-led Agricultural Value Chain

*Six women-led Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)* are created with over 4,672 shareholders, who are taking



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lead in the agriculture and value chain sector.

The value chain network promotes the production of Dairy, Pulses, Goatery and Vegetables with other products that are required by small families in rural India.

### An Exhilarating Journey

The journey of SSP through the decentralised leadership of Prema Gopalan was not an easy task as unorganised poor and marginal women communities do not acquire knowledge and powerful voices to raise their concerns in their families and local communities. To address this, SSP has mobilised women in groups to collectivise their thinking and action.

During the 1993 earthquake in Latur, these women have come together in making decisions to rebuild houses and address livelihoods through government partnership.

Upmanyu says, “The experience of Latur earthquake rehabilitation strengthened our confidence and approach to the grassroots-centred development initiatives.”

### A Unique One-Acre Farming Model

Further to add this, SSP worked with different disasters in Gujarat (2001 earthquake), Tamilnadu Tsunami (2004), Bihar and Assam Floods (2008/2009) and Kerala floods (2018) to mobilise and strengthen women’s leadership and community resilience.

“Our Women-led **Climate Resilient Farming (WCRF) model** (also called a one-acre farming model) gained recognition from national and global communities. In 2017, SSP received the **UNDP Equator price for this sustainable farming model**,” reveals Upmanyu.

### Women’s Initiative to Learn and Lead (WILL)

By unleashing rural women entrepreneurs in ailing economies, SSP has opened up non-traditional livelihood incomes, tripled household earnings and built new social capital in excluded areas. It has also galvanized investors, business trainers, climate scientists and government players to partner with rural women and co-create market-linked impact.

SSP’s recent flagship initiative, ‘**Women’s Initiative to Learn and Lead (WILL)**,’ focuses on women’s agency and leadership, enabling them to participate in governance, address critical issues at home and in the community, and empower other women.

### Community’s Tech-Knowledge Empowerment

Being an experienced leader, Upmanyu opines on how adopting modern digital technologies impacts the social reform sector and how SSP is adapting to the change. He expresses that SSP’s objective is to learn and implement new innovations through women’s leadership and especially women in communities are quick in learning new knowledge and technologies that suit their requirements.

## Leading NGOs Impacting Corporate Social Responsibility Drive - 2022

Upmanyu recalls, “During the COVID-19 pandemic situation when mobility was restricted, our women learned digital skills in communicating and coordinating COVID-19 response activities.”

Women learned how to participate in and conduct online Zoom meetings, passing useful messages and awareness videos to communities, learning new farming techniques through online videos, conducting agriculture and livelihood training through digital meeting platforms etc.

### Digital Women Leaders

Linkage with business support of SSP and **Sakhi Unique Rural Enterprise (SURE)** ensures that benefits from *Gaavkhaj online application* reach the stakeholders and also gives them digital support by providing *Mobile Platform Apps* to improve standard markets for women stakeholders’ businesses.

Now, these women are called **Digital Sakhis** and they are empowering communities with new technologies and knowledge.

### SSP’s Risk Mitigation Measures

Speaking about many obstacles, hurdles and issues, Upmanyu shares, “*Climatic changes and natural disasters are major challenges but our **Community Resilience Fund (CRF)** is a risk mitigation measure to address these risks.*” Women Farmers collective at cluster level and One Acre farming model itself is a de-risking model towards climate change.

Bureaucratic hurdles in getting govt schemes and programmes are overcome by regular dialogues and lobbying with local government and other stakeholders.

### CSR Conjoint Sustainable Development Goals

Expanding SSP’s social responsibility drive along with the corporates, *Upmanyu shares*, “We see corporates are one of the major stakeholders in development initiatives in India. Newly emerged CSR initiatives and their approach to partnering with NGOs to address Sustainable Development Goals are going to be strengthened in the coming years.

We work with CSR very closely for the last eight years and brought visible changes in the villages of Maharashtra. Public/private partnership is the need of the hour and our work with CSR has demonstrated that technology,

resources, and innovative knowledge can bring big changes in the community.”

### An Adept Advice for Social Knowledge Leaders

Upmanyu’s advice to budding social entrepreneurs who aspire to venture into the not-for-profit space is an inspirational force for Social Knowledge Leaders. He believes that social entrepreneurs are inspiring leaders for many and they added value to new products and markets.

He adds, “*When we mix business/entrepreneurship with a social approach there is always a risk in bringing success in business.*” So it will be always good that business should be treated as a profitable venture and Not-for-profit players can support and enhance the knowledge of entrepreneurs.

### Future Expansion of Social Learning

About envisioning scaling SSPs’ operations and offerings in 2022 and beyond, Upmanyu informs that SSP’s main approach is learning adaptive practices and scaling to new geographies.

In Post Covid era, SSP has planned to take positive lessons from the pandemic and find a sustainable solution to bring back the communities in livelihoods, health, food security and agriculture.

“Working with government and CSR gives us the opportunity to share and scale our approach to new communities across India. **Our business and farming models are appreciated by the national government and CSR will be the key factor for many communities to reap success in their life,**” concludes Mr Upmanyu Patil.

For more information *click the below-mentioned weblink and links to SSPs’ social media platforms:*

- <https://swayamshikshanprayog.org/>
- **YouTube:** <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4KSKqYZKU b9cQiNy6AFbjQ>
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/swayamshikshanprayog.org>
- **LinkedIn:** <https://www.linkedin.com/in/swayamshikshan-prayog-ssp-51b9b440/>
- **Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/sspindia>
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