

# VAGAD VOICES

ADIVASI WOMEN DRIVING DEVELOPMENT



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# INTRODUCTION

Across villages nestled in the hills and plains of rural Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, a transformation is taking place. In communities often shaped by patriarchal norms and systemic exclusion, women are stepping beyond the boundaries of domestic life to become catalysts of change. They are not only cultivating crops but also hope, dignity, and collective power.

This anthology brings together stories of such women—from farmers to anganwadi workers to community organizers—who are reclaiming their right to public life. Whether conserving traditional seeds like Taku Devi, re-enrolling dropout children in school like Hundi Bhurji, or navigating complex government schemes like Indra Devi, these women are defining what it means to lead in their communities.

They recognize that leadership is not about observation but participation, and that change happens slowly but surely. Their stories are not ones of overnight success, but of daily resilience—of women who, often without title or recognition, have transformed their homes, villages, and finances.

The women's efforts are divided into four themes, organized by chapter: sustainable agriculture (“Seeds of Sustainability”), government schemes (“Bridging the Gap”), child rights (“Classroom Champions”), and encouraging female leadership (“Leading Together”). Taken together, the stories are united by one thread: the spirit of Swaraj—self-reliance, self-rule, and shared responsibility.

These women's stories serve not just as inspiration but as affirmation—that when women lead, villages thrive.



# ABOUT VAAGDHARA



VAAGDHARA is a non-governmental organization registered under the Rajasthan Societies Registration Act, 1958. Its name combines "Vagad," a tribal region in Rajasthan near the Gujarat border, with "Dhara," meaning stream. The organization's work is rooted in the concept of Swaraj, or self-reliance, drawing from Gandhian principles. For over two decades, VAAGDHARA has been working with tribal populations in villages at the tri-junction area of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat.

The organization has three focus areas: True Childhood, True Farming, and True Governance. VAAGDHARA addresses the interconnected issues in each of these focus areas through the circular lifestyle approach. In True Farming, VAAGDHARA promotes food and farming sovereignty for tribal farmers as well as the preservation of traditional agriculture practices. Through True Childhood, VAAGDHARA advances child rights, protection, and nutrition. Finally, VAAGDHARA strives for True Governance by connecting marginalized farmers to beneficial government policies and supporting democratic community participation.

# GLOSSARY

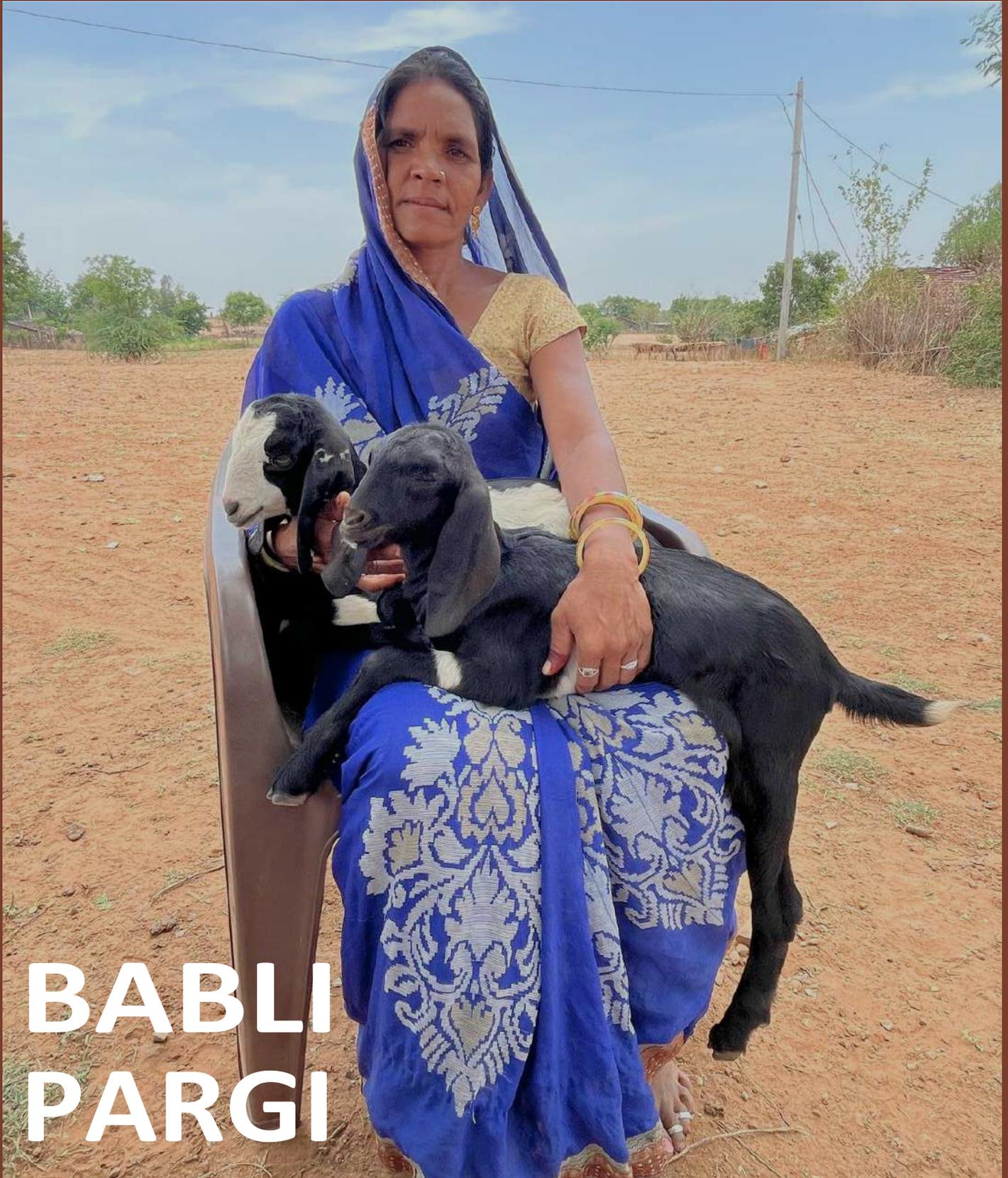
- ◆ ANGANWADI CENTER - A type of rural child care centre in India under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program to provide basic health care, nutrition, and education for children.
- ◆ BAL SWARAJ SAMUH (BSS) - Group of 20 children (10 male, 10 female) where they are oriented on child rights, traditional practices, and involving them in games, etc. to help them identify and address issues faced by them.
- ◆ BIGHA - Land Measurement unit in villages. 2.5 bigha is 1 acre.
- ◆ CHAUPALS - Community Meetings
- ◆ DASHPARNI - Organic pesticide made from 10 types of leaves.
- ◆ GRAM SWARAJ SAMUH (GSS) - Mixed group of 10 male and 10 female participants who operate at the village level to address issues faced within the community.
- ◆ JEEVAMRUT - Organic fertilizer made with the use of cow dung, urine, water, mud, and food to promote microbial growth.
- ◆ KRISHI EVAM ADIVASI SWARAJ SANGATHAN (KASS) - An independent people's organisation representing 35-40 villages. It consists of 20 male and 20 female participants from the GSS and SS groups.
- ◆ MGNREGA - Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
- ◆ NABARD - National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
- ◆ NIMASTRA - an organic pesticide and bio-insecticide made from Neem plant parts and used to prevent and treat plant diseases and pests.
- ◆ PALANHAR SCHEME - Sponsorship scheme by the Rajasthan government for Orphan Children.
- ◆ PMAY - Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna
- ◆ POSHAN VATIKA - Nutrition Garden
- ◆ SAKSHAM SAMUH (SS) - Women's group that operates at the village level to address issues faced within the community, with particular focus on addressing women's issues.
- ◆ SARPANCH - Head of the village council
- ◆ TEHSIL - Administrative subdivision of a district

# CHAPTER 1

# SEEDS OF SUSTAINABILITY

PROMOTING SELF-RELIANT AGRICULTURE





# BABLI PARGI

## GROWING A FLOCK AND A LIVELIHOOD

*KAJALIYA VILLAGE, ANANDPURI BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



BABLI DEVI PARGI, a woman in her early 40s, has emerged as a symbol of economic self-reliance and community change. She studied until the tenth grade and has a family of five, including her husband, two sons, and a daughter.

Her journey began modestly. After marrying in 2005, Babli and her husband faced acute financial challenges. Farming was seasonal and unpredictable. With no livestock and three young children to care for, the couple had to migrate temporarily to Ahmedabad, where they lived in makeshift shelters and cooked outside, surviving on a joint income of ₹10,000 per month. They were dependent on loans from local moneylenders to survive.

But a turning point came in 2015, when Babli joined the Saksham Samuh and GSS collectives facilitated by VAAGDHARA. Through these meetings, she learned about goat rearing and seed sovereignty. In 2016, she and her husband—an animal doctor—brought home their first Sirohi goat, a purchase of ₹1,000 from VAAGDHARA. That single goat marked the beginning of an extraordinary journey.

From just one desi goat, Babli grew her herd to 10 in 2017, eventually selling some to build a new home. With profits from her goat sales—over ₹6.3 lakhs to date—she bought an extra half bigha of land and pays for her children’s education. Her herd now includes desi-Sirohi crossbreeds, known for faster growth and better market value. At times, the family has managed over 50 goats, selling 10 or more each year depending on need, earning ₹17,000 to ₹18,000 per goat.



Babli is deeply involved in every aspect of livestock care—maintaining a cattle shed, deworming every three months, administering vaccines every six months, and preparing a mineral-rich supplement for the goats to lick, made from Multani mitti, lime, salt, and ash. She trained for four days at a center in Banswara, learning the nuances of animal husbandry. The couple dries and stores bajra, wheat, and maize for both household and animal consumption, selling only goats to maintain household income.

She now guides other women in the village—educating them about goat health, the importance of clean shelters, and how to calculate market weight. Government employees from nearby areas come to her to buy goats. When neighbors stop by, she also shares knowledge about seed saving and the importance of growing one’s own vegetables and grains. "Don’t depend on the market," she tells them, offering seeds to help others become self-reliant.

Her influence doesn't stop at agriculture. Babli is actively involved in local governance. Encouraged by her women's group, she stood for Vadpanch elections in 2021 with the goal of representing 300 families in Kajaliya. She also supports local events like weddings and public meetings.

For Babli, education is the next frontier of change. Her eldest daughter is pursuing a BSTC teaching degree, and Babli has sold goats to fund her tuition and boarding—over ₹2 lakh. Her sons, too, walk an hour each way to reach school. But the family believes that education is crucial, and that children need to experience the outside world in order to learn and grow. “The mind grows when children leave the village,” Babli says. “Ghar rehne se badlav nahi hota”—staying home brings no change.

Though financial constraints still loom—like when they couldn’t afford the ₹90,000 fee for a good school that accepted their youngest son—Babli and her husband remain hopeful. They believe boys and girls should have equal chances. “Finish education first, then marriage,” she says. “Even after marriage and children, girls should continue to work.” ♦





# JEMLI RATHORE

THE ORGANIC PATH TO PROSPERITY

*BORKHEDI VILLAGE, KUSHALJIARH BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



JEMLI BADER RATHORE of Borkhedi village was once plagued by severe financial constraints that affected her family of her husband, three sons, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. Due to lack of livelihood, Jemli and her husband had to migrate to cities like Surat and Ahmedabad to work as labourers during the summers. This not only separated the family but also had a profound negative effect on the education, nutrition and health of the children, who often did not receive food on time with their parents gone. Because their house was on the outskirts of Borkhedi, the children's safety at night was also a concern.

In fact, seasonal migration was a common problem in Borkhedi. Jemli Ben was just one of many who struggled to establish a stable source of livelihood that would meet the needs of their families and allow for consistent, quality education for their children. However, opportunities were scarce due to limited access from the village, as well as the lack of knowledge and skilled training that she and her family possessed. The social limitations of being a woman also presented roadblocks in securing financial opportunities.

In 2019, VAAGDHARA established a Saksham Samuh in Borkhedi. Upon joining these meetings, Jemli Ben received information about new sources of income like plant nurseries, organic farming and vermicompost. VAAGDHARA provided the village with 3,000 plant seeds, bags, nets, tools and technical training.

Jemli Ben seized the occasion and began developing her first plant nursery. At first, she encountered significant roadblocks. Her house's location at one end of the village made it difficult for her to transport seedlings from there to the nurseries, especially during the monsoon season. Over the course of many Saksham Samuh meetings, Jemli Ben also had to learn the ideal conditions under which to grow each plant. Finally, the nurseries required substantial amounts of water, particularly under Rajasthan's scorching summer seasons. Jemli Ben was initially forced to invest in extra water to establish both nurseries.

But over time, the proceeds from plant sales began to accrue. With this additional income, she was able to buy her own motor and pipe to provide sufficient irrigation for the nurseries. In tandem, Jemli Ben also turned to growing organic vegetables, as well as producing vermicompost and Dashparni medicine for her crops (a natural pesticide made from the leaves of ten different plants, including neem, papaya, castor, etc.). Once her husband joined these efforts, the family was able to stop their seasonal migration completely.

Today, Jemli Ben has both a vegetable and a plant nursery. She grows many varieties of mango, guava, jackfruit, sandalwood, ornamental and forestry plants and sells them in the Kushalgarh market herself.

Her annual income has reached around ₹5 lakh, of which ₹1 to ₹1.5 lakh is derived from organic farming. Her husband now earns Rs. 15,000–Rs. 20,000 a month from a grocery shop and flour mill in the village. Her children have been admitted to good schools and the entire family is living a self-sufficient life, an embodiment to the solution of seasonal migration. ♦





**SITA  
BAI**

**FARMING WITH CARE: THE ROAD TO LAND REFORM**

*MACHA VILLAGI, SAJJANGARH BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



SITA BAI has become an inspiration for village development and land reform. Five years ago, she became a member of KASS Tambesra. The main subject of Sita Bai's concern was the deteriorating health of agricultural land. Excessive use of chemical fertilizers and medicines was not just decreasing their land's fertility but also harming communal water sources.

Sita Bai recognized that taking on the challenge of land reform would not be a simple task. Community members lacked awareness about this issue, and farmers were not educated on alternatives to chemical fertilizers. Moreover, government scheme benefits were not reaching the villagers.

Sita Bai endeavored to meet the Gram Panchayat, block level, and administrative officers again and again to explain why land reform is necessary. Although her words were taken lightly, she began to attack the issue in an organized manner:

- She played an important role in getting soil health cards made for 238 families of the Gram Panchayat.
- She reminded the farmers of her village of the tradition of considering “land as mother” and motivated them to conduct organic farming.
- She got the most land reform works done in her proposals, such as the construction of check dams and field bunds.
- She supported the construction of advanced compost pits for 38 families across three villages, ensuring access to organic manure.

Due to Sita Bai's efforts, village meetings in Macha now promote the use of indigenous manure and medicine. Farmers have adopted traditional and sustainable farming alternatives, and young women, taking Sita Bai as their role model, are joining community groups. ♦



**JASI  
BEN**

**DAIRY, DIRT, & MORE: A MULTI-SOURCE INCOME**

*BHITODI VILLAGE, FATEHPURA BLOCK, DAHOD DISTRICT, GUJARAT*

JASI BEN has a small family consisting of her husband Jeetubhai, two sons, and one daughter. The family has 3 bigha of their own and 2 bigha of mortgaged land. There is a well from which they irrigate their crops: grains, pulses, vegetables, and fruits, which fulfill household needs. Along with farming, they also rear 2 buffaloes, 2 cows, and 8 goats.

For the past 3 years, Jasi Ben and her husband have been associated with VAAGDHARA's Gram Swaraj Group (GSS) and KASS. By participating in these monthly meetings of she came to understand understood the importance of self-reliance. In other words, they learned how life can be improved with one's own resources

Under the guidance of an organization representative, Jasi Ben began rearing 20 hens. She was able to turn a good profit from this first batch of poultry.



Through Jasi Ben's and Jeetubhai's advocacy and planning, their village of Bhitodi established a milk collection center 18 months ago. The collection center sends about 50 liters of milk daily to Panchmahal Cooperative Milk Production Organization in Godhra, out of which 4-5 liters of milk comes from Jasi Ben's livestock. From this, the couple earns an income of up to ₹6000 per month.

After joining VAAGDHARA, Jasi Ben started a nutrition garden in which she grows indigenous crops including vegetables like ginger, turmeric, chili, bitter gourd, eggplant, potato and fruit trees like mango, guava, date, banana, and ber. Through her nutrition garden, Jasi Ben has curbed her family's purchase of market vegetables and allowed them to become self-sufficient. She is also spreading awareness by encouraging her neighbors to begin organic farming.

The family also has a tent business, in which items are given on rent on the occasion of weddings and other functions. From this, an annual income of about ₹1.5 lakh is earned. Apart from this, Jeetubhai often cooks food at wedding events, from which additional income is obtained. ♦





# TAKU DEVI

## THE SEED KEEPER OF KANELA

*KANELA VILLAGE, JHATOL BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

55-YEAR OLD TAKU DEVI is an inspiring woman. Her husband Laluram Ji (60 years) and son Sunil (28 years) are the primary other members of her family. Taku Devi has given a new direction to her life through the conservation of seeds and biodiversity.

In 2019, Taku Devi joined VAAGDHARA's Saksham Samuh. There, she learned the importance of traditional agriculture and biodiversity. She is now also an active member of her regional KASS. The information she received from these groups not only helped her become self-reliant through indigenous seeds but also inspired her to spread this knowledge to community women who did not attend the meetings.



Taku Devi started collecting and conserving coarse grains and indigenous seeds, including wheat, maize, kuri, kodra, kang, suran and (yam), which have been sown by generations of her ancestors. Initially, the seeds came from her family's elders. Later, she also received some seeds from VAAGDHARA and sowed them in her field. She stores these seeds at her home and uses them for farming year after year.

Taku Devi has also planted 10-15 types of fruit-bearing plants at her home, including mango, guava, and lemon. Recently, she cultivated moong (green gram), from which she earned about 20,000 rupees.

Overall, these indigenous grains and fruits have not only positively impacted her family's health but also their financial situation. Taku Devi says that by regularly consuming coarse grains, the children no longer suffer from the illnesses they used to, and everyone's digestion has also improved. Additionally, she is able to sell surplus grains and produce in the market or distribute them to other women in the village. ♦



# CHAPTER 2

## BRIDGING THE GAP

LINKING COMMUNITIES TO GOVERNMENT ENTITLEMENTS





# MIRA DEVI

WALKING THE PAPER TRAIL FOR ORPHANS

*JAJHOR KANTA VILLAGE, JHATOL BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



MEERA DEVI, a resident of Jajhor Kanta village in Rajasthan's Banswara district, has spent over three decades working the land. Born into poverty and having lost her mother at a young age, Meera never had the chance to attend school. She began farming early and remained rooted in her village throughout her life.

Now in her mid-fifties, Meera Devi lives with her two grandsons. Her own son, who struggled with alcoholism, passed away years ago. Her daughter-in-law returned to her own parents' home soon after her husband's death and has had no contact with the family since, making it difficult for Meera Devi to access government benefits that require the mother's consent or thumbprint.

**HER VOCAL LEADERSHIP  
ENSURES THAT  
VULNERABLE CHILDREN  
IN HER VILLAGE ARE  
NOT FORGOTTEN.**

Despite her personal challenges, Meera Devi has emerged as an important community resource on the Palanhar Yojna—a state government scheme that provides financial assistance, nutrition, and care to orphaned and vulnerable children through their guardians. She first learned of the scheme through community meetings organized by VAAGDHARA's local outreach workers. Curious and concerned, she began attending meetings in Ghatol and Kupda, and engaged with VAAGDHARA representatives who visited her home.

Over the past 3–4 years, Meera Devi has helped multiple families access Palanhar benefits. These include two brothers, Lakshman and Amarji, and two girls from different families, all around five to seven years old when Meera Devi first got involved. In one case, the children's mother had experienced mental health challenges following her husband's death, and Meera Devi played a critical role in ensuring the children received support.



Navigating government procedures is not easy—especially for someone who never learned to read or write—but Meera Devi learned to gather essential documents like Aadhaar and ration cards, obtain forms from the tehsil office, and secure signatures from the local sarpanch. She now helps others in her village do the same, often visiting families in their homes and explaining the requirements in simple terms.

While she was unable to secure Palanhar support for her own grandson due to the absence of his mother's documentation, Meera Devi continues to advocate for other children. Recently, she helped a family whose children lost their father to suicide. Thanks to her guidance, the family was able to access the Palanhar scheme and begin receiving regular support.

Through word-of-mouth and community engagement, Meera Devi has become a local anchor for the Palanhar Yojana. Her vocal leadership ensures that vulnerable children in her village are not forgotten. Her work, rooted in lived experience and compassion, has helped make government support more accessible for the children who need it most. ♦





# INDRA DEVI

FIGHTING WATER SCARCITY, DRIP BY DRIP

*fIOJRATHORE VILLA fIE, fIHATOL BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



45-YEAR OLD INDRA DEVI stands as a bridge between government schemes for irrigation equipment and rural Adivasi farmers. Despite having no formal education, Indra has become a relentless advocate for water conservation, and women’s empowerment.

Central to her journey is the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY)—a government initiative aimed at improving irrigation efficiency and ensuring “Per Drop More Crop.” The scheme helps marginal farmers access drip and sprinkler irrigation systems that conserve water and boost productivity. In regions like Ghatol, where water is scarce and terrain is mountainous, such innovations are pivotal to boosting agricultural productivity.

Indra Devi first learned about the scheme through her informal women’s circle, and later through a VAAGDHARA field worker who recognized her potential as a community connector. When a government officer first called her to discuss the scheme, she hesitated—unsure of who he was and whether she could trust him. But her doubt gave way to determination. With the help of a gram sevak, she began identifying families who could benefit. She began with ten families, and over time, has helped over 250 families access PMKSY benefits to date.

Her role isn’t just about filling out forms. Indra Devi personally visits the government office at Rupji ka Kheda to collect blank applications, returns to her village to help villagers fill them, ensures Aadhaar numbers are linked with mobile phones for OTP verifications, and coordinates with banks when necessary. For those who can’t travel, she arranges government officials to visit the village directly. Sometimes she pays for petrol out of pocket to accompany people on these trips.

Through the scheme, each farmer receives a 700-foot drip pipe and a set of 40 sprinkler heads. Indra Devi conducts one-time training sessions outside her home, demonstrating how to install and maintain the systems. With no technical expert available for minor issues, she steps in to guide people, gaining their trust and admiration. “Now,” she says, “people respectfully call me ‘madam.’”

Beyond irrigation, Indra Devi has also linked villagers with vermicompost and seed access through VAAGDHARA, and helped women push for water infrastructure. Thanks to their collective efforts, handpumps were installed in 2019, ending the 1-kilometer walk women in Goj Rathore used to make daily to fetch water.

**NOW, WHEN OFFICIALS  
COME TO HER  
VILLAGE, THEY COME  
ASKING FOR HER.**

Her leadership hasn’t always been easy. At first, villagers gossiped, and even her husband gave her pushback for going out alone or removing her ghunghat. But slowly, he began to understand. Today, he proudly supports her work and says she fears no one.

In VAAGDHARA’s 2025 Delhi Swaraj Samvad, Indra Devi spoke into a microphone for the first time and sang before a crowd—an experience that made her feel seen. Still, she prefers her village, saying that she loves her open-air home and doesn’t want to live in a closed city apartment.

Indra’s story is also one of sisterhood. From a small circle of women, she found her voice. From working with sangathans and Saksham Samuh, she realized how to help herself before helping others. Today, she uses that strength to bring others along with her—whether by ensuring someone’s Aadhaar is linked, or helping them install sprinklers to grow more with less.

She never imagined herself in this role. But now, when officials come to her village, they come asking for her. ♦



## CHAPTER 3

# CLASSROOM CHAMPIONS

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S  
FUTURES





## TURN BACK THE BARAAT: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

*JHETHALIA VILLAGE, PEEPALKHOONT BLOCK, PRATAPGARH DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

MANI DEVI, who grew up in the village of Jhethalia, has witnessed from childhood how girls' lives were decided well before they reached adulthood — early marriage, away from school, and burdened with responsibilities. But Mani Devi decided to break this tradition.

This change began when she joined VAAGDHARA and started regularly attending KASS meetings. There, she gained knowledge of her rights, learned to speak openly on social issues, and was inspired by the courage of women from other villages.

When Mani Devi started raising her voice against social evils like untouchability and child marriage in her village, the villagers and even her own relatives found it strange. But gradually, her confidence and change in thinking began to influence the people of the village.

After becoming a regular KASS attendee, she encountered a new case of child marriage in Jhethalia, this time for a 13-year-old girl. While preparations were still happening, Mani Devi went straight to the girl's family. She informed them about the law and openly discussed the health and social consequences of child marriage. Initially, the family and village elders were upset, but with the support of the panchayat, she reported the case to ChildLine, which successfully intervened and stopped the marriage. This marked a turning point in her village, where the mindset of people slowly began to shift.

Her resolve only grew stronger. When two more child marriages were about to take place, Mani Devi and the organization she worked with physically intervened. She repeatedly took action and called the police to stop these marriages. At every organizational meeting, she continued to raise awareness, spreading the message that child marriage is a crime.

To prevent yet another case of child marriage in her village, Mani Devi went directly to the girl's house. The family was reluctant to listen. Undeterred, Mani Devi, along with VAAGDHARA, conducted a collective dialogue and explained the legal consequences and emotional toll such marriages bring. Some community members took a harsh stance against her, but she remained calm and persistent. With support from VAAGDHARA, she kept engaging, inspiring, and guiding them. Eventually, this combined effort led to the cancellation of the marriage.





But Mani Devi’s work didn’t stop with intervention alone. Recognizing the link between education and early marriage, she started visiting neighboring villages, especially homes where girls had dropped out of school due to parental migration. She went door to door, urging families: “Let your children study. You can also run your livelihood in your own village. If girls study, not only will their future be better, but they can get jobs and bring pride to the entire village, the panchayat, and the family.”

Her efforts began to gain momentum. Many families chose to re-enroll their daughters in school. With continued guidance and support from Mani Devi, not only did the girls’ education resume, but many families also stopped migrating for work. Today, girls’ parents say with pride, “Because of Mani Devi, our daughters are studying again.” Some even send her thank-you letters in gratitude.

So far, Mani Devi has successfully stopped more than five child marriages. With the collective strength of the panchayat and VAAGDHARA, she has built a strong social consensus against child marriage in her village.

Armed with the belief that education is true freedom, Mani Devi has also promoted girls’ education by coordinating with local anganwadis and schools. When she first started this initiative, she faced opposition from her own people. Many parents used to say, “What will happen by educating girls? If we marry them off early, they will take care of household responsibilities.”

But through children's assemblies and parent meetings, Mani Devi emphasized the importance of education and encouraged parents to send their daughters to school. For families facing financial difficulties, she gathered information about government schemes and helped fill out forms. She also played a major role in re-enrolling girls by making a list of dropout children and sending them back to school. Finally, by raising school-related issues in the Panchayat, Mani Devi ensured that teachers also consistently showed up to classes.

With the support of VAAGDHARA, Mani Devi also used her status as an anganwadi worker to prioritize the health of women and children in Jhethalia. She ensured timely health services for pregnant women and newborns, organized vaccination and nutrition check-up camps in the village, and created local sources of healthy food through nutrition gardens that boasted indigenous plants. To ensure children received clean, nutritious food, she personally supervised the kitchen. Finally, she initiated special awareness sessions for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. ♦



# HUNDI BHURJI

LABOR OR LEARNING: ENDING THE TRADE-OFF

*MASKA MAHUNDI VILLAGE, SAJJANPARH BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

HUNDI BHURJI DINDOR is a 42-year-old woman who until four years ago was limited only to her family and fields. But when she became a member of KASS Kasarwadi, a new turn came in her life. By participating in the organization's meetings, she came to understand the issues her village was facing and acted to address them.

The biggest issue of Maska Mahundi village was urban migration. Because the village is a border area, people here, especially poor and tribal families, often shifted to states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh in search of employment during agricultural off-seasons, often taking their small children with them.

Due to this phenomenon, children's dropout rate from village schools increased rapidly. School administrators were helpless to stop this issue. This situation shook Hundi Ben to the core. Being a mother, she understood that education shapes the future of children.

Hundi Dindor first started participating in the meetings of the Village Development Committee (VDC). She made the school administration, teachers, and other members aware of the dropout situation and tried to understand the root cause of this problem.

After this, with the help of VAAGDHARA, Hundi Ben ran a public awareness campaign in Maska Mahundi. She had personal conversations with parents, explaining to them that sending children for labor is an immediate solution but a long-term loss.

Through her initiative, Maska Mahundi ran a re-enrollment campaign. Within just two years, 22 dropout children were readmitted to school (7 boys and 15 girls). These were not just numbers to the community - each child's return to school invigorated their families with hope.

Additionally, Hundi Ben intervened at the panchayat level under MGNREGA, meeting with the Sarpanch and Secretary to ensure that children were not made to do labor. By raising this issue in the Gram Sabha, she made the community aware and created a consensus that children's place is in school, not at work.

Hundi Dindor's initiative proved revolutionary in the field of education in the village. Today, Maska Mahundi village has become an example of 'zero dropout': all the children of the village now go to school. The Village Development Committee is now fully active, and parents have also started to take the importance of education seriously.

This success not only changed the atmosphere of the village, but also inspired other women of the organization. They too are now taking steps towards school improvement in their own villages. ♦





# KALPANA PARGI

POSHANWADI & PUBLIC SCHEMES: A PATH TO HEALTH

*CHIKLIBADRA VILLA #E, ANANDPURI BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*



KALPANA DEVI PARGI has been working steadily to improve health and nutrition for her family and community. Connected with VAAGDHARA since 2018, she began attending regular meetings of the Gram Swaraj group, where the organization’s facilitator guided discussions on topics like health, nutrition, and food security. These sessions inspired Kalpana Devi to take concrete steps toward better nutrition at home.

She started a small nutrition garden, or “Poshan Wadi,” near her house, where she grew green vegetables, seasonal fruits, and medicinal plants. Incorporating these fresh, home-grown foods into her family’s daily meals led to noticeable improvements in their health. The children’s immunity strengthened, and the family began spending less on medical expenses.

After accomplishing better nutrition in her own home, Kalpana Devi spread awareness by sharing her experience with other women in the village, explaining how growing their own vegetables could provide fresh and safe food that is essential for children’s growth and women’s health. She also informed them about the services available at Anganwadi centers, such as supplementary nutrition for pregnant and lactating women, regular child weight monitoring, and guidance on breastfeeding and vaccinations.

In addition, Kalpana Devi helped educate the community about government schemes that support maternal and child health. She informed women about the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, aimed at first-time pregnant women, and the Indira Gandhi Maternity Nutrition Scheme, which compensates women for wage losses during pregnancy and promotes prenatal nutrition. Thanks to her efforts, more than twenty women in her village successfully accessed these benefits.

Kalpana's own family reflects the positive impact of her work. Her husband is a farmer, and their two children, studying in tenth and ninth grades respectively, are healthy and doing well academically, supported by the nutritious food from their home garden.

Through consistent efforts in community engagement, nutrition gardening, and spreading awareness about health services and government programs, Kalpana Devi Pargi has contributed to improved health outcomes in her village. Her story illustrates how informed, practical action at the grassroots level can lead to meaningful changes in rural communities. ♦



## CHAPTER 4

# LEADING TOGETHER

CREATING SPACE FOR FEMALE  
LEADERSHIP





# RAJESHWARI KATARA

PARTICIPATION, NOT PERMISSION: WOMEN IN GRAM SABHAS

*THUMMATH VILLAGE, KUSHALGARH BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

RAJESHWARI KATARA is a graduate-educated woman who lives in the village of Thummath with her husband, a son and a daughter. Until 2020, she was an ordinary housewife, but it pained her to witness the social, economic and political condition of the women of her village.

70% of the women in the area did not participate in Gram Sabhas and development schemes. Six out of 10 families were migrating for employment. The lack of women's education and economic self-sufficiency was evident. It was this situation that inspired Rajeshwari to become an agent of change from an ordinary woman.

Rajeshwari started participating in social activities by joining her local Saksham Samuh, a women's group organized by VAAGDHARA. Once other members saw her leadership ability, she was elected as a member of the Gram Swaraj Group. In 2021, she was appointed as a representative of the Krishi Evam Adivasi Swaraj Sangathan (Agriculture and Tribal Swaraj Organization) for her region, Potalia.

Her KASS works in 11 gram panchayats. Through this leadership position, Rajeshwari directed efforts on many issues:

1. Supporting women to participate in panchayat and departmental meetings.
2. Preparing collective request letters and sending them to government departments.
3. Organizing village level women's dialogue sessions.
4. Working on local livelihood options to prevent migration.



At first, Rajeshwari faced significant challenges. She used to go alone to the local government office to fill out form no. 6 for NREGA applications, which is used by rural families to request 100 days of employment under the act. She faced pushback in getting the forms accepted since she was a single woman. Over time, she began leading women to go to the government office collectively to submit their forms. Through this collective effort, applications were easily accepted.

Earlier, only the ward panch or sarpanch used to prepare and submit proposals for NREGA, which eliminated community participation and decision-making. By taking other women of the group along to submit village development proposals, Rajeshwari was able to broaden community agency as well as women's participation in the Gram Sabha.

Initially, men did not allow women to attend meetings. But gradually, more women gained employment through NREGA, and new works were approved through the submission of village development proposals. These successes increased trust in Rajeshwari.

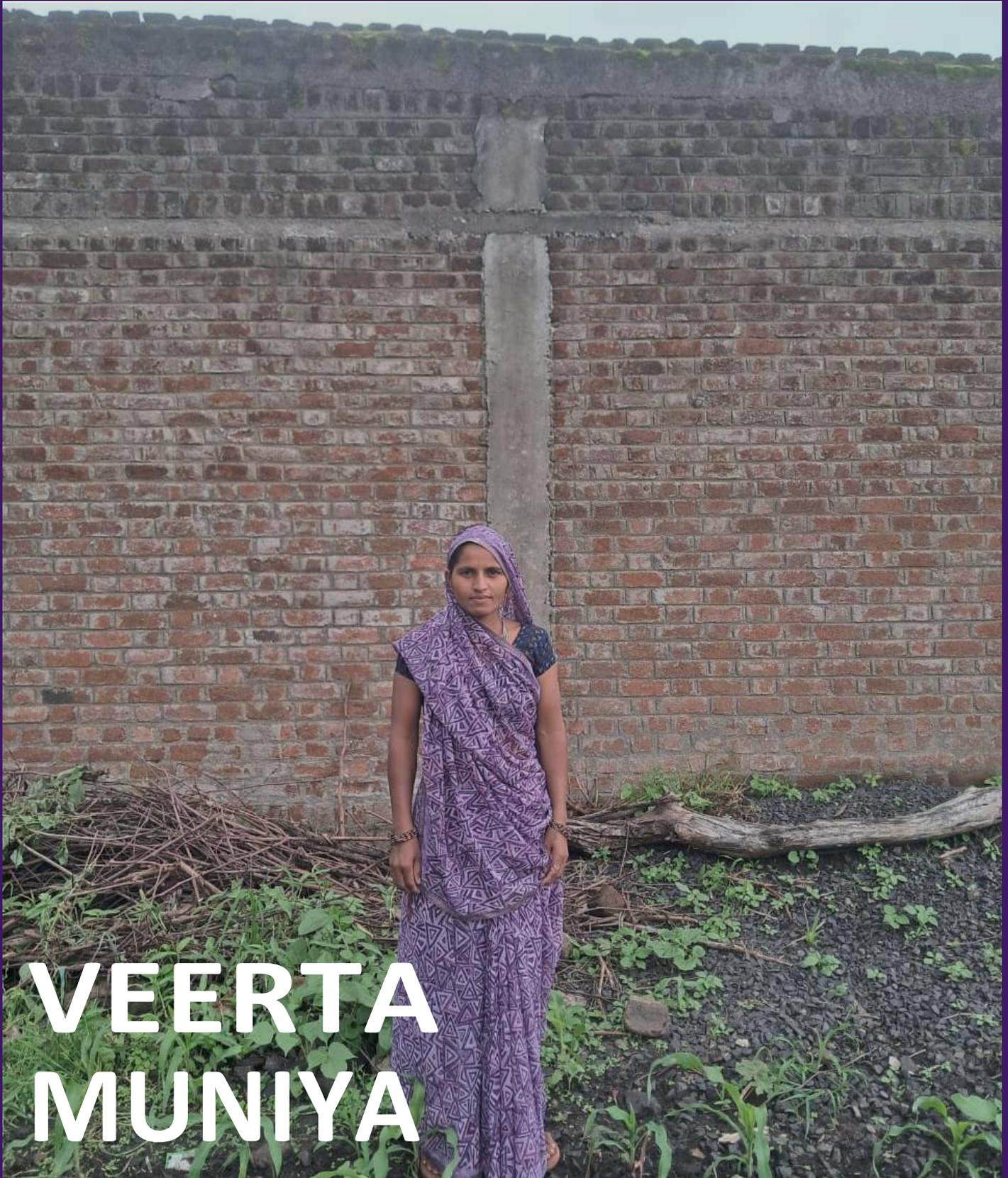
Rajeshwari's efforts led to a significant increase in women's participation in other panchayats, including Thummath:

- 1 Women's participation in the gram sabha increased from 20% to 65%.
2. More than 50 women applied for self-employment NREGA schemes
3. Seasonal migration from villages was reduced by 30%.
4. In 3 villages, 35 women started their own income-generating activities (e.g. goat rearing, turmeric production, nutrition, horticulture)



Rajeshwari's story teaches us that change does not come from a big beginning, but from small but concrete steps. Under her leadership, not only are women speaking but also planning, taking decisions and playing an active role in the development of the village.

It is essential that such local women leaders are given continuous training, resources and platform, so that they can lead the community more effectively. ♦



# VEERTA MUNIYA

CLAIMING THEIR SEAT AT THE TABLE

*KAKANWANI VILLA flE, KUSHALFIARH BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

HAILING FROM THE VILLAGE of Kakanwani in Banswara district of Rajasthan, Veerta Muniya is a tribal woman of 40 years whose life was once confined within domestic boundaries. Until three years ago, her life was like that of many other rural women – limited to the kitchen, farming, childcare, and confined by gendered restrictions.

In Kakanwani, the male-dominated mindset was rooted so deep that women’s mere presence in social programs was dissuaded and frowned upon. Women were only spectators – given neither the right to put forth opinions or participate in community decision-making. Their names were not even mentioned in Panchayat meetings.

**VEERTA REALIZED  
THAT THE WOMEN OF  
KAKANWANI HAD  
ACCEPTED THEIR  
SILENCE AS FATE.**

But three years ago, when she became a member of the Bhagtpura KASS, Veerta’s life took a welcome turn. She saw that the organization provides a platform for women to raise their voices.

In the beginning, she had to struggle to prove herself. Just getting to KASS meetings posed a challenge, since Veerta had no easy means of transportation and the meetings were often held far from where she lived. And of course, it was far from easy for Veerta to balance the domestic responsibilities of housework and caring for her children along with the social work she was undertaking.

More insidious than logistical challenges, though, was the social criticism Veerta had to contend with. Villagers ostracized her, distancing themselves from her family and labeling her “anti-culture.”



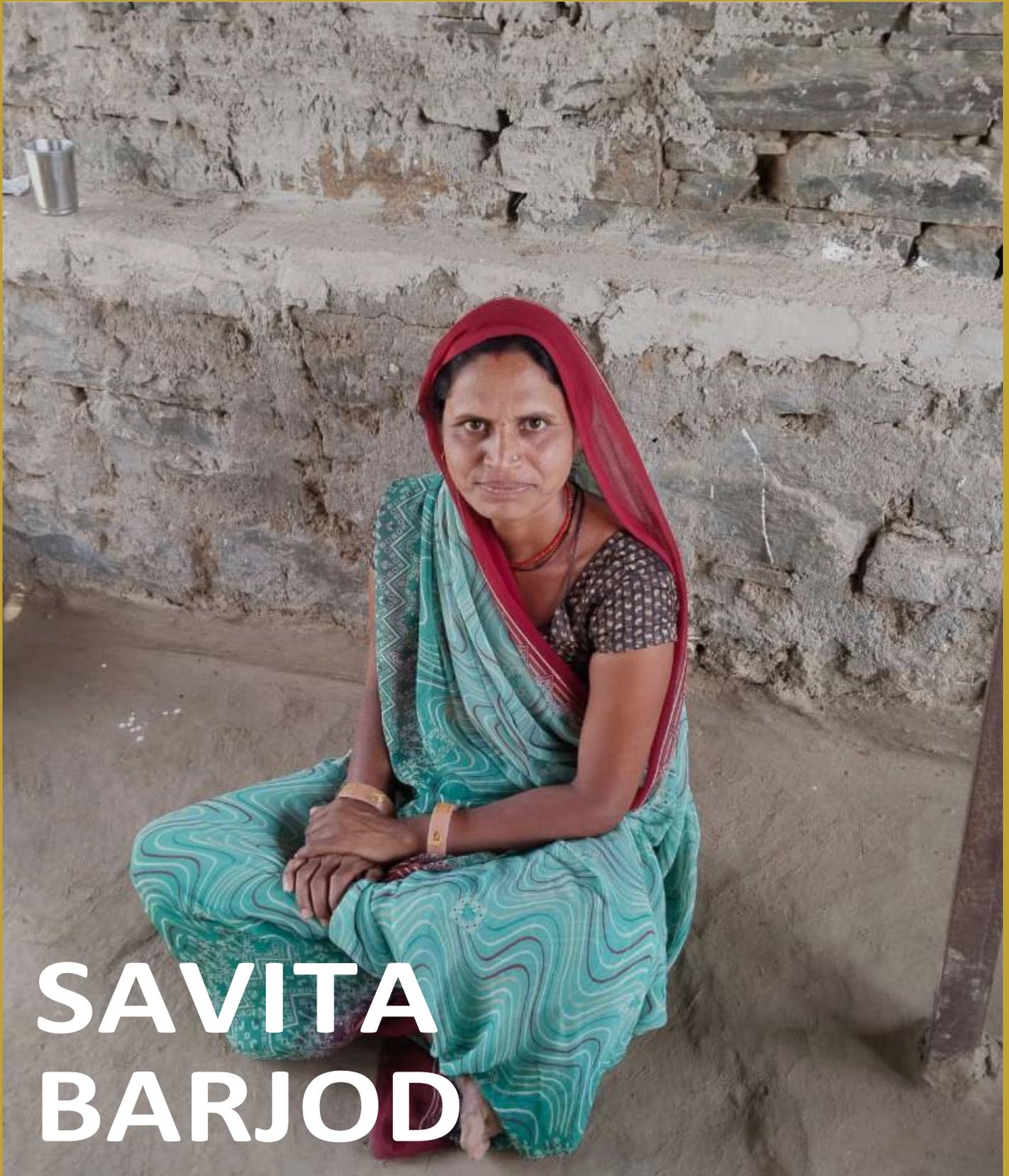


Most shockingly, Veerta was also met with indifference from the women she was trying to organize. She quickly realized that they had accepted their silence as fate. Making them aware of their own rights was a challenge in itself.

Veerta faced all these obstacles firmly and adopted the mantra, “I am not alone, we are all together.” She ensured to attend all KASS meetings, arriving on time in rain or shine, to demonstrate her commitment to participation in local decision-making and leadership. From that step, Veerta communicated directly with other women, encouraging them to participate in social programs. She was able to successfully establish women’s participation in their local Gram Sabha by taking women along with her to meetings. Now, women have more opportunity to voice ideas and participate in decisions.

Veerta has also worked on supporting health and child rights in Kakanwani. She spearheaded a campaign on addiction-free living to address the widespread substance use issues in their village, and another campaign to ensure children’s enrollment in schools. Through these efforts, many children have been re-enrolled in school, and families are more aware about the importance of education. In addition, Veerta raised awareness about the need for pregnant women to visit the local anganwadi, thus increasing the rate of safe deliveries and vaccinations, and connecting families with the government’s Palanhar, Food Security, and Janani Suraksha schemes.

Through these efforts, Veerta has become a model of leadership for other women in Kakanwani. Veerta is currently being considered by fellow village members as a suitable candidate for the next Sarpanch post. ♦



# SAVITA BARJOD

STEPPING OUT & SPEAKING UP

*BARAJADIYA VILLAŃE, ANANDPURI BLOCK, BANSWARA DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN*

SAVITA BARJOD was once fully occupied with domestic responsibilities—tending to livestock, farming, goat rearing, and growing vegetables at home. Her path to leadership began when a field worker from VAAGDHARA encouraged the villagers to form local committees. She started attending the community meetings, eventually becoming a member of the Gram Swaraj Samuh.

In addition to managing her household and daily chores, Savita Ben began regularly participating in the group’s monthly meetings, which included informational and training sessions as well as budget workshops. Through them, she became aware of various government welfare schemes and entitlements available to rural families.

Savita Ben began to participate in unit-level meetings, and later, inter-state and district-level gatherings. She now plays a key role in raising local issues to the government, especially at the panchayat level.

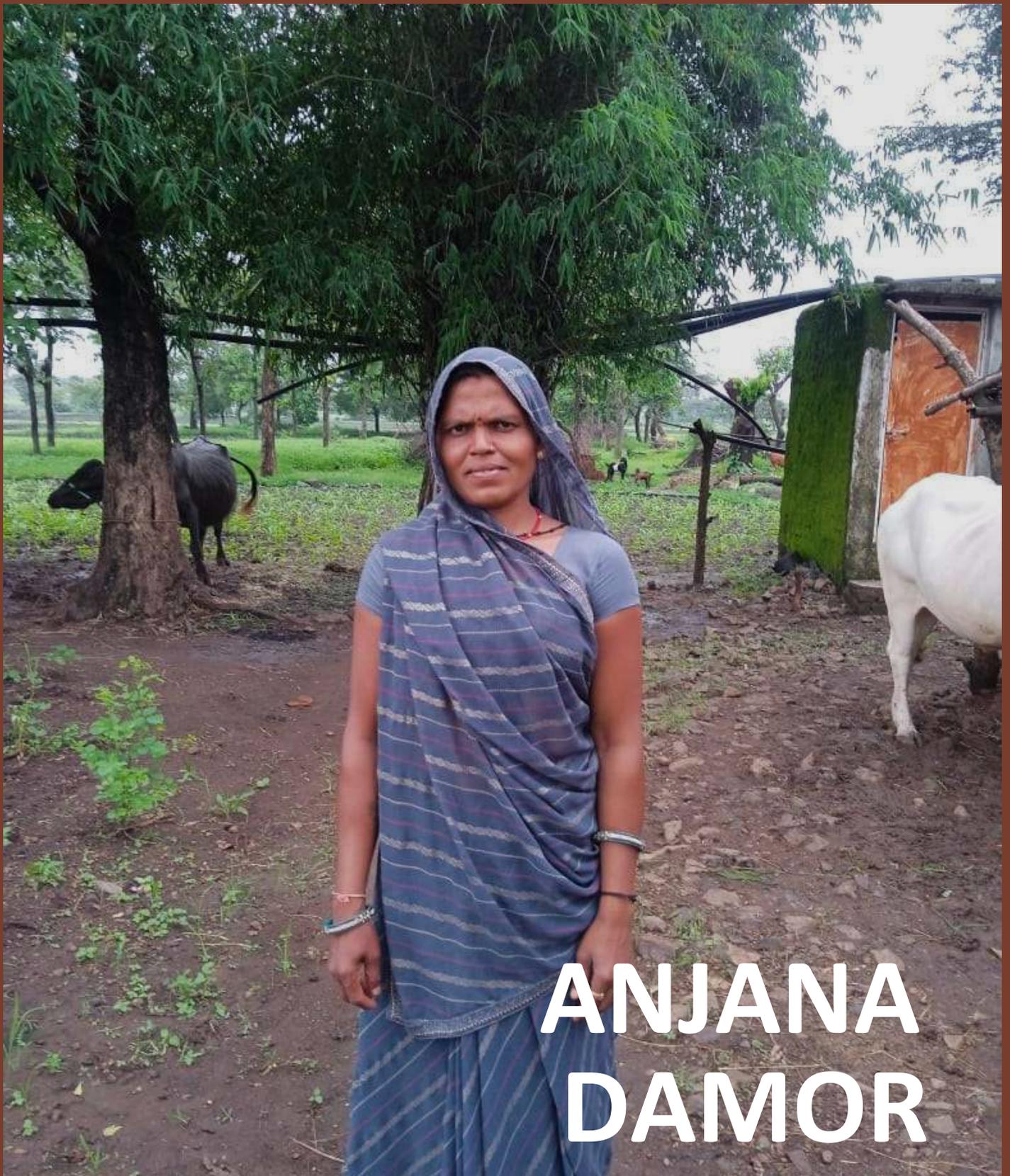
Savita Ben has also helped fellow villagers independently reach out to departments at the sub-divisional office in Anandpuri. One of her ongoing contributions has been supporting women—from helping them fill out forms to securing approvals for cattle shed construction.

Stepping out of the home has boosted Savita Ben’s confidence and dispelled her fears. She now encourages other women to raise their voices and speak up in community settings. In her own household, she treats sons and daughters equally. As a trusted figure in her ward, she also informs local families about how to apply for NREGA work through their ward panch.

Recognizing her leadership, some villagers even encouraged Savita Ben to run for the ward panch election, though she chose not to contest. Still, she remains deeply engaged in both family and community life.

Beyond her organizing efforts, Savita supports her community through sustainable practices. In the winter season, she cultivates different types of plant nurseries and has distributed over 3,500 saplings—including chili, tomato, and eggplant—free of cost in her village. This effort not only promotes nutritional self-reliance but is also a quiet testament to her commitment to swaraj. ♦





## HER QUESTION BECAME THEIR CAUSE

*JAMUKHADAN VILLAGE, BAJNA BLOCK, RATLAM DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH*

NESTLED AMONG HILLS, the village of Jamukhadan looked beautiful and peaceful from outside—but deep inside, the democratic system was corroding.

For the past three years, no real meeting of the Gram Sabha had taken place in the village. The panchayat used to sign documents and pass development proposals without discussion, and there was no female participation at all.

In Jamukhadan, 32-year-old Anjana Damor realized her agency in this issue upon joining KASS Bajna. When she heard in the organization’s meetings that every person has the right to participate in the Gram Sabha, she was surprised – “Am I really a member of the Gram Sabha too?”

Anjana first tried to speak with her family and neighboring women about the fact that for the past three years villagers were not being called to Gram Sabha meetings. But everywhere, she got the same answer – “What can we do in the Panchayat?”

This apathy was the real challenge. The panchayat ignored the villagers, and from their end, villagers did not believe that taking action would lead to any real change. When Anjana asked the panchayat secretary when the Gram Sabha meeting would be held, she was brushed aside.

Another big challenge was the silence of women, who were often unaware of their right to participate in local meetings. Whenever Anjana called them for any meeting or discussion, the women said, “What will we say there? We don’t even understand what they talk about.” This was due to women’s overall lower education levels and their exclusion from village decisions.

One day Anjana participated in a general meeting held at the District Office Bajna and clearly presented the condition of her Gram Panchayat. She told the officials, “The village panchayat is holding Gram Sabha meetings only on paper. This is an injustice to the village.”

After speaking on this open platform, Anjana made a pivotal decision: if the panchayat did not call the Gram Sabha, she would call it herself. A few days later, she announced a meeting under the village’s banyan tree. She invited all villagers above 18 years—personally explaining to women that this meeting is also theirs.





Anjana conducted the meeting herself. She told everyone, “Gram Sabha meetings are not a favor given to us by any official. It is our right.”

In this meeting, members discussed issues like the village’s water problem, irregularities in ration, the poor condition of the school, and women’s safety. And most importantly, women spoke openly. This was not just a Gram Sabha — it was the rebirth of democracy in the village.

Anjana’s one initiative created a stir throughout Bajna block. Activists and women from other villages contacted Anjana and asked, “How did you do this?” Gradually, Gram Sabhas began to be regularly held in many villages. People realized that questioning the panchayat is not wrong, but necessary.

Jamukhadan panchayat, which once only prepared files in the name of Gram Sabha, now holds open meetings every quarter. The panchayat now has to answer to community members, and women’s participation has increased tremendously.

Anjana Damor has become a symbol of Gram Sabha empowerment. She is now invited to block and district level meetings. Other women have started considering her their role model. ♦

# EPILOGUE

As the stories in this anthology testify, Adivasi women who face constriction by societal roles are continuing to advocate for their own rights as well as those of their families and communities. From fields to Gram Sabhas, from seed banks to schoolrooms, women are making their mark with vocal, sustained effort.

Ecologically, their actions are helping to restore village land. By reviving traditional farming, conserving indigenous seeds, and choosing organic methods, these women are reinstating the biodiversity and fertility of their soil as well as promoting nutrition.

Economically, they are improving their families' financial situations through plant nurseries, livestock rearing, and access to employment schemes like NREGA. They are creating self-sustaining livelihoods and reducing dependency on external markets, where prices are often high and the quality of produce low. Additionally, they have helped their families and villages break the cycle of seasonal migration and keep children in school.

Socially, the greatest shift is happening in the mindsets of both men and women who observe these community leaders. The women in this pages are no longer silent bystanders. They are speaking up in Gram Sabhas, filing applications for village works, demanding their entitlements, and guiding others to do the same. They are reshaping gender roles, challenging taboos, and encouraging the next generation of women to dream bigger.

These women are not exceptions. They are examples. They show us that the solutions to our most pressing challenges—poverty, inequality, cultural erasure—are already within our villages. We only need to support their efforts and follow their lead.



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