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VAAGDHARA'S CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGH PRIORITIES OF INCREASING IMPORTANCE

Vaagdhara voluntary organization's work in nearly 1000 villages and settlements of tribal communities in the tri-junction zone of three states (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat) has been widely appreciated. While Vaagdhara has been making important contributions in several contexts, one context that needs more emphasis is that its work is of very high relevance in the context of several priorities of increasing importance in a rapidly changing world. This note, which is also supported by some field reports based on recent visits to the work-area of Vaagdhara, discusses some of these contributions in the context of these priorities of increasing significance.

The first part of this paper consists of an overview of this subject, while the second part consists of supporting field reports.

Part One: Overview

In this first part of the paper we examine the many-sided contributions of Vaagdhara in the context of such priorities as facing the challenge of climate change at world level and, more in the national context, the importance of its work in the emerging context of the call for Swadeshi being revived in India. In addition its importance is examined in the context of such widely agreed priorities as strengthening rural communities, increasing and improving the social

participation of women, protecting tribal communities and respecting their traditions. The discussion here is further extended to increasingly prioritized issues like natural farming, seeds sovereignty of farming communities and increasing self-reliance of rural communities.

1A—Climate Change:

Firstly, in the context of climate change, there is increasing consensus regarding the great importance of climate change mitigation as one of the most important planks of saving the life-nurturing conditions of our planet. In addition there is growing realization of the important role rural areas can play in this context with much improved soil conservation, increased green cover of trees and by reducing fossil fuel consumption.

The farm and rural development pattern that Vaagdhara has evolved in a participatory way with rural communities minimizes the presence of fossil fuels whether in the form of chemical fertilizers, pesticides or weedicides, or in the form of diesel. Tree growth in and around farms as well in common areas has been taken up in a big way, emphasizing indigenous mixed species. The farming and land-use pattern in this model are such as to improve soil conservation steadily. The self-help group of women (saksham samooh) in Amlipara village provides a good example of such efforts as they have minimized fossil fuel use, almost eliminated it, while at the same time increasing trees on their farms and improving soil conservation. Then there are also inspiring examples of women running plant nurseries very successfully (see field-notes for more details).

The other important aspect of climate change is adaptation, where the contributions of the model that Vaagdhara favors are even more important in terms of improving the resilience of rural communities. As rural communities become less dependent on expensive outside inputs and more self-reliant, as they grow more mixed crops and a rich diversity of food from crops, trees, from even uncultivated crops and forests, the ability of communities to withstand adverse weather conditions including droughts improves. With reduced farm expenses and wasteful expenditure, the chances of households getting trapped in indebtedness decrease significantly and this increases their ability to withstand adverse conditions. Renewable energy is an important component of climate change response.

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The government has made the main contribution in this context in the form of improving the capacity of solar and wind power in this region. At the same time, the contribution of Vaagdhara has also been important at two levels. Firstly, the communities mobilized by Vaagdhara have been in the forefront of demanding devices like solar pumping sets. Secondly, Vaagdhara has introduced innovations, such as providing additionally a converter which makes it possible to use a renewable energy device like a solar pumping set in more diverse ways, such as the flour mill used by Monica (see field notes for details). Now there are plans to have many such flour mills and spice mills.



In addition there are efforts on to use other renewable energy devices like Mangal Turbine which can be very useful in local conditions to lift water from streams without using diesel or electricity.

2A. Contribution to Swadeshi:

Due to the fast changing international situation, at the national level there is a renewed call for Swadeshi. While the Swadeshi movement played an important role during colonial rule in boycotting goods associated with colonial powers and in promoting local livelihoods, in the present context this call has been given as a result of pressures being exerted on the economy and livelihoods of India by the arbitrary decisions relating to tariffs and related issues by very powerful foreign interests. In this context swadeshi is associated with increasing self-reliance of the India.

Given the very important role of villages and rural communities in India, this challenge is closely linked to efforts for self-reliance of villages and rural communities which is best captured in the concept of gram swaraj. How to ensure that the basic needs of the people can be met increasingly in self-reliant ways? How to make the food and farming system more self-reliant , how to ensure supply of the most basic inputs of seeds to farmers and how to ensure the most

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basic need of healthy and safe food to people? Gram Swaraj is the most important way of ensuring this.

For Vaagdhara this has been a key concept and a guiding precept all along, and now its importance is being realized more widely. Hence the overall importance of the work of Vaagdhara as a model for taking forward the swadeshi and gram swaraj approach is also increasing. Without the base and the support provided by gram swaraj, the swadeshi movement at urban level will not get the strength and confidence. Hence in this context also the relevance and importance of the work done by Vaagdhara has been increasing.





1C-Strengthening Rural Communities:

Many societies have neglected the importance of strengthening of rural communities and have not taken this up as an important objective. Hence these societies have not been concerned with such problems as increasing disruption of rural society and increase of migrant labor. In such a situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to carry forward

groups or saksham samooths as well as gram swaraj groups, in turn linked to block and district level formations. It is this strengthening of rural communities which is at the base of the success of efforts like improving self-reliance. The importance of this work is steadily increasing as development initiatives which have neglected this have often not been able to go very far.

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such objectives as mobilization of rural communities for such tasks as increasing self-reliance, responding to the climate change in effective ways and establishing a strong base for production of safe and healthy food linked to sustainable and creative livelihoods.

In its work Vaagdhara has always given importance to the strengthening of rural communities linked to women's self-help

1D-Strengthening Social Role of Women:

While the issue of rights of women has received widespread support, the importance of Vaagdhara's approach has been to place this issue in the wider context of strengthening rural communities. When the strengthening of women's equality and social role takes place as an integral part of the overall strengthening of the rural community, both of these positive developments

contribute to each other and enrich each other. The resulting contributions of women are very promising, as can be seen in more detail in the field notes, where we see several women progressing well in their own life while at the same time contributing in a big way to improving self-reliance of villages, saving seeds and protecting natural sources. Recently the important role played by the women of Jhikali village in protecting the main water source of the village provides a significant example of the highly constructive and creative possibilities arising from the increasing unity and social involvement of rural women. They are also participating more actively in gram sabha meetings and village affairs more generally.

1E-Progress and Protection of Tribal Communities:

Strengthening of tribal communities, forming an understanding of their way of life and its contributions to the creation of a better world, protection and promotion of those aspects of their traditions and worldview which are more important for such a contribution—all these objectives have gained wide acceptability at national and world level. The work of Vaagdhara can be seen as a very thoughtful integration of such thinking in its development initiatives which has been giving encouraging results. While this is very welcome in terms of the good development results achieved, such as in terms of improved food security and nutrition and protection of biodiversity, this has a wider significance in terms of the realization of various other objectives based on the opportunities being provided for the creativity of people and communities to result in new ideas and solutions.

Potentially these can make an even bigger contribution to such important objectives as climate mitigation and adaptation, self-reliance of rural communities and the emergence of new development thinking and concepts based on human creativity and satisfaction instead of the possession of more material goods.

1F—Promoting Natural farming in participative ways:

This is being widely accepted to be very important for providing safe and healthy food, for saving soil, for protection from climate crisis and for ensuring the sustainability of small farmer livelihoods. The development journey of Vaagdhara has been very firmly committed to natural farming. Natural farming is spread by Vaagdhara in highly participatory ways and tribal communities therefore see this as regaining their own good traditions and partially lost strengths. There is nothing like anything being imposed on anyone and instead there is a feeling of realizing the importance of something precious that was being lost and so must



be reclaimed by the farming communities. In such participatory conditions there is much more possibility of learning something invaluable from the accumulated traditions and wisdom of many generations of these farmers. Hence the practices which had evolved keeping in view local conditions—strengths as well as constraints—are more likely to be captured in such a participatory model. At the same time in some respects conditions are changing. New methods and innovations are available which may be able to add to the strength of what was being done earlier, without being disruptive or harmful to the essence of the traditional system. In a participatory model it should be possible to discuss all this in a free and meaningful way so that on the one hand one learns the most from a thoughtful understanding of traditional systems and at the same time one is open to new changes and innovations that can be useful. The model of natural farming being promoted by Vaagdhara in partnership with tribal communities has these strengths.

1G—Promoting Seeds Sovereignty:

The importance of saving traditional biodiversity is being increasingly felt with growing realization that the future of farm and food security is closely tied up with this. The contradiction of practicing natural farming while retaining green revolution seeds that are meant to be grown with high doses of chemical fertilizers is also being realized. Hence many natural and sustainable farming programs now emphasize the need for saving the rich diversity of traditional seeds, collecting these seeds and then also growing them, gradually increasing their availability from one crop to another on the basis of exchange of seeds.

Hence while seeds sovereignty is a widely used slogan in the alternative farming movement, this is actually a living reality in some villages of the work-area of Vaagdhara like Amlipara (see field reports). Here farmers save their seeds carefully and use them for the next crop, thereby avoiding the purchase of commercial seeds on annual basis. Annual seed fairs or beejmelas, generally organized before the advent of monsoons, increase the possibilities of exchange of seeds and information leading to diversity of seeds among farmers.

1H—Promoting Self-reliance of rural communities:

In the debate on alternative economy and alternative farming, the concept of increasingly self-reliant village communities has been discussed from

Natural and sustainable farming programs now emphasize the need for saving the rich diversity of traditional seeds.

several perspectives. While this was important also in times of Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, more recently this is receiving increasing importance in the context of resolving the many-sided environmental crisis, including climate change, which threatens the life-nurturing conditions of our planet. However there is another important context for this, important particularly for countries like India where this can be seen also to be of great importance from the point of view of resolving the livelihood crisis of farmers in particular and also of other sections of villagers like artisans. Vaagdhara has always



emphasized increasing the self-reliance of villages and its efforts in this direction have many important learning experiences and achievements.

1I—Healthy and safe food:

At a time of more and more serious health problems being related to unhealthy and unsafe food and to food being grown with unsafe and hazardous methods, there is increasing urgency of reclaiming safe ways of growing healthy food. The work of Vaagdhara has been consistently along these lines.

1J—Sustainable Rural Livelihoods:

In India there are several regions where a very large number of small farmers have faced disruption of livelihood, indebtedness and increasing dependence on migrant labor in exploitative conditions. However with its support for ecologically protective, low-cost and self-reliant farming in its work-area, Vaagdhara has been able to create such

conditions in several villages that several migrant workers have been able to return to sustainable livelihoods. There are some examples of this in the accompanying field-notes, which also bring out the happiness this has brought to these families and most particularly to women. Before these visits when I had gone to Anandpuri area of Banswara district, here too I met several farmers who had been able to return to sustainable, ecologically protective farming in their ancestral

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village after escaping from the exploitative grip of migrant labor, thanks to the help and encouragement provided by Vaagdhara. One of them AmritLal has emerged as a model farmer and has won an award for environment protection because of the widespread promotion of tree planting and care by him. Villages which were losing hope and getting caught more and more in the web of exploitative migrant labour have received new hope from such examples and from continuing efforts in this direction.

Thus it is clear that in terms of several priorities of high importance, Vaagdhara has made an important contribution. Now coming to the second part of this paper we provide several examples of such contributions as seen in the course of recent visits to four villages of Kushalgarh block in Banswara district.



Part 2: Field Reports

1. Anita Damor is a farmer of Amlipara village, located in Kushalgarh block of Banswara district (Rajasthan).

Her farming provides such a fine example of progress in the direction of ecologically protective farming and self-reliance of villages that when she spoke about this at

chemical fertilizers, pesticides and weedicides. They prepare organic manure on their own farm.

Secondly, they grow a great diversity of crops despite having small plots of farmland—generally about one or two acres (in addition, small kitchen gardens). Anita, for example, is able to grow about 30 crops in the form of cereals, millets,

One common characteristic of their farming is that they practice natural farming methods. They do not use chemical fertilizers, pesticides and weedicides.

a national level conference on village self-reliance this was very highly appreciated. I recently visited this village and met Anita in a group of about a dozen women. I realized that while Anita is like a group-leader, other members of the group also farm in a similar way and cooperate closely with each other.

One common characteristic of their farming is that they practice natural farming methods. They do not use

pulses, oilseeds, spices, vegetables in the crop cycle of a typical year. In addition she has some fruit trees as well. Hence her family and most families of this group are very largely self-reliant in growing highly nutritious, healthy, organic food for their self-consumption, and in addition have a little surplus for sale. Thirdly, these households save the seeds of their traditional varieties of crops. Women in particular play an important role in this. Anita proudly shows the different seeds

she has saved for the next year. Thus they do not have to buy hybrid seeds sold by various commercial companies every year. This is a very important part of their self-reliance. As Sarita, another woman of this group says, their experience has shown that self-saved and preserved seeds are the most protective.

Fourthly, these farmers avoid the use of tractors or other expensive machines. Bullocks are used instead to plough the fields, for threshing and carrying loads. They are also helpful in removing some of the weeds.

Even otherwise farming is well-integrated with animal husbandry. Anita has two bullocks, two calves, one buffalo, eight goats and several poultry birds. Bullocks are highly valued in these households and are never considered a burden.

Instead of being sent out for processing, most of the crops are processed using simple implements within the village, so that organic crop residues serve as healthy feed for crops.

There are high levels of cooperation among various households and particularly among women. When extra work is needed at a farm, women get together to contribute voluntary work. They also exchange seeds with each other.

This strong tradition also helps them to get together to raise their voice for government support in a strong way. Hence they could get together to demand and receive solar pumping set to lift water from a local rivulet for irrigation. Similarly they are able to together raise

demand for employment works (NREGA work), adding to livelihood and development opportunities in the village. These households place a lot of emphasis on education. In my group discussion, all women said their children are going to school. Two women, Sharda and Anita (a different Anita) said having done very well in their high school exams, their daughters have received scooties (two-wheeler vehicles) as prize and to help them in accessing higher education.

Thus the village development effort has a fine combination of strengthening good traditions and initiating new efforts (including access to renewable energy).

While the path shown by this village would be a very good learning in any circumstances, its significance has increased further in times of climate change. With its emphasis on minimizing fossil fuel based inputs (almost eliminating these), a farming pattern which protects and conserves soil and grows more trees this village provides a model for climate change mitigation. With its emphasis on more sustainable livelihoods, reduced costs, increased self-reliance, more diversity this model also contributes greatly to climate change adaptation. Its overall pattern is cyclical, with wastes returned to soil and soil fertility obtained from this for maintaining and increasing food production.



While the people and particularly the women of the village deserve the most praise for these achievements, a very important contribution has also been made by a voluntary organization Vaagdhara. As Sarita, one of the women explained, "Due to a number of factors the village was moving away from its rich traditions but then Vaagdhara helped us to find the wisdom of protecting our roots and the results have been really good for us."

Vaagdhara helped these women to form a self-help group or sakshamsamooch to coordinate their activities and take forward their common livelihood concerns in a more organized way.

Jayesh Joshi, founder director of Vaagdhara says, "Our effort is not that we are going to villages only to teach something. We go among people with a spirit of learning. This enables us to have a good understanding of the richness of traditional wisdom of tribal communities."

Thus it has been able to evolve a system based on retaining the richness of traditional wisdom, combined with contributions from modern science and development initiatives which too are welcomed as long as these are not disruptive for the traditional systems which evolved keeping in view understanding of local needs and environmental conditions.

Unfortunately among some powerful persons there is instead a different tendency to regard traditional systems of tribal communities as backward and so they only think in terms of imposing their own thinking here. Instead, with some

humility, if they look around with a true scientific spirit they will find that they have a lot more to learn here. As I realized in the course of my long group discussion with the self-help group or saksham samooch of Amlipara village, there is so much to learn here, so much wisdom among very ordinary looking villagers.



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2. A traditional pond has been a big support for farming in Jhikali village for as long as the people here can remember. Without the water obtained from here it would be very difficult for the Bhil Adivasi (tribal community) members of this village, located in Banswara district of Rajasthan, to carry out their farming.

Recently one good news and one bad news appeared for this irrigation source one after the other. The good news came in the form of the government providing a solar pumping set for lifting water.

However something very adverse also happened as large-scale seepage started taking place in this village pond. Experienced farmers soon realized that if this persisted, then very little irrigation would be possible from the pond.

Fortunately the women here are very well organized in a self-help group or sakshamsamooch organized by a voluntary organization Vaagdharma. Paskali, an active member of this group told this writer, "At first the panchayat was requested to take up repairs on the basis of urgency, but when the panchayat did not respond properly then we mobilized to assert this demand in a more organized way repeatedly."

With these efforts continuing for some time, the panchayat finally agreed to take up the repair work. However while much of the required work was done, the work was not completed by the panchayat in a proper way. Experienced villagers realized that unless more follow-up work was taken up immediately, the gains would not be permanent and in fact what has been achieved may not last for long.

To complete the work stones had to be fetched from some distance. Several villagers particularly women decided to get together and finish the work on their own. As Sakka, another member of the saksham samooch recalls, there was a very good spirit of solidarity and cooperation which kept us going although quite difficult work was involved.

What made it possible for the people to readily mobilize themselves for such cooperation? As the people here explain, there is a traditional system of Helma in these tribal communities which greatly

helps in cooperation and mobilization for common welfare. This works broadly at two levels. Firstly, whenever there is excess work on the farm of a villager, then some other villagers go there for voluntary work. Secondly, when voluntary work for the common welfare of the entire village community is needed, then members of all or many households get together with community spirit to carry out this work without any wage payment. It is this community spirit which enabled the villagers to sort out the seepage problem before it could create more serious problems for the village pond and the farming dependent on this pond.

In a different context, this similar spirit of cooperation also helped villagers to avert another increasing threat. As Paskali explains, "Some time back we realized

Several villagers particularly women decided to get together and finish the work on their own.

that our farming costs, our crop failures and other problems were increasing. On introspection we found that it was because we had given up our traditional systems which were more in accordance with our needs. This was confirmed further when we went to meetings organized by Vaagdharma. After getting organized in saksham samoochs we were able to carry forward this dialogue further."

This helped the community to take such decisions as going back to natural farming and saving and conserving our own traditional seeds. As Paskali explains—



some big farmers still want to continue with market-purchased chemical fertilizers and hybrid seeds. However most of us small farmers, including members of saksham samooch, have gone back to natural farming and saving our own seeds of the traditional system.

This rethinking and ability to take a decision to stop the drift towards increasing market dependence and rising costs is also related to the higher levels of cooperation among community members. This also enables them to exchange diverse varieties of seeds of various crops among themselves without having to incur cash expenses.

Such strengths as high levels of cooperation among community members are very important aspects of rural development but such soft but important aspects of development which are not easily captured in hard statistics are often ignored. It is high time that factors like

cooperation, community spirit and solidarity get the due attention that these richly deserve.

3. Baal Singh is an elder of Bhil Adivasi community in Kushalgarh area of Banswara district in Rajasthan who is widely respected for his knowledge and understanding relating to traditional farming practices of his community.

Recently when I went to meet him at his home in Nisnawat village, he asserted in strong terms that the base of tribal community's farming should be in traditional time honoured diverse varieties of crops which should be conserved and saved. He was equally emphatic that the trend of getting hooked on hybrid crop variety seeds purchased from the market has been very harmful for farmers of his community and should be checked. He explained—these hybrid seeds sold by companies are generally meant to be grown with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These seeds make us dependent on expensive market purchased inputs and increase our costs and debts, thereby endangering our viability and survival as small farmers. These often also require more water. Several of these seeds and the methods used for growing them have proved to be harmful for soil. These seeds are also more susceptible to attacks from pests. Sometimes farmers have lost heavily as these seeds did not grow properly.

In sharp contrast, Baal Singh adds, we can trust our traditional seeds, as we have saved and preserved them, and we know the characteristics of our diverse seeds. We know how to cultivate them well, and how to look after their plants and crops.



These can be grown using lesser water and these are less susceptible to harm from pests or diseases. These can be grown in very low cost ways using inputs from within the villages. Neither these seeds have to be purchased nor other inputs need to be purchased to grow them. For small farmers like us keeping costs low and avoiding unnecessary increase of costs is very important.

together at the same time, including millets, pulses, oilseeds, vegetables etc. Now these will be harvested at different times of the remaining year so that the family will continue to get some crop or the other at different times.

Such practices have been helpful for small farmers for a long time, and on the basis of seeds of traditional varieties saved by them over the generations, they

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Baal Singh continues—Maize is our most important food, and there have always been traditional diverse varieties of maize to suit different tastes and preferences. Our young generation should also know more about them.

Baal Singh then took me to his nearby farm to show a field in which the traditional Hangdi pattern cultivation is practiced. As he explained, in this small field nearly a dozen crops had been sown

know which crop can be grown together in such mixed farming systems and what kind of rotations can be most suitable.

This is an intricate system based on understanding of many generations and should never be uprooted. The younger generation should also understand its importance, he asserts.

Some years back when a voluntary organization Vaagdhara came to work in this region along similar lines, Baal Singh



was very happy at this development and he became an enthusiastic supporter of such efforts. Village level swaraj or self-reliance groups were formed in various villages and Baal Singh became an active participant in these groups. At the same time his daughter-in-law Pushpa also became an important participant in the self-help groups of women or saksham samooths devoted to promoting similar ideas of low-cost, self-reliant and ecologically protective farming among women farmers.

Dinesh, son of Baal Singh, is also very committed to taking forward his father's ideas. He says—these are not old or outdated ideas but instead I feel that these ideas are very important for protecting the interests of our generation and the future generations also. We must understand the importance of saving our seeds, saving our heritage based on this, and natural farming practices. There is so much talk of environment protection, but here in our village we are able to contribute in our daily life to this.

At a time when disruptive technologies imposed from above have played havoc with the farming communities of many parts of the world particularly the global south, it was very encouraging in the course of my recent travels to meet such a family which is so highly committed to protecting the heritage of its traditional seeds at several levels of two generations. Such efforts of saving and conserving the diversity of traditional seeds and crops or plant varieties should be widely encouraged.

4. There are two aspects of the life of Monica which impress you even in the course of a short inter-action.

Firstly, that she works very hard. Secondly, that she is very happy while working very hard.

However this happiness has entered her life only in recent times. Her earlier experiences were of a different kind of hard work—which involved drudgery as well as risk of injury. In development discourse there is substantial literature on drudgery and how this can make life very difficult. Monica has seen it all. Her experience reveals the difference between two kinds of hard work—the kind that can be done happily and the kind that creates stress and distress.

Monica and her husband live with their four children in the village of Jhikali (located in Kushalgarh block of Banswara district, Rajasthan). Till some years back the livelihood situation for her family was so precarious that almost every year she and her husband used to leave for to the cities of Surat and Ahmedabad, to work mainly at construction sites.

A shadow appears suddenly on Monica's face and her eyes moisten as she recalls those days. She says—Some times when I am sitting alone even now tears start rolling down my eyes when I remember those difficult days.

She adds—I was not prepared or trained for this, but still I had to carry about a dozen bricks on my head while climbing a rickety stair to carry these to the second or the third floor.

The first signs of relief in her life appeared due to the convergence of development initiated by the government as well as a voluntary organization. The government installed a solar pumping set close to her home so that irrigation was improved. A voluntary organization, Vaagdhara provided the guidance for natural farming which helped to reduce costs significantly and improved farming in other ways too.

The next step forward was taken when Vaagdhara also provided a converter which enabled her to use the energy of the solar pumping set to set up a flour mill and operate it without recurring expenses. Her family's initial effort at this had failed due to the non-availability of the higher power load required to this.

The next opportunity emerged when the government started a sewing training program. Monica was quick to avail this opportunity and quick also to pick up sewing skills. She also received a sewing machine.

Thus now by combining improved farming, flour mill and sewing work, it became economically viable for this family to earn adequate income to meet

all their essential expenses. They are also able to send all their four children to school, one of them to a relatively more costly school with higher fees and better facilities.

Earlier the family lived in a mud and thatch house but now they have constructed a sturdier house which provides safe shelter in all weather conditions.

Thus now Monica feels confident that she can meet properly the basic needs of her family (healthy home-produced food, shelter, clothing and education), and what is more, she is able to meet these needs without having to go to distant places in search of uncertain and risky work. After many years of uncertainties and drudgery as well high risk work, she now has the

Natural farming which helped to reduce costs significantly and improved farming in other ways too.

satisfaction of having the kind of livelihood opportunities that she is happy with and these provide enough to meet her family's needs.

So she works very hard at farm, sewing machine and flour mill, apart from household chores, but this work does not tire her, as you can see from the smile on her face and the delight she feels in talking about her experiences.

When I met her recently, she was smiling, chattering all the time. When I along with my companions got up to leave, she said how can you go without tea and how can

you go away without seeing the flour mill at work. So we sat down more to this lady's talk, sweet and also full of enthusiasm, as simultaneously she also went from one activity to another with a spring in her feet.

Monica's recent experiences, very happy on their own, also indicate the importance of diversifying sustainable livelihood opportunities in remote villages.

5. Jemli Bai lives in Borikhera hamlet of Bhil tribal community in Kushalgarh block, Banswara district of Rajasthan. Till about a decade back she used to toil along with her husband in various cities of Gujarat as a migrant worker.

Recalling those days she says—sometimes we were paid at a very low wage rate, and sometimes we just remained standing, waiting at a place meant for hiring daily wage workers for some employer who never came. Living in huts surrounded by mud and slush in conditions where it was difficult even to cook food, we spent our days in great hardship.

Then during one of her visits back to her village, she came to know about a training organized by a voluntary organization Vaagdhara, active in her area, for starting a nursery of plants of vegetables and fruits or other trees. As Jemli had a strong inclination for this work, she decided to take up this training.

In the course of the training the voluntary organization also realized her special aptitude for this, and decided to extend additional help to her if she decides to set

up a nursery. Vaagdhara had been distributing plants earlier for increasing tree cover on its own but was also keen to open up such avenues from within the community.

So about six years back Jemli said good bye to migrating to concentrate her time



and attention on her nursery. With her natural aptitude for this work helped further by training, Jemli soon settled down in this work quite comfortably, enjoying it. Starting with annual earnings of about seventy thousand rupees in the first year, she has been steadily increasing this till she came close to the half a million rupees mark during the latest year.

As there were savings, she and her family used this to start a shop which provides daily need goods in a remote village. This too is doing reasonably well, particularly at times when most villagers are at home. Alongside the shop there is also a small flour mill, or atta-chakki, providing some additional income and meeting a need of neighbours.

However achieving success in these new ventures does not mean that Jemli has given up her traditional livelihood of farming. Instead along with several other members of her community, she now follows the path of natural farming, thereby making substantial savings in costs on the one hand and producing more healthy food for her family members on the other hand. About one half of her nearly one acre of farmland is devoted to her nursery, while the remaining half is used for producing healthy food for the family in natural ways.



While Jemli and her family have done well in terms of increasing their income, it should also be noted that all her work is in keeping with community needs too—whether it is a nursery providing plants, or shop providing daily need goods, or flour mill providing a much needed service close to their home to villagers, or her natural farming work which is

protective towards environment and also gives healthy food.

As she looks back at this eventful turn in her life, Jemli thanks the voluntary organization whole-heartedly. Important as this very helpful contribution has been, what is no less remarkable is the great talent that Jemli Bai had all along for entrepreneurship but for want of opportunities this talent had remained dormant for so long, and perhaps would have remained so if opportunities had not emerged rather suddenly.

While her experiences constitute an inspirational story on their own, these also draw attention to the wider reality of so much potential that exists in remote villages which can be tapped and utilized for significant achievements if more attention is given to utilizing the creativity awaiting for suitable opportunities in remote areas.

Baba Amte once said—Many poor villagers do not need charity, they need opportunity. Jemli is an important example of what opportunity and a helping hand can mean for a woman in a remote village whose hidden talents had been held back for too long but immediately found wings once suitable opportunities emerged.

The reality of potential that exists in remote villages can be tapped and utilized for significant achievements if more attention is given to utilizing the creativity awaiting for suitable opportunities in remote areas.
