



From Faceless Agricultural Workers To Proud Farmers– The Ujaas Journey

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Introduction

Women play a critical role in agricultural production in developing countries, including India, where agriculture accounts for 32% of GDP. Women constitute a substantial majority of the agricultural workforce and produce most of the food that is consumed locally, which makes them the principal agents of food security and household welfare in rural areas. Yet, they are not recognized as farmers.

Their work is merely considered to be an extension of their household chores.

The socio-economic status of women workers in the tribal belt of south Gujarat, where the Ujaas Mahila Khedut Vikas Sangh is operational, is perhaps worse than that of their counterparts elsewhere in the country. One of the reasons for this is the inaccessibility and remoteness of the area. The consequent lack of awareness has meant that let alone women, even the male farmers have not had access to government programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The benefits of the schemes for tribal farmers under the Tribal Sub Plan have not reached them either.

“We are no less than the male farmers, but we get no recognition. After joining Ujaas, however, we have got the identity of being farmers,” says Sumitraben of Panikhadak, a remote, under-serviced village in the tribal belt of south Gujarat.

It was with a view to organizing women farmers of Navsari district in south Gujarat and transforming them into agents of social and economic development, that the Ujaas Mahila Khedut Vikas Sangh was established in 2011. The seeds of the initiative were in fact sown earlier, in 2008, when Cohesion Foundation started relief work after the floods in Navsari and Surat Districts. Cohesion started work in the two districts with organizing women in groups

and initiated savings and credit programmes as well as promoting livelihood enhancement of farmers.

This paper gives an account of the Ujjas intervention, highlighting the experiences of the stakeholders, the successes and the

lessons learnt, with the hope that this model may be replicated elsewhere.

The Context

The districts of Navsari, Valsad and Dang where Cohesion is currently working, though natural resource-rich, remain excluded from the government development programmes. These areas are tribal dominant and inhabited by the primitive tribe groups like Kolchas and Kotawalias who make up 70% of the population. The community has remained secluded from the

mainstream development processes. There is poor awareness on part of the tribal population regarding government programmes and their rights and entitlements.

The primary occupation of the people in the region is agriculture, the average land holding size ranging from 0.5 – 2 acres. The main crop of the area is paddy, grown in the monsoon season. About 18-20% households in the area is landless and work as manual unskilled laborer.

After agriculture, animal husbandry and unskilled farm labor forms the next most important livelihood option available to the local communities besides migrating to other areas. These livelihood options are seasonal and highly susceptible to climatic vagaries. Sometimes the climatic inconsistencies render these livelihood options an ‘either-or’ situation for the local communities rather than becoming a constant source of wage (and not income).

Status of women

The women in the community share a disproportionately higher ratio of the work burden (reproductive and care work in family, community work and unpaid labour in productive work as well). They also limited in their mobility and suffer from discrimination in access to education and work outside. In regard to access to various entitlements, women are usually discriminated – more so in health and education. Their

decision making role in the family and community is also minimal, although women do take part in joint meetings.

Status of women farmers

Men and women equally engage themselves in the primary and secondary agricultural work with women doing more than 80% of the labour work like sowing, weeding, watering, harvesting, threshing (manual) and storage of grains. But the gender based discrimination exist here, as well, like the larger society and women are largely excluded from any ownership and control over productive resources and decision making in agriculture. Their discriminated and dispossessed status can be understood by the following facts in regard to control over inputs and productive resources as follows:

- Access to land and water: Women own barely 2% of the overall agricultural land, as traditionally and customarily they are not part of the ownership of the family land and property. The user of water resources like the minor irrigation is also dependent on the land ownership and so women are not part of the water user committees.
- Access to credit and inputs: Access to various agricultural inputs like credits, fertilizers and seeds are also based on the ownership of agricultural land (Khedut Pustika), and/or

membership of the fertilizer or seeds co-operatives, which again are for land holders only. Hence women are denied these inputs.

- Access to extension services and training: These are also meant for the owners of the land, so women are constrained from accessing these services. Cultural and gender barriers of moving out for training also pose restrictions on them
- Access to market: Although on a smaller scale (for consumption purposes) women do go to market and sell/ barter their products and buy/ barter things they need. But agricultural produce markets are dominantly a main domain and women barely access them because of the market place culture, where women find themselves misfit.

The Intervention

Ujaas is the only organization of women in the district. It was started in 2011 with financial as well as technical support from Action Aid, for capacity building of women farmers and developing long term strategy for the federation. The main objective of Ujaas is to focus on the recognition of women employed in various agricultural activities as farmers. With men moving away from the farm to the non-farm sector and women filling in for them without the requisite recognition, it is time to think of radical changes



Women engaged in making bamboo products and rearing goats.

at the policy and institutional levels. The modalities of implementing agricultural plans and programmes, too, need to become more women-oriented. Such changes will require a re-orientation of all the stakeholders in the sector. Ujaas has made a beginning and hopes that the changes it has brought about will catalyse further enhancement in the status of women farmers.

The other problem has been with the narrow definition of farmers used until recently. The recent expansion of the definition by the National Agriculture Policy to include all those involved directly and indirectly with farming, and allied livelihoods is a welcome move. It implies that any intervention in the agricultural sector must expand its outreach to all these groups. The landless workers and forest produce users can, for example, be accommodated in collective farming or promoting agricultural inputs, such as bio-fertilizers. Also, those displaced by the adoption of modern technology must be accommodated in some

other agriculture-related activity, for example, the production and marketing of value-added products.

To begin with, the activities of Ujaas were confined to 10 villages of the Chikhli and Vanzda blocks of Navsari district. Now it has a presence in 35 villages and has a membership of 563 women farmers.

Thus, its beneficiaries include not only women farmers working directly in agriculture and allied activities, but also those engaged in gathering forest products and making articles of bamboo (referred to as *Kotawalia*). While helping women farmers increase productivity and ensuring food sufficiency, it has also been motivating the landless and the artisans to start micro-enterprises and market their produce.

The executive committee consists of 15 members who are peer leaders of



Women farmer members of Ujaas in a meeting.

different villages. According to the rules framed by the committee, these members are elected representatives of the women farmers and the leadership rotates every three years. In keeping with the vision and mission of Ujaas, the executive committee includes representatives from Primitive Tribe Groups (PTG) and landless women farmers as well as those engaged in allied agricultural activities. The Executive Committee of federation meets on every 22nd of the month for a monthly review and planning session.

Objectives and Strategies

Ujaas had the following principal objectives.

- To motivate women to assert their identity as farmers – the first step of which is calling themselves *mahila khedut* (women farmers)
- To facilitate processes to ensure their control over productive resources and equal participation in decision-making
- To enhance their social status and reduce their vulnerability by increasing awareness in the community. To address issues related to other rights and entitlements so as to bring about a comprehensive change in their life and livelihood
- In keeping with its inclusive approach, Ujaas has employed the following strategies.
- It has developed linkages with other like-minded organizations, such as Arch Vahini, BAIF Development Research Foundation and other local community groups and incorporated their learning experiences in its plans.
- It is working closely with government departments so that the people may reap the benefits of the tribal development programmes that are already in place. The organization has received recognition and support from block-level officials.
- It is working towards strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions and helping the people secure the benefits of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and the Forest Rights Act.
- While adopting modern technology and management principles it has kept in mind the philosophy and culture of the tribal people.
- It has focused on the most disadvantaged groups.
- It has formed youth groups to focus on the development and well-being of the future generation of farmers.

Achievements

These efforts made over a span of three years to organize women and assist them in becoming self-sufficient have yielded the following results.

1. Training camps were organized for capacity-building and awareness generation. Four leadership development camps were organized to make women aware of their rights and familiarize them with various aspects of gender issues. Six sessions were conducted on the identity of women farmers. Another six sessions focused on government schemes for tribals in general and tribal women in particular. Three training sessions on kitchen gardening were attended by 124 women.
2. Assistance has been extended to women on agricultural inputs. Under this scheme a farmer kit was provided to 540 women. The kit distributed to each farmer included 5 Kg of seeds per farmer of Paddy - GR7 (Organic), Gujarat 7 Bamboo, IR 28 Paddy (Organic) and a kitchen garden kit (*chilli, choli, papadi, karela, bhindi, dudhi, turiya* and tomato.) In addition, 58 women farmers have been supplied with bamboo for making bamboo-based articles.
3. Tie-ups with other organizations have yielded positive results. Six training camps were organized on sustainable agriculture with

the support of the Krishi Vigyan Kendra of Navsari. These camps, that were attended by 250 women farmers, focused on production of biofertilizers (including vermicompost), preserving local varieties of seeds and the impact of climate change on agriculture. The training has helped 23 women farmers to set up their own units for the production and sale of Vermicompost. Under a partnership with the NABARD – WADI Development Programme 1500 farmers (including women) have been identified for the promotion of organic farming.

***“We, the Kotwalias, were not recognized as farmers because we are engaged in bamboo work. But now we can proudly say that we too are farmers”
– says Rikaben of Panikhadak Village.***

4. Under Mission Mangalam of the Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company, 34 women producing bamboo-based articles have been identified for loans and subsidies for the procurement of bamboo.
5. A three-year project for the marketing of mangoes has been launched in partnership with the German Agricultural Society, GIZ. It shall considerably enhance and improve the livelihoods of women in the region along with ensuring a fair price for their produce by

- eliminating middle men from the value chain. In addition, women farmers shall be provided market orientation and training in handling the sales on their own.
6. In recognition of the work done by Ujaas, block-level officers have assigned its members to work with implanting the Total Sanitation Campaign.
 7. Several strategic tie-ups have been initiated *viz.* Tribal Sub Plan and other government schemes like NRLM, MGNREGA, Indira Awas, PDS system, ICDS, Education and Health Departments. The women farmers are now aware about these schemes and have started availing them.
 8. The women involved in these projects have become vocal about their rights and have learnt to effectively negotiate with government officials and panchayats. They have managed to convince the block officer to provide them with four shops required for the marketing of vegetables, fruits and bamboo-based products and all other produce. They have also been successful in persuading the Panchayat to allot them more land towards the construction of their shops in future. In one incidence, the women protested against the corrupt practices of the Sarpanch/ Patwari in four villages. The Sarpanch/ Patwari had been holding the National Rural Employment Guarantee



Women have adopted the collective farming approach to utilize time, energy and money in the most productive manner.

Act (NREGA) cards of 388 women thereby depriving them from employment. The women were successful in retrieving the cards, thereby setting an example for all women in the region.

9. Traditionally women's names are not included in the *khedut chopdi* (farmer's book) provided by the government. However, Ujjas has encouraged women farmers to maintain their own khedut diary, to give them a feeling of ownership of their farming. This practice has made the women understand the importance of managing their own money and given them pride and confidence. The diary, which is used for crop planning, work planning, seasonal planning, noting down useful and innovative technologies and maintaining accounts, is the first step towards developing farming literacy.
10. A group of 12 women of Toranvera and Chimanpada

“This is the first time that I have met the block-level officer. Now I want to meet the collector, share my views about our institution with him and seek his support for our mission,” says Naseemaben of Dholumber.

villages of Chikhli Block of Navsari district started a collective farming venture on a piece of land taken on lease. Within a year, they were able to make a profit of Rs 3000, and the model was replicated in 10 villages of the Chikli block. The idea was not only to make optimum use of their resources, but to strengthen each other and to work towards improving their social environment. These collectives are trying to evolve a sustainable model of agriculture by adopting innovative technologies, preserving traditional varieties of seeds, promoting organic fertilizers, and so on. They have also succeeded in ensuring better deals in the matter of marketing



Women have also started nurturing dreams about the future generation. However, there is still a long way to go, as Ambaben puts it.

their produce. What is more, they are trying to generate awareness and find ways of addressing social issues, such as domestic violence and alcoholism. Block-level officials have appreciated the collective farming approach and there are signs that more land may be made available for such ventures.

The Way Ahead

Ujaas is in the process of getting registered as a legal entity for institutionalizing, sustaining and scaling up its operations. Some of its plans for the future are as follows.

To help women gain control over land and farm resources

- Promoting share cropping on land taken on lease from big farmers
- Procuring land from the panchayat/ mandal panchayat for collective farming
- Promoting joint ownership of land and inheritance rights of women
- Equipment and tools storehouses are planned to be started for renting out farm equipment
- Promoting local seeds production, for use, sale and conservation
- Promoting vermi composting on individual farms and land taken on lease for sale to members

of women's collectives, other farmers or the market

To help women generate capital

- The sale of seeds, fertilizers, etc.
- Hiring out farm equipment
- Setting up agriculture-based micro-enterprises, such as oil mills and flour mills

Obtaining credit from banks by promoting joint liability groups and on the basis of a woman's share in the household farm

To build capacity

- Organizing training camps and workshops on various aspects of agriculture, including the identity and rights of farmers, share cropping, leasing farmland, and marketing, to which experts will be invited
- Holding workshops on the role and future shape of the institution. It is hoped that the members will decide for themselves as to whether the institution should be registered as a cooperative or a farmers' producer company. Cohesion will lend its support in this process.

To share the lessons learnt from this effort

- Documentation, dissemination of information at village, block and district level.