

Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable Development

Part I



JICA Partnership Programme in India

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INDEX

AGRICULTURE

The Green Cotton Fields Back Home
In Your Land, Lie Riches
Purpose to Prosperity
Greenhouses Bringing Home Profitable Yields
Fashionably conscious: Japanese consumers
help support cotton farmers in India
A silent agricultural revolution
Helping farmers help themselves

RURAL LIVELIHOOD

Banking on Trust: Tara Devi's story
Return of the migrant
Securing lives and livelihoods: A multi-touch approach for healthy,
self-reliant village communities.
SHGs gearing to make Kovalam a model panchayat

EDUCATION

If music be the food of love, play on...
Bands of security
Promising Profits: Ram Milan's story

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

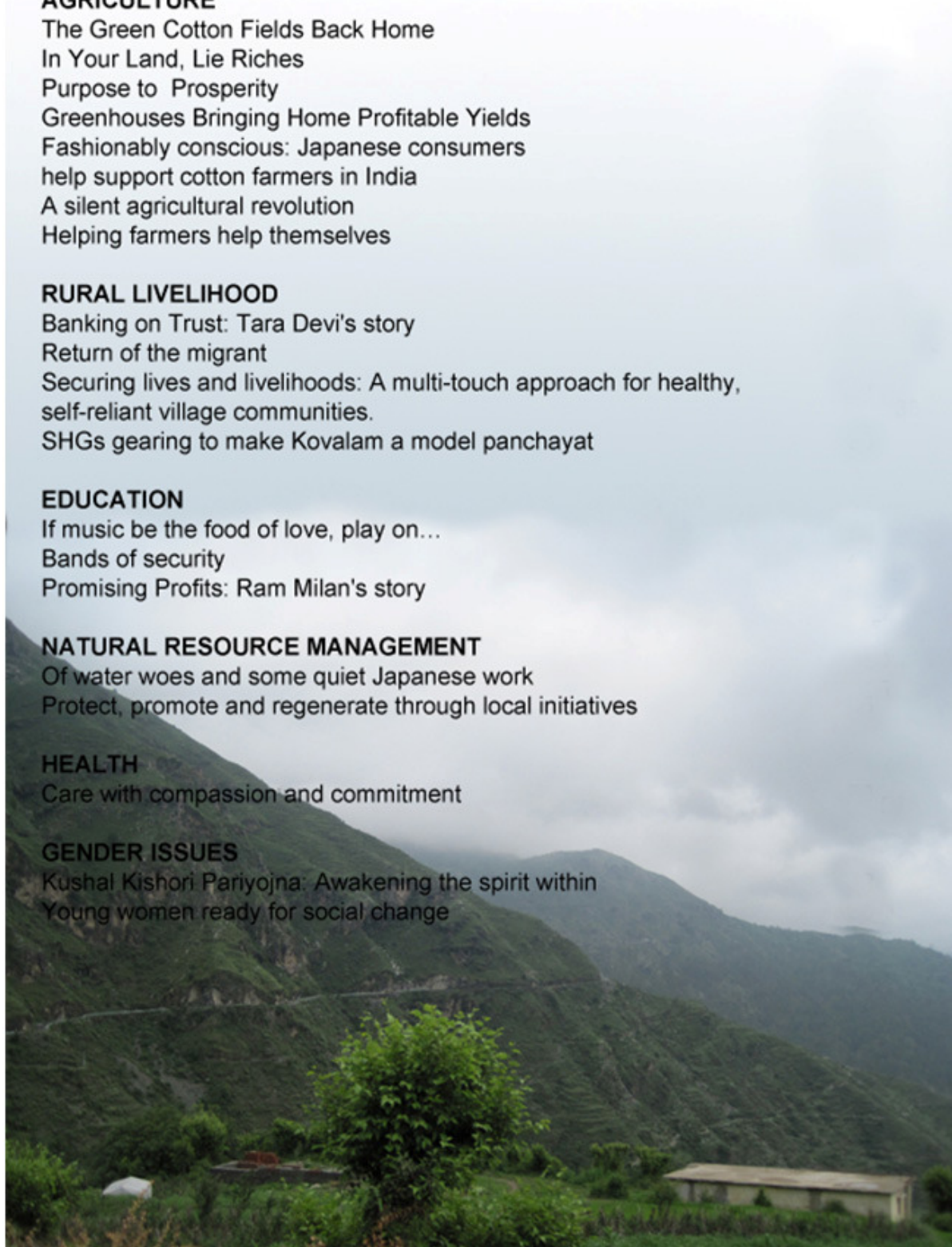
Of water woes and some quiet Japanese work
Protect, promote and regenerate through local initiatives

HEALTH

Care with compassion and commitment

GENDER ISSUES

Kushal Kishori Pariyojna: Awakening the spirit within
Young women ready for social change



The Green Cotton Fields Back Home

Madhusmita Hazarika/ OneWorld South Asia

Mar 10, 2012

The PEACE BY PEACE COTTON PROJECT being implemented by Chetna Organic, with support from Felissimo Corporation and Japan International Cooperation Agency is bucking the trend in chemical farming to revive cotton fields in India's eastern coastal state of Odisha, grown with nothing but a lot of care and an ample of nature.

PROJECT: PEACE BY PEACE COTTON PROJECT - SUPPORTING SMALLHOLDER COTTON FARMER HOUSEHOLDS IN ODISHA

PERIOD: 2010-2012

Agriculture not only gives riches to a nation, but the only riches she can call her own – Samuel Johnson

An apt quote by the celebrated English author underlines the importance of agriculture to a nation. But it is a tragedy that the very occupation that feeds a nation should come to a predicament in an agricultural country such as India.

There is no doubt that farming in India today does not present a rosy picture of sustainability with its debt ridden farmers and chemical tainted soil. Albeit modest, there have been hopeful initiatives – starting with organic farming and the progressive use of traditional agriculture practices – that are encouraging a shift from the dismal side.



The PEACE BY PEACE COTTON PROJECT (PBPCP), currently underway in eastern Indian state Odisha, is a fitting example. The project is implemented by a local farmer-owned organisation Chetna Organic Farmers Association (COFA), with support from Japan based popular catalogue retailer Felissimo Corporation and is facilitated by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Started in 2010, the project promotes organic cotton farming in Odisha's Kalahandi district to bring in eco-friendly profits to small holder farmers.

The main thrust of the programme is to secure agricultural livelihoods and bring benefits to the farming community – in ways more than one. Farmers are encouraged to go back to their traditional agricultural practices, use local seeds, and farm in a manner that does not harm the earth. In return Chetna helps sell their produce to the Fair Trade market – this is supported by the Felissimo Corporation, who procures this organic cotton for the Japanese market.

Going green

Kumar Mani Sah is today carrying ten gunny bags of cotton to the Chetna Organic cotton collection centre at Madingpadar. This measures up to around 800-900 kgs of cotton. A resident of neighboring village Tentulipada, he is a fully converted organic farmer who has got a first-rate yield from his five acre farm.



When Kumar Mani started organic farming, he was taught by Chetna to create compost using cattle manure. Chetna has a steady mandate to ensure that farmers do not deviate to chemical fertilisers – natural manure being the most important aspect of organic farming.

"Chetna people keep visiting us from time to time to tell us about organic farming. I do not use market fertilisers now," he says. "In organic, the cotton production is less compared to conventional and the manual labour required is more. But the quality is better. And we have lesser expenses too," he

adds.

Starting small, PBPCP has transformed ten villages in the Golamunda and Bhawanipatna clusters Kalahandi district to be completely organic. Reaching out to 1,517 farmer households since 2010, it has also boosted the production of cotton over the years – from 3.6 quintals/ acre (in 2007-08) to 6.2 quintals/ acre in the present day.

Among its most important achievements has been the bringing together of cotton farmers as self-help groups and federating them into cooperatives under COFA. These cooperatives have their cotton produce marketed by their own company, the Chetna Organic Agriculture Producer Company Ltd (COAPCL), with distinct economic benefits.

"When market prices of cotton are about 3,600 rupees in the local markets, we are able to offer almost 4,200 rupees per quintal to the farmer, which is 600 rupees more than the local price," says Ramakrishna Yarlagaadda, CEO of Chetna Organic. "As they earn profits from fair trade premium and increased base prices, the farmers' cooperatives are able to expand their activities into new areas."

It has certainly been profitable for Kumar Mani, also a member of Madangpadar's Mathrubhumi Cooperative. A former porter in Sambalpur town, he is now earning well through his association with Chetna Organic. He now grows cauliflower, tomato, brinjals and paddy as well – all organically – for consumption at home. "The taste is good," he shares, smiling. And so is life.

Success venture

Manohar Gaur, President of the Mathrubhumi Cooperative, is a satisfied man on making the switch to organic farming. "Going organic has been quite beneficial to us," he shares. "I started to get profits in the second and third years. My earning for one acre of land is 28,000 rupees; this brings me a profit of around 8,000-10,000 rupees."

The Mathrubhumi Cooperative at Madangpadar has 968 farmers, all of whom have been trained in organic cotton farming by Chetna Organic, which also helps them market their produce and earn a fair trade premium. With this money, supported by part contribution from Felissimo, they built an eco-centre for their farmers in 2010.

A veritable site of goings-on, the Chetna cotton collection centre at Mathrubhumi eco-centre brims with brisk activity through the day as farmers bring in their produce at the end of a laborious but satisfying crop. The cotton is weighed here, packed in appropriately tagged gunny bags, and sent forward for ginning.

Over the last year the eco-centre has also grown in its activities. Today it boasts of a vocational training centre, computer training facilities, an educational resource centre, and a daal mill, which will make possible the marketing of organic daal (*lentil*), produced by farmers in inter-cropping with cotton.

Children of cotton farmers affiliated to the cooperative learn tailoring at the vocational training centre. A second batch of 22 students is now in training. Jharna Manjhi of Madingpadar is a tailoring student from the first batch. After her training, she organised others from her batch to start stitching and supplying material for the market, and was able to make a modest earning of 200 rupees herself.

Rajesh Kumar Pradhan of Ramchandrapur village is an eager student at the computer centre. He wishes to learn DTP and know how to use the internet. He is hopeful this will help him find a job in the future.

Kumar Mani is now keen to send his eldest daughter Pinki to the vocational training centre at the eco-centre to learn some skills. Pinki has completed her high school and now stays at home. "It is to our benefit if our daughter gets some vocational training for herself," he says.

Manohar Gaur is also looking forward to the next season. The Mathrubhumi Cooperative has plans to organically grow dal that will be peeled at the dal mill for a market sale. "We are expecting profits at rupees 5 per kg from this," he adds.

New seeds, new plans

In 2011 Chetna Organic set up a Seed Evaluation Plot at Bondpari village in Lanjigarh block, where 461 varieties of cotton are under trial. The plot is spread across an area of roughly 4.5 acres, and has cotton crops intercropped with legumes/pulses; it has demo-sites for composting methods, an orchard and a nursery – all fed by a water stream nearby.

The intention is to increase farmers' income – through a cropping system approach, seed multiplication, and reuse and application of locally available resources effectively.

Rama Prasad, entomologist and technical specialist with Chetna, and also farm in-charge shares, "With exorbitantly priced hybrid seeds dominating the market, the farmer can barely buy seeds. If the farmer is self-dependant on seeds – that is, when he has his own seeds – he would not need to buy it every year."



The evaluation plot has partnership with the Dharwar Agricultural University, which has shared more than 400 genotypes of cotton for the farm. The genotypes are in a vast range – including Herbaceums, Arboreums, Barbadense and Hirsutums, as also hybrid varieties of cotton. From this, altogether 200 compact varieties of cotton were tried in the recent season, considering the very short rainy days and local soil conditions. Of this, 40 compact varieties of cotton were found to be performing well.

In total, the scientists at Chetna have been able to isolate around 80 good lines of cotton. These are pure lines, and their seeds can be re-used. Earlier farmers had to spend 550 rupees for a 450 gram pack of seeds. And with each acre requiring at least two packs, the cost shot up to 1,100 rupees – a huge amount for a farmer. Farmers now save a lot of money with the re-use and sharing of seeds.



In the agri-extension part, the plot endorses a cropping system approach – promoting inter crops such as red gram, black gram, green gram, cow peas – for additional income and reduced costs, for nutrition balance and food security, for biodiversity, pest reduction and improved soil fertility.

"In the last season, we asked the farmers to collect locally available indigenous seeds. The plan is that farmers can preserve their own seeds, and can also go for better seeds, if they want," says Rama Prasad.

A significant purpose served is the promotion and preservation of indigenous varieties of seeds for re-use, so that they can cut down on costs of buying new hybrid seeds from the market.

Going organic: need of the hour

Majority of paddy farmers need to apply one dose/bag of DAP, and two bags of urea and one bag of potash – in one acre of land. The cost of these inputs, summed up against the average MSP of paddy of Rs. 1,000 that a farmer earns, indicates he does not stand to make any money. This is a classic situation which bears that in the coming days going organic is inevitable. Increasingly farmers are getting convinced about moving to organic farming.

Moving to new areas

Chetna Organic is working with the Niyamgiri Cooperative in 14 villages in Lanjigarh block, a remote region of Kalahandi. Comprising 30 SHGs, the cooperative has about 400 farmers, most of who are now IC-2 farmers and will be certified fully organic soon. This is a quantum shift from just a few years ago, when farmers had to give up cotton farming due to losses.

Farmers start at In-Conversion stage-I (IC-1), which is the first year of conversion to organic farming, moving on to IC-2, the second year, following which they are certified fully organic. The In-Conversion stage is crucial to farmers, who are in transition, as they have a probability of lapsing back to conventional farming practices if they are not monitored and supported continuously.

Makaranda Sahu, President of Niyamgiri Cooperative, recalls the difficult times. "Many times farmers did not have money to buy seeds and had to borrow from *sahukars* (local money lenders), making the return payment in cotton. This meant that farmers could hardly make any profit; they ended giving up cotton farming, and took up growing pulses instead. But even then the profits were low."

In 2010 Chetna came in, and took up on a trial basis one village – Pratibeda – for organic cotton farming. That season Pratibeda farmers were able to produce a decent 61 quintals of cotton. This made farmers take stock of the productivity and profitability of cultivating one acre of cotton vis-a-vis one acre of pulses.

All farmers of Niyamgiri Cooperative have used the bunny variety of cotton (135-140 days/ long staple variety) to avoid any chance of contamination with any other variety. More than 700 quintals of cotton have been estimated for production this year.

Women power

People are in a festive mood today at the Bondpari village in Lanjigarh block. Women dressed in bright saris wait with flowers to welcome the visiting Felissimo team. The occasion is the inauguration of the poultry unit, which the women have set up on their own.

There are two women SHG groups that have come together for this enterprise – Maa Tarini comprising 10 members, and Sukalpatra with its 11 members. Investment support for the poultry unit has been provided by Chetna.

The women hope to pay back their loans with the estimated profits from the enterprise. It will also allow them to pay a wage of rupees 70 a day to the members who will work at the poultry unit on a rotation basis every seven days. In future, if they have profits for three years, the two groups plan to buy land to set up their individual farm ventures.



"We hope to make some profits from the poultry farm," say Bonita Harijan and Kusum Harijan from the Maa Tarini SHG. "We are very poor. This effort is mainly for our children, so that we can give them a better upbringing and a better life."

Meanwhile not too far away, members of another women's group at Tentulipada village are getting ready to inaugurate a dal powder-making unit (a pulveriser). This is the Maa Utkal Jyoti Women's Federation that has been formed by coming together of five SHGs – Maa Basumati, Maa Mangala, Maa Manikeshwari, Maa Thakurani and Maa Mahalakshmi SHGs.

"Now with the powder machine from Chetna, we are hopeful we will make some profits as well. Our association within the group has also become stronger from this new economic initiative," says Labanga Pradhan, President of the federation.

Educating children

At the Asrama Residential School, a tribal welfare school in Madingpadar village, under Karlapada Gram Panchayat, the children are an excited lot – people from Japan are visiting their school! The students have turned out in their bright blue uniforms, and are extremely enthusiastic as they welcome their guests with a local song and flowers.

The PBPCP adopts a multi-pronged strategy to holistically cover its project areas by engaging with schools to ensure out-of-school or drop-out farmers' children are enrolled back in school.

It has recently started a vegetable garden that supplies organically grown vegetables to Asrama. This vegetable plot, spread over an acre in Mading village, is part of Chetna's effort to also look at nutritional requirements of children, in addition to school facilities.



Chetna Organic also works closely with the School Management Committees (SMCs) – comprising teachers, parents, and members of the Panchayat and Gram Sabha to orient them to their core responsibilities and how to better monitor the school's progress. The result is that today 176 children of school going age in the ten project villages have been mainstreamed back in school. The project is also helping develop the infrastructure by constructing toilet facilities, and providing sports kits and learning materials for the students.



"Our plan is to adopt social welfare tribal school hostels, at least 4-5 of them, so we could support at least 600 more children," says Ramakrishna, CEO of Chetna Organic. "The government spending per child is meagre in such schools."

Tatsuya Kasai, Manager, Felissimo, echoes similar sentiments as he shares, "The project, although centred on cotton, has been able to extend help to support weaker areas and education for school children. We are keen to look at more areas in India where we can help, and bring in more stakeholders to our programme."

An integral component of education support is the scholarship programme for meritorious students. These include cash awards worth 7,500 rupees per student by Felissimo. Over 95 students have received scholarships till date.

As the children at Asrama greet Kasai with warmth and hospitality – imbibed very young here – it feels both heartening and humbling at the same time. By biding a better future for these children, the project is building new hopes and inspirations that go beyond mere profits.

(Additional reporting and photographs by Tej Prakash Yadav; Editing by Swati Sahi)

In your land, lie riches

Poorva Sagar/OneWorld South Asia

Mar 07, 2012

In India's western state of Maharashtra, a project supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency is yielding better incomes for farmers and has lured the migrants back to their native villages.

*PROJECT: RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR POVERTY REDUCTION
PERIOD: 2008-2011*

Vishwanath Gangaram Malpote, 28, is in the midst of a robust harvest. As he weeds his rice field, one cannot but help admire his meticulous effort to pluck off the small undergrowth from the standing rice crops. "This time I am expecting double the output," he says, smiling.



Situated in the foothills of the Sahyadri mountain range – also known as the Western Ghats in Maharashtra – Vishwanath's farm in Khamboli village glistens like gold in the bright sun. A light cool breeze blows through the mango trees planted all around.

Unlike most Indian farmers whose agriculture is dependant on rainfall, Vishwanath uses the lift irrigation system, facilitated by Japanese NGO Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan and the Pune-based ICA India, to grow his paddy. In the last three years he has followed the four-step farming

technique in his five acre farm, leading to a 30% increase in overall yield. The second crop cycle of bajra, gram and chickpeas are a bonus.

While major part of his produce goes into domestic consumption, the rest are sold to fellow villagers at a good price. More income means better education for his children, food all through the year, and new farm equipments for his field.

Return to wealth

This prosperity is not for Vishwanath alone. Ninety farmers in Khamboli have flourished through the 'Rural Development for Poverty Reduction' project in Pune district. Run by ICA Japan in collaboration with ICA India and supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) since 2008, the project focuses on a four-pronged approach – agriculture-dairy-biogas-agro-forestry – to reduce poverty and create sustainable development.

The project targets 500 farmers in four villages in Mulshi taluka – including Jawal, Katarkhadak and Andhale. Local capabilities are honed to adopt new technologies and practices in agriculture and agro-forestry to improve land productivity. Training in dairy development and co-operative management as a lucrative livelihood option is encouraged. Biogas plants are set up to integrate clean energy production with livestock keeping as animal manure gets converted to biomass.

"The amount we earn today through farming has solved our monetary problems. We no longer need to go outside our villages to earn our livelihood," says Vishwanath. Not long ago, he was a contract labourer in Pune city, earning a mere Rs 100 (\$2 approximately) per day. The income was less and there was no time to look after his family.

The JICA supported project in Mulshi, one of the most poverty-struck pockets in Pune district, has helped to turn around the migration rate. Farmers such as Vishwanath are returning to their homes.

Water fields

Most farmers in the region practiced rain-fed small scale farming using simple traditional techniques. Urea was widely used as fertiliser that hardened and degraded the soil. The hilly terrain made it difficult to explore the groundwater.

The project's lift irrigation system brought in hope by effectively tackling the problem. Water is now pumped up from the percolation dams with high pressure motors and distributed to the fields through a network of pipes and outlets.

A fee of Rs 40 is charged per hour from the farmer beneficiaries; this helps to support the salary for the operator and also maintain the irrigation system.

In Katarkhadak village, the lift irrigation system is managed by the Gosavi Baba Irrigation Co-operative Society which comprises 70 farmers. The society is chaired by an agricultural committee that meets every fortnight to discuss farmers' problems.

The meetings are participatory in nature and villagers make their own decisions. ICA field officer Tanaji Narayan Malpote helps the committee train farmers in four-step rice cultivation and usage of the lift irrigation system.



Lure of milk

Sandeep Khanekar, 30, learned all about poultry and dairy management at an ICA meeting three years ago. Starting with three cows in 2008, his herd has grown to 40 milch cattle producing 150 litres of milk per day. A successful dairy farmer, entrepreneur and a role model for his village Khamboli and neighbouring areas, Sandeep now partners with ICA in motivating small dairy farmers for higher outputs.



The ICA facilitated milk business now involves 28 farmers from the four villages who have formed the Vithal Rukmini Dairy Society, a co-operative which collects 468 litres of milk each day to sell to dairy outlets in Pune city. The fresh milk is either processed into curd, butter milk, paneer (cottage cheese) or delivered fresh to customers.

Farmers are paid rupees 25 per litre every fortnight – making the average monthly income of a farmer with one animal giving 9 litres of milk, about rupees 6,750.

Sandeep's entrepreneurship has inspired many – Rahul Maruti Malpote of Katarkhadak village among others. Rahul began by assisting Sandeep in milk collection and distribution. Today he owns a small dairy business of his own, and is raring to take it to the next level.

Sandeep and Rahul are examples of how ICA Japan and ICA India have honed the leadership skills of young men who wish to create profitable futures but no longer wish to migrate to cities.

Together we grow

The project's high point lies in its integrated community development that is self-sustaining in nature. This approach has encouraged community members to fully participate in the planning, implementation and monitoring processes.

"Our capacity building and leadership trainings provide farmers with new ideas and approaches. By accepting new technologies, their attitudes have changed, their relationships have strengthened," notes Shankar Jadhav, Executive Director, ICA India.

A special component of the integrated approach is the biogas plant – each village has 6-8 biogas plants. By integrating clean energy with livestock keeping, the project has succeeded in changing the cooking habits of women who have now traded firewood for smokeless piped fuel.

Savita Kemse, 35, in Kemsebadi village, is a dairy farmer who has benefited from the biogas plant. She feeds it with animal manure, uses the residual slurry as organic fertiliser, and saves time on cooking!



Prabhakar Genu Malpote, 40, in Katarkhadak village cultivates rice in his two acre field and vegetables in the remaining one acre. His farm is surrounded by mangos, jackfruits and other fruit trees. His two buffaloes produce 10 litres of milk daily. His six children play around the biogas plant. Prabhakar believes this is an ideal system where farming, agro-forestry, biogas and dairy reinforce each other, as demonstrated by ICA in its trainings.

The main achievement of this project has however been in uniting people. Families now are happier and comfortable working in their own farms. There has been comprehensive development and the project is slowly moving towards its sustainability. "We feel that even if JICA and ICA move away after few years, the villagers would still retain this unity and the capacity to maintain their own project," says Shankar with confidence.

In coming years, ICA hopes to strengthen its relationships with many more co-operatives and self-help groups to take forward the project's goals.

(Additional reporting by Satish Nagaraji, editing by Swati Sahi)

Purpose To Prosperity

Poorva Sagar, OneWorld South Asia

Mar 07, 2012

Benefiting from Japanese NGO Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan and its local counterpart ICA India's initiative 'Rural Development for Poverty Reduction,' supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Savita Khemse's family has prospered quickly in the past three years.

PROJECT: RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR POVERTY REDUCTION
PERIOD: 2008- 2011

It is a busy morning at Savita Khemse's house. She hurriedly cooks lunch for her daughter and son and then sweeps the house clean. In another half hour, Savita will leave for her farm to pluck fresh vegetables for sale in nearby Pirangut town.

"I sell around 30 kg of brinjals, lady fingers, tomatoes and chillies every alternate day," she says, after a quick mental calculation.

Savita, 35, resides in Kemsebadi village in Mulshi taluka near Pune city in Indian state Maharashtra. Benefiting from Japanese NGO Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan and its local counterpart ICA India's initiative 'Rural Development for Poverty Reduction,' supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), her family has prospered quickly in the past three years.

Savita's family comprises her husband and two children, her in-laws, and her brother-in-law and his wife and two children.



The family owns three acres of land which is cultivated all through the year with diversified crops, thanks to the lift-irrigation system and four-step farming training gained from ICA field officers. "The technique has produced 30% more rice than the previous year," Savita says happily.

The project was initiated in 2008 in four villages of the Mulshi taluka in Pune district – Khamboli, Katarkhadak, Andhale and Jawal.

The project aims to improve the productivity of cultivable land through irrigation and agro-forestry, thereby making agriculture profitable. Alongside, it provides training in dairy management as a lucrative business avenue. These local livelihood opportunities have reassured many residents, previously migrating to Pune for work, to stay back in their village homes.

The JICA supported project also promotes biogas as an alternative source of fuel among farmer households – thus integrating dairy development with clean energy production.

Entrepreneurship

Savita calls out to her children for breakfast as she brings in fodder for her dairy animals. Her family owns 28 animals including three cows, 14 big buffaloes and other small animals. Together they produce 60 litres of milk per day – of which 27 litres go to the milk collection centre run by ICA at their village.

She is happy with the price offered by them – an added incentive to sell the milk at the centre. “We don’t force them to sell the milk at our collection centre, we simply give them options and networking,” says Shankar Jadhav, Executive Director, ICA India.



Traditionally, dairy is the domain of men in the family. But Savita plays an extensive role – from cleaning the animals to feeding and milking them. She is a strong exception to the norm and is breaking stereotypes and inspiring other village women to action.

Her trainings in dairy management and business have evolved Savita into an entrepreneur. She is now well aware of the principles of money circulation within the local economy.

The biogas plant set up by ICA has replaced her smoky and cumbersome firewood stove with clean and hassle free cooking on biogas. The dung from her animals is used to feed the plant. Once the biogas is piped for cooking, the slurry is used as rich organic fertiliser. The result – tastier and organic fresh vegetables with a high demand!

Besides, the indigenous food and milk produce provide Savita and her family the right nutrition in times of rising food costs.

The yield has now increased and so have Savita’s income and aspirations. Her husband and others are proud of her entrepreneurial skills that have brought in better incomes for the whole family. She has now bought land worth eight lakh rupees in Pirangut where she intends to set up a vegetable shop and educate her children in a good school.

Having done her morning tasks, she is now ready to leave her home for a day’s work at her farm. Yes, there is no looking back for Savita.

(Additional reporting by Satish Nagaraji)

Banking On Trust: Tara Devi's Story

Veronica Srivastava/OneWorld South Asia

Oct 29, 2011

Over time Japanese NGO Asian Sustainable Holistic Approach has built bonds of trust with women like Tara Devi of Bada Kanjasa village in Uttar Pradesh.

Tara Devi walks nimbly over the muddy track along the river Yamuna as she leads us to where her boat stands. The rains could not dampen her spirit.

"There it is," she waves with joy. The half-constructed boat stands on the shore – made possible by a personal loan of rupees 8,000 from the *Saraswati Swayam Sahayata Samuha* (Saraswati Self-Help Group). "My husband is now at Allahabad city to buy the wood," she says eagerly.

Tara, 35, has been a member of the village Self-Help Group (SHG) since the last 23 months when it was first set up by Japan based NGO Asian Sustainable Holistic Approach (ASHA) at Bada Kanjasa as part of the Practical Farmers' Education Project.



Supported by JICA, the project was first introduced in 2009 in Bada Kanjasa and neighbouring villages and hamlets in the district, and is run in partnership with the Makino School of Continuing and Non-Formal Education (MSCNFE), Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences, formerly the Allahabad Agricultural Institute.

The project aims to cultivate rural leadership by educating marginal and small-scale farmers and women in income-generation activities to improve their quality of life. Forming SHGs is central to building the financial capacity of villagers.

Empowering women

Tara first came to know of the project when Urmila Kushwaha, an ASHA worker, visited her house during her village rounds. Urmila supervises the local trainers or animators who have been trained by ASHA to help build the SHGs.



The Bada Kanjasa SHG has 13 women members, with each saving rupees 65 per month on average. Local animator Vimal Chand helps to maintain their records as most of the women are illiterate. He also helps them realise the importance of savings.

"Our aim is to empower women, so that they can support themselves on their own. We want them to earn and grow within their villages so that they do not feel the need to migrate to urban areas," says Namita Singh,

the local Project Coordinator. Many have been given training in poultry rearing, farming, and other income generation activities.

The tall and chatty Shanti Devi, the SHG President, calls the loan meetings as and when required and resolves any internal disputes. She says her leadership training provided by ASHA helps her administer the group's activities more effectively. The group has now saved an impressive amount of over rupees 40,000, she declares proudly.

Namita and Urmila share a close rapport with the women as they laugh and talk at the meeting. But it has not been an easy task. In the beginning, the women were apprehensive about the SHG. Some even thought that the money they would save would be stolen by the project staff!

Over time ASHA has built bonds of trust with the women. The ability to dip into their savings in times of need, and at reasonable interest rates, has given them the confidence to make their own decisions.

"Did we steal your money?" Namita teases with a smile. "No, you helped us put it together," they respond, loud and happy.

The women are now confident that they will be able to sustain the SHG with the help of their children, who can help them with their accounts. They feel empowered by uniting together.

When asked if they would prefer a bank over the SHG, Tara and her fellow members chorus triumphantly, "This is our bank."

(Additional reporting by Poorva Sagar, editing by Swati Sahi)

Return Of The Migrant

Poorva Sagar, OneWorld South Asia

Mar 07, 2012

Young Rahul Malpote started his business after being introduced to dairy management by Japanese NGO Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan and its local Pune-based counterpart ICA India, as part of the 'Rural Development for Poverty Reduction' project.

PROJECT: RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR POVERTY REDUCTION
PERIOD: 2008- 2011

In the quiet retreat of the sprawling Sahyadri mountain range in India's western state of Maharashtra, is Katarkhadak village. The road outside the small village temple is abuzz with activity in the wee hours of morning as villagers gather patiently with cans of milk.



Young Rahul Maruti Malpote, 23, who has started a dairy business recently, soon arrives on his motorbike to collect the milk. After the preliminary greetings, they get down to business.

The villagers gaze intently at the lactometer which he dips into their samples to detect its richness and purity.

"The milk is of good quality," says Rahul, satisfied with the lactometer floating on the milk. After a collection of about 25 litres from the locals and another 30 litres from his own dairy

animals, he rides off to the neighbouring city of Pune for a profitable sale at a bigger dairy.

Rahul started his business after being introduced to dairy management by Japanese NGO Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Japan and its local Pune-based counterpart ICA India, as part of the 'Rural Development for Poverty Reduction' project. Launched in 2008 in four villages of Mulshi taluka including Katarkhadak, the project is supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

The project focuses on boosting productivity of land through simple techniques in irrigation and agro-forestry and dairy development. Building leadership capabilities of villagers such as Rahul is central to its objective to lifting people out of poverty in the region.

Leading by example

A big shed adjoining the modest and rustic house of Rahul is home to two buffaloes, three cows, ten chickens and three goats. The backyard is lush with trees and plants that he lovingly nurtures. Rahul is now both enthused and satisfied with his business.

Three years back Rahul worked as an electrician in a college outside his village. Staying away from his home, he was not happy. Also his meagre income was not enough to make ends meet.

At that very time, Tanaji Narayan Malpote, the field officer with ICA India, did his round of Rahul's village to introduce locals to sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry and dairy development.

Rahul was eager to learn. By the end of the trainings, he knew how to use the four-step rice cultivation technique, practice organic agriculture, measure fat in milk with a lactometer, and secure the best fodder for his animals.

He began assisting ICA with its dairy activities at neighbouring village Khamboli. He was particularly inspired by local resident Sandeep Khanekar, who runs a successful dairy business in partnership with ICA.

In 2010 Rahul began helping Sandeep to collect and market the milk. In due course, he saved enough to start his own dairy business. Albeit small in its scale of operation, he is now successfully delivering 55 litres of milk to his customers daily.

Green yield

ICA's main approach was to integrate farming, agro-forestry, dairy and biogas in a manner in which they support each other. "We do not impose our ideas on villagers. We train them and then they are free to pursue any activity they want. We are mere facilitators," said a modest Shankar Jadhav, Executive Director, ICA India.

Rahul's two acre farm land had a bumper yield of 800 kg of rice last year, thanks to the four-step cultivation technique and lift irrigation system introduced by ICA Japan. "This year we expect a 30% increase," says Rahul, beaming.



In his second crop cycle, he sows fodder for his livestock that he now plans to increase – five more buffaloes, five more cows and ten goats will add to his herd. He also plans to buy a hundred chickens – making him the first in his village to start a poultry business!

Rahul, the once reluctant migrant, is now a promising entrepreneur. "I will not work for any company now. I am more than content with my own business at home," he says self-assuredly. It has indeed been a grand homecoming to satisfaction and success.

(Additional reporting by Satish Nagaraji; editing by Swati Sahi)

Securing Lives And Livelihoods: A Multi-Touch Approach For Healthy, Self-Reliant Village Communities

OneWorld South Asia

Oct 22, 2010

By equipping rural communities in Allahabad, India, with tools of education, information and awareness, Japanese NGO: Asian Sustainable Holistic Approach (ASHA) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are transforming lives.

ASHA has been working with Makino School of Continuing and Non-formal Education (MSCNE) for seven years as a partner in rural development activities. The school is a unit of Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture, Sciences & Technology (SHIATS), Allahabad formerly Allahabad Agricultural Institute. The initiatives address knowledge gaps in the critical areas of health, education and self-reliance.

Chota Kanjasa is a small village amid lush green fields on the banks of the Yamuna in the Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The village, located away from the hustle-bustle of Allahabad city, is mostly inhabited by fishermen and landless farm labourers.

Accompanied by Dr. Teruo Miura, Dean, Makino School of Continuing and Non-Formal Education (MSCNE-SHIATS), and Project Manager sent by ASHA, we make our way to a little building, which seems to be the command central for all MSCNE/ASHA run initiatives, including a small primary school.



The place is bustling with activity as we enter. A group of women is sitting on a plastic mattress, making entries in their registers; another group is watching intently as a man demonstrates the correct way of planting seeds and covering them with leaves for protection from the wind, rain and animals; a lady addresses some women over the din caused by children and a group of elders busy talking to each other.

“The women are attending a workshop on kitchen gardens today. Since most of the people here are landless, being farm labourers or belonging to indigenous tribes, we are teaching them how to grow vegetables in bags that can be placed in small but safe spaces, even on their roofs. The focus of the workshop today is on benefits of locally grown vegetables,” explains Ms. Manmeet, a health coordinator at MSCNE.

“We realised that there is hardly any awareness here on the nutritive value of food items. People eat to fill stomachs not to stay healthy. An average meal here mostly consists of potato, rice and wheat. The lack of essential nutrients has led to the widespread prevalence of a number of diseases.” she elaborates. “The majority of children here, for example, suffered from chronic malnutrition.”

According to Ms. Takako Miura, a health specialist sent by ASHA, “Women and girls were especially marginalised and vulnerable owing to low literacy rates and the patriarchal nature of the local community. Often, the dominance of family elders and husbands in decisions made it harder for women to adopt healthier practices for themselves.”

Superstition mixed with a lack of awareness on good health practices was a potent combination that MSCNE/ASHA had to work hard to address. For instance, it was considered bad luck to acknowledge a pregnancy, so few women sought prenatal care. Few understood the benefits of immediate and exclusive breastfeeding. Families were hesitant to regularly weigh their newborns as they feared it would jinx the baby's health.

The MSCNE/ASHA team realised that one critical reason of low health indicators was also a lack of better options. It was felt that the best way to improve the health conditions was to adopt a holistic approach; that is centralising knowledge and information sharing while addressing other quality of life issues like education and employment.

To realise this aim, ASHA with support from JICA runs two major programmes in and around six villages in Allahabad. The Improvement of Rural Nutrition and Child and Mother Care Project addresses the problem of malnutrition of mothers and their infants through the identification and training of Village Health Volunteers (VHVs) and organisation of regular health seminars.

The Practical Farmers' Education for Improvement of Quality of Life among Small-scale Farmers in North India is synergised with ASHA run school and non-formal education projects to provide critical income-generation and livelihood opportunities through micro-finance and self-help groups and training in animal husbandry and food processing.

"Our aim was to equip the local population, especially women and children, with information and ideas to help them lead healthy and secure lives," says Dr. Miura.



Addressing early life health concerns

The Child and Mother Care Project was initiated by ASHA in partnership with a Japanese organisation Ajinomoto in 2008. The project entered a new phase with support from JICA, in January 2010.

As part of the initiative, Village Health Volunteers (VHVs) play a critical role in spreading awareness and ensuring follow-up on key health concerns. They conduct seminars and workshops on a regular basis to ensure that the right messages are continually circulated amongst the target communities.

"To make improvements in the health of women, it is very important to educate them and make them aware of the developments taking place around them," observes Dr. Miura.

Thirteen VHVs circulate in six villages, offering advice and returning often to check in on the expectant mothers and the babies as they are born.

"I was teaching at a village school when I was chosen as a VHV by MSCNE/ASHA a few years back. I am now in charge of three villages. I visit the villages regularly, befriending the women and counselling them - even their families - on the benefits of breastfeeding and eating wholesome food," says Ms. Phoolkali.



Focus has been on training the VHVs and increasing their knowledge of maternal and child health. They in turn, teach families about the importance of prenatal care and signs of stress to the child or mother, during pregnancy, birthing and the postpartum period.

“More than two hundred children are being monitored currently,” confirms Ms. Miura.

“We record the height and weight of newborns every three months in the Mother and Child books which are provided to pregnant women and mothers who have children below the age of five. These booklets provide information about the baby’s growth and vaccination status. There is a remarks column where we can insert specific advice as well,” Ms. Phoolkali adds.

If the baby does not register satisfactory growth over a period of time, the VHV advises the mother on food intake and breastfeeding practices, and visits the family regularly to keep track of the child’s growth. “We try to understand what kind of issues confront the family, why is it that the child is not receiving adequate nutrition,” explains Ms. Pushpa Devi, a VHV from Kanjasa.

“Initially, the women refused to attend health gatherings; many did not believe in our programmes. They have gradually started taking us seriously, after seeing some real results,” says Ms. Manmeet.

“Challenges still remain; our expectation to reach a larger number of people has not been entirely fulfilled. Also, it takes time to bring change in people’s attitudes and to ensure that the change is permanent. So, we have a long way to go,” says Dr. Miura.

Planting seeds of security

The Practical Farmers’ Education Project launched in April 2009 provides essential training in integrated sustainable agriculture, animal husbandry and poultry farming, and food processing to local farmers to expose them to varied ways of generating income.



“Since most residents are poor, we focus on affordable, sustainable agriculture that generates some income and encourages a healthy lifestyle. For example, we recommend they use organic fertilisers like husk charcoal as it is inexpensive and easily available,” states Dr. Miura. The produce is sold through cooperatives.

“I was unemployed until a few years back,” says Mr. Rajendra Prasad, as he tends to a batch of yellow chickens. “I heard about the animal husbandry programme in MSCNE/ASHA and enrolled for training. I am a poultry farmer now. Today I earn enough to meet all the needs of my family.”

Along with technical training, MSCNE/ASHA considered it crucial to build the financial management capacity of the residents.

The formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) by MSCNE/ASHA played a significant role. Today the SHGs, through a system of microfinance and microcredit, enable villagers to get loans for meeting urgent expenses at affordable interest rates. Active SHG members along with members of other youth groups go from village to village, motivating people to reap gains from microfinance.

Availability of credit and opportunities for saving has also contributed to the empowerment of women in the community.

"Initially the women were not convinced - as SHGs were not popular in the area. ASHA facilitators addressed this issue by enrolling the support of the more social and well-liked women, i.e. the informal group leaders of the community. Once convinced, these women helped pull the other women in" explained Dr. Muira.



"Each SHG has about 10-12 members. As the women are trained in income generation activities, and are mentored to play the roles of president, vice president and treasurer for the group, they develop confidence. Some take on bigger, leadership roles in propagating MSCNE/ASHA's work," says Ms. Namita, coordinator of microfinance at MSCNE. Ms. Namita has been instrumental in the creation of over 40 SHGs during the year.

"I took a loan too. We invested the money to expand our agriculture business. We could buy better soil and the profit we incurred was deposited back in the SHG account," an SHG member from Bargohana village reveals proudly.

Building bonds of trust

MSCNE/ASHA now shares a relationship of trust with the villages. People not only follow coordinator's advice but are also eager to learn more. Each family is associated with at least one initiative. There have been many positive changes over time," says Mr. A.K. Mishra.



Many local residents report an increase in income; average literacy rates also show improvement. Even more importantly perhaps, a much higher number of girls now attend school. Women feel better equipped to take charge of the well being of their family, as well of their own.

Now that they are planning the next phase of activities, 'ASHA' (meaning hope in Hindi) is truly hopeful that it will continue to make a difference in the lives of the rural poor by leveraging the lessons learnt so far. Important among those is the need of using the right tools and offering the right incentives to affect lasting change.

If Music Be The Food Of Love, Play On...

Swati Sahi, OneWorld South Asia

Dec 03, 2011

The SurDeep project supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency is using the power of music and dance to inculcate creative educational pursuits and self-reliance among street children in the Indian city of Mumbai.

PROJECT: Develop Music Instructors to Cultivate Slum Children's Self-reliance

PROJECT PERIOD: January 2011-December 2013

Unlike boys of his age, Mohit Gopal Varma, 14, has a long hard day ahead of him, everyday. His day starts early at 6 at the sabzi mandi (vegetable market) where he helps his uncle set up his fruit shop. In the afternoon he goes to the local municipal school to attend classes. Post-school, he is back at the market where he works alongside his uncle from 7 to 11 pm. The thirty rupees that he earns each day goes to support the tuition classes of his four younger siblings.



But there is one time of his day that he looks forward to – between his morning work and afternoon school. That's the time he spends at the Monsoon and Sunlight Class at Mumbai's Acworth Municipal Hospital with Yuri Nishimura and other members of Hikari no Onpu or SurDeep (as known in Hindi), a Japan based NGO that teaches children music, dance and creative arts as a means of self-expression.

SurDeep or 'The Musical Notes of Light', run by the effervescent Yuri, has been helping street children in Mumbai's Wadala area since 2004 in creative educational pursuits. Now supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) since January 2011, it aims to cultivate their self-reliance through the power of music and dance in partnership with local NGO, the Bombay Leprosy Project (BLP).

A 'miraculous' bond

Yuri Nishimura describes her relationship with India as "miraculous". Yuri first came to India in 2002 to bury her mother's ashes next to her father's grave at Agra. Her father, a leprosy doctor, had worked at Agra's National JALMA Institute for 13 years.

This was when she witnessed the plight of street children in Mumbai, especially those whose parents were affected by leprosy – out of schools, mostly begging on streets.



Yuri, a trained music teacher, had been working with handicapped children and the aged in Japan. SurDeep (Hikari no Onpu), the NGO founded by her, was based on the percept that providing the experience of articulation is the beginning of education, and music and its healing power can here play a strong role.

She realised these street children needed to be educated – and her music could help give them a chance to connect ‘emotionally’ with society.

Yuri discussed the possibilities of imparting this emotional education with the late Dr. Ganapathy, the then director of BLP and a close friend of Yuri’s father. He connected her with Sister Seraphin who had been running the Monsoon Class for Wadala’s street children for over two decades. Most of the children had leprosy affected parents, and belonged to the tribal community living under the railway bridge.

With strong passion and belief in her work, Yuri managed to mobilise resources from Japan to start her work in Mumbai in 2004. Over time she tied up with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to bring in music and dance instructors to her project to help the children cultivate self-reliance, confidence and hope.

All song and play in a day’s work

It’s Thursday morning and a small room on the grounds of Acworth Municipal Hospital is packed with 40 excited children. “One little, two little, three little Indians,” they sing along with Rommel D’Souza, the music instructor who has been teaching them to play the keyboard since the past four months.

“We practice English songs so that it is easier for them to pick up the language,” he says.



Rommel was introduced to SurDeep by Project Manager Subhash Hoval of BLP, a steady supporter of Yuri’s efforts. Rommel now loves his work; the children are quick, eager and attentive. Their love and uninhibited enthusiasm to learn has been both motivating and rewarding for him.

“The children are gaining confidence to sing. They are experiencing new things that their peers don’t have,” Rommel says, hopeful that the children will gain through this experience.

After the class, Feroz Sheik, 14, gets busy on the dholak (drum) as Sister Seraphin watches on with Yuri. She is pleased that the children are doing well and smiles delightedly at the children’s performance.

Vikram Tikkam, 19, aka Chunku, as he is affectionately called by the children, is an ex-student of SurDeep.



"I am glad I got a chance to study here. It helped me stay on track and take the right steps," he says as he fondly recalls his past six years. And now he helps Feroz, Mohit and others to practice their dance steps taught by dance instructor Brian Fernandes every Tuesday.

"This is a good platform for the children. They are so happy that they are learning to dance, play the keyboard and sing songs – something that we never used to do at their age," he says.

Brian, one of Mumbai's most popular dance instructors, has been associated with the project since the last six months. He believes the children are talented and with better training, can get to use their skills for their future. "Infrastructure, space is an issue," he says. "We also need to give them incentives so that the progress is sustained."

Brian is keen to put up a show with the children in November and in March, next year. "Music and dance help children forget pain. It can mellow their aggression and frustration," he says, noting that many of the street kids come from difficult conditions.

Creating joy

As the class gets over, the children rush to the kitchen to hot piping food.



The free midday meal is popular among the children as they fill themselves up, ready now for their afternoon classes at the municipal school. "The meals relieve their parents to some extent as many of them cannot afford to feed their large families," says Sister Seraphin.

Creative arts teacher Carmine Fernandes has been working with Sister Seraphin for the last twenty years. "The number of our children has increased with their joy," she says smiling, having noted a steady growth in their turnout with the project.

And it's not just about the song and dance. Kusum, 9, who is taught Urdu at the local school, is learning new languages – English and Hindi at SurDeep. She enjoys her drawing classes and is not shy of shaking a leg during Brian's classes.

Yuri Nishimura is most satisfied when she sees Kusum and others like her opening up to new possibilities. Poor children in India are not unhappy, but unlucky, she believes. "I hope my small efforts can bring a change in the world," she says with great hope and humility.

Her loving rapport with the children is most evident as they hug her goodbye and shake her hand at the end of day. Her eyes are bright with delight as they express their thanks, "Arigatō, arigatō" in Japanese. And she can't wait to get back to her work the next day.

(Additional reporting and video documentation by Satish Nagaraji)

Bands Of Security

Poorva Sagar/ OneWorld South Asia

Oct 29, 2011

A project supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency in north India is educating small farmers and rural women to earn better incomes and develop new livelihoods.

*"Jo anpadh hai naari, vo dukhiya bechaari, Jo padhti hai naari dekhe duniya saari
Aao behena sun lo ye gana, Hai Ram, sikhsha ka hai zamana"
(An illiterate woman has to face miseries, while the world respects an educated woman. Come, sister, listen to what the song says...It's the time for education)*



A dozen women sing aloud in unison in a small room with minimum furniture – a wooden string cot by the side and a bright blue plastic sheet spread on the dirt floor. It is the small hamlet of Bhiskuri, near Maida village, 30 km from the nearest city of Allahabad in north Indian state Uttar Pradesh.

The song describes the importance of education for women and their children without being preachy. The women, with neatly oiled hair and in colourful saris, sway to the catchy tune, fashioned on a popular Bollywood number.

The sense of unity and zeal is unmistakable. The women are a part of the Lakshmi Svayam Sahayata Samuha, a seven-month old Self Help Group (SHG) run by Japan based NGO Asian Sustainable Holistic Approach (ASHA) as part of the **Practical Farmers' Education Project**. The women raise 10 rupees (\$0.22) from their monthly savings to contribute to the group's fund, which in turn is distributed as micro-loans to members for livelihoods and income generation activities.

Maharani, 50, the treasurer, counts the collections for the month. She is illiterate, and is helped by the SHG animator Jagdish in noting the amount in the savings register. She then places the money in an aluminium box and locks it up in a bigger trunk along with the register and other notebooks.

Support networks

The **Practical Farmers' Education Project** is supported by JICA and is run in partnership with ASHA and the Makino School of Continuing and Non-Formal Education (MSCNFE), Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture, Technology & Sciences (SHIATS), formerly the Allahabad Agricultural Institute. The project aims to cultivate rural leadership by educating marginal and small-scale farmers and women in income-generation activities to improve their quality of life. Lack of livelihoods, migration and poor status of women were the key areas to address. In 2009 the project identified women in Kanjasa, Maida, Haldi and Bargohna villages and other hamlets in Allahabad district to set up SHGs that would help them beat poverty by saving. At the start, the local project coordinator Namita Singh encouraged the women to save as low as a rupee a day from their earnings. Over a period of 2 years, the project grew from ten to 40

in 2010. This year there are 65 fully operational SHGs, comprising 700 women and 50 youth members. Each SHG has a president, a secretary and a treasurer to smoothly administer its functions.

Enterprising growth

In neighbouring hamlet Khurji, the houses are wall painted with slogans by MSCNFE to raise awareness on gender equality and education. The petite Janaki Devi, 30, here balances the dual role of a community health worker and the secretary of the Radha Swayam Sahayata Samuha.

Janaki and her husband set an example of small-scale entrepreneurship for the local community. "I borrowed 700 rupees from the SHG for an ice cream business and we made good profit," she shares. In the future, she would like to start a business of spices and poultry rearing with some training from ASHA.



Tara Devi, 35, is a member of the oldest SHG in the district – the *Saraswati Swayam Sahayata*

Samuha in Bada Kanjasa since almost two years. She has seven children and she and her husband rely on fishing to make ends meet.

By saving rupees 65 each month, she has been able to borrow a large sum of rupees 8,000 from the SHG fund at a low interest to make a new boat. Unlike earlier times, she did not have to go to the local moneylender and pawn her possessions for a loan. (Read Tara Devi's story)

Urmila Kushwaha, the project supervisor visits Janaki, Tara and the other women in each of the villages to understand their problems and make them aware of their rights. For the women, the ASHA team's presence has been certainly life changing.

"We aim to make these women self-reliant so that they can stand on their feet and shape their lives," says Namita. And the results are showing. By dipping into their savings in times of need, these women feel empowered to lead better lives. They now command respect from fellow villagers and have a stronger say in their family matters.

Training centres in the four main villages also tutor the SHG members in income generation activities such as sewing and stitching, and beauty care.

Linking the rural and urban



Apart from training women to save and generate income through SHGs, ASHA also focuses on raising awareness on organic farming among small and marginal farmers. The Allahabad Organic Agricultural Cooperative (AOAC), located at the MSCNFE complex, is the project's one-stop training centre for the various related income generating activities.

Ram Milan, 40, a farmer from Bhiskuri, was trained in organic farming and poultry rearing at the AOAC by ASHA.

"I now own half an acre of Japanese rice," he says proudly. His poultry business also earns him an extra 1,400 rupees as chickens are sold to the cooperative for making processed meat products such as smoked chicken and sausages. (Read Ram Milan's story)

The fresh produce from Ram Milan's farm also finds a place at the AOAC where they are sold afresh or processed as squashes, pickles and sauces to be sold locally and in new markets in Varanasi, Delhi and other cities. Even as it thus builds a lasting demand for rural produce through its processing activities, ASHA creates income opportunities for rural youth and women at the centre.

Shubh Narayan, 22, from Bargohna village, is among the six workers at the AOAC food processing unit. After being trained in meat processing by ASHA, he earns a decent income and feels confident.

Through the AOAC, farmers like Ram Milan can also raise loans at minimal interest to invest in their livelihoods. India ASHA Project Coordinator Takaya Machigami envisions a future where farmers and SHG members come together to build a large scale rural industry funded by the cooperative.

Dr Teruo Miura, Project Manager, ASHA, sums up best as he says, "We believe nurturing local workers who continue to work here will lead to their empowerment."

(Additional reporting by Vernonica Srivastava; Editing by Swati Sahi)

Of Water Woes And Some Quiet Japanese Work

Madhusmita Hazarika, OneWorld South Asia

Dec 24, 2011

Rural Uttar Pradesh in north India is now aware of severe skin diseases caused by drinking arsenic contaminated water, thanks to a mitigation project by Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Project: Execution of Arsenic Mitigation Project for Establishment of Government Initiative System in Uttar Pradesh

Project period: Phase I (2008-2010) & Phase II (2011-2013)



It's a warm October morning and the district hospital at Bahraich is teeming with patients. But the crowd is not lined up as all days to meet the doctors. Instead they are huddled in a group outside the ward, closely watching a family row as loud shouts fly about.

An onlooker may almost get fretful till it dawns that the heated dispute is part of a street play. Kaluey ki Maa (Kalua's Mother) is a much harried woman, bothered by several skin problems. She has strange discolorations and

thickening on her skin. Now even her husband is complaining he has the same problems.

At a loss, the couple decide to seek help from the local medicine man. Just then the husband's cousin comes along and explains that their skin problems may well be symptoms of 'slow poisoning' by arsenic in water.

The audience, so far amused by the performance, is now curious and questioning about the matter of arsenic. As the play ends, some volunteers move among the crowd and distribute pamphlets. It's all in a day's job for the Bahraich Arsenic Mitigation Project (BAMP), which is on an awareness drive to educate locals on the ill health effects of arsenic contaminated water.

BAMP is a first-time, non-government intervention in arsenic mitigation in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The project operates in 34 habitations in two villages – Chhetra and Newada in Tejwapur block in Bahraich district. Supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) under their JICA Partnership Programme, the project was first launched in 2008 by the University of Miyazaki, Japan in collaboration with Kanpur based local environmental NGO Eco Friends.

An integrated approach

High prevalence of arsenic in the populous Ganges River belt (see map) was a major reason for the project's focus on Uttar Pradesh. Bahraich was selected following a state water survey

by the UP Jal Nigam that revealed the district, with 10 of its 14 blocks, as the most widely arsenic contaminated – Tejawapur block being the most affected.

The University of Miyazaki's wide experience in arsenic mitigation in Bangladesh with the Asia Arsenic Network was a strong driving force behind the project, guided by the able senior Professor Hiroshi Yokota as the Project Lead.

BAMP's success lies in its broad programme activities that provide an integrated approach to project implementation. In the first phase, every water source was screened – both private and government – in initial seven hamlets in the two villages. Hand-pumps with arsenic concentration above 50 PPB (parts per billion) were marked red as unsafe, while those less than 50 PPB were marked green as safe.



"The 50 PPB level was undertaken only as an interim measure owing to the wide prevalence of high arsenic levels," says Rakesh Jaiswal, President of Eco Friends. "The WHO and BIS standards prescribe 10 PPB as the maximum limit of arsenic concentration in the context of safety of human health," he clarifies.



However a lack of knowledge on arsenic meant the color codes were not taken seriously by the villagers. A household survey revealed that out of a population of near 1,600 in the seven habitations, almost 740 people were drinking arsenic-contaminated water above 50 PPB.

To tackle this risk, the project roped in villagers to form Arsenic Mitigation Committees (AMCs) at the village level. A study tour to Bangladesh was organised for the BAMP staff and village community representatives to learn more about the health impacts of arsenic poisoning.

Importantly, BAMP offered an alternative option to their water source in the form of Safe Water Devices (SWDs). Designed and set up by University of Miyazaki, the SWDs are locally-suited water filters – the Gravel Sand Filters (GSFs) attached to hand pumps, and Dug Well Filters (DWFs) set up on wells. These filters use locally available material, and offer an eco-friendly option to access arsenic-free water devoid of high energy inputs.

BAMP also trains AMCs on the use and upkeep of the filters, so these eventually become community-owned and operated facilities.



Following BAMP's example on SWDs, the state government has stepped in with its efforts, and has set up near 800 Activated Alumina Filters (AAFs) to provide arsenic-safe water in the entire district.

"The government planted many safe water devices in villages but people are not using them. Our main activity is to make people aware of arsenic," says Yasunori Yano, Deputy Project Manager, BAMP and Assistant Professor of Miyazaki University.

The second phase of BAMP, begun in early 2011 in 27 more hamlets, aims to execute the Arsenic Mitigation Project in active partnership with the UP government by focusing on awareness generation and ensuring effective use of the arsenic filters set up by both BAMP and the government. A step forward has been the formation of AMCs at the block and district levels.

Yano is hopeful that the project would succeed in changing people's attitudes and practices towards safe drinking water.

Working with doctors

The Gravel Sand Filter at Dhannipurwa habitation in Newada village is a popular spot for the locals. Village kids play nearby in the hot sun, and rush to the filter for a quick drink. When asked about arsenic, they clamor to show off their knowledge.

"We can get blisters if we drink arsenic water," yells out a boy, as he is playfully shoved by another who says, "We must only drink water from the hand pump filter."

"This is our village filter, so we all look after it," says a third quickly. The water is good to drink, they all agree. It is evident that most villagers know why the filter has been set up.

While Dhannipurwa is a success story, there are instances where the filters have not been able to achieve their expected uptake in the community – a major factor being the poor knowledge on arsenic poisoning due to no proven cases of arsenicosis.

While Bahraich is widely contaminated, its arsenic concentration (a maximum of 250 PPB) is much lower than that of its neighbouring districts Baliya and Ghazipur, where high levels of 1,000 PPB have been reported. This regrettably lessens the gravity of the issue among the people. The project therefore took help from doctors from Primary



Health Centres (PHCs) to conduct health examination camps in the villages and boost arsenic awareness.

Dr Chandrabhan Yadav, Medical Officer-in-Charge at the PHC in Tejwapur block, has been closely associated with BAMP and agrees that the project has given a push to knowing a risk that was earlier missed.

“Earlier our knowledge of arsenicosis was largely limited to literature,” he shares. “In 2008, BAMP organised an orientation on arsenic for doctors that informed us in detail about its pathology, diagnosis, treatment and scientific management.

“Doctors today include arsenicosis as a possible cause when we see skin problems like melanosis or keratosis. Like BAMP, we also tell our patients to drink water only from arsenic-free filters,” adds Dr. Yadav.

Making the message clear

“Sharmila and Piyush visit us regularly to tell us about arsenic,” says Satyawati, a housewife from Dhannipurwa. “It is only because of their repeated lessons that we have understood its risks. Now we drink filtered water only,” she acknowledges.

Satyawati’s neighbour Pushpa Awasthi has seen blisters getting cured by switching over to arsenic-free water. “We care for our and our children’s health. We are not going to use water from the red hand pumps anymore,” she says.



Sharmila Rai, a field officer with BAMP, drives community advocacy through word-of-mouth information, presentations and in-school promotions with children.

“At schools we use PowerPoint presentations to teach children about arsenic and its risks in a fun way. Till now we have covered 12 schools in Newada. We also make presentations in the village in the evening when the men folk return from work,” says Rahul Jaiswal, Sharmila’s co-worker.

Women are addressed separately in most instances. “I talk to women during the day time,” says Sharmila. “I use flipcharts with pictures of arsenicosis patients so that they can easily understand its risks. Most women take time to respond. They share their problems only later when they open up.”

Sharmila and Rahul’s sustained efforts are slowly yielding results. The presence of BAMP is now recognised in the villages. People know about arsenic, they know about the filters. The biggest achievement is however changing the mindsets of people such as Satyawati and Pushpa towards safe drinking water.

Benefiting environment, improving hygiene

In its second phase, the project has also focused on constructing a Model Biogas Plant that will improve village hygiene and provide a substitute to domestic fuel. The underlying thought is that better sanitation behavior will translate into better usage and maintenance of the village water filters.

Presently under construction in Dhannipurwa, the plant is slated for completion by the end of 2011. Md. Mizbaul Islam, Technical Assistant, BAMP explains its unique feature, “The above-ground biogas plant will maintain a constant temperature – so that gas production remains stable even in winter. This will tide over the disadvantage of the conventional underground biogas plant in which gas production decreases with reduction of temperature in winter.”

Having come a good way in establishing a first-of-its-kind intervention in arsenic mitigation, the Bahraich Arsenic Mitigation Project envisions the work it has started will set an example for the future.

Rakesh Jaiswal sums up the vision, “We want the government to further our precedent on integrated arsenic mitigation, and we expect more roles in future for the state, district and local governments for mitigating arsenic.”

As BAMP deepens its community engagement, and seeks to build stronger stakeholder partnerships to take forward its dream, its quietly committed Japanese efforts reflect an image of healthier and happier lives.

(Additional reporting by Poorva Sagar. Editing by Swati Sahi)



Care With Compassion And Commitment

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The Ananda Hospital at Sirsia village of Kushinagar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, has successfully raised awareness on public health and hygiene among the people. Supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the charitable hospital provides efficient primary health care services to the rural poor.

“Actions speak louder than words... To say something, it is not necessary to ‘say’ it... What you do, more often than not, conveys the message for you.”

A real life example for this adage is proffered by Mr. Koichi Otake, Coordinator, India Welfare Village Society (IWVS), who comes from Japan every year to India, to help the work of the Ananda Hospital located in Sirsia Village in Kushinagar, east Uttar Pradesh.

Mr. Otake is a pharmacist; he speaks only Japanese and some broken English, and understands a few Hindi words. Yet one amazes at how successfully he interacts with the stream of local villagers who come to Ananda Hospital for treatment.

The Ananda Hospital is a charity institution built and operated by India Welfare Village Society, a Japanese NGO based in Aichi, Japan and Ananda Mission Charitable Trust (AMCT), with help of Japanese contributions. It was built in 1998 to provide affordable medical services to the rural poor in India, and promote health and hygiene to prevent infectious diseases among them.

Koichi Otake has been associated with the hospital since its first brick was laid.



Over the past 12 years, Otake has been coming to Ananda Hospital every year, at least twice. Each time he is here, he makes it a point to visit every household in the village to meet the people and enquire about their well being in his unique language of Japanese, English and Hindi words, and hand signs. The villagers also communicate with him and endearingly refer to him as ‘*Taake Baba*’.

Otake proves that if the intent is sincere, then language can never be a barrier. His efforts form the pillar that gives strength to the Ananda Hospital initiative.

Another pillar of strength for the institution is Dr. P.N. Gupta, Medical Superintendent at the Ananda Hospital who sets an example in altruistic service. He is among the few doctors we see today, who have consciously chosen to go for a hardships-laden rural service than enjoying the comforts of city life.

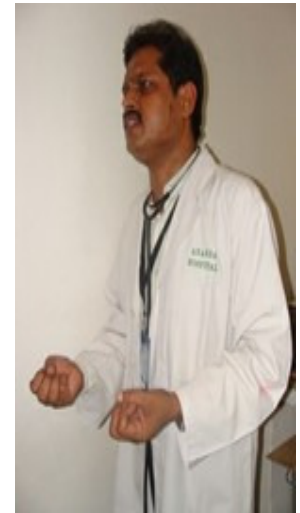
Dr. Gupta has been with the Ananda Hospital since it started from 2nd November, 1998. That time he started practice with nothing, but a table and two chairs. Today the hospital has a pathology lab, X-ray machine, facilities for ECG and Ultrasonography and a 7-bedded ward. As he took us around the hospital, we could sense the feeling of pride and contentment he exuded, while he showed us how the hospital grew equipment by equipment, and facility by facility.

Started in 1997, the hospital was built in a record time of one year, under personal supervision of Koichi Otake. As per Japanese ethos, the date of completion of any project is decided even prior to initiation of work on the project. Ananda Hospital was decided for service from 1998 November, and accordingly as well as incredibly, it was readied for service precisely by the stated date!

Otake stayed in India for 200 days, that is more than half a year, working with the construction workers and laying brick and cement with his own hands, to ensure that the hospital was ready on time. Living in India, one can only marvel at Japanese discipline, hard work and punctuality!

Till date Ananda Hospital has serviced more than 200,000 patients who come here not only from the neighbouring villages but also from as far as the UP-Bihar border, a couple of kilometers away. Most symptoms are of tropical diseases like amoebic dysentery, malaria, virus infections, tuberculosis, asthma and parasitic worm infections.

Such infections prevalent in the area can be prevented to a significant extent by proper hygiene and sanitation alone. Ananda Hospital, has therefore been conducting the “*hygiene education to farm villages, and nurturing of talented people*” programme with support from the [Japan International Cooperation Agency](#) (JICA). The programme lays much stress on educating the villagers on basic public health and cleanliness.



More than half the patients who visit Ananda Hospital are women and a substantial percentage among them are expectant mothers. Under the JICA supported programme, the hospital arranges for a special class for expectant mothers every week, which is conducted by lady hospital assistants Suman and Urmila.

The village women find it easier to open up to women instructors to ask queries and discuss their problems. Moreover the communication is facilitated in the local dialect so that all women can follow

what is being taught in the class.

Nearly 20-30 women attend this class every Friday, where they are provided basic health and hygiene education, including on maternal health, safe pregnancy, delivery, health-care and nutrition, and child care.



Around 80-130 patients come to Ananda Hospital every day; many among them from the poorest economic backgrounds and the lowest social classes. We spoke to a few villagers, who had come for treatment, and they were unanimous that the hospital is a big advantage. It could be inferred that the ones who benefited the most from the Hospital were the most marginalised members of neighbouring villages – the Dalit and backward caste population – who are, even today, far worse off than the upper caste people of their villages.

“It is good that we have a hospital here in the village, else patients would have to run to Gorakhpur town or other big cities for treatment. People are poor here, and it is not easy to afford such costly treatment.” says Uma Shankar, a patient from Kurmauta Village.

The first time patients visiting Ananda Hospital mentioned that they came to the Hospital after they learnt about other people benefiting from the treatment here. Not only this, it also comes to be cheaper for them, as the hospital charges only nominal fees for registration, lab tests and medicines.

Ananda hospital also conducts pre-screening for patients who show symptoms of possible HIV infection. It has a full-fledged facility for HIV screening and conducts the ELISA test at one third of the normal cost. Till date, near 100 HIV cases have been screened here, which reflects significant contribution by a primary health centre towards prevention of HIV/AIDS pandemic.



The medicines especially are a main highlight of the Hospital. Ananda Hospital is known in the area as having a good stock of high quality medicines, which are provided to the patients at fairly subsidised rates. This is acknowledged not only by patients, but also by doctors in neighbouring hospitals.

While interacting with a specialist at the Community Health Centre in Kasia, we were pleasantly surprised when she commended about the availability of good quality medicines in Ananda.

“I had been to the CHC for treatment earlier, and now I have come to Ananda Hospital after I came to know that the medicines given here are very good, and people have recovered very well,” says Meherunissa, a first time visitor whom we met at the waiting hall.

“We get first class medicines here,” says Bhikku who has come to the hospital around 3-4 times before. *“It is logical that only when medicines work, will the patients come. Since the medicines give benefits, and they are also cheaper, therefore people come here,”* he adds.

Ananda Hospital is today a success story scripted by the efforts of an Indo-Japanese team. It can be cited as an example of an efficient primary health care service provider in rural India. More such similar initiatives should be replicated in other parts of the country as well, so we in essence can have a strong infrastructure set up for rural health care in India.



JICA Partnership Programme in India