



A freshly painted anganwadi in Kaporada, Gujarat.



The 'One Mouse Per Child' programme being run in Walshaner taluka, Gujarat

FAR FROM THE MADING CROWD

How does one draw children to anganwadis? Why is our rural population so malnourished? How do we sustain agriculture? Five bright sparks put on their thinking caps to tackle these grass-roots level problems as part of a fellowship programme, writes **Anvi Mehta**

A recipe for employment in rural areas

As per an article about food and nutrition in India in the United Nations Food Programme published in 2016, our country is home to over one-third of the world's stunted (chronically malnourished) children. Around 38.7 per cent children under five years of age fall in this category. These statistics propelled three fellows to work on malnourishment in their home states of Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

'Amrit' for everyone

During his visits to the crèches in Tilonia run by Barefoot College, Rajasthan, 22-year-old Bidyapathi Ray observed that the crèche workers fed the children an indigenous food called amritchuran. A nutritional mix of wheat grains, roasted Bengal gram, jaggery, peanuts and sesame seeds was used in the village for over 30 years to improve the health of infants, children and anemic women.



Bidyapathi Ray (right) making amritchuran with a worker at his production unit in Tilonia

"Ex-SBI fellow Dr Monalisa Padhee had administered amritchuran to anemic women and saw an average increase of 2.3gm/dL in the haemoglobin level," says Ray.

Barefoot College then trained women to make it at home, but I found that making the mix was not the priority for homemakers.

So my project was setting up a large-scale amritchuran production unit to ensure regular supply and provide livelihood to the women."

Amritchuran is now a brand and the Tilonia unit produces 300 kg of it every month — enough for the village and some surrounding ones.

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Perhaps not in as equal a number as their counterparts who chase seven-figure salaries and early retirement, but a reassuring share of the youth is pointed in the other direction of rural uplift and welfare. This year, 65 fellows of the 13-month long SBI Youth for India Fellowship have partnered with NGOs on rural development projects. The Fellowship was launched by State Bank of India on March 1, 2011 in partnership with three NGOs — Bhartiya Agro Industries Foundation, Seva Mandir and MS Swaminathan Research Foundation.

Tackling issues of health, environment protection, education, women empowerment and rural livelihoods, this year's fellows have implemented change across nine states in partnership with seven NGOs. Five of these empathetic minds take us through their projects.



Harshitha Prakash (in red and below) working on a farm in Beed district

Convincing farmers to go 'natural' with their crops

In October 2016, Bengaluru's Harshitha Prakash quit a plush IT job. As part of the SBI Youth for India Fellowship project, Harshitha wanted to work with villagers in Beed district of Maharashtra, where suicide rates were alarming.

Six months ago, Harshitha finally found the starting point of her mission: Dunakwad in Beed district of Maharashtra, a village with about 460 families and a small water body called Kundalike. Working alongside members of the NGO Development of Humane Action (Dhan) Foundation, she was going to introduce the villagers to concepts of agriculturist and Padma Shri Subhash Palekar's Zero Budget Natural Farming.

An electronics engineer, Harshitha has since been working in Dunakwad with farmers on natural methods to revive soil health, improve crop yield and reduce pests.

What drew her to Dunakwad was the willingness of its people to give natural farming a chance, she says. "I visited several villages in the region with members of NGO Dhan. The people of Dunakwad were eager to know more and even help raise awareness in neighbouring villages," she says.

After numerous workshops on natural farming with the villagers, Harshitha eventually convinced a few to give it a try. "While everyone wanted to know more about natural farming, only five farmers came forward to try it on their lands. Their main crops here are sugarcane and vegetables. It was decided that they will try the technique on 10 per cent of their land holdings that grow sugarcane, and compare the quality and quantity of yields," explains Harshitha.

Harshitha put to practice all that she had learned under Palekar, a farmer from Belora village of Amravati district in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region. His technique calls for farmers to use naturally available materials as pesticides and fertilisers. He promotes planting legumes to infuse soil with nitrogen, rotate crops to control pests and renew the soil, compost waste and use cow excrement to use as fertilisers.

Now, in Dunakwad too, cow dung, cow urine, locally available plants like neem were being col-

JOLLY GOOD FELLOW

■ Living in Dunakwad for six months now, Harshitha Prakash has been teaching farmers about Zero Budget Natural Farming.

■ Shivaji Yadav, one of the farmers, said: "With Harshitha did's guidance, I converted three acres of my vegetable farm. We harvested cucumber, onions and brinjals this season. The shelf life of my vegetables is now longer."

lected, and farmers were learning to make organic fertilisers.

"Rising costs of farming, fluctuating markets and effects of climate change on resources have made things difficult for farmers, and unfortunately driven many to commit suicide. Natural farming is economically viable, as it cuts down the cost of chemicals and fertilisers," says Harshitha, speaking over the phone.

In summer, the village lake Kundalike doesn't bear any water. With continuous practice of natural farming, eventually farmers will need only 10 per cent of the water that they currently use for chemical farming, Harshitha says.

Pooja Kange, who tilled a portion of her land with organic fertilisers that Harshitha taught them to make, is seeing the results. "We sowed in January. The germination and length of the sugarcane is growing at a good rate. The natural farming plot also required 25 per cent less water in two-three years. I think the water usage will go down by 50 per cent," said the 29-year-old. She and her family now plan to bring in an additional two acres under natural farming next year.

Living in Dunakwad for six months now, Harshitha says she is beginning to gain trust of other farmers as well.

"With the results that they see on the first five farms, more will be willing to switch to organic methods. More farmers have already come forward," says Harshitha, who has another six months here.

HELPING ANGANWADIS FEED CORRECTLY



Shravani Ladkat at an anganwadi centre

As per a February 2017 report, out of 1,062 children in the 11 anganwadis of Kaporada, Gujarat, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) found that 22 are moderately malnourished and four are severely malnourished. But when 22-year-old Shravani Ladkat visited an anganwadi in Kaporada to

gather anthropometric measurements (height, weight) of 15 children under the age of six, she observed that five of them were severely malnourished and four moderately so.

"They informed me that the children were not regular due to lack of infrastructure and irregular attendance by anganwadi workers. There were also problems caused by lack of funding. We discussed these problems with Valsad's District Collector and Magistrate Ramya Mohan and she regularised the anganwadis by reviewing their attendance and speaking to them. Then, we got toys and painted in the anganwadi centres to entice the children to come regularly."

EDUCATING TRIBALS OUT OF MALNUTRITION



Ankur Chhabra with students at Walwant village in Palghar district

Ankur Chhabra is a finance consultant based in Walwant village in Palghar district of Maharashtra. Knowing that one quarter of all undernourished people on the planet live in India, the 29-year-old set out to provide health literacy and malnutrition awareness for school children.

"After working as a financial consultant, I worked as a research assistant in a public health study conducted in Ghasera village in Haryana," says Chhabra. "This got me interested in the public health sector

and I wanted to implement a developmental initiative. I chose Palghar district since the issue of malnutrition is particularly grave here," said Chhabra.

Over six months, he organised medical camps to check anthropometric measurements in a tribal school, and found that on an average, 30 out of 100 students were underweight and stunted. Chhabra also conducted awareness sessions for the school students and mothers using audio-visual tools about balanced diets and nutrition.

With the results that they see on the first five farms, more (farmers) will be willing to switch to organic methods.

Harshitha Prakash, who is working with farmers

We will educate the anganwadi workers on where to buy resources for a balanced diet within their budgets.

Shravani Ladkat, who is working with children in anganwadi centres

A digital future for rural schools, one mouse at a time

Fresh from her stint as a Chinese language teacher in two Delhi colleges — Daulat Ram and Khalsa — in the summer of 2016, Prateeksha Tiwari visited 20 schools in Gujarat's Morbi district to appraise the education system. She found that though the government had provided schools with computers, educational CDs and LCD monitors, computer labs were not maintained and the student-to-computer ratio was skewed.

The culprit was the usual suspect: Scarcity of funds for repair. But more glaringly disinterested from teachers and school staff in getting involved with technology. The 29-year-old decided to cause some mischief with a tool she was familiar with — Microsoft Mouse Mischief. "My mother teaches children of migrants from Bihar and UP. Education is very close to my heart. I



wanted to implement the 'One Screen, Multiple Mouse' concept to make computer-based learning simple for these children," she says. Working with members of the India chapter of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Prateeksha shortlisted three primary schools — Juna Vaghasiya, Palasli, and Lalpur in Wankaner taluka. The plan was to implement the pilot programme using the schools' existing comput-

This academic year, I plan to introduce more cost-effective technology in schools, such as Google Cardboard.

Prateeksha Tiwari (in pic), SBI Youth for India Fellow

ers and the learning material provided by the government.

"Educational presentations are shown on a single computer, and then we give a mouse to each student to participate in a computer-based quiz. Teachers can instantly evaluate the comprehension level of the class," she says. The only cost incurred was Rs 6,000 for 20 wireless mice — a one-time investment much lower than desktops or tabs,

Prateeksha says. She dipped into her fellowship funds to buy the equipment. The One Mouse Per Child (OMPC) pilot ran for three months until the final examinations in April. As soon as the schools reopen in the second week of June, it will resume.

"OMPC is a part of computer-assisted learning intervention, which works towards integrating simple, affordable technology in regular classroom learning. The idea is to bring the benefit of technology-assisted learning to as many students as possible with limited financial and hardware resources available," she explains on her blog, onemouseperchild.wordpress.com.

Send applications for SBI Youth For India Fellowships 2017-18 to www.sbiyouthforindia.com before 9th June, 2017

