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# Business Line

## The Baigas learn to save



Baiga tribals live by their own rules and prefer a hand-to-mouth existence.

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*Initiatives by voluntary organisations have brought Baiga women together to form self-help groups and generate income.*

### Aditya Malaviya

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It's a fascinating drive to Sunderwahi village in the Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh. As you pick up geographical details, those around you fill in the rest: "This is a Naxalite affected area... the tribal Baigas and Gonds are very poor and live by their own rules."

Once in the village, the distinct Baiga tola women welcome you to their small, yet roomy huts. For years, inhabitants of Sunderwahi comprising Gond, Baiga and Golar tribes have been collecting and selling firewood for their livelihood, with little or no interest in agriculture.

"The Baiga tribe in Madhya Pradesh is known for its unique culture," says Ameen Charles, Programme Coordinator for Community Development Centre, Poorest Areas Civil Society(PACS). They do not interact even with other tribals like the Gonds, believe in a hand-to-mouth existence, and do not try to access education, eat outside their community, or associate with others.

The dispersed and very basic hutments begin to make sense when Charles explains, "After a death in the family, the Baigas just leave the house and build another."

Interestingly, even though they are totally dependent on the jungle, they do not engage in tendu patta collection, which is a major livelihood provider in Madhya Pradesh. He adds that the Baigas have absolutely no contact with the Government. These people have not really benefited by the various schemes that the Union and State Governments announced for them.

And for groups working with this community, it is a continuous battle to win trust and a larger battle to keep the trust.

### Self-help groups

Studies conducted by the Society for Participatory Action, a voluntary organisation in the State, reveal that the situation of the tribals has not changed even after 58 years of independence. Kala Patle of Navjeevan, a civil society organisation, who has been working with these women under the PACS programme, explains, "When we began working, they did not understand anything about group formation. In fact, whenever we approached them, they would run away."

Nevertheless, Kala persisted. She approached the village chief and was able to get 12 women to form a group. "The chief reassured the women that I stayed only three km from the village and would not cheat them," she explains.

After an intense dialogue, the women agreed to save Rs 20 and with an initial corpus of Rs 240 formed the Gagan

Samoh and opened a bank account in Ukwa, 6 km from Sunderwahi. Sukhwanti Marawi, president of the group, says, "We are people of the village and jungle. We do not know the ways of the world."

Members Buri Bai and Parmila Bai nod in agreement. "Earlier, I never used to save anything. Today, we have begun to save and Madam says we will benefit." Another member chips in, "Forming a group of women and then retaining them permanently is indeed a challenge."

### **A similar effort**

Similarly, the Community Development Centre (CDC) and Navjeevan (both PACS partners) formed another self-help group Durgavati Swayam Sahayta Samuh, consisting of Baiga women from the Gogatola village.

Once the group was functional, PACS provided a rotation fund of Rs 2,000, which the group utilised to rear pigs. "The women were able to grasp the concept of savings, which was totally alien to their culture, within a year. Then we encouraged the women to take up more work, and generate more income," says Charles.

President Sudan Bai and Secretary Sanbati point out that after a lot of consideration, the women decided to collect sisal fibre, which was available in abundance, knowing that the forest department would purchase the fibre from them. CDC and Navjeevan contacted the Forest department and the forest range officer ensured that the sisal fibre extraction machine was made available to them.

"At first the women did not agree, fearing that it could be a Government loan," says Charles. When they were repeatedly told that the department would make the machine available in the group's name, and that they would only have to pick sisal leaves, remove the fibre and sell them to the department at a fixed rate, they relented.

They also rented a house to install the machine and organised power supply. However, the group was shocked when the divisional forest officer demanded a guarantee of Rs 1 lakh for the machine. "For group members who live below the poverty line and earn hardly Rs 10 a day, giving a guarantee of Rs 1 lakh was next to impossible," says Charles.

The department also demanded that the group work at the forest department campus situated at Baihar, about 20 km from Gogatola, if the members were not able to pay up that amount. So the project fell through. "It is only in this context that the PACS' intervention is significant... from a time when Baigas would not get together, to the present when they are doing business for the first time," says Charles.

### **Living for the present**

The Baigas live for the present, and do not think of the future. Their love for the country liquor called mahua daru is absolute, and they spend their week's earnings on liquor on Fridays and Saturdays.

However, Charles points out that the Baigas are a classic example of the oft-repeated story of benefits not reaching those they are meant for. "There is a fund-rich Baiga Development Authority, but the benefits never seem to trickle down to these people," he says.

Their recent experience in trying to access Government schemes has left the Baigas embittered. "Everything depends on the officers, who are not willing to work," says Charles.

Little wonder then that the Baigas see government programmes and projects with suspicion and constantly fear that whatever little they own would also be snatched away from them. "Today, even if the Baigas want to improve their living conditions through their efforts, they are not being extended any support or encouragement," adds Charles.

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