

MANY LIVES OF WOMEN FARMERS

Empowering Women Farmers in Vidarbha

Process Documentation



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

Chennai

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Pramod Kulkarni

**With Executive Support
from MSSRF Team**

*Kishor Jagtap
Charusheela Thakare
Jyotsana Raut
Manda Bhondave*



M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

III Cross Street, Taramani Institutional Area
Chennai – 600 113, INDIA

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M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

III Cross Street,

Taramani Institutional Area

Chennai – 600 113, INDIA

Tel.: +91 44 2254 1229 / 1698 / 2698 / 2699

Fax: +91 44 2254 1319

Email: executivedirector@mssrf.res.in

www.mssrf.org

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FOREWORD

Globally and nationally, the role of women in agriculture - including crop and animal husbandry, fisheries and forestry - is growing. In spite of the pivotal role played by women in natural resources conservation, cultivation, consumption and commerce, the support systems for such women are very meager. Women farmers require considerable support in terms of crèches, day-care centres as well as flexible working hours. The difficult tasks of women get compounded when they are widowed, particularly through tragic causes like suicides. Since this problem is serious in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, MSSRF started, in 2006, a Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana in Vidarbha. I am thankful to Friends of Swaminathan Australia for their contribution towards our Vidarbha initiatives. The present publication documents the processes used in this programme. The narratives of women farmers are also included, in order to bring grass root voices to the attention of policy makers. I am grateful to Shri Pramod Kulkarni for this careful documentation and to Dr. R. Rukmani for her overall leadership.

It is a matter of pride and satisfaction that this small initiative started in Vidarbha has now become a national programme under the same title, viz, Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana. The Finance Minister, in his budget presentation for 2010-11, has provided funds for expanding this programme on a national scale. The present Process Documentation will be very useful in this context. This is the first time that Mahila Kisans have been given explicit recognition in a national budget speech. I hope this will be the beginning of a new era where women farmers and farm women are enabled to play their rightful role in strengthening national food security and agrarian prosperity. Women farmers are particularly suited for launching an ever-green revolution movement since they live in close physical and psychological bonding with Mother Earth and are intuitively eco-sensitive.



M. S. Swaminathan
Chairman, MSSRF

PART ONE

Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (Programme for the Empowerment of Women Farmers)

1.1 The Context and Concept

Indian Agriculture is currently in a state of crisis and the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra is identified as one of the agricultural distress hotspots of the country. An alarming manifestation of the agricultural crisis in Vidarbha is the high extent of suicides by farmers. Six districts of Vidarbha – Buldhana, Akola, Washim, Yavatmal, Amravati and Wardha – are considered the epicenter of farmers’ suicides and this is a matter of concern for society and State.

Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh and former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr. Vilasrao Deshmukh, were among those who visited some of the places in Vidarbha where farmers’ suicides had taken place in 2006-07. Prior to that, in late 2005, Prof. M. S. Swaminathan, who was then the Chairman, National Commission on Farmers, also visited Vidarbha and interacted with some of the affected families, farm leaders, activists, NGO representatives, government officials, academicians and media representatives. The Commission submitted concrete suggestions and recommendations to the Central and

State governments that would alleviate farmers’ distress. Government of Maharashtra as well as Government of India have launched special packages to address the problems faced by farmers in the above mentioned six districts of Vidarbha.

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, under the guidance of Prof. Swaminathan, initiated an Educational Support Programme in 2006 for school going children of suicide affected farmers’ families in Wardha district. This became an entry point for interacting with their mothers. Interactions with women farmers in a meeting organised at Sewagram (Wardha), as well as interactions with government departments, research institutes, banks and civil society organizations, over September and October 2007, led to the initiative for empowering women farmers, namely, *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP). MKSP endeavours to bring change in the society by working for and with women farmers. Therefore, it is rightly termed as a programme for the empowerment of women farmers. The programme was originally conceived with the idea of addressing the needs of widows/women farmers of suicide affected families. When the man shouldering the family responsibility commits suicide, the family gets devastated, experiences distress and passes through depression and poverty. The dependent women and children are rendered more vulnerable in such

circumstances. They need external support in the form of economic, psychological and social inputs. However, the scope of the programme was later widened to include all resource - poor, small and marginal women farmers, as well as landless women labourers. Women farmers in general, beside vulnerable suicide affected widows, are an unorganised group without an identity as farmers despite being engaged in farming and farm-related activities for sustenance. The goal of MKSP is to organise the women farmers and give them an identity as farmers, understand and address the needs of women farmers, build their capacity and facilitate access to necessary training and linkages (technology, credit, market) for better livelihoods. This programme is a message of hope for the women farmers of Vidarbha region who are oppressed by the double burden of a highly vulnerable agricultural production system and lack of ownership rights to means of production. Many studies have shown that a major cause of the crisis in Vidarbha is the unremunerative nature of farming related to the pricing and trade policies adopted for cotton, a major crop of Vidarbha. While the nature of the policy regime has resulted in chronic indebtedness of farmers, MKSP is a response to address the human dimension relating to the widows and children belonging to the affected families. The programme focuses on sustainable agricultural practices as a

means to reduce risks associated with cultivation and to improve agricultural productivity. Moreover, *Mahila Kisan Samitis* are expected to create an environment of hope that will help alleviate their distress and ensure their gradual empowerment over a period of time. It will extend emotional peer support to families in distress.

The *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* promotes *Mahila Kisan Samitis* – called in Marathi Jagrit Mahila Shetkari *Samitis* - to empower women farmers in villages in the districts of Wardha and Yavatmal of Vidarbha region. *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* is a membership-based organization of women farmers. The criteria spelt out to form *Mahila Kisan Samiti* in a village are: an understanding of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* as a voluntary gathering of women farmers by the village community; expression of need for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* by the women farmers of the village; presence of at least a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 women farmers from the village who are willing to be members of the *Samiti*. In addition to these criteria, the *Samitis* so formed are subject to certain operational guidelines, which ensure that the *Samiti* affairs are democratically managed, based on clearly spelt out objectives, norms, and rules. The criteria for a woman to be a member of the *Mahila Kisan Samiti* are that she should be a resident of the same village and should be actively engaged in agricultural activities. Three

categories of women are included as members: Women farmers of the village whose names are recorded in land entitlement 'Satbara'; Women farmers actively engaged on family farm without formal land entitlement record; Women of landless families engaged in farming activities as wage earners.

At the *Samiti* level the individual woman farmers receive training on various activities relating to organizational management, sustainable agricultural practices, food security related issues, women's rights etc. In addition to training, appropriate arrangements are made for field demonstrations as well as exposure visits. *Samiti* members are taken on exposure visits to learn good practices from other farmers. Programme for the Empowerment of Women Farmers also articulates women farmers' concerns related to education, health and rights.

Currently, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation operates the *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* through a Project Coordinator and three Project Associates attached to the Wardha Site Office. The staff of MSSRF play a significant role in the formation of *Mahila Kisan Samitis*. In their early visits to project villages, MSSRF staff meet key government personnel – Village Revenue Officer (Patwari), Village Administrative Officer (Gramsevak), Village Panchayat President (Sarpanch), Anganwadi workers, Self-Help Group

members, other important persons etc. They interact with the local people through a number of such visits made before formation of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. Meeting with Village Revenue Officer is the first step towards identifying potential members for formation of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*.

The Village Revenue Officer would possess formal record containing information about women farmers of the village who own land. MSSRF staff will then receive the list of such women from the Village Revenue Officer. This helps to identify potential women farmers who could become members of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* of that village. With this list obtained from Village Revenue Officer, MSSRF staff visit those women farmers for personal interactions with them. They explain about the *Mahila Kisan Samiti*, its objectives and activities, along with its potential benefits. Such private meetings are spread over several visits by the MSSRF staff to the village. These eventually lead local women farmers to set an agenda, venue and time for a first informal village meeting.

Local women farmers' consensus is a notable facet of forming *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. All women farmers who have their names recorded in land entitlement records known as 'Satbara' are urged and invited to attend the meeting. Women without their names on Satbara record, but actively engaged in farming, also attend this meeting.

These women are usually wholly busy in range of activities on their family farm. Landless agricultural labourers from the village are also invited to participate in the meeting.

This meeting is treated as a first occasion to formally and collectively introduce M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and *Mahila Kisan Samiti* to local women farmers. The rationale of *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* is contextualized for the group. Key aspects and objectives of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* are presented. The mode of its formation and likely activities are explained. Women farmers suggest and discuss norms for the *Samiti* to function effectively. The composition of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* is decided before concluding this meeting. Women farmers who wish to join it are formally accepted as *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members.

In short, the first meeting usually has the following agenda:

- Introduce M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.
- Introduce *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana*.
- Evolve Indicative membership norms.
- Discuss *Mahila Kisan Samiti* activities and programmes.
- Discuss management of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*.

- Constitute *Mahila Kisan Samiti*.

Introduction to M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and *Mahila Kisan Samiti* helps women farmers to take a decision about becoming a member.

Mahila Kisan Samiti members settle on a name for the *Samiti* by consensus. Members who have some formal schooling and prepared to spare time to carry out responsibilities, get elected as President and Secretary for the *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. Each member pays a one-time membership fee of Rupees fifty, and an annual subscription of Rupees fifty. President, Secretary and one member visit a nationalized bank at their convenience, with required papers and photos, to open savings account in the name of the *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. They deposit the fee collected in the newly opened account. One of the three members signs bank withdrawals. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* spends money on capacity building activities as well as on office stationary, rubber stamp etc. All expenses are discussed, properly accounted for and recorded.

MSSRF staff's role as animator is critical in processes leading to *Mahila Kisan Samiti* formation. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* formation - and first few village meetings - is not as easy as it seems. This requires, in the first place, bringing potential members closer to each other. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation makes particular efforts for building trust among women farmers for this purpose. MSSRF staff works to

develop the 'we' feeling and a sense of belonging among women farmers. MSSRF staff, moreover, clarifies several queries and doubts that women farmers may have about the *Samiti*. MSSRF staff has to answer questions like, 'What is it that *Mahila Kisan Samiti* will do that is different from other [already existing] Self-Help Groups?' 'Will you give financial assistance for deepening wells or for buy farming tools?' Women farmers often request more information, expect repeated explanations and need adequate time to think and decide. Some women farmers need counseling to overcome their innate hesitation and reticence. MSSRF staff have been proactive in such difficult situations. They meet women individually at their homes or on their farms. They meet them in small neighborhood groups. They use other formal village meetings as occasion to discuss the *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. MSSRF staff spends considerable time and energy in essential groundwork to reach this critical phase.

Capacity building of *Samiti* members on organizational management issues, sustainable agricultural practices, food security concerns, women's rights etc. are key function of MKSP. However, *Mahila Kisan Samitis* are also women farmers' forum for sharing happiness and sorrow with one another. Women talk about their experiences, and also share their feelings. They reach out to one another whenever needed.

Women farmers discuss and learn from others' ideas on farming practices. Sharing and exchange of ideas and feelings - besides helping to learn best farming practices from one another - is a unique characteristic of *Mahila Kisan Samitis*. As the *Mahila Kisan Samiti* grows in age, new issues and concerns are brought in and the process deepens and intensifies.

Women farmers take up issues like:

- What crops should I select for this season to cultivate on a farm in my name?
- Which seed should I select for sowing for best results?
- Should I or should I not use chemical fertilisers and pesticides?
- How do I harvest rainwater on my farm?

Women farmers consider various aspects of decision-making related with farming practices to minimize risk by reaching proper decisions. They have had little scope to think over such decisions collectively, though all of them were engaged in farming. Anxiety and self doubt are common among women farmers when it comes to making decisions. Fear of failure due to wrong decisions puts them under stress. A decision gone wrong implies poor yield and income. Low self-image and low self-confidence invariably

affect the quality of decisions. A significant feature of capacity building of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members by M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, addresses this concern.

Women's wellbeing often goes unnoticed under pressure of regular household chores and farming tasks. Women farmers share health concerns at *Mahila Kisan Samiti* meetings. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* is also a forum that helps women to understand the various dimensions of wellbeing. They become increasingly aware of how and when to act on personal health issues, modes of redress, and whom to approach for help.

Implementation of government schemes for farming and food security is one more area of concern for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members. Women farmers frequently discuss difficulties in getting expected benefits of the government schemes. How to access assistance – PVC pipes, fencing, electric motor pump set, spray pumps and other farming heavy tools – under such schemes is a recurring subject of discussion.

Regular monthly meetings of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* are important events. Women discuss various issues, interact and share feelings, articulate personal views and ideas during meetings. Present farming practices and farmers' situation are important themes of their discussions. *Samiti* members reflect on how *Mahila Kisan Samiti* could effectively break the

vicious circle of farmers' distress that lead some to extreme step like suicide. Regular meetings plan *Mahila Kisan Samiti* activities that would provide direction to women farmers in this regard. Low cost sustainable farming activities are stressed as viable means by MSSRF staff.

MSSRF staff is not necessarily present at every meeting of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. On the contrary it is expected that the regular meetings be organised by *Samiti* members on their own, without assistance from MSSRF staff. Some of the *Mahila Kisan Samitis* are able to do this. The following steps are adopted for the meetings:

- Each one of the woman farmer present is invited to suggest topics for the meeting;
- This usually results in generating number of topics for discussion;
- Few topics are chosen for discussion by common consensus;
- If MSSRF staff is present at the meeting, she/he shares suitable information
- *Mahila Kisan Samiti* meeting usually begins with a review of the last meeting and a discussion on whether or not decisions taken in the last meeting have been carried out;

Newly formed *Samitis*, lacking experience, find it difficult to conduct

meetings without the help of MSSRF staff. Though, in course of time, with sufficient exposure and interaction within the group, they pick up the basic skills.

As regards the difference between *Mahila Kisan Samiti* and Self Help Groups, a *Mahila Kisan Samiti* comprises of a group of women involved in farming. 'Women' and 'farming' are two defining criteria for this. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* member is either a woman with land entitlement, or active on her family farm, or a wage earner working on any other farm. Focus on sustainable farming practices, as well as concerns

related to government entitlements, food and nutrition security, women's rights etc characterizes *Mahila Kisan Samitis*. Discussion and positive action on more substantive issues distinguishes *Samitis* from self help groups whose main function relate only to regular saving and credit activities.

1.2 MKSP A Profile

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation has so far organised 589 women farmers of Vidarbha into 42 *Mahila Kisan Samitis* across 38 villages of Wardha and Yavatmal districts. Table 1 and Map 1 provide the spread of

MKSP activities in Vidarbha as on October 2010.

Table 1: Operational Area of MKSP as on 2010

District	Taluk	Village
Wardha	Wardha	Kelapur, Chikani, Paloti, Neri, Talegaon T., Aashta, Kurzadi Jamtha, Waifad, LonSavli, Amla, Waigaon N., Kurzadi F, Dhamangaon W, Sonegaon Station, Dahegaon M.
	Deoli	Bodad, Jamni, Ratnapur, Wabgaon, Sonegaon Aabaji, Malkapur, Durguda, Muradgaon, Nagzari, Bhidi.
	Hinghan Ghat	Allipur
Yavatmal	Ralegaon	Persoda, Karanji, Vihirgaon, Zargad, Kalmner, Khadki sukali, Mudhapur, Sawangi, Sheli, Khirgaon, Takli and Sakhi.

Map 1



Analysing the socio-economic status of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members it is seen that the literacy level among the members is around the same as the district average at 77%. The single largest group of *Samiti* members, 187 women farmers or 32% have done schooling between classes VIII

and X. Just about ten women farmer members of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* are graduates. However, there is a striking variation across the two districts with respect to educational attainment, with Yavatmal faring poorer than Wardha (see Table 2).

Table 2: Educational Attainment of *Samiti* Members, 2010

Classification of <i>Samiti</i> members by educational attainment	Wardha District	Yavatmal District	Total
Classes I-IV	92	25	117
Classes V-VII	73	21	94
Classes VIII-X	137	50	187
Classes XI-XII	35	09	44
Graduate	7	03	10
Illiterate	73	64	137
All	417	172	589

An analysis of caste composition of *Samiti* members indicates that a predominant section of the *Samiti* members are from the vulnerable segments of our population, viz. the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. 27% of *Samiti* members in Wardha district are Scheduled Castes which is much higher than the percentage of Scheduled Castes in the rural areas of the district at 12%. Similarly, in Yavatmal district 26% of *Samiti* members are Scheduled Tribes, while in the rural areas of district a lower percentage, 22%, are in this category. 345 of 589 women farmer members of *Mahila Kisan Samitis* belong to Other Backward Classes (see Table 3).

An analysis of the age group of *Samiti* members, indicates that it ranges between 20 to 69 years. However, 119 members which account for one fifth of all members are in the age group of 40 to 44. About 34 percent of *Samiti* members are in the age group 20 to 39 years, 56 percent in the age group 40 to 59 years and 10 percent are above the age of 60 years.

Classification of *Samiti* members by land ownership indicates that out of 589 members, 36% belong to families that own less than 5 acres. Another 33% own land between 5 to 10 acres while 25% are from families that own 10 to 25 acres. Interestingly, if we classify members by ownership of land in their name, just about 2% or 15 members own land in the range of 10 to 25 acres and none of the *Samiti* members own above 25 acres. Of the 589 *Samiti* members nearly one fourth, 143 members, do not have legal title for land in their names though their families own land. 14 *Samiti* members belong to families that are landless. However, it is significant that 70% of *Samiti* members belong to families that own less than 10 acres (or 4 hectares). It is well known that in rainfed areas such as Vidarbha, the condition of farmers who own less than 10 acres is equivalent to small farmers of irrigated areas (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 3: Caste Composition of *Samiti* Members, 2010

Castes/Tribes/Community	Wardha District	Yavatmal District	Total
Scheduled Castes	113	14	127
Scheduled Tribes	27	44	71
Other Backward Classes	250	95	345
Others	23	-	23
Special Backward Classes	-	19	19
Muslim	4	-	04
All	417	172	589

Table 4: Classification of *Samiti* Members by Family Landholding, 2010

Size of land holding owned by the <i>Samiti</i> members' family (in acres)	Wardha District	Yavatmal District	Total
Nil	9	5	14
< 2.5 acres (Marginal)	9	9	18
2.5 – 5 acres (Small)	125	72	197
5 - 10 acres (Semi-medium)	141	54	195
10- 25 acres (Medium)	118	29	147
above 25 acres (Large)	15	3	18
Total	417	172	589

Table 5: Classification of *Samiti* Members by their Landholding, 2010

Size of land holding owned by the <i>Samiti</i> member (in acres)	Wardha District	Yavatmal District	Total
Nil	54	103	157
< 2.5 acres (Marginal)	4	29	33
2.5 – 5 acres (Small)	78	184	262
5 - 10 acres (Semi-medium)	34	88	122
10- 25 acres (Medium)	2	13	15
Total	417	172	589

Nearly 80% of *Samiti* members are also members of women's Self-Help Groups promoted by government or other NGOs, in Wardha as well as Yavatmal districts. Of the 589 *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members, 15 are widows of farmers who committed suicide and another 21 are single women. Except for the *Samitis* of three villages namely, Khirgaon, Takli and Sakhi, the rest 39 *Mahila Kisan Samitis* have opened their bank accounts as on October 2010.

1.3 Capacity Building Interventions

Capacity building of *Samiti* members is a major thrust of MKSP. Various approaches are adopted to build the capacities of *Samiti* members to achieve improved organizational management, sustainable farming practices, food and nutrition security, women's rights etc. Here is an account of some of the initiatives undertaken towards capacity building of *Samiti* members:

1.3.1 Two-day Training Programme at Chetna Vikas, Wardha:

Chetana Vikas, Wardha, is a NGO engaged in promotion of sustainable farming practices in rain fed areas. An exposure and demonstration visit to Chetana Vikas was organised for women farmers on the 1st and 2nd of February 2008, to encourage them to adopt sustainable farming practices.

Thirty women farmers, along with their sons who are engaged in farming, attended the training, where the concept of Natural Resource Management, Soil and Water Conservation, Self-reliant Farming, Multiple cropping systems etc. were discussed. The training programme included film shows on the concept of sustainable agriculture, field demonstrations as well as sharing of experience by farmers and village engineers who were trained at Chetana Vikas and are practitioners of sustainable agriculture. Women farmers were also trained to utilize modern agricultural tools. Further, an exposition on inter-cropping of sorghum and pigeon pea under rain fed farming system, was provided. Women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* also learnt about uses of live fencing. They were introduced to four varieties of ber. Chetana Vikas has identified these varieties from over 125 breeds as useful for the Wardha region. These high yielding, sturdy ber varieties are good in taste, besides being insect and pest resistant. The existing wild varieties can be grafted with high yielding ones. In addition to farming practices, training was also given on

establishing kitchen gardens in order to improve household food security, as well as to generate additional incomes for the families through sales of vegetables.

This training was followed up in three phases: the first phase (7-8 April 2008), on farmers' fields for necessary preparation to shift to multiple crop systems; the second phase (15-18 April 2008), at Chetana Vikas, to enable women farmers for crop-planning and land preparation; third phase when women farmers were provided with the seeds and other added inputs (May 2008).

1.3.2 Contour Bunding

MKSP promotes contour bunding as an important soil and water conservation technique. The physical conditions that prevail in Vidarbha, in particular, the soil characteristics and rainfall pattern, result in a significant extent of run-off of rain water and erosion of top soil, warranting serious efforts in soil and water conservation activities. Contour bunds are taken along the contour points in the field. Contour bund is a very effective soil and water conservation technique in fields which have some slope that are prone to soil and water draining during rains. Contour bunds in such fields help in reducing the velocity of water flow and arrest soil erosion. Bunding helps in more effective water percolation in the fields, resulting in ground water recharge and reduction of soil nutrient loss. Contour bunding is relatively a less complicated structure that requires relatively low investment of money and labour.

Process

- The idea of contour bunding was explained by the MSSRF staff, and the process was discussed on a regular basis with *Samiti* members during monthly meetings of *Mahila Kisan Samitis*.
- Subject experts were invited to provide guidance and answer queries of women farmers on this technique during women farmers' meet, outings and special events like International Women's Day. Through these programmes, MSSRF reached nearly 400 women farmers.
- 120 women farmers participated in exposure visits to farms with successful contour bunding.
- With this initial motivation, about 50 women farmers took the initiative and requested MSSRF to help them construct contour bunds on their farms. MSSRF staff visited the women farmers' land for preliminary survey after receiving these requests in April 2010.
- 31 women farmers formally registered themselves, paying the requisite fees, with MSSRF by 15 April 2010.
- The actual marking on the farms as per women farmers' requests started by 24 April 2010 by DharaMitra, a NGO that was chosen as a resource NGO by MSSRF for this purpose.
- Women farmers were present at the time of actual marking for construction of contour bunds on their farms.

- Once the marking for contour bunds was over, a practical demonstration was given on how to pull the surface soil on to the bund using a tool referred to as 'keni'.
- In 141 acres of land in 12 villages, marking for contour bunds were made by 31 women farmers.
- 20 women farmers of 11 villages constructed contour bunds on about 90 acres.
- Contour bunds could not be constructed, for various reasons, on 50 acres land.
- Bench mark statistics were compiled on the crops grown earlier and income earned from it the previous year, on the land where contour bunding was undertaken.

Difficulties encountered

- It was expected that farmers will be ready with pre monsoon ploughing and weeding operations by second week of April. However the contour bunding programme was delayed as ploughing and harrowing were not completed as per schedule.
- Eleven farmers could not hire wage labourers to pull the soil on the area marked for contour bunding.
- Most farmers who undertook contour bunding are small farmers. They could not afford high wages for hired labour. This summer was particularly hot and unbearable to work all through the day.

Table 6: Contour Bunding (2010-11)

No.	Name of <i>Samiti</i> member	Village	Completion of Contour marking (in acres)	Completion of Contour bunds (in acres)
1.	Vanita Shedmake	Persoda	6	6
2.	Shalinda Perchake	Vihirgaon	7	7
3.	Asha Kulsange	Vihirgaon	8	8
4.	Geeta Tore	Vihirgaon	7	-
5.	Shubhadra Meshram	Khairgaon	4	4
6.	Anusaya Waghade	Zargad	4	4
7.	Jyoti Lakhe	Talegaon T.	4	4
8.	Asmita Raut	Talegaon T.	5	5
9.	Shakuntala Lokhande	Talegaon T.	3	-
10.	Shashikala Suryawanshi	Talegaon T.	3	-
11.	Shakuntala Deshmukh	Ashta	6	6
12.	Sunita Wadhai	Ashta	4	-
13.	Kusum Nikode	Ashta	3	-
14.	Kalpana Nival	Bodad	5	5
15.	Venutai Maske	Bodad	3	3
16.	Shankuntala Dofe	Sonegaon(St).	2	2
17.	Karuna Teltumde	Sonegaon St.	6½	-
18.	Usha Kamble	Sonegaon St.	8	-
19.	Bebi Dofe	Sonegaon St.	3	-
20.	Bebi Rondhale	Chikni	3½	-
21.	Sunita Chande	Amla	7	7
22.	Anjana Zamre	Durguda	4	4
23.	Shalu Thool	Durgada	3	3
24.	Tara Moon	Durgada	3	3
25.	Ragini Marghade	Durgada	5	5
26.	Yogita Wankhede	Durgada	3½	-
27.	Nita Moon	Durgada	5	5
28.	Premila Shende	Durgada	5	5
29.	Sangeeta Nagrale	Durgada	4	4
30.	Kanta Hande	Wabgaon	3½	3½
31.	Sangeeta Patil	Wabgaon	3	-

Many wage labourers were reluctant to work as the hot summer was unbearable for them. Those who were ready to work demanded high wages. Such wages were prohibitive for eleven farmers to undertake contour bunding activity on their farm.

- Eleven farmers could not arrange for bullock to work on the field.
- The early arrival of monsoon was a disruption for contour bunding programme. Dry spell in early June would have helped about eight farmers to complete contour bunding on their farms.

Those farmers who completed the contour bunding successfully were happy and satisfied that more moisture will be retained for a longer period on their farm. That in turn will hopefully lead to reduction in risks associated with farming, and also increase farm yield.

1.3.3 Haemoglobin (Hb) testing for women farmers

Haemoglobin testing is a simple method to assess anemia in a person. Anemia is a serious public health problem in our country affecting all segments of the population, particularly women and children. The major cause of anemia in our country is iron deficiency while folate deficiency in children and pregnant women also leads to anemia. The level of haemoglobin in a person's blood helps diagnose if the person is anemic or not. Hemoglobin

concentration measurement is among the most commonly performed blood tests and this gives a measure of the level of hemoglobin in a person's blood. A below normal level hemoglobin concentration in a person's blood is indicative of anemia.

Majority of MKSP members during general awareness meeting on health and other issues, expressed concern about a general feeling of exhaustion, weakness, brief periods of black out, and pain in the waist area. These are symptoms generally associated with anemia. Taking this into account, it was decided to conduct health camps for Haemoglobin testing for the women farmers. Accordingly, 6 one day camps were arranged for Hb testing over November 2009 to March 2010, in which 406 women farmers checked their blood count. The medical camp test revealed that 395 out of 406 women farmers, that is, 97%, were anemic.

The process

- Importance of haemoglobin (Hb) testing was repeatedly emphasized during monthly *Samiti* meetings at the village level.
- MSSRF staff visited Primary Health Center of the area to discuss the issue and coordinate arrangements for testing in the villages. The staff met the concerned officer and Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM) located at the village and discussed details with them. In this way, a Hb testing camp calendar was set up for project villages.

- MSSRF fieldworker reported the discussion and decision to hold Hb testing camp to *Mahila Kisan Samiti* of the village. Appropriate venue was selected and related arrangements were organised through consensus and responsibilities were shared by women farmers themselves.
- MSSRF staff confirmed the details, communicating them to Primary Health Centre (PHC) staff through personal visit.
- *Mahila Kisan Samiti* women farmers were checked and tested by the PHC staff and the test report was collected from ANM.
- Folic acid and vitamin tablets were distributed as per the test report.
- Informal discussion right at the camp venue was helpful to give tips on balanced diet and nutrition. Awareness on locally available food grains, pulses and vegetables for their nutrition value was created.
- Such awareness was expected to bring about change.

Difficulties

There were few difficulties in organizing Hb testing camps and MSSRF team was unable to reach desired number of women farmers who would have benefited from it. The difficulties encountered were:

- Not all women farmers of the village presented themselves for the testing.

- The PHC staff was not ready to organize the camp in spite of several personal visits and request by MSSRF.
- The ANM did not carry sufficient stock and supplies of medicine and tablets for distribution during the camp.
- Women who checked below nine gram hemoglobin count needed special care and attention. However, such care seems to be lacking.
- Medical officers often suggested that women farmers should themselves buy the solution necessary to measure the hemoglobin concentration in their blood samples as only a restricted quantity of the required solution was available in the Primary Health Centers. However, this problem of 'scarcity' was resolved after MSSRF staff took up the matter with the district health officer.
- PHC staff members do not consider hemoglobin testing of women as their responsibility. They think of it as additional work load imposed on them.

1.3.4 Kitchen Gardens / Home Gardens

Kitchen gardens/home gardens were promoted essentially to address the health concerns of women farmers. As discussed earlier, Hb testing was conducted in six project villages and

prevalence of anemia was seen to be high among women farmers. Given that lack of balanced nutrition is a major factor responsible for a very high prevalence of anemia, it is expected that availability of fresh vegetables and fruits from the gardens would help to improve the health status of women. Eighty women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* adopted new methods to raise their individual kitchen gardens in 2008-09. Almost an equal number of women, 87 women farmers of *Samiti* members, followed the idea next year i.e. 2009-10. So far, 167 *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members have developed kitchen gardens at their home sites. Though the concept of growing fruits and vegetables in their back yards is not new for rural women, there was considerable scope to improve the approach. Awareness creation on the need for diversity in vegetables and fruits grown, and imparting necessary technical guidance on the same, was undertaken by MKSP. The kitchen gardens raised by women farmers now include a range of vegetables like brinjal, tomato, lady's finger, cucumber, beetroot, spinach etc. Those women farmers who had access to more space have raised fruit trees like guava, custard apple, papaya in their kitchen garden. Fencing the gardens, to protect plants from stray cattle, was also suggested by MKSP.

Process

The following process was adopted to raise kitchen garden.

- MSSRF staff discussed the idea of kitchen garden in all the 42 *Mahila*

Kisan Samitis. They discussed the concept as a useful intervention to address anemia.

- Women farmers of 35 *Mahila Kisan Samiti* responded positively to the concept and decided to work on it. They requested MSSRF to arrange seeds and other inputs for them.
- Workshops on kitchen garden were organised for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members at DharaMitra to provide scientific guidance to raise kitchen gardens. These workshops were organised between 25 and 27 February 2009, 9 and 11 April 2009 and on 29 January 2010.
- The idea, as also some practical steps in implementation and related problems, were discussed at length in the project villages. MSSRF team arranged talks by resource persons and question and answer sessions with them on the special events like International Women's Day and Savitri Bai Phule Birth Anniversary. MKS members shared and discussed it during 'Van Bhojan' (common outing and lunch).
- The training inputs and regular interactions with women farmers created awareness and interest among women farmers to take up kitchen gardening.
- Women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* registered their specific request for seeds with MSSRF. About 100 women farmers asked for seeds in 2008-09.
- MSSRF sourced the required supplies

of seeds for kitchen gardens from DharaMitra, BAIF and open market at Wardha.

- Seeds received from BAIF and DharaMitra were repacked in small pouches of convenient sizes for distribution. The small packets for ₹2/, ₹3/- and ₹5/-, as per whole sale rates, were distributed among woman farmers.
- Women farmers were given instructions and a model annual calendar at the time of seed distribution.
- Women farmers arranged for fencing as per need and convenience for kitchen garden raised by them.

Difficulties

- Some women farmers were still confused and undecided, even after training, about selecting seeds for their kitchen gardens.
- For some women farmers the practice and notion of buying seeds for kitchen garden was not acceptable.
- Some superstition over beetroot prevented women farmers to go for this seed. They hesitated because of the prevailing misconceptions about this vegetable.
- Women farmers faced problems to maintain kitchen gardens in summer. Most of the wells had dried up in summer since the last two years and they could not water their vegetables. This was more serious in fifteen villages of project area.

- About half of the women farmers who raised kitchen gardens could not fence them. They found it too expensive to do so. This resulted in stray animals eating their produce and destroying the gardens.
- Raising kitchen garden added to existing work load of women farmers. Male members of the family hardly worked in kitchen gardens. Hence kitchen garden was one more burden for women farmers besides the household chores and farming activity.
- Lastly, some of those women who had raised kitchen gardens in spite of these difficulties, did not take efforts to include vegetables in their daily diet. This was clear through personal interactions and discussions with women.

1.3.5 Other Activities

- a. Women Farmers' Meets are organised periodically, where 150 to 200 *Samiti* members participate. These meets are held in Wardha as residential programmes, usually for two days. These are occasions for *Samiti* members to listen to eminent resource persons on diverse issues. Senior government officials are also invited to address the *Samiti* members. *Samiti* members are exposed to various concepts related to sustainable agriculture, food and nutrition security, government entitlements and drudgery reducing tools related to agriculture as well as household activities. Lectures as well as detailed discussions and demonstrations are arranged

on low cost farming- preparation of bio agents etc. pulse mill, use of smokeless chulas, coal based cookers etc. These are also occasions for *Samiti* members to interact with each other, to share their varied experiences, to discuss the goal and objectives of MKSP and finally to chart out a plan for future work. Cultural events are also organised during the Meets.

- b. Snake show: *Mahila Kisan Samitis* of Kelapur and Bodad organised a live snake science show on 30 August 2009. The live show on poisonous and non-poisonous snakes by Vidarbha Sarpa-Mitra Mandal President Mr. Gajendra Surkar, helped to remove villagers' misconceptions and irrational fears. 'Farmers kill snakes, their friends, due to prevailing wrong notions,' he clarified. He gave tips to avoid snake bites and safety measures in the event of bites. For women who handled the snake during the show, to first touch the snake itself was a most unforgettable experience. A large group of about eighty men and women attended snake show at Kelapur. Similarly, ninety villagers, including women, were present at Bodad. Sarpanch and Gram Sevak were present at both places.
- c. Exposure visit: On 8 January 2010, seven *Samiti* members, along with MSSRF staff, visited two villages- Sakhi and Lavhana- where BAIF, an NGO, is actively working. Significant interventions have been made by BAIF in the field of horticulture, kitchen

gardens and general sanitation. BAIF interventions were helpful at Sakhi, a village with a population of 650: each house has a cement platform (5"x5") around chulhas as well as clean water storage placed at a particular height. Transparent roof (1"x1") filters enough sunlight into kitchen. BAIF has promoted here two women's Self-Help Groups and one organic cotton grower men's group. The visitors saw common kitchen garden and a hand pump collectively maintained by women, besides development of horticulture at Lavhana. The imaginative hand pump design includes a platform at about 12 feet away for washing clothes and an outlet into the common garden. The group had discussions with BAIF promoted SHG women at both places. BAIF staff was present and cooperated during exposure visit. Some of the *Mahila Kisan Samiti* members were impressed with organic cotton crop and decided to discuss it with their family members.

- d. Some of the other activities taken by MKSP are listed below:
- Discussion and training on role of Panchayat Raj institutions in development;
 - Group lunch in the field, as a form of outing;
 - Celebration of International Women's Day with special events.
 - Cattle vaccination

PART TWO

First Person Narratives: Women Farmers' Stories

This section presents a brief profile of some *Samiti* members as well as excerpts from their 'first person narratives' that highlight the relevance of MKSP in their lives.

2.1 Indira Meshram – Takli-Chincholi, Yavatmal

Indira Meshram lives with her husband, two young sons, and elderly in-laws in Takli Chincholi village in Yavatmal district. The family owns 3 acres of farm land that she cultivates. Her husband does not share in the day to day farming activities or the responsibilities of running the family. He engages himself in religious activities and is absent from home for long stretches. Uncomplainingly, Indira carries out the multiple responsibilities of cultivating the farm land, bringing up her children, educating them, and taking care of her elderly in-laws. She is a hard working person who dreams of a better future for her sons, and wants to educate them well. She says "I want to ensure that investing in their education and career should not suffer due to lack of resources". She has good leadership qualities. She is the president of a self help group in her village and is actively engaged in organising self help groups in Takli-Chincholi. She is a member of the *Mahila Kisan Samiti* formed in her

village.

Below are excerpts from her narrative:

The staff member from M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation discussed with me on how women farmers can make progress in spite of leading restricted lives. Her guidance inspired me. The urge to invest my time and energies into creative pursuits is strengthened through such interactions with the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation team. I want to keep myself busy with productive activities.

I took up kitchen gardening on my farm as I cannot grow vegetables near my home due to lack of space. In fact, it was for the first time that I grew vegetables on my farm. Gavaar (cluster bean), Bhendi (ladies finger) and Barbati (cow pea), once ready and dried, were replaced with vegetables like Palak, methi, coriander, and beet. I sold Palak and methi in my village itself. Methi seeds bought at the cost of ₹75/- fetched me ₹500/-. I sold 25 kilograms of Gavaar at ₹16/- per kilogram and that earned ₹400/- for me. I also sold 10 kilograms Bhendi. Besides earning income from the crops, we also got to consume the vegetables within the family. But I see to it now that vegetables like Palak, methi, coriander, Gavaar, and Bhendi are available on farm all the year round for home consumption. This saves on my food bill. I now cultivate wheat, Chana, and Bhendi as I can water these crops

and vegetables. I have grown Bhendi, Gavaar, Barbati, Methi, and Palak. Gavaar, grown in two lines, was enough to meet daily consumption needs of my household. I used brinjal and tomatoes within the household. I do not have to purchase vegetables from the market. This means ample savings on such unavoidable daily expenses.

I have reduced use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides on my farm. Instead, I use neem and other botanical extracts as pesticide. Preparation of these bio pesticides/extracts were taught to us by MSSRF staff. Now I prepare it myself. I paid school children ₹2/- to collect one kilogram neem seeds from nearby trees. These were dried and then crushed into powder. This dried neem powder was soaked in water for two days before it was cooked well. The cooled concoction was filtered by cloth before use. This organic pesticide not only protects crop against pests but the crop also looks green, fresh, tender and shining.

Creating awareness on the advantages of multi-crop practice was provided by MKSP. I have adopted multi-crop practice on my farm. Single cash crop cultivation for more money is not seen as a desirable practice for its long-term harmful effects. Mixed crop cultivation is cost effective. It makes a farmer self-reliant to meet family needs. Mixed crop was something of a new experiment for me that I wanted to try. I cultivated various crops on our one and half acre land. These are soyabean,

toor, Moong (green gram), Barbati, til (sesame), udid (black gram), samridhi Jowar (sorghum), Gavaar, Bhendi and Jhendu flower (merry gold) seeds. I undertook nindan (weeding) in August on this plot of mixed crop. I gave the crops required quantity of fertilisers and spread pesticide to protect it adequately. However, I did not get much profit from soyabean: attack from wild pigs and pests damaged the crops in spite every precaution. Pigs almost entirely destroyed Barbati, Moong, udid and jowar grown on mixed crop farm. Wild pigs ate up Jowar that had grown quiet healthy. I expected every 'kanis' to give me one payali jowar. I got 100 kilogram toor and 25 kilogram til (sesame). I had expected to get 50 kilograms til. Encouraged by MSSRF I took up production of hybrid cotton seeds (NH44) on 25 cents. MSSRF had arranged for technical guidance from Central Institute of Cotton Research, Nagpur. My family members were not much responsive to the idea. I did all related tasks on my own, with the help of hired labour. I paid ₹1200/- in wages to the hired labourers. The seed plot did not yield as expected. But I got 50 kilogram cotton produce.

2.2 Ratna Borkar – Kurzadi Jaamtha, Wardha

Ratna Borkar (45) was born at Kurzadi Jamtha, in a family of 8 children (7 daughters and 1 son). She studied up to Class XII. She was given in marriage at Injhapur - a village about eight kilometers

away from Kurzadi to an employee in the irrigation department, who deserted her soon after her marriage. She was alienated by her husband's family and was forced to return to her parental home. Her husband married another woman even without formally divorcing her. Back in her village, she worked at the Bal Bhavan of Chetna Vikas, an NGO in Wardha. While serving at the Bal Bhavan, she learned about kitchen gardening and organic farming practices – all of which were taught to the children in the Bal Bhavan. She also trained herself in raising herbal medicine gardens and in herbal medicine preparation. After Bal Bhavan activities were stopped, she worked briefly for an NGO as a self-help group organizer. She also worked for Sewagram Medical College as part of the project on Community led Initiatives for Child Survival. On popular demand, she contested in local panchayat election in Kurzadi (Jamtha). She was elected the sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat. As a woman sarpanch, she faces a lot of hurdles. She is a very courageous woman who says that she believes in the mantra – "Fear nothing, as you have done no wrong".

We give below excerpts from her narrative:

Mahila Kisan Samiti was formed at Kurzadi on 8th September 2009 as a part of a women-focused programme of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. Fifteen women farmers are members of Mahila Kisan Samiti, Kurzadi Jamtha. I am its president. A jointly operated bank

account is opened for Mahila Kisan Samiti at Waigaon. Mahila Kisan Samiti activities bring women farmers of Kurzadi together. It seeks to create awareness among them about gender issues. Mahila Kisan Samiti wants to empower women farmers of Kurzadi through positive action.

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation invited Dr. Madhuri Dighekar, Medical Officer of Primary Health Center, Talegaon, to conduct Hb (hemoglobin) tests for women farmers at Kurzadi. Mahila Kisan Samiti organised this event. The weight and blood pressure was checked for women attending the event. Meaningful ways and means to improve women's health were discussed. Green leafy vegetables and sprouted lentils, for instance, were recommended to address anemia. Practical steps like how to prepare groundnut sweets were explained. Folic acid tablets and tonic were distributed among Samiti members. Mahila Kisan Samiti, Kurzadi organised an eye check-up camp for men and women on 8th March 2010, the International Women's Day. Dr. Sanjay Dubey was invited for this purpose. Mahila Kisan Samiti organised one day training for adolescent girls through Kishori Panchayat. It provided information to create awareness on women's health like personal hygiene during menstrual cycles.

Promotion of Kitchen Garden concept by MKSP has resulted in availability of fresh, clean and inexpensive vegetables at the door step. Women farmers of Kurzadi have followed the idea.

They raised kitchen gardens in their homesteads. Some women raised them on farms in case of space constraints in the homestead. These kitchen gardens consist of a variety of vegetables – cucumber, brinjal, tomato, spinach, bitter gourd, chili, Gavar, dudhi bhopala (pumpkin), chavali, dodake (gourd), chakvat (leafy vegetable).

We organised Haldi-kumkum to celebrate birth anniversary of Savitri Bai Phule, a pioneer women educator of Maharashtra. Women enjoyed the fun and joy of being together through traditional art forms combined with present day content. They composed instant quick-response Ukhane (couplets) on Savitri Bai. Puja Jadhav, guest speaker from Wardha, discussed the concept of gender discrimination and girl child's rights. About forty women farmers heard her talk on evils of alcoholism. Kirtan is a widely used art form of recreation based on religious themes. I composed Kirtan on themes like status of women farmers, organic farming, women's health, corruption and superstition. 180 women listened to my Kirtan during women's meet organised by MKSP at Sewagram. I have composed, besides Kirtan, a play on water-borne diseases and farm related songs and slogans.

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation sponsored Deepali Potphode and Seema Bhurey for a course in home nursing at Pune as part of the education support programme

initiative. Another interesting event was farming practice for children. Boys and girls prepared Gadiwafa (trenches) for sowing of spinach, chili and methi. It was an occasion not only to learn new farming practices, but also to earn small income through selling their produce. Mahila Kisan Samiti promoted basil garden as preventive herbal medicine against Malaria. Basil plants were raised in the school. Each child took away ten saplings to grow at his/her home.

I shared my knowledge through Mahila Kisan Samiti. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation invited me to design and conduct herbal medicine garden course in Ralegaon (Yavatmal). Twenty women from suicide affected farmers' families attended this course. The course design included inputs and information on Korhad (aloevera), Neem, Papaya, Ambadi sarbat (red sorrel leaves juice) and Tarota coffee. I demonstrated how to prepare 'Ral malam'.

I was one of the four women farmers of Mahila Kisan Samitis of Wardha district to participate in Livelihood meet by ANANDI at Ahmadabad (3-4 June 2010), arranged by MKSP. I shared my experience on herbal medicine and presented Ambadi sarbat and tarota coffee at this event.

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Project Associate Charusheela Thakre heard my story.

She inquired about how much I get as Sarpanch and my other livelihood options. She counseled me to register my complaint with Women's Grievance Cell run by Tata Institute of Social Sciences at Wardha. I am entitled for financial assistance as destitute under the government scheme. This required a formal divorce from my husband. This discussion with M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation Project Associate was useful. Pratibha Gajbhiye, Counselor, wrote down my case when I visited Women's Grievance Cell. My husband did not present himself at the next two or three hearings. Pratibha Gajbhiye visited Hingan Ghat and asked him to attend the hearings at Cell. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation Project Coordinator Kishor Jagtap was helpful with his practical guidance. He attended two recordings of my case. My husband - Vinod Telhande, after twenty-five years, settled my divorce claim with ₹25,000/-. I will now be able to seek various entitlements under government schemes for destitute women. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's initiative made all this possible.

2.3 Pushpa Bhabley – Waifad:

Pushpa Bhabley hails from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. She was born in a family of six children. Since early childhood, she had realised the importance of education and had strived to complete her graduation.

Her subsequent attempts to enroll in B. Ed and Journalism were in vain. Her marriage took her to Waifad village in Wardha district, Maharashtra. This brought about a lot of changes in her life. She had to adapt herself to the rural way of life in contrast to her urban upbringing. Early into marriage, she lost her husband. She had a one year old baby boy by then. This was a major turning point in her life. Immediately after the death of her husband, her in-laws turned against her and tried to take over her husband's share of the land and sent her back to her maternal home. After a period of time, she took a major and courageous decision of returning to her husband's village and eking out a living by cultivating her husband's land. With sheer determination and perseverance, she learnt farming skills, and is now actively engaged in cultivating her land. She is an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) volunteer. She is a member of the Jagrit Mahila Shetkari Samiti since its inception in Waifad in November 2008.

We give below excerpts from her narrative:

I joined Jagrit Mahila Shetkari Samiti (as known in Marathi) / Mahila Kisan Samiti (MKS) when it was formed as a part of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation intervention at Waifad on 10 November 2008 along with 13 women farmers. The Mahila Kisan Samiti holds monthly meetings on relevant local

specific topics, creates awareness and provides training on improved farming practices, organic farming, animal husbandry, production of milk products, kitchen garden, green fodder production etc. Mahila Kisan Samiti encourages women farmers to participate in training events to upgrade their skills and learn new ones. I participated in a Animal Husbandry programme (16 December 2008) at Maharashtra Animal and Fishery Science University, Nagpur.

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation arranged for a video conferencing with the President of India, Smt. Pratibha Patil. I had the rare privilege to participate in it. I was selected to present the questions to the Minister in video conferencing. However the President was busy, and women farmers talked with Women and Child Welfare Minister Renuka Chaudhari. I spelt out a range of farming related issues - load -shedding; water for dry land farming; subsidy for Jowar, bajra and soybean; remunerative prices for farm produce - and the Minister responded to them.

I also had the privilege to hold a dialogue with Ms. Mina Swaminathan of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation during a three-day Sewagram meet. During the meeting, women farmers' issues were discussed, and development activities were planned. These included constructing toilets and making village free of open defecation and conducting Adult Education programme.

I represented the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation at the National Virtual Academy programme on 17 Feb 2009. We celebrated Mother's Day. Later, I attended interviews for National Virtual Academy Fellow Award at Science Vidyapeeth on Nagpur Road. However, I missed this opportunity for some reason.

Women farmers, I feel, are not equal to men in all spheres of action. A woman farmer like me lives and works within the invisible confines of countless limits and controls. There are several hurdles at every step for me to carry on farm operations. Jagrit Mahila Shetkari Samiti gave me useful exposure and recognition. It gave me guidance on tangible ideas for action.

2.4 Antkala Omkar - Lonsavali

Antkala Omkar was brought up in a troubled family in Selu block of Wardha district. Her father did not provide for the family. Her mother ran the household by labouring in others' fields. Antkala was the eldest in a family of 4 daughters and two sons. She started living with her grandparents since the age of six. She was a talented student and stood first in her class. The death of her paternal grandfather deprived the household of a prime income source. This forced her to discontinue her studies and take up wage labour at the age of 13. She was married at the age of 15 to a tailor. The men in her husband's

family were all tailors by profession and did not know much about farming. They owned some goats, and by selling them, and also with financial support from her maternal grandfather, they bought 8 acres of land. Out of this, 4 acres of land was sold to meet expenditure on child's health. They bought another 4.5 acres of land. This land had not been cultivated since many years and it was full of wild shrubs. As her husband used to be away for most part of the time on business, Antkala took up the entire responsibility of tending to this land. They cleared this land of wild vegetation and started cultivating it. Being a family which did not pursue cultivation as their primary activity, farming this 4.5 acre land was quite a challenge. Her efforts met with ridicule from the villagers. But with sheer hard work and determination she cultivated this land and her efforts started yielding and won appreciation from the same people who ridiculed her. She is a member of a SHG and is involved in income generating activity of the SHG.

We give below excerpts from her narrative:

Mahila Kisan Samiti that the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation organised at Sewagram. After this event we discussed among ourselves about women's situation in the village. One of the commonly accepted points that struck me as relevant is that women continue to live life confined to their home. I accepted, with rest of those present, that women must assert themselves.

MKSP helped women adapt innovative farming practices like contour bunding to improve productivity of land. I took up mixed cropping on my land on guidance from Jyotsna Raut, project associate of MSSRF. I have also learnt to prepare and use jeevamruth- a bio fertiliser and Agniasthra- a biopesticide in my field. I use jeevamruth for cotton and all the crops. Agniasthra is used against pests in tur. Integrated fertiliser application was also taught to us in the mahila kisan Samiti. I practice integrated fertiliser application in my field.

PART THREE

Education Support Programme

One of the first initiatives of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Vidarbha region is the Education Support Programme designed as a source of support for the suicide affected families. The objective of the programme is that the education of the children (boy or girl) should not be disrupted because of the distress caused by a parent's suicide. Aim of the project is to ensure that children (both young boys and girls) of farmers who have committed suicide continue their education at least up to the ten plus two (Junior College) level. Where the child is not keen on continuing high school after class VIII or junior college after class X or is a class X fail, vocational training at ITI or Polyclinic will be considered and supported on a case by case basis. Education in the state of Maharashtra is free up to the Ten plus Two level. The programme extends support by way of an annual stipend to provide for two sets of uniform, a pair of footwear, school bag and writing material and a monthly allowance for food and nutrition and miscellaneous expenses. In the case of high school and junior college students, provision will be made for the exam fees.

The annual stipend given under this programme for students at different levels of schooling is as follows:

- Primary school level (Upto class IV) - ₹1,500/-
- Middle school level (Class V-VII) - ₹2,000/-
- High school level (Class VIII-X) - ₹2,500/-
- Junior college students (Class XI-XII) - ₹3,000/-

In cases where the child is to go for vocational training, a maintenance amount and fees for the course will be met. This will be decided on a case by case basis. In 2006, 77 children from 36 families in Wardha district were covered. For the academic year 2010-11, 81 children are covered in the districts of Wardha and Yavatmal under this programme. MSSRF has facilitated the enrolment of nursing course, in Pune and Nagpur, for three girls, who completed class X with good performance. One boy who completed XII standard got admission to B.E. course at Bapurao Deshmukh College of Engineering, Sewagram. Residential camps are arranged for special coaching in English, Maths and Science for the children. In 2009, twenty-five local families of Wardha town hosted home stay for student for four days. The students visited institutions around Wardha: Gandhi Ashram (Sewagram), Vinoba Ashram (Pavnar), Gandhi Vihar Parishad and Centre of Science for Villages. They went to Mosque, Church, Gurudwara, Jain Mandir, Baudha Vihar and Lakshmi Narayan Mandir.

This experience enthused children with new confidence. Five children received bicycles as donation from philanthropists. One philanthropist has also funded a girl student to pursue a course in nursing.

3.1 First Person Narrative:

3.1.1. Rushali Petkar

Eighteen year old Rushali Petkar hails from Kurzadi Fort which is 5 km from Waifad. Her family consists of her widowed mother, her younger brother and herself. They own five acres of farm land which has no irrigation facility. Rushali lost her father when she was studying in 4th standard. He was the first farmer in her village who took the extreme decision of committing suicide as he was unable to repay the loan to the bank and also to the money lender. It happened on 8th October 2002. According to Rushali, "...my father was hard working farmer and simple by nature. He had availed of a loan of ₹ two lakh from the nationalised bank and money lender, which he could not repay on time. As time passed, the amount mounted up. Due to threat from the money lender and pressure of the bank, he committed suicide". She says she was very young that she was unable to understand the cause for his death. It was the first farmer suicide in Wardha district which qualified for the support of Government of Maharashtra. Her mother got the financial assistance of ₹1,00,000/- (₹50,000/- in cash and

the balance in the form of National Saving Certificate) from the State Government. Since her father's death her mother single handedly managed the farm land.

Below are excerpts from her narrative :

I was in class 4 when my father committed suicide.....After I passed 10th examination, I was very much worried about my higher studies since I did not have proper guidance or financial help. Meanwhile, I received a message from M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation to attend a meeting on career guidance. When I went to the meeting conducted on 3rd July 2009 there were about 20 children from farmers' suicide affected families, who had passed their secondary and higher secondary examinations. That day I experienced a ray of hope and thought I could do something in my life. I was exposed to various opportunities in higher education through guidance and personal counseling of experts. I decided to take up nursing course. I made this choice out of my interest and confidence of finding employment. My mother approached MSSRF for admission to Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM) course. My application, along with the recommendation letter of MSSRF, was sent to Swami Vivekananda Medical Mission (SVMM), Khapari, Nagpur. I appeared for the personal interview conducted by SVMM. I could face it with confidence only because of

the total support of staff members of MSSRF. I passed in the interview. I was given details pertaining to admission fees, duration of the course, hostel facility etc.

The Project Coordinator of MSSRF talked to the Director of SVMM for obtaining some concession in the fees. Though he could not get any fee concession I was happy to know at least I was allowed to join by depositing ₹12,000/- instead of ₹20,000/- and pay the total fees of ₹62,000/- (₹38,000/- for tuition fees and ₹24,000/- for mess charges) in three installments. My mother and I were happy about it. However arranging money to pay the first installment fees of ₹12,000/- was very difficult. My mother could arrange for ₹7,000/- and when we were worried as to how to get the balance amount of ₹5,000/-, the Project Coordinator of MSSRF came to our rescue. When he came to know that there was a shortfall of ₹5,000/- for admission he immediately gave it from his personal account as a loan which my mother returned after six months. I could join the course on 1 August 2009 by depositing ₹12,000/-

Next installment of ₹20,000/- had to be paid in the month of September 2009. My mother had no option but to break the National Saving Certificate of ₹50,000/- to pay the fees. She thought it was easy to break the NSC. But when she approached the post office to do so, she found it was very difficult. Therefore, she met the Project Coordinator of MSSRF and asked for help. The latter wrote a

letter requesting the Director of SVMM to give in writing, the fees structure of the course. The director immediately sent a letter to the Foundation, quoting the fees structure. Then the Foundation sent a request letter to the District Collector (with details of fees structure) asking for the approval to encash the NSC. In this context I must say that all this was done by the Foundation on behalf of my mother. The District Collector issued the order to the Superintendent of Post Offices to permit my mother to encash the NSC in the last week of September. Accordingly she did so, and we were able to deposit the amount of ₹20,000/- towards my tuition fees. In the due course of time, the remaining amount of ₹6,000/- was also deposited.

The Foundation did not just stop supporting me with this. It again organised support for my boarding expenses. Because of the Foundation's effort, Mr. Sheikh from Ralegaon, is extending financial assistance of ₹1,000/- every month towards my boarding expenses. He also sent a dress for me and a sari for my mother for Diwali. An unknown benefactor is doing a lot for my welfare and I am overwhelmed with gratitude for such kindness. Apart from the above support, the Foundation has been giving me a stipend ranging from ₹2,500/- to ₹3,000/- from 2006, which helped me buy the books, sandals, notebooks, uniform etc. on time. All this is really a great help to me and my family.

Presently I am studying in the final year of ANM course. SVMM is an institute which is of very high repute in Nagpur. I feel proud to be the student of the same. Importantly, I passed the first year examination with 70% marks. After I get through the ANM course, I would like to do GNM course in Nagpur itself. I am full of confidence that I can do the same while I earn. I am given the assurance of a job by SVMM, if I wished to join.

3.1.2 Shubhangi Patil, Wabgaon

Subhangi Patil belongs to Wabgaon Village of Deoli Taluk in Wardha. Subhangi Patil is the eldest of three sisters. Her father committed suicide when she was studying in Class 8. Subhangi is a warm and spirited young girl who has a large circle of friends. She respects and adores her mother and looks up to her as a role model. She is an energetic child and finds pleasure in playing team based outdoor games like Khoko and Langadi. Writing is one of her favourite hobbies. Subhangi and her sisters have been covered under the Education Support Programme of MSSRF since 2007. Now she has completed her class X and is pursuing a diploma course in Agriculture at KVK Selsura.

We give below excerpts from her narrative:

Wabgaon, my village, is in Wardha district. It is seven kilometers from the

village of Bhidi. We are four members in the family – three sisters Shubhangi (me), Swati, Shweta and our mother. Mother heads my family. Our father passed away in 2006. My mother is my first teacher. We follow mother's decisions and do things as she desires us to do them. My mother has admirable relations with all. She meets and interacts with everyone on equal terms and talks with all agreeably.

For me my school is a world of many experiences and emotions associated with it. I learnt many things during school days. I also faced and overcame many difficulties during my schooling days. The school provides the scope to learn every subject so that a student knows enough things. I was a student from Class I to X at Navjeevan Madhyamik Vidyalaya, Wabgaon. My school is beautiful. It is an adorable village institution with many resources that appeal and attract students. It has a well maintained playground. Many subjects - Marathi, history, math, geometry, economics, science, geography - are taught in the school. Students like most of the subjects. My Primary School teacher Thakre, is one that I admire most. I also appreciate my High School teachers Landge and Bhojar a lot.

My father committed suicide and died on 30 November 2006. I was studying in class 8 then. My sisters were in class 6 and 4 respectively. The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation initiated its

Education Support Programme in Vidarbha around this time. The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation has extended valuable support to me. I will use it to shape our future. The exposure and educational support it has arranged for us is imaginative and unique. I respect the MSSRF for this initiative. The support and guidance received from MSSRF inspired me to join the Agriculture Diploma course at KVK Selsura. MSSRF provided financial support for this course. Support from M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation has been helpful in other ways. For example, it was instrumental in calling attention to the plight of the suicide affected families and acknowledgment in the form of emotional and financial support. The educational events organised by MSSRF are relevant and useful. My family members gather new hope and courage to go ahead in spite of crises situations when I share the experiences with them.

I appreciate and consider the staff of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation as part of my extended family.

Writing is my most favorite leisure pursuit. I like many games and I play some of them. I love games like Khokho and Langadi, besides cricket, which everybody likes. I play games of Khokho and Langadi almost every day. There is such a vast difference in playing a game with many and playing it alone in a corner of home. I have many friends and

they treat me well. They take me to their homes. I, too, like to visit my friends' home. Family members of my friends welcome and treat me well. I never feel like a stranger with my friends or their family members. I am wholly comfortable with all my friends. I like to make friends with those older and younger than me as well. I can learn things from older friends that even the elder sister will not be able to give me. My mother, though she is a family head, is like my friend.

My village, Wabgaon has Gram Panchayat, Anganwadi, as well as Hanuman and Vitthal-Rukhmini temples. People at Wabgaon have over the years become health conscious and take care of their surroundings and give much importance to proper sanitation. People of Wabgaon have organised village sanitation carefully. Village Coordination Committee monitors public sanitation and sources of drinking water. Indeed, sanitation has made Wabgaon a pleasant place, admired by visitors.

I will be someone great in the future. I will look after everyone of my family member out of my earnings. Clearly, being eldest daughter, I will be responsible to look after them and I will surely do it. I will never allow my mother to feel isolated. I never want her to say that she is all alone. If I become a gram sevak, sanitation will be my first priority. I will keep villagers of all ages well immunized against diseases. I will involve everyone in such activities. The norms of behaviors I would set, I am sure, would be acceptable to all.

3.1.3 Ranjana Deshmukh – (Talegaon Talatule)

Ranjana Deshmukh, a victim of farmer suicide, had the sole responsibility of bringing up her two little daughters. She recalls how MSSRF's support has been instrumental in her children completing their schooling.

We give below excerpts from her narrative:

My husband Ramesh was such a good person. He inherited a three acre farm as his share of parental land. This includes a fair size stream that runs across in one acre land. The remaining two were under cultivation. There is a well on the farm, but it has dried up, and all our efforts in making the land yield were in vain. Successive years of poor farm yield meant a lot of accumulated debts. Meanwhile, our mud house collapsed. We accrued loan for its urgent repairs and construction. Added to this, we had already availed of loans for sowing. Bank employees visited our house for recovery of dues. We were in no position to repay the loan installments.

27 July 2004 was a fatal day for us. My husband was very much upset on the day. I was busy working in our farm. There was some function at the Suryavanshi family. Ramesh took his afternoon food at this function. He talked amicably with everyone for whole day. He pampered our children by giving them money. It was around

11o'clock, when others in the home were asleep, he consumed poison. His loud cries awoke us. He was taken to government hospital at Wardha. We performed obligatory Thirteenth Day ritual, though we could ill afford it, to meet community obligations.

Sonia Gandhi, Sulekha Kumbhare, Prabha Rau and Sushil Kumar Shinde visited us some time later. I was given ₹1,00,000 financial assistance. A job was assured for my son and daughter. I now think that my accepting a job offer would have been better choice.

I recounted our efforts to make dry well yield water for irrigation. I was assured of a new well. However, papers in government offices did not move in desired direction. The well on my farm remains as dry as it was twenty years ago. I am charged usual electricity bill for the dry well. I think I will never be ever able to pay accumulated charges of ₹20,000/- for electricity.

My elder daughter Vaishali was in class 4 when my husband passed away. Now she has passed the Higher Secondary School Certificate (Class XII) exam. The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's education support programme has been instrumental in her completing her higher secondary. This support was used to spend on her footwear, books and daily travel to and from school. Vaishali was married on 29 May 2009. She is given in marriage at village Pujai (Wardha). My son-in-law is a farmer. They are a happy couple.

My younger daughter Yogita, a pampered one, is a considerate and receptive individual. She helps me in household chores. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation supports Yogita, too. She scored 61 percent marks in SSC (class X) exam. Yogita has finished Higher Secondary School Certificate (class XII) exam. She would like to do a nursing course, and I look forward to MSSRF's continued support in helping her realise her ambition.

PART FOUR

Postscript

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation works with nearly 600 women farmers of Vidarbha through *Mahila Kisan Samitis* since 2007. This process document is a participatory exercise to articulate their experiences. Programme's stakeholders - thirty-five women farmers and sixteen children - were invited to three workshops. First Process Documentation workshop was organised at Sonegaon Aabaji (Deoli) in April 2010. The second and third workshops were organised at Savangi Meghe (Wardha) in May 2010.

4.1 Workshops and Field Visits

Nineteen women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* participated in the first Process Documentation workshop. MicroLab exercise helped women participants share their experiences, on the following points:

- My childhood village and my present village
- My childhood friend
- Summer days when I was young and now
- The farming task I have done
- *Mahila Kisan Samiti* formation in my village was good because ...
- What I did as *Mahila Kisan Samiti* member

- How I will celebrate my 80th birthday

As topics for written exercises, the women farmers identified and listed about ten topics, each reflecting their personal experiences. These points were discussed and rephrased for clarity. The women then sat down with focused attention, to write on the first three topics of their choice. This was continued for rest of the workshop, and they came up with 130 handwritten pages. The micro lab consisted of physical movements and several in-between activities.

It was emphasized that each one's experience is something unique and only the individual could articulate. Facilitator, Freelance Trainer Pramod Kulkarni, stressed that women have a clearer grasp and suitable idiom to express them. They have to exert, find time and express themselves. In spite of intense heat and the delay for women returning home in the evening, this was a remarkable experience for all. Here is final feedback on this process documentation workshop.

- I did many things but they are conveyed only when I write about them.
- I was initially confused. My inner feelings emerged after writing 8 or 9 pages.
- This workshop gave me pleasure of doing something new.

- Writing is more difficult than sowing in farm. I learnt how to write about myself.
- Writing like this helps to know facts of farming. I feel that I now know many things.
- I lacked speed in writing. I was worried all the time that my writing may be full of errors.

Sixteen children - recipient of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation Education Support Programme - participated in second process documentation workshop (7-8 May 2010) organised at Village Uplift Society Savangi Meghe (Wardha). Pramod Kulkarni, Freelance Trainer, explained that children, usually passive listeners, have a rare chance to express themselves in this workshop. Children are more sensitive to absorb the outside world. They sense it differently.

Topics to write were discussed and identified through shared exercise finally the themes were clustered around following topics.

- My village
- My home and my mother
- My childhood experiences
- My school and teachers
- My idea on future
- Using MSSRF support.
- My hobbies

The second workshop output added up to 300 handwritten pages. Group songs, naming games and exercises were conducted to break monotony of writing.

The Workshop begun with self disclosure exercise: Who am I? Boys and girls wrote down ten statements describing their temper, habits and hobbies, likes and dislikes. It was fun when they pinned their papers on shirt fronts and moved around to read each other statements. Pramod Kulkarni linked the exercise, by way of brief explanation, with Johari Window concept of personality.

Admiration Ladder asked boys and girls to recall anyone with whom they have first-hand contact and they admire, irrespective of age, gender, education or place. They had to write two qualities they admire in that person. Children shared their Vision of Ideal Village in small group discussion.

Their feedback included following observations:

- Ability to write in proper sequence is indeed a rare gift.
- I learnt techniques to write about my thoughts and experiences.
- Girls wrote more than boys, they worked even late hours on their tasks.
- This will improve my skill to use verbs, break subsections and use correct handwriting.

- Writing like this helps understand my shortcomings.
- Writing was a tedious task. My hand was hurting.
- I am not used to writing so many pages.
- I am not used to writing so much.

Children shared their feelings before conclusion of workshop. 'I was delighted to get introduced to new friends, Pravin said. This workshop added to his general knowledge. Sagar Solav felt that writing helps to express his mind better than talking. Swati Patil was happy that she could write about herself. It was her first experience to speak out her mind. Pallavi and Ashwini Rokade shared this feeling. For Avinash the workshop was an occasion to 'recall childhood memories.'

Third process documentation workshop started (8-10 May 2010) with brainstorming exercises to generate topics for sixteen women farmers to write about. These included:

- Planning and management of farming cycle
- My farm and my organic farming experiences
- Water scarcity and farming
- Women farmer's Responsibilities
- How women give a helping hand to run the household

- Women's life cycle and health
- My childhood: my Maher (parents' home) and my Sasar (in-laws home).
- My *Mahila Kisan Samiti*, kitchen garden and my seed plot
- City women and village women
- Women and income generating activities
- My Self-Help Group and my tailoring class

Time constraint made it imperative to choose from these meaningful experiences to write ten handwritten pages (or more) during workshop. Women settled on Women's Lifecycle as more intimate theme to express themselves. Sixteen women farmers wrote down 158 hand written pages of their experiences

Two group discussions – Annual Farming Cycle and Men's Work Vs Women's Work - were organised to break monotony of continuous writing. Icebreaking exercise MicroLab was enjoyable. Women formed circle within circle, ran in opposite direction some time and formed pairs for experience sharing on

- Changes after *Mahila Kisan Samiti* formation in my village.
- Positive action of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*
- What I got from *Mahila Kisan Samiti*? What I gave to it?

- Improved farming practices I have adopted through *Mahila Kisan Samiti*.
- My eightieth (80) birthday

Their feedback was important.

- Alphabets written in black ink on white paper are more important than countless transactions. These are ultimately lost, but what is written in black ink remains.
- I wrote a much longer narrative, as I wrote something after long time.
- I felt relaxed after speaking out my mind by writing.
- We could write a lot as we did it in a group.
- I am now confident about writing out my ideas and experiences.
- Workshop days passed quickly without our realizing it.
- This was a unique training event among all that I have attended.
- Women with SHG experience wrote more comprehensively.
- This encouraged us to persist with the writing habit.
- You find time for the tasks like writing if you so desire.
- It was a better pursuit than other usual ways of spending time in villages: if I visit one relative there it is likely to

displease the other. Here all of us worked, ate, and talked together.

- I could understand the task but was unable to write about my experiences.
- I was apprehensive when I learnt that we are expected to write in the workshop.

Workshop facilitator Pramod Kulkarni told the story of Radha Bai Dahake, an illiterate, but determined woman of Choundhi, Deoli who settled as a millionaire in London around World War II.

In addition to conducting workshops, field visits were undertaken to meet large number of *Samiti* members. MSSRF organised field visits to Waifad, Durguda, Choundhi, Kurzadi (Jamtha) and Takli Chincholi (Ralegaon) on 11th and 12th September 2010.

At Durguda contour bunding on the clean farm of the newlyweds Nisha and Bhaiyya Moon of Durguda was a sight to behold. Bhaiyya's mother was a member of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* at Durguda. She asked her daughter-in-law to replace her after Bhaiyya's marriage. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation arranged for a subject expert to visit and mark his farm for contour bund. Bhaiyya and his wife were happy to show the vegetables grown on the bund, spread east to west on his five acre land. Sesame had grown plenty and tall on western end of the bund. Nisha said they got enough Bhendi to

eat and also share with neighbors. Not only til and Bhendi but Bhaiyya raised several vegetables on contour bund occupying just small part of farm. It was so numerous that Project Coordinator (MKSP), Kishor Jagtap reminded Nisha and Bhaiyya Moon of making entries in diary provided by M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. Bhaiyya said he rarely hired wage labourers. Bhaiyya and Nisha pulled soil on contour bund and paid just ₹50/- for tractor to supplement it once. Compared with this a farmer has to spend anything around ₹4,000/- for Nindan of one acre farm through wage labourers, according to Bhaiyya's rough estimate. Bhaiyya is not only self-reliant farmer but also enterprising tailor. He works as tailor in the evening to earn additional income. Indeed this role model youthful Dalit farmer couple has crucial insights to share with all *Mahila Kisan Samitis*.

At Takli Chincholi, Indira Meshram and her hired wage labourer were busy on her farm. It was very clear that lot of care and attention goes into her farming. Indira Meshram possesses initiative and enterprising spirit: she has not only succeeded herself as hard working woman farmer but also worked as persuasive organizer of local women. She is significant role model that would carry *Mahila Kisan Samiti* forward. Her home is a veritable stock room for NGOs. Fencing wires, saplings meant for distribution were lying here and there in the foreground. One corner of it was occupied by flour mill and pulverizer.

4.2 MKSP: Some Insights

This process documentation - an exercise stretching over the last few months - seeks to help women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* to articulate their experiences. Here is the essence of the several insights they offer. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* is an evolving concept. It has a potential to shape itself in the near future through closer interaction with women farmers. This would anticipate a sort of 'reversal' of learning process. It precludes going to women farmers in distress with preconceived conceptual framework. Women farmers associated with *Mahila Kisan Samitis* would help discover contours of what is relevant and what works.

Prof. Swaminathan has termed sustainable farming as 'ever green' revolution. Women farmers have responded positively, and largely accepted sustainable farming practices. They can easily understand and experiment with seed plot or kitchen garden, offered as project intervention. It will have perceptible impact if all of 600 women farmers of *Mahila Kisan Samiti* were to adopt sustainable agricultural practices on their farms. It is for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* to internalize such ideas, with their underlying values and attitudes. *Mahila Kisan Samiti's* role and responsibility is to ensure their effective implementation. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation would do well to add more of such activities to its programme - especially

those that would render farming a more productive vocation for women farmers and their families. Enlarging the scope of sustainable farming activities, in other words, for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* to adopt, would form the agenda for women farmers for the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.

Careful reading of women farmers' first person narratives would reveal several ideas for action for *Mahila Kisan Samiti* to consider. This agenda equally pertains to twin project elements, namely, women and farming. Ensuring women's wellbeing - primarily, at least for its members - will be the imperative concern of *Mahila Kisan Samiti*. The scope for expanding health related activities, to include health issues affecting women farmers should be considered. *Mahila Kisan Samiti* would ensure that, in course of time, its health activities would reach out to the rest of the women of all age groups - from girl child to destitute elderly - of their village communities.

Mahila Kisan Samiti may like to ensure better education for girls. This means organizing allied activities for adolescent girls and coordinating with existing institutions for its better functioning, and even act as a pressure group whenever needed. Some dilemmas and challenges have emerged with the mainstreaming of Self-Help Groups as a relevant tool to organize rural women. MKSP can learn from these and diversify and develop into a distinct entity. It is critical to listen to women farmers sensitively rather than going to them with simplified preconceived framework of a programme. Such programme merely co-opts women rather than offer scope for organic growth of an activity and a local institution. Quick extensions, at the expense of qualitative dimensions of the healthy field level processes, will give an illusory satisfaction. M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation should continue to engage in regular intensive interactions with women farmers to address such dilemmas and challenges.

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*Director in-charge,
Food Security, MSSRF*