

FINDING THE POWER OF CHILLIES



SMITA KADU (Maharashtra)

Who would have thought that chillies would be the ingredient to a sweeter life? For Smita Kadu, that's just what happened.

A resident of a small village in Talasari, Palghar district of Maharashtra; Smita lives with her husband, mother-in-law, brother-in-law and two children. Their livelihood comes from small-scale farming, and there were years where they had tried planting eggplant and tomato. Their earnings were minimal, however, due to the quality. There was even a time where a kilo of eggplant fetched them just two rupees.

Smita had seen Uddyam staff in action when they came for visits to her area, and slowly got involved.

The Uddyam project, supported by United Nations Development Programme and run by Catalyst Management Services in the Talasari region, focuses on agriculture. It looks at training, agricultural extensions, and agri-marketing. Crop diversification, one of the main aims of the project, introduced chillies, watermelon, and marigolds. These were crops that were affordable, sustainable and replicable in the local environment, while still helping to diversify from a pure paddy focus.

For Smita, it was chillies that have helped carve a new path.

The scope to grow chillies improved with the new techniques that they've learnt in the training. The seedling tray technique in particular has helped her to increase yield. The seeds are planted in trays (approximately 18 trays per packet of seeds). These are kept covered for about a week until the first buds start to show. They are then kept in a green net, which Smita has learned to make at home.

For her, the difference has been noticeable. Unlike the bed technique, where seedlings are of different sizes or don't flower at all, the tray technique sees every seed flower.

For the first year, she simply planted and sold for herself, but this year she has got an order for 10,000 seedlings from other families! They harvest 2-3 times a week and have almost doubled their income.

The nearest markets are 20 kilometres away. Earlier, there used to be people who took vegetables by themselves to the market. Now they take them in groups of 6-7 people, splitting travel costs and saving on money. A lot of people are seeing these advantages.

"Now I don't have to go anywhere for vegetables. It feels like my own business. You can earn on your own, don't have to take anyone else's orders. Even our returns at the market are better."

In fact, chillies have had the best rate in Talasari in all of Maharashtra in the last season. Third party buyers have even been exporting them.

Smita feels that the benefits have gone beyond the financial and has social implications. There is still a culture in her village of telling women to not go here and there; to stay at home. Yet Smita's family has been very supportive. She gives them the credit for being able to pursue this further.

She thinks more women should join the project Uddyam. "Until the time we are able to step out," she says, "we will not get to know things."



"If I hadn't become a Resource Person, I wouldn't even be able to speak anything. Before that, I wouldn't go out of the house much. I was uncomfortable dealing with others. Whatever I am able to communicate today, it is because of the training. Despite my lack of education, I can do so many things now."