

WHERE HOPE TAKES ROOT

Stories of Rights, Resilience and Community
Ownership from Tribals of West Bengal



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The Field That Started Conversations

How one tribal family inspired a quiet shift towards sustainable farming in Purnapani Bara Tung

Tucked deep inside the forests of Purnapani Bara Tung village in Ranibandh Block of Bankura district, farming has never been easy. Situated on the forest fringe, the village depends almost entirely on rainfed agriculture. Frequent droughts, erratic rainfall and declining soil fertility make every cropping season uncertain, leaving most tribal farmers with little choice but to follow conventional farming practices passed down through generations. In such a landscape, changing the way one farms is often a far greater challenge than changing the crop itself.

Among these farmers were Mirjumala Tudu and her husband Dasarath Tudu. Their lives were no different from those of their neighbours. They cultivated vegetables on about 10 decimals of lowland, depended largely on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and followed farming practices that had remained unchanged for years. The land produced crops, but it also reflected the uncertainties of rainfed agriculture. Few could have imagined that this ordinary field would one day become the place where villagers stopped, observed and began asking a simple question: "Can farming be done differently?" The answer did not arrive through a dramatic breakthrough. It began with curiosity.



When the Centre for People's Forestry introduced farmers to organic cultivation, crop diversification and sustainable farming practices under the SPF-supported programme, many villagers attended the discussions with interest. But listening to a new idea and adopting it are two very different things. Mirjumala and Dasarath chose not to reject the unfamiliar. Instead, they listened, observed, asked questions and gradually began experimenting on their own land.

The transition was deliberate rather than hurried. They learnt to prepare bio-pesticides, use vermicompost, cow dung, super compost and Jeevamrit, adopt Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices and understand improved techniques such as the System of Rice Advancement Practices (SARP). Every new practice demanded patience, additional labour and the courage to move away from methods they had trusted for years. Yet with every season, their confidence grew.

As the discussions with CPF continued, the couple realised that the land itself offered greater possibilities than they had imagined. The plot had once supported indigenous paddy under organic conditions and, before that, green gram. Instead of limiting vegetable cultivation to 10 decimals, they decided to reimagine nearly one acre as an organic demonstration plot—not through monocropping, but through a diversified and multi-layered farming system that could make better use of every part of the land.

Ridge gourd became the principal crop, accompanied by two to three varieties of leafy vegetables spread across around 40 decimals. Nearby, pumpkin, coriander, beans, carrot and onion occupied smaller plots, while tomato saplings found space beneath the ridge gourd trellis. Carefully designed trellis systems improved crop management, while every available patch of land was productively utilised. What had once been a conventional vegetable field gradually evolved into a vibrant demonstration of crop diversity, organic soil management and efficient land use.

CASE STORIES

The first signs of success appeared on 25 March, when the family harvested around 15 kilograms of ridge gourd, selling the produce in the local market at 37 per kilogram. Although modest in quantity, the harvest carried far greater significance than the income it generated. With harvesting expected every three to four days, the family could now look forward to a more regular flow of produce and income instead of depending on a single harvest.

Yet the most important transformation was happening beyond the harvest. Neighbours began visiting the field to see the changes for themselves. They observed the healthy crops, the diverse planting pattern, the organic inputs and the careful use of every corner of the land. Conversations replaced scepticism. Questions replaced assumptions. Without formal classrooms or training halls, Mirjumala and Dasarath's farm quietly became a place of learning where sustainable agriculture could be seen, discussed and understood through experience.

The couple never intended to become model farmers. They simply chose to take the first step when others were uncertain. In doing so, they demonstrated that sustainable farming is not achieved through expensive technologies or large landholdings alone. It begins with a willingness to learn, experiment and adapt to changing realities.

Today, their field is producing far more than vegetables. It is producing confidence, curiosity and new ideas that are gradually spreading across the village. In a drought-prone, forest-fringe landscape where farming has long been shaped by uncertainty, Mirjumala and Dasarath have shown that meaningful change does not always arrive with sweeping reforms or major investments. Sometimes, it begins quietly—with one family, one field and one decision to believe that farming can be done differently.



He Didn't Choose Sides, He Chose His Soil

How a young tribal farmer discovered that the future of farming lies between tradition and science.

For years, farmers have been asked to take sides. Either continue with chemical farming. Or abandon it completely for organic agriculture. Somewhere in that debate, many small farmers found themselves trapped between ideals and reality. Ramchandra Hembram never believed farming had to be a choice between the two. At just 28 years old, the young tribal farmer from Murkum Chotatung village in Ranibandh Block has quietly built a different philosophy—one where tradition and science work together instead of competing with each other.

Ram's journey began long before anyone spoke about regenerative agriculture. Like thousands of young tribal farmers, he left school early because his family needed another pair of working hands more than another student in a classroom. Farming became his responsibility, not his ambition. His family's six bighas of land, stretching across laterite and sandy loam soils, provided food and income, but every season demanded higher investments in fertilisers and pesticides while the soil seemed to give back a little less. Quick results came at an increasing cost.

Yet Ram was practical. He never dismissed chemical farming because it helped him survive. Nor did he believe every modern input was harmful. What concerned him was something else. If the soil continued losing its strength, what would remain for the next generation?

When he joined village-based learning sessions on regenerative agriculture facilitated through the Centre for People's Forestry, he found an approach that matched both his experience and his common sense. Nobody asked him to stop using chemical fertilisers overnight. Instead, he learnt how to rebuild soil gradually by combining vermicompost, Jeevamrut, Ghana Jeevamrut, green manuring and crop rotation with carefully measured quantities of chemical fertilisers whenever necessary. The objective was not ideological purity; it was restoring life to the soil while protecting farm productivity.

Ram decided to test the approach in his own fields. In April 2024, he established a vermicompost unit, producing nearly 2.5 to 3 quintals every one to one-and-a-half months. Most of the compost nourished his own fields, while surplus bags were sold to neighbouring farmers for 800 per 50-kilogram bag, creating an additional source of income. Gradually, vermicompost became more than an input—it became the foundation of his farming system.

His experiments continued across every season. Lentil, Bengal gram and mustard shared the same fields through intercropping. Green gram naturally restored nitrogen to the soil before the Kharif season. Vegetables such as tomato, cauliflower and cabbage flourished on irrigated land, while pumpkin proved remarkably resilient during extreme summer heat when sesame yields declined. On one bigha, Ram



experimented with the System of Assured Rice Production (SARP) and harvested about one quintal more paddy than neighbouring conventionally managed fields. Instead of replacing one practice with another, he carefully observed what worked, adjusted his methods and built a farming system suited to his land.

The changes were visible beneath the surface as much as above it. Hard, exhausted soil gradually became softer and easier to cultivate. Earth enriched with vermicompost and green manure began retaining moisture more effectively. Seeds were no longer purchased indiscriminately; Ram preserved green gram, lentil, mustard and paddy seeds, while selecting hybrid or open-pollinated vegetable varieties according to local conditions. Even livestock became an integral part of the system. His eight cows supplied dung for compost production, while twelve goats provided a financial cushion during emergencies. Every component of the farm began supporting another.

Today, Ram sells vegetables throughout the year in local markets including Kendisol, Birkar, Dhojuri and Barikul villages. Buyers often notice that his vegetables appear fresher and greener. Fellow farmers visit not because he has abandoned modern agriculture, but because he has learnt to use it more wisely. Ram's story challenges one of the biggest misconceptions surrounding sustainable agriculture—that farmers must choose between tradition and innovation. His fields suggest something very different.

Real resilience does not emerge from rejecting one system in favour of another. It comes from understanding the land deeply enough to know when tradition offers the best answer, when science provides a better solution and how both can work together to restore the health of the soil. In Murkum Chotatung, regenerative farming is therefore not a return to the past. It is a practical investment in the future—one handful of living soil at a time.



He Left Home to Earn. He Returned to Build

How a migrant worker rediscovered his future in the soil of his own village.

Before sunrise, buses carrying young men would leave villages across Ranibandh Block for distant cities. Among them was Amiya Sardar, a young tribal farmer from Sindriam, who spent nearly fifteen years working on construction sites and in jewellery workshops across India. Like many others from his forest-edge village, he believed that the only way to support his family was to leave his land behind. Agriculture, dependent on uncertain rains and recurring droughts, no longer seemed capable of securing a future.



For Amiya, migration was never a choice—it was a necessity. Unable to complete his secondary education because of financial hardship, he became the sole earning member of a family comprising his elderly parents, a differently abled sister, his wife and a young son. Every year, he spent eight to nine months away from home, returning only during the monsoon to help his father cultivate paddy before leaving once again. His family's 7.5 bighas of land, including Individual Forest Rights (IFR) land, remained only partially cultivated. Paddy, mustard, sesame and a few vegetables grew on limited patches, while much of the land lay fallow during the Rabi and pre-Kharif seasons due to water scarcity, limited technical knowledge and lack of confidence to explore new farming practices.

Then came 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic brought Amiya back to Sindriam. Like millions of migrant workers across the country, he returned home uncertain about what lay ahead. But what began as an enforced return gradually became an opportunity to rethink his future. Standing once again on the land he had left behind for years, he made a decision that would change the course of his life. Instead of boarding another bus to the city after the lockdown, he decided to stay back and see whether farming could become a reliable livelihood.

Around the same time, the Centre for People's Forestry started promoting sustainable agriculture in the village through the Tribal Farmer Service Centre (TFSC). Initially, many farmers—including Amiya—were sceptical. Generations of chemical farming had shaped their understanding of agriculture, and natural farming seemed uncertain. However, the enthusiasm of senior farmers, especially Amiya's uncle Dhrubapada Sardar, who helped establish the TFSC, encouraged him to attend CPF's training sessions, village meetings and field demonstrations. Slowly, hesitation gave way to curiosity. Curiosity soon turned into conviction.

With technical guidance from CPF, Amiya gradually transformed his farming practices. Chemical fertilisers gave way to Jeevamrut, Ghanjeevamrut, vermicompost and cow dung compost, while homemade bio-pesticides such as Neemastram and Agniastram replaced expensive chemical pesticides. He adopted the System of Assured Rice Production (SARP) for paddy cultivation, diversified his cropping system by introducing red gram and maize during Kharif, followed by mustard, lentil, Bengal gram and wheat during the Rabi season. Before Kharif, he cultivated green gram, which naturally improved soil fertility by fixing nitrogen. The results were visible. According to Amiya, the introduction of green gram alone helped reduce chemical fertiliser use by nearly 40 per cent in the following season. Today, he practices regenerative mixed farming in paddy and vegetables while relying entirely on bio-inputs for pulses and oilseeds.

Yet Amiya understood that improving agriculture required more than changing farming techniques. It also required solving the village's biggest challenge—water. Although a check dam existed nearby, its damaged lock gate meant that precious rainwater could not be stored during critical cultivation periods. Rather than accepting the problem as inevitable, Amiya mobilised fellow villagers to restore local water resources. With facilitation from CPF and a 30 per cent community contribution, a nearby pond was desilted, enabling irrigation across nearly 70 bighas of farmland. The restored water source not only strengthened Amiya's own farming but also encouraged many other families to cultivate vegetables and cash crops during the dry season.



His learning journey continued beyond the village. During an exposure visit organised at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Amiya learnt about Azolla, a fast-growing aquatic plant that serves as an effective natural fertiliser for paddy. Inspired by the experience, he introduced Azolla cultivation in his own fields and established a mobile vermicompost unit, reducing cultivation costs while steadily improving soil health. Every new practice strengthened his belief that farming could become both environmentally sustainable and economically rewarding.

Today, Amiya is no longer recognised as a migrant worker. He is recognised as a farmer, a learner and an inspiration. Young people in Sindriam who once believed migration was their only option now visit his fields to understand crop diversification, regenerative farming and organic inputs. Elder and younger farmers, who once worked separately, increasingly exchange ideas through the TFSC, creating a shared commitment to sustainable agriculture.

Reflecting on his journey, Amiya says: "CPF showed us a different path. We learnt, we practised and realised that agriculture can become a strong livelihood if we continue these good practices. Wherever we go, we eventually return to our own village. The greatest gift we can leave for the next generation is healthy soil and a self-reliant community."

Amiya's journey is about much more than returning to farming. Across rural India, migration is often seen as the only pathway to economic security. His experience offers a different perspective. With knowledge,



community institutions, restored natural resources and sustained handholding, villages can become places where young people choose to stay rather than leave.

Today, Amiya is building far more than crops. He is helping rebuild confidence in farming, restore the relationship between people and their land, and inspire a new generation to believe that the future does not always lie beyond the village—it can take root in the very soil they once left behind.

When an Island Learns to Speak Collectively: Voices, Rights, and Resilience from Sandeshkhali II



A Field Reflection from Sandeshkhali II, North 24 Parganas

The boat ride to Sandeshkhali II on 31 December 2025 felt familiar, yet different. Familiar because Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) has been walking with these islands for the last three years. Different because this visit was not about introducing a programme or explaining an intervention. It was about listening—listening to what has changed, what remains unresolved, and what the community now wants for itself.

At Paschim Joygopalpur, one of the villages where CPF has been working since 2023 on Rights to Entitlements, the interaction unfolded through a meeting with the 'Paschim Joygopalpur Akshay Smriti Gram Samanvay Samity' (VCG). The purpose was simple: to hear back from the community, to understand how interventions were landing on the ground, and to sense the direction in which people themselves wished to move.

What became immediately visible was presence. Out of 36 registered VCG members, 32 were present on the day—30 women and 2 men. In a block marked by heavy male out-migration, this was not a routine statistic. It was a quiet indicator of something deeper: collective interest, trust in the platform, and a sense that participation mattered.

The meeting did not follow a scripted agenda. It moved organically—from entitlements to water, from livelihoods to kitchen gardens, from everyday hardship to future aspirations. And in those transitions, the real story of Sandeshkhali II emerged.

When Entitlements Become Collective Work

Discussions around rights and entitlements revealed how far the VCGs have travelled—from hesitant intermediaries to confident community facilitators. Members spoke fluently about Aadhaar cards, voter IDs, PAN cards, Lakshmir Bhandar, Kanyashree, Krishak Bandhu, and even demands for road repair. These were not recited as scheme names but discussed as processes—applications filed, follow-ups done, offices visited, and responses tracked.

A question was raised during the discussion: when the state already operates Bangla Sahayata Kendras (BSK), why does the VCG matter?

Ashalata, a 54-year-old member, responded without hesitation: "When people go alone to BSK, there is no follow-up. In most cases, nothing moves. When we go together as a group, officials take us seriously. We keep following up until the work is done." Her statement captured the essence of CPF's engagement over

the years—not replacing state systems, but enabling communities to negotiate with them collectively. While reviewing the VCG’s entitlement tracking records, members themselves pointed out that many applications remain pending. A suggestion emerged from the discussion: adding a ‘Remarks’ column to document reasons for delay. It was a small administrative idea, but it reflected strategic thinking—an understanding that better tracking leads to better action.

When Follow-up Alone Is Not Enough: A Call for Dialogue

As discussions around entitlements deepened, a shared concern surfaced with unusual clarity. Despite sustained efforts by the VCGs, a significant number of applications remain pending, often without clear communication or response from the block administration. The frustration was not directed at the system itself, but at the absence of dialogue.

In response, VCG members articulated a collective idea—one that marked a shift from follow-up to engagement. They expressed a strong interest in organising a large, joint interface where members from all twelve VCGs across Sandeshkhali I and II Blocks would come together on a single platform. Their vision was to invite block-level officials from relevant departments, including ADOs, FEOs, the BDO, and Joint BDOs, and create space for direct exchange.

What made this proposal significant was its intent. VCG members did not speak of protests or petitions. Instead, they spoke of presentations, shared reflections, and mutual listening. They wanted to place their lived realities, pending cases, and ground-level challenges before officials—not as complaints, but as documented experiences—and hear directly from the administration on pathways forward.

One member pointed out a telling gap in awareness: “Many people still don’t know that if a farmer dies between the age of 22 and 60, the family is entitled to 2 lakh compensation. Information like this doesn’t reach villages properly.”

For the VCG members, such an interface was not only about accelerating approvals. It was about information symmetry—ensuring that communities are aware of their rights, and officials are informed about the realities of implementation.

They felt that if CPF were to facilitate such a platform, it would serve both sides: villagers would gain clarity and confidence, while block officials would better understand CPF’s work, the status of entitlements, and the structural bottlenecks faced at the last mile. More importantly, it would reaffirm a principle CPF has quietly strengthened over the years—that governance works best not through distance, but through conversation.



The Water That Shapes Everyday Life

As the conversation deepened, one issue surfaced repeatedly, cutting across age and occupation: drinking water. Members spoke of summer months when deep tube-wells stop functioning as groundwater levels fall. A recently installed government solar-powered water pump exists, but its reach is limited. For most households, the solution is neither public nor affordable.

They buy water. A 20-litre can costs 20, supplied by a few businessmen who own deep bore wells, filter the water, and sell it within the village. For many families, this is not a choice but a compulsion. One member summed it up quietly: “Our income has not increased. But our monthly expenses have. There are no savings left.”

This lived reality aligns closely with documented research. A 2022 water survey in the Korakati–Tushkhali area of Sandeshkhali II found that “water at shallow depths is salty and therefore unfit for human consumption.” Ponds, too, are saline, leaving deep tube-wells as the primary source—yet even these often “go dry during the summer.” Experts studying the Sundarbans have consistently warned that salinity intrusion has turned safe drinking water into an acute and persistent crisis across the region. For the community, however, this is not an academic concern. It is a recurring monthly expense, a daily anxiety, and an invisible tax on poverty.

Women Holding the Island Together

As discussions continued, a pattern became impossible to ignore. Of the women present, 27 out of 30 were effectively heading their households. Husbands and sons work outside the block—as construction workers, daily labourers, or informal workers—mostly in South Indian states, but also in Kolkata and Delhi. Around 80–90 households in the village are now female-led, not by choice but by circumstance.

CPF field report from Sandeshkhali notes that “the majority of men are employed as migrant workers,” while women manage households and supplement incomes through fishing or prawn seed collection. Other studies describe this as distress migration, driven by chronic underdevelopment, climate vulnerability, and shrinking local livelihoods.

The impact of this migration became especially visible after Cyclone Amphan (2020) and Cyclone Yaas (2021), when many migrant workers returned home unemployed, only to face flooded homes, damaged livelihoods, and—once again—scarcity of clean drinking water.

In this context, the role women play in sustaining households, accessing entitlements, managing water, and maintaining food security becomes not just important, but foundational.



Kitchen Gardens: Small Plots, Large Shifts

Introduced in 2025, CPF's Kitchen Garden initiative appeared repeatedly in conversations—not limited to a project activity, but as a daily practice. Household visits revealed carefully tended patches of beans, brinjal, spinach, tomatoes, and other vegetables. Women spoke of reduced dependence on market purchases, better food for children, and modest but meaningful savings. Jaba, a 42-year-old VCG member, explained: "After keeping enough for our families, we sell the extra. Sometimes wholesalers come directly to our homes."

What made the initiative stand out, however, was what happened beyond the distributed seeds. Several women had independently begun growing garlic, turmeric, and ginger at plastic pots, using kitchen waste as compost. Vegetable peels had become fertiliser; waste had turned into input. This was no longer just about nutrition or income. It was about ownership. The shift—from receiving support to adapting, expanding, and sustaining it—marked the difference between output and outcome. The kitchen gardens had become spaces of experimentation, confidence, and self-reliance.

When Communities Begin to Plan Their Own Futures

As the meeting moved towards closure, the VCG members raised a proposal—not a demand, not a complaint, but an idea. They wanted to explore setting up a paper plate and paper glass manufacturing unit. The reasoning was practical. Local demand is high. Products currently come from outside the block. Raw materials are accessible. What they need is training, initial support, and collective organisation.

What stood out was not the proposal itself, but the manner in which it was presented. The discussion was confident, animated, and grounded in local realities. This was not dependency speaking—it was aspiration shaped by experience. In many ways, this moment captured the most significant impact of CPF's engagement: a community that now sees itself as capable of identifying opportunities and shaping its own economic pathways.

What the Visit Ultimately Revealed

The visit to Sandeshkhali II was not about measuring activities completed. It was about observing a transition.

- From individual struggle to collective negotiation
- From scheme awareness to entitlement facilitation
- From food insecurity to household-level resilience
- From silence around hardship to articulation of future plans

The challenges remain stark—drinking water scarcity, migration, rising costs, climate vulnerability. But alongside them exists something equally real: community confidence, inquisitiveness, and readiness to lead.

For CPF, this visit reaffirmed the value of long-term, trust-based engagement. For the community, it was another step in claiming voice, space, and direction—on an island that has long been spoken about, but is now increasingly speaking for itself.



In a Village of Poles and Water, Women Hold the Balance

A field story from Sandeshkhali I



When Kolkata stepped into the new year of 2026 with one of its coldest January days in the last fifteen years; recording a minimum temperature of 10.2 degrees Celsius—the Sundarbans experienced winter in its own way. Here, the temperature drops a little further, close to 8 degrees, not because of altitude but because the land is broken into islands, wrapped by rivers on all sides. Winter mornings arrive with dense fog and biting cold; summers bring extreme moisture and cyclones; the monsoon floods everything that can be flooded. Life in the Sundarbans is shaped by constant exposure to nature's extremes. People do not romanticise this hardship—they have simply adapted, because adaptation is the only way to survive. Against this backdrop, the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) West Bengal team scheduled a visit on 9 January 2026 to Boyarmari village in Sandeshkhali I Block, to meet the members of the 'Boyarmari Polpara Ujjwal Village Coordination Group'. The meeting was fixed for 9:00 a.m., a time when fog still hangs low and cold slows down movement. There was an unspoken concern within the team—how many members would actually turn up on such a morning?

That concern dissolved the moment the team arrived. All thirteen members of the VCG were already present. They were waiting. And every one of them was a woman.

The first few minutes said more than any formal introduction could. Sundari Mahato, the President of the VCG, had come despite losing her aunt earlier that very morning. Pratima Mahato, the cashier, had left rice boiling on the stove at home; by the time she returned later, it had burned, a fact she narrated with a smile rather than regret. Sarbani Mahato, at 62 years of age, had finished cooking before dawn and arrived at the meeting only to insist that the CPF team must come to her house for lunch.

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These were not isolated gestures. Together, they reflected dedication, ownership, and a quiet sense of responsibility that CPF's work in Sandeshkhali has been nurturing over the last three years. For the team, this first impression alone provided enough reason to believe that meaningful change is possible here—even in a landscape that rarely makes things easy.

Boyarmari village has around 275 households, with an estimated population of 1,500. The entire village is encircled by canals. From the point where one enters the village from the Basanti Highway to its far end, the view remains largely unchanged—fish farms on both sides, stretches of water, open land, and sky. On a phone screen or a canvas, the landscape looks calm, even beautiful. On the ground, it tells a different story.



Agriculture, once the backbone of this area, is no longer viable. Basanti Mahato, a middle-aged VCG member, explained it without bitterness: “Thirty years ago, these lands were agricultural. We grew rice and pulses. Now the water has turned saline. Rice doesn’t grow anymore. Still, in government records, this land is agricultural.”

Fish farming has replaced cultivation—not as an economic upgrade, but as the only available option. When people speak of struggle in development contexts, they often refer to poverty, education, health, or employment. Boyarmari Polpara has all of these challenges. But it also has something more immediate, more physical. Here, everyday life depends on balance.

The village is crisscrossed by canals, and many of them are bridged not by concrete or steel, but by one or two bamboo poles placed temporarily across the water. Villagers walk over these poles daily, maintaining balance with practiced ease. This is how the village earned its name—Polpara, the place of poles.

Kalyani Mahato, around 60 years old, spoke about this matter-of-factly. Her life, however, carries layers of loss that are anything but ordinary. She lost her husband Gopal Mahato to cancer after 32 years of marriage. Before she could come to terms with that, her eldest daughter Sudha died of blood cancer. At the time, Kalyani did not even know the word leukemia. Treatment was beyond reach—financially and informationally.

Today, Kalyani lives with her 25-year-old son, who works as a plumber in Kolkata, and her 15-year-old daughter Tithir, a student of Class X. Kalyani herself plays a vital role in the VCG, helping others secure their entitlements. When she was asked what she needed for herself, she did not talk about pensions or income. She said she wanted support for her daughter’s higher education.



Tithir, standing nearby, lowered her head. The gesture said more than words could. Kalyani owns three bighas of land, where she practices fish farming on her own. Tithir supports her mother whenever possible. From this, Kalyani earns roughly 20,000 in a year. The family receives 9 kg of rice and 6 kg of wheat per month through the public distribution system. To supplement this, Kalyani does hand stitching work. She earns 100 for a piece of stitching that takes seven days to complete—roughly 14 a day. The vendor supplies the raw materials and collects the finished product. When Usha Mahato, another VCG member, brought out Kalyani's stitched work and showed it to the CPF team, the quality was striking. The payment, in comparison, was disturbing.



Kalyani's story is not an exception. Most women in the village live similar lives. Their husbands or sons work outside the state because there are no dignified livelihood options left at home.

As the discussion continued, Sarbani Mahato suddenly interrupted, gently but firmly: "Chharun to dada ei sab katha. Amra ekhon ei gram e onek kichu kaj korechi." ("Let's leave all this talk, brother. We have done a lot of work in this village now.") What followed was not a defensive reaction—it was pride.

One by one, the women spoke about the changes they had collectively achieved. Through the VCG, villagers have secured Lakshmir Bhandar, food security entitlements, caste certificates, Aadhaar cards, Swasthya Sathi health cards, old-age pensions, and widow pensions. At the community level, the changes were visible and tangible: four street lights installed, 2.5 kilometres of road concretised, and a submersible pump with filtration installed for drinking water.

These achievements were not narrated as victories over the state, but as outcomes of persistent, collective engagement. When asked about plans for the coming year, the response was equally grounded. The VCG members decided that every VCG in Sandeshkhali I would prepare detailed lists of pending individual and community-level entitlements, specifying numbers, categories, and locations—for example, how many elderly people are excluded from old-age pensions, or exactly which stretch of road needs concretisation and from where to where.

These consolidated demands will be placed before officials during the upcoming block-level annual interface meeting, proposed to be held at the Block Meeting Hall, with the presence of block-level officials and the local MLA, subject to confirmation from the BDO.





As the meeting drew to a close, it became difficult to end the conversation. Stories, laughter, concern, and warmth kept flowing. But daily life was waiting. Some women returned to fish farms. Others went home to cook for their families. Walking along the embankment, arms swinging, led by Nilima Mahato, the Vice President of the VCG, the women began singing a Tusu song—“Rajrani Tusumoni, Adibasir Janai.” The CPF team was invited to the upcoming Tusu festival, not as guests, but as their own. In that invitation lay the quiet success of CPF’s journey in Sandeshkhali. Not in numbers alone, but in belonging. Not in delivery, but in ownership. In a place where people cross bamboo poles every day, balance has become a way of life—and collective strength, a learned skill.



Rights to own. Rights to stand. Rights to move forward—together.

A House That Cannot Hold the Rain And a Mother Who Still Holds a Dream

In a fragile shelter in Sandeshkhali, where rain enters as freely as uncertainty, a differently abled couple survives on a mother's relentless effort—and her quiet belief that her son's education will one day become their only secure home.



It began with a presence that was difficult to ignore.

During a meeting with members of a Village Coordination Group (VCG) in a school in Sandeshkhali-I Block, a man in his mid-thirties was seen moving restlessly around the edges of the gathering. He did not enter. He did not interrupt. But he kept returning—peeking in, stepping away, and coming back again.

There was something urgent in his movement. Something unfinished. When the meeting ended and people began to disperse, he stepped forward and blocked the path—not aggressively, but with a kind of helpless insistence, as if words alone would not be enough. Before anything could be understood, one of the VCG members quietly explained: “This is Nilkamal Mahato, from Mathbari, Majherpara.” What followed did not begin with a conversation. Nilkamal simply held a hand and started walking.

The road to his home was not really a road. It was a narrow, broken stretch of mud, uneven and slippery, carved more by necessity than by design. Yet this is what the villagers use every day. There is no alternative. As the walk continued, a VCG member pointed toward a dried fish farm nearby. A young boy was playing there with two other children. “That is their son,” someone said. The distance was hardly ten minutes. But it felt longer—not because of the walk, but because of what waited at the end.

What stood there was not a house. It was a shelter. A dim, fragile structure barely holding itself together. Part of it had once been built under the Indira Awas Yojana, with an allocation of 30,000. That portion still stood, though weakened, with an ageing asbestos roof. The rest of the structure was improvised—walls made of bamboo strips, covered with plastic sheets that struggled to resist wind and rain.

Inside, it was dark. Not the comforting darkness of shade—but the kind that comes from absence. No proper ventilation. No door to close. No boundary between inside and outside. It was then clear what Nilkamal had been trying to say without saying anything. He was not asking. He was showing. Standing in the courtyard, Nilkamal raised his voice and called out to his wife. “Shyamali!” A woman emerged slowly from inside.

Shyamali Mahato, around 38 years old, walked with visible difficulty. She lives with polio, a permanent physical disability. Nilkamal himself is also living with a neurological condition that limits his ability to work. And in this fragile household, there is almost no stable source of income.

Nilkamal does not have any regular livelihood. The family survives primarily on Shyamali's 1500 monthly support under Lakshmir Bhandar, along with the uncertain and meagre earnings she manages through hand

stitching—work she does tirelessly, often day and night. That income is not just for survival. It carries a purpose. It carries a dream. To educate their son. Because somewhere between the leaking roof and the dark interior of that shelter, Shyamali holds on to a belief—that one day, her son's education will become the strongest shelter their life has ever known.

The VCG members shared that efforts are already underway to secure a disability certificate for Shyamali, a necessary step toward accessing entitlements. The process has begun—but like most processes here, it takes time. But time is not what their house can withstand. Nilkamal began to speak, his words tumbling over each other. He pointed toward the roof, the walls, the floor. During the monsoon, he explained, rainwater flows straight into the house. There is nothing to stop it. No proper roof, no sealed walls, no door to shut against the storm. “This is how we live,” he seemed to say, even when words fell short. Shyamali stood beside him, mostly silent. Her eyes spoke differently—not of complaint, but of a quiet, contained desire. She wants a better shelter. Not comfort. Not luxury. Just something that can hold against rain.

Livelihood here is not built—it is managed, somehow, every day. The nearby school provides food through the mid-day meal system, which often becomes their regular lunch. Beyond that, survival depends on whatever little Shyamali can earn through her stitching work. And still, even within this struggle, education remains non-negotiable for her.

At one point, Shyamali suddenly went inside and returned with something carefully held in her hand. Their Aadhaar cards. She did not say why. She did not need to. It was an act driven by hope—the belief that if someone has come this far, perhaps something might change.

As the visit came to an end, Nilkamal folded his hands. His voice was soft, but the weight behind it was not. “Sir, ghorta ektu thik kore din na... khub upokar hoy.” Sir, please help us repair the house. It would mean everything to us.

In the deltaic stretches of the Sundarbans, people are often imagined as living under the fear of tigers. But here, the real fear is different. It is the fear of a collapsing roof in the rain. Of water entering the only place you call home. Of not knowing how long the structure will hold.

Nilkamal and Shyamali did not ask for much. Only a house that can stand. Only a door that can close. Only a roof that can protect. As the team walked back along the same broken path, the couple stood there—watching, waiting. Not with expectation. But with hope. And sometimes, in places like Sandeshkhali, hope is the only shelter people have left.



Kalyani Mahato: A Mother Who Asks for Nothing Except a Future for Her Daughter



Kalyani Mahato lives in Boyarmari village of Sandeshkhali I Block, North 24 Parnaganas, deep inside the Sundarbans region of West Bengal—a place where land is broken by canals, livelihoods are fragile, and survival depends on quiet resilience rather than opportunity. Kalyani is 60 years old. Her life has been shaped by loss, but also by responsibility—both for her family and for her community.

She was married for 32 years. Her husband, Gopal Mahato, died of cancer. Before the family could recover from that shock, tragedy returned. Her eldest daughter Sudha died of blood cancer. At that time, Kalyani did not even know the word leukemia. Treatment required money she did not have, and information she never received.



Today, Kalyani's family consists of three people. Her 25-year-old son works as a plumber in Kolkata, sending whatever little he can back home. Her 15-year-old daughter, Tithir, studies in Class X. Tithir is quiet, observant, and carries her dreams silently.

Kalyani herself is an active member of the Boyarmari Polpara Ujjwal Village Coordination Group (VCG), a women-led collective supported by the Centre for

People's Forestry (CPF). Through the VCG, Kalyani works tirelessly to help villagers access their rights and entitlements—ration cards, pensions, health insurance, Aadhaar cards, and other government services.

Ironically, while helping others secure their rights, Kalyani's own widow pension has been stopped for an unforeseen reason.



She has visited the Gram Panchayat and the Block office several times. She has submitted petitions. She has followed every instruction given to her. The pension has not resumed.

When asked about it, Kalyani does not express anger. She speaks softly, almost apologetically. And then she changes the subject—to talk about pending pension cases of other widows in the village. What worries her is not what she has lost. What worries her is what her community still lacks. To survive, Kalyani does fish farming on her own three bighas of land. It is physically demanding work. Tithir helps her after school—feeding fish, cleaning ponds, carrying loads. From an entire year of fish farming, Kalyani earns around 20,000. The family receives 9 kg of rice and 6 kg of wheat per month through the public distribution system. It is not enough. So, Kalyani stitches clothes by hand. One piece takes seven days to complete. For that, she is paid 100—about 14 per day. A vendor provides the raw materials and collects the finished work. The patience, skill, and labour she puts into each stitch are worth far more than the price she is paid.

During a community discussion, when Kalyani was asked what she needed right now, she did not speak about her stopped pension, her income, or her hardship. She said only one thing: “I want support for my daughter’s higher education.” From the corner of the room, Tithir lowered her head. That small movement carried a lifetime of fear and hope—the fear of dreams ending too soon, and the hope that maybe they don’t have to. Kalyani is not asking for charity. She is asking for a chance. A chance for her daughter to study further. A chance for Tithir to choose a future beyond survival. A chance for one generation to step out of the cycle her mother was forced to live in. Because dreams like Tithir’s should not end where hardship begins.



“Will You Teach Women?” A Question from a Tribal Courtyard That Speaks for Many

A young Santal woman’s simple question in a drought-prone village of Bankura reveals how empowerment begins—not with speeches, but when rural women realise that knowledge, skills, and opportunity belong to them too.

“Meyeder ki sekhabe?” The question stopped the conversation for a moment. Will you teach women? It came from 25-year-old Lakshmimani Tudu, who was sitting in the mud courtyard of her home in Lithra village of Ranibandh Block in Bankura district, finishing a simple late-morning meal of rice soaked overnight in water.

In 2026, when the world often speaks of living in a global village, where information travels instantly and mobile networks reach even remote landscapes, a young tribal woman still wondered whether training in livestock care would include women at all.

The moment unfolded on 9 March, a day after International Women’s Day. A short distance away, in neighbouring Lithra village, work was underway to desilt a community pond, an activity being implemented by the Centre for People’s Forestry (CPF) as part of its ongoing livelihood support in the area. Barely a hundred metres away from that worksite, the small courtyard where Lakshmimani sat quietly opened a window into a larger story.



Lakshmimani Tudu, 25, sits on the earthen veranda of her home in Lithra village of Ranibandh Gram Pachayat, Bankura, with a metal bowl of soaked rice—her simple morning meal before returning to daily work.

She was finishing her meal—boiled rice soaked overnight in water, a common breakfast in this drought-prone part of Bankura. The rice had been prepared the previous night for the family. That morning her mother, Malati Tudu, had cooked a simple cabbage curry from vegetables grown in their small patch of land. When asked casually whether their goats had recently been vaccinated, Lakshmimani nodded. Yes, they had. But when asked who had vaccinated them, she smiled lightly. “Seta ami jani na. Kono ekta sanstha theke esechilo.” “I’m not sure. Some organisation came.” Then she pointed down the narrow village path. “Oi to amar maa esechi. O sab jane.” “My mother is coming. She knows everything.” Within minutes Malati Tudu arrived from the fields, followed by other family members returning from their morning agricultural work.

When asked about the support they had received recently, Malati paused for a moment, trying to recall. Before she could answer, Lakshmimani began listing them quickly. Seeds of gourd, cabbage, radish, and leafy vegetables. Ducklings for rearing. Vaccination and deworming support for goats. She remembered every detail clearly. Perhaps because she had studied up to Class Ten, and because she had taken a keen interest in the small but meaningful changes taking place around her household. Her two brothers continue their education—one studying in Class Ten, the other in Class Twelve. Malati then added quietly that the quality of vegetable seeds had been very good, producing enough vegetables for the family’s daily consumption. For households in regions where agriculture depends on uncertain rainfall and incomes are limited, that simple outcome carries real significance.

The conversation soon returned to the moment that had sparked it all. When Lakshmimani was asked whether she would like to learn how to vaccinate and deworm livestock herself, she paused and asked again: “Meyeder ki sekhabe?” The question reflected a belief that still exists in many rural communities—that technical skills, even in activities largely managed by women, are meant for men.

The answer came immediately: yes, women will be trained too. Not just one woman, but many. Right there in the courtyard, it was decided that Lakshmimani would be invited to attend the upcoming Tribal Farmers Service Centre (TFSC) meeting scheduled for 13 March 2026, where basic training on livestock management would be introduced.



Malati Tudu holds a recently vaccinated baby goat in the courtyard of their home where livestock support and training initiatives are strengthening rural livelihoods.

As the conversation continued, Lakshmimani became more relaxed and spoke more freely. At one point she mentioned something almost casually. “Amar bon to prem kore biye kore niyeche.” “My younger sister married someone she loved.” The statement carried a quiet hesitation. In many tribal communities here, love marriages are still viewed with suspicion and often disapproved of. Malati Tudu, sitting beside her daughter and gently holding a baby goat recently vaccinated under CPF’s livestock support programme, fell silent for a moment. The small courtyard seemed to hold two realities at once—tradition and change, hesitation and possibility.

Scenes like this unfold regularly across the forest-fringe villages of Ranibandh Block, one of the most drought-prone parts of Bankura district. For the past three years, CPF has been working in these villages under the Adivasi Livelihood Programme supported by the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation (formerly OAK Foundation). The initiative focuses on strengthening livelihoods through crop diversification, vegetable and pulse cultivation, livestock management, duck rearing, and training in water-efficient agricultural practices suited to drought-affected landscapes. CPF also supports communities through awareness on the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and facilitates access to government rights and entitlements through regular meetings of Village Coordination Groups (VCGs) and Tribal Farmers Service Centres (TFSCs).

Across programme records and baseline surveys, nearly 60 percent of participants are women—a deliberate effort to empower tribal mothers and daughters and to contribute toward the broader goal of gender equality under SDG-5. Because in villages like Lithra, women already carry much of rural life on their shoulders. They manage households, livestock, fields, and the education of children. What they often lack is not responsibility, but opportunity. That is why the moment in Lakshmimani’s courtyard mattered.

Across the world, 8 March is celebrated as International Women’s Day, and CPF too observed the day through programmes involving tribal women across its working villages. But empowerment cannot be limited to a single day on the calendar. In the forest-fringe villages of Bankura, it unfolds quietly—through regular field visits, training sessions, village meetings, and everyday conversations that encourage women to see themselves not only as workers, but as decision-makers.

Across these villages there are countless Lakshmimanis—young tribal women ready to learn, ready to lead, yet often waiting for someone to tell them that the space is theirs. Holding their hands, guiding them forward, and standing beside them— that work does not happen on one day. For CPF, it continues all 365 days of the year.



Children play in the courtyard of a mud house in Lithra village, Ranibandh Block—reminding that empowering today’s tribal women will shape the lives of the next generation.

When A Village Refused To Drink Fear

In the world's largest democracy, access to safe drinking water should never become a test of human endurance.

Yet, for nearly two years, a small tribal community in the river islands of North 24 Parganas struggled for this basic right—until CPF helped transform collective action into lasting change.

CPF, West Bengal

Water surrounds Joygopalpur Amtali Hatkhola Para, a small tribal hamlet under Manipur Gram Panchayat in Sandeshkhali-II Block of North 24 Parganas. Rivers, canals and tidal creeks encircle the village, yet none of this water is safe to drink. Salinity and arsenic contamination left nearly 55 tribal households searching every day for a single bucket of safe drinking water. Living on an island surrounded by water, yet unable to drink it, became one of the village's harshest realities.

For years, the community depended on only two public tube wells. Both repeatedly broke down and, by the summer of 2024, had stopped functioning completely. Women walked longer distances carrying heavy buckets, children accompanied them before school and elderly villagers waited for neighbours to bring water home. With no public source left, every household was forced to depend on a privately owned agricultural submersible pump that had no filtration, no regular water quality testing and no assurance that the water was safe. Yet there was no alternative.

"We knew the water was unsafe. We knew about arsenic. But what choice did we have? Children cannot survive without water," recalls Chandana Sardar.

The villagers did what responsible citizens are expected to do. Applications were submitted, meetings were held and government offices were visited repeatedly. Weeks turned into months and months into years. Apart from a temporary emergency supply of about 20 litres of drinking water per household, three days a week, little changed. The community had almost begun to accept that unsafe water was simply their fate.

Instead of giving up, the village chose another path. With support from the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF), the Village Coordination Group (VCG) evolved into a platform for collective leadership. CPF did not arrive with drilling machines or pipelines. It began by strengthening community awareness, helping villagers understand that access to safe drinking water was not a favour but a right. Village meetings became spaces where people learnt about government responsibilities, prepared petitions, documented every follow-up and collectively approached the Panchayat and later the Block Development Officer. Women, who carried the daily burden of fetching water, emerged as strong leaders of this process, while the entire community stood together in demanding a lasting solution.





The struggle continued for nearly two years before the breakthrough finally came. The administration approved the proposal and installed a submersible-based filtered drinking water system, built at a cost of 3,48,842.

Today, clean drinking water flows where fear once did. Children no longer begin their mornings drinking water their parents quietly feared. Women no longer depend on an irrigation pump never meant for human consumption. But perhaps the greatest transformation cannot be measured in litres of water alone.

The Village Coordination Group became far more than a village committee. It became proof that informed and organised communities can engage constructively with public institutions and secure their rights. Villagers who had once believed that submitting an application was the end of their responsibility discovered the importance of persistence, collective representation and continuous follow-up. As VCG member Nirmal Sardar reflects: "Earlier we believed that once an application was submitted, our responsibility ended there. Through the Village Coordination Group we learnt that government offices also need communities that continue asking, following up and standing together."

The story of Joygopalpur Amtali Hatkhola Para is therefore about much more than restoring a drinking water source. It is about restoring people's faith in the strength of collective action. CPF's contribution was not merely facilitating a water infrastructure project; it was helping a vulnerable tribal community organise itself, understand its rights and confidently engage with public systems until those rights became reality.

Today, every bucket of clean drinking water drawn from this system reminds the village that sustainable development begins long before the first brick is laid. It begins when communities discover that they are not powerless. The real legacy of this journey is not only the water system standing in the village today—it is the confidence that collective action, supported by informed facilitation, can transform basic rights into lasting change.



When Rights Finally Reached Manisha

How CPF helped a tribal family turn a long-denied entitlement into hope for the future.

CPF, West Bengal

There are no signboards leading to Purnapani Chhota Tung, a remote Santhal tribal settlement in Ranibandh Block of Bankura district, West Bengal. Here, forests sustain families when crops fail, hospitals are hours away and government offices feel even farther. Poverty is not merely about low income—it is the daily struggle to survive.

For 35-year-old Manju Tantubai, every day begins before sunrise. She cooks, fetches water, tends goats, hens and a small kitchen garden before turning to the responsibility that defines her life—caring for her five-year-old daughter, Manisha, who lives with cerebral palsy. Since infancy, Manisha has been unable to walk or stand without support. Doctors told the family that while therapy could improve her condition, there was no cure. From that day, Manju's life became centred on carrying, feeding and caring for her daughter.

The family's struggles deepened when Manju's husband, Madhusudan, a migrant construction worker, was diagnosed with a serious liver disease. Medical expenses forced the family to sell their two cows and mortgage their small piece of land. Today, their mud house, a few goats, hens, a tiny kitchen garden and the surrounding forest remain their only means of survival.

Yet poverty was only one challenge. Although Manisha was eligible for government disability benefits, the family had never managed to obtain a disability certificate. In remote villages, information about government schemes rarely reaches those who need it most. Even when families know about their rights, repeated visits to hospitals and government offices demand time, money and documentation that many simply cannot afford.



Everything began to change during a community awareness programme organised by the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF). It was there that Manju first learnt that a disability certificate could open the door to disability pension, healthcare support and educational assistance for her daughter. More importantly, CPF helped her understand that these were not favours—they were rights.

Determined not to lose another opportunity, Manju travelled to the disability certification camp at Khatra Sub-

divisional Hospital, carrying her daughter while accompanying her seriously ill husband. After waiting for hours among hundreds of applicants, the camp closed before her turn arrived. Many families returned home disappointed. Manju refused to. She waited, requested and persisted—not because she sought charity, but because she was claiming a right already guaranteed to her daughter.

Recognising the family's circumstances, CPF field staff coordinated with the concerned authorities, facilitated a preliminary medical assessment, ensured referral to a child specialist and persistently followed up with the health system. Their efforts resulted in Manisha being officially assessed and certified with 70 per cent permanent disability. A month later, the disability certificate reached the family's home.

Nothing miraculous happened that day. Manisha did not suddenly begin to walk. Madhusudan's illness did not disappear. The mortgaged land was not returned. Poverty did not leave the family. But something fundamental changed. For the first time, the State formally recognised Manisha's disability and her right to support. The certificate opened access to disability pension, healthcare assistance and educational benefits—entitlements that had always existed but had remained beyond the family's reach. Today, Manisha can sit independently for short periods, and doctors remain hopeful that regular therapy will continue to improve her condition. For Manju, that hope means everything.

Manju's story is not simply about a mother's determination. Mothers across the country make extraordinary sacrifices for their children every day. The difference here was that CPF became the bridge between a vulnerable tribal family and the public systems created to support them. By raising awareness, facilitating access, coordinating with institutions and ensuring persistent follow-up, CPF helped transform a constitutional entitlement into a lived reality.

This story is therefore not just about one disability certificate. It is about restoring dignity through access to rights. It reminds us that meaningful development is not only about creating new schemes, but about ensuring that the most vulnerable citizens can reach the systems already designed for them.

When we look at Manju Tantubai, we see more than a mother carrying her daughter. We see a family that refused to surrender to exclusion, and a reminder that the true measure of a democracy lies not in the number of welfare programmes it announces, but in whether its most vulnerable citizens can access them with dignity. Sometimes, all it takes to change a family's future is ensuring that rights finally reach the people to whom they have always belonged.



Sandeshkhali: Where Facts Bleed, And Data Only Confirms The Abandonment

An on-ground editorial reflection from the margins of North 24 Parganas



There is a convenient fiction we tell ourselves—that remoteness excuses failure. That distance dilutes responsibility. That difficult geography justifies weak governance. Sandeshkhali shatters that fiction.

A visit across Sandeshkhali I and II blocks reveals not scattered gaps, but a layered collapse of access, services, and accountability. What is seen on the ground aligns, almost point by point, with what national surveys, government records, and research institutions have already indicated. This is not perception. This is convergence between lived experience and documented evidence.

HEALTHCARE: WHERE DELAY IS OFTEN DEATH

A teenage boy lay bleeding, his foot deeply cut, two toes hanging. The nearest sub-health centre—locked. The time—around 10:30 in the morning. With no doctor, no nurse, and no alternative, his family carried him to a local medicine shop. Under torchlight, without medical expertise, the shopkeeper stitched his wound.

This is not an isolated case. Villagers repeatedly stated that **sub-health centres open barely two days a week**, and even then, doctors are irregular. More critically, villagers shared something far more disturbing:

- Women frequently suffer miscarriages due to lack of timely care
- Patients with heart disease or severe illness die before reaching hospitals
- Emergency cases are often handled locally without trained personnel



This ground reality is not anecdotal exaggeration. It aligns with findings from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) and assessments by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which highlight:

- Gaps in rural healthcare access in remote regions
- Delayed maternal care leading to adverse outcomes

- Transportation barriers as a major contributor to mortality risk

District-level health infrastructure reviews in North 24 Parganas have also pointed to shortages of medical personnel and inconsistent service delivery in hard-to-reach blocks. What Sandeshkhali exposes is simple: Healthcare does not fail here dramatically. It fails silently, repeatedly, and often fatally.

DISTANCE AND TRANSPORT: A SYSTEM DESIGNED TO EXCLUDE

On paper, Kolkata is about 70 kilometres away. In reality, it is a journey of endurance. From villages like Joygopalpur:

- 45 minutes on severely damaged roads by risky motor vans

- Ferry crossing from Tushkhali to Dhamakhali

- 3+ additional hours by public transport

Villagers emphasized that there is no structured public transport system, only informal, unsafe options. During monsoon, mobility nearly collapses. This directly affects access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods.



This lived experience is strongly supported by findings under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and reports from the Ministry of Rural Development, which acknowledge:

- Connectivity deficits in riverine and deltaic regions
- Long travel times despite short distances
- Limited last-mile transport infrastructure

Studies by the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) further highlight how Sundarbans regions remain structurally isolated due to terrain and policy gaps. In Sandeshkhali, distance is not geography. It is a structural barrier created and sustained over time.

LIVELIHOOD: WHEN SURVIVAL BECOMES THE ONLY ECONOMY



Door-to-door interactions reveal a pattern that is as consistent as it is concerning.

Most households survive on:

- Rice—often soaked overnight or freshly boiled
- One seasonal vegetable, sourced from kitchen gardens or the cheapest local markets

This is not an exception. This is routine.

Agricultural viability is severely constrained:

- In Sandeshkhali I, saline soil makes cultivation nearly impossible
- In Sandeshkhali II, paddy cultivation continues, but largely managed by women

Men, as widely observed, migrate out as labourers, leaving behind a feminised rural economy. Fish farming—another key livelihood—is plagued by disease outbreaks, with farmers lacking access to scientific inputs or technical support.

Villagers also reported loss of trust in MGNREGA, citing delayed or irregular payments despite DBT provisions.

These realities are strongly aligned with findings from the World Bank and UNDP, which identify the Sundarbans as:

- Economically fragile
- Highly climate-vulnerable
- Dependent on migration and low-income activities

This is not just poverty. This is a structurally constrained economy with no clear exit path.

WOMEN: HOLDING STRUCTURES THAT NO LONGER HOLD THEM

With men migrating, women have become the default managers of crisis. They farm. They cook. They care. They negotiate with systems that are often absent or indifferent. Community platforms like Village Coordination Groups have enabled some access to entitlements, with women forming the overwhelming majority of members.

But let us be precise. This is not empowerment driven by policy success. This is empowerment extracted from structural failure. Women are not leading because doors opened. They are leading because no one else remained.



CHILD MARRIAGE: ACKNOWLEDGED, YET UNCHECKED

During field interactions, a recurring figure emerged: In villages with around 100 households, nearly 50% of adolescent girls are married early. This is not speculation. During an official meeting facilitated at the

field level, the Block Development Officer (BDO) himself acknowledged this pattern, further supported by local health data.

This aligns with the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), which shows West Bengal among the states with high prevalence of child marriage, particularly in rural districts.

The drivers are visible:

- Poverty
- School access challenges due to transport



- Migration of male earners
- Social acceptance

But when both data and administration confirm the problem, its persistence points not to ignorance—but to weak enforcement and inadequate intervention.

HOUSING: LIVING IN PERMANENT VULNERABILITY

Field observation across multiple villages indicates:

- 90–95% households live in kachha houses
- Only a small fraction have benefited from housing schemes

In a region exposed to cyclones and flooding, these structures offer minimal protection. Data from the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) and state-level reports confirm coverage gaps in remote regions, while climate vulnerability studies in the Sundarbans highlight



repeated housing damage and asset loss. Here, housing is not security. It is a recurring risk cycle.

THE LAYER BEYOND DATA: FEAR, VIOLENCE, AND SILENCE

While official statistics remain limited, multiple reports from outlets like The Indian Express and NDTV have documented unrest and allegations of violence in Sandeshkhali.

Field conversations reflect similar patterns:

- Reports of intimidation
- Accounts of houses being burnt
- Allegations of violence against women
- References to suicides and murders linked to local tensions

Not every account is documented. But the repetition of narratives across villages indicates a deeper issue. Fear here is not always visible. But it is deeply embedded in everyday life.

THE FINAL TRUTH: THIS IS NOT A DATA DEFICIT—IT IS A DELIVERY DEFICIT

By every measurable indicator—health, infrastructure, livelihood, social outcomes—Sandeshkhali reflects what national and state-level data already warns about.

The difference is stark:

Here, all failures converge in one geography.

- Healthcare exists—but does not function
- Roads exist—but do not connect
- Schemes exist—but do not fully reach
- Data exists—but does not translate into change

THE QUESTION THAT REMAINS

If a boy bleeds without care, if women lose pregnancies for lack of access, if patients die before reaching treatment, if girls are married before adulthood, if families survive on the bare minimum and if all of this is both seen on the ground and supported by data, then the question is no longer about awareness. The question is: What explains the persistence of failure, despite knowing everything?

Sandeshkhali is not invisible. It is documented, observed, and repeatedly reported. And yet, it remains unchanged. Which makes this not a story of neglect alone— but a story of normalised neglect.



When A Broken Bridge Broke An Entire Village

How collective action restored more than a culvert—it restored a community's right to connect.

For nearly a year, the people of Ranirashmani, a small agrarian village under Jaygopalpur Gram Panchayat in Sandeshkhali-II Block, measured every journey in kilometres they should never have had to travel. The village's only culvert had collapsed. What looked like a broken concrete structure to outsiders quickly became a daily struggle for nearly 500 villagers. Children began missing school because the safer route no longer existed. Farmers found it difficult to transport vegetables and paddy to nearby markets. Reaching the Primary Health Centre became uncertain, while the nearest government hospital—already 44 kilometres away—felt even farther during medical emergencies. A journey that once took minutes suddenly demanded an additional five kilometres, increasing both travel time and transportation costs.

The collapse exposed a simple truth. In rural India, a road or a culvert is never just a piece of infrastructure. It is the pathway to education, healthcare, livelihoods and dignity. For months, the people of Ranirashmani waited. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, but the damaged culvert remained untouched. Like many rural communities, they could have accepted the situation as another hardship of village life.



Instead, they decided to organise. Members of the Village Coordination Group (VCG) began discussing the problem during their regular meetings. Rather than waiting for someone else to take the initiative, they documented the impact the broken culvert was having on every section of the village—from school-going children and farmers to elderly people and patients requiring urgent medical care. With facilitation and guidance from the Centre for People's Forestry, the VCG prepared a formal petition and submitted it to both the Gram Panchayat and the Block Development Office, ensuring that the community's demand was backed by evidence and collective voices rather than individual complaints. The effort did not produce instant results. It required follow-up, persistence and continuous engagement with local authorities. The VCG members repeatedly visited government offices, tracked the progress of the proposal and ensured that the issue remained visible in official discussions. Their determination reflected a growing understanding that rights and entitlements are realised not simply because schemes exist, but because informed communities actively claim them. Their persistence paid off. In November 2024, the government sanctioned Rs.3,00,203 for reconstructing the culvert. Construction began in January 2025 and was completed the following month. What had remained a symbol of neglect for nearly a year was transformed into a lifeline once again.

Today, the restored culvert carries much more than people. It carries children on their way to school. Farmers transporting their harvest. Workers travelling in search of livelihoods. Patients reaching healthcare without unnecessary delay. Every day, more than 500 villagers cross the rebuilt structure, often without thinking about the months when its absence shaped almost every aspect of their lives. School attendance has improved, agricultural activities have resumed without additional transport costs and emergency healthcare has become more accessible.

For CPF, the story of Ranirashmani is not about constructing a culvert. It is about strengthening the confidence of a community to engage with public institutions, articulate its needs and collectively secure its rights. The rebuilt structure stands as visible evidence that development becomes sustainable when communities themselves become active participants rather than passive beneficiaries.

Sometimes, the strongest bridge is not the one built with cement and steel. It is the bridge built between people, collective action and a responsive system. That is the bridge the people of Ranirashmani rebuilt together.

When Water Stays, Everything Else Grows

How reviving one village pond became the foundation for climate resilience, sustainable farming and community prosperity..



Every farming season in Bagdubi, a tribal village under Barikul Gram Panchayat in Ranibandh Block, began with the same uncertainty. Would the rains last long enough? For generations, the answer to that question determined almost everything. It decided whether families would cultivate only one crop or several. Whether vegetables would grow after the monsoon. Whether cattle would have water during summer. Whether trees around the village would survive another dry season. And whether young villagers would stay or leave in search of work. Here, water was never just another natural resource. It was the difference between possibility and limitation.

Ironically, the village already had a pond. Years ago, the community had excavated it with great effort. But as seasons passed, rainwater carried silt into the reservoir until it gradually lost its depth and storage capacity. What had once served as the village's lifeline slowly became an abandoned water body, unable to retain sufficient rainwater when it was needed most. Agriculture once again became confined almost entirely to the monsoon months, leaving nearly 30 bighas of farmland without dependable irrigation during the rest of the year.

For the Centre for People's Forestry, working to promote agroecology, crop diversification and climate-resilient livelihoods in the region, the message was clear. Improved farming practices alone would not be enough. Before changing agriculture, the village needed to secure water.

Rather than proposing an entirely new structure, the team encouraged the community to revive what they already possessed. Through discussions with villagers and technical assessment, the neglected pond emerged as the most practical solution—not only for irrigation but also for strengthening the ecological foundation of the village itself. What followed was not merely an engineering activity. It became a collective investment in the village's future.

The community agreed to contribute 15 per cent of the total renovation cost, demonstrating that the pond belonged to them as much as the project. Excavation began on 10 January and continued for nine days. By the time the work was completed, the pond had been restored to a size of 210 feet in length, 115 feet in width and 6.5 feet in depth, with nearly 156,975 cubic feet of accumulated silt removed.

The impact of the restored pond reaches far beyond its banks. For the first time in years, farmers can look beyond a single rainfed crop. Reliable water storage is opening opportunities for multi-cropping, crop diversification and vegetable cultivation beyond the monsoon, strengthening the very agroecological practices that CPF has been promoting across the area. Around 20 tribal households are expected to benefit directly, while irrigation becomes available for nearly 30 bighas of agricultural land.



The pond is also changing the village's relationship with its surrounding landscape. Stored rainwater helps recharge groundwater, maintains soil moisture for longer periods and creates a more favourable microclimate for vegetation. Trees on the forest fringe, kitchen gardens and community plantations all stand to benefit from improved water availability. In a region increasingly affected by erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells, every drop stored during the monsoon becomes an investment in climate resilience. While the renovated pond also creates opportunities for fishery, supports domestic water needs and improves household food security, its greatest contribution may be invisible—it helps the village hold on to water long after the rains have ended.

The story of Bagdubi challenges a common assumption in rural development—that progress always requires building something new. Sometimes, the most sustainable solution lies in restoring what communities already have. A neglected pond became productive again. Rainwater became a year-round resource instead of seasonal runoff. Agriculture gained the possibility of extending beyond one crop. And a village strengthened its ability to face an uncertain climate with greater confidence.

The success of Bagdubi is therefore not measured simply by the amount of earth excavated or the dimensions of a renovated pond. It is measured by what the water now makes possible. Because in villages like Bagdubi, when water stays, livelihoods stay. Forests stay greener. Farming becomes more resilient. And hope, quite literally, takes root.



At the Last Mile of Development: Water, Rights, and Dignity in Banksole



At first glance, Banksole looks like any other forest-fringe village of western West Bengal — quiet, distant, and forgotten between sal forests and elephant corridors. Located in Binpur-II Block of Jhargram district, the village stands at the edge of both wilderness and vulnerability.

Out of 54 households, 41 belong to the Santal community, 10 to the Mahato community, and 3 to Karmakar families. Livelihood here is fragile and seasonal. A single paddy crop during monsoon sustains most households. Rabi cultivation is rare; only a few manage small patches of vegetables or pulses. For the majority, survival depends on non-timber forest produce, daily wage labour, and small-scale animal husbandry.

Struggle here is not dramatic. It is routine.

If one observes Banksole from above, the poverty is visible — mud houses, scattered firewood, hand-to-mouth living. It invites sympathy. But walking through the village reveals something deeper: resilience quietly stitched into daily life.

And then there is Bijoy Rani. Around 82 years old, a Santal widow, mother of seven — two daughters (one no more) and five sons (one deceased). Her husband passed away long ago. She lives in a modest mud house built under Indira Awas Yojana. A toilet was sanctioned under the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin), but it was never functional. Like many in rural India, she continues open defecation — not merely by compulsion, but habit reinforced by infrastructure failure.

Yet the image that remains etched in memory is not of deprivation.

It is of Bijoy Rani washing her cooking utensils beside a tap — pipeline water flowing steadily into her aluminium pots. When asked how she feels about the water connection, she smiled and said in her soft voice: “Subidhato hoyechei baba. Agey durer pukure jete hoto. Ar grishmer samay jakhon jol thakto na, takhon oi durer patkuo bharosa chilo.” (It has truly become convenient, son. Earlier we had to walk to the distant pond. And during summer, when that dried up, we depended on a faraway well.)

This is not merely convenience. This is dignity. Earlier, fetching water meant physical strain, time loss, and vulnerability — especially for elderly women. In tribal belts across India, women spend hours daily collecting water. National rural data consistently show that lack of household tap connections disproportionately burdens women and elderly members. Time that could go into rest, care, or supplementary livelihoods disappears into survival logistics.

Today, Banksole's 54 households receive piped water supplied from a local pumping station constructed by the Public Health Engineering Department, Government of West Bengal. A young tribal couple shared that water is supplied twice daily — morning and forenoon. Predictable access. Assured supply. A rhythm of reliability in an otherwise uncertain rural economy.

When I was about to leave the village, Bijoy had finished washing utensils. She sat on a bamboo cot in the courtyard. The setting sun fell gently across her face. There was something unmistakable — a quiet glow. Not of prosperity. Not of transformation in the dramatic sense. But of relief.

She looked lighter. It made me ask myself — what is the true meaning of “Jal-Jeevan”? Is it just infrastructure statistics? Is it a scheme number? Or is it this moment — when an 82-year-old tribal widow no longer has to walk to a distant pond under the summer sun?

Banksole still faces elephant movement risks. Livelihood insecurity persists. Agriculture remains rain-dependent. Toilets need functionality, not just construction. The community is also struggling to secure formal recognition of their forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 — a long-pending aspiration that directly impacts their access to land, forest produce, and livelihood security. Development, therefore, cannot be reduced to a single intervention.

But sometimes, progress arrives not as a revolution — it arrives as a tap that flows. And in that flowing water, there is health. There is time saved. There is reduced drudgery. There is dignity restored.

Because when Bijoy Rani smiles beside her tap, that is not just water reaching a household. That is the State reaching the last mile. And that, perhaps, is development in its truest sense.



You Call It Fresh; He Had to Change Everything to Grow It

In a forest-fringe village of Bankura, where farming once depended on chemicals and a single crop, a young tribal farmer's shift to organic, multi-layer cultivation is quietly transforming not just his field—but how an entire village thinks about food.



These days, many people from cities look for something simple. A quiet weekend. A village stay. Fresh air. And food that tastes real. A tribal village, surrounded by greenery, far from traffic and noise, has become a kind of dream escape. People travel miles just to sit in a mud courtyard, eat freshly cooked vegetables, and feel close to nature—even if only for a day.

But what if the vegetables on that plate are not as “natural” as they seem? What if the green fields we admire are quietly dependent on chemicals? This was the reality in Bagdubi village of Barikul Gram Panchayat, Ranibandh Block, Bankura district—a forest-fringe tribal village where farming was once limited, predictable, and largely dependent on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. For years, most farmers here followed a single pattern—paddy cultivation. The land rested unused beyond one season. The idea of multi layered cropping was almost absent. And the soil, slowly, was losing more than it was giving. It was not ignorance. It was simply the only way they knew.

Then came a slow shift. Not overnight. Not through instructions. But through conversations, demonstrations, and trust. The Centre for People’s Forestry (CPF), West Bengal began working in the village—introducing farmers to new possibilities. From mono-cropping to crop diversification. From chemical inputs to organic alternatives. From dependency to understanding. Meetings were held. Trainings were conducted. Field visits were organised. Farmers were introduced to bio-fertilizers, vermicompost, organic pesticides, improved tools, and water-efficient techniques. At first, like most places, there was hesitation. But change, in villages, does not begin with many. It begins with one.

That one was Shantalal Kisku. A 31-year-old tribal farmer, Shantalal did not stand out earlier. Like others, he too practiced conventional farming, relying on chemical inputs and seasonal crops. But something shifted when he began attending CPF’s training sessions. He listened. He questioned. And slowly, he experimented. For nearly two years, he tried small changes—learning, failing, adjusting. Until one day, he made a decision that many around him were not ready for. He decided to go fully organic.

On his 20 decimals of land, Shantalal began a different kind of farming. He chose ridge gourd as his main crop, but he did not stop there. Instead of leaving the land partially unused, he introduced 2–3 varieties of

leafy vegetables as companion crops. The land that once produced a single crop now became multi-layered, productive, and alive. He adopted trellis methods for better yield. Used leafy vegetables to naturally control weeds. Used vermicompost provided by CPF team, cow dung mixtures, and super compost instead of chemical fertilizers. And applied Jeevamrit and Agniasttra, learned through training, as natural pest control solutions. To manage pests, he installed sticky traps for whiteflies and aphids and pheromone traps for fruit flies, following eco-friendly Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. It was not just farming anymore. It was understanding the land.



The seeds were sown in the last week of December 2025. By mid-March 2026, Shantalal harvested his first crop. Around 15 kilograms of ridge gourd. He sold it in the local market at Rs.60 per kg, earning Rs. 900. It may not sound like a large amount. But the real story was not the number. It was the timing. At that moment, ridge gourd was not widely available in the market. He entered early. He earned better. And more importantly, he proved something—to himself and to others. That change works.

Today, Shantalal expects to harvest every 3–4 days, ensuring a steady flow of income. He also maintains a daily record book—not just to calculate profit, but to understand his own journey. For him, this is not only about income. It is about control, awareness, and confidence. His land has changed. But more importantly—his mindset has changed.

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There is a line by Saint Ramprasad, often quoted in Bengal: “Mon re, krishi kaj jano na, Emon manob jomin roilo potit, Abad korle folto sona.” (O mind, you do not know farming. This human land lies fallow— If cultivated, it would yield gold.) In Bagdubi, something similar has happened. CPF did not just help cultivate land. It helped cultivate thought. And Shantalal did both— he nurtured his 20 decimals of land, and he nurtured his belief in change.

Today, his field is not just producing vegetables. It is producing confidence. Other farmers in the village have started watching. Some have begun asking questions. A few are ready to try. Because in villages, transformation does not arrive loudly. It spreads quietly—from one field to another.

So, the next time someone from the city sits in a village courtyard and enjoys a plate of fresh vegetables, there is a story behind that taste. A story of soil. Of learning. Of courage. And sometimes— of a farmer like Shantalal Kisku, who decided that his land could do more, and proved that it could.



Growing Hope: How a Young Farmer's Faith in Nature Led to a Journey of Transformation

For many young graduates, success often means leaving their villages in search of opportunities in cities. But for Kiran Tudu, a 32-year-old tribal youth from Baratung Purnapani village, success meant something entirely different. After completing his graduation, Kiran made a conscious decision to return to his roots and embrace farming as his profession. He believed that no urban lifestyle could offer the peace, purpose, and fulfilment that he found in working with nature.



Like generations before him, Kiran's livelihood depended on agriculture and livestock rearing. His family practiced conventional chemical-based farming, a system that had become the norm despite increasing production costs and declining soil health. When the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) began working in the village, Kiran emerged as one of the few farmers willing to explore a different path. He embraced the idea of agro-ecological farming and started integrating leguminous crops into his fields to naturally improve soil fertility. His willingness to experiment made him the first farmer in the village to adopt regenerative practices for cucumber cultivation on two bighas of land. The results not only strengthened his confidence but also inspired several neighbouring farmers to follow his example.

While Kiran readily adopted improved practices for vegetables and pulse cultivation, one crop remained untouched—paddy. Like many experienced farmers, he was hesitant to change traditional methods for the crop that secured his family's food and income. Despite repeated discussions and demonstrations by the CPF team on the System of Assured Rice Production (SARP), he remained unconvinced. Everything changed when he visited the paddy field of Mrs. Mirjumala Tudu, another farmer from the village who had adopted the SARP method. Seeing the healthier crop stand and improved productivity with his own eyes challenged years of hesitation. It was not a presentation or training that convinced him, it was the evidence growing in the field of a fellow farmer.

Encouraged by what he witnessed, Kiran decided to test the SARP method on just one bigha of his own land during the following cultivation season. The decision marked a turning point in his farming journey.

When the harvest was complete, the results spoke louder than words. From that single bigha, Kiran harvested an additional 70-80 kg of paddy compared to his conventionally managed fields. More importantly, he gained confidence that sustainable farming practices could improve productivity without compromising the health of his soil.

What began as a small experiment soon transformed into a firm conviction. Today, Kiran has decided to adopt the SARP method across his entire 10 bighas of paddy land, reflecting not only his confidence in the practice but also his hope for a more sustainable and prosperous future.



Kiran's journey is more than the story of one farmer adopting a new technique. It is the story of patience, trust, and the power of learning through experience. It reminds us that meaningful change in agriculture does not happen overnight, it grows gradually, nurtured by evidence, perseverance, and the courage to take the first step.

This Water is Ours Now

A silent borewell start speaking. Left unused for three years, an irrigation system now transforms fields and futures in Purnadih through a rare coming together of community, government, and grassroots facilitation.



he first thing you notice in Purnadih is not the land. It is the waiting. Waiting in the fields that lie dry after the monsoon. Waiting in the courtyards where mahua flowers are spread under the sun. Waiting in conversations that pause not because they end—but because there is nothing urgent to rush to. For years, this has been the rhythm of life in this forest-fringe village of Ranibandh Block, Bankura, West Bengal—a place where agriculture depends on one season, and survival depends on patience.

On a harsh afternoon of 4th April 2026, the village looked exactly as it always had in summer. The temperature had climbed close to 39 degrees, but the heat felt heavier, sticking to the skin. The air carried the sweet, fermented smell of mahua flowers, freshly collected and spread across roadsides and courtyards. Women moved back and forth with buckets—collecting, drying, storing—because this short season brings one of the few assured incomes.

In one courtyard, Sulochana Mandi, just 23, sat quietly, rolling sal leaves into plates, her fingers moving with practiced ease. The leaves were laid out in neat rows under direct sunlight to dry—another small but essential livelihood practice that continues even today. When asked later to speak, she would hesitate, smile, and remain silent—but her work had already said enough.

Across the village, the patterns were familiar. Mahua drying. Sal leaves stacked. And in some households, even now, sal seeds exchanged for salt and soda—a quiet reminder that not everything has changed with time.

Agriculture, meanwhile, was absent. Because without water, there is nothing to begin. A little distance away, two young men sat under a jackfruit tree, talking without urgency. No tools in hand. No fieldwork in sight. That too is part of the story. When farming depends on a single season, the rest of the year stretches long.

It was around this time that members of the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) team walked towards a small structure near the fields. No one was called. Still, people followed. Across the agricultural land—not through any road. Dry soil under their feet. Cracked earth that had not seen water in months. Among them was six-year-old Baisakhi Mandi, barefoot, quietly trailing behind. No one had asked her to come. She came because something was happening.

The structure ahead was small—but different. A brick-built pump house, standing firm in a village where



most homes are still made of mud. The door was locked. Joydev Mandi, 35, a TFSC member, stepped forward and opened it. Guiram Mandi, 42, moved to the switch. There was a moment of stillness. Then the motor started. Watch the moment water flowed for the first time https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mh9uKdurkQQO3odK7tFgRkhhPGSCNLDr/view?usp=drive_link

Water burst out. Fast. Sudden. Continuous. It hit the dry ground and began to spread, as if the land itself had been waiting for this exact moment. Nobody spoke. Because everyone understood what this meant.

For Baisakhi, it was a first. Water flowing like this, in this season, in her own village—something she had never seen before. She stood still, watching.

For Jhangal Mandi, 65, it was something else entirely. He owns two acres of land—land that has always been there, but never fully used. Year after year, he cultivated only during the monsoon. Paddy. Once. The rest of the time, the land stayed silent. That day, standing beside the flowing water, he did not talk about the past. He spoke about what he would do next. For the first time, he was planning pre-kharif cultivation. A dream that had lived quietly in him for decades had finally found a way out.

The story of that water did not begin that afternoon. It began three years ago. A deep borewell had already been installed by Chendapathar LAMPS (Satnala). The intention was clear—to provide irrigation, to allow farming beyond the monsoon. But the system remained incomplete.

There was no submersible pump. No electric connection. No way to use it. And so, it stayed there—unused. A structure with potential. But no life. The turning point came during a TFSC meeting, when the issue was first raised by Project Coordinator Shreaysi Sen Gupta. A visit followed. What was seen was simple—and frustrating. Everything was there. Except the final step. If completed, the borewell could irrigate 35–40 bighas of land, directly benefiting 15 tribal households. That meant more than agriculture. That meant stability. Income. Possibility.

What followed was not a top-down solution. It became something deeper. A Tri-Engagement model— where Government, NGO, and Community came together, not just in planning, but in responsibility.

A TFSC resolution was passed. But it was more than paperwork. It defined ownership. The community decided: They would build the pump house. They would arrange electricity. They would contribute money. CPF would support with the pump and facilitation.

Within months, the village acted. Nearly 25,000 was collected and invested by the 15 beneficiary households to construct the pump house. Not mud. Brick, cement, sand. A semi-pucca structure. In a village where many still live in mud houses. When asked why they chose bricks instead of mud, Joydev Mandi replied instantly: “Eta amader benche thakar jaiga. Eta ke bhalo rakhte parle sab hobe.” (This is our source of survival. If we can

protect this, everything else will follow.)

Electricity required another effort. After repeated communication with departments and WBSEDCL, a 3-phase commercial connection was secured. The cost— 8,500—was paid by Guiram Mandi alone. A man from a BPL household. Living in a mud house. Investing not for comfort—but for continuity. When his wife Bimala Mandi was asked about it, she lowered her head slightly and said: “Hyan, amra ekhon theke sabji chas korbo, aloo chas korbo.” (Yes, now we will grow vegetables, we will grow potatoes.)

On 24th March 2026, the 3hp pump was finally installed. After three years, the borewell became functional. The village celebrated. Not with announcements. But with sweets—shared hand to hand. One feeding another. Smiling. Because something unfinished had finally become theirs. For many, that day felt like a New Year.

As the conversation continued that April afternoon, more people gathered. Baddinath Mandi, 60, came after leaving work on his house. Sulochana, still standing with her sal leaf work waiting back in her courtyard, listened quietly. Sombhari Mandi, once frustrated by the absence of irrigation, now spoke of growing pulses and sesame—using seeds already provided. Beside her, Shibani, a Class VI student, listened closely. Learning. Perhaps imagining something different.

Over the last four (4) years, across 25 villages of Ranibandh, Barikul, and Rautora, CPF’s work—supported by the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation (SPF)—has slowly shifted realities. From single crop to multiple crops. From chemical dependence to bio practices. From waiting to planning. From silence to participation. The shift is now visible not just in fields, but in people.

What is unfolding in Purnadih is not only about irrigation.

Similar patterns are being recognised in tribal regions across India. A recent analysis by Down To Earth notes that community-led, ecologically rooted systems—where people collectively manage natural resources—offer a more sustainable and resilient pathway to development than purely top-down approaches. Comparable examples have been observed in Savara tribal villages of Seethampeta in Andhra Pradesh.

In many ways, Purnadih reflects that reality—not as a model designed on paper, but as one shaped through lived experience, shared responsibility, and local ownership.

As the sun began to soften, the water continued to flow. Across fields that once waited. Across land that once remained unused. Across a village that had learned to depend only on the rain. Now, something else had begun. And for a barefoot child like Baisakhi, this sight may no longer remain a surprise in the years to come. Because development is not when something is delivered. It is when people begin to believe— “This is ours.”



When a Small Garden Becomes a Strong Shield: Malati Singh's Story from Sandeshkhali

In Sandeshkhali, on the deltaic edge of the Sundarbans, nothing grows easily—not crops, not incomes, not certainty. Here, land is fragile and water is saline. Villages are cut off from the mainland, dependent on boats for even the most basic movement of people and goods. Cyclones are not rare events but recurring disruptions. Vegetables and essential food items cost more here than on the mainland, simply because transporting them is expensive and uncertain. Livelihood options are limited, and for many families, survival depends on migration.



In this geography, women quietly carry the weight of daily life. When men migrate to distant states for work, it is women who manage households, care for children, ensure food and nutrition, navigate health and hygiene challenges, and keep small patches of cultivable land alive—if cultivation is possible at all. It is within this context that Malati Singh's kitchen garden matters. Malati Singh lives in Joygopalpur village, under Manipur Gram Panchayat of Sandeshkhali-II Block, in North 24 Parganas district. Her para—Joygopalpur Akshay Smriti Primary School Para—is home to just 76 households, spread across agricultural land in a region where farming has become increasingly uncertain. The village population is largely from Scheduled Tribe (43%) and Scheduled Caste (40%) communities, with very limited economic resilience.

Malati's husband, Subrata Singh, works as a migrated daily wage labourer, travelling to Kerala and Andhra Pradesh for nearly 7–8 months every year. Migration is not a choice here; it is a compulsion. During these long absences, Malati runs the household alone, looks after their 9-year-old daughter, who studies in Class IV at Akshay Smriti Primary School, and manages whatever agriculture is possible on their small homestead land.

Like many women in Sandeshkhali, Malati was used to adjusting—cutting portions, postponing purchases, and accepting nutritional compromises, especially when market prices rose or cash was short. The idea of a kitchen garden, at first, seemed modest. But in Sandeshkhali, modest interventions can have disproportionate impact.

Through the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF), West Bengal, Malati received vegetable seeds as part of CPF's first-time trial of promoting kitchen gardens in the region. The initiative was not limited to seed distribution alone. Through regular meetings with Village Coordination Group (VCG) members, CPF discussed the concept, demonstrated methods of cultivation suited to saline-prone and small homestead land, and shared practical guidance on maintaining gardens throughout the year.

Malati, an active member of the VCG, listened closely—and then acted. She began cultivating tomato, spinach, brinjal, and red kohlrabi in her homestead. As the plants grew and yields came in, something changed. The vegetables were fresh, available at her doorstep, and no longer dependent on boat schedules or market prices.

Encouraged by the results—and driven by her own interest—Malati expanded the garden beyond what CPF had initially supported. She added cabbage, cauliflower, chilli, and additional varieties of kohlrabi, experimenting carefully, learning from experience, and adapting practices to local conditions.

The garden soon became a reliable source of daily nutrition for her family. More importantly, it reduced their dependence on the market during months when cash was scarce. In Sandeshkhali, where vegetables are often priced higher than on the mainland, this alone made a meaningful difference.

What came next was equally significant. After meeting her household's needs, Malati began selling surplus vegetables at nearby local markets—Korakati Bazaar, Amtali Market, and Manipur 3 No. Bazaar. The income was modest, but steady. It helped her manage day-to-day expenses during the months when her husband was away, reducing financial stress and uncertainty.

This was not charity. It was control. The kitchen garden strengthened Malati's self-reliance, enhanced her confidence, and expanded her role in household decision-making. Nutrition improved. Small but regular income flowed in. The household became more resilient to shocks—price hikes, delayed remittances, or transport disruptions.

Malati Singh's story is not an exception. Across Sandeshkhali I and II Blocks, many women have begun to follow a similar path—adding more vegetable varieties than those initially provided, experimenting with crops, sharing learning within VCG meetings, and treating kitchen gardens not as a temporary activity but as a core household strategy.

This collective response signals something important. In a region where livelihoods are fragile, where land and water pose constant challenges, and where women shoulder disproportionate responsibility, the kitchen garden is not a “small component.” It is a nutrition intervention, a livelihood buffer, and a poverty alleviation mechanism, all rolled into one.

For CPF, the success of this initiative reinforces a larger lesson: when women are trusted with knowledge, supported through collective platforms like VCGs, and given context-appropriate resources, change follows—quietly, sustainably, and at scale.

Malati Singh's garden may occupy only a small patch of land. But in Sandeshkhali, it stands as a shield—against hunger, against price shocks, and against the uncertainty that migration leaves behind.

And she is not alone. There are many Malati Singhs across the islands of the Sundarbans—women whose gardens are slowly reshaping what resilience looks like, one household at a time.



When Humanity Slips Quietly: Choto Sabar's Story from the Forest Fringe of Bankura



here was a time when progress was measured by how well we held each other's hands. Today, it is often measured by how fast we move ahead—sometimes leaving those hands behind. Across cities, stories of ageing parents being placed in old-age homes by their educated, affluent children have become disturbingly common. What was once considered a breakdown of urban values is now quietly seeping into rural India as well—travelling at the speed of mobile networks, aspirations, and altered priorities.

This story comes from rural West Bengal, from a place far removed from glass buildings and gated societies, yet painfully close to the same erosion of human bonds. This is not a story from a city. It comes from a forest village where electricity arrived late, but indifference arrived early.

During a field visit to Ranibandh Block of Bankura district under the programme 'Support Tribal and Other Vulnerable Communities to Improve their Livelihoods and Social Security', supported by the Swiss Philanthropic Foundation (SPF), the West Bengal team of CPF encountered a woman whose life mirrors a larger social truth—one that is unfolding silently in villages too.

Ghoradoba village, under Barikul Gram Panchayat, Purnapani Chototung Mouza, lies nearly 90 kilometres from the district headquarters. Forests surround the settlement, and the population is predominantly tribal, including members of the Sabar community—among the most marginalised groups in the region.

It was here, during a village-level meeting organised by CPF, that the team met an 85-year-old woman who introduced herself simply as "Choto Sabar." A moment later, she corrected herself: "Choto Patra." Both names, she explained, belonged to her.

Before marriage, she was Choto Sabar. At sixteen, after a love marriage with Shaktipada Patra, she became Choto Patra. By law and custom, her husband's surname replaced her own. Yet today, she wonders aloud whether reclaiming her old identity might bring her dignity back.

Choto never went to school. Her dreams were modest—far removed from wealth or status. She wanted a small home, a husband, and her only son. For years, she worked alongside her family, farming and grazing goats—activities often labelled "alternative livelihoods" by policy language, but which are, in reality, the backbone of survival for tribal communities.

Twenty years ago, her husband died of multi-organ failure caused by prolonged alcohol consumption. After his death, Choto's world narrowed rapidly. Her son, influenced by changing social norms and personal aspirations, gradually withdrew from responsibility. What followed was not a dramatic abandonment—but a slow, suffocating exclusion.

When Choto could no longer farm or graze goats due to age, her usefulness in the household ended.

She was pushed out of her own kacha house, built more than 35 years ago. Her ration card, voter ID, and Aadhaar—documents that connected her to the state and ensured her survival—were taken away. She was left to live under a fragile tent made of four bamboo poles, covered with torn polythene sheets, already eaten away by termites.

Her story reflected a rural version of the old-age home—without walls, without care, without acknowledgement. CPF did not record Choto's name merely as a beneficiary. The team chose instead to write her story into the larger narrative of citizenship and rights.

Through sustained coordination with the District Administration, Block Office, and Gram Panchayat, CPF facilitated the reissuance of Choto's voter card and ration card. The Aadhaar application process has been initiated and is currently underway.

Until formal rationing could resume, CPF ensured—through direct engagement with the Block Development Officer—that Choto receives 12 kg of rice every month, free of cost, along with transport support of 240 per month. The Block Administration also provided her with a saree and a tarpaulin for immediate relief.

But survival requires more than food. Recognising that food, clothing, and shelter are inseparable, CPF took a step beyond programme mandates. From a fund created through one day's salary voluntarily contributed by CPF staff, a small kacha house with an asbestos roof is being constructed for Choto at a cost of 25,000.

To restore livelihood dignity, CPF provided her with 10 ducklings. She already owns three goats, which she carefully raises—not for herself, but as gifts for her grandchildren, despite her son's continued neglect.

Today, Choto earns 600 per month working as a domestic helper. She also collects firewood from the forest and sells it near the ICDS centre, earning an additional 350–380 per month.

For the first time, Choto learned about Scheduled Tribe entitlements. She was informed about old-age pension schemes, which CPF will now help her access. She often wonders aloud whether reclaiming her surname—from Patra back to Sabar—might help her reclaim something deeper.

Perhaps identity! Perhaps belonging!

Now aware of Scheduled Tribe entitlements and forest rights, Choto quietly reflects that perhaps she will one day reclaim her surname—Sabar.

The decline of humanity does not announce itself loudly. It enters homes quietly, justified by busyness, masked by progress. When parents are discarded—whether in cities or forest villages—civil society must intervene, not as benefactors, but as custodians of conscience.

Choto Sabar is not alone.

She is a question.

And the answer depends on whether we still remember what it means to be civilian—before we become only citizens of convenience.



When the Soil Spoke Back



In Punshya village of Ranibandh Gram Panchayat, mornings usually begin quietly, with the smell of damp earth and the slow rhythm of footsteps moving towards the fields. For decades, this rhythm hardly changed for the Murmu family. Rabi Murmu has tilled the same 20 bighas of land for nearly 65 years; his wife Srimati Murmu has stood beside him through every sowing and harvest; and their son Rohit, now 40, stepped into the fields at 25 not as an experiment, but as destiny. Farming was never a choice for them—it was inheritance, responsibility, and survival rolled into one. Paddy once a year, mustard if the season allowed, rice kept for the household and the rest sold at the Krishak Bazar run by the Department of Food & Supplies—this was life, predictable and limited, like the horizon seen from the field bunds.

The change did not arrive with noise. It arrived in 2023 with notebooks, soil samples, patient conversations and muddy shoes, when CPF's West Bengal team entered Punshya as part of its intervention across 25 villages of Ranibandh Block, supported by the Swiss Philanthropic Foundation. Before speaking of solutions, they listened—mapping livelihoods, understanding practices, testing soil, and quietly decoding why fields that once fed families generously were now giving only just enough. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides had entered farming only in later years, promising quick gains but gradually unsettling the soil's balance. CPF did not ask farmers to abandon their wisdom; instead, they asked them to refine it.

Rohit remembers the training clearly. Line sowing of paddy, indigenous seed varieties, biofertilisers, bio-pesticides, and most importantly, seeing these practices demonstrated on real fields—not on charts or flipbooks. The soil, CPF explained, is not a surface to be fed chemicals but a living system to be restored. Rohit listened, experimented, and convinced his parents to try. The field responded faster than anyone expected. In December 2022, the Murmus harvested enough to sell 24.9 quintals of paddy for 51,294, followed by another 30 quintals for 66,090 in December 2023, with both transactions officially recorded at the Department of Food & Supplies, Ranibandh Block—clear proof that CPF's mix of knowledge, agroecological inputs and family labour produced marketable yield, not just good intent. For Rohit, those receipts mattered more than praise—they were evidence that learning and effort could be trusted.

25/11/21
30/11/21
30/11/21
30/11/21

GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL
DEPARTMENT OF FOOD & SUPPLIES
FARMER REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE FOR THE KMS 2021-2022

512-387

Date: 13 December 2021
Agency: DCFB-BANKURA
Farmer's Name: RABU MURMU
Caste: ST
Village/Municipality: PUNSHYA
Bank Name: STATE BANK OF INDIA

Centre: Kalam Karmadaha(CPC)
Allotted Rate of Paddy: 1,360.00/Quintal
Epic No.: WB36246/21607
District: BANKURA
Pin Code: 722148
Bank A/C No.: 3549 1234 997

Centre type: CPC
Registration No.: 339 011 5415
Father's/Mother's Name: RADHA MURMU
Block: Ranbardi
Mobile No.: 78726 11349
IFS Code: SBIN0012398

Signature of farmer

Signature of Purchase Officer
Kalam Karmadaha CPC
Ranbardi

(* Only for CPC No. 3549 999999 in other purchase centre.)

Sl No	Date of purchase	Quantity purchased	Amount	Signature P.O.D.O	Signature of farmer	Remarks
SLH	14/12/21 23-11-21	24.90 35.00	8,241/- 66,050/-			

Confidence grows when numbers make sense. By 2024, CPF introduced Bengal gram and bio-inputs like Nimastro, enabling year-round cultivation without chemical dependency. Then came the question that changed Rohit's idea of farming forever: Why only rice? CPF laid the arithmetic bare on the ground itself. On one katha, rice brings 500-700; mustard barely 50; green pea around 1,500; but cucumber—managed properly—can return 4,000. The soil had not changed; the thinking had. In 2025, Rohit agreed to try cucumber cultivation

on 15 katha, while allocating 4 katha to green pea, marking a decisive shift from subsistence-focused cropping to a calculated, market-oriented agroecological strategy. CPF provided seeds, vermicompost, Trichoderma viride, pheromone traps, yellow-blue sticky traps and super compost—about 8,500 worth of support—while Rohit arranged 100 kg of dry cow dung and committed what his family always had: labour, patience and care.

What followed was not just cultivation, but participation. When CPF's team visited again, they did not find Rohit working alone. His 80-year-old father and 69-year-old mother were in the field, gently placing cucumber seeds into prepared lines, smiling, unhurried, confident. There was no trace of exhaustion—only anticipation. The calculation was already clear: cucumber farming on 15 katha could yield about 15 quintals in three months, fetching nearly 60,000, while green pea would add another 7,500 in just two months. For a family that had once waited a year for modest returns, this felt almost unreal.

Rohit Murmu's field is no longer just land; it is a ledger, a classroom, and a quiet declaration. It shows that agroecology is not ideology but practice; that trust is built when advice stands up to official records; and that farming, when guided by science, indigenous wisdom and the right support, can stand shoulder to shoulder with any other livelihood. In Punshya, the soil did not change overnight—but someone finally listened to it. And when that happened, the soil spoke back, not in promises, but in harvests.











Centre for People's Forestry

Rights | Livelihoods | Conservation

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FIELD OFFICES :

Telangana - Adilabad, Kumuram Bheem Asifabad, Warangal and Bhadradi Kothagudem Districts

Adilabad District,

H.No. 1-1-45/B/53, Housing Board colony,
Adilabad district - 504001,

H.No.14-339/1, Back side of Rajsthani Sweet House,
Main Road Old Uttoor,
Adilabad District-504311,

Kumuram Bheem Asifabad District

H. No. 3 -23/1, Bheemaram Village,
Tiryan Mandal, Kumrambheem Asifabad - 504297.

Warangal District

H.No: 18-266/5-4, Malki Sri Children Hospital,
Nekkonda Road, Narsampet Town, Warangal - 506132.

Bhadradi Kothagudem District

H.No. 3/129/A, Raghu Theatre Road, Cherla Village
and Mandal, Bhadradi Kothagudem - 507133.

H.No. 6-112, Dummugudem Village, Bhadradi
Kothagudem Mandal and District - 507137.

ANDHRA PRADESH

Parvathipuram Manyam and Alluri Sitharamaraju
Districts

Parvathipuram Manyam District

Opposite ITDA, Seethampeta,
Parvathipuram Manyam district -532443.
Andhra Pradesh.

Alluri Sitharamaraju District

Beside Mahatma Gandhi Statue,
Hukumpeta Post & Mandal, Alluri Sitharamaraju,
District, Andhra Pradesh - 531077

ODISHA

Odisha - Malkangiri District

At / Post - Main Road, Korukonda, Near Bust Stand,
Opp. LAMPCS (Mini Bank) - 764045,
Malkangiri, Odisha

WEST BENGAL

Bankura District

Khatra, Para-Joldobra, Near 9 Star Club,
Bankura District-722140