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ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-220



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Of Spice & Spirit: 24-YO Quits Cushy Job to Double Income of Gujarat Tribe!



Turn the pages of history, and it will narrate the plight of the Halpatis of Gujarat, one of the most backward tribal communities. For the longest time, they have struggled to break away from a shell that dictates everything they are –landless farmhands under exploitative zamindars.

The year is 2018. It is a primary school in the Bardoli taluka of Gujarat. A few parents walk up to the class teacher and say, “Stop

teaching these Halpatis. If they get educated, who will toil in our fields?”

No, this is not an imaginary scenario. This is but a glimpse into the oppression faced by the Halpati scheduled tribe at the hands of upper-caste villagers.

Turn the pages of history, and it will narrate the plight of the Halpatis of Gujarat, one of the most backward tribal communities. For the longest time, they have struggled to break away from a shell that dictates everything they are –landless farmhands under exploitative zamindars.

But one 24-year-old is on a mission to change this. And the workforce she is training to challenge this age-old oppression is a group of women.

Born and brought up in Kanpur, Saumya Omer moved to the national capital to complete her Bachelors of Commerce

(Honours) from Hindu College, University of Delhi.

Despite working with several startups in the marketing and communication space, Saumya wasn't satisfied. While the paycheck was good and the job was cushy, the thrill of working at the grassroots level was greater. Her full-time opportunity to work in the social development sector came in the form of the SBI Youth for India Fellowship.

When she arrived in Zakharda, Saumya learnt that only last year, a group of 30 women were trained in making spices by an ex-fellow Ayush Sinha during his fellowship.

The 30 women Saumya learnt were even given a spice grinding machine, a pulveriser worth Rs 20,000 by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India, which happens to be Saumya's partner NGO too. Inspired by this, she decided to set up a similar venture with a different set of women.

Talking about the region Zakharda, Saumya says it is predominantly a Halpati village just like most villages in this region of south Gujarat. And while the Halpatis, earned their living through agriculture on their own land, crop failures and poor production over the years, forced them to sell their land to the upper caste community and become landless laborers.

And while the infrastructure in Zakharda is well in place, the confidence of the community to take up any work apart from landless labour is next to impossible. These are the reasons why Saumya decided to work with this community exclusively. The main goal of Saumya's project was to not only to generate and establish a sustainable, alternate source of income, but to create that confidence that they can rise above the mere tag of being landless labourers and explore entrepreneurship.

When Saumya interacted with the Halpati community women, they told her about the unreliability of income in their daily work.

The women came forward and told her that they wanted to undertake work that would help them meet ends without having to break their backs every day.

Saumya told The Better India, “I knew my goal was to get some stability in their lives. It had to serve as an alternate source of income and livelihood. I spoke to the women and realised that despite being trained in making spices, they weren’t putting their skills to use. So, I decided to capitalise on their skills and awaken the entrepreneurial spirit in them. They lacked the confidence and knowledge of running a successful venture. My work is only an attempt to make them aware of the power that lies within the palm of their hands.”

Soon, two women, 23-year-old Sonamben Halpati, and 27-year-old Sobhanaben Halpati stepped up to become lead entrepreneurs. “They were firm in their resolve that they didn’t want financial help from anybody. And thus, with a small team of five other women as part-time workers and an existing machine, the women began their entrepreneurial journey,” shares Saumya.

They had a machine, they had labour, and they would eventually buy the raw materials, but where would they set up their production unit?

And so, they decided to find a place to move the existing machine and use it as their production area.

It was at this time that the Panchayat came to their rescue. Impressed by the women’s venture, it offered to let them use the vacant rooms in its premises for the purpose.

After kick-starting their regular production of spices, the women also set up a stall on the highway, outside the village Panchayat. The demand was high, and the production was low, so Sonamben and Sobhanaben decided to pool money to buy a small grinder, a sealing machine, and an initial lot of raw materials to make 20 kgs of spices.

The women have till date spent over Rs 45000 on raw materials, machinery as well as participating in a week-long trade fair in Vyara, a nearby district.

Where it would once take months for one woman to sell off a couple of kilograms of spices, the group had sold out 20 kg of spices in less than a month.

Branded 'Tez' Masala (which means spicy), a short but catchy name to define the taste of Gujarat, the women began to produce powdered spices such as red chilli, turmeric, garam masala, masala chai, chicken masala,

coriander-cumin, pav bhaji masala, achaar masala and pulaav masala.

“Our best selling items are Masala Chai Powder and Chicken Masala powder due to their unique and native taste. Even if you are five feet away from the stall, the aroma of the rich spices and their unadulterated taste will attract you,” says Saumya, proudly.

While some of these recipes were taught to the women in their previous training, Saumya and her squad, perfected each of them by making 4-5 iterations after experimentation and as per customer feedback.

The women were given a chance to showcase their spices at the prestigious India Environment Festival in February 2018. While the very story of empowered tribal women setting up their own venture was enough to move the customers, the quality, aroma, and

taste of the spices kept them wanting for more.

Saumya recalls, “In less than three days, we sold around 13kgs, which was a stellar record for our enterprise, along with a plethora of people taking our business cards to contact us for future orders.”

The women are now selling their spices in three different ways. While their stall on the highway is set to be constructed into a permanent shop on a nearby land given by the Panchayat, they are also putting up weekly stalls in local haats and mandis. They spend three days producing the spices and use the other days to sell from door-to-door as well as at the stalls in two mandis, twice a week.

Saumya has also struck a deal with a local dealer in Bardoli, who owns the largest spice shop in the area. He has agreed to keep Tez Masala products on his shelf. A veteran in the

spice trade business, with 20 years of experience, the man is also providing the women raw materials at wholesale rates.

Saumya is now trying to get the Taluka Panchayat onboard to promote Tez under the National Rural Livelihood Mission and the Mission Mangalam scheme.

“We are also in talks with the livelihood officer to increase our market reach by helping us get orders from government school canteens and anganwadis. My women, who once seemed fazed while speaking to Block Development Officers and even men in their own homes, are now proudly pitching the products to all officials, travelling to different villages and negotiating prices confidently with dealers,” says Saumya.

These women who would hardly earn Rs 100 a day with farming and seasonal professions like embroidery work are making Rs 150 a day now and earning commissions on their

sales while working solely for Tez. They no longer have to deal with exploitative zamindars or endure long waits for remuneration.

The two lead entrepreneurs, Sonamben as well as Sobhanaben are reaping the benefits of the social venture and learning to run it on their own.

“We currently produce about 30-40 kgs of spices a month and are trying to stabilise it at 70-80 kg a month,” says Saumya.

The impact of the venture reflects on how it is helping the villagers see their women in a different light.

“Women like Sobhanaben and Sonamben but they are the quintessential definition of the working Indian women. They don’t need to be pushed to work, they are a self-motivated working force. The most beautiful aspect of this is that when we are short staffed, the

villagers come forward and fill the void, regardless of age or gender without expecting any money,” says Saumya

Today these Halpati women proudly claim that they will not be limited to being daily wage labourers. They can turn into entrepreneurs. Looking at the success that Tez Masala has amassed in five months, other groups of women have walked up to Saumya. While some want to set up their stitching unit, others want to run an Anganwadi centre.

Who would've thought that all it would take was a group of women armed with spices to spark a revolution in a remote tribal village in Gujarat? These women are doing it every day, and how!