

100 Stories of Change..
by Goonj..

34th

Story

Vaapsi- Restoring lives..



This week we bring you part 2 of the Vaapsi story.. About how people discovered a new potential in themselves in the face of a colossal disaster.. In a way this story is also about how people found a silver lining for themselves in the aftermath of a disaster. It certainly gives us strength and reinforces our belief in our ability to face challenges.

The first in this 3 part story talked about how we initiated Vaapsi for the Kosi flood-2008 affected people of Bihar. We identified some 35 different local occupations and provided low investment livelihood kits to people while the recipients did many pro bono acts for their communities as a pay back.

Started out as an experiment Vaapsi turned out to be a huge exercise in reviving rural entrepreneurship. On a deeper level it turned out to be more about building an identity with a lot of dignity and self reliance for people who had lost everything.

Part 1 - Discovering Hidden Talents



A survey done before providing Vaapsi Kits asking people what they did before the floods (with the flood affected) threw up some interesting insights. We realized that the disaster had given a fresh start to many. Someone working as a laborer but dreaming of running a shop, was no longer tied to their existing work, after the floods. This was an important input for us.

Instead of asking about their existing profession, we asked what would you like to do? What interests you? What skill do you have?

These questions opened up a world of hidden talents. A laborer told us that he enjoyed making Jalebi as a child in some sweet shop, thus instead of a laborer kit we created a Halwai kit for him. He soon had the most famous Halwai shop in the area, with queues running so long that even our team members couldn't taste his Jalebi's.

When Chandan Kumari lost her older brother in a tragic accident, she took up the family's responsibility but the floods proved to be a big setback. Post floods even as she restarted her studies the community started pressurizing her parents to marry her off. When she heard about Goonj's Vaapsi initiative, she wanted a sewing machine. Soon she carved a niche for herself and as a girl, found women felt more comfortable talking to her about size and designs. She was soon able to fulfill the role of a breadwinner for her family. Chandan's mother proudly says, "She is my son. Though we are extremely sad to have lost our son, she has given us a reason to live and smile." Chandan is now married to a caring and understanding partner who accepts her responsibility towards her parents and helps in her endeavor.

Part 2 - Rise of Serial Entrepreneurs



Gautam Thakur has a powerful story to tell... Living in village Mangwar, 5 km north of Badhgaon district, Gautam lost the little that he had, in the floods. He earlier worked as a migrant laborer in Punjab, renting an ice cream cart to make earnings which were never enough but it taught him how to make ice creams. When he found out about Vaapsi he expressed a desire to start something that would help him stay back in his village. He received a cart rickshaw with a condition that repayment would be done within a year, at 15 rupees/day (total cost approx. 5400 rupees). Gautam worked hard and paid off the entire amount in a few months. He turned this rickshaw into a platform to fulfill his dreams. Investing his next three months earning in procuring ice making equipment Gautam started a ice-cream shop from his rickshaw, while in winters he started selling warm foods like Chowmin and burgers from his rickshaw. Gautam used every opportunity to build a business from just one rickshaw. Today, he not only has a rickshaw, but also a seasonal business of ice-cream in summers, and chowmin selling cart in winters- all of his own choice..

And here is Chandar, who would have been named a serial entrepreneur in the urban world of entrepreneurship!! Chandar Dev Ram (50-55 years of age) is also a resident of Mangwar. A cobbler by profession Chandar Dev lost every little thing he had earned, in the floods. Struggling to feed his family of 7, when Chandar Dev got a new cobbler kit from Goonj, he started off with a makeshift roadside shop earning 50-55 rupees a day. In 6 months Chandar was earning double this amount and on some days when he would sit in the village haat, he would earn up to 200-300 rupees.



Soon after, with his savings Chander started a band party employing 11 people on a need basis for marriages/festivals etc. He now owns a small permanent shop apart from running a successful band party.

These are just a few examples...from the 20,000 Vaapsi Kits, many similar rickshaw-walas and shop owners discovered their hidden talents. These stories are humbling and deeply inspiring for the talent, resilience and raw enterprise hidden in rural India. It also shines a light on our strong belief that people only need a little nudge to transform their lives themselves.



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