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The Marvels of Munsiyari..

Munsiyari in Uttarakhand is a beautiful town nestled amongst the snow-capped peaks of the *Himalayas*. The scenic views are a well-kept secret among mountaineers and trekkers who often use it as a base camp. But it is the women of *Malla Ghorpatta*, a village next to Munsiyari, who are the real jewels, given their amazing solidarity and sense of purpose. With this story, we celebrate womanhood with and for the women in this hinterland of India.

A 150-hectare piece of land owned and managed by *Malla Ghorpatta's Van Panchayat* (village forest council) is at the heart



of this story. Most of the villagers here are directly or indirectly dependent on this land as they graze cattle here and collect dry grass to feed their livestock and sell as fodder.

The villagers wanted to build a protective wall around this land under Goonj's '**Cloth For Work**' (**CFW**) initiative. They needed the wall to protect the land from grazing by wild animals, police horses and mules, which led to a loss of grass worth lakhs of rupees. The wall would protect the grass and establish the village's unequivocal right over this land.

But much more happened in the process as Goonj's partner organisation, *Quantum Social and Educational Society (QUSES)* played a vital role in bringing together and unifying all castes and communities of the village to a common cause. The details were collectively discussed and decided at a joint meeting of the villagers; the *Sarpanch* of the *Gram Panchayat* (head of the village governing body) and members of the local institution *Mahila Mangal Dal* (society for the betterment of women). Based on the common consensus the women decided to build a 750-metre long and approximately a metre high wall, in four sections around the grassland.

A *tok* (a ward of 15-20 people) of women worked on making different sections of the wall and every participating woman worked for at least 3 hours a day. Each *tok* was further divided into four groups with different responsibilities such as- digging mud, collecting stones, cutting bushes for the wall and making the wall. 72 women in total worked with this very systematic and disciplined approach in one of the toughest terrains and despite bad weather situations, finished the dream task in 45 days.

What evolved during this incomparable endeavour makes for an exemplary story. The wall-making work had to be halted often because of the bad weather conditions such as heavy rainfall

and or the hot sun beating down on the women during the day. However, they wouldn't give up. They would sit under their umbrellas and wait for the downpour to stop, thus working for longer hours. They would sing folk songs, share folk stories and continue with their work, despite all odds. Women as old as 75 years also joined in digging mud and carrying rocks. Women heading the *toks* emerged as effective leaders, encouraging everyone to work in a united way to ensure that they finished this stupendous task on time, meeting the self-decided standards of the villagers. As the work gained momentum, the arrival of

Goonj material, the 'Family Kit', proved to be a big boost to the villagers. "जिस काम को संस्था द्वारा सिर्फ कपड़ों के दम पे किया गया वो काम अगर सरकारी होता, तो इसके लिए सरकार 10 लाख रुपए खर्च कर देती और कम से कम 6 महीने ये काम चलता.."

- नरेंद्र रावत, ब्लॉक प्रमुख मुंसियारी

("For the task that this organisation did just with clothes (under CFW), the government would have spent 10 lakh rupees (1 million INR) and it would have taken 6 months to finish.."- Narendra Rawat, Block Chief, Munsiyari)

“हमने इतने बड़े काम को गाँव वालों द्वारा मुफ्त में करते हुये कभी नहीं देखा”- गायत्री देवी, ग्राम प्रधान घोरपट्टा

("We have never seen such a big project being done by villagers, for free" - Gayatri Devi, the village head of Ghorpatta)



At the end, the people of *Malla Ghorpatta* had not only made a wall but also gained the strength of community unity and action.

This also reaffirmed our belief that people are the best judge of assessing the nature of their problems and finding viable solutions. They have to just be motivated to come together, deliberate in a positive way and take decisive collective action. Team Goonj contributed to the motivation and supportive material that first started this process and then helped to sustain it.

The people of *Malla Ghorpatta*, especially the women did the rest,

taking their rightful place at the centre stage. Interestingly, this was the first time three communities - *Thakurs*, Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes came together to work on a common issue.

“हम सामान के लिए ये काम कर रहे थे लेकिन काम करते करते लगा कि ये तो अपना ही काम है तो हमने ये काम और अच्छे ढंग से किया बिना किसी तालच के” - लक्ष्मीदेवी, महिला मंगल दल

(We started the work for the material but as we worked, we began to feel that this was our own work and we worked more diligently for ourselves without any greed for material- Laxmi Devi, Mahila Mangal Dal)





Moving the focus from 'self' to the 'common good' is not so common and yet here in the remote foothills of the *Himalayas*, these women did this 'uncommon' so easily. Now, these women can not only feed their own cattle but also take out a substantial quantity of grass to sell as fodder. In the first year, after the wall was constructed, the 'saved' grass generated an income of approx. ₹ 70,000... a figure that is only growing.

The local units of calculation for grass are *luththa* and *muththa*. The women here tried to teach us how many *muththas* are equal to one *luththa* and how much does a *muththa* of grass sell for...

Doing some quick calculations to find the additional grass sold and money earned, we laugh with them as they come to the incredible conclusion that there is almost 2.5 times growth in the yield!! Interestingly, this story is so much more about breaking bigger, perhaps stronger walls of perceptions that these feisty women face in their everyday life.

Just goes to show that the real women's liberation is stuff made of unassuming revolutions happening in the back lanes of remote villages somewhere..





1 luththa= 120-150 Muththa

1 Muththa is a bundle of dried grass weighing between 5-7kg

Market cost of 1 Muththa is ₹20-22

UPDATE FOOTNOTE

The *Munsiyari* story stands as a powerful example of Goonj's extensive efforts and impact in most remote areas of difficult geographies like *Uttarakhand*. Originating from our relief efforts during the 2013 flash floods in *Uttarakhand*, our humble beginning as a small team has now evolved into a large scale operation, including a large-scale processing and production centre in *Rishikesh*, with the urban network extending to cities like *Dehradun* and *Haldwani*. Goonj's dedicated rural implementation teams have been working extensively with hundreds of local communities in *Munsiyari* and other districts in the region, reaching basic needs material amounting to over **5000+** tons (**FY 2014-2023**) to hundreds of villages, working with the communities to strengthen their assets and infrastructure and mobilising and motivating them to address their issues with their own efforts and wisdom. Amidst the recurrent natural disasters in the region - monsoon floods, fires, and landslides, our teams have also steadfastly supported the local population. Over the years, a strong and robust network of actively engaged volunteers and contributors is also emerging that's reinforcing our efforts in nudging for people led grassroots development.