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Innovations Taking Seed in Disasters..
Redefining Disaster Relief & Rehabilitation - Part III



In this last part of the stories on disasters, far from doom and gloom, we talk about four innovative initiatives born in the midst of some of the biggest disasters...

People have many different adjectives for *Bihar* but for Goonj, *Bihar* has been our lab of experiments and innovations. It's where people face floods almost every year. That's probably what makes them so resilient. Goonj started working in *Bihar* in a big way after the massive *Kosi* river floods in 2008. It was also our first big learning about how people in the rural hinterland of India live in a state of constant disaster.

In *Tamot Parsa*, a remote village in *Bihar*, connected to the world by a dirt track, *Hansa* was the sole bread earner for her family since her husband was unwell. She recounts her days at the farm where she worked 8-10 hours a day, "We would get ₹ 25 -30 every day and it was an uphill task to provide enough food for my children".

Many like *Hansa* live in extreme poverty, falling deep into the debt trap. Things were the same even before the *Kosi* floods but the floods broke her back completely. Once the flood water receded, money lenders came knocking at her doorstep.

When Goonj decided to do long-term work in *Bihar*, *Tamot Parsa* was made the hub for making *Sujnis*. *Hansa* was among the first women who joined in. She learned the craft quickly and started producing high-quality *Sujnis* in large numbers.

Her income soon grew and she eventually repaid her loan. "It feels good to see everyone relaxed and enjoying better food. Though my husband won't be completely free of his ailment but within his constraint, at least he has a better life" she says.



from the locals led to the opening of many such *Sujni* centres across *Bihar*. The first recipients of the *Sujnis* were the differently-abled and elderly in the villages where these were made, to help them deal with the severe winter.

Soon Goonj started paying for each *Sujni* making, turning it into a major income generation activity across *Bihar*. In the first year (2009-10) alone more than 24,000 *Sujnis* were made by 285 women in four villages (*Sukhasan, Tamot Parsa, Forsahi* in *Madhepura* District and *Duhabi* in the *Saharsa* district). Initially, women who made approximately ₹ 35 then, are now paid ₹ 50-75 per *Sujni*. Just after a few days of hands-on training, the women can make 5-6 *Sujnis* a day, earning dignified wages.

This successful experiment has now reached *Uttarakhand*, another disaster spot where we established production units in *Rishikesh* and *Uttarkashi*. The *Sujnis* made in *Bihar* and *Uttarakhand* are now an integral part of Goonj's disaster **Relief Kit** and **Winter kit**. In the financial year 2016-17 alone more than 300 tons of absolute waste

1. Sujni

An innovative idea born out of need. *Sujni* is the traditional cloth quilt of rural India layered with tattered and shredded pieces of clothes stitched together. It's used as a quilt in winters and as a mattress in summers. Worldwide disaster wastage is a common phenomenon resulting from a mismatch between what is given and what is needed or due to insensitivities in giving. After the *Bihar* floods in 2008, the district administration of *Saharsa, Bihar* had around 30 truckloads of disaster waste material in a warehouse. They didn't know what to do with it.. After a series of discussions when we received this material, it also had a big quantity of unwearable clothes. *Sujni* emerged as a viable solution to put this cloth to better use. It also solved a bigger issue of bad quality *Daan ka Kambal* (donated blankets).

This experiment of making *Sujnis* in the villages, first started in *Sukhasan* village in *Madhepura* district, *Bihar*. The positive response



cloth was converted into 54,000+ *Sujnis* and 45000+, *Aasans*. These *Sujnis* and *Aasans* are a major source of livelihood for over 300 women at Goonj's centres and rural families in *Uttarakhand*, *Bihar* and now in *Tamil Nadu* also. In the last few years since we started making *Sujnis*, Goonj has been able to convert over a million kilograms of last shreds of clothes into a very valuable product and is a major source of livelihood in the shape of *Sujnis* and *Aasans*.

"Goonj gives me savings."

"Our village took on the Sujni project in 2010. When the project was active, we'd get raw materials from Goonj, bags full of clothes. The men sat next to the women and we all sewed the Sujnis together, which is uncommon! We were very happy when the project was running because we could earn a living. Our families have greatly changed. We were able to save money, and now we manage living in a better way. We are also able to send our children to school." Bodhi Ram, Kal Devi, Gaia Ram, Mahmudda Village, Bihar.



2. Vaapsi

Mahavir's small makeshift hairdresser shop got swept away in the Kosi floods. Tired of living in relief camps for weeks, with no source of sustenance he didn't know how to rebuild his life. After the Kosi floods, Goonj identified people who either had low investment occupations like *Mahavir* or were interested in starting one. Goonj provided basic occupational kits to them. In return, people would need to do some shramdaan (voluntary labour) for their own community. More than 30 different kinds of local skills were identified and kits were made accordingly. *Vaapsi* was thus born. When *Mahavir* got a hairdresser kit under *Vaapsi*, he started afresh with renewed vigour and set his shop once again. Within six months he expanded his shop; bought large mirrors, new benches and chairs, earning a sum of ₹ 80 per day. Talking about those days, *Mahavir* says, "It was a tough time, as I didn't have any money but thanks to *Vaapsi* I got a kit. People don't understand the importance of small things. Actually, they make a big difference." The rest as they say is history.

Vaapsi livelihood kits acted as an asset for many flood-hit people in Bihar. The ones who had been bonded labourers immediately started working on their own. More than 20,000 such kits were distributed worth INR 11.5 million. This first of its kind effort by Goonj was to give the flood-hit people a much needed nudge that would stop the tide of migration, one of the big fallouts of a disaster. *Asha Devi's* husband was diagnosed with cancer. With 4 daughters and an ill husband, life had been really tough on her. She was chosen under *Vaapsi* initiative wherein she was given dry ration in three phases to sell. She generated ₹ 7,960 by selling ration items to sustain her family for a while. Likewise post 2014 *Jammu & Kashmir* floods, when the rehabilitation work expanded to other reaches of the state, 17 families with similar backgrounds as *Asha's* were identified under '*Vaapsi*', who were given ration and crockery to start a shop. Some of these recipients earlier had little shops while others wanted to start one but could not due to financial and





material constraints.

"Goonj gives me progress"

"The market in our village was built in 2009. In 2008, the area that the market is currently in, was completely flooded. The process of rebuilding was slow, but we have seen a lot of improvement just within the last year. I'm happy with my work. I feel my family is well now - we now eat rice daily, and we have green vegetables for dinner. I wouldn't have been able to do this on my own; Goonj enabled me to build my chai-pakora shop" (Supash Pawan, Chharrapatti Village, Bihar)

3. Vaapsi Haat

Village *haats* (markets) came up at many places in the flood-affected parts of Bihar, after the Kosi floods. Many people who had received 'Vaapsi kits' like tea sellers, egg sellers, *halwais* (sweets maker) and other kits from Goonj started to come together to sell their wares at some central locations. Slowly village *haats* started emerging in these places, giving a big boost to the local economy. Some people even started growing vegetables to sell at these markets because they saw an opportunity to earn money. *"The market has grown so*

much. We have been visiting from the start. From 40-45 shops in 2010 to over 200 shops now. Most of our needs are met. We no longer go to Mahua bazaar but come here now. It's nearer." Rita Devi, 40 years, Rabna village (Block Sonvarsha, Saharsa, Bihar) says about the Vaapsi haat.

4. Pandal (Tent House) Kits

Despite all hardships, village India revels and lives in its festivities and religious rites. Whether it's a birth or a death, the occasion always involves everyone in the community. Unfortunately, people run into debts on occasions under social compulsions. Goonj started the '**Tent House Kit**' initiative keeping this aspect in mind. A kit of most things needed to hold big events was put together. Village communities normally take materials like tarpaulins/tents, blankets, dari, buckets, mugs and utensils on substantial rent.





Goonj handed over these kits to village committees with a condition that people who used the Tent House Kit would in return do *shramdaan* or community work. Additionally, the family taking the kit must add 1 or 2 items to it while returning it back to the village committee.

Many such *Tent House Kits* have been given in villages of *Kosi* and *West Champaran* regions in *Bihar*. Each kit is meant to take care of the needs of 10-12 villages in the periphery. Post *Uttarakhand* floods the same model has been implemented there as well. 30 such *pandals* (extended versions of a *Tent House Kit*) have been handed over to village communities. Each *Pandal Kit* usually contains big cooking vessels, pressure cooker, steel and iron buckets, large tea container, steel plates, glass and spoons, jugs, *kadhaai*, etc. This is now a huge asset for the villagers saving a lot of expenses on renting things.

In every disaster, while staying with the communities, we get a chance to add a new meaning and quality to the lives of people who have lost everything except for their hopes for a better tomorrow. And this hope is good enough to inspire more innovations..
