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Weaving a future of possibilities..



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A piece of cloth can tell a thousand stories about the person who wears it; such is the common lore.. By that yardstick, a *dari* (mat) made from hundreds of shreds of cloth is a treasure of tales. This story about *daris* possibly has many 'shreds' from our collective lives, making it a story worth telling. This is a tale of little options, lots of hard work and how waste has become a ray of hope to keep going.

Set in *Moradabad*, a city not too far from *Delhi* - this story speaks of a world of second-hand cloth and *dari* making, utilizing the last shreds of tattered clothes. Almost every house in villages around has a loom and almost every home's story is one of gloom; of feeling exploited, of random and arbitrary rates, high costs and the daily struggles for life. From obtaining raw material from *Punjab* and *Delhi* to the marketing of final products and everything in between, there are intermediaries at every step and hundreds of untold stories.



पर रहते थे और ये बड़ी बेटी (खतीजा) मज़दूरी पर जाती थी, तपती गर्मी में काम करने की मुश्किल अलग और हिफाज़त से घर वापिस पहुँचने का डर अलग रहता था” (My husband used to be away for months on *pheris* and my elder daughter (*Khateeja*), used to do daily-wage work on other field. It was hard work, in the scorching heat and I was worried all the time until she came back home safely.)

Today..

Things have changed. *Kamar Jahan's* younger son is eleven years old... She makes a comfortable living for herself and both her children go to school. She gets the raw material for making *daris* at home and she doesn't have to worry about procuring the threads or selling them. Like her, many other women, who are the sole bread earners for their families, now live a dignified life, working from their homes, thanks to the *daris* they weave.

Over the years, *Ibrahim* and *Ishaaq* and many more from their village



The background..

Kamar Jahan's husband died in an accident when she was about to deliver her second child. A single mother raising two children with absolutely no source of sustenance meant a very tough life. She had only a loom left behind by her husband but using that to generate a sustainable income wasn't an easy option. At each step, right from getting raw material for *dari* (handwoven rug) to arranging the threads and then selling them.. meant that she would have to step out of the house. With two small babies, that was next to impossible..

Ibrahim and *Ishaaq*, lived with their families in *Padianangla* village (*Thana Bhagatpur*), 35 kilometres from *Moradabad* city. These two brothers earned their living by selling *daris* as roaming hawkers, *pheri walas* - as they are commonly known. Away from their homes for months, they managed to save very little for their families.

Mohammad Ibrahim's wife says about the old days: “महीनों तक फेरी



have stopped going on *pheris*. They make *daris* at home. Now *Khateeja* doesn't need to go out to work as her entire family is involved in weaving *daris*.

The transformation...

A local vendor, *Ilias Bhai*, has been our partner in bringing about a silent but significant transformation in the lives of hundreds of families engaged in this work. Years ago, he came to Goonj, as a seller of *daris* and then we followed him to his village, to see yet another '*pheri tale*' unfold 😊

Ilias Bhai was a local teacher, having a hard time running his family

of seven on a meagre honorarium. Owing to his wife's health issues, the little money that he earned was spent on medical bills. That was when his eldest daughter *Firdaus*, who is now married, started making *daris* on the family loom. She recalls, "*Initially our condition was really very bad, so bad that we had no idea whether we would have something to eat for the next meal. We didn't have any source of income. Then we got into dari work more rigorously and since then our lives are improving... Today, even if we don't make daris for one day, we know that no one will go to bed on an empty stomach.*"

His wife says, "अम्मी खाना दो !बच्चे बोलते थे । मिट्टी का घर था..बारिश के समय पूरा घर पानी से भर जाता था, मैं बच्चों को ऊपर बैठा देती थी । नीचे चल नहीं पाते थे, बैठ नहीं पाते थे और बहुत परेशान थे । मैं सोचती थी कि कहाँ से लाऊं खाना जब बनाने की जगह ही नहीं है ..पिछले कुछ सालों से दरी का काम कर रहे हैं



families into this fold. He connected the dots to involve the poorest families in the traditional *dari*-weaving work. Talking about his first assignment with Goonj, he says “जब पहली बार मुझे गुँज से 2000 दरियों का आर्डर आया तो मेरी खुशी का ठिकाना नहीं था, तब मुझे लगा के अब हालात बदलेंगे” (*When I got my first order of 2000 daris from Goonj, I was ecstatic. That's when I felt that things would change*).

He adds, “*Today I have five godowns (warehouses) where we collect daris from different families.*” More than 40 families are connected with *Ilias Bhai*. Most of them are widows, single women, landless labourers or from jobless families who now have a sustained livelihood. Also, over 30 families benefit through *Naseem Ahmed* (another vendor).

Pan India Impact

At Goonj, there is a much bigger role and impact of these humble *daris*. These are an integral part of Goonj's '**Family Kit**', which is given to village families who participate in the '**Cloth for Work**' (**CFW**) initiative for development activities. These *daris* also go into Goonj's disaster-relief kits. This seemingly small item has a huge significance for thousands of families, particularly children who have, over the years, received and used these after a disaster. In many far flung small schools where there is little in the name of furniture, these washable, durable, thick cloth *daris* stand the test of time for children.

After the 2013 floods in *Uttarakhand*, Goonj started by reaching out to badly affected, cut-off areas with essential relief material. Our rehabilitation work still continues in many parts of the state. In *Gyandeep Children Academy* in *Brahmkhal village, Dunda block, Uttarkashi* we saw children sitting on old gunny bags in their classrooms. As part of Goonj's '**School to School**' (**S2S**) initiative, in the harsh winters, they stitched together these *daris* and used them as wide sheets to cover the floor and make it more comfortable to sit.

Munni Kumari, an aanganwadi worker from Pipra Tola in Bihar says,

..हमारी परेशानियाँ कम हो गयी हैं..और हमने एक पक्का घर भी बना लिया है”
 (“Mother, give us food! My children used to cry. Earlier, we had a mud house. During the rains, it used to get flooded. I would make my children sit on the bed, there was no place to cook. I used to feel helpless, about where to get the food from, when there was no place to cook? For the past few years, this *dari* work is going on and things are much better now, we have even made ourselves a *pakka* house”). Slowly as the whole family got involved in *dari*-making, *Ilias Bhai* took charge of spreading the work and bringing other

"These daris have saved children from the chilling cold of the winters. Earlier parents were not sending their children to the aanganwadis and schools because of the cold and because of the lack of such basic facilities." Many such stories emerge from schools in *Uttarakhand*, *Sunderbans* in West Bengal, the deep interiors of *Odisha*, *Chhattisgarh* and many other states. The *dari* making and the second-hand cloth industry is massive, spread over many states, with a lot of lives depending on it.

Over the years, as the intake of these *daris* grew with our escalating disaster relief work; it not only replaced the plastic mats but also boosted the connection with the second-hand cloth industry. We are doing whatever we can, within our organisational capacity. In just the past 3 years, 375,000 pieces of *daris* and sheets (used as *Sujni*

covers) are being sourced from the area through *Ilias Bhai* and others, creating large-scale local employment.

The impact on the lives of a handful of families may seem insignificant but every effort matters and every head counts. These people convert absolute cloth waste into *daris* that are recycled and brought back into our homes as *yoga* mats, *pooja* (prayer) mats or they go out to village schools for the children to sit on. It is our cloth waste at play in this process, which if not converted into these very useful and durable *daris*, would end up in landfills.

This in its true sense is a trash-based economy that supports dari-makers and waste cloth collectors all across the country.





UPDATE FOOTNOTE

As of 2024, over 900 families are now linked with *Ilias Bhai*, ensuring a stable livelihood through the production of *daris* for Goonj. We have channelled over **1.48 million daris** to rural India between **FY 2014-15** and **FY 2022-23**, all crafted from the last shreds of cloth. Expanding beyond *daris*, Goonj's proactive engagement in *Moradabad* has evolved into a dedicated local team and an active Goonj centre, facilitating the decentralised production and procurement of various items like bedsheets, towels, mats, second-hand goods, woollens, etc. These initiatives in Moradabad align with Goonj's overarching objective of fortifying India's second-hand cloth ecosystem and economy. Focussed on sustained livelihoods, particularly for the most financially vulnerable families in this ecosystem, our efforts aim to contribute to their dignity and overall well-being.