

A photograph showing three women in a workshop setting, focused on weaving a large, intricate rug. The rug features a prominent pink and red color scheme with a complex geometric and floral pattern. The woman on the left is wearing a purple shawl over a red and blue patterned dress. The woman in the middle is wearing a red headscarf and a blue patterned dress. The woman on the right is wearing an orange headscarf and a white dress. They are all seated on the floor, working with their hands. The background shows a wooden structure and some tools, suggesting a traditional weaving environment.

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7.
*Respectful Life versus
Easy Money !!*

Champaran in Bihar has a special place in the annals of history. It was here that *Mahatma Gandhi* first personally confronted the basic need for cloth. It has the honour of being the first place where *Satyagraha* (Civil disobedience movement for freedom during British rule in India) was successfully put to test. This anecdotal piece of history is relevant to this story. We shall see why...

Unfortunately, not much has changed in *Champaran* today. Even after a century, the poverty that moved *Mahatma Gandhi* is still pervasive but working against overwhelming odds is still an option some dare to take. This story is about how village communities used their own wisdom, will and resources to address their issues while the humble *Sujni* (a quilt/mattress made from the last shreds of waste cloth) acted as the gentle nudge that empowered them & the heroines are the daring women of *Bherihari*, a village known for the traditions and music of the *Tharu* tribe and for the local liquor these women used to make.

These women chose a life of dignity and respect against huge odds. Till five years ago, with only forest produce to sustain this tribal community, these women were fighting a losing battle with the age-old tradition of liquor making and selling as their only other source of income. By her own admission, *Devyanti Devi* of *Bherihari* says, "*There was more money to be made in liquor making but now we live a dignified life*". We figured that it didn't make sense to start talking about the ill effects of liquor production and consumption, in the absence of a viable alternative, especially when it meant a better income than any other venture. Instead, our team chose to work with these women and let them find their own solutions. In the first meeting attended by only six women, a cleanliness drive of their



homes and surrounding areas was initiated with the reward of much-needed clothes for their families. Subsequent '*Cloth for Work*' (CFW) activities also focused on similar issues. At each meeting, the number of participants grew by 15 to 25 people. By the 5th meeting, 70 women participated. Exploited for generations, these women desperately wanted a change. They faced constant humiliation as anybody in a drunken stupor would walk in at any time and behave badly with them. This work was clearly not a choice but a necessity because of the easy money. The talk of quitting the liquor-making work slowly gained momentum and the change in local equations, preferences and dynamics started becoming more visible. In the 5th meeting, completely arranged by the village women, finally, an open

discussion on liquor-making took place. In one voice, the women shared their desire to quit and asked Goonj to give them another employment option. We grabbed this opportunity and asked the women to first prove their intent. Fully aware that some of them could make more money from liquor, we put a condition that if they abstained from liquor-making for two months, they would be channelized with material for making *Sujnis*. It was time to gauge their resolve.

Soon, a committee was set up to ensure that no one would make or sell liquor in the village. A penalty of ₹ 2,500/- was set for violating the pact. The committee closely monitored the actions of the villagers (two people were actually fined). The next two months proved to be the real test. Under *CFW*, every household got into action; sweeping and cleaning the area around hand pumps and drainage for water outlets, cleaning the wells, etc. Meanwhile, the fine money was used by the committee to add big utensils to the 'Tent House Kit' (now called '*Pandaal Kit*') given by Goonj. A library was also started with 150 books.

Ultimately, the committed efforts of the villagers motivated us to start the *Sujni* making unit in the area. Starting initially with 35



women, soon grew to 55 as the women found sustenance from this work. Soon the villagers turned an abandoned structure into a workable space under *CFW* and Goonj started a stitching center here. As a result the *Sujni* making and the sewing center ended up supplementing each other. While the outer layer/cover for the *Sujni* was made at the sewing center, the *Sujni* was made by women in their homes. *"The liquor selling business was eroding the values and culture of our village but now with the improving conditions, all of us are happy,"* said Prem Kali Devi, one of the women leaders from the village.

Tharu tola was a huge learning ground for us. Making *Sujnis* from last shreds of waste cloth emerged as a viable income generator instead of the social evil of liquor making. The bigger learning was of course that when it's about a woman's dignity and respect, she won't even mind rejecting a better income option. That change also called for us to walk our talk and create a viable option for them, instead of just pointing out what's right or wrong.

We also learnt an important lifelong lesson in the process; that when



people get options, they are smart enough to pick out what's right for them and also spread it. When the people of nearby villages of *Kadamhiya* and *Sahuriya* also prohibited liquor production and selling we knew that the change had its own momentum and multiplier effect. *Sujni* making work also spread out to *Kadamhiya* later on.

It is important to remember that when people make their own rules and agree to abide by them, they bring about change in a constructive and positive way. That is, probably, civil obedience at its best.

Here is a poem in *Bhojpuri* by the *Tharu* women, expressing their gratitude to Goonj for the awareness on hygiene, child birth, child marriage and the feeling of empowerment in their community...

“सुनो मेरे बहिना सुनो मेरे साथी,
गूँज संस्था ले के आई दीया और बाती,
आई घर-घर के अँधेरा भगाई
एकरा रोशनी से झोपड़ी जगमगाई ।

गूँज संस्था भगाए अँधेरा
लेकर आई है नाया सवेरा ॥

शिशू- बच्चा के मौत काहे होला
प्रसव के समय माता लोग मरेला,
एकरा के बंद करी, मिल के जंग करी,
संगठन बनाई, माता के बचाई ..

गूँज संस्था भगाए अँधेरा,
लेकर आयी है नाया सवेरा ॥

काहे करेलअ लड़की के बाल विवाह,
लड़की के मौत लावेला अइसन रिवाज,
एकरा के बंद करी, मिल के जंग करी,
लड़की के बचाई संगठन बनाई..

गूँज संस्था भगाये अँधेरा,
लेकर आयी है नाया सवेरा ॥”



UPDATE FOOTNOTE

What began as a successful experiment in establishing a rural *Sujni* making centre in *Berihari* with local women has flourished into a big initiative. This journey includes the establishment of a Goonj *Sujni* making centre in 2018 in *Bihar*, a significant processing and production centre in *Rishikesh (Uttarakhand)*, and an upcoming centre in rural *Palghar (Maharashtra)*. Over the past nine years (**FY 2014-2023**), this initiative has yielded more than **800,000+ Sujnis**, providing over **0.2** million person-days of employment for women, who are often missed out of the workforce.

Beyond the economic impact, *Sujni* production has become a catalyst for these women to discover their voice, agency, dignity, and

a sense of community through their craft. Goonj has further expanded this impact through the '*Cloth Based Employment*' (CBE) initiative, engaging thousands of women to earn their livelihood by working with old cloth, both within Goonj production centres and from the comfort of their homes. These *Sujnis*, are integrated into diverse Goonj material kits, ensuring millions of rural families receive this essential item, with dignity as a reward for their contributions to their community development. As we scale this circular economic model, our aspiration is to catalyse surplus cloth in the world to bring widespread positive change in the lives of the most marginalised communities, especially women.