

# OXFAM IN ACTION

## Mobilising Women Farmers to Secure Land Rights in Uttar Pradesh



ऑक्सफैम इंडिया  
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Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality; in India it works in seven focus states<sup>1</sup>. Oxfam India aims to improve poor people's access, rights and entitlements over land, and natural resources in order to support and augment their livelihood. Through its programme on Small Holder Agriculture, Oxfam India focuses on socialising the identity of women as farmers, strengthening the economic leadership of women farmers, ensuring their land rights, and making public investments in agriculture accessible to small farmers, especially women farmers. Oxfam India is working to bridge this gap and is supporting the AAROH Campaign in Uttar Pradesh to bring social and legal recognition to women farmers.

Consider these numbers: 17 crore (170 million) women, out of 40.5 crore (405 million) women in rural India, are involved in agriculture and allied activities. 74 per cent of the India's rural women workforce is engaged in agriculture as against 59 per cent of the male workforce<sup>2</sup>. Only 12.69 per cent rural women have operational land ownership<sup>3</sup>.

As women are not recognised as farmers and do not own land, they have limited access to government schemes and credit restricting their agricultural productivity. This is a stumbling block especially in states like Uttarakhand<sup>4</sup>, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) where migration is high and the role of women in agriculture is crucial. Ironically, for the same reasons, suicide by a woman farmer does not count<sup>5</sup>. The 2014 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on farmer suicides reports 5,650 farmer suicides and 472 were women<sup>6</sup>.

To improve access to land and resources for women farmers in UP, one of its focus states, Oxfam India conducted a study along with Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG) in 2006. The study<sup>7</sup> aimed to understand whether government schemes actually reached and benefitted women farmers. The study showed only 6 per cent women owned land, 2 per cent had access to credit and only 1 per cent had access to agriculture trainings. It also revealed that the women who owned land were either widows (81 per cent) or a single child (19 per cent). A need was thus felt to assert rights and demand justice for women farmers' in the state.

This was the beginning of AAROH Campaign, a women farmers' campaign, in 2006. The AAROH Campaign is supported by Oxfam India, and led by GEAG in coordination with four other regional not-for-profits — *Vinobha Sewa Ashram (VSA)*, *Disha Samajik Sansthan*, *Pani Sansthan*, and *Samarpan Jan Kalyan Samiti*. The Campaign is operational in 70 districts of Uttar Pradesh with every five regional partner anchoring it in five Gram Panchayats (GP) in 14 districts each<sup>8</sup>. GEAG works in Eastern UP, VSA in Rohilkhand

in North-western UP, Disha in Western UP, Pani in Central UP, and Samarpan in the Bundelkhand<sup>9</sup> region.

### महिला कृषक, किसान या सहयोगी

(*Woman farmer, Farmer or labourer*)

A critical frame underlying the AAROH Campaign was a question often raised by women farmers- the question of their identity. Thus the campaign emphasised the social acceptance of women farmers as farmers in its initial years. Once the campaign was able to create the legal space for getting women recognised as farmers it shifted gears in 2011 when it began advocating for joint land titles. Demands were made to amend the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 (later replaced by the UP Revenue Code Act, 2006) for including joint land titles for private land. In 2012, a five-point demand docket was sent to the state assembly, including to the Chief Minister (see box).

The Campaign got a boost when renowned scientist MS Swaminathan initiated the 'Women Farmers' Entitlements Bill, 2011<sup>10</sup>, as a private member bill in the Rajya Sabha<sup>11</sup>. The Bill resonated the demands made by the AAROH Campaign. It included demand for land rights for women farmers and their easy access to credit and institutions.

In the last nine years, the Campaign has come a long way. It engaged with over 9000 women farmers, brought the term 'women farmers' or '*mahila kisan*' into common parlance. It has mobilised 6800 men to share their land with their spouse and engaged with the government at both the local and the state level. The UP government in March 2015 initiated waiving off stamp duty during the transfer of land to spouse or next of kin. The decision now lies with a committee of the state revenue department, which is studying the financial implications of the waiver.

### 5 POINT DEMAND DOCKET SUBMITTED BY AAROH INCLUDED:

1. CO-OWNERSHIP OF AGRICULTURE LAND<sup>12</sup>
2. WAIVER OF STAMP DUTY ON LAND TRANSFERS WITHIN THE FAMILY (MOTHER, DAUGHTER, WIFE AND SISTER)<sup>13</sup>
3. MANDATING WOMEN FARMERS TO ACCESS CREDIT THROUGH THE HUSBAND'S KISAN CREDIT CARD (KCC)<sup>14</sup>
4. 33 PER CENT RESERVATION TO WOMEN FARMERS UNDER RELEVANT PROGRAMMES AND SCHEMES
5. 50 PER CENT RESERVATION IN GOVERNMENT AND AGRICULTURE-RELATED INSTITUTIONS.

# AAROH TIMELINE AND MILESTONES

**2006:** AAROH Campaign initiated in 5 GPs in 50<sup>15</sup> districts

**2006-07:** AAROH *Mahila Kisan Manch (MKM)* formed, in each GP, comprising 20-30 women farmers. State-level Steering Committee formed to provide strategic direction and leadership to the Campaign<sup>16</sup>; it meets twice annually

**2007:** *Padyatra*<sup>17</sup> held in 585 GPs across 50 districts. **43000 women** participated. **15000 men** came out in their support



**2007-08:** Women farmers become members of Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA)<sup>18</sup> board; **currently, 32 AAROH MKM members are ATMA board members in 23 districts.** Discussions on giving legal recognition to women farmers begin. Joint land titles become talking point

**2011:** 7500 women farmers participate in *padyatra* and send letters demanding joint land titles



**2010-11:** Oxfam India trains women farmers on Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 and other land acts. *Jan Sunwais*<sup>19</sup> held and fact-finding report on the status of women farmers shared with the government

**2009:** 6800 men petition Revenue Officer through a signature campaign demanding ease of transfer of land titles into joint titles. First women farmers' Parliament held in the state

**2008:** Faizabad DM issues executive order that the wife should be a co-signatory, in presence of a magistrate, in any land sale; the order continues to be applicable in the district

**2012:** MS Swaminathan felicitates **3 AAROH members**<sup>20</sup>, for their contribution to food production

**2012-13:** *Vidhayak Samvaad Yatra* (Dialogue with the MLAs) organised. **25 MLAs** issue a statement accepting and supporting the Campaign

**2013-14:** Women's property rights campaign organised by Oxfam India, across six states<sup>21</sup>. **110,000 women farmers** participate in '*Hal Nikalo*' (walk to claim the plough) campaign in UP

**2014:** UN declares International Year of Family Farming. Over **100,000 farmers send a letter with 2 demands** to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon — these are a call to observe Women Farmer's Day and demand to declare National and International awards for women farmers

**2016:** Membership of AAROH *Mahila Kisan Manch* reaches **9615 women**



**2015:** Two *Jan Sunwais* organised with independent commission members and district administration. UP government initiates waiving off stamp duty on transfer of land titles to joint titles

**2014:** Independent People's Commission on Women Farmers Recognition<sup>22</sup> formed to analyse status of women farmers through regional and state-level public hearing and consultations

**2014:** Kushinagar DM, issues executive order similar to the one issued by Faizabad. However, it is opposed and the High Court stays the order. Two rallies are organised— '*Gram Sabha to Vidhan Sabha Yatra*' (walk from the Gram Sabha to the state assembly) and '*Hal Nikalo Yatra*'

# THE MAKING OF AAROH CAMPAIGN

**हम है भूमिजा; हम है शैलजा;  
हमको नहीं किसान का दर्जा**

*(We are daughter of the land; we are daughter of the mountain, we don't have the status of a farmer)*

"We do all the work on the field. If we don't, the men will be unable to farm on their own. So why aren't we farmers?" asks Leelavati. Sixty-year old Leelavati of Bantara village in Shahjahanpur is fondly called 'cyclewaali'. At 60, she cycles for about ten kilometres daily to the *sabzi mandi*<sup>23</sup>, to sell her vegetables, hence the sobriquet.

Associated with the Campaign since 2006, Leelavati became the first woman farmer in the state to be awarded the *Kisan Samman* in 2014. She personifies the ethos of the AAROH Campaign that it set out to achieve, i.e. social and legal recognition of women farmers.

Like all women farmers in India, she worked in her husband's field growing paddy, wheat and potatoes. After becoming a part of the AAROH *Mahila Manch*, she developed her own vegetable plot. Leelavati grows organic vegetable as a conscious choice (unless there is a severe pest attack when she is forced to use pesticides). She grows a range of vegetables including bitter gourd, water gourd, mustard, peas, apart from crops like groundnut and maize. She convinced her husband to transfer the land in their joint names. She purchased a plot and registered it in the name of one of the daughters-in-law. She plans to do the same for her other two daughters-in-law.

When AAROH Campaign was initiated, the emphasis was on providing social recognition to women farmers so that they could own agricultural land, access institutional credit, new technologies and relevant government programmes. Each of the regional NGOs started work in 10 districts (it later became 14 districts after a few of them were bifurcated). The Campaign was built through innumerable meetings with farmers (men and women) and government officials by way of *padyatras*, signature campaigns, petitions to the Chief Minister and other legislators, and public hearings.

The first few years were spent in socialising the idea among people that women who were engaged in farming were farmers. The first task was to convince the women themselves. "Women thought of themselves as nothing more than agriculture labourers. They had to be told they were farmers and that the Campaign was about getting them the social recognition," says Neelam Prabhat, Campaign Coordinator, AAROH Campaign.

The NGOs were already working with women Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the districts prior to 2006. Though it was easier to bring them together for the Campaign, some women did face resistance. Nirmala and Saroj of Patni village in Saharanpur, for instance, became victims of domestic violence when they wanted to attend the meetings. "Since men resisted, they were made a part of the campaign. We invited them to *Pati-Patni Sammelans*<sup>24</sup>," recalls KN Tiwari, director, *Disha Samajik Sansthan*.

Many meetings were held. Women farmers then came together under the banner of AAROH *Mahila Kisan Manch*. "Earlier when we met, it was about collecting and managing money. But the *Manch* was informative. We became aware that we were not benefiting from many schemes because we were not socially recognised as farmers," says Shanti Devi, a member of the *Manch* from Ambedkar Nagar district. The *Manch* meets regularly every month.

Apart from these monthly meetings, the *padyatra* was also strategic for the Campaign. 43000 women farmers walking together

on the streets, some of them driving bullock carts made for good impact. "Men were shocked to see women drive bullock carts, then. They still remember it. Men realised that we were indeed farmers," says Suresho. Popularly known as the 'tractor lady', for being the first and perhaps the only woman driving a tractor in and around her village, Suresho is a *Manch* member from Saharanpur.

The *padyatra* brought the women farmers into the spotlight. The agriculture department took note of the Campaign and provided farm tools and implements at subsidised rates to women farmers. They were also identified for exposure visits to agriculture universities in Delhi (Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi) and Uttarakhand (G B Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar). In the media, terms like '*mahila kisan*' or 'women farmer' gained currency and women farmers received invitations for televised panel discussions on agriculture on Doordarshan (the government-sponsored television channel)<sup>25</sup>.

The Campaign then advocated for decision-making roles for women farmers in different agriculture forums/ government bodies like ATMA. Oxfam India trained partner NGOs on building linkages with government schemes and ensuring last-mile delivery for women farmers. Workshops dealt with women land laws, *Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana* (RKVY) and sustainable agriculture practices.

Some successes include women farmers on the board of ATMA and as members of *Kisan Club* or farmers club – an initiative by NABARD<sup>26</sup>. These have traditionally been an all-male bastion. For instance, in Saharanpur, 13 women farmers are now part of the 25-member *Kisan Club*. "Earlier, we went to the agriculture department seeking information about schemes. But, the Campaign changed that. Now, the officials come and inform us about the different schemes," says Chandravati, a member from Sant Kabir Nagar district. They have been invited to attend Rabi and Kharif *Goshtis*<sup>27</sup>.

**सौ में सत्तर काम हमारे, लिखो बही में नाम हमारे**

*(We do seventy out of hundred work, include our names in the deeds)*

Though women farmers were able to access institutional credit by getting their names included in the KCC, this was possible in districts with a receptive administration. Land ownership remained a hurdle. Only those who owned land were eligible to access institutional credit and inputs. With this in mind, in 2009, the Campaign began advocating for joint land titles.

The idea appealed to women farmers on two counts. For one, if there was a joint title, the husband would have to take the wife's



consent before executing a sale. On many occasions, alcoholic husbands sold off the land without the knowledge of their wives. And two, in the event of their husbands migrating for work, they would be able to access institutional credit and inputs to improve farm productivity.

Subsequently, the district magistrates of Kushinagar and Faizabad issued executive orders favouring joint land titles and mandated that the wife be a co-signatory in any land sale. Speaking on the basis of anecdotal evidence, Neelam recalls that after the order, there was a substantial fall in the sale of land. Men resisted, fearing losing land and authority to their wives. Meetings were held to convince men that equal rights to women would ensure benefits to family. As a result, the men participated in a signature campaign demanding joint land titles.

The Campaign broke several myths. One of them was regarding the use of ploughs. Women farmers weren't traditionally allowed to use the plough. But after the 'Hal Nikalo' Campaign, many women started ploughing the fields. The 'hal' or the 'plough' was used as a symbol to reinforce women's recognition as farmers. Women

farmers took control of their farm, homestead land and the *Mandi*. For women who hardly ventured out, this was a big step. This also improved nutrition, the children's education and augmented their income.

As they say now...

**महिला भी किसान है, यही देश की शान है**

The *Manch* members meet every month and their discussions range from solving land disputes and demanding equal farm wages to improving children's studies and ending domestic violence. Men also approach the members of the *Manch*, to resolve their problems; the women happily oblige.

"The Campaign was a success with both women and men farmers because it moved from livelihoods to rights. Through these years, the presence of women farmers in claiming their demands and their presence on agriculture boards, across the state, have increased. What we need now is a change in both state and central laws to ensure that women farmers get equal rights and a level playing field," says Shiraz A Wajih, president, GEAG board.

## NOTES

- 1 Uttarakhnad, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam
- 2 <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/land-their-own>
- 3 Agriculture census 2010-11
- 4 Uttarakhnad has the highest migration rate at about 53 per cent
- 5 It is important to note that the farmer suicide data only includes farmers with land titles
- 6 Catch News: 100,000 women, 10 years, one demand: let us own our farmland; Sabita Parida & Savvy Soumya Misral 2 October 2015
- 7 Women farmers in Uttar Pradesh- A Survey [October 2006]; Survey partners Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG), Vinobha Sewa Ashram (VSA), Disha Samajik Sansthan, Pani Sansthan, and Samarpan Jan Kalyan Samiti; Supported by Oxfam India Trust (Lucknow)
- 8 Of the 50 districts that AAROH initially began work in a few of them got bifurcated and the total number of districts became 70
- 9 Bundelkhand is a mountain range in Central India; the hilly region lies both in UP and MP. The larger region lies in MP; the Campaign was carried out in UP's Bundelkhand region
- 10 AS INTRODUCED IN THE RAJYA SABHA ON THE 11TH MAY, 2012 Bill No. LV of 2011 THE WOMEN FARMERS' ENTITLEMENTS BILL, 2011; [https://kractivist.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/women-farmers-bill-2012\\_english.pdf](https://kractivist.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/women-farmers-bill-2012_english.pdf) [as viewed on 2 Nov 2015]
- 11 Rajya Sabha or the Council of States is the Upper House of the Indian Parliament
- 12 Joint in the name of both husband & wife in land records, *Khatoni* (land deeds) & *jot-bahi* (cultivation rights)
- 13 For instance in Uttar Pradesh, the stamp duty stands at 6 per cent. When a land is registered in a man's name,

- he pays 8 per cent as registration fee (in case land is registered in the woman's name, the registration fee is 6 per cent, and in case of joint title it is seven). If he wants to transfer the land in his wife's name or include her name, which can only be through a sale deed, he will now have to shell out an additional 6 per cent for half of his land
- 14 The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) scheme introduced in August 1998 has emerged as an innovative credit delivery mechanism to meet the production credit requirements of the farmers in a timely and hassle-free manner. The scheme is under implementation in the entire country by the vast institutional credit framework involving Commercial Banks, RRBs and Cooperatives and has received wide acceptability amongst bankers and farmers
- 15 Of the 50 districts that AAROH initially began work in a few of them got bifurcated and the total number of districts became 70
- 16 The committee comprises of Oxfam India, GEAG and the four partner organisations. GEAG is the nodal organisation.
- 17 *Padyatra* is a foot march undertaken by groups to interact closely with the different parts of society, educate about issues concerning them, and galvanize their supporters
- 18 ATMA is a registered society responsible for technology dissemination at district level. It is a focal point for integrating research extension and marketing. It has decentralized day to day management of the Agricultural Technology System (ATS). It allows receiving and expanding project funds, entering into contracts and agreements and maintaining revolving accounts. It also has linkages with all the line departments, research organizations, non-government organisations and organisations associated with agricultural development in the districts. Each ATMA has a governing board. The district collector is the chairman of the board of the ATMA while other district level officials from the agricultural,

- veterinary, fishery etc department and farmers as members. Woman representative are also included. The board members take all discussion concerning programme planning resource allocation. (<http://agropedia.iitk.ac.in/content/agriculture-technology-management-agency-atma>; as viewed on 2 Nov 2015)
- 19 *Jan Sunwais* means Public Hearings
- 20 Apart from 10 women farmers Bihar, Uttarakhnad, Odisha and Maharashtra
- 21 The campaign was held in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Delhi and Gujarat to raise awareness among the community, policy makers, and the urban middle class
- 22 Members of Independent Commission: Kanchan Sinha (active in women's movement since 1984 and involved with AAROH from the very beginning). The Commission comprised lawyers, rights activists, academics and journalist like Rajendra Prasad Mangain (professor at Giri Institute of Development Institute, Lucknow), Ramesh Bhaiyya (leader of land rights movement and founder of Vinobha Sewa Ashram), Jayant Verma (senior advocate), Govind Kelkar (women's rights activists), Aadiyog (journalist)
- 23 A wholesale vegetable market
- 24 A meeting of husbands and wives
- 25 Doordarshan is autonomous India's Central Government founded public service broadcaster, a division of Prasar Bharati. It is one of India's largest broadcasting organisations in terms of studio and transmitter infrastructure
- 26 Farmers' Club is a grassroots level informal forum. Such Clubs are organised by rural branches of banks, NGOs and KVKS etc. with support and financial assistance from NABARD for mutual benefit of banks and the farmers
- 27 These are important consultative process for seasonal agricultural planning and discussions on various schemes and benefits for farmers

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