



India's "animal friends"



INDIA

Madhya Pradesh, India – In a remote and hilly area of India's central Madhya Pradesh State, the village of Sad has some 350 homes with backyard poultry and goats – a mainstay of livelihoods here. Selling a few chickens in the local market fetches good money. But repeated waves of poultry deaths, caused by viral infections, have too often left villagers struggling to make ends meet. Most often New Castle Disease has been the culprit, wiping away entire flocks.

"Chicken mortality was as high as 75 percent," says Prem Thakur of Sampark, an Indian NGO implementing a project to prevent future losses from disease. "Our *murgi sakhis*, a Hindi word that translates as 'chicken's friend', are in fact local women trained in basic veterinarian skills for poultry. Since their trainings, they have reduced the chicken mortality rate to around 40 percent," Thakur says. The project was a joint initiative of FAO and the National Dairy Development Board of India, with additional support from IFAD and the Ford Foundations.

Things have indeed changed since the *murgi sakhis* started vaccination and de-worming work about a year ago. Pushpa, a local villager says, "The deaths have gone down. I had just two *murgis* (hens) before but now I have 15. And we no longer have to borrow money because we can sell the chickens in the local market."

Dittu Bai Parmar, of the Patelia tribe, is a much sought after *murgi sakhi* in Sad and neighbouring areas. A secondary school graduate, she underwent a five-day residential training programme along with 16 other *sakhis*. Dittu Bai attributes the fall in poultry mortality mainly to the vaccination and deworming work

carried out by the *murgi sakhis*, and learning a few good management protocols.

The on-call animal friends

If anyone in Sad or neighbouring areas has a sick fowl Dittu Bai is readily available on a mobile phone. "When I visit a village for deworming or other treatment I also tell them about the next vaccination dates." Dittu Bai's rates for vaccination or de-worming services are as low as two rupees or a little above US\$ 0.03 per fowl.

Dittu Bai also doubles as a *pashu sakhi* ('animal's friend' – local women trained in basic livestock health care) and can treat other livestock that earn her ten rupees (US\$ 0.16) per animal. Now Dittu Bai and the others earn 1 500 to 2 000 rupees (US\$ 25-35) per month. Not a large sum by city standards but, as she says, "I don't have to go to the moneylender when it's time to buy books or school uniforms for the children or for treatment of small ailments."

From chicken to mutton

In Jharnia, some 200 kms from Indore city, goat rearing is in full swing. This sub-district ranks among the poorest in the country. Here the *pashu sakhis* are rewriting the rules of the village economy. As with

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poultry, the procedure is the same, vaccination and de-worming of goats and managing a few food and health issues. These activities have led to a sharp decline in goat mortality. "Before our intervention, goat mortality was 35 percent. It's now down to four percent," says Bharat Mogre, who heads the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, FAO's implementing partner.

At Saka village's primary school a meeting with a group of *pashu sakhis* is revealing. Neema Bai, of the indigenous *Bhil* community, explains how she goes about her work in the village and neighbouring areas. "When a goat is sick in the village they inform me and I attend to the animal. People from neighbouring villages often bring along their sick animals and I treat them," she says. She often goes around the village meeting with groups of women and speaking to them about how to keep their goats healthy. "Earlier they were indifferent. But now they come and listen to us. The villagers are more forthcoming in asking for treatment."

The meeting with the *pashu sakhis* is interrupted by a bunch of goats being herded back home by a local man who peeps in. Does he find the *pashu sakhis* helpful? The villager breaks into a toothy smile, "Yes they help us with the medicines and vaccines. Now very few of our goats die." Jamuna Bai, an elderly woman in the village agrees, "Ever since they started treatment the animals are not falling sick."

Inspirational and replicable

The work of another local woman, Shruti Bai as a *murgi sakhi*, made her so popular with fellow

villagers in Sad that she successfully ran in local elections and now leads the village council. Taking advantage of her poultry rearing technology her husband has bought some 400 chicks of "Kadakhnath", a rare indigenous breed that fetches a high price. When matured, this black chicken has unique high protein-low fat qualities. Selling their flock for an average of 500 rupees a piece, Shruti Bai and her husband have earned over two hundred thousand rupees (around \$3 500) – a fortune in local terms.

Following the *pashu sakhi* interventions the goat population has shot up in Jhirniya, where a healthy goat can fetch around 7 000 rupees (US\$ 110). That extra money comes in handy for meeting critical regular family expenses. Moreover, feeding children on goat milk ensures better nutrition.

The project's success is now being replicated. From the initial ten villages, Sampark was expanding its outreach to 330 villages with the help of a funding agency. This time they will train both men and women to take care of the poultry and goats. Nilesh Desai, who heads Sampark says, "People have now begun looking at poultry as a commercial venture. After farming and labour-migration, it's become the third option for income generation."

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ACHIEVING FAO'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Helping to eliminate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition while increasing the resilience of livelihoods to disasters and enabling inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems are three of FAO's strategic objectives in achieving a food-secure world.

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