

Kindling entrepreneurial dreams in rural India

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“Mother’s tension has eased out,” says 18-year-old Karuna Chavan from Nanose village in Raigarh district, about two-and-half hours away from Mumbai.

Kneading the dough and rolling out paper-thin methi, moong dal, and nanchni khakras, Chavan says that since the last three years, her daily income of about ₹80 is a blessing for her six-member family. “I am confident that my three younger brothers will be able to complete their education and my mother will be able to relish two-square meals a day,” says Chavan, who dropped out of school after class VII due to financial problems and a jobless alcoholic father.

“Since I make khakras which are sold in Mumbai and Delhi, I am not just earning an income, but also preparing myself to start my own snacks business some day,” she says.

Like Chavan, who has been rolling khakras since she was 15, Kanta More from Gotawada village is also thankful to her khakra-making skills which help her run her family. With a paralysed husband, aged in-laws and two school-going children, More used to scout every construction site and farm in search of a job. Destiny introduced her to Jyotsna Shah, who was running a khakra business in Parli village for rural women. In Shah’s 350-sq ft room, More found not just a regular source of income, but also a women-friendly environment away from the hazards of a con-



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struction site.

“My timings are 9 am to 5:30 pm like any jobs in Mumbai. The security in Jyotsnabai’s room is something we village women otherwise can’t dream of,” says More.

More and Chavan are part of a group of about 25 village women working under Shah’s guidance doling out khakras which are sold in metros at departmental stores and supermarkets, under the “Chaakri” brand. Started in 2007 with two village girls, the venture is part of Shramik Naari Sangh (SaNiSa), a socio-economic development initiative by a spiritual organisation, Shrimad Rajchandra Gyan Ashram.

“The idea is to promote entrepreneurship amongst rural women by enhancing their skills in making snacks. They not only become confident, but can even think of starting their own little food ventures with this experience,” says Simi Thapar, trustee, SaNiSa.

Shah says there are absolutely

no employment avenues for these rural women, who at times manage to get some labour work and then end up pulling their older kids out of school to look after the house while they work in the heat carrying heavy bricks.

“Four years ago, we started with half kg of khakra per day and after four months roped in more women and increased production,” says Shah, adding that initially it took four months for the women to perfect their khakra-making skills.

“Since most women are Maharashtra, we had to acquaint them with making the dough, rolling and baking the khakras on the tava. Today, our women teach the new entrants,” says Shah.

From half kg per day, today the group makes 50-55 kg of 15 flavours of khakra daily, in addition to banana wafers, wheat laddoo, papads as per order, all of which is sold under the Chaakri brand.

SaNiSa also offers performance incentives to its women, by giving them ₹12 per extra kg of khakra, in addition to the ₹80 they earn for making 6 kg per day.

“This incentive brings out the best in them. Several women end up earning ₹300-400 more per month due to their extra efforts,” says Shah.

Thapar says SaNiSa aims at having 100-150 women under its banner in the next six to eight months after setting up a full factory. “We have an export licence and would look at selling overseas once our production increases.”