

CASE STUDY: PASKELI BAI

Paskeli Bai studied up to the 8th grade, the highest level of education her village offered when she was an adolescent girl. She married at 20 years, which was rather unusual in those days because girls in her village typically married at a much younger age. Paskeli Bai's husband, elder to her by six years, completed through 12th grade and works as a teacher in a private school, earning Rs. 6000 per month.

The couple do not have any children. Inability to conceive depressed Paskeli Bai initially, but she did not allow that to hamper her life. Fortunately, her husband was compassionate and the lack of children did not result in the negative outcomes that many women face, for example in abandonment or abuse due to their infertility. Together, they decided to work for the welfare of their fellow villagers.



QUICK FACTS

Paskeli Bai is married with no children and is a Vaagdhara self-help group (SHG) member and of their *Annapurnas*. Paskeli Bai lives in a remote village in Banswara district, located 53 km from the district headquarters. Her village has 209 households and a population of 939 people, 93 per cent of whom are tribal.

Annapurnas, or community nutrition advocates (CNAs), are SHG members selected and trained by Vaagdhara for promoting health and nutrition

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Paskeli Bai sits, lost in her thoughts—possibly thinking of all the ways that she can change her community for the better.

People in Paskeli Bai’s village depend mostly on small-holder farming and are poor because of small land holdings and lack of irrigation facilities. The village pond, which used to be filled with water now, lies dry much of the year.



Dry pond in Jhikali village



Dry and parched lands of Jhikali village

As a result, farmers grow dry land crops, such as, maize, pulses (lentils), and cotton. Paskeli Bai’s family are marginal farmers and own just one acre of land, on which they grow maize and pulses. To supplement the family income, Paskeli Bai runs a small shop, which, on average, nets Rs. 80 per day, and she saves Rs. 100 per month with her self-help group (SHG). To promote her business, Paskeli Bai sells goods in her shop to her SHG mates on credit.

Before joining Vaagdhara as a CNA, Paskeli Bai worked with Sampurna Jeevan Vikas Samiti (SJVS), an NGO based in Banswara that focuses on education, women’s empowerment, livelihood creation, and agriculture. Her duties included attending SHG meetings and maintaining their books, in addition to promoting the developmental schemes of SJVS. She also taught community members how to do organic farming. This assignment came to an end when SJVS project was closed.

IMPROVING WOMEN’S HEALTH: THE RAJASTHAN NUTRITION PROJECT

Under the Rajasthan Nutrition Project (RNP), community nutrition advocates, termed *Annapurnas* by Vaagdhara, facilitated conversations with the local self-help groups on nutrition, maternal and child health, hygiene, and gender-equitable resource management.

The Rajasthan Nutrition Project is a collaboration of Grameen Foundation USA, Freedom from Hunger India Trust, Pradan, CHETNA and Vaagdhara.

AN OUTSTANDING ANNAPURNA WHO WALKED THE EXTRA MILE

Paskeli Bai impressed the Vaagdhara field staff with her confidence and communication skills. They saw in her the potential to be a good facilitator and offered to train her as a CNA, which she readily accepted as she did not have any job on hand at that time.

Paskeli Bai felt motivated to join as CNA because she liked the idea of teaching the SHG members about health. Empowering women and improving their nutrition—and that of their families—are issues close to her heart. She liked the concept of all family members eating together and sharing food equitably. As a matter of fact, before RNP, she herself used to eat only after her husband finished eating. This habit changed when she attended the training of trainers (ToTs) conducted by CHETNA and started eating along with her husband

In response to whether she had to take her husband's permission to become a CNA, she responded saying that it took some time to convince her husband. He was apprehensive initially, particularly when she had to go out of her village to attend the trainings. Being a woman of grit, she persisted with him and finally got his approval.

Paskeli Bai liked the trainings conducted by CHETNA. She was most impressed by the way the trainees sat in a circle as against the convention of sitting in rows. She felt the circular seating dispensed with hierarchy and enabled all the participants to feel equal. Her performance as a trainee and as CNA surpassed most others. Paskeli Bai thinks her SJVS experience helped her to perform better.

When asked what changes she would like to improve trainings, Paskeli Bai suggested that new topics should be introduced, such as, how to negotiate with husband and make him give up drinking. She also advocates for using different methodologies, such as, plays, skits, folk dances, and so on. Paskeli Bai prefers to have the ToTs in her village. In her opinion, it is very inconvenient for CNAs to go out of their village for trainings.



Circular seating dispenses with hierarchy

Paskeli Bai facilitating health lesson to SHG members

CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE FOR ADOLESCENTS

Paskeli Bai has several achievements as a CNA to her credit. After receiving training on maternal, adolescent and child health, she felt the inputs of this training were vital for adolescent girls. She knew that girls in her area do not maintain the needed hygiene during menstruation. Their diet also is very poor during that period. In addition to delivering the lessons to SHG members during the group meetings, Paskeli Bai began convening adolescent girls in her village, along with their mothers, to tell them about the importance of using sanitary napkins and to consume nutritious food. She taught them to include locally available nutritious foods, such as, green vegetables, lentil sprouts, seasonal fruits, milk and milk products. She also advised them to consume iron folic acid tablets. She has succeeded in changing the habits of several adolescent girls through such counselling.

Paskeli Bai is a big advocate of *Poshan Wadis* (kitchen gardens). She brought together SHG members and the management committees of several schools to educate them on the importance of nutritious food for children and the need for improving the nutrition of the meals provided to children by the schools. She convinced several schools to utilise their open spaces for growing vegetables. With the help of the other SHG members and the motivated school children, she promoted the practice of cultivating of *Poshan Wadis*. The vegetables thus grown were used for preparing the mid-day meals in the schools.

BREAKING BAD HABITS (AND THE PATRIARCHY)

Alcohol abuse was a common problem among the husbands of SHG members in Paskeli Bai's area. Liquor vendors would sell liquor on credit, which encouraged men to drink more. Paskeli Bai encouraged SHG members to avail internal loaning and wipe clean their husbands' liquor debt. She then approached the liquor vendors and insisted that they no longer sell liquor on credit to husbands of SHG members.

One SHG member often suffered physical abuse from her husband, who had a drinking problem. When he refused to allow his wife to attend SHG meetings, Paskeli Bai mobilised all the SHG members and held the monthly group meeting in their house, upon which the husband angrily left the house. Paskeli Bai continued to hold the SHG meetings in his house. With her persistent efforts, the husband finally allowed his wife to attend SHG meetings.

Some CNAs could not attend out-station trainings because either their husbands or mothers-in-law did not let them go. Paskeli Bai took the initiative and explained to the husbands and mothers-in-law of such CNAs the useful work they were doing and convinced them to let their wife or daughter-in-law to attend outstation ToTs.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PASKELI BAI

Paskeli Bai has no plans to retire. She wants to continue and work in newer fields. She would like to visit Anganwadi centres and engage with the pregnant and lactating women, and she wants to meet CNA colleagues informally and discuss what they could do together for improving the health of women and children in their area. She would also like to promote immunisation by visiting houses of those who have newly born children and discussing with the mothers about their immunisation schedules.

Paskeli Bai strongly feels that a small stipend, as a recognition of her hard work and outstanding performance as a true "community nutrition advocate," would go a long way in performing even better.