

CASE STUDY: KANKURI BAI

We arrive at Kankuri Bai’s home, which is right off the concrete road, in the heat of the day, likely around 110 degrees (Celsius) given the trend over the last few days. She, her husband, a friend of her husband who lives up the hill, her friend who happens to be the agriculture community volunteer known locally as a *Hariyali Bai*, and several of her children greet us as we exit our car. To our right is a small green structure that at one point served as a chicken coup,



though it is empty as all the hens have died because of the intense heat—so Kankuri thinks. Next to the chicken coup is a small pen of goats. **One goat pokes its nose out the fence to greet us.** A small girl hangs onto a pole over the goat pen, watching as we move toward the house.

Kankuri’s home is a concrete structure, with three to four leather-woven cots, that either are beds or resting areas on the porch. We stay here, under the shade of the roof, to meet and talk with Kankuri and her family. I imagine her family sleeping here at night, anticipating any cool breeze that might pass through to provide relief from the day’s heat.

QUICK FACTS

Kankuri Bai is married with 7 children and is a Pradan self-help group member. Kankuri lives in a small village of 500 households approximately 27 KM on a winding one-way, concrete road from Abu Road, the nearest town.

Abu Road is the largest city in the Sirohi District of southern Rajasthan, and home to approximately 56,000 people.

Case study author: Bobbi Gray, Grameen Foundation USA





A few of her children are observing the conversation, standing on the other side of ledge that marks the parameter of the porch area. Kankuri has seven children: three boys and four girls. Her four oldest—a 12th, 9th, 8th, and 7th grader—are being boarded for free at the school they attend a little over 27 km away. When we arrived, they'd all arrived for a summer break.

WORKING HARD TO EARN A LIVING

Kankuri begins her story four years ago, prior to joining a self-help group (SHG) with Pradan, when she gathered and sold firewood every day in Abu Road. When the road was made impassable during the rainy season, she would climb over the hill and down into Abu Road 27 km away, carrying about 20 kg (44 pounds) of wood. Despite her heavy burden, she might earn about Rs. 10-12 (less than US \$0.25).

As a member of Pradan, Kankuri no longer gathers and sells firewood in the market. Her product of choice is now the home-grown vegetable. Now, when she carries 20 kg of tomatoes to the market, she estimates she can earn Rs. 150 (\$2.30) for each 20 kg. Now, she travels to Abu Road about every other day to sell her vegetables. In her basket, she might carry chilies, gourds (squash), ladyfinger (okra), green gram (a type of green lentil), and several other vegetables, depending on the time of the year. When the market is high, Kankuri might earn Rs. 1,000 per day; when the market is low, maybe Rs. 300–400 a day. If she sells her vegetables to a wholesaler who travels to her village, she might earn Rs. 400–600, but if she sits and sells her own produce in the Abu Road market—usually between 7 and 12 in the morning, before it gets too hot—Kankuri can bring in as much as Rs. 1200–1300 (\$20).

IMPROVING WOMEN'S HEALTH: THE RAJASTHAN NUTRITION PROGRAM

Under the Rajasthan Nutrition Program (RNP), community nutrition volunteers, known locally as a *Shakti Bai*, 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, Chetna, Pradan, and Vaagdhara.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CHANGES SEEN

When asked about the recent health education she received from her *Shakti Bai*, Kankuri recounts that her favorite parts were learning about hygiene and the importance of availing of the services at the ICDS center (Integrated Child Development Services) such as the food provisions, immunizations, and early childhood education that are all free of cost to her family through the government. She appreciated the information on iron and folic acid tablets and how this helps “increase blood” for women, young girls, and children. (Locally, doctors talk about anemia and low-iron as “not having enough blood” since the concept of minerals and vitamins is often hard to convey.)

In addition, Kankuri remembers the messages about the importance of institutional delivery and the importance of breastfeeding in the first hour of birth. With her older children, she gave them goat's milk soon after birth, and institutional birth is a relatively new reality for women in her village. It was only 12 years ago that the road to her village was built. Prior to that, they'd have to seek the support of several villagers to carry a pregnant woman on a cloth up and down the mountain slopes to reach the nearest “institution.” Needless to say, institutional birth was quite uncommon until the road was built, and out of her seven children, only one was born in an institution.

One key message provided by Pradan and Vaagdhara was the expectation that by the end of the RNP project husbands and wives would eat more meals together. During the initial research, despite common knowledge that women in India often eat last and least, it was discovered that men were unaware of what their wives ate and assumed they ate at least as much as they did. National statistics in India indicate that at least 1 in 2 women will be anemic due to poor diets while the rate for men is almost half of that. Therefore, promoting all household members to eat at least one meal a day, together, in the presence of each other, was one tactic to improve equitable distribution of food. Anecdotes suggest that while women are the ones to prepare the meals that consist of proteins and nutrient-rich vegetables, they will often share these with their husbands first and then their children, and they might only consume the sauce and rice left-behind—often unaware of the consequence this has on her own health.



Asked whether they ate their meals together, Kankuri's husband shyly smiled, waiting for her to answer the question. He then shared, "I usually sit twice a day with my family, but I miss some meals because I do agriculture labor." Kankuri shared that before, maybe her husband would not even have sat in the circle we now sit in as a group. She smiles as she looks at him and says, "If he comes home drunk, we don't eat together. Once in a while, when a person is drinking, it is tough, but those who don't drink will eat together."



Kankuri continued, "Last year, the SHGs in this area made the decision to fight the drinking. We demanded that the local government close down the shops selling alcohol." She continued to describe how the fight would sometimes escalate. "I heard there was a man selling alcohol. The SHG members stripped him down, covered him in black soot, and made him roam the village." Since 2015, each year 7000–8000 SHG women come together at the federation level and perform a skit on alcohol at the community level. Every 4th of March, the federation of SHGs comes up with issues they want to address. This past year, they decided on growing SHG membership. Since March 2017, they have seen 200 new SHGs built already in only a few months.

Kankuri's friend, the *Hariyali Bai* (at left), shared about her role in the community. She mobilizes the SHGs to plant maize in rows. "In the past," she says, "we used to just throw the seed out across the soil." The *Hariyali Bai* smiles, "I want to see everything green. We used to not intercrop, but now with maize, we've learned to intercrop

with black gram and pigeon pea." (Black gram is a type of black lentil bean that is known for its curative properties for digestive or nervous system issues and diabetes. Pigeon pea is a drought-resistant pea that resembles the black-eyed pea and is a great source of protein.)

When we ask Kankuri and her husband what they do to earn income, we learn that the household income really comes from the vegetables they grow on their land. While maize and wheat are often considered a cash crop, for Kankuri's family, maize and wheat are primarily grown for their own consumption. They also raise and sell some livestock. If they raise a goat, they can earn up to Rs. 10,000 for a goat (\$155). Used to, a butcher would come to their village and purchase livestock without weighing and just dictate the price. With Pradan's work in the area, they are trying to build stronger linkages with buyers to ensure better and fair prices for the farmers.

Does Kankuri have a mobile phone? Yes. Does her husband? No. Kankuri has a phone primarily to keep up with her children who spend so much of their time boarded at school.

When we ask Kankuri what has been the most important change in her life as a result of being a Pradan SHG member, she shares, "I used to not leave the house. My husband wouldn't let me leave. Now, I go to my SHG meetings, I go to the cluster meetings, I go to the Federation meetings. I'm doing good for the family." While she may be illiterate, she can now sign her name. This is why education is important to her. We turn our attention to her children, who've been listening to this exchange with great interest. We ask each of them what they want to be when they grow up? Lady doctor. Police officer. Teacher.

THE PROOF IS IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN



The end of our visit is the most exciting. Kankuri takes us on a tour of her land to show us the variety of fruits and vegetables she is currently growing. First, the *Hariyali Bai* shows us one of the local water sources they use for irrigation and community water needs. At first, it looks like a random white pipe sticking out of the ground, but then she puts her lips on the pipe and sucks in, and spits out water. This is one of the projects Pradan helped support so that there would be local water sources for the agricultural work in the area.

We then walk through a narrow pathway built through a line of cacti that serve as an improvised fence line. We take care to ensure that the needles do not snag our clothing. Kankuri shows us some of the green gram, black gram, ladyfinger, and chilies growing on her land. In the background is a massive mango tree heavy with unripened mango. When asked whether she sells the mangos, she responds, "No, we eat them. Others in the village will eat them as well." (We later learned of a superstition that if you sell mangos, the tree will not bear fruit the next year. So, the families living around the tree will simply eat what they can.) We also learn that Kankuri has newly planted, with Pradan's support, pomegranite and guava trees. Her land is also sporting a tall tree with clusters of dates, promoted through the RNP as a fruit high in iron.



Kankuri walks with confidence through the various plots of land, naming the fruits and vegetables. At one point, she invites me to join her and the *Hariyali Bai* in a photo to show off her crops. It is one of the first times I have ever been asked to take a photo, as I am usually behind the camera asking for permission to take photographs. She suggests we all lean down and grab one of the leaves to show off her coming harvest of vegetables.

We round off our visit at a greenhouse that has been built by Pradan to help promote the planting of tomatoes and other seedlings by Kankuri and other SHG members. Right now, the greenhouse is dry and void of anything growing, but once the rains start in June, she will plant tomatoes.



You cannot help feeling quite impressed with the diversity. I think about the variety of vegetables and fruits Kankuri is likely feeding her family throughout the day as well as the vegetables she is selling in the market. With the new information provided by the *Shakti Bais*, Kankuri likely considers the nutritional value of the foods prepared for herself and her children. She also ensures that other community members, as well, have access to these nutritional vegetables and fruits are available in the market.

While the global community struggles with designs and concepts for nutrition-sensitive agriculture, it strikes you that one may have to look no further than Kankuri's farm. The support of her Pradan *Shakti Bai* has equipped Kankuri with the knowledge to understand the nutritional value of each plant on her farm. Her *Hariyali Bai* advises her and other community members on how to grow new and traditional plants in improved ways to ensure greater production. Kankuri has brought her agricultural life and nutritional needs together in a way that one hopes will result in a healthier family and a generation of family members who will carry on new traditions of agriculture and food consumption.

As we leave for the car, we all pause and take one more look across her land. In the *Hariyali Bai's* words, we "see everything green."

