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OFFTRACK: HOSHANGABAD

Flying in the Face of Flu

Tribal and Dalit women make a success story out of a poultry co-operative and fight the bird flu scare
By Ambreesh Mishra

Far from chickening out in the face of the bird flu scare, tribal and Dalit women of Hoshangabad's Kesla block have given proof of amazing business acumen to keep Sukhtawa Chicken afloat despite spiralling losses.

Even half a decade ago, Sukhtawa was just another rural idyll nestled deep in the verdant embrace of the Narmada valley. But that was before its impoverished but enterprising womenfolk hit on the idea of establishing a co-operative society to trade in poultry—a business dominated by big private players. Today, Sukhtawa Chicken is the most recognised poultry brand of Madhya Pradesh, with its products being sold from exclusive outlets across the state. Registered in 2001 under the Madhya Pradesh Mutually-Aided Co-operative Registration Act, the co-operative has augmented the household incomes of 375 women members by almost Rs 12,000 per annum, hauling them above the poverty line.

Then, just as things were beginning to look up, the threat of bird flu started looming closer home. First, reports filtered in of avian influenza outbreaks in the state and adjoining Maharashtra. Then, media obsession with the country's only High Security Animal Disease Lab in Bhopal further fanned public anxiety. With the widespread panic showing little signs of abating, co-operative members began thinking up potential new markets. Production, meanwhile, was cut from the peak of 1.2 lakh birds a month. "We decided that if we can't sell in the cities, we'll go to the villages, where bird flu isn't such a big dread," said Santari Bai, a tribal woman member. Vans loaded with chicken, they toured weekly haats and bazaars that dot the rural landscape. Though chicken sells cheaper in villages, the move has helped to partially dilute the losses.

The co-operative's poultry operation, a household occupation since 1991, isn't centralised. Around 100 to 150 birds are reared by every member in the backyards of their homes. Admittedly, many private players practise distributed production through contracted households, but difference is that the co-operative was formed by tribal women for their own livelihood—a profitable venture until 2004, when the bird flu surfaced, leading to a loss of around Rs 15 lakh. There will be losses this time around, too. Faced with a challenging future, the women are hoping the poultry industry is extended the tax exemption and subsidies available to agricultural activities. Else, they plan to take up commercial backyard goat rearing. "That's because we're far more flexible than others in the trade," said consultant veterinarian Harekrishna Deka.

PICTURE SPEAK

CO-OP QUEENS: Tribal women members of Sukhtawa chicken set off for the market