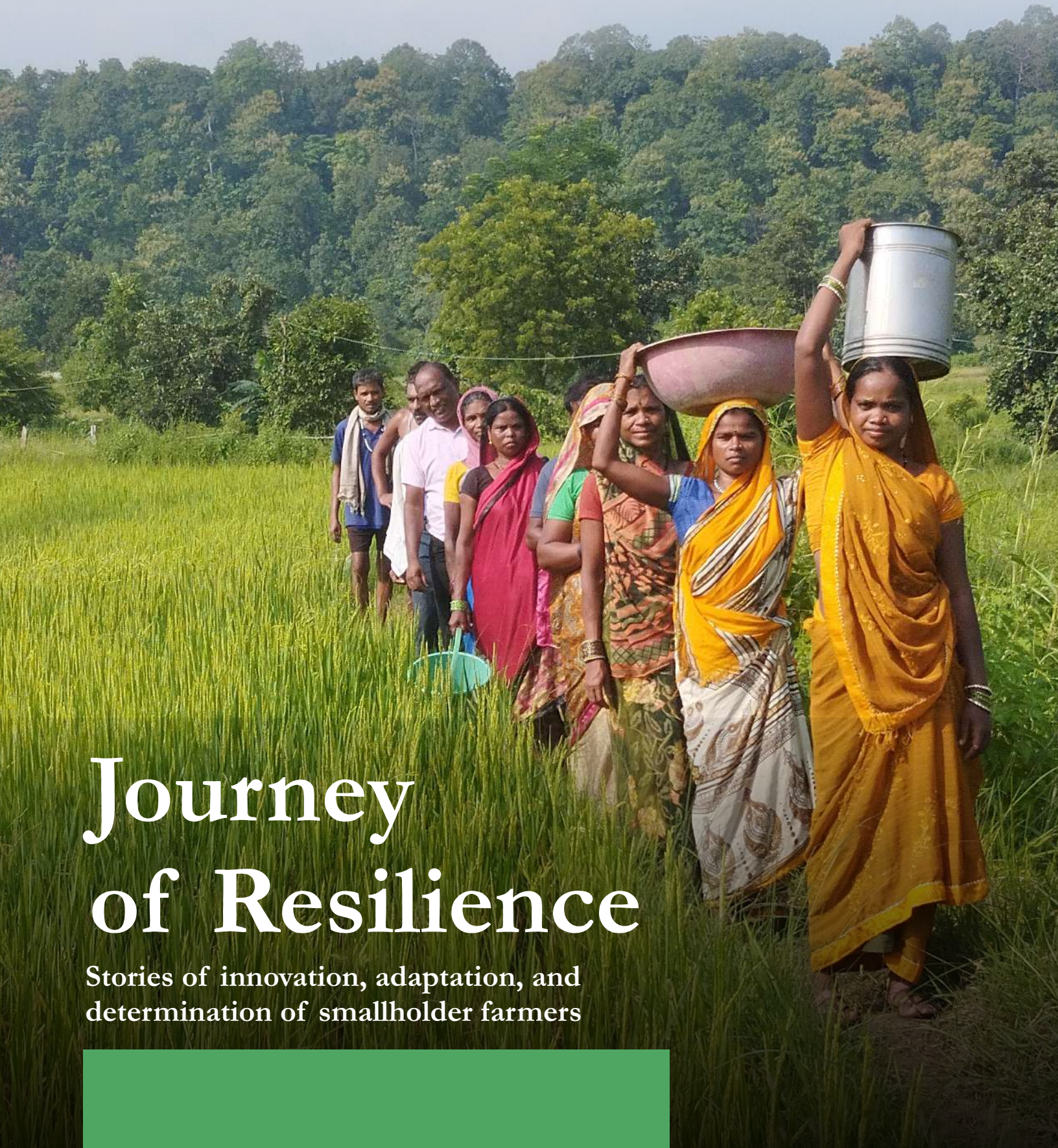


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Journey of Resilience

Stories of innovation, adaptation, and
determination of smallholder farmers





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determination of smallholder farmers

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Message

I am pleased to share **Journey of Resilience** a collection of powerful stories that capture the courage, perseverance, and innovation of smallholder farmers as they face the growing challenges of climate change. These narratives are more than just success stories; they reflect the strength of communities determined to reclaim control over their land, their livelihoods, and their future. It is a celebration of their journey towards sustainable and self-reliant farming, driven by knowledge, solidarity, and hope.

Today, climate resilience is not a choice but a necessity for smallholder farmers, who make up more than 80% of India's farming community and form the backbone of our food systems. Working with limited resources and vulnerable to every shift in weather, they are often the hardest hit by climate shocks. According to the Economic Survey of India (2022–23), farmers' incomes could fall by as much as 25% due to climate change, with rain-fed areas suffering the most. In Madhya Pradesh, this threat is deeply felt, with erratic rainfall, delayed monsoons, and rising temperatures becoming routine, leading to repeated crop losses and worsening debt for smallholders, particularly those dependent on monocropping and chemical-heavy methods.

In response to this urgent reality, Caritas India stands in solidarity with these 'warriors on farm', walking beside them as they strive to build resilience against the unpredictability of nature. Through SAFBIN, Caritas India is helping strengthen local knowledge systems and promote sustainable practices such as integrated nutrient management, crop diversification, and the revival of traditional seeds. These efforts are not just about increasing yields, but they are also about restoring dignity, deepening community ownership, and ensuring that farmers are equipped to face an uncertain climate with greater confidence. Caritas India remains firmly committed to supporting smallholders in this journey towards a resilient and secure agricultural future.

A word of heartfelt gratitude is due to Caritas Austria for its generous technical and financial support to the SAFBIN initiative. Their continued partnership and steadfast belief in the vision of farmer-led, climate-resilient agriculture have been instrumental in shaping SAFBIN's success on the ground.

FR. JESUDASS R.
Executive Director
Caritas India



Introduction

It is a stark irony that in India, the very farmers who feed the nation often suffer from hunger themselves. Over 80% of India's farmers are smallholders, cultivating less than two hectares of land, and they are among the worst affected by climate change. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events are leading to mounting crop losses and deteriorating soil health. Simultaneously, smallholder farmers face declining yields due to diminishing soil fertility, inadequate irrigation facilities and unsustainable farming practices.

Markets offer little relief either. Farmers seldom receive good returns for their produce, and agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides remain increasingly expensive. This leaves farmers squeezed from both sides. As a result, smallholder farmers in India battle on multiple fronts: climate stress, market volatility, inadequate support systems, and food and livelihood insecurity. Smallholder farmers in Madhya Pradesh, many of whom depend on rainfed agriculture, face growing challenges due to climate change. Erratic monsoons, delayed rainfall, high intensity rains, extended dry spells, and sudden weather extremes like unseasonal hail or heatwaves are increasingly threatening their crops and livelihoods. Since smallholder farmers lack any substantial safety net to protect their livelihoods and food security, building climate resilience becomes a critical imperative.

Smallholder Adaptive Farming and Biodiversity Network (SAFBIN) is a farmer centered initiative implemented by Caritas India and two partner organizations in collaboration with Caritas Austria in twenty villages in Sagar and Mandla districts of Madhya Pradesh. SAFBIN focuses on improving food and nutrition security, building climate resilience, and promoting sustainability among smallholder farmers through adaptive farming practices and integrated soil and water conservation. Caritas India adopted a farmer-led approach rooted in participatory solution-seeking, empowering communities to draw on their traditional knowledge and co-create sustainable, locally relevant solutions grounded in indigenous farming systems and lived experiences.

Another distinguishing feature of SAFBIN was its

recognition of farmers as scientists in their own right. True to this perspective, farmers were seen not only as resilient cultivators but also as custodians of deep, experience-based wisdom. Their tenacity in the face of adversity is matched by an enduring curiosity and a willingness to learn, adapt, and refine their farming systems. Caritas India also acknowledged the unique relationship farmers share with the land—one rooted in reverence, care, and a profound sense of stewardship. Thus, SAFBIN's approach to ensuring livelihood, food, and nutrition security was predicated on the farmer's sensitivity, resourcefulness, indigenous wisdom, openness to innovation, and deep-rooted care for Mother Earth.

SAFBIN's strategy for building climate resilience among smallholder farmers was structured around six key focus areas. These interconnected approaches were designed to reduce climate vulnerability, enhance food and livelihood security, and promote sustainable, farmer-led solutions rooted in local knowledge and community participation.

1. **Strengthening Farmers' Organisations:** SAFBIN facilitated the formation and strengthening of village-level institutions such as Smallholder Farmers' Collectives (SHFCs), which served as vital platforms for peer learning, local innovation, and knowledge-sharing. These collectives enabled farmers to access inputs collectively, build awareness about climate risks, and engage with government schemes related to drought relief, crop insurance, and other adaptive measures. In addition, Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) were established in all intervention villages as dynamic on-farm learning hubs. Through FFS, farmers learned by doing—testing, adapting, and exchanging climate-resilient practices. This experiential approach empowered smallholders, reinforced traditional knowledge systems, and fostered leadership in sustainable agriculture.
2. **Diversification of Crops and Cropping Systems:** SAFBIN helped smallholder farmers diversify their cropping patterns to better cope with increasing climate uncertainties. Moving away from the monoculture of soybean, wheat, and paddy, it



supported the introduction of resilient crops such as millets, pulses, legumes, and vegetables. This shift strengthened both household food and livelihood security while contributing to the restoration of soil health. SAFBIN also promoted intercropping and multi-cropping practices, which not only stabilized yields but also reduced risks for farmers.

3. **Reviving and Popularizing Indigenous Seeds:** SAFBIN revived several indigenous varieties of paddy, millets, sesame, pulses and vegetables that were naturally more tolerant to local climatic stresses. SAFBIN supported the establishment of community resource centres that also doubled up as seed banks and encouraged farmer-to-farmer seed exchanges, helping conserve and promote resilient, locally adapted crops. These traditional varieties proved to be better suited to erratic rainfall patterns and played a key role in strengthening the climate resilience of smallholder farms.
4. **Nutrient and Soil Health Management:** SAFBIN promoted a range of eco-friendly practices—such as vermicomposting, composting, mulching, green manuring, and the use of bio-fertilizers like Jeevamrut—to restore and enhance soil health. These methods helped farmers increase soil organic matter, which significantly improved moisture retention and nutrient availability.
5. **Integrated Pest Management (IPM):** SAFBIN promoted a range of pest control and management practices as sustainable alternatives to chemical-based solutions. Farmers were trained to prepare and apply locally sourced, eco-friendly pest repellents such as Neem Astra, Dashparni Ark, and Lamit, all of which are proven substitutes for chemical pesticides. In addition, SAFBIN introduced other effective methods like pheromone traps, yellow sticky boards, and barrier crops such as marigold to naturally deter harmful insects. These low-cost, farmer-friendly techniques not only reduced dependency on chemical inputs but also contributed to healthier farms and prevented avoidable income drain.
6. **Integrated Farming System:** SAFBIN promoted agroforestry and integrated farming models that combined trees, crops, and livestock to enhance ecological balance and farm productivity. As part of its Integrated Farming Systems approach, SAFBIN

promoted livestock, fishery, poultry, and pig rearing to help smallholder farmers diversify income sources and strengthen household nutrition. SAFBIN supported initiatives like vermicompost from livestock waste, Azolla cultivation for protein-rich cattle feed, and backyard poultry to improve dietary diversity. SAFBIN also started three fishery units which were managed by farmers' collectives.

SAFBIN embodies Caritas India's deep respect for smallholder farmers—true bravehearts who face the vagaries of nature and the uncertainties of farming with resilience and dignity. SAFBIN has supported farmers in enhancing farm productivity, diversifying income sources, and reducing their dependence on costly external inputs, thereby minimizing income drain. By promoting farmer-led, sustainable practices grounded in traditional knowledge and local innovation, SAFBIN has empowered communities to wrest back control over their farming systems. Caritas India remains committed to walking alongside these intrepid and resourceful 'warriors on farm'.

Caritas India is deeply grateful for the generous technical and financial support of Caritas Austria, which has not only supported a futuristic project but has championed the paradigm of farmer-led resilience building and farmer-led agricultural knowledge development. A special word of appreciation and gratitude is due to Mr. Matteo Putzolu and Mr. Sunil Simon of Caritas Austria for their technical guidance, for sharing an ideological horizon, and for helping the teams gain greater clarity on the specifics of farmer-led climate resilience and solution-seeking.

This compendium of stories, **Journey of Resilience**, is both a tribute to the phenomenal resourcefulness of smallholder farmers and a window into their resilience perspectives. Each narrative captures the lived experiences of farmers who, in the face of mounting climate challenges, chose to innovate, adapt, and lead. These stories not only celebrate their determination but also showcase the diverse range of context-specific, farmer-led solutions they have identified and practiced to achieve greater climate resilience. Together, they form a collective voice of hope, strength, and ingenuity from the frontlines of climate-impacted agriculture.

Saju MK PhD
Zone Programme Lead



01 Farming Smarter: A Widow Farmer's Turning Point

In the remote village of Sankuhi in Madhya Pradesh's Mandla district, Meera Bai Kudape has quietly navigated a personal and agricultural transformation. Following the death of her husband, the responsibility of managing her household and farm fell squarely on her shoulders. Today, she lives with her daughter-in-law and grandson, while her son frequently travels to Kerala for wage labour to help meet the family's financial needs.

Farming has long been the family's primary source of livelihood, but erratic weather patterns and poor returns had made it increasingly unsustainable. That began to change when Meera Bai participated in awareness programmes, and expertise exchange sessions conducted under the SAFBIN, which aimed to promote resilient agricultural practices among smallholder farmers.

"Understanding the impact of climate change on our fields made me rethink our approach to farming," she said. "Given our financial situation, I decided to try mixed cropping on one acre of our land." With some seed support from the programme, Meera Bai cultivated black gram, sesame, pigeon pea, and kodo millet - a local variety of millet well-suited to the region's conditions.

The experiment proved fruitful. "All the crops grew well," she said. "It gave us hope and a sense of direction." Encouraged by the initial success, she extended the mixed cropping model to the rest of her farm during the winter season.

The returns were striking. From just five kilograms of kodo millet seed, she harvested 300 kilograms. A small investment in pigeon pea—500 grams—yielded 50 kilograms, while 1 kilogram of black gram produced 25 kilograms. Sesame too responded well, with 15 kilograms harvested from 500 grams of seed. By selling the surplus from both monsoon and winter crops, Meera Bai earned a profit of ₹40,000, a significant boost for the smallholder head of family.

She has since become an advocate for mixed farming in her community. "With one crop, the risk is high and the return is low. Mixed cropping spreads that risk and brings in more income. For us, it increased our income by more than 30 percent," she explained.

Emboldened by her success, Meera Bai made another bold decision: purchasing a tractor on loan. Previously reliant on a pair of oxen, she saw mechanization not just to improve efficiency on her own farm, but also as a potential source of additional income. “I plan to rent it out to other farmers in the village. It's an investment that can help us all,” she said.

Her efforts have had a ripple effect. This year, 15 other women farmers from the local Self-Help Farmer Groups have followed her lead, incorporating kodo millet and local paddy varieties into their cropping systems. Together, they are exploring ways to revive traditional seeds and

reduce input costs through diversified farming.

While SAFBIN had created learning platforms and provided initial assistance, Meera Bai's story is ultimately one of self-determination and practical adaptation. Her journey from vulnerability to resilience is helping to shift the narrative on what smallholder farmers can achieve when equipped with the right tools—and the confidence to use them.





02 From Forgotten Grains to Future Gains

In the remote village of Dhouranala in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, Sumantra Bai Uikey tends to her three acres of rainfed farmland, the sole source of livelihood and food security for her family of five. Like many other villages in the region, Dhouranala has been grappling with the twin crises of declining agricultural productivity and environmental degradation. Erratic weather patterns, persistent soil erosion, and inadequate access to resources have become the norm, leaving smallholder farmers like Sumantra increasingly vulnerable.

“Most farmers had stopped cultivating traditional food grains and switched to cultivation of so-called hybrid seeds,” Sumantra said. “This has caused the loss of the wealth of seeds that our ancestors had handed over to us.”

Faced with these challenges, the community began to reflect on the resilience of their indigenous farming systems. “Realizing the potential of local paddy variety to withstand erratic climate incidents, farmers in our village decided to revive the Luchai variety of rice, which used to be cultivated on a large scale some decades ago,” she added.

The turning point came in 2024 with the introduction of SAFBIN, a programme designed to strengthen the climate resilience and food security of smallholder farmers. SAFBIN began working with the farmers of Dhouranala to revive traditional practices while introducing innovations that enhance their control over agricultural operations. The initiative encouraged the community to experiment, share learnings, and re-establish confidence in time-tested crops and methods.

“Very few farmers nowadays cultivate the local Luchai rice,” Sumantra said. “I decided to preserve the seeds of my ancestors because I am convinced that local seeds can effectively address the vulnerabilities caused by climate change.” Her conviction marked the beginning of a new chapter in the village's farming story.

But Sumantra's efforts did not stop at seed preservation. With the insights that she received from the learning platforms of SAFBIN, she adopted several other practices that were entirely new to the village. “I learned to prepare several integrated pest and nutrient management solutions using localized botanical inputs. These not only increase yields but also significantly reduce input costs,” she explained.

Her return to traditional farming showed promising results almost immediately. “There was excessive rainfall which affected the crops of most farmers in my village,” she recalled. “However, my Luchai paddy remained unharmed by the heavy downpour and from the attacks of insects and fungi.”

The knowledge and skills she gained through SAFBIN's Farmer Field School (FFS) played a critical role in this transformation. “I learnt several good farming practices since joining the Farmer Field School that SAFBIN had formed in the village. This forum is a wonderful platform for farmers to converge and share their farming challenges and solutions emerging from practice,” Sumantra said. Through FFS, farmers learn by doing—observing, experimenting, and making decisions based on direct field experience. The approach equips them with practical, hands-on knowledge in sustainable agriculture, pest management, and climate-resilient practices.

Sumantra's unconventional approach and her willingness to innovate earned her the reputation of a model farmer in the village. Her successful cultivation of Luchai paddy inspired curiosity and admiration from fellow farmers.

“Impressed by the good result of my paddy cultivation, other farmers have developed interest in Luchai cultivation. I have given seeds to many farmers,” she said. Together with 90 other farmers across Mandla, she has contributed to the revival of local paddy varieties, recognizing their strength in climate resilience and their potential to generate additional income.

Beyond her own fields, Sumantra has extended her influence into community well-being. With support from SAFBIN, she established a systematic nutrition garden at her home, improving the variety of fresh, nutritious food available to her family. She also helped the local Anganwadi (village childcare centre) set up a similar garden, enriching the mid-day meals provided to preschool children with fresh vegetables and greens.

From reviving indigenous seeds to promoting community nutrition, Sumantra Bai Uikey's journey exemplifies the transformative power of knowledge, tradition, and collective effort. Her story is not just about improving agricultural outcomes—it's about restoring dignity, self-reliance, and hope in a changing climate.





03 Miracle on a One-Acre Farm

Hemraj Patel, a 42-year-old smallholder farmer from Khiriya village in Madhya Pradesh's Sagar district, owns just one acre of land. He lives with his wife and two sons, while his two daughters are married and live separately. As the family's sole provider, Hemraj had long struggled to sustain them through farming and livestock rearing—both plagued by low productivity, rising input costs, and growing environmental stress.

His farming practices were largely market-driven and misaligned with climate realities. Hemraj followed a monocropping of soybean during the monsoon and wheat in winter. He bought fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds from the market at an expense of ₹10,000 per season. The returns were minimal: a profit of only ₹5,000, far from enough to meet household needs. With declining soil health, erratic rainfall, and stagnant yields, his farming was fast becoming unsustainable. His only supplementary income came from selling the milk of three cows and one buffalo.

That began to change when Hemraj became part of the Smallholder Farmers Collective (SHFC) raised by SAFBIN for promoting sustainable farming and as a village-level platform for peer learning. “I learned several new things from SHFC discussions that transformed my farming,” Hemraj said. He was introduced to the idea of cattle breed improvement by his SHFC. The discussions held in the SHFC helped Hemraj learn how breed quality directly affects milk productivity. SAFBIN also connected him with the Animal Husbandry Department for artificial insemination, and in May 2025, two of his cows gave birth to healthy male calves.

“These calves are of the high-yielding Gir and Sahiwal breeds. I expect them to mature for breeding in 18–20 months, which should increase milk productivity by at least 60%,” Hemraj shared. SAFBIN also provided him with Napier grass seeds for nutritious green fodder and helped him establish an azolla cultivation unit to boost protein intake for his livestock. “Napier grass and azolla significantly increased milk production. Daily yield rose to 32–34 litres which is over four times what it was earlier. Now, I earn around ₹1,400 per day from milk alone,” he said proudly.

Hemraj also embraced scientific

livestock management practices such as routine vaccinations, regular health checks, and improved hygiene in his cattle shed. “The overall health of my cattle has improved noticeably,” he added.

His transformation did not stop at livestock. Determined to reduce market dependency, Hemraj adopted eco-friendly farming practices. He set up two vermicomposting units that produce around 700 kg of compost every two months. “This compost has greatly improved my farm's fertility and helped me reduce spending on market-bought inputs,” he noted. Encouraged by these gains, Hemraj expanded his efforts to develop an integrated farming model—combining livestock, fodder cultivation, composting, organic farming, and vegetable production.

On his farm, he now prepares several organic formulations such as Beejamrut, Jeevamrut, LAMIT, and Cytosine, which act as substitutes for chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Using these, Hemraj cultivates a variety of crops—wheat, chickpea, lentil, mustard, and coriander. “The results were visible: healthier crops, improved soil structure, and better resilience to climate variability,” he explained.

Hemraj also shifted to water-efficient farming techniques and focused on high-value vegetable cultivation, including tomatoes, peas, and brinjal. This diversification has paid off—earning him an additional seasonal income of ₹2 lakh from vegetable sales alone.

His success has inspired others. Six farmers in Khiriya village have started breed improvement anticipating higher milk yields in the next 18 to 24 months. Seventeen others have adopted organic inputs after attending Hemraj's on-farm training sessions and seeing his results firsthand.

Since joining the SAFBIN project, Hemraj Patel has increased his annual income by approximately 60%. His adoption of sustainable agricultural practices, livestock enhancement, and organic methods has not only secured his family's livelihood but has also elevated his standing in the community. Today, Hemraj's farm serves as a demonstration model, and he is recognized as a progressive farmer—proving that with knowledge, innovation, and the right support, smallholders can transform their lives and lead others toward a resilient farming future.





04 Sowing Hope with Sesame

Bharat Ahirwar, a smallholder farmer from Doha village in Sagar, previously relied on a single soybean crop during the monsoon season on his 2.5-acre farm. This limited income from farm barely supported his family of four, as he had to spend heavily on their food needs. After the crop season he would work as a mason to earn additional livelihood.

Erratic weather patterns further reduced his soybean yields, prompting Bharat to seek alternative sources of income. He had always wanted to diversify his crops but felt uncertain about which ones to adopt.

In January 2024, things began to improve when Bharat joined the Maa Annapurna Smallholder Farmers Collective (SHFC) started by Manav Vikas Seva Sangh (MVSS) under the SAFBIN project. SAFBIN has been working in ten villages in ten villages of Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh to improve the climate resilience by promoting innovative, cost-effective, eco-friendly farming practices with the inputs mobilised locally.

One of the first steps SAFBIN took was to assist Bharat and other Doha farmers in getting the soil tests conducted at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) or the agriculture extension center in Sagar. The results indicated that Doha's soil was light and suitable for sesame cultivation. SAFBIN team also helped 62 farmers including Bharat to obtain the GT-5 improved variety seeds of sesame from KVK.

“Since sesame was a new crop for all farmers of our village, we decided to start small,” Bharat explained. “I planted it on just 15 decimals (0.15 acre) of my land, using only ecological practices and locally prepared pest control solutions.” SAFBIN had trained farmers to make botanical solutions for plant nutrition and pest control, which saved Bharat Rs. 1,400 on farming inputs on his sesame farm.

The sesame crop proved successful, yielding a promising return. “I harvested 25 kg, worth about Rs. 3,000, from this small plot—a significantly higher profit compared to what I'd have earned from soybean on the same land, which would have been just Rs. 2,400. Overall, including the money saved on inputs, I gained Rs. 2,000,” Bharat said.

Farmers in Doha, including Bharat, learned valuable lessons from reintroducing sesame cultivation. Bharat decided to save his sesame harvest for the next planting season, aiming to expand to a full acre next year. “I’m expecting at least Rs. 14,000 in profits,” he said. “With rising demand for sesame, it’s a great crop choice. Plus, it’s hardy and more resilient to climate stresses than soybean.”

In addition to his economic gains, Bharat noted improved food security for his family due to SAFBIN’s promotion of systematic nutrition gardens. SAFBIN also organized learning interactions on the platform of Farmer Field School (FFS) on Bharat’s sesame farm, allowing other farmers to learn firsthand about sesame crop management. This experiential learning platform, popularized by SAFBIN, fosters knowledge-sharing among farmers.

“We learned several sustainable agricultural practices that help us adapt to climate change,” Bharat said. “By reducing chemical inputs and using organic, integrated nutrient and pest management, we’re not only improving our farm’s profitability but also contributing to a more environment-friendly approach to farming.”





"Since the income from the farm was meagre, I had been searching for other ways to support my family, but I couldn't start anything new due to a lack of skills and funds," Ms. Bharti explained. However, things began to change with the start of the SAFBIN program in Gondai village, Madhya Pradesh, in February 2024. This initiative, launched by Manav Vikas Seva Sangh (MVSS) with support from Caritas Austria and Caritas India, aimed to improve the resilience of smallholder farmers like Bharti.

SAFBIN seeks to strengthen the livelihoods and food systems of smallholder households across ten villages in Sagar district, including Gondai. It focuses on helping farmers diversify their income and adopt sustainable farming methods to mitigate the risks of climate change.

One of SAFBIN's first interventions was to organize women into self-help groups (SHGs) that would serve as platforms for credit mobilization and knowledge-sharing. The women in these SHGs received training on sustainable, climate-resilient farming, government schemes, and leadership skills. Bharti joined one such SHG called 'Madhuri' which not only fostered unity among the women but also encouraged regular savings. "In the SHG meetings, I learned about managing livelihoods and government schemes that could help me start new ventures," she said. "It was during one of these meetings that I learned about the potential of incense stick making as a source of income."

Confident in her ability to pursue this new opportunity, Bharti reached out for assistance through SAFBIN, which connected her with a wholesaler willing to provide both training and a market for her products.

A SAFBIN community worker contacted a wholesale incense stick trader in Sagar city, around 10 km away,

05 Building a Livelihood One Stick at a Time

The burden on Bharti Patel to support her five-member family was immense, with their only income coming from a small two-acre farm. She and her husband Sitaram Patel grew soybeans and wheat, but their yields were unpredictable due to erratic weather patterns.

who agreed to train Ms. Bharti for free. Over the course of three days, she learned how to produce incense sticks using machinery. After completing the training, she used her family's savings to purchase an incense stick-making machine, which cost Rs. 91,000 (€1050).

Ms. Bharti launched her incense stick business in May 2024, and it proved profitable right from the start. "I now earn Rs. 14,000 (€160) every month from making incense sticks. I buy raw materials from the same trader who then purchases the finished products from me," she shared. Shiva Traders supplies her with raw materials at Rs. 56 per kilogram and buys the finished sticks at Rs. 65 per kilogram. On days when demand is high, she can produce up to a quintal of incense sticks, earning around Rs. 900 (€10) daily. "Though demand fluctuates, the business provides a steady income that meets our family's needs," she added. Her husband helps her procure materials, produce the incense sticks, and transport them to the trader.

In addition to her new business, Ms. Bharti has also improved her farming practices. "I've started preparing local Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) solutions, which have significantly reduced our input costs. I've also begun vegetable farming through intercropping," she noted.

"I'm so proud of the incense stick business I started. It has helped improve my family's livelihood," Ms. Bharti said with satisfaction. "This transformation in our lives happened thanks to SAFBIN."





06 Diversified Farming Helps Build Resilience and Income

Erratic rainfall and rising input costs had long made farming an unreliable occupation for many smallholders in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. On her two-acre farm, one farmer found herself confronting the same set of challenges - unpredictable weather, high dependency on external inputs, and poor returns from monocropping.

For years, she experimented with hybrid seeds, chemical pesticides, and market-driven techniques. But despite her efforts, farm productivity remained low, and costs kept rising. With her husband commuting daily to Mandla town for wage work, the responsibility of managing the household farm fell entirely on her shoulders. “Even though farming was not yielding much, I had to continue,” she said. “There were times I barely saved anything, despite working long hours.”

Things began to change when the SAFBIN programme was introduced in the village. One of its key components was the promotion of Integrated Farming Systems (IFS), which encouraged smallholders to adopt low-cost, diverse, and climate-resilient agricultural practices. She was among the early adopters.

“From the regular exchanges of farmers, I understood how climate change was making traditional farming practices unsustainable,” she said. “I decided to switch to mixed cropping and to use traditional seed varieties that were better suited to local conditions.”

During the Kharif season, she planted black gram, pigeon pea, and paddy on half an acre using seeds provided by SAFBIN. She also began replacing synthetic inputs with bio-based alternatives prepared from local resources. These home-made pest repellents and growth promoters not only improved crop health but also reduced input costs by more than 25 percent.

Her success with mixed cropping led to wider recognition in the community. She became an active member of the Farmer Field School (FFS), a farmer-led platform where practitioners exchange field-level insights and learnings. “The experience-sharing during FFS meetings helped me improve my practices further,” she said.

Building on this foundation, she later expanded the diversity on her farm. In addition to black gram, pigeon pea, and paddy, she began cultivating Kodo millet and maize—reviving a crop that had almost disappeared from the area. With support from SAFBIN, she also ventured into poultry farming, which provided an additional source of income.

Beyond the commercial gains, she focused on food and nutrition security for her household. She developed a kitchen garden that produces a steady supply of vegetables. “The nutrition garden ensures that we have access to healthy food year-round,” she said.

Today, her diversified approach to farming is being replicated by others in the village. At least seven farmers have adopted her model, and she is often approached for guidance on seed selection, crop diversification, and pest management.

“Adopting mixed cropping and traditional practices has helped me stabilise income and reduce dependence on the market,” she said. “What seemed like small changes have made a big difference over time.”





07 Growing More Than Crops

For years, Veer Singh Patel, a smallholder farmer from Mothi village in Sagar district, battled the harsh realities of farming in a changing climate. Unpredictable weather, soil degradation, and shrinking returns had pushed his family to the brink. With only three acres of rain-fed land and traditional crops like wheat and soybean to rely on, Patel found himself trapped in a cycle of debt, barely able to support household expenses or fund his children's education. Like many others in the region, he saw no way out—until a new path emerged.

In April 2024, Patel became a member of the Smallholder Farmers' Collective (SHFC), a platform initiated by SAFBIN to bring together the experience, knowledge, and struggles of farmers like him. Through SHFC, he was introduced to climate-smart farming techniques that were designed not only to boost productivity but also to build resilience against the erratic impacts of climate change. It wasn't long before Patel stood out as a lead farmer in his village, guiding others in understanding weather shifts and ways to adapt.

Determined to break from convention, Patel began by applying these techniques to a single acre of land. He phased out chemical fertilizers and began enriching the soil with botanical formulations such as farmyard manure, Jeevamrit, Neem Astra, Dashparni Ark, and Tej Lal, all of which he learned to prepare using locally available materials during the learning exchange sessions of the SHFC. He also replaced monocropping with diversified methods like intercropping and multi-cropping. His fields soon flourished with a variety of crops including soybean, black gram, green gram, pigeon pea, vegetables, sorghum, and pearl millet. These changes helped reduce his reliance on market-bought inputs and improved soil health, making his land more resilient to extreme weather conditions.

The results were swift and encouraging. By the end of the 2024 monsoon season, Patel saw a 15% increase in yield compared to conventional methods, translating into an additional income of ₹20,000. This financial cushion offered his family critical relief—and solidified his belief in the promise of sustainable agriculture. Motivated by his success, Patel volunteered to host a Farmer Field School (FFS) on his farm. Organised by SAFBIN, these on-farm learning sessions allow local farmers to witness and replicate practical, climate-resilient

techniques. Every Friday, around forty farmers from Mothi and neighbouring villages now gather in his fields to learn firsthand from his experiences and successes.

But Patel didn't stop there. He went on to establish his own vermicomposting and Azolla cultivation units, ensuring a steady supply of organic inputs for his fields. "Vermicompost and Azolla are excellent substitutes for chemical fertilizers," he explained, pointing to the sustainable nutrient cycles now operating within his farm.

Though he had grown vegetables during the monsoon in the past, he had never attempted them in the winter season. Armed with new knowledge and confidence, Patel experimented with vegetable cultivation on twenty decimals of land during the rabi season which turned out to be another success for other farmers to learn from.

Today, Veer Singh Patel is no longer just a cultivator. He has become a mentor, a local leader, and a strong advocate for sustainable agriculture. His journey from desperation to resilience exemplifies how knowledge, innovation, and determination can transform farming livelihoods.

As climate change continues to challenge traditional farming systems, Veer Singh is a shining example of climate resilience not only for the farmers of Mothi but also of neighbouring villages. His experience affirms that with the right support and strategies, it is possible to break free from the grip of climate vulnerability and cultivate a future grounded in self-reliance and ecological balance.





08 Sowing Change: How a Farmer Turned to Climate-Smart Farming for Stability

In the heart of Madhya Pradesh's Tinsua village, 45-year-old Govind Patel cultivates three acres of fertile black soil. For years, his farming was confined to one or two seasonal crops, occasionally supplemented by small-scale vegetable cultivation. But unpredictable weather and escalating input costs were eroding his yields and his hopes.

“My income barely covered my family's needs,” he recalled. “Agriculture was becoming more expensive by the day. Seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides consumed most of my earnings. On top of that, erratic rainfall made farming even riskier.”

Like many farmers in his village, Govind was looking for answers — a way to reduce input costs, protect soil health, and make his farm more productive.

In April 2024, a turning point arrived with the launch of the SAFBIN project in Tinsua. Designed to empower smallholder farmers through climate-resilient practices, the initiative brought knowledge, support, and a new perspective on sustainable farming. Govind became an early and active participant, joining the Smallholder Farmer Collective (SHFC), a peer-learning platform formed under the project.

Govind attended several learning and experience exchange workshops organized by SAFBIN where he learned about farm analysis, diversification, and low-cost, sustainable methods. His openness to new ideas soon made him a frontrunner in introducing the Integrated Farming System (IFS) model in the village — a holistic approach that combines multiple farming activities to build resilience and boost productivity.

“I diversified my cropping pattern to include wheat, chickpea, lentil, mustard, and peas, along with vegetables, especially tomato” Govind said. “This helped reduce dependency on a single crop and improved soil fertility through natural nitrogen fixation.”

The SAFBIN-promoted IFS model integrates crop cultivation, livestock rearing, and organic practices — a package that appealed to Govind's

practical mindset. With guidance from the project, he also secured ₹30,000 in financial assistance from the Horticulture Department to install a drip irrigation system.

“Drip irrigation cut down water wastage significantly and helped me make the most of my resources, especially during dry spells,” he explained.

Alongside, Govind adopted Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) techniques. He began preparing organic pest control solutions using locally sourced materials — a shift that helped him slash his annual input costs by ₹20,000.

To further strengthen his eco-friendly approach, he set up a vermicomposting unit with technical support from SAFBIN. “These measures gave me access to affordable, organic fertilizers and reduced my reliance on chemicals,” he said.

Govind didn't stop at crops and compost. He added a poultry unit to his farm operations, again with SAFBIN's support. The initiative generated supplementary income and provided nutrient-rich organic manure, which further enriched his fields.

The results were significant. His annual income grew by ₹25,000, giving his family greater financial stability. His crops became healthier, his soil richer, and his land more resilient to extreme weather conditions. The poultry unit not only cushioned him from the risks of crop failure but also diversified his revenue streams.

Govind's transformation has had a ripple effect in Tinsua. Inspired by his success, 12 other farmers have adopted similar practices, gradually building a community-wide movement towards sustainable, climate-resilient agriculture.

“Earlier, I practiced chemical-intensive farming, which raised my expenses and left my crops vulnerable,” Govind reflected. “Switching to climate-smart methods has reduced my costs, minimized crop losses, and improved my farm's sustainability.”

Govind's story is more than a personal success — it's a model of resilience, learning, and community-led change. As more farmers in Tinsua follow his lead, the village is moving steadily toward food security, environmental balance, and stronger rural livelihoods.





09 Building Resilience Through Mixed Farming

For years, Ghanshyam Ahirwar struggled to support his family of six on the modest yield from his 2-acre rainfed farm in Koluwa village, Sagar district. “I could manage only two crops a year,” he recalls. “To meet household needs, I worked as a laborer on others’ farms — and even that was seasonal, mostly during harvest time.”

A member of a socially and economically marginalized community, Ghanshyam was one of many in Koluwa dependent entirely on erratic monsoon rains. “Rising expenses and dwindling returns from farming trapped me in a vicious cycle of poverty and debt,” he said with a visibly strained expression.

Things began to shift in 2024, when the SAFBIN programme was introduced in Koluwa to support smallholder farmers through climate-resilient agriculture and improved farming systems. The team launched awareness drives and formed a Smallholder Farmer Collective (SHFC) as a platform for sharing knowledge and practices.

“Initially, I was skeptical,” Ghanshyam admits. “We’d seen many NGOs make big promises. Besides, I was busy with farm work and didn’t see the point of attending meetings regularly.” But his perspective changed after a few discussions with the SAFBIN team. “Their approach seemed practical — it directly addressed the problems I faced on my farm.”

His first takeaway was crop planning and increasing crop density and diversity to boost both yield and resilience. Testing the waters cautiously, Ghanshyam began mixed cropping on half an acre, planting soybean, black gram, maize, and green gram — a marked departure from his usual monoculture of soybean during the monsoon.

He also stopped using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, replacing them with homemade organic alternatives promoted by SAFBIN. “Now I prepare botanical solutions myself to enrich the soil and manage pests,” he said.

The shift paid off. His new farming model that he practiced fetched him ₹8,500 from just half an acre.

Encouraged, Ghanshyam set up azolla and vermi-compost units with SAFBIN's technical guidance. "I used azolla as fodder for my two cows. It boosted milk production by nearly 50%."

Not stopping there, Ghanshyam expanded into poultry after receiving ideas from the discussions of SHFC. Today, he now has 30 birds and earns about ₹2,000 a month from egg sales alone.

He also transformed a previously unused patch of land near his house into a thriving nutrition garden. "I grow 6-7 varieties of vegetables and fruits throughout the year. It gives my family a steady flow of vegetables" he said.

Since becoming a member of the SHFC constituted by SAFBIN, Ghanshyam's confidence in farming has grown significantly. What was once a fragile, subsistence-level practice has evolved into a dependable source of income and food. "Today, I practice

mixed farming across my entire land, and the results are truly encouraging. I now earn between ₹4,000 and ₹5,000 every month just from farming," he said. "SAFBIN's model has strengthened our resilience to climate shocks and greatly improved our livelihood and food security," Ghanshyam concluded, with quiet satisfaction.





10 Farming Against the Odds: A Woman Farmer Leads the Way

Salhedanda village, nestled on the forested fringes of Madhya Pradesh's Mandla district, is marked more by its remoteness than by opportunity. Home to a predominantly Gond tribal population, over 90% of its households, the village comprises marginal farming families whose livelihoods rely heavily on rainfed agriculture. However, with the monsoon growing increasingly erratic year after year, farming has become an increasingly precarious and unsustainable means of survival.

When the rains fail, so do the harvests—and with it, food insecurity and economic distress. During such lean seasons, families often migrate to nearby towns or villages, seeking wage labour to get by. Agriculture, once a proud tradition, has turned into a gamble that many young villagers are no longer willing to take.

But an intrepid woman chose to walk against the current.

Manila Bhavediya, who lives with her grandparents, has two acres of land from which she and her grandparents will have to earn food and livelihood. Her parents stay in a neighboring village with her two siblings. Despite the huge challenges, she decided not to abandon agriculture like many of her friends. Instead, she chose to embrace it, but differently. In 2024, she joined the Smallholder Farmers' Collective (SHFC), an initiative supported by SAFBIN, which works with marginal farmers to promote climate-resilient agriculture.

“I found that the farming methods popularized by SAFBIN were very innovative and nature-friendly,” Manila recalls. “I realized that large-scale use of chemical inputs only increases our vulnerability to climate change. We needed to find local, sustainable alternatives.” Armed with this conviction, Manila began to practice what she had learned. She had confidence in the Integrated Farming System (IFS) model and decided to adopt it despite others' skepticism about vegetable farming in the village.

“Most families here avoid cultivating vegetables, fearing damage from unpredictable weather. But I believed this model could address those insecurities,” she says. “My priority was to ensure a reliable supply of vegetables for my family. But I also wanted to generate income from it.”

What stood out most to Manila was the

technique of multi-layer vegetable farming, which she learned from the experience exchange sessions organized by SAFBIN. She started vegetable farming on a piece of her two-acre farm which involves cultivating different types of vegetables with varying heights and root depths on the same plot. This system not only maximizes land use, but also protects soil health, ensures efficient nutrient use, and enables year-round harvests.

“I was impressed by how practical it was. SAFBIN taught us how to select vegetables based on their height and growth cycle. They helped me with the seeds, develop a seasonal cropping plan and farm layout,” Manila explains. From there, she turned toward natural farming methods to lower her costs and reduce environmental impact. “I stopped using synthetic fertilizers and pesticides completely. I learned how to make my own using local materials,” she says.

Fortunately, Manila has access to an open well that provides adequate water, enabling her to cultivate two crop cycles. On the rest of her farmland, she grows paddy, pigeon pea, kodo millet, little millet, wheat, gram, peas, and lentils. She now prepares her own organic fertilizers, growth promoters, and pest repellents. Her success with these natural methods led her to explore azolla farming, a nutrient-rich biofertilizer, and vermicomposting, which has further improved the health and productivity of her farm.

Her vegetable farming today is a vibrant spread of gourds, yams, leafy greens, tubers, gooseberry, lemon, ginger, and turmeric—a clear testament to what a small, well-managed plot can achieve. With consistent harvests and low input costs, Manila now earns ₹7,000–₹8,000 a month from vegetable sales alone. She carries the produce to nearby local markets, where she sells directly to

consumers. Her grandfather sells the rest of the produce in Mandla city.

“Vegetable cultivation has changed everything for us. Not only are we eating healthy, toxin-free food, but I also feel proud that I'm not harming the environment,” she beams.

The change hasn't gone unnoticed. Her success has inspired many in the community to rethink their approach to farming. In a village where once chemical-intensive monocropping was the norm, a quiet transition is underway. “Through integrated farming, not only is my livelihood improving steadily, but many villagers have also learned from what I'm doing and started their own vegetable farms,” Manila says.

She's right. So far, five families in Salhedanda have adopted multi-layer vegetable cultivation, building resilience against climate shocks while improving their families' food and income security.

In a region where the climate is unpredictable and resources are scarce, Manila's farm is more than a patch of green—it is a symbol of what's possible when tradition meets innovation, and when one woman dares to farm with hope.





11 Sustainable Farming Ushers in New Hope for Smallholders

Narayan Patel, a 56-year-old farmer from Barkheda village in Sagar district, has emerged as a symbol of agricultural revival through sustainable practices. With just two acres of land and a family of eight to support, Patel had long struggled with low yields, high input costs, and growing uncertainty due to erratic weather. Until 2024, his farming was marked by monocropping and heavy dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides—practices that offered little return and depleted the land.

A turning point came in April 2024, when Patel joined the Smallholder Adaptive Farming and Biodiversity Network (SAFBIN), an initiative of Caritas India launched in ten villages of the district. The programme enabled farmers like Patel to adopt low-cost, climate-resilient agricultural practices rooted in local knowledge and biodiversity.

“I learned several new techniques for pest and nutrient management—using materials I could prepare at home instead of buying from the market,” Patel said. “SAFBIN also taught me how to diversify my crops in a scientific way.”

With support from SAFBIN, Patel began implementing Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Integrated Nutrient Management (INM), reducing his reliance on chemical inputs while restoring soil health. The initiative also promoted the use of traditional seed varieties—hardy, climate-resilient crops that had disappeared from local farms over the years.

“I received seeds of sorghum and pearl millet, which had not been cultivated here for a long time,” Patel said. “These were once staples in our diet, and it feels good to bring them back.”

The results were immediate and encouraging. In one cropping season, Patel saved ₹20,000 by switching to bio-fertilizers and homemade pest repellents. He diversified his crops as well—growing chickpea, wheat, coriander, lentil, pea, and mustard in the winter season, and soybean, maize, sorghum, and pearl millet during the monsoon. This shift not only improved household nutrition but also added ₹10,000 to his seasonal income.

Patel also became an active member of the Smallholder Farmers' Collective (SHFC) formed under SAFBIN. This platform allowed him to share his

experiences, learn from others, and inspire fellow farmers. His efforts have already motivated 12 others in Barkheda to adopt similar practices.

“I used to be deeply worried about how to feed my family,” he reflected. “But after joining SAFBIN, we gained new knowledge and skills that have strengthened our farming. During the last monsoon season alone, my income rose by ₹30,000.”

Beyond improved incomes, SAFBIN's approach emphasizes climate adaptation and long-term resilience. By encouraging crop diversity and organic methods, it equips farmers to handle the challenges of changing weather patterns and soil degradation.

“SAFBIN helped us reduce crop losses and adjust to unpredictable rainfall,” Patel added. “It's more than farming support. It's future-proofing our livelihoods.”

Narayan Patel's journey is a powerful example of how sustainable agriculture can transform not just crops and incomes, but entire communities - building resilience, restoring dignity, and offering renewed hope for the future.





12 Farm. Adapt. Thrive: A Smallholder's Path To Climate Resilience

In Pipariya Chamari, a quiet village in Sagar district, smallholder farmer Bhav Singh Patel is redefining what it means to farm in a changing climate. For years, his three-acre rainfed farmland could barely sustain his family's livelihood. Like many others in his village, he relied on monocropping, cultivating a single crop season after season. "I practiced monocropping for years mostly traditional cereal crops because that's all I knew," he recalled. "But those methods left my crops vulnerable to climate shocks, pests, and water stress. The returns were meagre, and every year felt like a gamble."

Water scarcity during crucial crop growth stages only worsened his challenges. Crop yields were inconsistent, and with no direct access to markets, Bhav Singh was forced to sell his produce through middlemen who pocketed most of the profits. "The situation created a lot of anxiety. I had no control over prices, and farming became more of a risk than a livelihood," he shared.

Things changed for good in 2024 when Smallholder Adaptive Farming and Biodiversity Network (SAFBIN) started working with the village farmers on climate-resilient farming. Bhav Singh joined the project and became an active participant in its experience exchange sessions and demonstrations. "After attending the SAFBIN sessions, I realized I needed to move away from chemical-intensive practices that were harming both my farm and income," he said. The two practices that had the most profound impact on his farming were mixed cropping and drip irrigation. "Together, they changed not just my harvest, but my entire way of farming."

With the knowledge he gained from the various interactions organized by SAFBIN, Bhav Singh shifted from monocropping to growing a range of vegetables through mixed and intercropping systems. He began cultivating 10 to 12 varieties of vegetables including eggplant, tomato, bottle gourd, ridge gourd, pumpkin, bitter gourd, spinach, radish, cucumber, elephant foot yam, and potato. This diversification made his farm more resilient to climatic fluctuations and pest attacks. "Mixed cropping has reduced the risks of crop failure and given me a stable and diversified income stream," he said.

Drip irrigation, installed with SAFBIN's technical support, helped Bhav Singh conserve water and increase productivity. "It significantly reduced water wastage and ensured my

crops received moisture even during dry spells,” he noted. With consistent water supply and a diversified cropping pattern, Bhav Singh began seeing tangible improvements in both yield and income.

In addition to physical interventions, SAFBIN also helped him adopt eco-friendly practices. He began treating his seeds with *Trichoderma* and *Pseudomonas* — bio-agents that protect against soil-borne diseases. “These were simple techniques, but their impact was substantial,” he said. Bhav Singh also started producing and using solid bio-manure, azolla, and liquid organic growth promoters. Under SAFBIN's Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) guidance, he began preparing natural pest repellents and using traps. These practices not only reduced his dependence on chemical inputs but also cut cultivation costs by 20 to 25 percent.

The transformation didn't stop at production. With his farm now yielding a variety of high-quality vegetables, Bhav Singh made another important shift — he began selling directly in the local market. “I discovered the trader in me,” he said with a smile. “I no longer rely on middlemen. I decide the price

and manage my own sales. It's empowering.” This direct-to-market approach helped him earn a fairer share of the profits and brought a sense of ownership over his produce and pricing.

The changes on Bhav Singh's farm have translated into impressive financial gains. His monthly income has increased by ₹10,000, and he has recorded a stupendous 150% increase in his annual income since adopting climate-resilient and integrated farming practices. “I never imagined farming could be this rewarding,” he said. “Now, I earn more, use fewer chemicals, and I'm no longer afraid of unpredictable rains. Farming has once again become a stable and hopeful way of life.”

Bhav Singh's journey is a compelling example of what is possible when smallholder farmers are equipped with the right knowledge, tools, and support. Through resilience, innovation, and determination, he has turned his modest plot into a thriving farm that not only sustains his family but also inspires others in his village to take similar steps toward climate-smart agriculture.





13 Farmers Turn to Fish Farming for Resilience

In Silpura village, a public pond constructed by the Panchayat two decades ago for irrigation and groundwater recharge gradually became a neglected asset. Over the years, recurrent droughts and a heavy dependence on rain-fed agriculture pushed smallholder farmers into repeated cycles of hardship. Many families were forced to rely on seasonal migration or agricultural labour to sustain themselves. The unchecked use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides—without an understanding of their long-term impact—further depleted soil fertility, increased input costs, and exacerbated rural poverty.

In February 2024, the SAFBIN programme began engaging with the community by forming smallholder groups and facilitating intensive discussions on climate resilience, integrated farming, sustainable crop systems, and livelihood diversification. It also helped establish Smallholder Farmers' Collectives (SHFCs) as peer platforms where farmers could share knowledge, exchange experiences, and co-develop climate-resilient strategies.

During one such discussion, members of Hardulala SHFC identified the underutilized village pond as a promising opportunity. Motivated by the SAFBIN team's guidance, they submitted a formal proposal to the Gram Sabha to begin community-based fish farming.

“We realized the pond's potential and approached the Gram Sabha for permission. Hardulala SHFC submitted a formal proposal,” said Shravan Kumar Marko, a member of the group.

Following the approval, SAFBIN extended financial support by providing 22 kg of fish seed, which was released into the pond. The SHFC members took collective responsibility for the operation—feeding the fish, maintaining water levels, and monitoring their growth. Despite having no prior experience in fish farming, the group adapted quickly and managed the initiative effectively.

“Initially, none of us had experience in fish farming. We struggled with selecting fish species and managing water levels—but we learned together,” shared Ms. Sangeeta Bairagi, a member of SHFC. “We looked after the pond daily. By the end of the season, we harvested about 150 kg of fish,” added Ms. Santoshi Marawai.

The harvested fish was sold within the village at subsidized rates, making it accessible to all households. A portion

was also distributed among SHFC members as an incentive for their efforts. The group earned approximately ₹10,000, which was added to the SHFC fund for future initiatives.

“Fish farming introduced a new source of nutritious food. It improved the diets of many families in the village,” said Shravan Kumar. As part of their nutrition outreach, the group also planned to distribute 3 kg of fish to Anganwadi children. The remaining fish was sold at the local haat bazaar and in Mandla city, with an expected income of ₹25,000. This additional revenue is earmarked to support the upcoming July farming season and invest in community-driven schemes.

Buoyed by this initial success, the SHFC submitted a second proposal to the Gram Sabha—this time to deepen the village pond, thereby enhancing its water storage for both fish farming and irrigation.

“We are preparing to submit formal requests for financial assistance through the Fisheries Department, other government schemes, and our local Panchayat,” said Shravan Kumar.

“Our goal is to scale up the initiative, increase productivity, and ensure that more families benefit in the coming years.”

With new skills and growing confidence, the group is now independently managing the fish farming operations and preparing for expansion in the upcoming season.

“With the knowledge we've gained, we're aiming for a harvest of over 500 kg next season,” said Ms. Sangeeta. “This time, we are better prepared and more determined.”





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