

# FACTORY FOR CHANGE

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Eight young women on bright pink bicycles weave in and out of a dusty, rutted track that leads through the village of Masarakal in northern Karnataka, their dupattas trailing behind them. They pass mothers tipping water on to their children, soap glistening on their thin legs in the sharp sunshine; rocky boulders strewn across the dry terrain and teenage girls looping their long black hair into braids and hurrying out to school without breakfast.

## **Malnutrition Challenges**

This is the taluka (district) of Devadurga in Northern Karnataka, a marginalised, low-income block in which a high number live below the poverty line. So problematic is malnutrition and other health and educational indicators that during the last census, Devadurga scored at 175 out of all 176 talukas in terms of its development. Here, stunting and wasting is commonplace, as is maternal mortality through severe anemia. An area where Scheduled Castes and Tribes (a government classification of lower castes) are high, three distinct groups of the community are particularly at risk: infants below the age of 3, adolescent girls between the ages of 11 and 18 and women who are pregnant and lactating.

## Factory Plant

In this area blighted for many years by high malnutrition and all its associated problems, despite its challenges, a beacon of hope shines brightly. For standing inconspicuously on a roadside acre of land in the village of Masarakal is a factory building where the eight young women park their bicycles and go inside to spend their working day. These bright, motivated women are the pride of their community, hand-picked to work in the factory following a rigorous selection process. They are operating machinery to produce and package two metric tonnes daily of a highly nutritious, fortified and blended cereal (to be consumed with heated milk or water) that is tackling under-



*A female factory worker transporting the high-nutrition packaged cereal*

nutrition in the area. Containing a mixture of grains, soya, green gram, peanut powder, millet and sugar as well as vitamins and minerals, this could just provide the solution to Devadurga's low-

scoring in the census nutritional status, given that each one of the 227 villages in the taluka is being reached.



All factory workers are being taught how to operate computers, two of them are receiving instruction on how to drive the distribution vehicles and there is also a trained female electrician, both the latter roles revolutionary in an area in which traditional gender responsibilities are rarely strayed from. As such, a vital precedent is being set as adolescent girls observe the roles that the factory workers are engaged in. Younger girls in the community are thus able to expand their belief-systems about what they can and cannot do and dare to dream of a different future from what they previously believed was possible or were being moulded for.

The women told me that when they started the factory work, they were afraid they would not be able to successfully operate the



*Two of the young women chosen from the community to work in the factory*

heavy machinery. But more than a year on, they see that they are more than capable of handling the machinery alone, with no extra support. Ambika, one of the workers, told me 'We are proud to say we are producing powder to

relieve malnutrition in our area.' And this, indeed, was the overall feeling I received from all the female workers, a noticeable pride in their work, the salary they take home and their invaluable contribution to their community.

### **Village Nutrition Volunteers**

Simultaneously, as part of the same nutrition project, a young woman cycles along the road of a neighbouring village on a red bicycle. She slows down beside a wall where a poster is just starting to peel in a top corner, pushing it firmly back into place. The poster depicts three painted figures of an infant, an adolescent girl and a pregnant woman with script in Kannada beneath the pictures. The woman continues on her journey, before propping her bicycle against a wall and being welcomed warmly into a house. She is one of 421 local women who have been trained and empowered as village nutrition volunteers to engage in part-time outreach and community work. This includes distribution of the energy dense food and the collection of anthropometric measurements. The volunteers also engage in fundamental behavioural-change counselling to ensure consumption of locally available, high-nutrition foods that can be bought within the family budget, alongside discussions based around family hygiene, safe water drinking and nutritional status.

Since participating in this outreach work, they have gained respect and recognition from within the community. According to a few of the volunteers I met, through working within their own communities, the honour they

receive is considerable. 'The women call me 'Madam' and the girls call me 'sister' ' one volunteer recalls in delight. They may not be receiving payment, but the returns on their efforts far outweigh this.

### **Challenges and Achievements of KHPT's Nutrition project**

It was not easy to initially select the neediest beneficiaries of this outreach project, nor to ensure continuance and sustainability due to the high level of household migration that comes about in this drought-prone area. Through a process of trial and error and adapting the questions asked of potential beneficiaries, KHPT now has a tried and tested procedure to ensure the correct high-risk groups are reached, offering help to individuals whether they have migrated or are living in geographically stable households.

There were also challenges in convincing the target beneficiaries and their families of the credibility of this fortified blended nutrient rich product. Many were highly skeptical, believing that if the product was free, how could it possibly be any good? This is where the volunteers stepped in, explaining the importance of consuming the ready-to-cook powder product, exactly what it contained as well as testimonials from others who had already taken it and were reaping its benefits.



It has been found that adolescent girls are a particularly challenging group to reach; to motivate them and recognise the importance of good nutrition. Yet, alongside the counselling from the village nutrition volunteers that these girls receive, weight gain has been significant. They are growing taller and stronger, their increased energy levels starting to help them become more active both at home and at school. The results from the project's concurrent monitoring and an Impact Study conducted by the National Institute of Nutrition showed a decrease of 8%, 3% and 2% in the proportion of underweight, severely stunted, and severely wasted children respectively.

Since the female-operated factory production began at two units in 2016, and the nutrient-dense cereal started reaching its three aforementioned high-risk groups, KHPT has reached a vast 37,000



*Village Nutrition Volunteers*

beneficiaries. On a daily basis, each unit is able to produce two metric tons of finished product and it's not just food for survival, either. 'It tastes really good,' one of the factory workers grins. 'Everybody I know loves eating it.'

### **What's next for Devadurga?**

The next census will take place in 2021 and there are high hopes that Devadurga taluka will score much better. According to Manjunath, a KHPT employee who has worked on various initiatives within the organisation, this project is especially impressive. The secret of its success, he believes, is that it's developed by and for women. 'Women are empowering women,' he says, 'and KHPT has taken innovative actions to make this initiative a women-driven and women-led intervention.'

With continued support and cooperation of the Panchayat, the local governing body, it is hoped that the success already achieved can be built upon. One of the Panchayat members I met enthusiastically told me that he wants to improve handwashing, encourage more breastfeeding and fight the problem of open defecation, amongst other objectives. He looks forward to the day when every single volunteer is equipped with their own bicycle, as without these it is hard for them to travel between households.

Gains have already been made in Devadurga block and the future looks promising for the target groups and their families. As for the bright young women who work in the two factories, they aim to one day lead the plants as successful social enterprises, alongside being fully self-sufficient. As I watch one of them determinedly slip the

jeep she is learning to drive into reverse and the others ride their bicycles confidently out of the gate after a long working day, I don't doubt it for a moment.

