



## **Integrating Functional Literacy into Agricultural Development and Women's Empowerment Programs**

*Experience from the Sunhara India project*



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## Executive Summary

Programs helping women farmers in India build functional literacy skills can improve women's agricultural outcomes, and develop women's self-esteem and confidence—crucial components of sustainable empowerment programming.

The literacy program developed as part of the three-year Bill & Melinda Gates-funded Sunhara India project grew out of the program's ongoing agricultural development and women's empowerment work. It adopted a two-pronged strategy to develop women's functional literacy skills: building agricultural capacity (seed packet reading, understanding and use of measurements and weights, etc.) and supporting empowerment initiatives so that women were better placed to take advantage of agricultural economic opportunities in the broader program.

The integrated literacy program faced several challenges, especially given the conservative social norms of Uttar Pradesh, where women are often isolated, marry and bear children young, and have time-consuming household and farm responsibilities. Despite the women's interest and high demand for the literacy training, for example, attendance for many women was irregular and their families often objected to their participation.

That said, the results of the 18-month initiative shows promise for the women:

- Nearly all women now write their names, an improvement from the 40 percent who could write their names at the start of the program.
- One in five (22.5 percent) women now write using complete sentences. No women wrote in complete sentences at the beginning of the literacy training.
- Nearly all women can now add and subtract orally (99.3 percent), and 83 percent are able to dial numbers on mobile phones.

Moreover, women saw improvements in their agricultural productivity and incomes. Women who participated in the literacy training adopted almost all the agricultural practices taught through the project. Several also became lead farmers, teaching good agricultural practices to others.

Innovative interventions included building functional literacy classes into existing self-help groups, ensuring literacy leaders have gender sensitization training and designing a five-day literacy camp to provide focused skills building as well as bonding for the women. The trust and relationship building that occurred between the women, including between the students and literacy trainers, often helped ensure that women were able to devise flexible and creative solutions to gender-related barriers as they occurred. Many of the women also said in ex-post interviews that they now want their daughters to attend school and become literate. A future area of study could be the role women's trust and sense of camaraderie plays in the pace and depth of social norm change.

# Report

This report presents a practical example of how to set up a sustainable literacy initiative as part of a broader agricultural development project. It is intended to be a resource for development practitioners seeking to integrate literacy into their programs. The report makes the case that functional literacy initiatives are important and complementary components of smallholder-focused agricultural development initiatives, especially those that seek to empower impoverished and marginalized groups. This report outlines the process of establishing literacy centers, the impacts and challenges to consider.

## 1. Background

The four-year Bill and Melinda Gates-funded Sunhara India project aims to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of smallholder farmers in Uttar Pradesh, including women, by facilitating market-oriented farming and improved service delivery systems. The project works with 25,000 farmers, 6,000 of which are women, in Shahjahanpur, Sultanpur and Pratapgarh districts. The project seeks to help women develop their capacity to address challenges they face at the household level.

## 2. Overview of Pratapgarh cluster

In Pratapgarh, Sunhara works with 3,000 women organized into 240 self-help groups (SHGs) in village-level clusters and under the umbrella of a women's federation, Vamashakti, meaning "women's strength." Sunhara provides training to a network of women lead farmers on appropriate agricultural technologies. These lead farmers then provide training and support to other women in their group.

Sunhara engages women in collective marketing and facilitates market linkages between Vamashakti and input suppliers, government institutions and institutional buyers.

Women are elected into leadership positions by members at each level of the federation. The structure of the elected SHGs is meant to help give women the courage and capacity to overcome the social and economic challenges that impede their development and ability to provide for their households.



### **3. Women Farmers, Literacy and Empowerment: A Context**

According to India's Ministry of Statistics, women make up at least 41 percent of the agricultural workforce in India.<sup>1</sup> However, prevalent social norms and gender inequalities position men and women differently throughout the agriculture value chain. This gender segmentation precludes women from deriving the full benefits of their agricultural involvement.

The Sunhara program began its literacy program because literacy plays an important role in helping women identify and take advantage of economic opportunities. For women farmers, basic numeracy is particularly important in managing their agricultural fields and off-farm enterprises, more so when credit and savings are involved.

The Sunhara literacy activities are aimed at building women's capacity to take advantage of economic opportunities that can make them financially and psychologically independent while simultaneously boosting women's self-confidence and improving their ability to achieve goals that are important to them.

Women's lives in Pratapgarh are shaped by social customs that often do not allow women to have an identity of their own. The discrimination against women sets limits to their aspirations and ability to assert their existence as individuals. In order to be empowered, it is very important that women gain freedom to act, to question, and to reassess standard cultural and social practices.

For literacy activities to be empowering and transformative, the education process should connect with the women's realities. The Sunhara program's literacy work has been embedded within the contexts and lives of its rural women participants, helping women confront the challenges they face on a daily basis.

### **4. How it all began**

**4.1 Getting the idea:** In Pratapgarh, the Sunhara India project is implemented in collaboration with Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation (BAIF). BAIF has worked on rural development issues, particularly animal-based livelihoods, for the last ten years.

Prior to the literacy initiative, Sunhara organized basic gender trainings for groups of 20 literate women from the community to help them analyze their gender upbringing so that they could more effectively assert their rights. During the training sessions, participants repeatedly said that women in their villages want to learn to read and write.

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<sup>1</sup> National Sample Survey Office of India (NSSO).



We asked these women to go back to their villages and informally survey who would be willing to come to a literacy learning facility for three hours a day on a user fee basis. Keeping it fee-based helped ensure that women had ownership over the trainings. In addition, we conducted meetings in a few villages to assess the demand for literacy services. In all, 20 villages reported significant demand.

After seeing the demand for literacy programs, the Sunhara India program decided to establish village-based learning centers to create a safe environment where women could access knowledge and information, empowering them to change their lives. Basic literacy skills are necessary to effectively negotiate market prices, safely use fertilizers, manage a bank account, and other market activities that are critical for women's economic empowerment and integration into higher value income-generating activities. The Sunhara program also wanted to impart confidence in the women that change is possible if they work together.

**4.2 Getting started:** For literacy programs to be empowering, it is important that the three traditional R's (reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) are woven into women's practical everyday environment. Sunhara's literacy trainings also sought to help women raise questions about everyday life and find solutions. A traditional or a casual literacy activity simply aimed at training women to read and write, therefore, would not be sufficient in this context.

Sunhara collaborated with Nirantar, a New Delhi-based resource agency for gender and education (<http://www.nirantar.net/>), to set up literacy courses and learning centers. Nirantar's work with the women's movement and other democratic rights movements in India allowed them to integrate gender rights into its educational work and help shape literacy trainings suited to the Sunhara project's needs.

**Nirantar provided support in:**

- **Planning the program:** In discussions with Nirantar, we decided that 18 months was a sufficient period of time for women to learn functional literacy and numeracy skills.
- **Building the perspective of program leaders:** Program leaders participated in a six-day training program organized by Nirantar. This program helped build their perspective on women's literacy including the need, the importance and the policy environment.
- **Providing teacher training and continuous capacity building:** Nirantar organized a training in which the literacy program coordinator and two supervisors participated. The participants were then expected to provide training to all other women educators.
- **Arranging for the learning material:** Nirantar provided the literacy primers on collective action through the self-help group and federation model. They also provided practicing exercises and learning aids.
- **Conducting field visits and providing feedback:** Nirantar conducted field visits to help women improve the process of learning at the centers.
- **Organizing camps:** A five-day residential camp was organized with technical support from Nirantar.
- **Conducting the baseline survey and adopting a monitoring and evaluation framework:** Nirantar designed specific formats for conducting the baseline survey and for regularly monitoring the learning curve of each woman.

To find the educators, we interviewed the 35 women volunteers who conducted the surveys, looking for women who could read and write effectively and had some level of numeracy. We knew these women had an understanding of gender issues from their participation in Sunhara's gender trainings. Of these, we selected 20 women from 20 different villages to serve as educators. The community chose the literacy center's location based on accessibility to all participants.

The women educators had a limited educational background. Most of the educators passed class 8 several years ago. They had never taught literacy courses and since they came from the same community as the literacy trainees, they faced similar social restrictions. They were confident in their abilities to lead a literacy center, but needed support and guidance from Sunhara. Therefore, it was very important to build their confidence and capabilities.

The educators participated in a six-day training where they learned about functional literacy education and developed an understanding of the curriculum, the teaching methodology, and how to maintain a learning center. To facilitate the trainings, Nirantar first organized a training of trainers<sup>2</sup>, in which three women participated. These women then organized trainings for their fellow educators. The cost of the training of trainers was borne by Nirantar (with support from larger agencies), and the cost of training for all the educators was borne by Sunhara.



Building women educators' leadership and capacity was also central to the project's empowerment goals.

#### **4.3 Getting community support—from both men and women**

In every village with a learning center, the women educators led an inauguration ceremony, a local gathering of 40-70 people. The participants were the prospective learners, their family members and other community members. Educators from two or three nearby centers also came in support of each other. They invited important people within the village – both women and men – so that they were aware and supportive of the center's efforts. The ceremonies also gave educators an opportunity to practice organizing events within their village.

At each ceremony, the guests lit a lamp, women sang a song and the center's teacher said a few words. Learners also shared why they wanted to learn and pledged to take the learning seriously.

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<sup>2</sup>Nirantar acts as a resource agency and supports several organizations that are interested in doing the literacy programs for women. So they usually organize trainings centrally for representatives from all their partner organizations and build their capacity to do the same back in their regions

The ceremonies are an example of how the centers sought to get the support of the community, including the men, and build women participants' ownership of the activity.

The entire cost of the ceremony (for decorations and sweets) was borne by the educators and at some places, the women collectively. This buy-in from the participants demonstrated the participants' ownership of the new literacy centers.

Because community leaders were involved in the inauguration of the learning centers, and because the centers were conveniently located near the women, women were more likely to be granted permission to participate in the literacy programs.

## **5. A profile of learners**

During the beginning stages of opening each literacy center, the educators conducted a baseline survey of the 333 participants using Nirantar's standard format that was tailored to the objectives of the program. The educators wrote down each learner's information, took the requisite fee and officially registered the learner. The basic profile of the learners is below. However, it should be noted that there were a few women who withdrew from the program for different reasons. At the same time, there were several others who joined the program during the later stages. Therefore, follow-up surveys do not track the exact same sample population. That said, the fact that these first-time educators are capturing this data at all is impressive, and the data is sufficient in providing a glimpse into the profile of participants and results of the initiative.

### **5.1 Age of the respondent:**

It is worth noting that only 16.5 percent of the women enrolled in the centers are between 18-25 years old. On one hand, this can be considered a positive sign that elderly women are interested in becoming literate, but at the same time it may reflect the area's value system that does not allow younger women to travel out of their houses.

<b>Age group</b>	<b>(%)</b>
18-25 years	16.5
26-35 years	37.8
more than 35 years	45.6

### **5.2 Belonging to caste/community:**

The Indian community is divided by the caste system. The majority of participants in the literacy courses came from the more discriminated castes, the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Caste.

<b>Caste community</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Scheduled Caste (SC)	36.6
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	16.4
Other Backward Caste (OBC)	28.5
General Category	18.4

**5.3 Religion:** There are fewer Muslims and Buddhists, and more Hindus involved with the centers. This corresponds with the religious makeup of the respective communities.

Religion	(%)
Hindu	85.9
Muslim	7.5
Buddhist	6.6

**5.4 Marital status:** 88.9 percent of the women who came to these centers were married, and 6.3 percent were either widowed or separated. Only 4.8 percent of the women were unmarried. Young women get married between the ages of 16-18. Younger girls are usually enrolled<sup>3</sup> in the school up to class five, thanks to the government-run programs such as midday meal (in which afternoon meals are served in school) and the free school uniform distributed to all children.

Marital Status	(%)
Married	88.9
Unmarried	4.8
Widow/single	6.3

**5.5 Representation in governing bodies:** The extremely low percentage of women involved in governing bodies (.3 percent) is a reflection of women's limited political participation in the program districts. Only one out of 333 women happened to be a member of the village panchayat, the local governing body in the village or town.

Options	(%)
Does not hold any post	99.7
Sarpanch or pradhan <sup>4</sup>	.3

**5.6 Employment in government programs:** About 8 percent of the women in the survey were involved in a government program such as the asha worker in health program, the aanganwadi worker or midday meals in schools. For these women, literacy results in a direct and immediate benefit, because they interact with government officers (while receiving their salaries and stocks, maintaining records, etc.) and the educated class on a daily basis.

Options	(%)
No involvement	91.9
Midday meal <sup>5</sup> cook	.9
Other government post	7.1

**5.7 Role in family decisions:** Only 2.7 percent said that they actively participate in the decisions of the family, while 87 percent, say that they do not participate at all in family decisions.

Options	(%)
Inactive	87.1
Some participation	10.2
Active participation	2.7

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that enrolment in school doesn't necessarily mean that they attend the classes too.

<sup>4</sup> A *sarpanch* or a *pradhan* are usually the heads of a cluster of 4-5 villages called *panchayat*.

<sup>5</sup> Midday meals are given in all the government primary schools. So, several women get appointed as a 'cook' in these schools.



**5.8 Working area:** Most of the women who come to the center either work on their own agricultural field or work as a wage laborer elsewhere.

Options	(%)
Do not work	9.9
Self-employed	1.8
Wage labor	30.0
Work on own field	48.0
Other	10.2

## 6. A glimpse of the centers

Each of the learning centers is named “Saksham”, meaning able. The centers provide women with a safe and accessible space to regularly meet. The presence of a facilitator helps build a relationship with the community. The approach to running the centers is flexible in order to respond to the needs of adult women. Multi-grade teaching is the norm.

At each center, there are 15-18 women who come regularly (attendance of between 70-100%). The centers are open six days a week and for approximately four hours a day (12-4 p.m.). For three hours learners come and go, and one hour is set aside so that educators can plan and prepare for the next day and maintain records. Every day there are three sessions: language, arithmetic and awareness of social, cultural, and economic issues. A separate attendance record is kept for all three sessions.

The time of day women come to the center typically changes during the sowing or harvesting seasons. In these cases, they might study for just one hour in the early morning or late evening.

The initial learning phase is woven around a primer, a curriculum framework and teaching-learning materials developed around generative themes, thereby enabling a holistic exploration of gender issues and collective action. For example, the very first chapter is called “NaamKaMaan” meaning “proud of name.” This chapter focuses on a middle-aged woman who does not remember her name because for years she had been recognized as someone’s daughter, wife or mother. The chapter encourages women to identify with their name.

“Through the money I received, I bought a new sari for my mother. She is a widow and it’s been years since she wore a new sari. I am fortunate that I could do this for my mother.

Earlier I never took interest in agricultural fields, but now I am amazed that this too requires a lot of skill and technical understanding. I cultivated [a] tomato nursery in low poly-tunnels. The good produce made me respected in the family as well as the community.

The work I do helps me connect closely to the women’s lives and their sufferings. I have got a vision to see the things that I could never get anywhere else.”

~ A teacher at the learning center

Some of the other themes include realizing self-worth; self-help groups and their functioning; importance of financial planning; linkages with banks and collective action. All of these themes reinforce the activities of the Sunhara India program and its efforts to build self-worth and empowerment.

Each center displays a set of four posters that contribute to building's environment. The messages include:

- i) I am learning to read so that I can read my own life.
- ii) I am learning to write so that I can write my own destiny.
- iii) I am learning calculation so that I can take an account of my rights.
- iv) One and one together makes eleven.<sup>6</sup>

At the centers, women not only strengthen their literacy and numeracy skills, but can also access information on social, political and economic opportunities and entitlements. It is also a safe space for them to discuss problems and receive support from their peers. Facilitators hold regular meetings with the women, during which issues such as health, violence, family planning and caste are discussed. These are open meetings and all women are encouraged to attend.



The centers built skills that left women better able to participate in the agricultural value chain, including:

- weighing produce
- calculating investments
- completing financial transactions
- getting information from others (as they can now dial numbers on a mobile phone)
- calculating seed rate and other inputs
- negotiating with traders

Coming to the centers on a daily basis also provided women with an opportunity to spend some time away from the household chores, share their problems, and pursue their own happiness.

## 7. Monitoring and record-keeping

The activities of the centers are monitored in different ways and using different approaches. Educators maintain monthly progress records of each learner, which become the basis for further planning. They also do collective reviews using participatory approaches. Discussions with

<sup>6</sup>This is a very common Hindi idiom that means that when two people come together their strength increases manifold.

learners occur regularly, but educators also sit together and discuss the progress in each center collectively. Educators do a weekly and monthly compilation of each learner's progress and keep an attendance record for each learner. Educators also maintain a diary in which they write their plans for each day.

Each center maintains a file in which women can write about anything that they want to, and those sheets are kept as records. Educators hold a monthly meeting with supervisors and discuss any issues that arise.

## 8. Literacy camp

Most women participants find it hard to come regularly to the centers. Even when they do, learning is often interrupted by day-to-day activities: family members calling them back home, a crying child or cattle needing tending. To overcome some of these problems, the project organized a five-day residential camp in July, 2012. The project covered the expenses, the women's federation facilitated the camp, and Nirantar provided the technical support in planning and organizing the camp. The camp was organized at a site 40 kilometers away from the centers. Nine educators and supervisors and 36 women from different centers participated in the camp.

At the camp, an intensive teaching-learning environment was created. Interactive exercises, games and role plays were used. Educators taught in groups according to participants' learning levels. In the evening, discussion sessions on issues such as SHGs and collective action were held. To encourage the women's ability to express their thoughts and feelings, every night they would write a letter to whomever they wanted. The next morning, the letters were read aloud in the plenary. The camp succeeded in accelerating learning and enabling in-depth discussion.

The self-help group structure played an important role in supporting women's participation in the camp, despite their demanding responsibilities at home. One woman had four daughters age 5 - 13 years old at home. She wanted to come to the camp but could not leave her children. The other women in her village and self-help group came to her support. During a group meeting, one woman agreed to become the guardian of her daughters for the five days she was gone. Another woman had to take care of her husband and an eight-year-old son. One of her neighbors (also in

- *I have learnt a lot in this camp. The love and hard work that the teachers do to make us learn is really worthy of respect*
- *When I go from here I will motivate all the other women to study seriously*
- *Earlier I thought that I am a fool and will not be able to learn. But now I am confident that I can learn to read and write.*
- *When I got the opportunity to be at the camp and lived freely here for four days, I realize that our lives are like pigeon in the cage, who wants to fly but can't.*
- *When we go back to our villages we will work hard to make our organization become stronger so that our voices are heard*

*Excerpts from the letters women wrote at the camp*

her self-help group) assured her that she would take care of the food for her husband and son for the days she would be gone to the camp. Women convened together and helped other women in their group make the most of this opportunity. This reflects the strength of collective support and individual ownership that the Sunhara program promotes.

## 9. Progress till now: seeing quantitatively

The table below shows the literacy progress of the women who attended the centers. Nearly all can now write their names, compared to the 40 percent who could write their names at the start of the courses. None could write in complete sentences at the start of the program, now 22.5 percent can. In addition, the vast majority, 99.3 percent can add and subtract orally and 83.3 percent can dial numbers on their mobile phones.

	<b>Baseline Values July 2011 (in percentage)</b>	<b>Values in April 2012 (in percentage)</b>
Women who can write their name	40.2	99.3
Women who can write the name of their village	15	90.2
Women who could not read one letter	71.2	5.2
Women who could read one letter or more	20.7	53.6
Women who can read complex words	3	75.2
Women who cannot read sentences	92.2	16.3
Women who can write sentences	0	22.5
Women who can add orally	16.2	99.3
Women who can subtract orally	10.2	99.3
Women who can multiply orally	6	98.7
Women who can divide orally	4.2	98.7
Women who can read dates on a calendar	2.7	69
Women who can dial numbers on a mobile phone	6.9	83.3

## 10. Literacy as empowerment for educators

As of June 2012, there are 17 educators in 17 centers,<sup>7</sup> two supervisors, and one full time coordinator. The coordinator and supervisors support the educators. Their age and education profile can be found in the table below:

Age profile		Education profile	
Age group (years)	No of educators	Educational standard	No of educators
20-30	6	Passed class 8 <sup>th</sup>	8
30-40	7	Passed class 10	7
40-50	6	Graduate	4
Total	19	Total	19

For all 19 women (except the coordinator who had been a community worker for last several years) this was the first time they had the opportunity to act as teachers and be recognized as leaders in the community. In the process of developing their capacity, the educators saw secondary benefits of their involvement with the centers. Several trainers were elected as cluster leaders in the women's federation and three of them became members of the registered board of federation, indicating that they are now more respected in the community as educators and leaders.

Some of the educators have also opted to continue their education. For example, those who have passed class eight have applied for examination of class nine. Two of the supervisors learned how to ride a bicycle to get to the literacy center and one of the educators learned how to drive a scooter. These are significant actions because riding a bicycle and scooter are seen by the community as being male-specific.

Some of the educators are also the lead farmers of their farmer groups where they teach good agricultural practices to the other out-growers in their groups. With initial support from Nirantar, this cadre developed four booklets on issues of agriculture for the neo-literate women. The four books are: soil sample collection; preparing compost; nursery sowing in raised beds; and identification of real and fake fertilizers. These booklets are written using basic English, bold letters and enough pictures to support the text. The neo-literate women can now easily conduct soil testing and calculate and apply fertilizer and pesticide doses.

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<sup>7</sup>Three learning centers have closed. One closed because the educator became pregnant and ill. She went to Delhi where her husband lived for treatment. Another educator fractured her back and has not been mobile. In the last case, the educator got a job in a government program and she could not regularly run the center. Because of the teacher's absences, learners also lost interest. However, there were 4-6 women who regularly came to the center to continue learning on their own, but with only intermittent presence of the educator, it was difficult to move the center forward.



## 11. Literacy as an empowerment tool for learners

The literacy classes have allowed women to overcome social isolation, giving them a chance to meet other women and learn collectively. In their lives, illiteracy had reduced their self-image so drastically, that sometimes they would say “I am not literate, so I cannot tell you anything.” Women’s participation in the learning centers, both as educators and as learners, broke these stereotypes and helped them develop a new image of women’s capabilities.

In addition to their participation in the farmer groups, the centers gave women a platform to talk about challenges they face in agriculture. The literacy and numeracy skills helped the women read names of the seed on seed packets, their MRP, the expiration date, and information on pamphlets. Women can also now calculate the seed or fertilizer rate or a pesticide dose. Since the women participants now leave their households and are more prevalent in market operations, they have become more aware of fair value market prices.

Other benefits of the centers include:

***More opportunity to earn income:*** One 35-year-old woman had gone to school up to class five, but was unable to receive any additional education. Over the years, she never had the opportunity to learn to read and write and had lost her confidence. She joined the center and now assists the teacher. If the teacher is in the field conducting a training, she is responsible for running the center. In another similar case, a woman has started a farmer resource center in the village. Through this center, she sells seeds, pesticides and other agricultural inputs. She has learned to identify the right packaging, calculate the transactions and manage the center’s finances.

***Increased Mobility:*** When women come to the centers, they adjust the timing of their other responsibilities accordingly. They attend trainings and meetings, and participate in other group activities. This has given them an opportunity to move out alone from their houses and see the world outside their villages.

***Increased school enrolment for girls:*** The literacy program has motivated and encouraged women learners to educate their children, particularly girls, by enrolling them in school. As women realize the importance of education, more and more girls, especially in the secondary classes, are receiving opportunities to continue their education. (See text box.)

***Opportunities for disabled women:*** Reena is 13 and deaf. She never had an opportunity to go to school. In August, a learning center opened in her village. She began going to the center and within a month, she learned to write her name, the names of her family members, the name of her teacher and the name of her village. She can also count from 1-50 and do simple calculations.

***Being part of SHGs and accessing credit:*** Many women who were not members of SHGs but started coming to learning centers, have gradually become a part of SHGs too. They now have

financial management skills and the ability to increase income and access credit. 112 Self-Help Groups in Pratapgarh opened bank accounts midway through the program.

## 12. Opportunities and Practices

As part of the larger Sunhara India program, many events were organized that gave women the opportunity to explore and understand themselves and their lives

**International Women's Day Conference:** In March 2012, Vamashakti, the women's collective in Pratapgarh, celebrated International Women's Day with the theme, Voices of Change. The conference was planned, managed and controlled by the women themselves. During the three-hour event, women staged plays, shared their struggles, spoke about the change they see in their lives and sang songs.

Women who attended the learning center participated in the event with great enthusiasm. They staged a play on their right to education, demonstrating the obstacles that women face in coming to the learning centers. Women from other learning centers learned about speaking out against domestic violence.

Some women shared their individual stories of how the literacy centers impacted their lives.

These women practiced a lot before finally coming on the stage. Their preparation and participation gave new dimensions to the women's organizing capacity and collective work.

**Suchitra**, 14, had stopped going to school after passing class 5. The middle school was a small distance from her home, thus her parents decided to discontinue her studies. But since her mother has been coming to the learning center, she has insisted that Suchitra's father let her continue her studies. This year Suchitra is happy that she is enrolled in school again.

**Series of one-day gender trainings:** In October 2011, a series of one-day gender trainings were conducted. Women from three centers got together and the facilitators (the local district coordinator and the Sunhara program manager) conducted interactive exercises and discussions with the participants. The trainings focused on three specific messages – i) women matter ii) their work is important and iii) they have a right to be involved in decisions on spending family income. The trainings were free and were done in common places such as school buildings.

Other festivals that women found their own ways to celebrate include:

**Deepawali:** The Festival of Lights allows women to inscribe *Shubh Deepawali* (Happy Deepawali) on the walls and practice their handwriting, often in the company of their husbands and family.

**Rakshabandhan:** This festival demonstrates the sanctity in the relationship between a brother and a sister. Women tie a knot on the hands of their brothers and in turn, brothers give their sisters a gift and assure them that they will be safeguarded. Women discussed the patriarchal nature of

this festival, and celebrated it by tying a knot on other women's hands who attend the center to cultivate a feeling of togetherness and assure that they will help each other overcome the cultural and social challenges they face in life.

### 13. Challenges encountered in creating and running the centers, and solutions found:

**Regular attendance:** Regular attendance is a big issue, especially during the planting and harvest seasons. Those who go to work as daily laborers are also not able to attend classes regularly. We tried to shift the regular timing of classes to suit the needs of the learners.

**Intermittent problems by the participants' families:** During the early stages of developing the center, it was common for women to hear discouraging words from their family and the community. Gradually, the families and larger community became supportive of the women as they understood their new potential in generating income and becoming leaders.

**Training new educators when the original educators cannot continue in their role:** In the three cases where educators could not continue in their role, it was challenging to find a woman who was both literate and who had her family's support, and then train the educator midway through the program.

#### Strengths of the program

- The program was customized according to women's needs
- Flexible time frame
- Small groups
- Included women from the community at all levels
- Parallel efforts on SHG, collective action, leadership building and improved agriculture.
- Building gender consciousness through repeated trainings
- Organized large events

**Problems in identifying the place for the center:** We initially thought that common community spaces such as panchayatbhawan<sup>8</sup> or a school building would be the communities' contribution for running these centers. However, we soon realized that although there was a lot of available infrastructure in the villages, using them in accordance with government rules and regulations proved to be difficult. Except in two instances, learning center activities were conducted in someone's house or field. When it was organized in people's houses, there were sometimes caste issues. The people of a higher caste would not go the house of the people of lower caste to study. We organized a village meeting to resolve this.

**Capacity Building of Educators:** Since all the educators were chosen from within the community, they were initially skeptical of engaging in literacy activities. They were all born and brought up in a submissive atmosphere to follow all the norm of being a "good daughter in-law."

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<sup>8</sup>Gram Panchayats are local self-governments at the village or small town level in India. Modern Indian government has decentralized several administrative functions to the local level, empowering elected gram panchayats. For functioning of panchayat, there is an office, usually a government owned building, called, panchayatbhawan.

## **14. Way forward**

Parallel to the learning center initiatives, we made a concerted effort to strengthen the self-help groups, clusters and the women's federation, Vamashakti. Vamashakti is now a registered body and can generate funds and operate independently.

In conjunction with strengthening the SHGs and federations, BAIF had a conversation with Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT), a major Indian funding agency. The team from SDTT has already visited the area and approved a project for running 200 learning centers in four different districts, one of which is Pratapgarh. BAIF intends to manage 50 new centers in the Pratapgarh area through Vamashakti. BAIF demonstrated faith in the women's federation by transferring all the funds to Vamashakti and giving them a chance to manage and implement the program, including financial controls. SDTT is also considering supporting continued training for the 17 pre-existing learning centers. This will provide women with an opportunity to continue their journey to empowerment. Many of the women who have learned in these centers can become the educators for the next phase and some of the educators in the current set can become the supervisors for the next phase.

The advent of public and private sector support to replicate the literacy center model demonstrates its viability as an empowerment activity and its importance in terms of complementing and enhancing women's livelihood activities, especially relating to agricultural.

## **15. Conclusion**

The Sunhara literacy program is an essential supporting activity for agriculture development and women's empowerment. Through the implementation of this activity, we have learned that functional literacy is a basic yet critical element in creating positive change in practices and attitudes. Illiteracy and poverty are the norm in rural women's lives, and functional literacy should be the key component of any coordinated effort to bring about long-lasting and dynamic change.

The women involved with the learning centers are able to apply their literacy skills to the other Sunhara India activities, especially the agricultural training and enterprising activities. Furthermore, it also helps build the local capacity of the SHGs and Vamashakti, sustaining empowerment; multiple efforts focused on the same challenge magnify results.

Empowerment is a continuous state and transpires overtime. As women move from invisibility to recognition and from isolation to organization, they become empowered and are able to build on their hopes, aspirations and expectations.

## 16. Financials of the Literacy Program

SN	Item	Unit cost (Rs)	Number	No of months	Total Cost (INR)
1	Teacher	1,500	17	18	459,000
2	One time basic establishment cost (mattress, blackboard, copies, pencils slates etc.)	4,000	17	One time	68,000
3	Supervisor	2,500	2	18	90,000
4	Coordinator	7,000	1	18	126,000
5	Recurring expenses (Chart, colors etc.)	200	17	18	61,200
6	Trainings <sup>9</sup> (3days, residential for 20 people)	25,000	4	variable	100,000
7	Support cost to Nirantar	50,000			50,000
				total	954,200

### About Agribusiness Systems International

Founded in 1993, [Agribusiness Systems International \(ASI\)](#) provides tailored services to firms, investors and entities that support the agribusiness sector to create increasingly competitive and dynamic industries. An affiliate of [ACDI/VOCA](#), ASI draws from that organization's more than 45 years of experience expanding economic opportunities in 145 developing and transitional nations. ASI supports ACDI/VOCA's mission by helping farmers and agribusinesses develop the skills necessary to operate competitively in a market-driven global economy. ASI fulfills its clients' needs through world-class, market-oriented services and training to facilitate socially responsible business innovation, investment opportunities and financial access.

ASI's projects are funded by non-U.S. government entities, including individuals, charitable foundations, associations, corporations, foreign governments and development funding organizations. Through its more flexible and entrepreneurial mode of obtaining operating funds, ASI aims to expand the scope of its agricultural production, agricultural credit and food systems program activities. ASI is poised to bring diverse business and development partners together in ways that contribute to sustainable growth.

For more information on ASI, please visit our website: [www.asintl.org](http://www.asintl.org). For more information on ACDI/VOCA, please visit the website: [www.acdivoca.org](http://www.acdivoca.org).

<sup>9</sup> Expenses for training are highly variable depending on the place of stay and mode of travel.