

Spreading the light

Meet the women who are running their own successful businesses and mentoring and empowering other women to do the same.

They have walked the hard road, gone through turbulent times and have emerged as winners. They know what works and what doesn't, what's sustainable and what isn't. Meet the women leaders and mentors who are inspiring their neighbours, friends and communities to embark on a journey of self-empowerment, entrepreneurship and financial independence.

VIDYA KIRVE, Tailoring and bag designing



Vidya is an accomplished businesswoman who has her own shop and runs tailoring classes which have trained more than 3,500 women in Satara district. But her journey was far from easy. She has successfully overcome numerous obstacles and, what's more, she is dedicated to empowering other women find their own feet and become independent.

In 2014, when her husband's real estate business faltered and her family finances were impacted, Vidya wanted to start working. But she wasn't allowed outside their village. Fortunately, around the same time, she was introduced to the Mann Deshi Foundation's Business School on Wheels programme which went to remote locations and offered women various courses at their doorsteps. Vidya was keen to enroll. "But in order to start a course, the Mann Deshi trainers required a group of at least 10 women. I went across the village convincing women to join and was so relieved when I managed to get a group together. That gave me a huge boost of confidence." remembers Vidya.

Once she had completed the workshop, Vidya took a loan of Rs 10,000 from the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank and bought a sewing machine and some raw material and set up her bags business. In the beginning, she focused on getting customers rather than increasing her profits and when she was invited to the Mann Deshi exhibition in Satara, she displayed over a thousand bags. The exhibition brought her a tidy profit and increased her confidence to continue to expand her business. She applied for another loan of Rs 20,000 and this time bought a larger machine that was able to stitch tougher materials such as jute and leather. Her husband, initially reluctant to let his wife work, began to see the value in her business and joined her. Soon her two children also began to help her. With all the support, she bagged her first big order from the Satara Gram Panchayat. Since then orders have flown in and her income has significantly increased. She also supplies raw material to other women who have set up their own tailoring businesses.

Vidya feels that though there's no dearth of talent and zeal in rural areas, what's lacking is family support. "Most women are not allowed to step outside their villages and so it's very hard for them to grow their businesses and earn more. I do everything I can to help women become more independent - everyone must realize that when a woman progresses, the whole family progresses," points out Vidya.

VANITA DIPAK SALUNKHE, *Paper and cloth bags*



Failure and rejection can be your best teacher. This certainly holds true for Vanita Salunkhe. Encountering rejection instilled in her the burning desire to prove herself to the world.

A few years ago when Vanita decided to start a paper bag printing business, she approached a machine dealer in Satara who disparaged her and said that since she was a woman and only educated till the 10th

class, she should sit at home, do housework and produce kids. “I felt very hurt and disheartened but didn’t lose hope. I approached another dealer in Nashik. He had never sold such a large piece of machine to a woman before, but I managed to convince him of my eagerness and ability to learn. He agreed to train me for Rs 5,000. Though I was nervous, I knew I had to take this risk,” says Vanita, who took loan of 5 lakh from the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank for the machine.

It’s nearly eight years now that Vanita has been successfully running her manufacturing unit in Satara. She supplies school bags of various designs to nearly 400 shops in and around the city and has trained another 50 women in this skill, many of whom she has hired. Vanita, who bagged the Best Businesswoman Award in the Special Category at Mann Deshi Rural Mahotsav 2019, is now keen to significantly scale up her business and give another 1,000 women training and jobs by 2022. She has also successfully completed Mann Deshi’s one-year Deshi MBA programme.

RUPALI RAMCHANDRA PAVNIKAR, *T-shirt making*



If Rupali is able to earn nearly a lakh rupee per month today, it’s only due to her hard work and persistent effort. Way back in 2011, when she started her stitching business, she had just two sewing machines. Today, she has 10 sewing machines and five women working as assistants. Her clientele includes reputed names such as Dove and Champion Sports, among others. Rupali’s journey to reach this point has not been an easy one.

In the year 2010, Rupali’s world came to a standstill when she learnt that her younger son had holes in his heart. At the time, she and her husband worked in the same private firm and earned poorly.

Realizing that their son would require expensive medical treatments, they decided to launch their own business.

The couple took a Rs 2 lakh loan from a private bank and started manufacturing t-shirts which they sold to retailers. However, they didn't do as well as they had hoped.

Six years ago, Rupali attended a business workshop by the Mann Deshi Foundation. "It helped me hone my marketing skills and learn the nuances of business. I was also assisted to procure stitching contracts from reputed companies," she says.

Rupali has trained more than 30 women. "My training covers many topics- fabric estimates, cutting fabric, pattern design, stitching, thread trimming, folding, tagging and packing," says Rupali, one of the awardees to receive the Best Businesswoman Award 2019.

Her younger son, who is now eight-year-old, has successfully completed two operations, all thanks to the income she has made from her business.

It's not just women who are leading the charge. Here is a very special man who is also dedicated to empowering women achieve their potential.

VANRAJ KUMKAR, scientist, mentor for the past 20 years



Vanraj has an interesting approach to his training programmes that are based on a great deal of research. Before he begins work in a particular geography, he studies the area in great detail, identifying which businesses have potential.

Over the past 20 years, he has trained thousands of women across Maharashtra in different skills and helped them start their own businesses. “I focus a great deal on value added services. For example, if a woman has a mango farm but is unable to earn enough by selling the fruit in the market, I teach her how to process the pulp and make jam or jelly chocolate that will help her earn more,” explains Vanraj.

Vanraj is constantly coming up with new business ideas. His advice to women who own a few hens? Don’t just sell eggs. Invest in an incubator and produce chicks. The chicks, when sold in the market after a few months, will fetch far better prices. For a woman farming peanuts or *rajgira* (amaranth)? “Process the crop to make chikki or laddoos. I also train women on how to label and package their products better,” says Vanraj, who has nearly 50 business models that can be run with rural resources. Mann Deshi is fortunate to have such an innovative partner!