

We don't grow just to eat; we grow to heal,
to celebrate, and to remember !

52nd ShodhYatra in Katihar, Bihar

Marked by sprawling fields, erratic power cuts, and the quiet hum of everyday survival, Katihar in northeastern Bihar forms a complex terrain where traditional knowledge meets systemic neglect. The 52nd ShodhYatra, covering over 100 km across 28 villages in a week, traced this landscape not just geographically but socially, considering how rural innovation, gendered labour, and ecological practices emerge and endure in the margins of formal recognition.

Katihar, situated in the alluvial plains of North Bihar, is part of the fertile Gangetic belt. The region is characterized by its rich natural vegetation, including sal (*Shorea robusta*), teak (*Tectona grandis*), mango groves, and indigenous grasses, which support an array of wildlife such as jackals, foxes, mongooses, and various avian species. As the Yatris walked through fields and wooded patches, they witnessed a diversity of flora: Lapha saag (possibly *Chenopodium album*), wild turmeric (*Curcuma aromatica*), and grasses used in mat weaving like Sarkanda (*Saccharum munja*). The wisdom of elders was evident, when a dada

remarked, “*We don't grow just to eat; we grow to heal, to celebrate, and to remember.*”

Rural Resilience and the Spirit of Innovation

In Colonel's Academy, Rautara, several innovators and local community members were invited. Shri Kali Das Banerjee, a mango farmer and proud agro-nationalist had over 450 trees in his orchard and several cultivars named after national icons like Chittaranjan Das, Swami Vivekananda, and Subhash Chandra Bose. His most notable variety, “Chittaranjan,” is renowned

for its exceptional taste and resistance to storms, to the extent that even during strong winds, the mangoes remain firmly attached to the tree. This variety is now registered under the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Authority (PPVFRA). His orchard also has hundreds of trees painted in Tiranga colors. During the inauguration of the Yatra, Banerjee planted mango saplings along with the Yatris at Colonel's Academy.

Meanwhile, in Sharifganj, Preeti Kumari transformed her 1-hectare farm from not-so-remunerative paddy cultivation to a thriving enterprise in mushroom farming (*Agaricus*

bisporus), after receiving training from Krishi Vigyan Kendra. Facing initial setbacks in marketing, she formed a Self-Help Group (SHG) that now produces innovative value-added mushroom items: papads, pickles, jhalmuri, powders, and even halwa. Her products are sold through the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA), Katihar and Jeevanika. Her initiative empowered 16 women-led SHGs, raised her annual income to approximately 3.5 lakhs, and addressed malnutrition in the area. Preeti is also the first woman in Katihar to receive an FSSAI license and was awarded the Outstanding Woman Farmer Award (2024) by Bihar Agricultural University, Sabour. Her farewell gift to the Yatris, mushroom halwa and pakoras, was a delight.

Similarly, Panchlal Mandal, an organic farming pioneer, champions natural methods using Jeevamrit, Neemastra, and Beejamrit, all rooted in cow-based inputs and Ayurvedic principles. He actively teaches these techniques and established a Farmer Producer Organization (FPO) that supports local organic growers.

Further south in the district, the Yatris met Amresh Chaudhary, a farmer redefining rural innovation through bamboo cultivation and agritourism. Having planted 45 acres with multiple species of bamboo, Amreshji has developed a complete system for harvesting and hot water-based processing. He has trained 22 people and connected them to bamboo-based enterprises. Amreshji is also piloting three methods of rice farming to reduce water usage, a project in collaboration with Bayer scientists. His integrated farming model includes 12 ponds with eight species of fish, sold at prices ranging from 120 to 800. His use of herbal, eco-friendly treatments has made his land a haven for migratory birds and a destination for visitors.

Architecture, Aesthetics, and the Ethics of Sustainability

In Nargada, yatris encountered an old woman drying cow dung cakes (*uplas*) used as cooking fuel. These homemade biofuel cakes would later serve as cooking fuel, a practice both frugal and eco-friendly. Throughout Katihar, many homes ingeniously utilize local natural materials for building and insulation. Thatched roofs are packed with kans grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*), and walls are often reinforced with woven bamboo splits – techniques that provide excellent insulation against the searing summers and chilly winters. Now, the aspirations are understandably shifting towards pucca houses.

Makhana and Millionaires

Katihar is one of India's leading districts cultivating *Euryale ferox*, locally known as makhana—an aquatic crop deeply integral into Mithila culture, Ayurvedic traditions, and now global superfood markets. Despite Bihar accounting for over 90% of India's makhana production, cultivation and processing remain largely small-scale. The communities that brave through thorny ponds and labor-intensive methods rarely share in the profits generated by urban brands.

In Kola Gram Panchayat, the Yatris met Usha Devi, a veteran cultivator

with over 20 years of experience. Usha earns approximately 100 per kilo after laborious manual processing, while branded and flavored makhana packets sell in urban markets for 1,200– 1,500. Without access to modern popping machines, vacuum packaging, or proper monsoon drying facilities, she still manages to produce some of the region's cleanest makhana, free from bleaching agents or artificial polish.

In Dharhan, several families continue to follow the traditional *geliya* method—a cooperative model where roasting and popping duties rotate among members. However, this model is vanishing as startups and large brands disrupt local systems. In the makhana economy, the millionaires are rarely those who harvest the crop. Yet, change is afoot in some corners. In Keotia, the Yatris met a collective of women entrepreneurs, each earning over 5 lakh annually. Led by Anupriya Kumari and supported by her husband, their makhana processing and flavoring venture has scaled to export operations, boasting a turnover above 70 lakh. When introduced to the potential for diversifying using corn silk as a parallel enterprise, Anupriya laughed, “We're so busy with makhana, there's no time for anything else!”

Contd... in the next issue

