

The other frontline workers of the pandemic

Across India, grassroots workers engaged in developmental work have taken on the role of keeping rural communities safe, writes Venu Sandhu



Health workers trained by CII distribute ration, daily essentials and hygiene kits to villagers in Maharashtra's drought-prone Marathwada region

For the last few weeks, Manisha Ghule and her team of 30-odd women have been sleeping for barely three to four hours a day. The sugarcane cutters, who head to Karnataka and western Maharashtra every year in search of work, have returned to their villages in Beed, the drought-prone district of Maharashtra's Marathwada region where Ghule works. As the lockdown was announced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the vulnerable seasonal migrants rushed home. The state borders were getting sealed, but they somehow managed to make the journey back to an uncertain future — and to antagonistic villagers who were worried they might have brought the virus with them.

Ghule, who works on the health rights of women in Beed, has now diverted her time and energy to provide these migrants with ration, daily essentials, hygiene kits, and counselling, she is helping reach out to over 5,000 families across 300 villages.

Over a thousand kilometres away, in Rajasthan's Tonk district, Rama Sharma is doing the same for some 300 families from the nomadic Banjara, Madari and Qalandar tribes. Besides distributing ration, masks and sanitisers to them, she and her team have been telling them about the virus that has brought the world to a standstill. They have taken on the task of explaining to the villagers why it is important for them and their children to frequently wash their hands, refrain from touching their faces and how and when to use this thing called the sanitiser,

which, until now, didn't even remotely feature in their scheme of things.

Ghule and Sharma are part of a vast grassroots network built and cultivated by the CII Foundation, which was set up by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in 2011 to undertake developmental activities across India. In this critical time, this robust network is coming in handy to extend both material help and mental health support to rural and marginalised communities, among whom many have lost their livelihoods and the basic means to get by.

Overall, CII is working across 26 states — covering the span from Gujarat to Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir to Tamil Nadu. So far, it has managed to reach out to nearly two million people in these areas with cooked meals, ration and hygiene kits. Awareness drives in villages and among distressed, ignored sections of society, which are crucial to protect them from Covid-19 and contain the spread of the virus, are also being undertaken. The CII Foundation alone, for instance, has carried out Covid-19 relief work and awareness initiatives among nomadic tribes, agricultural women workers, daily wage earners and the impoverished and oppressed Musahar community across seven states.

"All of these initiatives, amongst other efforts, are being funded by our member companies, where companies are contributing either in cash or kind," says CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee. "CII is facilitating the translation on ground using its extensive presence and network."

What is making these initiatives

effective is that the people carrying out the work are those who belong to those very areas, speak the local language and have the trust of the communities.

Sandeep Kumar, for example, is a member of a farmer cooperative society in Haryana's Sirsa district. The society was formed by CII Foundation in 2019 to work on stubble burning and crop residue management. Since all its members are farmers and representatives of the local farmer community, they know of the below-poverty-line (BPL) families and farm labourers who are in dire need of ration kits and food items after the lockdown. Not only are they helping spread awareness and support in the distribution of ration kits, but they are also providing real-time feedback from the community so that the industry body is able to design its relief strategy according to the needs of the villages.

"The concept of social distancing does not exist in villages," says Kumar. "So we really had to work hard to tell them why they needed to stay away from one another, remain home and decontaminate whatever essentials they bought." Besides ensuring that announcements to the effect are made from the temples and gurdwaras in the villages, morning and evening, Kumar and his team have also distributed pamphlets in Hindi about the pandemic and the safety measures it necessitates. They have also carried out decontamination

exercises in the villages.

Harminder Sidhu, a promoter of a farmer producer organisation (FPO) in the Raikot block of Ludhiana in Punjab, is working in 50 villages along with local volunteers. Like Kumar, Sidhu and FPOs such as his have been associated with CII Foundation on various issues, including stubble burning. "We are now sending out relief vans to the villages," says Sidhu. Seeing their work, the sub-divisional magistrate has asked them to continue with the campaign.

"When the lockdown was announced, it was potato harvesting season," says Sidhu. "Farmers needed passes to get out to their fields and to transport their produce. We guided them on how to get these passes, and in some cases got them made for them."

Meanwhile, CII sent relief kits and 25,000 sanitiser bottles. "We were judicious in their distribution, keeping those who go out into the fields and are, therefore, more vulnerable as priority."

All the *chupatis* (community spaces) were shut down and the village youth were roped in to guard the routes to the villages from 6 am to 8 pm. "The idea is to get people to avoid all unnecessary travel to and from the village," says Sidhu. A local artist was also brought on board to create catchy awareness messages, which are now announced through loudspeakers on a tractor across villages.

Then another issue came up. "There

was a news story that a family in Ludhiana had refused to accept the body of an elderly woman who had died of Covid-19," says Sidhu. "Doctors, police and the administration are already stretched; they shouldn't have to deal with such problems too." So now announcements are made twice a day from village temples and gurdwaras urging people to remain sensitive and mindful, while also exercising caution.

"People are traumatised," says Ghule, who is part of CII Foundation's "Woman Exemplar" network, a programme that recognises exemplary women working at the grassroots and trains them in leadership and capacity-building skills. She underwent a three-day training by CII in Delhi in 2017.

Ghule, who is the founder of an all-women federation (Mahila Vikas Manch) in Beed district, says complaint boxes have been kept in every village — either in the village school, the gram panchayat office or other such prominent places. Women can drop in their complaints or suggestions, which the field staff then acts on. Important information or feedback is communicated to CII.

Ghule is a local leader in her own right. In the past her efforts have ensured that Beed became one of the earliest districts of Maharashtra to implement the Ghar Doghaanche Abhiyan, the state government's scheme for joint property ownership between husband and wife. Her intervention made it possible for 20,000 women to become joint owners of their houses.

Ghule's personal network extends to Angamwadi and Asha workers. And then there are other NGOs she is coordinating with. Such a web of networks exists in other states too, making these grassroots workers a fortified force, one that we need in this trying time.

"Yes, we face problems when we go out to the villages. But, we also have help from the local administration and the police in distributing the relief kits from CII," she says. Each kit carries 21 products: Atta, rice, oil, toothpaste, soap and other such essentials.

Sharma, a woman exemplar from 2019 who is enabling girls from Tonk's Banjara community to enter the formal schooling system, says the police have been pro-active with their help. "Our relief vans travel with a police personnel and a nurse to the villages," says Sharma, who herself overcame marital violence and financial crisis to work for the education of marginalised girls. Appreciating her Covid-19 relief work, the district administration has given her 300 more kits to distribute to vulnerable families.

"When we started the pandemic relief work, the community had no clue that a deadly virus had shaken the world," says Sharma, who has been educating them about it. She has also been telling them to sun themselves and their clothes, drink warm potions that have spices such as cloves, turmeric and pepper, and do whatever it takes to strengthen their immunity. And, strengthen social solidarity in this time of physical distancing — the way she and networks such as hers are doing.

PHOTO: CII