

SUNITA DEVI

The Mushroom Lady of Tipri

Leadership doesn't only exist in corporate boardrooms. Sunita Devi's story is proof of that.

When we launched the Mera Gaon Mera Pride training program for rural India at Samhita, we realised leadership takes many forms. This led us to design a unique leadership program in partnership with Indian School of Business (ISB) Hyderabad, called the Women Entrepreneurship Development Program (WEDP).

The WEDP, with support from DXC Technology, aims to empower handpicked individuals recognised by our field partners for their tremendous leadership potential. Our training modules help develop sustainable enterprises across the rural belt and inspire progressive behavioural shifts in communities through these entrepreneur leaders.

That's how we met Sunita Devi, Tipri Basti's firebrand ***"Mushroom Lady".*** This is her story.

For the longest time, Sunita Devi has dreamed of setting up her own business. ***"Kissi aur ke liye kaam karne se achha hai apna khud ka kaam karna,"*** she says, with an unwavering self-belief, whenever someone asks why. She wants to ensure a better life for her family, one where her children thrive and have access to all the opportunities they need.



Sunita Devi's family is among the 113 residents of Tipri Basti, a small village tucked away between the mountain ranges that embrace the Chinyalisaur district of Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand. While agriculture has been the primary source of income for generations, it doesn't offer much beyond the bare minimum, especially in today's growing climate uncertainty.

"I knew I needed to aim higher so I could guarantee a better future for my children," Sunita Devi said, with a quiet determination ever-present in her voice. With this goal in mind, she joined a Self-Help Group (SHG) near her village in 2017 and worked her way up to become an enterprising community leader. With her natural flair for leadership, Sunita Devi then went on to establish the first SHG in Tipri Basti. ***"This helped me establish a good reputation in my community and also increased my monthly earnings, but there's still more I needed to do,"*** she added.



Sunita Devi's dream of being a businesswoman was close to becoming a reality. With a small loan of Rs. 50,000 from her SHG, she set up a general store. ***"Things were off to a great start but I realised that I can only go so far with the footfall my shop was getting thanks to my community's goodwill. I needed a constant flow of money to keep the business afloat,"*** Sunita Devi said, recalling the tough initial days of her foray into entrepreneurship.

Sunita Devi's struggle is one that far too many women entrepreneurs in the country identify with. Women make up about 20% of India's 63 million MSMEs and yet continue to face significant barriers to entering and scaling their businesses, chief of which is their inability to access capital. This accounts for more than 40 per cent of the USD 400 billion credit gap that's holding back the MSME industry from reaching its full potential.

So, how did Sunita Devi land the moniker of ***"Tipri Basti's Mushroom Lady"?***

In 2020, Sunita Devi's ambition and hunger for growth led her to join a training session on mushroom farming organised by Himmothan Society, a nonprofit supporting rural communities. She instantly outshone everyone else and began constructing a shed for mushroom cultivation with support from groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. Despite her zeal to get it right this time, the money problems remained. Dealing with a perishable product had its own set of challenges and the need for proper financing only made things harder.

Sunita Devi possessed all the skills required to become a successful entrepreneur. All she needed was a spark to light her way forward. The members of Himmothan Society recognised this and encouraged her to join the Women Entrepreneurship Development Program (WEDP), which equipped Sunita Devi with essential business skills that she previously lacked. ***"For over two months, the WEDP provided rigorous training to community leaders like me through peer-to-peer learning and personalised guidance sessions. We learned everything from how to raise capital through formal credit institutions, to finance management and planning, digital marketing, and leadership development,"*** she explained.



It didn't take Sunita Devi long to apply her learnings to her mushroom cultivation venture. In no time, she designed a comprehensive business plan, a logo, and marketing material during the 15-day intensive Marketing workshops that she attended. ***"I acquired a small packaging unit and equipment to complete my shed and also began attracting customers beyond Tipri Basti by sharing customised content across my business accounts on YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook,"*** Sunita Devi proudly declares.

Her exceptional performance led to her being selected as a champion performer from the Chinyalisaur district. ***"From struggling to make ends meet, to now, where I'm expanding my business online through ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce), I feel so much more confident to chase after bigger dreams,"*** Sunita Devi's eyes glint as she fixes her mind on her next goal—growing her business to the district level, and eventually the whole state.



Not one to monopolise success and opportunity, Sunita used her experience to inspire others in her village to think beyond traditional agriculture and learn new skills to shape their independent ventures. ***"My success alone isn't enough to make my community prosper,"*** Sunita Devi says thoughtfully, ***"that's why I got 90 women from my block to participate in the Mera Gaon Mera Pride training programs."***

Like a true leader, Sunita Devi is now a strong voice for her community, inspiring others, building consensus on common issues, and resolving conflicts effectively. Her journey is a reminder to the Samhita team that when we empower women, we make a difference for an entire community.

