



Poshan Pakhawada From Assam Story



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Hope from Small Success Stories

District: Dhubri, Assam

Dhubri district in Assam is a low lying and flood prone area where poverty and illiteracy is prevalent. Majority of the population is made up of wage earners or migrant workers. Child marriage is prevalent while school dropouts are a common feature. Institutional delivery is still low in the area.

“We are concerned about the low rates of institutional deliveries in our area. It is a huge challenge but we are trying our best to bring about some change here,” said Aloy Mitro, Anganwadi Supervisor for Debitola ICDS Project.

She added that while real success will be achieved only when institutional deliveries become a norm, there are small victories in the way pregnant women and lactating mothers are becoming more mindful of their health.

Godh Bharai as learning experiences

“We started taking up Godh Bharai ceremonies for pregnant women and annaprashan for infants after they reach the six-month milestone when we got to know about the elements of the POSHAN Abhiyaan.”

The Supervisor added that *Godh Bharai* was not something that was being observed by the community in the area but had now led to a lot of women getting together to celebrate it and share their health experiences.

At Bottle Bhanga Anganwadi Centre (AWC) in Baghmara village, the accredited social health activist (ASHA) and anganwadi worker (AWW) have started a welcome song that talks about the services that women can avail at the centre. The song mentions health check ups and immunisation for pregnant women and children. Soon, other women who have come to take part in the event take up the song refrain. Taking part in the *Godh Bharai* event today are five women: Asathan Bibi (23), Morzina Bibi (27), Lendha Mark (25), Roshida Khatun (27) and Rubanu Khatun (25).

Along with the ceremonial aspects of *Godh Bharai* function, the staff at the centre facilitated a discussion on correct diet for pregnant women. Morzina Bibi said that she and other women enjoyed the function. ***“It was totally new for us. We saw Godh Bharai happening in TV serials but we never thought we would be part of it someday. We got to learn so many things about how to take care of our health during our pregnancy. I also***



Godh Bharai function with messages on diet and nutrition at Bottle Bhanga AWC, Dhubri, Assam



Women learning together at Bottle Bhanga AWC, Dhubri, Assam

learned in advance what to do post my delivery from other women at these events regarding my diet and what supplements I have to take,” adds Morzina.

Like most other women present at the AWC, Morzina said her husband is a migrant daily wage earner working at a brick kiln in another part of Assam. “I don’t think we would have been able to think of buying the iron folic tablets if I didn’t get them for free at the AWC. I know that having my delivery at the hospital is much better in terms of my and my child’s health but it will be my husband’s family that will be taking the decision on that,” says Morzina.

A saas bahu story with a twist

Taking a strong lead at the ongoing discussions with the five pregnant women was the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law duo of Meher Van (58 years) and Arshida Parbin (38 years) who have been involved in many awareness programmes at the AWC, besides raising a voice calling for more institutional deliveries in the area.

According to Meher Van, ***“In our times, we did not know much about what diet elements are integral in order to get good nutrition at every stage of our pregnancy and later. We delivered our children at home and I was fine with that when it was the turn of my daughter-in-law, despite what the ASHA and AWW had to say about it.”***

Things changed in the household when Arshida, whose mother is an AWW, married into the house. ***“I was aghast that my sisters-in-law had their deliveries at home and had to work on convincing my mother-in-law along with the help of the ASHA and AWW here,”*** says Arshida.

Arshida became a strong ally for ASHA Baherjan Bibi and AWW Suchitra Marak who continuously involved Meher Van in all discussions and counselling sessions. It worked and subsequent deliveries in the Van household were at the hospital. Her mother-in-law smiles when she recalls and says that she attends every *Godh Bharai* event and other activities at the AWC now “to talk sense to other mothers-in-law”.

Ashaton Khatun (22 years) said that the inputs on diet and nutrition were really helpful for her and other pregnant women. ***“My family was very involved when it came to eating healthy food but they were still to be convinced about getting my delivery done at the hospital. hope that Arshida and her mother-in-law along with the ASHA and AWW will be able to convince my family regarding my delivery,”*** she said.



Saas bahu: A jodi with a difference, Arshida Parbin with Meher Van

She added that convincing her family about her dietary requirements had been possible due to the constant reach out to the elders in the family by the staff from the AWC. Pointing towards Arshida's five-year-old daughter playing nearby, she said that everyone remarked at how healthy and active the girl was at her age.

All the women present at the *Godh Bharai* listened attentively to the discussion about what type of vegetables and fruits are best for pregnant and lactating women. ***"I took good note of the immunisation schedule, the importance of hygiene and my diet needs from the Anganwadi staff,"*** said Roshida Khatun (27) who admitted that she did not put in any fruits into her diet earlier.

For Anganwadi Supervisor Aloy Mitro though, it was a long haul ahead to be able to convince people in the area when it came to institutional deliveries. ***"We were hopeful that we will bring a change. It began with the Van family and God willing, there should be more families,"*** she ended on a wistful note. ***"I am glad that pregnant and lactating women in the area are able to come together and learn about their diet requirements,"*** she added.

Adolescent health matters

At the AWC in Urani Bazar, mothers had come along with their adolescent daughters for a health awareness programme. According to AWW Anjuma Khatun, ***"We make the mothers of adolescent girls attend the programme as their involvement is important"***. Anjuma earlier addressed the girls on diet and nutrition while detailing on the impact of anemia on adolescent health.



Adolescent girls and their mothers at the AWC in Urani Bazar, Dhubri

Mamtaz Bibi (49) of Khelbari Part IV Village was one such mother who had accompanied her daughter to the programme. According to Mamtaz, ***"There are so many activities and programmes centred on health and nutrition for girls and women now, starting from the check up facilities to the delivery stage, while the AWC takes in younger children."***

Mamtaz added that her own daughter and others in the area got to take part in health programmes and were getting mid day meals at schools. Her daughter Rexona Begum (16) who is in Class X said, ***"The awareness programme for adolescent girls is interesting as I get to interact with other girls on our health and hygiene"***.

"We learnt about anemia and what diet is important for us to take to avoid it," said Shaahi Noor (15 years) who along with her younger sister Haashi Noor Khatun (14) had cycled to the centre after school hours. Their mother Mafida Bibi (39) said that her two daughters are less fussy about the vegetables and fruits in their diet after they both began to take part in such interactions at the AWC. Haashi Noor added that it is important to eat the right things to have the energy to study well and play with friends.

Mafida's daughters who are in Class X and IX are the most academically qualified in their family. Mafida said, ***"They are learning so many things at school and the Anganwadi staff do interact with them when they are at home regarding menstrual health and hygiene or at such programmes like today. I am also learning along with them."***

District: Barpeta, Assam

Linking health and diet concerns through anemia camps

In the community health centre (CHC) at Howly in Barpeta district of Assam, there was a crowd of women and children who had come to attend the Anemia Screening Camp on March 16. The screening camp was being held in order not only to ascertain the incidence of anemia in the area but also a means to educate and raise awareness on malnutrition. Staff at the CHC along with AWWs and ASHAs of the nearby areas were busy arranging for people to be seated and allocating rooms for the blood samples to be taken. Weighing scales were being arranged in the room where people were to be screened for anemia, while iron supplements and tablets were being kept ready. In the next room, there were children playing with toys while their mothers caught up with ASHA and AWWs.



Mothers walking into the children's play room at CHC Howly, Barpeta District

Kalpana Das, a Supervisor with the Social Welfare Department, said that the ASHA and AWWs in Howly had reached out to all the families in the villages while giving due attention to women and children they considered to be at risk of anemia. The turn up at the screening camp in the first half hour was high and the rooms were packed. Just outside the CHC but inside the compound, there were preparations underway for an awareness programme on health and nutrition.

Anjuwara Khatoon (35) of Bogaijaan Para village had come with her three children to the camp and said that the ASHA in her area, Majeda Khatoon, told her that her youngest son looks at risk of having anemia. ***“ASHA didi had been insisting that I bring him for a test and so I came,”*** she said.

Her eight-year-old son Aashiq Ali was duly weighed and his height measured, and the anemia test came positive, following which Anjuwara was given iron supplements. Majeda and Mahima Khanon, the AWWs, told Anjuwara that they will be making a home visit to explain more about taking care of Aashiq's diet and tell her to take part in the anemia and health awareness programme in the campus of the CHC. ***“The home visits by our workers will ensure that Aashiq's progress is duly monitored,”*** said Kalpana Das.



Growth and weight indicators being noted, CHC Howly, Barpeta District

The anemia camp served as a link to bring in women and children who are not part of health and nutrition programmes under the ambit of the Anganwadi. ***“Our frontline workers were sure that Aashiq looked anemic and when we planned this screening camp, they ensured that he be brought here by consistently reminding his mother to be present. We did the same with other children by convincing their parents to bring them,”*** said Kalpana Das.

While Aashiq continued to play with other children in a room, Anjuwara listened attentively as the talk on health, diet and nutrition took place in the CHC compound. Anjuwara who runs a small grocery store said that she has not been mindful of what the family had been eating. ***“We eat vegetables and pulses but today I am learning how to balance each meal in order to improve the growth and health of my children. I am really thankful that this camp was organised,”*** she said, adding that she exchanged notes with other women who had come for the screening camp.

District: Udalguri, Assam

Nutrition and diet plans

Women attending the diet and nutrition awareness programme at the AWC, Mara Dhansri in Udalguri district, had brought locally available vegetables and fruits with them. ASHA Chambi Gowla arranged the vegetables on a table for they were used for display and to initiate discussions among the women present.

“We emphasised that diet and nutrition is not about spending a lot of money in getting things to eat but that we only need to know which locally and seasonally available fruits and vegetables are to be included in the diet plan for women and children,” said AWW Pabitra Devi.

According to Lakshya Prava Devi, Supervisor of the Rowta ICDS project, ***“We conduct these events which do not involve too much of expenses but rather, the women enjoy looking into their kitchen supplies or vegetable gardens and bringing their pick here so there can be interactions and discussions.”***

There were pregnant and lactating women at the awareness programme who were taking an active part in the proceedings. Sumita Guala (22), who was in her fifth month of pregnancy, said she regularly attended the events and programmes at the centre. Sumita’s first child was enrolled at the AWC and she couldn’t be prouder of the fact that her four-year-old child already knew how to wash her hands properly.

“She learned about hand washing and brushing of teeth at the AWC with other children in a fun manner but the best thing is that I did not have much of an issue putting in fruits and vegetables in her diet as she learned that they have to be eaten for her good health,” said Sumita, adding that her weight was also closely monitored by the AWC staff.

Attending the programme was Jaya Devi (25) whose three-year-old daughter was also enrolled at the AWC. ***“I eat a meal at the AWC every day, attends the classes and I***



Nutrition awareness programme at AWC, Mara Dhansri in Udalguri district



Talking about locally available nutritious food, AWC Mara Dhansri, Udalguri district

also get the take home rations of peas or other pulses and rice every month,” said Jaya. All the women attending the programme had their weight measured even as the discussions were centred on why adequate and nutritious diet is important for women and children.

Another woman at the programme, Priyanka Gautam (23), who was in her fourth month of pregnancy, said that she had started eating pomegranates even though she does not like the fruit at all. ***“The Anganwadi didis told me that they are a good source of energy and iron, so I have to eat it,”*** she said, making a face. Priyanka and other pregnant and lactating women had brought the Mother and Child Protection (MCP) Card along for discussions during the course of the programme. Priyanka added, ***“In my first pregnancy, the main focus was on immunisation and health check ups but this time, I received a lot of additional inputs on hygiene and nutrition.”***

Priyanka and the other women agreed that the interactive programmes at the AWC were very helpful reminders for women in the area. Jaya Devi added, “On a general level, we do keep hearing about eating well but the specifics of what to eat and when is what is very helpful and interesting”.

