



PROFILE

Fish, ponds and empowered lives

Under Suman Singh's leadership, women in Madhubani, India, gain greater control over their lives

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Women in inland fisheries in the Madhubani district of Bihar, India, started organizing way back in the year 1999, first registering a district level fisherwomen's cooperative, and then cooperatives at the block or sub-district level throughout Madhubani. At the helm of movement building was a non-governmental organisation (NGO) named Sakhi led by the efforts of its secretary, Suman Singh.

Suman Singh's work in Madhubani started even before Sakhi was formally registered as an NGO. She was part of a team involved in coordinating one of the field projects of

another organisation. This project, initiated with the support of Swiss Red Cross in the Andhrathari Block of Madhubani District in 1990, targeted fisherwomen engaged in inland, pond-based fisheries, helping them gain access to government ponds on lease, equipping them with technical and managerial skills, providing start-up capital support, and over time, contributing to a steady enhancement in their income levels.

As the project gained critical mass, it was registered as an independent entity named Sakhi in the year 1999 with Suman

Singh taking on the mantle of Secretary. Suman Singh became active in organising the poor fisherwomen into groups and having these groups registered as fisherwomen's cooperatives. She took the initiative to link these cooperatives with the credit programmes of bank and worked towards getting ponds leased to women by the government. She also organised training for the fisherwomen in a variety of fields: freshwater fish culture; pond management; fish breeding; fish vending and *makhana* (lotus seeds) cultivation, processing, and marketing.

With Suman Singh driving the efforts, Sakhi, then decided to introduce the components of health and education into their programmes. The health programme focused on reproductive and child health, while the education programme consisted of running non-formal education centres where girl children in the age group of six to fourteen could gain an education.

Word soon began to spread about how these fisherwomen and their communities were benefiting from Sakhi's work. This brought increasing demand from other communities for similar support and Suman and her organisation decided to increase their coverage, turning their attention to other areas as well.

Today it may be said that, through a range of initiatives, Suman Singh and Sakhi have greatly helped fisherwomen in Madhubani to gain control over their fish, their ponds and their lives. ❏