

Draupadi of Bhojpura - The Dhaba Story



Draupadi from the Indian epic, Mahabharata, was given a bowl by Krishna; a bowl that would never let anybody starve, irrespective of the mouths she fed. This role has been assumed by Maheshwari Devi aka Mummy.

Twenty years ago, Maheshwari Devi used to accompany her husband to the stone crushing unit where he was employed as a labourer. Since his hours were long, she looked to keep herself busy. She bought some cigarettes, packets of gutkha and rolls of bidi from Jhansi and decided to sell these by the roadside. "I bought things worth Rs.50 and was amazed that it all got sold on the same day," she remarks. This gave her the first taste of income. Gradually, Maheshwari increased the variety and amount of goods,

consequently increasing her income. Conversations with her customers made her realize that she could also run a tea stall. Subsequently, she began making tea.

Thereafter, Maheshwari got her eldest son a job as a labour contractor with a nearby stone-crushing unit. His earnings lent stability to the family and enabled Maheshwari's husband to quit his arduous job. However, once her husband's income stopped, Maheshwari found it difficult to run the family. It was during this time that DA's Social Action Group (SAG) formed women's self-help groups under its Swa Shakti programme (aided by the government of Madhya Pradesh). Like many other women Maheshwari was approached by the field workers and briefed about the concept that led to the formation of Raja Bhoj SHG in Bhojpura village, Tikamgarh.

Maheshwari wisely capitalised on the SHG to fulfill her desire to build a covered shack for her little shop. She borrowed Rs.5000 from the SAG's revolving fund and pursued the government Patwari (the person who demarcates land in rural India). She paid the Patwari Rs.200 to transfer a small piece of government wasteland in her name. Combining a small amount taken from her son's earnings and the loan she took, she set up small tea stall. At first the stall served on biscuits with tea which eventually progressed to serving full meals.

Today, the shack has graduated into a dhaba. Thalīs (Indian combo meals) are available for Rs.15 and one can also order an à la carte that comprises of rotis at Rs.1 each, sabji or dal for Rs.5 and so on. Her regular customers alone account for about 18 thalis a day. Maheshwari procures her raw material in bulk from Jhansi once a week, usually on Mondays when the stone-crushing units remain shut. Her business is doing well and has inspired two others to open similar shops close by. Mummy, however, has not lost out to competition because she maintains high standards, ensuring prompt service and hot food. Recently, she took Rs.4500 from her SHG's cash credit limit and opened a pan-bidi-gutkha shack on the highway connecting Jhansi to Harpalpur, supervised by her husband and daughter. She has married off her eldest daughter and is confident that she will succeed in doing the same for the other five, as long as "God allows me and these shops to run like they are running now and if my son continues to contribute his earnings," she says.