

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Mukul (for Manki): My husband and I used to wake up very early when the rooster crowed, and every day travelled 35 kilometers to the city by bicycle for daily labor work.

We continued this way of living for three years with many issues.

Meghan: *Manki's story is common. Many people in rural villages in India have to commute long distances to get to work. Some even need to live apart from their family for long periods of time because the commute is too far to do every day. They faced other challenges too.*

Mukul (for Manki): We did not have food for all members in my family. Each day for lunch, as well as supper, I used to serve my husband and children first and then eat whatever was leftover. We could only buy vegetables once a week.

Meghan: *Things changed for Manki and her husband Botiram when one day an MCC partner arrived in their village. The partner, SEBA, taught them to turn their unproductive land into a farm, using conservation agriculture and agro-forestry techniques.*

Deforestation and commercial agriculture in the region have been hard on the land, and SEBA encouraged a return to traditional agriculture techniques that would transform the soil and increase the amount of food they could grow.

Mukul (for Manki): They also helped us dig trenches to prevent rainwater flowing from farms to our homestead areas like it used to.

They provided us trainings, fruit sapling inputs and other plants.

Meghan: *The family used to grow corn and 2-3 other vegetables. Now they grow 20-30 different vegetable varieties and rice as well. All these changes have made life easier for Manki and her family.*

Mukul (for Manki): I cook and prepare food from our garden and we are able to earn a living from our own farm.

We no longer need to purchase seeds from the market because we always preserve & store seeds for the next season.

Our whole family invests their time in the farm and it has become the main source of our livelihood.

No more long commutes to get to work.

Recently we sold enough to make about \$205 US dollars. We used to carry the vegetables on a bicycle for selling but now we have been able to purchase a motor bike for transporting them more quickly.

We are also now able to afford to send our children to school.

Meghan: *There were also other ways SEBA was helpful.*

Mukul (for Manki): We used to go to the forest to get wood for fuel and would have to miss work and spend our whole day cutting wood from the forest. But now because we

have planted trees on our farm, we are able to get wood for cooking from our farm itself. This has brought light in our family because now we have some time to relax.

Meghan: Perhaps the most important change has been that they are able to spend more time together.

Mukul (for Manki): We (my husband and I) work together to do the farm work. My son also helps us. I feel very grateful we get to work together.

Music fades out

Scott

That was Mukul Harishchandra, reading a translation of words from Manki Kashyap from a village in India called Kadipara. That story was narrated and produced by Meghan Mast. You're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Today on the show, we're talking with Pabitra Paramanya, a project officer for MCC food security and sustainable agriculture programs, based in Calcutta, India. Around the world MCC partners help teach new techniques and enable small farmers to increase the amount of food grown. This work is helping ensure farmers and their families can eat a more nutritious diet and earn more income to pay for school and health care. These new skills are also helping farmers adapt to climate change. Pabitra has worked with MCC for nearly eight years on projects like these. He recently returned from a trip where he visited a number of people who are participants in a project supported by MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. On this recent trip, he met Manki Kashyap, who you heard from earlier, and her husband Botiram, and several others who benefit from projects like this one. Today, we get to know Pabitra and discuss some stories and challenges around these projects. Pabitra joins me today via zoom. Welcome, Pabitra. I'm so happy to be speaking with you today.

Pabitra

Thank you, Scott, I am excited to talk with you today.

Scott

Can you tell us a little bit about how you personally have been impacted by food insecurity? What's your story? And how does it relate?

Pabitra

I am also from a farming background. My father does agriculture in one-acre farm. In a year, three, four times I go in my village and I help my father. I remember the food insecurity. Like in a year, only, we used to grow rice, and two to three vegetables. So for me, the food insecurity was, we were not sufficient with the rice we used to grow. So, I remember we used to borrow rice, maybe after harvesting maybe three, four or five months maximum, we used to consume from our own harvest. But the rest of the month, we used to take rice from our neighbors, or we used to borrow rice from other shops. And there was a lot of condition also to return those rice or sometimes instead of returning the rice back to them, we used to deliver in their

agriculture work. So the food insecurity, the main, the staple crop, sometimes it was not sufficient. And that's the picture of the many rural families in India. And in another way, the food instability for me was not maintaining the all the food groups, whether it is in a week or in a month or seasonally. And some of the crops, what we [were] not able to grow in our farm, definitely, we needed to buy from the market. And market price is so high that we used to just skip to buy those. For me the food insecurity was not able to access due to the higher prices. So in that way, the healthy nutritious food consumption was very much low. So, and that is another area of the food insecurity.

Scott

Can you tell us a bit about the places that you've traveled to visit these agricultural projects that MCC is involved with?

Pabitra

So here in the area, like where the projects are running, I find the similar stories we saw. Like, they used to suffer also for the same reason. There were no food diversity in their daily intake. There [was] not sufficient staple crop available. And when they used to borrow some food or when they used to take some money to buy food, the lot of higher interest rate also is also involved to get back to them. So in several ways, the food insecurity were exist in the system. And now because of this project, once they started growing their own food, so they can save some money to buy the good quality food or to buy other essentials like the cooking oil or maybe butter or some other essentials they can buy, they used to avoid to buy because of the higher prices. They take different strategies to cope with this situation.

Scott

And so with all of these challenges, to farm productively, what are some of the changes or new skills that people have learned that have really made a difference? How did you convince some of these people to farm differently?

Pabitra

So in the beginning, we focus on the relationship-building with the farmers. So, the local partner, MCC and the farmers, the participating families, these three stakeholders, they start to develop relationship-building. That is our first approach. The idea we bring that is the letter but first we do the relationship building and we tell them, this agriculture is your own work, and we will not bring any new idea for them. So we can work together. And we can just tell them that this is your own problem. And you can solve your own agricultural problem. It's not that we are trying to convince them that you must take this idea, and it will be very good for you. It's not like that. So, in the first approach, as I said, so maybe in the year one, two or three farmers, they just received this learning. They had, they have the good exposure. And then they followed this method and started doing a lot of good things. And the other farmers gradually join. So the convincing people are, as I said, is really challenging...and...but in this program in this program, that through the CGB support and the MCC, and the local partners, through the hard labor, and through the relationship building, is quite, it's quite a relationship-centered development, I could say. Because that triggered to convince people. Like, we are not the outsiders, but we are

all together. We are working together to reduce hunger to improve the food security, to improve their farmland. So that's the understanding, actually helped to convince people,

Scott

Relationships are built on trust. And it sounds like you've done a lot of work, building trust with these rural farmers. I've heard a story that you've even made some promises at times to make sure that these farmers understand how much you're invested. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the ways that you've built trust with these with these rural farmers?

Pabitra

Oh, yes. I remember the stories where personally I was involved to implement a new system of rice-growing method. And that was the system of rice intensification (SRI). That was a very new thing for those farmers and in that area. So, to convince farmers, it was a lot of struggle for me. I remember when I used to discuss this idea in a village meeting. So, in the many meetings just the farmers used to ignore the idea. They used to tell me, how you will teach us the new method because we are growing rice past 30 years and we are growing it in this way. And here you are saying there will be a one seedling, there will be distance between between two seedlings, but it will not give you more production and it is never possible to grow more rice through this way. I remember the Mr. Hopna Murmu and his wife Hupni Murmu. Those two were the first people like who took the initiative to grow rice through the SRI method. And during the demonstration, his wife Hupni she was just doing it differently because whenever we used to say like, no you put the rice seedling in a 10-inches gap and she again started doing is so close, because she was not at all believing some results will come, some good results will come. Even she said to her husband Hopna, like if you believe to this partner, then it may you may fail. So then we told, okay, we are ensuring like, if you don't get anything from this plot, or maybe much lesser than the your neighbor's rice production, then we will compensate you. We will compensate you. Don't worry for that. So that was the challenging part to convince people to start some new thing. And that was the initiation in the 2009. The one farmer followed this practice in his tiny plot And gradually it transferred from one farmer to another's. And in the next year, four more farmers joined in the next year, again, six farmers. And now I see that in that area, about 2000 farmers are following these practices. And gradually when they saw the result, then they started having the good faith on their system.

Scott

Why do you think that agricultural work is so important to the well-being of the people in rural India?

Pabitra

Yes. The importance of health and well-being of the humankind is in the limelight more than ever before. And it has been realized that besides access, the quality of food is highly essential. And what is important that a family must access diverse food choices from their local ecosystems. And in our experience through this partnership program, through CFGB and MCC, this mission, we feel this agriculture work is so important. Because every day the daily food we are taking, it should be very nutritious, very good quality and healthy food. So the project is

helping through this agricultural. These many agriculture interventions, what we are bringing. These agriculture interventions are helping farmers, especially the small farmers, those who are very much diverted into different profession. And they're not, like they're kind of forced to engage in a different profession. So where they are just earning little bit money, but they are not at all able to get enough food through that earning, even they have food, but that is quality's not insured. But through this agricultural work, we can transfer knowledge to the small farmers and we can make them engage in this profession. And where the agriculture, we can show them or better like we can work together to prove that agriculture is also remunerative. And it can give you the fresh food the fresh or natural way you can grow food in your own farm, but we grow different crops and they divide the year after year more climate change effect/impact is coming. So, so in rural India, the recent trend is coming lot of migration. Cities growing, so more jobs are available in cities. So, the agriculture work is very important to learn about the farming, to learn about to how to grow food, to learn the different methods, the environment-safe method, and the local, they can increase the local food security, which I am very much interested to tell you that the local food security is important, and which is hampering. The food is traveling from very far to maybe other remote villages. So, when we visit in the village we see in their local market, the food is coming after 500 kilometers traveling. That is not from their area. So the quality food is questionable always. So that's why I feel the agriculture work is so important. And this kind of project is so helpful for the well-being of the people, those who are living in the remote areas of rural India.

Scott

You mentioned that there are growing impacts of climate change on rural farms. Perhaps, you even said that there's impact in your family's farm. Can you say a little bit more about what the changes that you're seeing and what kind of impact that's having?

Pabitra

Climate change is really impacting in smallholder farm families. And it's pushing the people, like, to leave their own land and maybe go in somewhere else and settle and find a different job. But the growing population in India is really another big issue. It's not that you will get a good job and part the income will be sufficient for a family to access the good food. Because once it will be, I feel like, once it will be like farm family—those who have even a tiny land once they will change their profession and come back to different places. They just to become the non-producer because they are not producing their own food. So as a non-producer, they are fully dependent on just buying food. And I am living in Kolkata, I understand to buy the daily food, how much we need to earn in a month to buy daily food in a city like Kolkata. It's a metropolis and different cities are growing and the more population is there and divided. Again, the fuel prices are increasing. And the price of the daily goods or daily essentials are really increasing day by day in India.

Scott:

It's important work you are doing with farmers to find solutions. If you were to leave our listeners with a final message, what would you want them to remember from this conversation today?

Pabitra:

Yeah, so I am concluding that, I had one place I read that, if you ate today, thank a farmer. And I am very humble before all farmers and whoever is engaged to produce food. I think that producing local food is important to eradicate hunger. And the smallholder farm families are playing a significant role in producing food locally. So, it is important to protect the small farmers and their farm. And exactly we, MCC and CFGB and local partners are doing the same. And I am blessed that I could do some good for the farmers and their families. Through your support. This partnership approach is helping them to think differently, to produce enough food in tiny farm, which is making difference. I see that our project also helping them to be united as they will to work together to solve their own problem. Everyday this work gives me peace. Because I see at the end of the day that a family is able to put step towards securing enough food and quality food to eat together at home. And every step towards food justice is a step away from hunger. So, I want to say that, as he created in the image of God, it is his desire to work for [the] needy and to respond to hunger and so on. So, for me this work is very important. Thank you, Scott.

Scott

Pabitra, thank you so much for sharing some insights into the work that you're doing. Painting a picture for us of rural farming in India and the changes that are happening. It's been a pleasure speaking with you today.

Pabitra

Thank you, Scott.

Scott

That was MCC staff Pabitra Paramanya, who is supporting sustainable agriculture in rural India.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation and also on the traditional land of the Anacostia and the Piscataway.

This episode was produced by Meghan Mast and Christy Kauffman. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thank you again to Pabitra Paramanya for speaking with me. And special thanks to Manki Kashyap, for sharing her story and to Mukul Harishchandra for lending her voice.

Next month, we'll have a special Christmas episode for you that explores some international holiday traditions that center around food.

Well, that's it for this episode. If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. Thanks and take good care.