



SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE WOMEN DARE TO TRUST



Goni Bai's Journey

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DHAATRI

A Resource Centre for Women and Children

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Thanks to the women of Umraavan, Panna
Goni Bai, Umraavan
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ABOUT DHAATRI

Dhaatri Trust works on the intersections of gender and environment justice. We work closely with indigenous/ adivasi and rural women in India to strengthen their collective voices and rights to forests and natural resources. We promote their indigenous knowledge practices and sustainable ways of living with nature which provide valuable insights in the present global politics of climate crisis. These stories from the ground are a tribute to the invisible practitioners of nature based knowledge.

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This story we present here is a small tribute to women like Goni Bai who are confronting the challenges of dispossession and redefining sustainability dialogues. They are bringing together their ecological knowledge to care for their nature and their families through their collective productivity and the new opportunities of alternative technologies.

Ironically, these women are the lowest consumers or emitters of carbon. Yet, the macro solutions of alternatives pose a deep threat in their backyards, which are grabbed for renewables, plantations, or conservation projects. Hence, by demonstrating in their own backyards what could be a more sustainable alternative energy solution, women are communicating to the world the urgent need for rethinking alternatives. Therefore, in order to bring a public discourse on women's right to energy equity and women's knowledge of sustainability, we have initiated a campaign, #WomenforEnergyEquity.

The story here brings out the essence of our aspiration to amplify the women's voices for their share in energy finance and their perspectives on sustainable energy. We hope that policymakers, energy financing institutions, and governments listen to these voices of women from the grassroots.



Climate Change and Energy Equity A Campaign for Women's Right to Energy Entitlements

In India women from poor rural, tribal, migrant, coastal and urban marginalised communities bear the primary responsibilities over cooking, fetching water, working and living in very unsafe and unsustainable conditions whether it is walking long distances for daily wage labour, performing multiple labour intensive tasks in their farms, factories or other occupations, having little or no access to electricity, water or toilets that can provide decent and safe spaces of human existence. Women face many challenges whether to collect firewood or to afford or access LPG for safer means of cooking.

As farmers, most of the activities are performed by women manually as technology and energy resources are inaccessible to them. In factories women work with poor ventilation, lack decent toilets or even drinking water facilities and are paid the lowest. Women informal workers in agriculture, construction, mining or other unorganised sector activities have to constantly migrate seasonally with no proper shelter, access to fuelwood, water or toilets and they often walk long distances for work because public transport in most rural areas is poor or not available. Adivasi women living in the forest collect forest produce and walk down the hills in hazardous conditions to sell their produce in the towns or haats.

As climate disasters are increasing either in the form of floods, droughts, crop losses, drying up of water bodies or other sudden or prolonged forms of crises, poor women and their children in these marginalised communities face the worst impacts through starvation, hunger, ill health, increased workloads for livelihoods, collecting water, firewood, caregiving or other daily activities. This is also visible in the growing distress migration, children dropping out of school and child labour, with violence at work and at home.

In short, women and children have the smallest carbon footprint and are paying the highest price for the global climate crisis. They are also paying a high

price for the global climate action solutions that are causing further hardships for women. The targets to address climate crises like alternate energy solutions through renewables, ground water, tree plantations or alternate transport technologies are barely reaching the large majority of poor women and their households. Although solar, wind, hydrogen, hydro and other alternate energy solutions are increasing in a big way, women are yet to experience any beneficial change in their daily energy needs. Majority of them still depend on firewood whereas LPG, clean cooking stoves or other technologies are either not accessible or are at experimental stages. Women continue to walk long distances to collect water and have very minimal access to public transport for their travel. While there are some schemes for addressing women's needs under the climate action targets, we feel that these are grossly inadequate, inequitable and inaccessible to the large population of poor women.

However, women are facing a new crisis when they have to give up their lands and occupations for setting up new climate action projects like solar parks, wind parks, dams or plantations, the fruits of which are benefited by a largely urban population and the private and industrial sector. Women who are forced to give up their resources are not getting benefits of these green energy projects for their cooking or for public transport or water or for toilets, and therefore, becoming climate action victims. We believe that green energy is today not gender just or socially equitable and the poor are paying for the privileges of those who can consume and demand for green energy. If we have to make energy finance sustainable, we have to ensure that the new energy resources, technology, skills and knowledge are reaching the large population of women. We also need to listen to the knowledge and local wisdoms of women who have been conserving resources - forests, firewood, water, land and other ecosystems - and women are practising sustainable energy solutions.

In order to bring to public attention this urgent need to recognize women's energy needs and energy knowledge in the global climate change dialogues and energy finance policies, **we would like to call upon women's networks, unions, collectives and local communities to come together to lobby for women-centred and gender just energy policies and for bringing women's energy needs as a priority in energy finance and technological investments.**

#WomenForEnergyEquity

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In the silence of the room, she enters quietly, with a glass of water and a couple of tablets in her fist. She sensed an unusual drop in the temperature of the room, an air of chilling stillness. Fear gripped her, causing the pupils of her eyes to widen. Her knees got weak and she froze in the moment, while her heartbeat rose loud to the ticking of the clock kept on the bedside shelf.

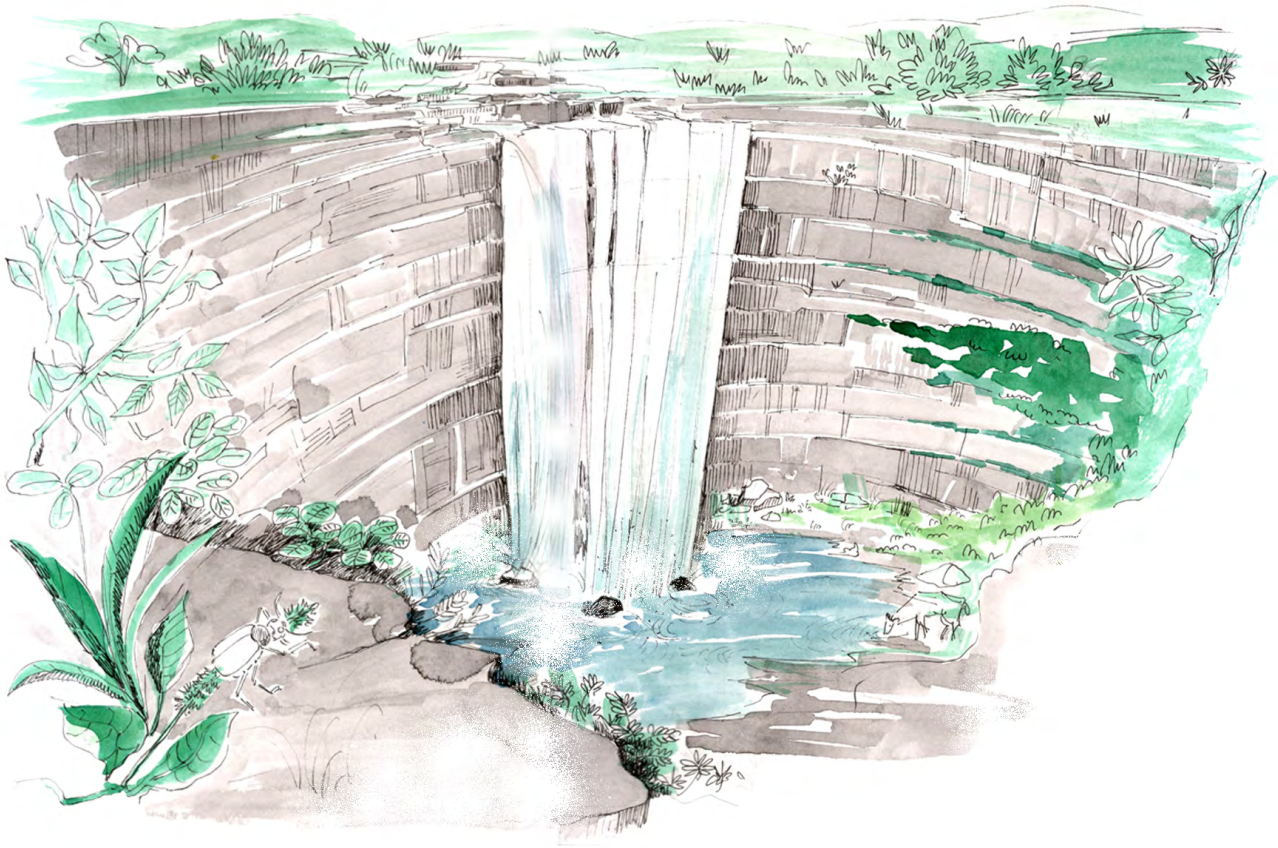


As she rushed towards her husband, tablets and water fell from her grip. She found her husband breathless. In desperation, she attempted to shake him up but he remained unresponsive. Her mind and heart couldn't accept the painful reality in front of her. Shocked and shivering, she yelled out to her neighbours but it was too late. And who could help anyway. Her four children stood at the door, frightened and confused.

The pain in her heart pierced through, reaching the depth of her profound emotions. Tears rolling down, Goni Bai sat beside her deceased husband. Sobbing she wrapped her arms around her four dear children, held tightly in sorrow.

The sun gently bid its adieu as the day concluded. Natural light steadily decreased, making the room dim and gloomy. The veil of quietness of the night enveloped the landscape of Panna, inviting a sense of vulnerability and introspection.





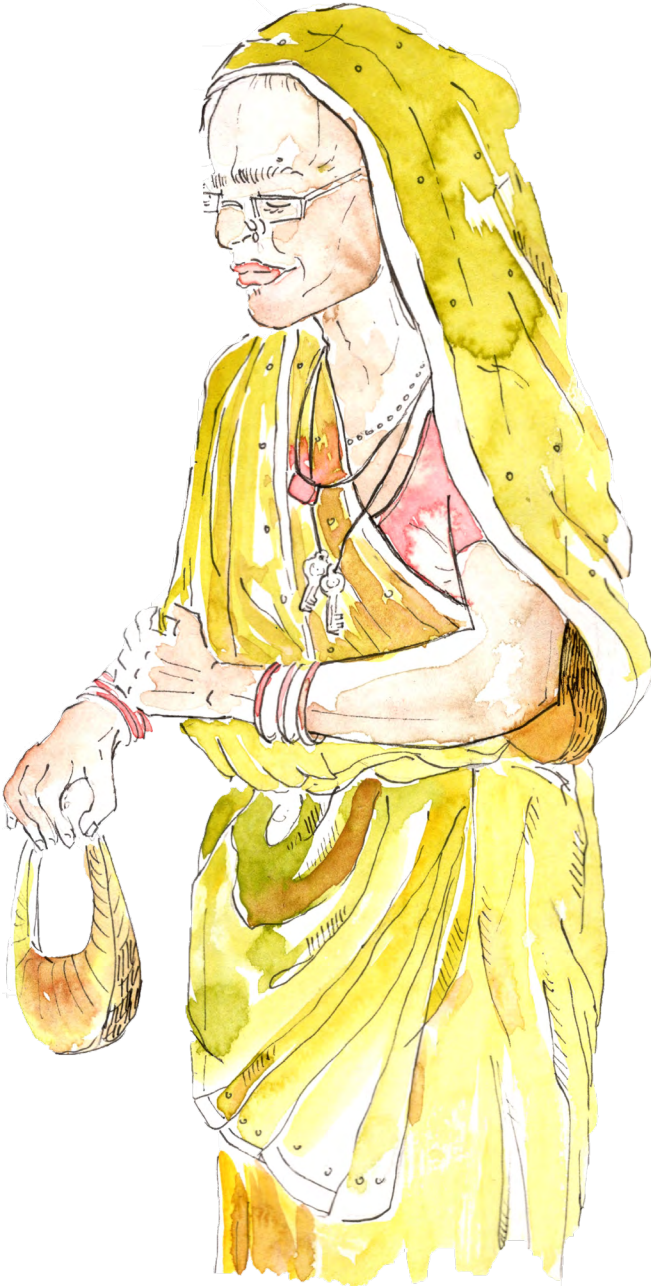
Panna, a district in Madhya Pradesh, is nestled in the semi-deciduous forests of the Vindhya mountain range. The landscape is exquisite in its open jungles, hills and rivers. Once this region was predominantly populated by the Scheduled Tribes and was the heartland of Gondwana kingdom, ruled by the Gond Rajas. The Ken river meandering through the forest, is the lifeline for the rich biodiversity it holds in this ecosystem. On the periphery of this stretch of forest lies a small village called 'Umravan'.

Umrahan was once the centre of life of all kinds. With its forests flourishing, the communities living in the vicinity, 70 families to be exact, had a richness to their everyday life. Even when the local economy was considered 'primitive' by the dominant modern societies, and people had to sometimes go to the neighbouring villages for daily wage work, there was always the promise and security of their land—a home that goes long back in the history of the Gond community. The tribals enjoyed a diverse livelihood and food security as the forest offered plenty of wild food and forest produce like Mahua, Chironji, Amla, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, tendu, a variety of herbs, roots and nuts. The forest also offered a range of fish to collect from the many small streams, and wild boars, wild fowls, birds and other fauna that they regularly hunted, despite the presence of tigers, sambhars, leopards and other wildlife.



In 2012, the forest authorities along with the police started displacing the residents of Umravan forcefully. The tribals were told that tiger count in the forests of Panna had reduced to zero and that drastic measures were needed. The Ganghau wildlife sanctuary was merged with the Panna Tiger Reserve extending the Protected Area into Adivasi villages.

The Adivasis have a different narrative of the tigers - that the Gonds had also co-existed with the tigers and at no point did the tigers face threats from Adivasis. In their version of history, the British Generals, the Rajas and feudal families that held power in the region after overthrowing the Gond kingdom, had hunted the tigers for their trophies and to exercise their feudal pleasure. Yet today, the Adivasis are forced to pay the price of tiger conservation. As a result, 13 villages were thrown out, the last to face the threat being Umravan. As a result of the intimidation and pressure from the forest personnel and from the non-tribals, most families left, without proper completion of rehabilitation. Today, they are scattered and uprooted beyond trace, wandering around the country as migrant labour, with no sustained livelihoods or a place called home.



Among the few who remained resolute in their intent to continue living in their native village, was Goni Bai, a Gond Adivasi widow, who decided to stay back and resist displacement.

Goni Bai had come to Umravan as a child bride and has ever since lived here with her husband who often worked in the mines during lean seasons. As she recollects the past, with pain and sorrow in her eyes, she hesitantly expresses,

"Mere pati hire ke khadan me kaam karte the bhaade per"

"He worked in the diamond mines nearby as daily wage worker".

After having lost her husband to TB (suspected Silicosis) and kidney ailments, she had neither the financial capacity to rebuild life in a new location, nor as a single mother of four children, did she have the courage to migrate to an alien place. She made a silent protest by refusing to lift her hand and give consent when the authorities demanded people to vote, and when the police were brought in to evacuate the village, she and some of the courageous women of the village remained rooted to their land.

Even when electricity was cut off and houses were demolished, they were unfazed and stood firm to give hope to the other families. They decided to stay back in their village and somehow eke out a livelihood from the remaining forest they were allowed to access.

At the time of displacement Goni Bai had lost her land, her husband and had no familiarity with any other form of work other than collecting forest produce. Ever since the Tiger conservation project was declared, activities such as farming and collection of forest produce came to be considered 'illegal', and life became a daily victimisation and criminalisation for the local communities. They were compelled to seek other alternatives like mine labour or seasonal migration for their survival. Much as people were aware of the hazards of working in the mines, their lack of choice forced them to make a living from breaking stones, even if their lungs were filled with the irreversible condition of Silicosis.

In the pursuit of survival, Goni Bai had limited choices and she had to take decisions all by herself. It was too risky a business to carry her infant children with her to the mining sites. So she desperately began to search for other ways to survive, like collecting firewood (or haar as the Gonds call them). Visiting the nearby jungle for long hours every day became her daily routine.

Goni Bai, every dawn, while her children were still asleep, would set out into the forest to gather firewood. She is too familiar with the forest and knows how and where one can find high quality wood. She says, the deeper one goes into the dense forest, the quality of the wood gets better. *Achchi jalau lakdi ke liye dur jana padta hai* (the deeper you go in the forest, the better the quality of the firewood), she explains and adds only after one has walked 2-3 km inside the forest that one can actually find good quality wood. But she has a very good understanding of the best firewood species, in which corners of the forest to search for them and which varieties are found in different seasons.

She also knows in which direction she should not trudge for her firewood, lest she bumps into the tiger - although these accidental encounters are an increasing risk, given the many threats that the tigers face due to expanding mining and highways in its corridors.



When she had collected enough firewood for the day, she divided them into bundles according to the sizes. Securing them tightly with a rope, she would carry the bundles on her head for about 8 miles on foot, in order to catch the NMDC (mining company) bus that dropped her in Panna town.



She would choose a strategic spot near a bustling junction to stack up her bundles for display and pray that the locals come early to take her stock so that she can reach back home before 9 AM, in time to get her children ready for school. If not lucky, then she would roam around the streets of Panna town trying to sell her bundles of firewood for whatever price they fetched, as carrying back the heavy load was too much of a burden, and without the few rupees these fetched, she would not have enough to buy food for her children.



On returning home, Goni Bai, without taking a break, would plunge into her other daily chores. She would quickly prepare food and send her children off to school. Then she would tirelessly complete all the domestic chores of washing, fetching water, cleaning the house and going for odd jobs in the village for a few rupees more. However, as each day progressed, managing everything by herself and struggling to make sufficient money to meet the basic needs became increasingly arduous for Goni Bai.

Her unwavering determination was put to the test as she navigated through these difficulties. She even tried going for construction labour in Panna town. But this was erratic and would not fetch enough to feed her family. She herself became afflicted with Tuberculosis, but bore through the responsibilities of her four children, without any support.

This was some time ago. Now Goni Bai barely goes into the forest to collect firewood for her income, other than for her own domestic needs. Even if she gets enough to make a sale in the market in Panna, she says she won't be allowed to pass through the forest department check post in Darera and it is impossible for Goni bai or other families from Umraivan to struggle through the daily haggling with the forest staff, to sell firewood.



In the mental tug of war, her mind told her that selling firewood does not generate enough income for her family and that she needed to think of other ways.

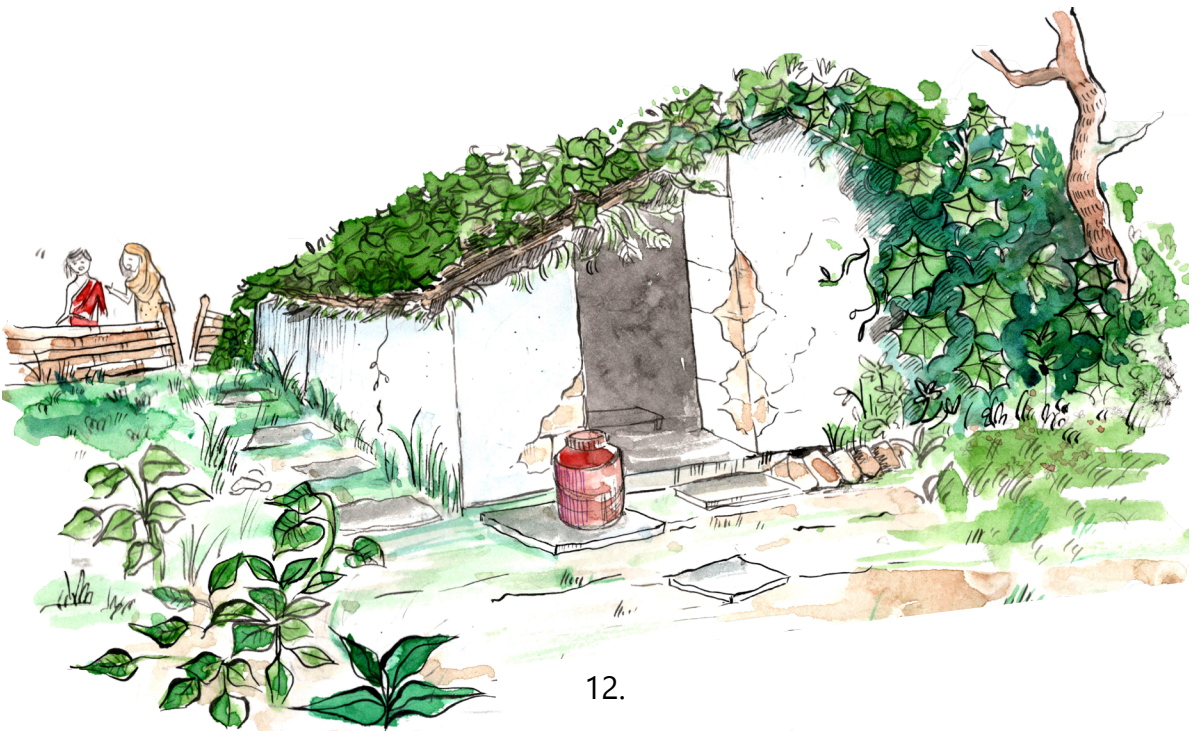
Goni Bai shared that all the families that stayed back and refused to relocate despite the constant threats and endless difficulties planted in their way to 'voluntarily' push them out, gave each other the strength to dream of a future where they are free to continue leading their traditional way of co-existing with the forests and all forms of life they hold and shelter.

She herself decided to take control of her life, instead of grieving and mourning. She recounts how, on a clear bright sunny day, she sat quietly under a giant mahua tree, meditating with her racing thoughts to calm her down. Worries about her children's future and wellbeing weighed heavily on her, and she was left with a feeling of anxiety and fear.



Her friend Janaka Bai was passing by when she was in this contemplation over their future. Janaka Bai has been working as a health worker with the government and also working with Dhaatri to help the community find spaces for dialogue with the government. They sat together talking about their past abundance in the forest and the present distress.

Janaka Bai shared with her, her discussions with Dhaatri team about exploring ways of looking at their village resources or what remained of these, and to find ways to restore their sustenance. They both realised that most of the families who left their homes and never returned, left behind homesteads that were now growing with weeds. So also the common land that used to be a space for all and sundry activities back then - as pathways, as meeting spaces or ritual spaces, where cattle were tied and children played. Now all that had turned to thick undergrowth, lying unutilised and this gave them both the answer- if they cleared up all this space that lay vacant within their own village boundary, there would be enough for all the remaining families to have homestead gardens where each could cultivate a small patch of land for vegetables and food crops. Thus, they sowed the seeds of hope for abundance in this moment of reflection.

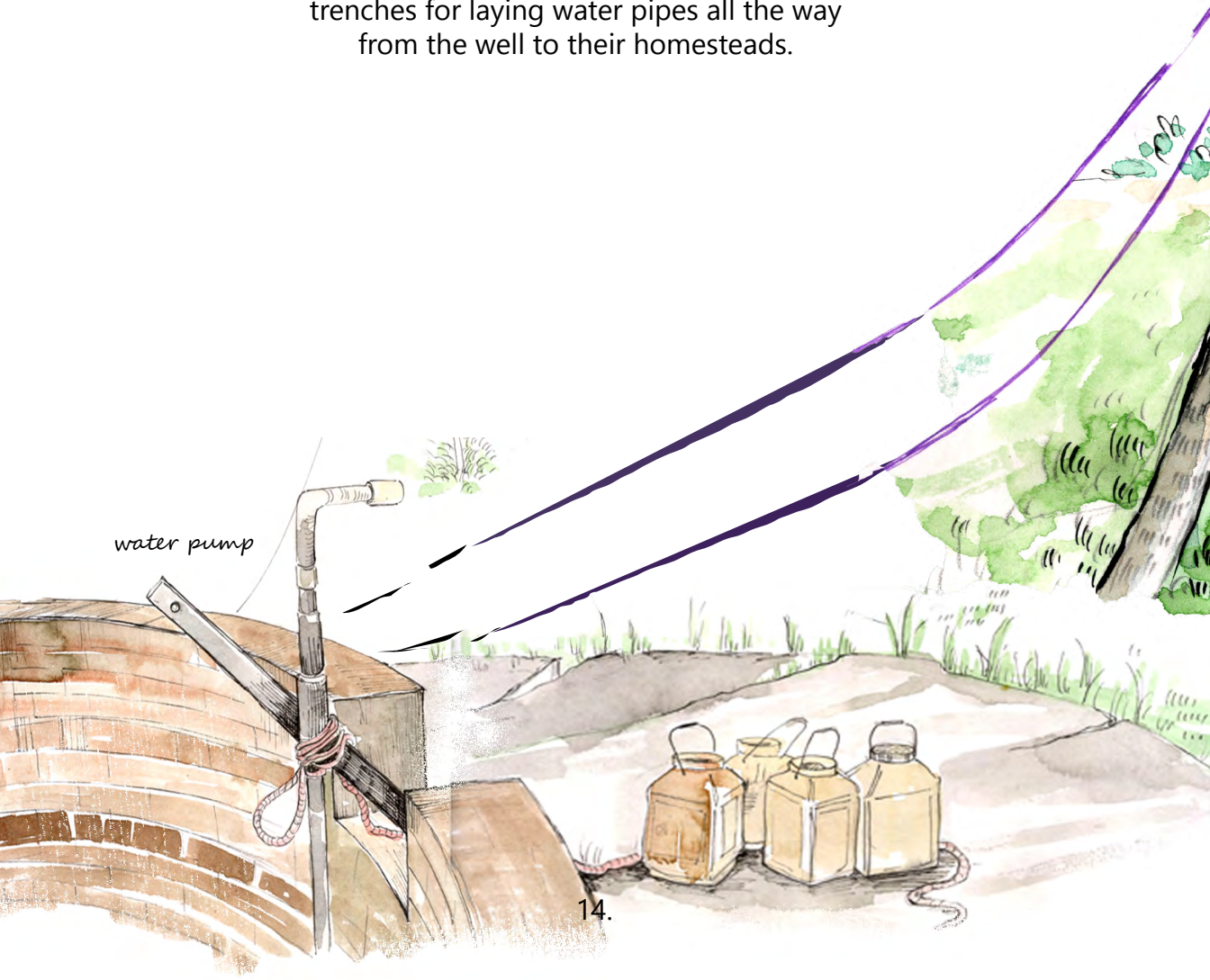


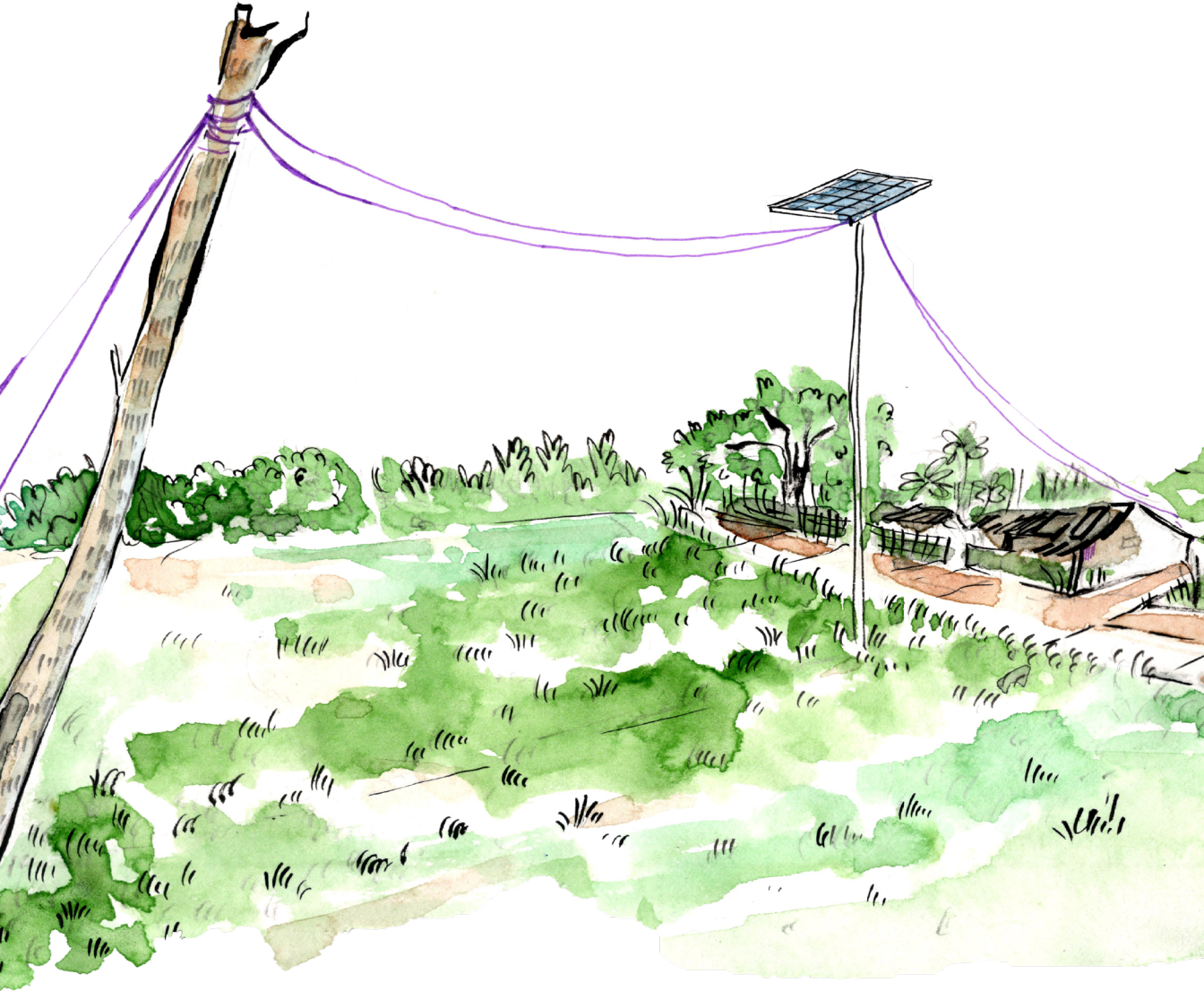
Goni Bai immediately got to work. She decided that she'd start with her own homestead. She invited all the other women in the village to discuss the idea. They posed a problem-they would clear the weeds, but what about water-they need water to irrigate the homesteads. The only source of water is a village well but that was too far from their homesteads, and drawing water from it in buckets and carrying these to their backyards would be too arduous a task.

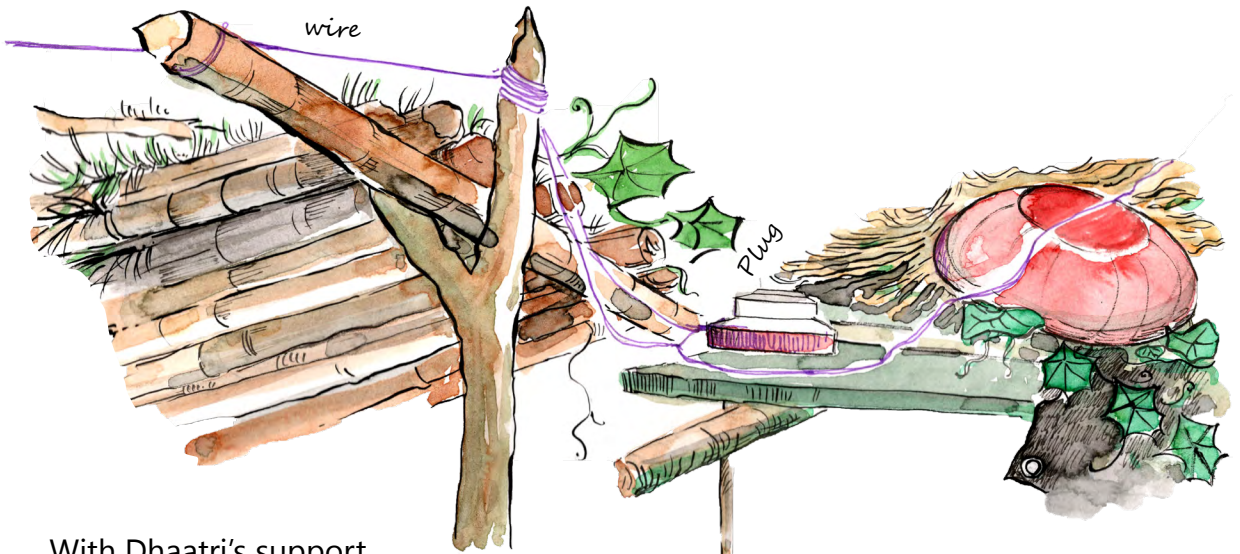
Goni Bai talked to Janaka Bai and also with Dhaatri team. They had to find a way. The village was already familiar with solar lighting as Dhaatri had helped them set up roof top/courtyard solar panels to provide street lights and to light up their houses after their electricity was cut off, as a way of forcing them to leave their village.



Together the two decided that they could try to draw water from the well using solar power to irrigate their kitchen gardens. They soon got all the villagers to dig up trenches for laying water pipes all the way from the well to their homesteads.

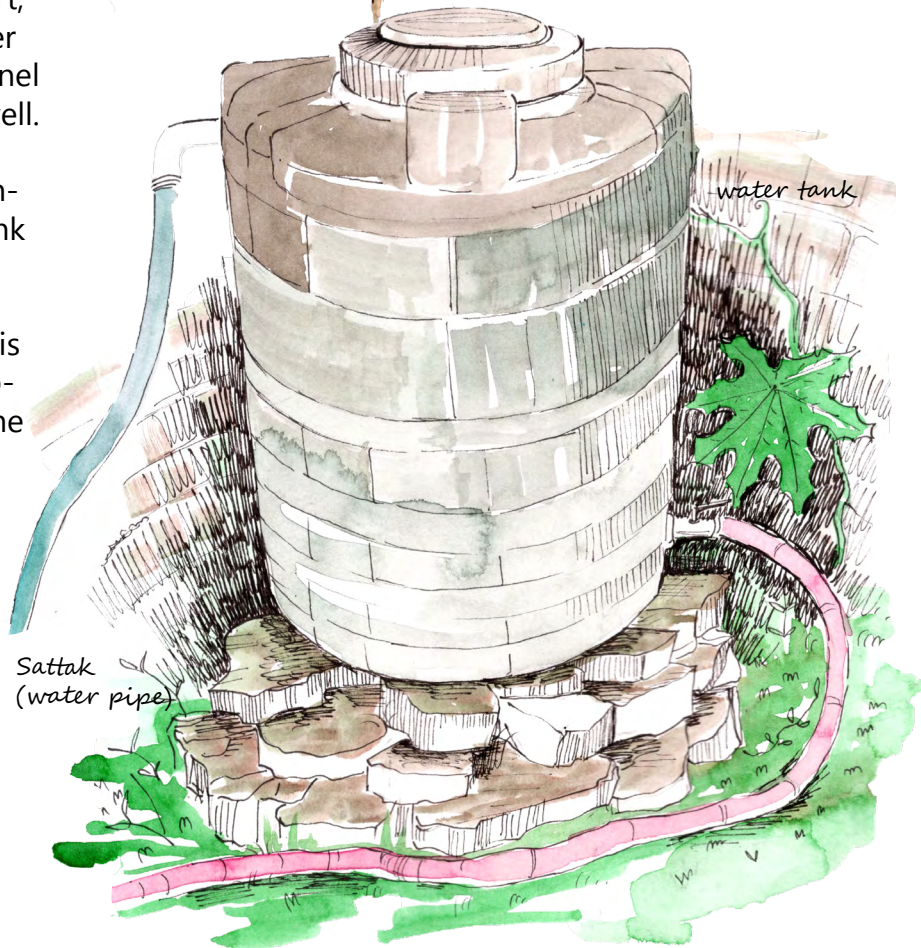






With Dhaatri's support, a solar powered-water pump with a solar panel was installed in the well. A single pipeline was laid underground connecting to a water tank placed in one of the households, through which a sattak (pipe) is used to evenly distribute water across all the kitchen gardens.

This was an absolute solution to their water crisis and they could immediately get started with sowing their seeds of hope.



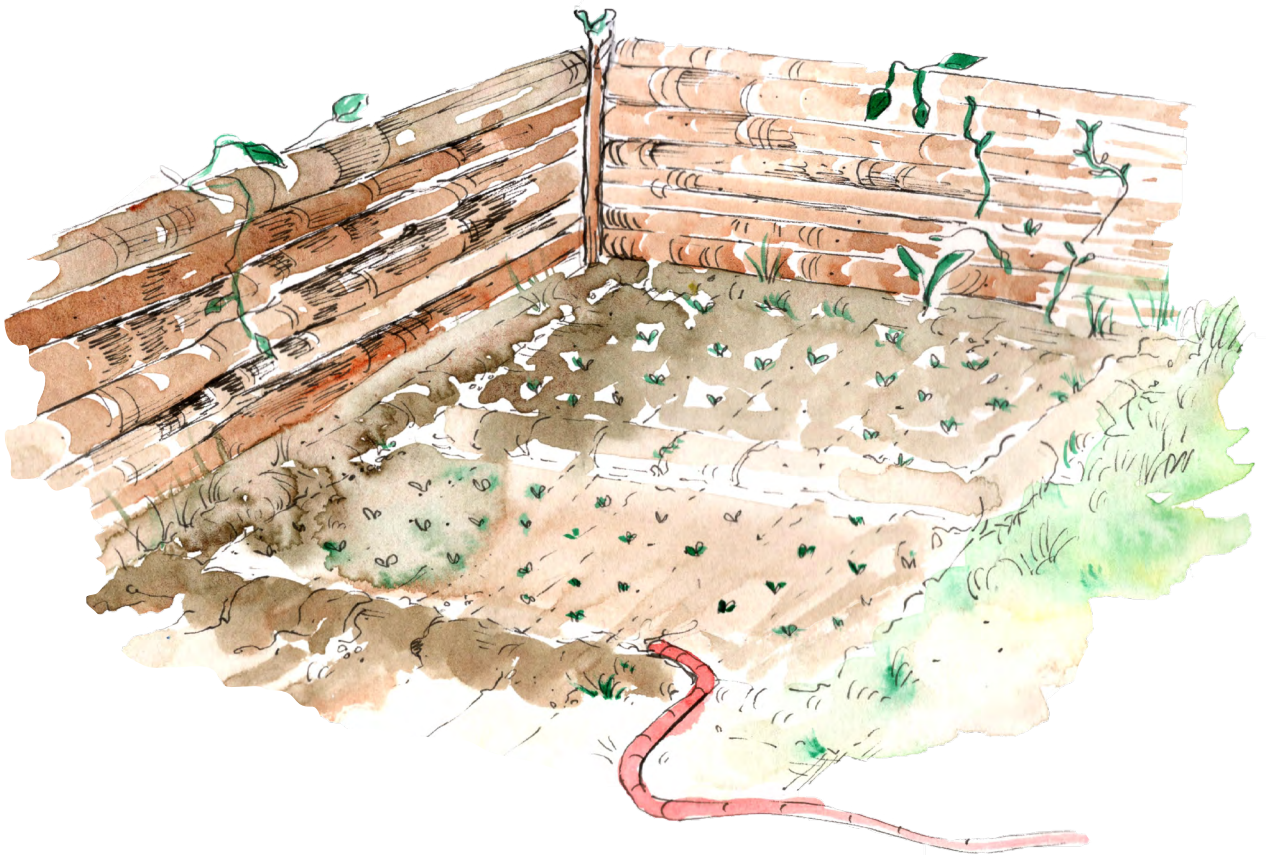
Goni Bai went door to door around the village, assembling the families and getting people to volunteer - they started clearing the bushes, cutting and cleaning out the weeds and rocks...



Properly levelling the ground to ensure proper water drainage. Preparation of soil requiring mixing of organic manure, harrowing and equalizing the surface with required adjustments.



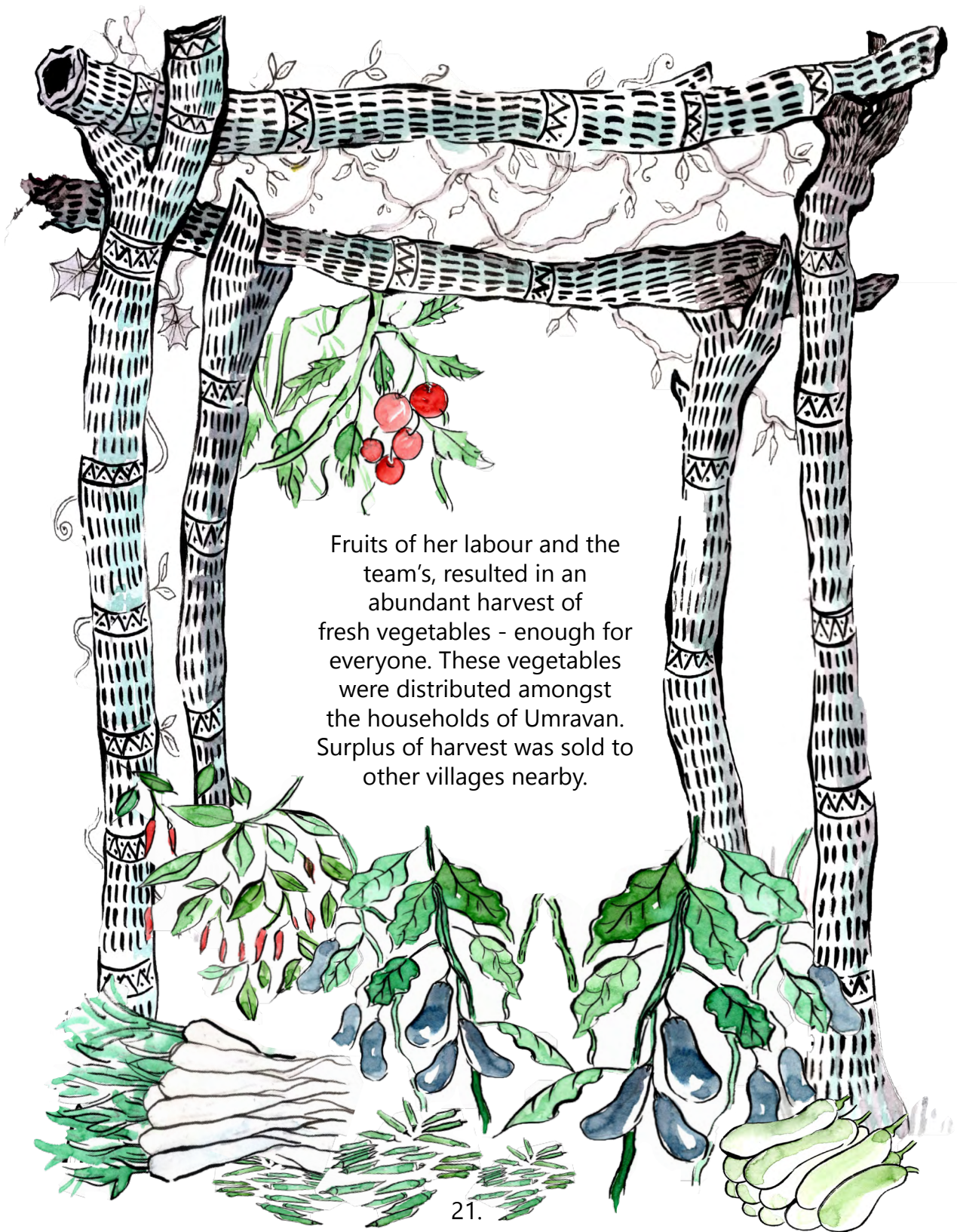
Vegetable beds were made and Goni Bai proceeded to grab quality seeds from the local market. Egg plants, Tomatoes, Greens, Bhindi, Beans, Chillies.... seeds were bought from the market and distributed to each household.



Sattak (water pipe)



Taking the main responsibility of supervising the work of all the houses, Goni bai diligently took care of monitoring all the kitchen gardens. She carried out pest control strategies, constantly removed weeds from the vegetable beds, alerted the village on tending to their cattle to prevent any possible damage to the gardens, and all through the season, she was bending over her gardens with timely care, love and attention. She carried out this mission and nurtured it for several months.



Fruits of her labour and the team's, resulted in an abundant harvest of fresh vegetables - enough for everyone. These vegetables were distributed amongst the households of Umrahan. Surplus of harvest was sold to other villages nearby.

Witnessing the fruits of their labour, there was a sense of accomplishment for the people of Umrahan. Its positive impacts have had a renewed hope in every household and in the neighbouring villages too. Every person in the village could enjoy the fruits from the kitchen garden initiative, be it children, elders, and most of all, the patients suffering from malnutrition and Tuberculosis. Every patient's house received baskets of vegetables as part of the nutrition kit given by Dhaatri. This has helped improve their condition faster and this year, the team also boasts of bringing 9 patients out of the dreaded TB disease.



Goni Bai's determination and unwavering will power has got the village moving forward with hope. She stands tall against any challenge life has thrown at her, and with her children by her side, she remains resilient all through these years of distress. She continues to fight and give hope and is looking for fresh solutions and fresh vegetables to fill her garden.

She wants to tell the authorities that kicking her community out neither saves the tiger nor it saves her people. Left to themselves, and with little support and with the forest as their ecosystem of sustenance, they can seamlessly survive and co-exist with the tigers. And small scale renewables provide large solutions where communities can adapt to new technologies under the sun.



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