

Malli Lohar: Promoting Better Health Practices in Rural Odisha

“ When I watched the videos on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, I was surprised to learn that there are so many benefits for the mother and baby. I learnt a lot of new things from these nutrition videos and found them beneficial for myself and my village. ”



Women from Malli's self-help group sit and discuss the best practices for childcare during a group meeting

Malli Lohar and Sita Majhi have been friends for many years. When Sita was pregnant, Malli told her about the importance of only giving the baby breast milk for the first six months after delivery. Malli, a 30-year-old mother of two from Kothaghar village (Keonjhar district, Odisha), was not always this savvy herself about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding; she learnt about it after watching a short video. Malli has been part of the Lakshmi Narayan self-help group (SHG) for a year and a half and is now the secretary of the group. A year ago, when videos on health and nutrition were screened at their SHG gatherings, it opened up a whole new world of

information for Malli and hundreds of women like her.

The introduction of these nutrition videos was part of a pilot project led by Digital Green and the Strengthening Partnerships, Results and Innovations in Nutrition Globally consortium (SPRING). The pilot aimed at adapting Digital Green's agriculture-focused, video-based approach to promote high-impact maternal infant young child nutrition (MIYCN) practices. Implemented by the community-based non-governmental organization, VARRAT, the pilot engaged SHGs in 30 villages of Keonjhar district, screening 10 short videos on proper care

within the first thousand days after birth.

Digital Green's community-led ICT approach has been successfully used to disseminate agricultural information to farmers in India and Africa since 2008. The Keonjhar pilot, however, is a unique attempt to converge agriculture and nutritional messaging by disseminating nutritional videos to groups who have already been watching agricultural videos for some time.

Malli has watched all 10 videos that were produced and screened as part of this pilot. Although she cannot benefit from the practice herself, she feels the information is important and is keen to help others in her community. "I see that children in the village are not so healthy and if I can help new mothers with some information, then I feel it is my duty to do so", she says.

As Malli was neither pregnant nor lactating when she watched these videos, she falls into an interesting group referred to as 'promoters'. Promoters are SHG members who cannot adopt a practice themselves at that time (as they are not pregnant or lactating), but who nevertheless have the ability to accurately counsel their families and other members

of the community on these topics. The concept of the promoter arose from the recognition that certain members of a community can be powerful influencers, particularly in the case of healthcare.

In one year, the SPRING-VARRAT-Digital Green pilot has reached 3,088 households and the videos have successfully triggered 1,063 adoptions in the MIYCN domain. In addition to these achievements, the pilot has also been a great learning experience, shedding light on the many differences between the uses of videos for agricultural and nutritional messaging. Whereas agricultural adoptions are easier to track because they are more tangible, verifying nutritional adoptions during home visits is a complex process. Given this fundamental difference, this pilot has allowed Digital Green to adapt the project design and the adoption verification process to make it more conducive for tracking nutritional adoptions. The concept of the 'promoter' is one such iteration to the Digital Green approach. However, the challenge of tracking these promoters and the extent of their influence still remains, and will be explored further as the intervention scales up to 70 villages in Keonjhar and Kendrapada districts of Odisha.



One of the many babies who will benefit from the knowledge her mother gains at the SHG meeting