

CASE STUDY

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From Forest Resources to Markets: A Case Study of Rural Livelihoods, Collective Action and Sustainable Value Chains in Odisha, India

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the first-year experience of BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar in developing market-linked livelihood opportunities for rural and tribal micro-enterprises in India. The case emerged from a 2024 visit to Gochha in Nayagarh district, Odisha, where women producing sal-leaf plates requested a machine to reduce physical labour. The eventual delivery of the machine exposed a wider problem: a production asset can address one constraint without resolving market access, information, quality or bargaining power. The paper therefore examines an emerging model that combines skills, quality practices, aggregation, market information and buyer access, with particular attention to the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains. Operational figures are drawn from the organisation's internal records, reported as audited by a local chartered accountant, while the qualitative account is based on field observations and interviews. The case does not constitute an impact evaluation. Its contribution is to identify mechanisms through which production capability and market connectivity may jointly support rural livelihoods.

Keywords: Agribusiness; Market access; Rural livelihoods; Social entrepreneurship; Sustainable value chains; Tribal enterprises

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel beyond India's cities into rural and remote communities' offers an important perspective on the country's development journey. Economic transformation is not experienced uniformly, and the availability of local resources or productive skills does not necessarily translate into secure and sustainable livelihoods. In many rural settings, households combine agriculture, forest-based collection, small enterprise activity and informal trade. The economic value generated by these activities may nevertheless be constrained by fragmented supply,

limited market information, inconsistent quality, weak aggregation and dependence on intermediaries.

The experience described in this paper began with a visit to Gochha in Nayagarh district, Odisha, in 2024. There, women were making *khali patra*, or leaf plates, from sal leaves collected from the forest. The work provided an important source of household income, but it was physically demanding. The immediate request was for a machine that could reduce labour. A commitment was made to help arrange one, and a subsequent offer of corporate social responsibility support appeared to make



the intervention possible. Yet the machine took nearly four months to reach the women because of procedural requirements. The delay changed the question. A machine could address a production constraint, but it could not by itself address the wider conditions that determine whether a rural enterprise can earn sustainably.

This distinction is important for agribusiness and rural development. Productivity is only one part of a livelihood system. A producer may increase output and still remain vulnerable if there is no reliable buyer, if product quality is inconsistent, if individual volumes are too small to negotiate effectively, or if prevailing prices and demand are not known. The case of BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar developed from an attempt to address these interconnected constraints rather than treating them as separate problems.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the first-year experience of BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar sought to connect rural and tribal micro-enterprises with markets through skills, quality practices, aggregation, market information and buyer access, focusing particularly on the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains. It asks three questions: What constraints to market participation were identified through field experience? How did the emerging model attempt to address them? What can the first-year evidence reasonably establish about livelihood and market outcomes?

The paper is not presented as an impact evaluation. The available material is primarily qualitative and practice

based, supplemented by operational records reported by the organisation. The records are stated to have been audited by a local chartered accountant, whose details can be made available for verification. The analysis therefore distinguishes reported operational indicators from independently demonstrated outcomes. This distinction is important in rural development, where reach, participation, transactions and livelihood impact are often conflated.

The central argument is straightforward. Rural livelihood development cannot be reduced to improving production capacity. Where local resources and traditional skills already exist, a meaningful intervention may be to build the institutional and commercial bridge that connects producers with information, aggregation, quality systems and markets. The BhaMa-MSE Bazaar experience provides a grounded case through which this proposition can be examined and relates directly to the special issue's emphasis on economics, entrepreneurship and innovation.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE CONTEXT

The case sits within several established strands of social-science research. Rural households commonly construct livelihoods from multiple activities rather than from a single source of income. Seasonal and non-farm activities can be particularly important when agricultural income is limited, helping households manage consumption and production across the

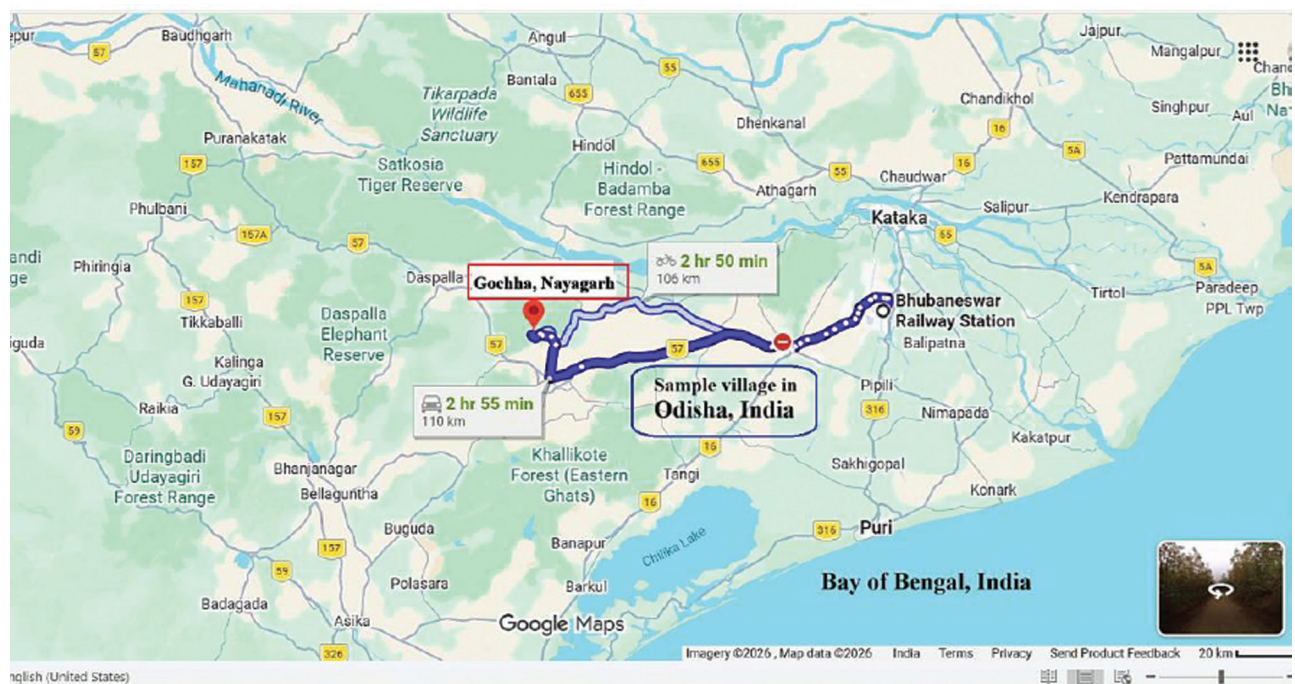


Figure 1. Location of Gochha, Nayagarh district, Odisha, India.

Source: Author's field documentation, 2025.



Figure 2. Rural women and community members at a village setting in Odisha associated with the field context of the initiative.
Source: Photograph by the author, 2025.

year (Barrett et al., 2001). This perspective is relevant because Sal Seed and Mango Kernel are described in the case as seasonal resources that may supplement agricultural income. The case therefore concerns not only commodity sales but also the timing and reliability of livelihood opportunities.

A second strand concerns the commercialisation of non-timber forest products. Belcher and Schreckenberg (2007) caution against assuming that commercialisation automatically produces better livelihoods. The distribution of benefits depends on production organisation, transaction costs, market structures, value addition and bargaining relationships. A forest product may have a recognised market and still generate limited returns for collectors when producers face poor information or weak negotiating positions. This literature supports the paper's focus on the institutional conditions surrounding market participation.

A third strand concerns collective action and market-chain coordination. When individual producers supply small and irregular quantities, they may struggle to meet buyer requirements or to absorb the costs of searching for markets. Collective organisation can help overcome some of these barriers, although collective action does not automatically guarantee equitable governance or benefit sharing. Devaux et al. (2009) show why coordination among small producers can matter for

market-chain innovation. In the BhaMa case, SHGs, FPOs, APOs and local aggregators are described as mechanisms for bringing dispersed production into more commercially meaningful volumes.

The case also has a clear social-entrepreneurship dimension. Social entrepreneurship research commonly examines entrepreneurial activity that seeks social value while employing organisational and market mechanisms to address social problems (Mair & Martí, 2006). BhaMa's stated purpose is to strengthen rural and small enterprises while building commercially sustainable market linkages. The aspiration to reduce dependence on philanthropy gives the model an entrepreneurial orientation. At the same time, the case does not assume that commercial participation is automatically socially beneficial. The more defensible proposition is that commercially viable relationships may complement social support when they are accompanied by capability building, transparency and producer agency.

The business-model perspective adds another useful dimension. Teece (2010) describes business models in terms of how organisations create and capture value. In the present case, value is not located only in a processed commodity or finished product. It can also arise through aggregation, quality assurance, information, buyer coordination and the reduction of transaction frictions. The emerging model can therefore be interpreted as an

attempt to redesign the relationship between dispersed rural supply and market demand.

Relevant work already published in Horizon JHSSR provides useful points of comparison. Sarkar (2024), in a JHSSR case study of Madur Mat production in Sabang, West Bengal, places women's craft production and livelihood empowerment within a local enterprise setting. The comparison is useful because both cases examine community-based production as a route to economic participation, while the present case places greater emphasis on forest-linked resources and market coordination.

The JHSSR archive also includes research on sustainable consumption in Odisha. Giri et al. (2024) examine consumer attitudes toward paper-bag usage in Odisha, illustrating the journal's engagement with sustainability-related economic behaviour in the same state as the present case. The relevance here is contextual rather than empirical: sustainability initiatives involve both production and market behaviour.

A further JHSSR reference is Biswas and Biswas (2024), whose case study considers heritage tourism and sustainable development in West Bengal. Its relevance is conceptual rather than empirical, reinforcing the value of examining locally embedded economic resources through a community-development and sustainability lens.

Taken together, the literature suggests a four-part analytical framework for this case: productive capability, collective organisation, market connectivity and livelihood value. Productive capability concerns skills, processing and quality. Collective organisation concerns aggregation and participation in SHGs, FPOs, APOs and other local groups. Market connectivity concerns information, price discovery and buyer access. Livelihood value concerns whether these mechanisms translate into improved and more resilient economic opportunities. The framework guides the interpretation without implying that the case has already demonstrated causal effects.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative, retrospective case-study approach. The case is bounded by the first year of the BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar initiative, with particular attention to its early work on the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains in rural and tribal communities. The unit of analysis is the emerging market-linkage model rather than an individual household. An embedded illustrative case, concerning Manjulata Naik and women in Boudh who collectively marketed approximately 15 metric tonnes of Sal Seed, is used to make the broader mechanism more concrete.

The evidence base consists of the author's field observations, visits to rural and tribal communities,

interactions with participants and stakeholders, qualitative interviews, descriptions of the intervention process, and operational figures reported in the manuscript. The quantitative information is based on the organisation's internal records, which the author reports were audited by a local chartered accountant; the auditor's details are available for verification. The material includes the Gochha experience, the development of BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar, observations from field travel, and reported experiences from the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains. An official TDCCOL guideline is also used to contextualise Sal Seed procurement and the government-declared MSP.

The analysis is thematic rather than statistical. Recurring issues were organised around collection, quality, aggregation, market information, buyer access and bargaining power. The analysis then considers how the emerging model responded to each constraint and what level of evidence is available for the resulting change. Quantitative indicators are treated as reported operational measures, while qualitative observations are used to examine mechanisms and experiences.

Several limitations remain. First, much of the evidence is closely connected to the organisation implementing the intervention, creating a risk of positive reporting bias. Second, there is no comparison group or baseline household survey against which outcomes can be attributed to the intervention. Third, several terms are programme-specific rather than standard statistical categories. In this paper, "micro-enterprise" denotes the organisation's operational category for a rural income-generating unit participating in its activities; "connected" denotes a linkage established with the initiative; "engaged" denotes participation in a group, meeting or value-chain activity; "onboarded" denotes inclusion in the enterprise network; "aggregator group" denotes a group coordinating collection or aggregation; and "business turnover" denotes the gross transaction or sales value recorded by the initiative, not profit or household income. These definitions should be read as operational labels and checked against the organisation's records.

These limitations determine the level of inference that is appropriate. The paper can make observations about the intervention's design, the problems it sought to address, the organisational responses described by the author and the operational indicators reported for the first year. It cannot establish a causal effect on household welfare or environmental conditions. Future research should combine field interviews, transaction records and longitudinal household or enterprise data to test whether reported changes persist.

All six field photographs used in the article were taken by the author, and permission for their publication

has been granted. The captions identify the available field context and avoid treating photographs as proof of economic outcomes. They are used as documentary context within the case-study narrative.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 From a production problem to a livelihood problem

The Gochha experience provided the starting point for the model. Women producing leaf plates wanted a machine that would reduce physical labour. The four-month delay in delivering the machine revealed a broader issue: production assistance does not necessarily address the economic system in which production occurs. A machine can increase productive capacity, but its economic value depends on access to inputs, appropriate quality, sufficient demand, working capital, buyer relationships and the ability to obtain a viable return.

The story is important precisely because the initial intervention was reasonable. There was a real physical burden, and a machine was a practical response. The lesson was not that technology is unimportant. The lesson was that technology is one component of a livelihood system. This distinction is relevant to contemporary rural innovation, where mechanisation and digital tools can receive more attention than the institutional conditions required for those tools to generate durable economic value.

The subsequent question was therefore not simply how to support one village but whether a repeatable structure could help many rural enterprises diagnose gaps, strengthen capabilities and reach markets. The concern about scale became a central design question. BhaMa Foundation emerged to work on the producer side, while MSE Bazaar developed as a market-facing mechanism. The model therefore divided the problem into complementary but connected functions rather than assuming that either production support or market access alone was sufficient.

4.2 From helping one village to building a sustainable model

The experience prompted a broader examination of how similar support could be extended to the many micro and small enterprises that often need limited but well-directed handholding to improve their commercial position. Around the same time, Mr. Prashant Kumar Sahu expressed an interest in joining such an initiative. Mr. Bhaskar Panigrahi, Chairman and CEO of ConnectM, was invited to become involved, but his initial response was cautious because a new initiative would require both

time and a sustainable structure. His central question was whether the idea could scale.

That question changed the direction of the discussion. The challenge was no longer merely how to help individual enterprises, but how to build a model capable of helping large numbers of enterprises become more commercially capable. An institution was needed that could work at the grassroots level, diagnose gaps, strengthen capabilities and help enterprises become more resilient. Mr. Sahu suggested the name BhaMa, combining Bhaskar and Manorama, and the initiative subsequently took shape as BhaMa Foundation.

As the model developed, it became clear that strengthening producers was only one half of the equation. Scaling would require partners, investment and a market mechanism. Mr. Mahesh Navani, COO of eClinicalWorks, agreed to become an equal partner with the condition that the work should improve rural livelihoods and contribute to a circular economy. BhaMa's purpose therefore became centred on empowering micro and small enterprises by diagnosing gaps, improving processes, enhancing skills and creating sustainable market linkages.

4.3 Finding the missing bridge

Field experience increasingly suggested that the missing element was often a bridge between what communities could produce and where that production could be marketed. Producers may possess natural resources, traditional skills and willingness to work, while buyers may have demand, but fragmented transactions can prevent the two sides from connecting efficiently. The author describes an observation by HG Gauranga Das Prabhu ji about the contrast between urban consumers and rural producers. In the context of the present case,



Figure 3. Women engaged in processing and packaging activities within a rural enterprise setting.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2025.

that observation became a way of thinking about the weak connection between village production and urban or larger-market demand.

MSE Bazaar emerged from this reasoning. BhaMa Foundation strengthens the producer side through skills, processes, quality and aggregation, while MSE Bazaar builds the market side by connecting enterprises with demand and buyers. *Vanajata Udyan* Fresh in Bhubaneswar was established as an early retail bridge, bringing forest products from tribal and small enterprises closer to consumers. The significance of these components is organisational: the intervention is not limited to training producers but attempts to coordinate several stages of a transaction.

The emerging sequence can be expressed analytically as producer capability, quality improvement, aggregation, market information, buyer linkage, value creation and greater self-reliance. The sequence should not be interpreted as automatic. Quality improvement without a buyer does not guarantee income. Buyer access without sufficient volume may not create a sustainable relationship. Aggregation without transparent pricing can reproduce unequal bargaining relationships. The case is therefore best understood as a coordination problem rather than as a simple supply problem.

4.4 From forest resources to “Waste to Wealth”

Effective scaling required focus rather than attempting to work with too many products simultaneously. From more than 250 items originally identified by Mr. Sahu, only a few were selected for initial intervention. The first major value-chain experience came through Sal Seed, followed by Mango Kernel. This narrowing of focus is itself a form of organisational learning. A market-linkage initiative that attempts to handle every local product may spread its attention too thinly to develop reliable quality systems, buyer relationships and aggregation structures.

The case uses Sal Seed and sal-leaf products as part of its forest-based livelihood context. Rather than relying on an unsupported estimate of Odisha’s forest coverage, the paper focuses on the market and institutional dimensions of these resources. For Sal Seed procurement, the Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation of Odisha Ltd. (TDCCOL, 2024) specifies an MSP of ₹20 per kg for Fair Average Quality (FAQ) Sal Seed for the MFP crop year 2024 and sets out procedures for collection, quality, records and payment. This provides an official benchmark against which the case’s later market observations can be understood.

The “Waste to Wealth” idea is therefore understood carefully. In this case it does not necessarily mean converting physical waste into a new manufactured

product. Rather, it refers to recognising economic value in resources, skills and materials that may already exist but remain under-commercialised. The distinction matters for sustainability. Creating value from a resource is not the same as increasing extraction. Long-term viability requires attention to harvesting practices, regeneration, quality, processing, local value addition and the distribution of returns.

4.5 Building on Odisha’s existing ecosystem

The case describes an existing rural livelihood ecosystem involving initiatives such as Mission Shakti Odisha, the Department of Agriculture & Farmers’ Empowerment and ORMAS. BhaMa’s stated role is not to replicate these efforts but to complement them and complete the loop from community production and aggregation to enterprise development and market access. The institutional proposition is significant because rural enterprise development rarely depends on one organisation alone.

The case describes an existing rural livelihood ecosystem involving Mission Shakti Odisha, the Department of Agriculture & Farmers’ Empowerment, ORMAS and other actors. Based on qualitative interviews and organisational records, BhaMa’s stated role is to complement such initiatives by linking community production and aggregation with enterprise development and market access. The paper treats these institutions as part of the case context rather than evaluating their programmes. The longer-term ambition of increasing annual family income from approximately ₹85,000 to ₹1.40 lakh is a target described by the initiative, not a demonstrated outcome.



Figure 4. Women members of a Self-Help Group participating in a rural enterprise setting in Odisha.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2025.

4.6 Building the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains

Sal Seed and Mango Kernel are presented as seasonal resources that can provide income during agricultural lean months. Instead of approaching them simply as commodities to be collected and sold, BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar began examining collection, quality, aggregation, market information, buyer access and bargaining power as connected parts of the value chain. The approach is consistent with the literature on non-timber forest products and collective market action (Belcher & Schreckenberg, 2007; Devaux et al., 2009).

Table 1. Reported value-chain constraints and intervention logic. The final column describes the intended or reported operational result and should not be read as independent impact measurement.

The table shows why the intervention is broader than a market-place function. Collection is addressed through mobilisation; quality through awareness and training; aggregation through village and cluster structures; market information through buyer and price information; buyer access through direct connections; and bargaining through collective volumes. Each response addresses a different friction in the chain. The model's strength, therefore, lies in the combination rather than in any single intervention.

4.7 Collective action, aggregation and bargaining power

The value-chain experience shifts attention from the individual producer to the institutional conditions of market participation. Collective action can reduce transaction costs and make small volumes commercially relevant. It can also improve information flows and create a basis for negotiating with buyers. At the same

time, collective structures require governance. The case would be strengthened by documentation of who decides prices, how payments are made, how quality disputes are handled and how benefits are distributed within groups. Without such information, the existence of aggregation alone cannot establish that producer bargaining power has improved.

The case of Manjulata Naik and the women of Boudh provides a useful illustration. The group reportedly marketed approximately 15 metric tonnes of Sal Seed collectively. The significance is not merely the quantity but the possibility that aggregation allowed dispersed collectors to act as a recognisable market participant. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on collective action and market-chain innovation (Devaux et al., 2009) and also resonates with JHSSR's publication of community-enterprise case research, such as Sarkar's (2024) study of women's craft production.

4.8 Price discovery and the Sal Seed example

The Sal Seed experience offers the clearest numerical example in the manuscript. During a two-month collection period in 2026, the organisation's internal records report procurement prices ranging from ₹13/kg at an earlier point to as high as ₹32/kg later in the period. These records are reported as having been audited by a local chartered accountant. As an external benchmark, TDCCOL's 2024 guideline specified an MSP of ₹20/kg for FAQ Sal Seed and required systematic procurement records (TDCCOL, 2024). The 2026 figures should therefore be understood as reported transaction observations, not as evidence that the intervention caused a price increase.

The available evidence supports a more cautious interpretation. Price comparisons should be read with attention to date, geography, quantity, quality or grade,

Table 1. Sal Seed and Mango Kernel Value-Chain Constraints and BhaMa-MSE Bazaar Responses

Value-chain area	Key challenge	BhaMa-MSE Bazaar intervention	Reported/expected result
Collection	Scattered individual collection	Cluster-based mobilisation through SHGs, FPOs, APOs and local aggregators	Greater collective participation
Quality	Inconsistent drying, grading and storage	Awareness and training on quality practices	Better market readiness
Aggregation	Small quantities and fragmented supply	Village and cluster-level aggregation	Larger tradable volumes
Market information	Limited knowledge of prevailing prices	Sharing buyer demand and market information	Better price discovery
Buyer access	Dependence on local intermediaries	Direct connection with credible trade partners	Wider market participation
Bargaining power	Individual collectors have little negotiating strength	Collective volumes and improved market conditions	Potentially stronger negotiating position

Source: Author's synthesis based on field observations, qualitative interviews, and BhaMa Foundation/MSE Bazaar internal records.

Note: The table synthesises the principal value-chain constraints and responses described in the case. "Reported/expected result" refers to reported operational observations or intended effects; it does not represent an independently measured impact evaluation.



Figure 5. Collection of forest resources as the first stage of a rural value chain.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2025.

and whether the quoted amount was farm-gate or delivered price. Transport, cleaning, drying and other transaction costs may also affect comparability. The present paper therefore uses the ₹13/kg and ₹32/kg observations to illustrate the importance of price information and market conditions, while avoiding a causal claim about BhaMa's effect on prices.

The analytical lesson nevertheless remains important. Market information can have economic value even before any physical transformation occurs. Knowing prevailing demand and having credible alternatives can alter a producer's negotiating position. Aggregation can strengthen that position by increasing the commercial relevance of the producer group. Buyer access can reduce dependence on a single local intermediary. These mechanisms offer a social-science explanation for why market linkage can complement productivity interventions.

The same caution applies to the example of a woman receiving ₹3,200 for two sacks of Sal Seed. The transaction illustrates the human meaning that the author attaches to a payment for collected produce, but it should not be used as evidence of a general income effect unless the quantity, grade, price, costs and comparable prior transaction are documented.

4.9 Reported scale: reach is not the same as impact

The first year is reported to have produced substantial operational reach. The organisation's internal records report more than 7,000 villages across 16 districts, 368+ aggregator groups, 283+ community-level meetings, and

more than 1.10 lakh micro-enterprises connected with or onboarded to the initiative. They also report business turnover exceeding ₹14 crore through the Sal Seed and Mango Kernel value chains. Because these are internal operational measures, their significance depends on the definitions and counting procedures described above.

The distinction among outputs, short-term outcomes and longer-term impacts is essential. Outputs include meetings conducted, groups engaged and enterprises onboarded. Short-term outcomes may include improved information, better quality practices, aggregation and increased participation in organised markets. Longer-term impacts would include sustained household income growth, reduced vulnerability, stronger women's economic agency, enterprise survival, improved bargaining relationships and demonstrable environmental sustainability. The current case provides evidence primarily at the level of activities and reported operational outcomes, not independently verified long-term impact.

Accordingly, the figure of 7,000+ villages is treated as reported village-level reach. The 368+ aggregator groups are reported groups involved in collection or aggregation under the organisation's operational definition. The 1.10 lakh+ micro-enterprises are reported participating units under the organisation's definition and should not be assumed to correspond to a legal enterprise classification. These distinctions make the figures useful as measures of programme scale while limiting claims about impact.

The reported ₹14 crore+ turnover is treated as a business indicator derived from the organisation's records. In the absence of a more detailed accounting schedule in the paper, turnover should not be interpreted as profit, producer income or household welfare. The author can provide the underlying records and audit-verification details if required by the journal.

The manuscript also reports a field estimate that the initiative touched the livelihoods of more than one million people. Because this is an indirect estimate based on enterprises and associated producers or family members, it remains explicitly an estimate. It is not presented as evidence that more than one million people experienced measurable improvements in income or welfare.

4.10 Seasonal income and livelihood resilience

The manuscript makes an important point when it argues that rural development cannot be measured only by annual income. Seasonal cash flow can matter because households face periods in which agricultural earnings are low or absent. Income from forest products can support household expenditure, healthcare, debt repayment and agricultural inputs. In this sense, the timing of income can be as important as the total amount. This is consistent with the broader livelihood-diversification literature,

which emphasises the role of multiple income sources in managing seasonal and economic risk (Barrett et al., 2001).

At the same time, increased commercialisation does not automatically produce resilience. Dependence on one commodity can create new vulnerability if prices fall, resources decline or buyers withdraw. The decision to explore multiple value chains is therefore potentially significant. Sal Seed and Mango Kernel provide different seasonal opportunities, while Moringa is being evaluated as a possible future value chain. Diversification across products and collection periods may reduce dependence on a single seasonal market, but this remains a proposition for future evaluation rather than a demonstrated outcome.

4.11 Social entrepreneurship, agency and self-reliance

The stated ambition to reduce dependence on philanthropy gives the case a clear social-entrepreneurship dimension. The initiative began with a problem that could have been addressed through a conventional charitable donation. Instead, the experience encouraged the promoters to ask how rural enterprises could become more commercially capable. This is consistent with a social-enterprise orientation in which social objectives are pursued through entrepreneurial and market mechanisms (Mair & Martí, 2006).

The distinction between charity and enterprise should nevertheless be handled carefully. Rural communities should not be described as successful merely because they participate in markets, nor should philanthropy be treated as inherently ineffective. CSR support, grants and public programmes can provide essential enabling infrastructure. The more defensible proposition emerging from the case is that one-time assistance is unlikely to be sufficient where the underlying constraint is a weak market system. Durable livelihood improvement requires a combination of capability, institutions, finance, information and market access.

The author's statement that people treated as partners begin to behave like entrepreneurs captures this idea in accessible language. In scholarly terms, it can be reframed as a proposition about agency. When producers have information, collective mechanisms and credible market alternatives, they may have greater capacity to make economic decisions rather than simply receive assistance. Whether this confidence translates into durable changes in bargaining power, investment and control over income is an empirical question. Future research should examine women's decision-making, control over income and participation in producer organisations directly.

4.12 Sustainability and the risk of equating market growth with development

The manuscript uses the language of sustainable value chains and circular economy. These concepts need to be understood as more than market growth. A sustainable value chain should consider economic viability, the distribution of benefits and environmental conditions. Forest-based value chains additionally require attention to harvesting, regeneration and resource monitoring. The commercial success of a forest product can become environmentally problematic if increased demand encourages unsustainable extraction.

The case contains promising elements: better use of existing resources, seasonal income generation, reduced dependence on distress sales, potential value addition closer to communities and a stated intention to build commercially sustainable systems. These are components of a sustainability strategy, not proof of sustainability. The "Waste to Wealth" framing is strongest when it means increasing the value captured from existing skills and resources without assuming that more extraction is always better.

A future monitoring system could therefore include resource-level indicators alongside commercial ones. These might include harvesting practices, regeneration conditions, post-harvest losses, quality grades, rejection rates, processing yields and the share of value retained by producer groups. Such measures would allow the model to test whether economic value creation is compatible with the ecological base on which forest-linked livelihoods depend.

4.13 The institutional ecosystem and innovation

The case does not present BhaMa Foundation as operating alone. It describes interaction among rural entrepreneurs, SHGs, FPOs, APOs, aggregators, buyers, financial institutions such as Axis Bank, strategic partners such as Manorama Industries Ltd., Raipur, and the field team. Public livelihood initiatives are also part of the surrounding ecosystem. Based on the case's qualitative interviews and organisational records, these relationships are understood as a network through which mobilisation, demand, finance and market coordination can be connected.

The innovation dimension of the case is therefore organisational as much as technological. The Gochha experience began with a request for a machine, but the most consequential learning concerned the relationships around production. Clustering, aggregation, information sharing and coordinated buyer access are forms of process innovation. This broad understanding of innovation fits the special issue's emphasis on

entrepreneurship and innovation because it recognises that rural transformation can occur through changes in institutions and market relationships as well as through new machinery.

The manuscript also proposes future use of data and AI-enabled tools to capture field learning, track value chains and streamline processes. This should be presented as an emerging plan rather than an achieved innovation. A useful system could record collection volumes, quality grades, transaction dates, buyer requirements, prices, payments and logistics at cluster level. Such data could improve visibility and support more transparent price discovery. It could also allow the organisation to identify bottlenecks and compare performance across value chains.

4.14 Human dignity as an economic outcome

One of the strongest features of the original narrative is its insistence that livelihood development concerns dignity as well as money. A small payment can have a different meaning when it reflects a fairer return for labour and greater choice in selling. Economic participation can involve information, voice, recognition and the capacity to make decisions. The language of partnership rather than pity is therefore worth retaining, provided that it does not substitute for evidence.

4.15 What the first year has taught the model

The first-year lessons can be consolidated into four propositions. First, a production asset is not equivalent to a livelihood model. Second, productivity without market access is incomplete. Third, market access without quality and aggregation can be fragile. Fourth, scale without environmental, social and economic sustainability is not necessarily development. This model is represented in figure-6.

These propositions are more analytically useful than a slogan-based presentation because they connect directly with the literature and with the evidence available in the case. The first concerns the difference between productive capacity and livelihood systems. The second and third concern value-chain coordination and transaction conditions. The fourth concerns the multidimensional meaning of sustainable development. The broader proposition is that rural entrepreneurship may be strengthened when producers are positioned as economic actors within functioning value chains rather than treated only as recipients of assistance. The case is still too early to establish that this transformation has been achieved at scale, but it provides a plausible model and a set of mechanisms that can be tested.

4.16 Implications for the CUTM-JHSSR special-issue agenda

The case speaks directly to the special issue's three linked concerns: economics, entrepreneurship and innovation. Its economic dimension lies in the attempt to improve the terms on which dispersed rural production enters markets. The entrepreneurship dimension lies in creating a structure that treats local producers as participants in value creation rather than as passive recipients of assistance. The innovation dimension is organisational as much as technological. The model experiments with clustering, aggregation, information sharing and coordinated buyer access before relying on more advanced digital tools.

The case also has implications for how rural innovation is evaluated. An intervention should not be judged only by the number of machines distributed, villages visited or enterprises contacted. More informative indicators would include repeated transactions, price transparency, payment timeliness, quality improvements, producer

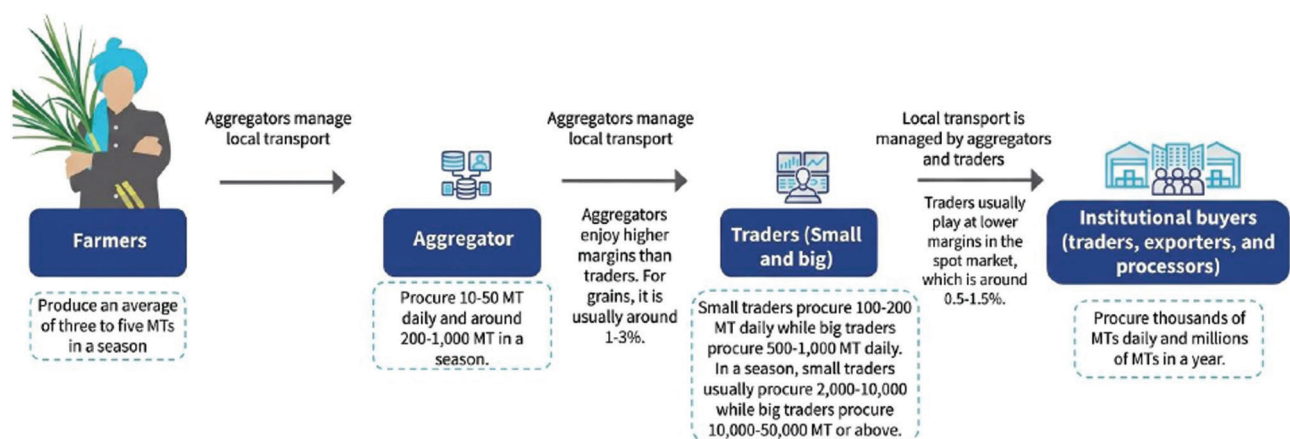


Figure 6. Farmer to market: a value-chain conceptual model.

Source: Conceptual model by the authors

retention, value distribution and resource sustainability. This moves evaluation from activity counting toward understanding whether the institutional conditions for durable enterprise have been created.

From an economic-development perspective, the case raises a further question about where value is captured. If rural communities supply raw materials while processing, branding and final marketing occur elsewhere, improvements in producer prices may remain limited. The manuscript's future emphasis on processing and value addition closer to producing communities is therefore important. Research should track value distribution across stages of the chain rather than measuring only total turnover.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The BhaMa Foundation and MSE Bazaar experience began with a practical problem in Gochha: women making sal-leaf plates needed a machine to reduce physical labour. The difficulty of delivering that machine revealed a larger problem. Rural livelihoods cannot be strengthened sustainably through isolated production interventions when the surrounding market system remains fragmented.

The emerging model responded by combining producer-side and market-side functions. BhaMa Foundation focuses on skills, processes, quality and aggregation, while MSE Bazaar seeks to connect rural enterprises with demand and buyers. The early focus on Sal Seed and Mango Kernel allowed the initiative to examine collection, quality, aggregation, market information, buyer access and bargaining power as connected parts of the same value chain. *Vanajata Udyan* Fresh added an early retail bridge, while partnerships with groups, buyers, financial institutions and field actors broadened the institutional network.

The reported first-year figures indicate substantial operational reach: more than 7,000 villages, 368+ aggregator groups, more than 1.10 lakh micro-enterprises and reported turnover exceeding ₹14 crore. The Sal Seed records also report prices ranging from ₹13/kg to ₹32/kg during a two-month collection period in 2026. These figures are presented as internal operational observations, reported as audited by a local chartered accountant, rather than as independently demonstrated impact. The price observations are additionally interpreted in light of TDCCOL's 2024 MSP guideline and are not treated as a causal programme effect.

The central scholarly contribution of the case is therefore not a claim that the model has already transformed rural livelihoods. It is the identification of a potentially important mechanism through which such transformation may occur. The case suggests that

production capability, collective organisation, market information, quality practices and buyer access may be mutually reinforcing. It also shows why technology alone may be insufficient when the institutional and commercial environment remains weak.

Future research should move from descriptive case evidence toward systematic evaluation. Priority areas include longitudinal measurement of household income, producer prices and enterprise survival; analysis of women's control over income and economic decision-making; assessment of the distribution of value along the chain; measurement of quality improvements and post-harvest losses; and evaluation of the environmental sustainability of forest-resource collection. Comparative studies across districts and value chains could examine whether the model works differently under different institutional and market conditions.

The proposed use of data and AI-enabled tools may also provide an opportunity to turn field learning into an institutional knowledge system. Such tools should be designed around transparent data governance, practical usability and producer benefit. Digital innovation will be valuable only if it improves decisions and relationships within the value chain. Similarly, expansion into Moringa and other products should follow evidence about market demand, resource sustainability, quality requirements and producer returns rather than scale for its own sake.

The longer-term ambition described by the promoters is to move rural micro and small enterprises from the margins toward greater recognition as contributors to local economic development. The aspiration to increase family income, strengthen rural enterprise participation and potentially reduce distress-driven migration is consistent with the broader goal of building resilient rural economies, but these outcomes require sustained evidence. The next stage should therefore focus not only on adding villages and products, but on demonstrating whether the model produces durable economic, social and environmental value.

The journey from one village to a broader model remains unfinished. Its most important lesson may be that sustainable rural entrepreneurship is not created by production capacity alone. It emerges when resources, people, collective institutions, information and markets are connected in ways that allow producers to participate with greater agency and resilience. The case began with a machine, but its deeper question is about the system surrounding the machine. That is where the future research value of the BhaMa experience lies.

The promoters continue to draw strength from the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, particularly the emphasis on purposeful and honest action. In this paper, that reflection remains peripheral to the empirical argument.

The substantive lesson is more practical: a village visit can identify a problem, but sustainable development requires the patience to understand the system behind that problem. One year is only the beginning of that process.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors did not use Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies for research ideas, theoretical framework, analysis, interpretation, arguments, or conclusions presented in the manuscript. All intellectual content, conceptual development, methodological decisions, and scholarly interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Appendix A.

Additional Field Photograph



Figure A1. Close-up of a forest-derived plant material documented during field collection.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2025.

Biographical Statement of Author(s)

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is a U.S.-based writer, social entrepreneur, philanthropist, and cultural advocate originally from Berhampur, Odisha, India. A multilingual author writing in Odia, Hindi, and English, her scholarly and creative interests encompass Indian literature, culture, aesthetics, spirituality, and the intersection of cultural heritage with contemporary society. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Political Science, an MBA from Berhampur University and Bentley University, and a diploma in Interior Decoration from Kolkata, India.

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Beyond her literary work, Manorama has contributed to initiatives in women's empowerment, education, health, indigenous arts, handloom promotion, and community development. She is Chairwoman of Avanti Holdings Company and co-founder/advisor of the *BhaMa* Foundation and MSE Bazaar, and has been associated with several nonprofit and philanthropic initiatives. Her contributions to art, literature, and cultural diplomacy have received recognition, including the Outstanding Woman of the Year for Art and Literature award (2023) and the Business Excellence Award for Outstanding Woman in Cultural Diplomacy (2025).

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Professor Subudhi has authored 19 books and published more than 100 research papers in national and international journals and conference proceedings. His scholarly work has been published by internationally recognised publishers, including Springer, Taylor & Francis and Emerald Publishing. He has presented research at more than 60 academic conferences, including international forums, and has served as a resource person for numerous faculty development programmes and research workshops. He has supervised 16 doctoral scholars and completed five major funded research projects supported by national and international agencies. His academic contributions also include work in research methodology and social science research, including participation in an International Sociological Association conference at the University of Leicester, UK.

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