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'Turning indigenous women into social entrepreneurs key to rural development'

Dr Nandini Azad, an anthropologist and noted social worker of international repute, has been working for the cause of gender equity, poverty alleviation, cooperatives, financial inclusion and development issues mostly concerning women over the four decades. She served in different capacities under the Union govt, international boards, cooperatives and the non-profit sector to push and champion the cause of women's cooperatives to make them financially stronger in rural areas. Dr Azad, who is also the president of the Indian Cooperative Network for Women (ICNW) headquartered in Chennai, spoke to TOI's ASRPMukesh during her visit to Jharkhand as part of her field studies. Excerpts...

■ **Tell us about the purpose of your visit.**

Being an anthropologist, Jharkhand has always fascinated me given the richness of the indigenous tribals here. In the late 90s and early 2000, I invested a lot of time here to under-



Dr Nandini Azad

stand the social and cultural aspects of different tribes and their challenges especially for women while rolling out various interventions through a network of NGOs. While those works continued, my focus concentrated on southern parts of the country to build a robust network of women cooperatives to make them financially strong at rural levels. However, I am again refocusing to channel the efforts to work with the indigenous womenfolk here.

■ **What are the key channels for women in India?**

There are many depending on the region but talking about

the farming sector, statistics suggest that despite the high number of women engaged in farming jobs, their ownership of land is negligible. For the last few decades, I have been advocating and working to address this issue through the Working Women's Forum (WWF), a wing of the Indian Cooperative Network for Women (ICNW). We have fairly managed to bring financial inclusion and capacity building by aiding in getting agriculture land titles to thousands of women in rural India. Coupled with exposure, training and meetings, women farmers through cooperatives today, mainly in south India, can now decide on what crop to grow, make marketing strategies and profit making. Today, we have around 6,00,000 women in the cooperative in the entire south India.

■ **Tell us about your work in Jharkhand, so far.**

The Independent Commission for People's Rights and Development (ICPRD), a conglomeration of 21 local self-raised

NGO networks which were mentored in the last two decades, has been predominately working for women empowerment in the Santhal Pargana region. The focus has been on capacity building through micro-credit programmes to help them tackle various social ills. We managed to touch about 10,000 women and children so far and we are in the process of scaling it up at a larger level.

■ **What kind of challenges exist in the state?**

Financial inclusivity from institutions is still a hurdle as they thought it was a high-risk zone. The govt has also failed to build banking infra for the indigenous people. Further, the govt needs to sync their plans and projects with the ground reality for effective implementation. Teaching women ways to access the source of power — be it banking, govt offices, legal and police, etc., is needed. Most importantly, turning poor indigenous women into social entrepreneurs holds the key to rural prosperity.