

Samaj Pragati Sahayog — A Million Acres of Tribal Land, Transformed from Within

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Agriculture & Markets

Published: May 2026 · Last reviewed: —

In 1994, Nivedita Banerji started a stitching centre in a remote village in Dewas district, Madhya Pradesh. The village was in the ghaat-neeche — the valley below the Narmada plateau, a tribal pocket of Bhil and Bhuiya communities locked into what researchers describe as "enduring conditions of resource degradation and political marginalisation." The plateau above was fertile, irrigated, and prosperous. The valley was not.

Banerji had not come to run a stitching centre permanently. She had come to understand the paradox of the valley — and to build the institutional infrastructure that would allow its communities to change their own conditions. Thirty years later, Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) is one of India's largest grassroots initiatives for women empowerment, water, and livelihood security, working with its partners on a million acres of land across 72 of India's most backward districts. The stitching centre is now Kumbaya Producer Company Limited — a women-owned enterprise with more than 100 members from marginalised communities.

Who They Are

SPS is headquartered in Neemkheda, a drought-prone tribal village in Dewas district, Madhya Pradesh. Headquartered — not in a district town, not in Bhopal, not in Delhi. In the village where the watershed work began in the early 1990s. This geographic

choice is a values statement about where institutional intelligence should reside.

Their work spans three interconnected domains: watershed development and water security, women-led microfinance and SHG federation, and sustainable agriculture and nature-based livelihoods. The interconnection is the point: in drought-prone tribal areas, water security enables agriculture, agricultural income enables SHG savings, SHG savings enables crisis management, and community institutions built through all three enable democratic governance.

They describe their work deliberately as "not so much a model as a living laboratory of learning for others to adapt." The Baba Amte Centre for People's Empowerment at Neemkheda — established in 1998 as a training centre for watershed development — is where this laboratory learning is shared with partner organisations and government agencies.

The Watershed Numbers

SPS's watershed programme covers the most specific documented outcomes in their portfolio. Their direct implementation has covered 160,765 acres across 119 villages, with effective spending of Rs. 35.94 crore. The agricultural impacts are verified: watershed development produces a 10 to 20 percent increase in Kharif (monsoon) crop yields and a 60 to 70 percent increase in Rabi (winter) crop yields, by extending the period of soil moisture available to crops.

The compound effect of this double-crop reliability: the value of agricultural production has doubled in watershed-treated areas compared to control areas, and distress migration — the defining symptom of rural poverty in central India's tribal belt — has measurably decreased.

The SHG and Microfinance Foundation

SPS's SHG programme is central to its theory of change: in areas where moneylenders charge interest rates of 5 to 10 percent per month, access to group-based credit at

affordable rates is not a financial service — it is liberation from a structure of debt bondage that reproduces across generations. The documented impact: 41,000 families reached, with a total loan amount of Rs. 467 crore leveraged across 72 backward districts.

The SHG is also the institutional vehicle through which women exercise governance over the watershed and agriculture programmes. This integration — financial institution and programme governance simultaneously — is what distinguishes SPS from organisations that either do microfinance or watershed development but rarely both with the same community institutions.

The State Government Partnership

SPS's partnership with the Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Mission in Madhya Pradesh — and the academic documentation of how this partnership worked — is among the most studied civil society-government relationships in India's watershed sector. SPS was selected as a Project Implementing Agency (PIA) for the mission and adopted a "bold interpretation" of the programme guidelines, building on existing village relationships and community institutions rather than creating parallel structures.

The lesson extracted in the academic literature: civil society organisations that bring genuine community trust to government programmes outperform those that bring only technical compliance.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: samajpragatisahayog.org | **Kumbaya:** kumbaya.co.in | **Centre:**

Neemkheda, Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

Key evidence:

- Give.do SPS profile: 41,000 families, Rs. 467 crore loans, 1 million acres, 72 districts

- Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies: SPS grantee profile — watershed + microfinance + livelihoods
- SPS watershed page: samajpragatisahayog.org/watershed — 160,765 acres, 119 villages, Rs. 35.94 crore
- UEA Research Portal: *How Samaj Pragati Sahayog Works the State and Why It Succeeds* — academic analysis of government partnership model

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