

People of Poi Tanda vs the Grim Reaper

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In drought-hit Marathwada, where death looms large, other villages have surrendered. But a nondescript hamlet in Beed is winning the fight.



"They have come," said the neem tree to the Baya birds. "It's time. Go now, please. I want you to remember me as strong and whole, resilient and happy. It will be more painful to have you watch as they chip away at me, until I stand no more."

It took the three little birds all their strength to flap their tiny wings and take flight from the strong, woody arms that had cradled them unconditionally. That day, even the wind stood still, because it knew no leaf in the village would want to rustle, not when they wanted to mourn.

It took three villagers to take down Namdeo Chavan's body from the neem tree on which he had hanged himself. After they'd done that, they hacked down the tree. Trees on which people hang themselves are considered bad luck in Marthawada.

The story of Namdeo Chavan from Poi Tanda, a Banjara hamlet in Gewrai Taluka, Beed, was no different from that of the 486 farmers who had committed suicide in the district or the 27 others who had killed themselves in Gewrai Taluka alone. The only difference was that Chavan's suicide was not reported.

About 155 kilometres from the main town of Beed, this cluster of hamlets which is home to the Banjaras – a community mainly of migrant sugarcane cutters who travel for work to Kolhapur and Satara – is a few light years away from the kind of progress and development other villages in the same taluka have witnessed. It's not big enough to have a panchayat of its own, only a primary school up to Class IV, and no primary health centre. The houses here lack the quintessential Marathwada character, the teak wood doors and open courtyards. Instead, there are only single-room mud-and-straw homes supported by a few bricks.

But in 2014, around the time of Chavan's suicide, the fortunes of the village were about to change. Dilasa, an Aurangabad-based non-profit body, unaware of the suicide issue, began work in the area to help villagers set up farmer groups and an agro-producer company under the World Bank-assisted Maharashtra Agricultural Competitiveness Project. Buoyed by the opportunities a proposed grain production unit in the village would offer, they roped in local resident Shankar Rathod to survey the neighbouring Banjara Tandas.

As the newly appointed secretary to the upcoming agro-producer company, 32-year-old Rathod, one of the few graduates in Poi Tanda, set off. He visited the other eight Banjara hamlets, but returned with disturbing data – the Banjara hamlets of Gewrai had seen 22 suicides in one year. It was more than any other village cluster in the taluka and none of them knew about any government compensation schemes for loss of life. They had been labouring away in their corner of the world, dealing with their struggle and loss, all on their own.

After hearing this report, Dilasa realised they'd have to change tactics. No economic empowerment scheme was going to work when the neighbourhood had an average of two people checking out early each month. People needed to be saved first.



It's been about four months since Marathwada's first Ubhari Pathak came into being at Poi Tanda and the Grim Reaper hasn't been seen since.

Photo Courtesy: Saadia S Dhailey

So, on November 20, 2015, Dilasa's President Dr Anagha Patil, head of the Department of Psychology at Aurangabad's Vivekanand College, arrived in Poi Tanda to chair an awareness meeting on suicide prevention. As the principal investigator on NABARD's study on suicides in the region, Dr Patil already had insight into the issue.

That evening, under Lord Hanuman's watchful eye in the village temple's patio where everyone had gathered, she spoke about how for a long time, great efforts had been taken on the economic aspect of drought but nobody had talked about how the farmer has been hit hard psychologically. The mental state of the farmer needed careful monitoring and people in the village needed to take responsibility. They would need to take on the job of offering support to their fellow villagers, to strengthen their resolve to tide over these difficult times with dignity.

Three days later, Ubhari Pathak – meaning Team of Hope – was established with 15 people of Poi Tanda. The villagers didn't know it that day, but Ubhari Pathak was going to save their lives.

Janardhan Chavan, a resident of Poi Tanda, had already lost his younger son Achut. He committed suicide in 2014, as mounting loans cost him a chance to complete his diploma in agriculture studies. They didn't notice it but their older son, Bharat, also began to sink into depression. He had a loan of ₹9 lakh staring at him, and no income, as drought scorched all chances of a good yield. He had to sell his six-acre landholding, all that he had.

Ubhari Pathak's Ankush Chavan was assigned to the family and he began visiting them with a manual on Prevention of Farmer Suicide and a survey that Dr Patil had promised would identify vulnerable individuals. Ankush had seen tragedy too close to home and had been trained along with the other Ubhari Pathaks by Dr Patil to identify symptoms of depression.

Like every other Ubhari Pathak member, Ankush had 15 to 20 families under him to visit, counsel and console and he was keeping a special eye on Janardhan Chavan's family, especially the elder son. One day, Ankush arrived just after the family had had a heated argument. He learned that Bharat had left in rage, threatening to end his life. Ankush ran to look for him. Bharat was found about 2.5 kilometres from the village at the foot of a neem tree, tying a noose.

Ankush didn't panic. He sat Bharat down and talked to him until the wish to kill himself vanished. Janardhan Chavan has been indebted to Ankush since that day.



Ubhari Pathak, or team of hope, was established with 15 people of Poi Tanda. The villagers didn't know it that day, but Ubhari Pathak was going to save their lives.

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It's been about four months now since Marathwada's first Ubhari Pathak came into being at Poi Tanda and the Grim Reaper hasn't been seen since. There is talk of replicating the model as the government's mental health scheme hasn't met with much success. The key, officials have finally understood, is making the villager stakeholders in their own survival.

Meanwhile, Poi Tanda flourishes. About 15 men and women have been employed on the construction site of the village's most awaited project, the Tvarita Agro Producer Company. Soon, their fortunes will change and the Grim Reaper will be a distant memory. As farmers continue to thrive, so do the neem trees. They no longer sing mournful songs of farewell to the Baya birds

First published on [Arre Beta](#)