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ANCHOR

Ragi bars to millet brownies, a bakery with flavours of Dantewada

GARGI VERMA

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A BAKERY that employs women who were trafficked and rescued, transgenders and those who are differently abled – the district administration hopes to chart a new course with this initiative in the Maoist hotspot of Dantewada.

"We wanted to provide employment to vulnerable groups that doesn't constrain them to a routine job. The bakery will supply bread and other items to hotels and government-run canteens, as well as explore

other markets. The idea is to make them self-sufficient," said Astha Rajput, nodal officer of the project.

Set up at an initial cost of about Rs 10 lakh, the Navchetna Bakery, which is equipped with high-end machinery, is yet to be inaugurated by Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel.

"We are working on providing both the services as well as the items that were not known in the district so far. It's a pilot project, but we are very hopeful about it," said Dantewada Collector Deepak Soni.

Anand Sai Paul, 23, the patissier, said they were looking

at a confluence of modern baking skills and local produce. "We will have the basic flavors but we are experimenting with mahua, moringa and local jaggery flavours. We are also planning to use millet and other grains to make bread and brownies," he said.

Paul, a resident of Bachel in the district, has a professional degree and work experience with some top hotels. "I returned because I wanted to work in Dantewada. Any baked item in Dantewada has to be sourced from Jagdalpur, which is over 85 km away," he said.

Paul has already started



The Navchetna Bakery in Dantewada employs women who were trafficked and rescued, differently-abled. Gargi Verma

working on packaging the baked goods, to be supplied across the state and even outside. "We are also looking at making Ragi nutrition bars with local produce. We want Navchetna to keep experimenting in the field of sustainable production," he said.

He also wants to introduce a variety of breads and dessert like Bebinca in the local market. "These are not labour intensive items. The lack of options in Dantewada is simply because nobody wants to get out of their comfort zone. But with the local tribals learning these techniques, it opens up opportunities for them," he said.

For Rashmi (name changed), 21, one of the seven employees at the bakery, the immediate goal is to bake a cake for her daughter's first birthday, just a few months away. Trafficked when she was just 15 years old, Rashmi was rescued in 2016. Now married, she wants to leave her past behind.

"I want to earn money like my husband and brothers-in-law, so that no one in my family has to be sent away in search of a job," she said.

Accompanied by her eight-month-old daughter, Rashmi travels for over an hour daily, from her village to the bakery in

Dantewada. "I want to bake a cake for my daughter when she turns one," she said, with a smile.

Binnu Vek, 21, another employee, is a resident of Halbaras in Kuakonda block of the district. "When I finished school, the district administration sent me to Pune for a Diploma in Basic Rural Technology in 2018," he said. "Tab dar lagta tha (I was scared then)," he recalled. But Vek had to return after his brother fell ill.

After doing odd jobs for about two years, Vek was contacted by the district officials for the bakery. "When they said I had to go to Pune again, I was

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A bakery with flavours of Dantewada

happy. I missed misal pav (a local dish)," he said. "Now, I know how to bake pav (bread) and I eat it with everything," he said.

Vek and three others were sent for a bakery course at Vigyan Ashram in Pune last year. For them, traveling during the pandemic was the biggest worry.

"Pune was a Covid-19 hotspot and I was worried about going. Throughout the train journey, I tried not to touch anything except my seat," said Gopal, 35, another employee.

The Navchetna Bakery has been painted and decorated by Pinku Jhagda, an artist from the state university in Khairagarh. "I wanted to keep the decor contemporary while also introducing types of tribal art," he said.