

## Reviving Guniada: A Journey of Reforestation and Water Conservation

In 2002, I got married and moved to Guniada, a village in Bankura district, West Bengal, where I have since lived. This area was once thickly forested, but by the time I arrived here, there was no green cover left. We grew paddy and some other food crops but this was not without its challenges; when you looked at the land, you would see more rocks than soil. Those who tried their hand at raising cattle would eventually give up as there was no grasslands for the animals to graze.

As a result, many migrated in search of livelihood opportunities.

Bankura receives heavy rainfall, but the bare hillocks were unable to absorb rainwater. This resulted in water scarcity because our villages didn't have any means to capture the water that flowed downhill. The panchayat, other government departments, nonprofits such as PRADAN, and the villagers would often gather to discuss ways of conserving water. I started attending these meetings and learned how to create a water harvesting system. I developed resource maps on which we depicted the catchment areas and the route through which the water flowed. We took these lessons to our own farms, which allowed us to implement them, make mistakes, ask questions, and eventually succeed. Within a few years, I became a Chashi Bandhu ('farmer's friend') and started helping others in my community to apply these methods.

We built trenches on the slopes that absorbed water, thus enabling the trees that we had planted to grow. These trenches also ensure that water does not run off the slopes; rather, it seeps into the soil and trickles down the hill into seepage wells that we have built in the lowlands. Now, with increased access to water, our farmers are growing watermelon, mustard, lentils, and more, and have an additional source of income through the sale of these crops.

Grass has started growing on the slopes, and our cattle now have a place to graze. As the trees grow, they provide shade to the villagers who accompany their cattle. Our hillocks are greener now & many who had migrated are choosing to return home because agriculture here is turning into a feasible livelihood option again.