



Mann Deshi
Foundation



**A STITCH
IN TIME**

Our Story

How Mann Deshi women began Making Masks

The perfectly stitched masks draw everyone's attention in Mahswad's weekly market. They've been made by Ashwini Manohar Kesar, 28, one of our rural women entrepreneurs. Ashwini has been making them ever since she closed her tailoring business because of the lockdown. That was a big blow, but, undaunted, Ashwini, a graduate of Mann Deshi's business school, quickly found another way to support her family and herself. She makes high quality masks at home and sells them in the weekly Market. Women like Ashwini are standing strong in difficult times and are also inspiring others.

Actually, from the time Ashwini got married in 2014, meeting household expenses had been a struggle. Her husband, a marketing executive, made very little. In 2016 he lost his job. By then the couple also had a daughter. So, the following year, Ashwini started a small business of tailoring and selling cloth in the weekly Market of Mhaswad. Since Ashwini earned nearly Rs 15,000 per month, the Keskars's financial problems seemed over. But after the lockdown in March this year, Ashwini had to stop working, and the Keskars had to fall back on their savings. Fortunately, the Mann Deshi Foundation suggested that Ashwini make and sell masks. And the very first month, Ashwini, along with two women who joined her, earned Rs 10,000.

Ever since the lockdown was imposed, the Mann Deshi Foundation has been encouraging women to make stitch masks. To date, over 400 women have joined this initiative and produced more than 450000 masks worth over Rs 60 lakhs, and there's no stopping them.



SOWING THE SEED

Mann Deshi's mask initiative required a lot of planning, coordination and patience. Even before the lockdown was imposed the Foundation sensed that in the coming months women who ran small businesses like sweet shops, vegetable stalls, school uniform stores, snack centres would probably have to close down.

“But since the demand for masks was bound to grow, we suggested to women tailors that they make them,” says Vanita Shinde, the chief administrative officer of the Mann Deshi Foundation. “This would not only fill a crying health need, it would also enable women to earn money.”

Pamphlets and videos on the design, size and stitching of masks as well as how to sanitize sewing machines and other equipment were prepared and circulated.

Initially 50 women started making masks, but today there are more than 400 across the Mann Deshi Business School and Chambers of Commerce in Satara, Pune, Dahiwadi, Chiplun, Silvasa and Latur.



FACING CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge was procuring cloth and stitching material since all the local shops were closed and there were restrictions on movement. However, Mann Deshi women got permission to go to Pune and Ichalkaranji and procure the material. It wasn't easy. “Sometimes online permissions took a lot time and our orders were cancelled. Transportation was another headache. But we had to follow all the rules and guidelines imposed by the government,” says Vanita.

There were other problems too. For fear of getting infected, many women were reluctant to make masks. Says Vidya Kirve from Bhuinj near Satara: “Six out of every 10 women I approached refused to participate. Finally, four women agreed – from three different localities. Every time I had to hand over raw material to them or take the masks they had made, I had to get permission to enter their village.”

THE TORCHBEARERS

Some enterprising women like Ranjana Kalshetti had thought of making masks even before Mann Deshi's initiative. For more than a decade, Ranjana had a tailoring business and had been running fashion designing classes. Fifteen women worked for her. In addition, she made and sold jute artefacts. She'd been the sole bread winner for her family ever since her husband had fallen ill and lost his job four years earlier.

A few days before the lockdown was announced, she approached a nearby blind school and an orphanage and got bulk orders for masks. "I had taken education loan for my daughter who is studying pharmacy," Ranjana says, "and I needed money to run my house and pay bills and EMIs. I told Mann Deshi that I was making masks." Mann Deshi then asked her to join and help lead its initiative. Ranjana made a video on how to make high quality masks, brought another 15 more women on board, and went house-to-house supervising their work. Ranjana's group of 30 women now makes 3,000 masks a day, each earning between Rs. 350 to Rs. 500 a day.

Masks have been a particularly fruitful line of business for Ranjana. Apart from coordinating the entire effort, Ranjana and her 20-year-old daughter spend their evenings making 300 masks themselves every day. In fact, her monthly income has gone up 50% from Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000!

But it's been a rough ride. Initially, her family and neighbours objected to her going outdoors. "I was worried too," Ranjana says. "But I had to take the risk. I got permission from our society chairman to go out for two hours every day, during which I collected stitching material, distributed it to those who were working for me and collected the masks that were ready. I always carried a digital pass, sometimes cops would stop and question me, but when they saw my pass, they would let me go."



Rupali Ramchandra Pavnkar is another example of an entrepreneur who has displayed outstanding leadership during this time. After her tailoring business came to a standstill and Mann Deshi proposed that she make masks, there was no stopping her. She hired 30 women, many of whom knew only basic stitching. To train them, Rupali made a video and circulated it on Whatsapp. Anyone who had a smartphone could contact her if they had any queries. She also set aside a room in her house where between 11 am to 1 pm, women working under her could enter, either to drop off finished masks or collect material. Since she had the machinery, she cut cloth for women who had bulk orders for masks, thereby earning more money. During the two months of lockdown, Rupali earned nearly Rs 70,000 from cutting cloth and Rs 60,000 from bulk orders.

Seeing Rupali and Rajana's success in Pune, Mann Deshi provided cloth cutting machinery to women in Satara, Dahiwadi and Mhaswad so that they too could take bulk orders. One of them is Anita Bhosale. Before the lockdown, between her tailoring business and her husband's work in a brick kiln, the Bhosales made Rs 6,000 a month. This dried up when lockdown was imposed. Anita then started making face masks on her own with the cloth she already had. She supplied these masks to medical stores in Pune and Baramati, a hospital in Satara and neighbouring gram panchayats. It was then that Mann Deshi got in touch with her and gave her a cloth-cutting machine. Anita hired 20 women who now make 700-800 masks a day. During the two months of lockdown, Anita herself earned nearly Rs 50,000. "Although the mask-making work has come down now," Anita says, "the experience has honed my stitching skills and I've realized the importance of quality. I've also learnt how to lead a team. I will be using these new skills to expand my business."



QUALITY CONTROL

Since the women were working from their homes and were primarily coordinating with each other through audio/video calls, special attention had to be given to quality control.

Vanita Shinde kept a close watch on the quality of cloth—it had to be 100 per cent cotton-- the size of the masks and the stitching style. “Although we all were interacting virtually, we paid very close attention to details,” she says. “If a mask didn't match the parameters set by us, we would reject it. It was a matter of our credibility.”

Ashwini Keskar, who sold cloth at Mhaswad's weekly Market, never paid much attention to quality. But when she joined Mann Deshi's mask initiative and her masks were rejected for poor stitching, she reworked and corrected her inferior masks and helped other women to do the same.

Women like Rupali, Ranjana and other mask trainers, also checked masks thoroughly. “I would check the masks at night,” Ranjana says. Those masks that required some rework were given back to the person who made them. If only a minor alteration was needed, Ranjana would give instructions over the phone. If more work was needed, she would demonstrate what had to be done using a Whatsapp video. Whenever quality was not up to the mark, Rupali and Ranjana would arrange a video conference call with their team or call them for a meeting to discuss the problem.

Masks made under Mann Deshi's auspices have been tested and certified by the South India Textile Research Association. They are made with single, double and triple layers, are washable, and in different colours. They've been sold in bulk to medical stores, panchayat samitis, doctors, government offices, and government hospitals, NGOs as well as to corporations.

The Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT), Hyderabad, has placed bulk orders for multi-layered, washable facemasks.



The training and technology for these multi-layered masks will be provided to Mann Deshi women by IICT. Corporates like Cipla are also approaching Mann Deshi for bulk orders.

LEARNING LESSONS

Mann Deshi has learnt a lot from its mask-making initiative. As Chetna Sinha, founder of Mann Deshi Foundation and Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, points out, “We have 400-plus women making masks, all at home across so many different locations. They have produced more than 4 lakh masks. Generally, a production on this scale requires a manufacturing unit, land and machinery. This success has only been possible because women entrepreneurs themselves took on the leadership of this initiative. Their ability to adapt and train so efficiently and rapidly has made us rethink, redefine and reinvent the manufacturing process and create a low-cost model.

ROAD AHEAD

Although until now its masks have been sold by word of mouth, Mann Deshi team is now exploring other sales channels. Vanita Shinde says that Mann Deshi can absorb more women and produce 6 lakh masks a month if they get large orders. Mann Deshi's mask-making women have also started making masks for children. “There's a large opportunity here,” Vanita says.

Meanwhile, Mann Deshi women are full of confidence and enthusiastic to take on more work. While Rupali is confident that if she gets more orders, she and her team of 30 women can churn out 6,000 masks daily, Ranjana says that with her group of 15 women she would be able to make 5,000. Kirve, who, along with four women who work with her, has been making 1,000 masks every day, and has designed nine kinds of masks--those made of *khan*

(a traditional Maharashtrian textile) fabric, embroidered masks, and round and square-shaped ones. She has been publicizing her masks on social media and selling them online.





“During this entire journey, our women leaders and their teams challenged themselves to make things work,” Chetna Sinha says. “They faced several hardships but found solutions each time. They have evolved and emerged as winners. They have proved Mann Deshi's motto—that their courage is their capital.”

Achieving this milestone in our journey wouldn't have been possible without the timely-support rendered by supporters. Mann Deshi Foundation and its women express a heartfelt thanks to all our supporters and partners.



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