



Vanita Vinod Naroti's house. She (below) is the sarpanch of 15 villages in Todsa taluka

## 'Women now can speak up'

Gondwana's skill centre became a crossing point for villagers from fear to choice. They were taught mining skills, yes, but also employable ones they could carry anywhere. Transport was arranged for those travelling from Maoist-prone belts. For many, it was the first risk taken for hope, not survival. Each employee received 100 company shares giving them an importance.

Vikas Pungati, 25, is from Hindur village near Chhattisgarh's border, where

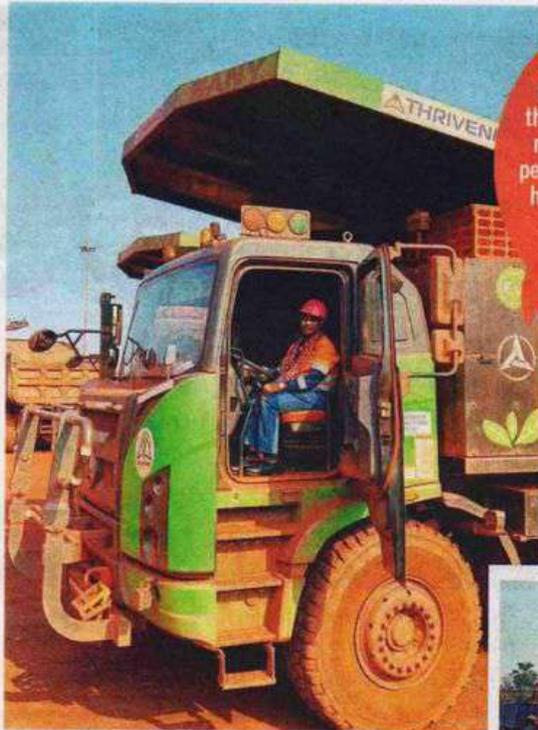


the towering threat of Maoists was a constant terror. Pungati remembers going to school while hiding. "Taking up work scared me. Maoists gave us nothing but pressure. When the police and local leaders backed us, the threats stopped."

Vanita Vinod Naroti, 32, sarpanch of 15 villages in Todsa taluka, speaks of change rooted in income. "Earlier, women farmed and stayed home. Men decided everything, even childbirth. Hospital visits were refused." Sickle cell disease, malaria, malnutrition were common as villagers held no concept of money, farming being their bread and butter while markets were unheard of. "After steady work, food habits changed, health improved, and women began to speak," says Naroti. Employment didn't just end Maoism. It also made it unnecessary.



Vanita Vinod Naroti



I like driving. It pays me well and it's fun too. I never thought I could do this as a woman. No one stopped me from doing this and in fact, people encouraged me as well. My husband works here [Surjagarh mining centre] too

Pratibha Madavi, 36, truck driver at Surjagarh



Pratibha Madavi is a 36-year-old mining truck driver at Surjagarh's mining centre, who never thought she could do this as a woman. PICS/TANISHA BANERJEE

## 'I never thought I could drive a huge truck as a woman'

At Surjagarh, the earth is cut open carefully. This is where iron ore is mined but it does not feel like a place that only takes. Every worker here comes from the villages that circle the hills. They are fed, housed when needed, and ferried to work. The mine bends itself around people, not the other way around.

Surjagarh practises green mining where electric vehicles hum instead of roar, water sprays hang constantly in the air to keep dust down, and carbon footprints are measured, not ignored. Women operate machines once thought too large for them.

Of the 3500 odd employees here, skill is the only qualification that matters.

Because operators did not exist locally, they were moulded. Villagers are trained from scratch, paid stipends while learning, and supported with free transport, schooling, and hospital care — benefits that spill beyond employees to neighbouring villages. Education, too, travels far from here. Twenty-five students from Gadchiroli, selected on merit, are sent to study mining engineering in Australia — ₹1.05 crore invested per student. Three batches have already left.

For most of Gadchiroli district, the houses are made of wood

carrying a district's expectations with them.

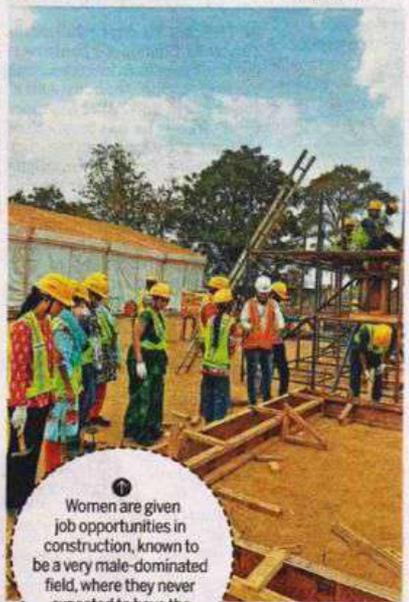
On site, 104 women are currently training to operate heavy moving vehicles. Seven already do. One of them is Pratibha Madavi, 36, a mining truck driver. "I like driving. My husband works here too. It pays well and it's fun. I never thought I could do this as a woman," she says, smiling shyly. At Surjagarh, progress is slow and steady like a loaded truck driven by someone who once never imagined she'd be behind any wheel.

## A history lesson on Gadchiroli

- The district is currently a part of the Red Corridor, in the eastern, central and southern parts of India where the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency has the worst and the strongest presence.
- The local languages spoken here are Gondi and Madia apart from Marathi.
- Despite being a dry district, local alcohol or the local Mahua is a central part of cultural celebrations in the district, especially in the interior villages.



Bus for employees



Women are given job opportunities in construction, known to be a very male-dominated field, where they never expected to have the chance to work



Surjagarh has become the mining centre for iron ore, following which thousands of residents have received employment

## What went wrong?

Till five years ago, when Maoism was rampant in the district, Gadchiroli's people did not take up guns for the sake of it. Apart from lack of employment, the district was riddled with poverty. Villagers had no idea about the concept of money nor the Internet. Food came from backyard farming, which was never fully nutritious or filling. No masalas were used either. The backwardness here was a result of being invisible to the system. It's the complete sense of abandonment and desperation for decades which had pushed Gadchiroli into the pits of violence.