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"I grew up in a family with more than 20 people. Even as a child, I would cook for all of them, as the others would go to work in the fields. I couldn't go to school or learn to read and write.

"When I was just 14, I got married, and had my first child at 17. My new family was much the same. My husband worked as a bonded labourer with a landlord in the village. As payment, he got only food, but no money. I would cook at home, go to work at the landlord's, and come back home after a long day of labour, bodies aching. Two or three times a week I would walk 3 km uphill to fetch firewood for cooking. On such days, all I'd have to eat was fruits and berries gathered on the way. I would eat my first meal of the day as late as 4 pm!



"Once, while going to fetch firewood, a snake bit me and I fell unconscious. Had it not been for a kind stranger who got me medical treatment, I wouldn't be alive today.

"One day, when my younger son had gone to gather firewood, he contracted meningitis. We couldn't afford proper treatment, so he died soon after. Why did I allow him to go gather firewood? This question haunts me even today.

“We were so poor that I couldn’t send my older son to school. The back-breaking work I had done since childhood started to affect my health. My back was bent double and I went about my chores in constant pain. I couldn’t take it any more.



“I knew that the landlord at whose home we worked had ‘gas’ and that they could finish their cooking in no time. I wasn’t allowed into the kitchen, so it took me a while to figure out what exactly they were using. When I found out they had Biogas, which could be generated from *gobar*, I was excited. It was healthy, safe and much easier to cook on!

“I wanted Biogas too, and I wanted it desperately. I knew the Coolie Sangha would help me get Biogas. But it was only active in the part of the village where upper castes lived. I was determined to find a way. I approached the Coolie Sangha and finally, the Biogas project came to my part of the village. I sold my goat to hire people who would dig the pit, since my back couldn’t take the hard labour. But every step was fraught with problems. My only remaining son picked up a quarrel, claiming for his own the piece of land on which the pit had been dug. He moved away to his own home, just when he was about to start earning. Getting Biogas has come at a price.

“Today, I comfortably sit on a chair to do my cooking. The cloud of firewood smoke that hung over our lives has lifted!

“My husband and I are a part of the School Betterment Committee of the Coolie Sangha. I have raised mango and cashew plantations. I earned Rs 20,000 as Carbon Revenue from GS VERs, for



raising these plantations. I used the money to buy one more cow, and we now have two cows. I’m determined to be financially independent. I run my own business in processing and selling cashews and mangoes. I also convert the milk from our cows into ghee and sell that.

“My husband works for the Coolie Sangha now. I feel like a bona fide citizen now, being involved in work that helps the whole community, and using ways of cooking that are not harmful.”