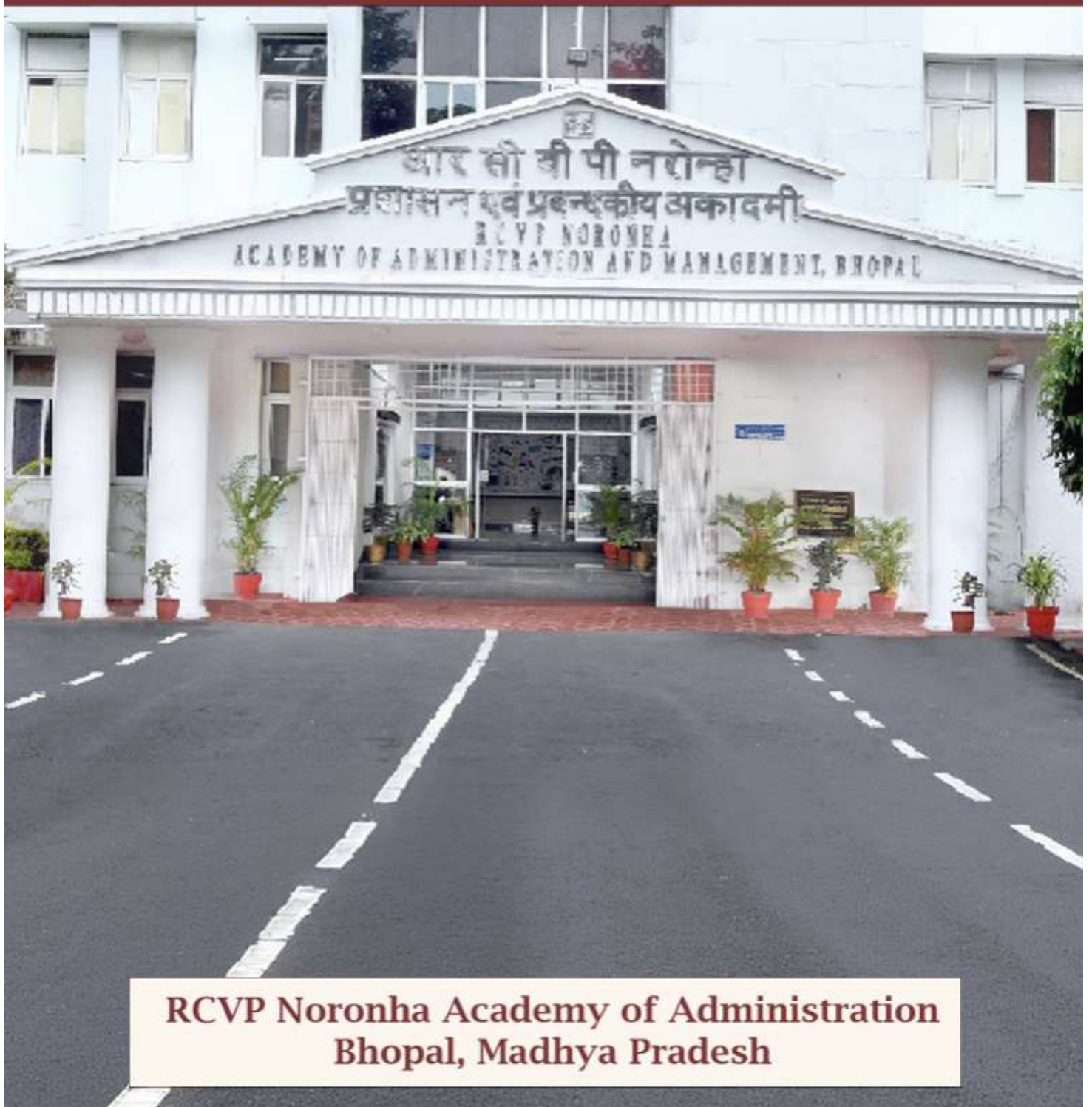




Academy Vimarsh

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Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh**

When Women Step Forward: Kala Bai's Journey into Leadership

G. Jayanthi



Ms G. Jayanthi, Director and one of the founding members of Action for Social Advancement (ASA), has over three decades of experience in development work, with a strong focus on human resource management and development communication. An alumna of IIFM, Bhopal, she has played a key role in promoting smallholder livelihoods through natural resource management, advancing sustainable agriculture and strengthening smallholder organisations for agribusiness.



Name: Mrs Kala Bai

Position: Board Director, Barwani Farmer Producer Company Limited

Location: Bajjata Village, Rajpur Block, Barwani District, Madhya Pradesh



Abstract

This case study traces the journey of Kala Bai, a 50-year-old farmer from Bajjata village in Barwani district, Madhya Pradesh, and shows how steady, well-designed support can open pathways to women's leadership in agriculture. Raised in a rain-fed farming household, Kala Bai spent years coping with uncertain harvests, low incomes and eventual distress migration due to the lack of irrigation. Her return to farming in 2012 marked a shift from survival to rebuilding, beginning with her participation



in a Self-Help Group and support from Action for Social Advancement to construct a dug well on her farm. Assured irrigation and technical guidance enabled her transition to organic farming, gradually improving soil health, lowering input costs and securing better prices. As her confidence and credibility grew, Kala Bai joined the Barwani Farmer Producer Company Limited, where she progressed from shareholder to Board Director and now manages an aggregation centre serving several villages. Beyond income gains, her story highlights how access to productive assets, farmer collectives and sustained mentoring can transform women's roles from participants to decision-makers within farmer institutions.

Kala Bai is 50 years old today, a woman whose journey reflects the change that becomes possible when determination meets opportunity. She is a Board Director of the Barwani Farmer Producer Company Limited (BFPCL), manages agricultural operations across four villages, and is regularly approached by farmers from the region for advice. Her story, however, did not begin with leadership or recognition. It began with struggle and a difficult choice that would eventually change everything.

The Difficult Years

Kala Bai was born in 1974 into a farming family in Barwani district. Like most families in rural Madhya Pradesh, her household depended entirely on agriculture. Agriculture, in turn, depended on the monsoon. There was no irrigation, no backup plan, and no safety net. When the rains failed, everything failed. "My childhood was about watching my parents worry," she remembers. "Every year, it was the same question. Will it rain enough? Will we have enough?"

As she grew older and started her own family, those same worries became hers. The 2-acre plot her family owned could not support them reliably. Yields were unpredictable, and some years the harvest barely met household needs. The absence of water infrastructure meant the family lived at the mercy of rainfall patterns that were becoming increasingly uncertain.

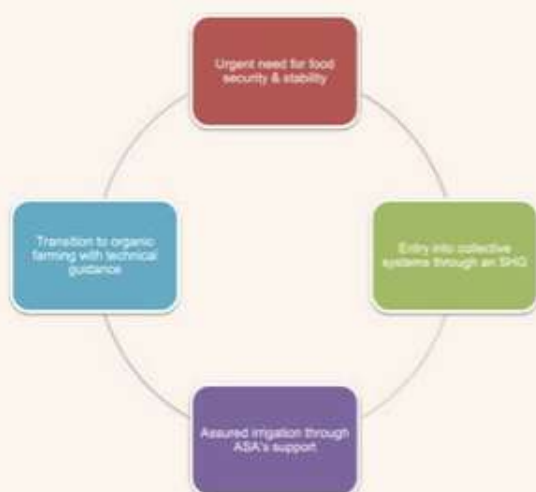
As economic pressure mounted, Kala Bai and her husband decided to migrate to Indore, the nearest major city, in search of work. The city appeared to promise regular employment and a steady income. "We

thought city life would be easier,” she recalls. “We thought there would be work for people who were willing to work hard.”

The reality was far harsher. Without formal education or specialised skills, both Kala Bai and her husband depended on daily wage labour, earning roughly ₹120 to ₹150 per person per day, and only on days when work was available. Employment was irregular. Some weeks offered 10 or 12 days of work, while others brought far fewer. Even when both found work, the couple’s combined monthly earnings rarely crossed ₹6,000 to ₹8,000, an amount that barely covered food, rent, and basic expenses in the city. The stability they had hoped for never came. She says, “In the village, at least we had our home and our people. In the city, we had nothing secure.”

By 2012, Kala Bai made the difficult decision to return to Bajjata and try to make farming work again. Many advised against it, warning that the village had already failed them once. “People told us we were making a mistake,” she remembers. “But I felt that this was where we belonged. We had to try.”

The Difficult Years



When Kala Bai returned to her village, her goals were simple but urgent. She wanted food security for her family, a measure of economic stability, and freedom from the constant anxiety of survival. “I wanted to stop worrying about tomorrow,” she explains. “I wanted my children to study without wondering whether we would have food next week.”

Soon after returning, she joined a Self-Help Group. For Kala Bai, this marked her first step towards collective action and financial literacy. “When I joined the SHG, I did not understand accounts or proper money management,” she admits. “But I watched, I asked questions, and I practised.”

Her ability to learn quickly stood out. Within months, she became someone other members turned to for guidance. The experience strengthened her confidence and gave her the assurance that she could manage

responsibilities beyond her household. Recognising her potential, Action for Social Advancement (ASA) supported Kala Bai in constructing a dug well on her 2-acre farm. This single intervention transformed her relationship with agriculture. “That dug well changed everything,” she says. “Before that, we planted crops and prayed for rain. If it came, the season survived. If it did not, the entire year was lost.”

With assured irrigation, farming became more predictable. She could plan her crops and manage risks in ways that were not possible earlier. Around the same time, with ASA’s technical support, Kala Bai shifted from conventional to organic farming. The transition was not easy. Initial yields were lower, and the learning process was demanding. “The first year was difficult,” she admits. “I wondered if I had made a mistake.”

By the second year, however, the soil showed visible improvement. Crops became stronger, and input costs reduced. When she sold her organic cotton, she received nearly 30% higher prices compared to conventional cotton. These outcomes strengthened her confidence and gave her the credibility to speak to other farmers about organic farming from lived experience.

Stepping into Leadership



With agricultural stability came opportunities for broader engagement. When the BFPCL was formed, Kala Bai joined as a shareholder. She believed strongly in the idea of farmers coming together to reduce dependence on traders and middlemen. “After what ASA did for me, I trusted the idea of the

FPC,” she recalls. “For the first time, farmers could have an organisation that worked for them.”

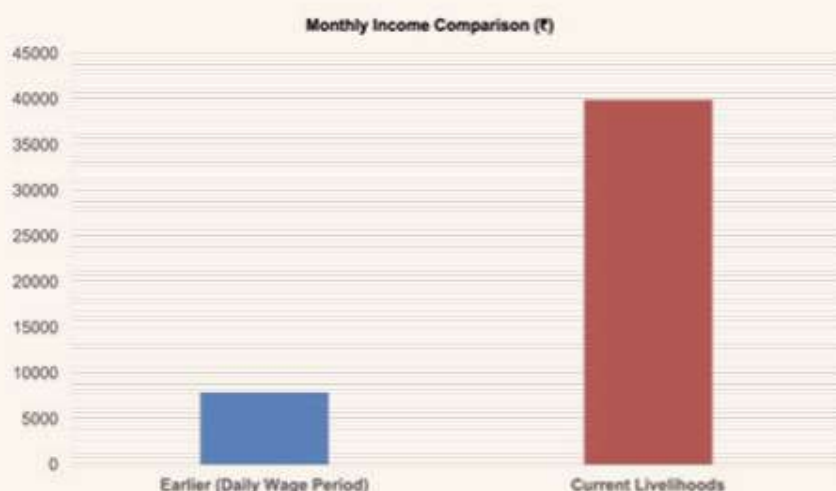
Within a year, her understanding of farmer issues, clarity of communication, and commitment to collective growth led to her appointment as a Board Director. As a Board member, she travelled to villages, encouraged farmers to join the FPC, and explained the benefits of collective marketing in practical terms.

A Woman of Many Roles

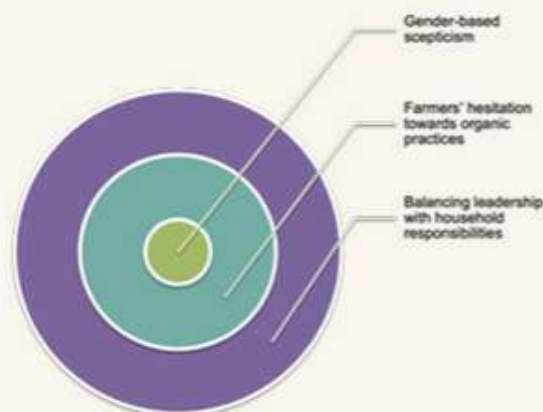
Today, Kala Bai's work reaches far beyond her own farm. She is the in-charge of an aggregation centre serving four villages in Madhya Pradesh: Sangaoun, Mandil, Narwala, and Atrsambha. During the 2023-24 season, the centre aggregated 3,667 quintals of cotton and generated earnings of ₹1,32,184 over a three-month period, a responsibility that requires coordination with farmers, careful handling of produce, and consistent accountability.

Alongside this role, Kala Bai operates a Public Distribution System shop with the support of her younger son, ensuring that BPL families in her area receive essential food supplies on time. She and her husband have also established a small dairy business, through which they sell milk and earn roughly ₹10,000 per month. From a time when the family's monthly income barely reached ₹8,000, their combined earnings have now increased nearly fivefold and stand at around ₹40,000 per month.

As her responsibilities have expanded, so has Kala Bai's confidence. A woman who once hesitated to speak in front of strangers now addresses farmers and community members in meetings and engages comfortably with representatives from national and international organisations at public events. For Kala Bai, this personal shift holds deeper meaning than the economic progress she has made. She often reflects that no amount of money or material support can replace the confidence a woman gains when she recognises her own strength, and that this inner change is where women's empowerment truly begins.



Navigating Challenges



Kala Bai's journey was not without resistance. Gender-based scepticism was a persistent challenge in a sector where leadership roles were traditionally held by men. She chose not to confront doubt directly. Instead, she focused on preparation, transparency, and results. Over time, her work earned acceptance.

Convincing farmers to adopt organic practices was another challenge. Many feared the risks involved during the transition period. Kala Bai addressed this by leading through example and openly discussing both the difficulties and the benefits.

Balancing household responsibilities with expanding professional roles required constant adjustment. While her family supported her, much of the domestic work remained hers. Careful time management became essential.

The Road Ahead

At 50, Kala Bai is not slowing down. She plans to expand aggregation activities carefully while maintaining quality and trust. She wants to strengthen organic cotton supply chains and mentor more women into leadership roles within farmer institutions.

She is also concerned about young people leaving agriculture. "Many think farming has no future," she says. "But with irrigation, organic practices, and collective systems, farming can provide dignity and stability."

Reflecting on her journey, Kala Bai offers a simple message to other women: "Do not think you cannot do this because you are a woman. Doubts will come, from others and from yourself. But if you keep working and keep learning, change will follow."

Women's empowerment; Farmer Producer Organisations; Rural livelihoods; Organic agriculture;

Natural resource management; Gender and agriculture; Institutional participation



About Action for Social Advancement

Founded in 1996, Action for Social Advancement (ASA) promotes farm-based livelihoods for smallholder farmers through its Livelihood Enhancement Model, which harmonises People, Nature and Economy. With a presence across 8 states and a team of over 350 professionals, ASA is committed to driving sustainable agricultural innovation and supporting marginalised farming communities.