

# HOLY FOOD UPGRADING LIVELIHOODS



**PRASADAM INITIATIVE**



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Improving livelihood of the marginal people of Uttarakhand has been the goal of Uttarakhand Gram Vikas Samiti (UGVS). One such challenging activity knocked on the door of UGVS was preparation of Prasadam (Holy Food) for the popular shrine of Kedarnath. Systematic planning and implementation led the Prasadam programme to be one its most successful initiatives. It is a women oriented programme having a potential to scale up on an exponential level. The impressive outcome of the programme was 844 women were able to make 42731 Prasadam packets creating a turnover of Rs. 16,26,040 for their Livelihood Collectives (LC) within two months working part time.



**Prasadam Ringaal Bag**

An abode of around 625 shrines, Uttarakhand is visited by large number of pilgrims annually, especially during the Char Dham season. Millions of pilgrims visit the Char Dham - Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamnotri. Now with helicopter facilities the pilgrim numbers have risen even more in consecutive years. The numbers will further swell subsequent to the construction of all weather roads and is expected to touch 67 million by 2026.

Prasadam, a holy food offering of traditional value is treasured to be offered by all devotees in the temples. Small amount of Prasadam is consumed by the devotees in the temple premises itself and the remaining is taken back home as a sign of good luck for self and for distribution among friends and relatives. This illustrates the huge demand for Prasadam which is a hidden industry of millions of rupees, especially for Uttarakhand which is globally popular for its Char Dham and numerous other shrines. A popular saying in Uttarakhand says "water and youth of the mountains could never be of any use to the mountains," similarly the benefits accrued from Prasadam sales were not of any use for its people.

UGVS supported by International Fund for Agriculture Development and Government of Uttarakhand was approached by district administration of Rudraprayag in March 2018 to prepare a traditional Prasadam product on a short notice. The time of the year coincided with farming work in the hills for UGVS federation members. UGVS took up the challenge in a systematic way trained it's federation members and were able to make 3,41,848 pieces of Prasadam from Uttarakhand's traditional recipe.



**LC Members Packing Prasadam Packets**

Anita Devi, the president of Udacha Doongi Livelihood Collective mentioned a feeling of disconnection towards Char dham yatra prior to the Prasadam initiative, now the spiritual tourism has added new meaning and purpose to her understanding. She is a master trainer for making traditional Prasadam and is filled with pride that her product travels across India, supplementing Rs. 5000-6000 to her family income based at her home. This is a considerable support to someone with no income, a mother of two and whose husband is involved in a miss timed job of a driver, earns the same amount with great difficulty.

Every year around two millions pilgrims flock to Uttarkhand just to visit the Char Dham shrines and millions other visits the holy city of Haridwar and Rishikesh. Leisure tourists adding to the numbers often end up visiting the local shrines taking up the counting to 225 lakhs (2015). The promise of this project lies in the possibility to earn livelihood by local people participating in preparing holy Prasadam at this magnitude, making it one of the biggest livelihood project in the world of this nature.

**Historical Perspective** Historically pilgrims across India from ancient times used to travel to the Himalayan shrines after getting their families to conduct their last rites, the possibility of return from such a tough voyage was minuscule. There was no culture of taking any temple offering 'Prasadam' back from the Char Dham shrines, this was unfounded in comparison to the shrines of non-Himalayan regions.

Few decades back very few pilgrims used to reach Char dham shrines because of limited traveling resources, lack of infrastructure and limited motor vehicle services. Uttarakhand's culture was indigenous, local people used to offer free food and residence to pilgrims, and sometimes offered them valedictory money offering called "Dakshina". The Dakshina was offered to seek blessings from the pilgrims who were going to pray at the holy shrines and get consecration.

Agriculture was prominent, migration was negligible. With the advancement of technology and infrastructure development like roads, advancement in motor vehicles, the spiritual tourism rose exponentially and it's meaning for the inhabitants of Uttarakhand have changed dramatically. Not many of the their elders in the past had fathomed that it would become a major source of income in the future. Tourism contributes 40% to the total revenue of Uttarakhand government.

It is hard to investigate what historically has been offered and prescribed in the scriptures as Prasadam but whatever had been offered was symbolic. In the past decade it is noted just one piece of Mishri (crystal sugar) was offered as Prasadam during darshanam (view) at Badrinath's sanctum sanctorum, slowly traders from plain started getting variants of Mishri with Cardamom as it can be procured for much less rate and is sold for higher profits.

The participation of other inhabitants in the tourism activities such as travel and hotel industry

owners are from the higher income group and seldom not from Uttarakhand. The inhabitants from the lower income group who are able to participate in tourism activities have to migrate from their village to participate in doing low income petty jobs which are seasonal in nature. Prasadam project gave a chance to the lower income group inhabitants to get involved in a pious activity from their home itself, instilling sense of pride and confidence in them.

**Prasadam Equation** In the past numerous efforts of the government for livelihood generation has gone in vain due to absence of a very direct case of demand and supply like the Prasadam Initiative. Understanding the huge amount of Prasadam consumption to enhance the livelihood activities of the local people and improve their socio-economic status, the erstwhile and the present Chief Minister of Uttarakhand proposed that the Prasadam should be made of local products by local people.



Cholai or Amaranthus is a local rain fed grain which grows in ample amount in these hilly areas. It has high nutritional value being rich source of protein. Traditionally these grains are roasted and popped then mixed with Jaggery to make a sweet called Cholai laddu having high shelf life. Amaranth can be stored easily. the production can be high enough to cater to the demand of entire pilgrim tourists visiting Uttarakhand.



**Cholai (Amaranth) Plant**

**Women Centric Enterprise** Women of Uttarakhand are known to be its backbone, their role was instrumental in the struggle to form the new state. They contribute substantially in farming, raising livestock, bringing fodder, fetching drinking water and managing the household work. They carry the burden of family and work on their shoulders. Rural Uttarakhand's figures estimates women's contribution of upto 90% in agriculture and animal care. The participation rate of women in the economy of the state is much higher than several states and spike's way above the national average. The state statistics shows that the average household income in hilly regions is just 5000 per month which makes it difficult to sustain even the bare minimum.



**Women Group making Prasadam of Cholai**

The district administration of Rudraprayag introduced Cholai Laddu as Prasadam in Kedarnath Dham and launched a pilot in the year 2018, this promoted local produce for livelihood enhancement of rural women. The pilgrims were offered Prasadam which would be made

locally by women SHGs. It was estimated that women SHGs would earn around Rs 80 crores if the Prasadam is sold at a reasonable rate of Rs 100 per packet with this the Prasadam initiative.

The Intervention This pilot intervention was implemented in Kedarnath temple in the year 2018 with the hope to emulate the same across all 625 pilgrimages with the help of women SHGs. UGVS has been working in the area on Livelihood enhancement activities with the government, it was selected by the District administration to carry out the pilot with the assurance to provide all possible help such as ensuring space to sell, proper training to all participants as well as use of local farm ingredients.

Earlier the vendors or Mandir Samitis (temple committees) sell Prasadam in Mandir premises. Prasadam was mainly made of Cardamom and Sugar locally called Elaichi Dana. It was sold at Rs 51 with some flowers and bhasm (holy ash), whose procurement cost is just Rs 10. In the year 2018 Kedarnath alone hosted more than seven lakhs foot falls. Spiritual tourism is on a rise on yearly basis. Economics of Prasadam is quite remunerative considering a packet of Laddu is sold for Rs 100 for instance, it would amount to Rs 7 crore on an average only from Kedarnath.



**Pilgrims at Kedarnath Temple in the year 2018**

**Teething Troubles** Looking at the successful track record of UGVS, the district administration was favoring UGVS to carry out the entire pilot project but it faced pressure from other prominent stakeholder's organisations, especially the Badri Kedar Mandir Parishad. The Elaichi dana Prasadam had been sold by vendors for past many years, the new intervention was treated like a threat to their business. The entire Vyapar Parishad was not in support of the new scheme.

The prevailing trend carried huge profit margins, they were not supportive to introduce locally made Cholai laddu, this would also cut down the profits earned. Elachai dana normally sold as Prasadam would cost Rs 10 as compared to the selling amount of Rs 51 straightaway making a profit of Rs 40 per Prasadam packet sold.

Another challenge given to the UGVS by the Badri Kedar Mandir Parishad, it decided by the that the Cholai Laddu Prasadam would sold in a handmade bag or Ringaal (Bamboo variety) Tokri with bhasm, Panjiri, Honey, Dhoop, Belpatra, Holy Kund Jal, flower and small Kedarnath

God symbol. The handmade bag was made of jute, silk or paper. It was priced at Rs 400/ bag. The breakup of costing is as mentioned below, this created a wide gap of Rs 350 in two types of Prasadam sold in the temple premises.

**Overcoming the Conflict** The district administration being demotivated by prevailing vendors that if only Cholai laddu would be sold made by women groups they would not be able to meet the demands of pilgrims which may lead to stampede or chaos. It was decided along with Cholai laddu, prevailing Elaichi dana was also sold as Prasadam. This led to a wide price disparity for the buyer. The Elachi dana was sold at Rs 51 whereas the Cholai laddu packet was sold for Rs 400. Naturally any pilgrims will prefer buying cheaper packets.

UGVS systematically took up the challenge and responsibility and started sensitizing it women federations and SHGs, in January 2018, UGVS started imparting training to make good quality hygienic laddu to its women members. By March 2018, UGVS gave training to 231 women in Augustmuni and Jakholi Block.

Change is always difficult to be accepted by the people who are directly involved in a profitable enterprise. In spite of such price disparity the new Prasadam was well received and relished by the pilgrims, after all they had something new and interesting to offer back home, UGVS for the next year is gearing up to move forward with a competitively priced product with extensive planning.

**Winning Runs** Amidst the peak of farming season 844 women spared one to two hours daily for about two months in April and May 2018. They were able to make 42731 packets each having 8 laddu creating a turnover of Rs 16,26,040 for their Livelihood Collectives (LC).



**Prasadam Bag being sold at Kedarnath Temple**

Cholai the main ingredients of the Prasadam was obtained from LC's members. Women had surplus income by selling the Amaranth seeds for the preparation of Prasadam. A total of 9500 kg of raw Amaranth was procured from 767 LCs at the rate of Rs 40 per kg, costing Rs 3,95,000 which was borrowed from the federation corpus and later reimbursed.

Incense sticks worth Rs 3,26,316 made by 55 women in 27193 Prasadam packets, creating an average income of Rs 5935 for each women.



### **Women Groups making Incense**

During auspicious nine days of Goddess worship in October this year at the famous Ma Surkunda shrine, 22 women of Chamba for the first time made Cholai laddu as the offering to the temple. Local vendors and the temple committee was taken into confidence, they offered support to the women and bought the Prasadam for Rs 35-40 and sold the packet of 5 laddu for Rs 51 per packet.

**The Verdict** It is for the Government to decide on what basis historical, economical or social, upscaling of the Prasadam initiative has to be conducted in the coming times. Does people in the marginal income groups whose ancestors have played a vital role in keeping the Char

Dham yatra alive in the difficult times of the past should be slowly move towards exclusion or made to play an indirect and active role in one of the most vital activities for the state. The Prasadam Elaichi dana may offer price benefits and profit to some few vendors but the Cholai laddu stands out as a healthy food of traditional significance that bears true essence and energy of Uttarakhand.

## Recommendations

Interface between the shrines and Prasadam marketing initiative should be strengthened on a periodic basis. Government should take steps to ensure that a single window agency is created which ensures availability of Prasadam in all 625 shrines of Uttarakhand.

Single window agency of the government should also be responsible to ensure the Prasadam product is of superior quality.

Single window agency should also develop products like Til ka laddu (sesame seed), Hemp seed laddu, Mandwa ka laddu which are healthy and off seasonal variant of Cholai ka laddu.

Positioning of the Laddu as a tea time snack and a gift item should be available round the year at Hilans outlet.

The success of Prasadam initiative has added wings to the home based industry. Slowly the women can be trained to prepare snacks, namkeens, sweets and indigenous variety of snacks to be marketed through Hilans.



**Cholai Laddu Prasad in Hilans Packing**



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