Women raise their arms in celebration.

Missionary Sister of the Queen of Apostles Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel celebrates India's Independence Day with members of her women's group in Uttar Pradesh in northern India. (Courtesy of Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel)



by Thomas Scaria

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For more than 40 years, Missionary Sister of the Queen of Apostles Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel has worked among mostly women farmers in the northern Indian dioceses of Gorakhpur, Varanasi and Lucknow.

The 68-year-old lawyer, who has a doctorate in social sciences, is credited with initiating a farming company in September 2023, owned and governed by rural women. It also promotes organic agriculture products and markets them.

She was in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru on Nov. 29, 2024, to receive a lifetime achievement award, a national recognition, for promoting eco-friendly organic farming among women. The Eco-friendly Skill Development Award for

Sustainable Livelihood was set up by the Functional Vocational Training and Research Society.

Vettikuzhakunnel spoke to Global Sisters Report in Bengaluru after receiving the award.

Sister with award

Missionary Sister of the Queen of Apostles Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel receives a lifetime achievement award for promoting eco-friendly organic farming among women. The award was organized by the Functional Vocational Training and Research Center. (Thomas Scaria)

***GSR*: Congratulations on winning the national award. What are your thoughts?**

Vettikuzhakunnel: I feel really happy and excited about this recognition as I believe it was an award for the rural women in northern India who have proved their credibility as successful farmers in a male-dominated community. It was a proud moment for our organization, and we salute our people for their enduring outstanding performances. I dedicate this award to them.

Why did you choose farming as your mission field?

I was born the sixth among 11 children in a family of farmers in Palai, [Kerala state in southwestern India], and grew up observing and working on our farms. We produced sufficient food for the family and sold the surplus in the local market. I developed a passion for agriculture as a child, which helped shape my vocation to religious life. To serve the farmer is my mission.

I wanted to serve the poor outside my village. So, I joined the congregation of the Queen of Apostles [based at Varanasi in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh]. Our congregation allows its members to develop their ministries according to their inner calling. Since I wanted to serve the poor, my superior sent me to study social work in Chennai at Stella Maris College [southern India]. After the course, I worked among rural women, initially in the Diocese of Gorakhpur as the assistant director of the Diocesan Social Service Center. Later, I moved to Lucknow [Uttar Pradesh capital] and founded the Jeevandeep Charitable Trust as an independent organization.



A woman in Uttar Pradesh, a northern Indian state, works in her vegetable garden promoted by Sr. Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel. (Courtesy of Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel)

How significant is agriculture in India, and what are its challenges?

Agriculture is the most significant primary sector that provides livelihood to millions and food security to the country. In the region where I work, [most] families own less than half an acre of land. They usually work as laborers in large farms owned by the rich. Most farms cultivate seasonal crops that leave the agricultural laborers jobless in off-seasons. Problems in the agriculture sector and low wages force many young people to migrate to other places. Farmers abandoning farming leads to food insecurity, climate change and other problems.

In addition, small and marginal farmers face higher costs of production compared to rich farmers who have better input management, technology transfer, credit support, marketing and risk mitigation steps, including diversification of agriculture.

What motivated you to organize women in the farming sector?

Women do most agriculture work —production, processing, preservation and marketing. Yet, their role is not recognized adequately. Often, their role is limited to working for the rich for a pittance. The farming sector is usually the monopoly of big farmers, mostly men.

Women working in the agriculture sector [receive] low wages, [do not own] land, and [have] less access to information and [the] market. Marginal farmers need more skills and financial support. As they are scattered, these farmers also require a platform to get [the] maximum price for their produce.

So, I thought about promoting collective farming among women to produce organic vegetables, rice, wheat, sugar cane and a variety of fruit plants. We also have to do marketing without the middleman.

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Was it easy to win the women's confidence? How did you make the entry?

It was not easy to win their confidence initially. I used to travel by bicycle to [the] remote villages of Gorakhpur and the temple town of Varanasi to meet women in their homes. I spent time with them, listening to their stories, appreciating their achievements and empathizing with their difficult situations.

When I started working with women four decades ago, communal sentiments were absent among them. However, they were restricted by the caste divisions and the patriarchal system. I convinced them that I had come to learn from them and not to teach them anything. I also told them that I did not have answers to their questions but suggested that by coming together, we could perhaps find some answers. This was the beginning of our collective thinking, and they liked it. Slowly, they started coming out of their houses and meeting with other women, laying the foundation for our mission among them.

How did you make them self-sustainable?

From the beginning, our strategy has been to promote women's empowerment and sustainability. The patriarchal system restricted the individual. But collectively, they felt liberated. Our focus was to form women's self-help groups that do collective farming or similar projects. The self-help groups helped them get government loans. When we registered the first "women farmers company" in the region to give it a legal status, the company's motto was, "Towards an all-inclusive society."

The company provided the women farmers greater visibility and increased credibility. They could assert their place in society. The company was the role model when our congregation organized a workshop in July. We have adopted it as a benchmark for our social ministry.

Women distribute clothes

Missionary Sisters of the Queen of Apostles Sr. Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel and her colleague distribute warm clothes to disabled people in a village in Uttar Pradesh, northern India. (Courtesy of Ajita Mathew Vettikuzhakunnel)

How did you make the company eco-friendly and aligned with sustainable development goals?

The formation of the company helped the women [with] various projects and government support. They could buy quality seeds, fertilizers, machinery, water and pesticides. Promoting organic farming among rural women helped improve the region’s food security, environmental conservation and health benefits. The company has [also] developed organic fertilizers.

The model of women owning and managing a company aligned with the development goals of the nation and the world.

How does this company function as an independent body?

The company was registered on Sept. 29, 2023, as Khushyali [Happiness] Women Farmers Producer Company Limited, a 10-member governing body with five directors and five promoters. Nearly 1,000 members of the self-help groups are attached to the company. The company is managed only by village women. Neither I nor our staff are its members. This is the ultimate model for self-sustainability.

Why only women?

Women and children are the ultimate victims of food insecurity and economic backwardness. Therefore, any positive change among them requires bridging the gender gap in the farming sector and giving women economic freedom. Please note that I have not avoided men as they are equal partakers in the developmental sector. But as a policy, we promote more women entrepreneurship and leadership.

You work in the predominantly Hindu state of Uttar Pradesh. Have you faced any problems because of your religious identity?

Nothing so far. We are involved in the rural development of the state. Everything we do is transparent. Almost everyone in our village groups is Hindu. Their families know what we do. Even the government officers we interact with have been supportive. They know we are Christians, and what we do is understood as Christian service to society. Until 2000, we were in our traditional habit. After that, we adopted a sari as our dress for [the] village ministry.

Did you celebrate Christmas with your people?

All our beneficiaries are Hindu women, so we did not have any celebrations with them. But we decorated our center with stars and a crib that attracted many villagers. We also celebrated Christmas by distributing blankets, clothes and other materials to the disabled and the poorest in the region as severe winter swept northern India.