In Jharkhand, kadhai's keep anaemia at bay

Activists come up with simple low-cost solution of cooking in iron vessels to improve health of tribal women

Ketaki.Desai@timesgroup.com

Around 85% of women in Jharkhand’s Torpa block, about 70km from capital Ranchi, suffer from anaemia. This means profuse bleeding during periods, fatigue and various kinds of aches and pains. Till health activists working in this tribal area hit upon a simple idea — persuade the women to revive a tradition from their grandmothers’ time — cooking in iron kadhai.

In just six months since NGO Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) along with Public Health Resource Network introduced the idea, 2,000 families have purchased iron woks that cost a few hundred rupees and is known to increase haemoglobin levels.

Prem Shankar, who leads the initiative, says, “When we interviewed the women in the area, they would tell us about all these ailments. So, we introduced iron utensils, combined with leafy vegetables and citric acid,” he says. Citric acid helps hasten the absorption of iron, helping their anaemia.

Women’s self-help groups have been instrumental in spreading the word. Bishwasi Topno, who is a designated ‘swasth badlaav didi’, says it has helped her with body ache and fatigue. “Now, my body ache has got better, my knees don’t give me as much trouble, and my menstrual problems have also improved.”

Shankar adds that women were sceptical earlier about it being a waste of money but have reported comparative improvements ever since. “Women claim they have less gastric issues. Some who have become mothers for the second time after the switch say they’re feeling much better.”

The NGO now wants to expand it to other blocks in the Khunti district with the support of the district administration. “We were looking for low-cost interventions that take into account the culture of the people of Khunti. Working with PRADAN, we have also introduced mushroom farming to tackle malnutrition because of their high protein content,” says the deputy commissioner of Khunti, Suraj Kumar.

In the last few years, iron cookware has been making a comeback in cities too. Meera Ramachandran is one of the founders of Zishta, a range of cookware made of traditional materials, including Ekanta copper, neem wood, clay and, of course, iron. Their iron cookware is made in a village near Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu, where iron products have been produced for over 300 years. “From our own experiments, we’ve seen that iron utensils take 15% less time to cook than modern alternatives,” Ramachandran says.
While citric acid may be helpful for those with anaemia, cooking something with citrus in an iron wok could lead to too much iron being leached, she warns. Also food cooked in iron vessels has to be emptied out as it turns black.

Kayalvizhi Sriram, who runs Essential Traditions by Kayal, an online and Chennai-based store that sells traditional utensils and artefacts, says she has seen people become more open to using iron cookware. “Lot of people want to know about it, and understand how to use it, like their grandmothers used to,” she says.

**IRON WOMEN:** The women of Jharkhand’s Torpa block have reported better health since switching to iron cookware