

Weaving a new life

Bright oranges, reds, blues and greens jump out at the visitor from the loom set up on the verandah of a mud house in Birganj, reflecting the happy face of *Shantona Mormu*, a Santal tribal weaver. Shantona is also a member of the local RDRS women's Group and, because of that, she emanates self-confidence and determination. Under RDRS' Tribal Empowerment Project, her life, like that of her friends and neighbours, has significantly changed in the last few years.

The tribal people in the RDRS working area have long been part of a poor and marginalised community, although it was these groups that brought sericulture skills with them when they arrived in large numbers after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. While everyone has a tough life, women like Shantona, with an idle husband and a large family to support, have had to struggle especially hard to ensure survival for themselves, their children, parents, even their siblings.



Shantona Mormu

For Shantona, with no education, few skills and fewer options to improve matters, the days were spent toiling – as a farm labourer, at the household chores, looking after her mother. After years of marriage, Shantona thought life could not get worse, but it did when her husband disappeared from the village forcing her to return to her parental home. There, with a worthless brother, she had to shoulder the burden of providing for her mother, brother, sister-in-law and the children.

Only when Shantona joined the local RDRS Group did things begin to look up. Through her membership, she learnt new skills and ways of earning money more easily, becoming a carpet weaver after attending an RDRS training course. "It is a relief not to have to work under the hot sun all day in the field," she says. "It takes less than a week to weave a carpet and what I earn is enough." Through RDRS, Shantona gained the confidence to market her products and use her new-found knowledge to become a paid expert on weaving, training women like herself in Pirganj.



Bodin Mormu

Another woman who changed career from a farm labourer to carpet weaver is *Bodin Mormu*, who finds it easier to look after her six-year old son and do the household chores now she can stay at home all day to work instead of going many kilometres in search of poorly-paid work. As Group Member, Bodin has also been able to borrow money from the RDRS credit programme, which she invested wisely, first in goats, then in a cow, and lastly in a tubewell to ensure the family has a steady supply of clean drinking water. The first two loans have been fully paid while the third is also being used to buy corrugated iron sheets to put a sturdy roof on her house, to replace the rotting thatch.

Because of their poverty and marginalised position in society, which restricted finding other funds, many families in the tribal villages had mortgaged their land to local money-lenders. One such was *Maloti Mardick*, who became a Group Member in 2002 and learnt dressmaking as her income-earning activity. Through access to the RDRS Land Redemption Scheme with its easy conditions, she was able to repay the money she had borrowed in the past and redeem her land. “Today,” she asserts proudly, “not only am I cultivating crops on my land, but I have leased more land using other loans from RDRS.”



Maloti Mardick

For Shantona, Bodin and Mardick, life is still hard, but not the never-ending daily grind controlled by avaricious money-lenders and land-owners; now their children go to school, the families eat well and live wisely, and, they have their land back, securely, in their own hands.



Weaving a new life