

Mission Navshakti: A Journey of Empowerment and Transformation for Rural Women

ICAR-National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources (NBFGR) has marked a significant milestone with the successful completion of one year, Mission Navshakti, a transformative initiative that has empowered around 425 women from the Scheduled Caste community, equipping them with skills in ornamental fish rearing, maintenance, and aquarium fabrication. This journey, aimed at strengthening women's empowerment through sustainable community entrepreneurship in ornamental aquaculture, has not only provided these women with an alternative source of income, but also opened doors to a future, where financial independence is within their grasp. Fifty-three rural women from the villages of Nunari Bahadurpur, Phanda, Pratapur, Baribasta, and Rudrapur, belonging to thirteen Self-Help Groups—Jaidurga, Lakshmi, Radhika, Mahi, Shakti, Richa, Mansi, Payal, Nidhi, Gangabai, Ananda, Vimal, and Maya—undertook a life-changing training program. Their journey began with an intensive training session on ornamental fish rearing and maintenance, followed by learning the intricate process of aquarium fabrication. The programme held during March 5 to 6, 2025, at KVK Kanpur Dehat in collaboration with Aquaworld and this was more than just training—it is an introduction to new learning. Many women had never ventured beyond household responsibilities, found themselves in a new world, where they could earn, create, and inspire.

The initiative, under the SCSP component of the ICAR-NBFGR, envisions bridging the gap between rural women and urban market demands in the ornamental fish sector. As part of their learning experience, the women travelled 150 km to Ganga Aquarium of the institute, where they marvelled at different fish species and absorbed the artistic nuances of aquarium decoration. The approach was simple yet effective—learning by seeing, an experience that deeply resonated with them. The excitement and curiosity in their eyes as they saw possibilities unfold before them were nothing short of inspiring. For many of these women, life had been a cycle of struggle, limited by the constraints of small land holdings that provided minimal productivity. In this milieu, the Mission Navshakti gave them a new avenue to explore. Already, fifty women have constructed backyard cemented ponds, transforming their courtyards into hubs of productivity. The shift is remarkable—where once there was only barren space, now thrive colourful ornamental fish, representing hope and economic empowerment. The training was not just about business, it was about rewriting their futures. Women who once had no alternative sources of income now see a pathway to self-sufficiency without leaving their homes. Families that once relied solely on agriculture, struggling to make ends meet with small land holdings, are now discovering new possibilities through backyard ornamental fish culture unit.

The beauty of this mission lies not just in financial gain, but in the ripple effect it has created. The trained women, armed with newfound confidence, are inspiring others in their communities to step forward, work together, and create job opportunities. The ornamental fish industry, long dominated by commercial players, now finds itself enriched by the hands of women, who were once on the periphery of economic participation. By keeping fish and rearing them with safe at their homes, they are not only ensuring additional income, but also reinforcing their roles as entrepreneurs within their communities. ICAR-NBFGR and Aquaworld have committed to handholding these women, providing them with a safety net by buy-back the fish they rear, ensuring they have a guaranteed market. As they diligently worked on fabricating aquarium (particularly, Nano / table top aquaria), the excitement was palpable. They received a complete package / input kit, including a fully equipped aquarium with a filter, air pump,

LED light, FRP cover, background poster, plants, air stone, aeration tube, feed, and live ornamental fish—everything they needed to start their entrepreneurial journey. But, beyond these materials, they received something far greater: the belief that they could shape their own destinies. Technology has played a pivotal role in keeping them connected. Further, a dedicated WhatsApp group was set up to provide continuous guidance and support, ensuring that they are never alone in this endeavour. This digital bridge has allowed them to seek help, share their progress, and celebrate their small victories together.

Among these success stories, two women from Unnao, Ms. Poonam and Ms. Sangeeta, stand as shining examples. Having undergone training in January 2025, they took the bold step of selling mini aquaria, proving that their skills could indeed translate into income. Their aspirations have now grown—they dream of opening a shop, supported by the SCSP programme of the ICAR-NBFGR. Their journey, from training participants to aspiring businesswomen, is a testament to what Mission Navshakti set out to achieve.

The initiative is scaling new heights with the establishment of Navshakti: Aquagri Business Incubation Centre (NABiC), a centralized facility designed to serve as a marketplace for mini aquaria, ornamental fishes, and handcrafted baked clay decorative materials created by the SHG women from Unnao, Barabanki, Sitapur, and Kanpur Dehat. This hub-and-spoke model will provide a stable foundation for their entrepreneurial ventures, ensuring that the women's efforts bear fruit on a much larger scale.

Guided by the leadership of Dr. T. T. Ajith Kumar, Director (A), ICAR-NBFGR, and conceptualized by Dr. Poonam Jayant Singh, Nodal Officer of the SCSP Project, the program was coordinated by Dr. L K Tyagi, Dr A K Pathak, Sh. Ravi Kumar and Dr. Arpita Batta of ICAR-NBFGR, with invaluable technical support from Sh. Indramani Raja. Dr. A K Singh and Dr. Nimisha Awasti, from KVK Kanpur provided support and facilitated the conduction of training programme. Dr. Suresh Chandra and team from Hitech Fisheries coordinated the programme at Dhankutti. This collaboration between ICAR-NBFGR, KVKs, and the women of these communities has created a new model of capacity building, one that has the potential to change countless lives.

The seeds of this transformation were first sown in Dhankutti village, Barabanki, where fifty women took the plunge into this new venture. Their success became the catalyst that inspired many more to join. The initiative soon expanded to Sitapur, Unnao, and Kanpur Dehat, with KVK Sitapur, KVK Unnao, and KVK Kanpur Dehat playing crucial roles. Even urban SHG women from Bangla Bazar and Valmikipuri were not left behind, receiving training in community entrepreneurship through ornamental fish rearing and aquarium fabrication. The reach of Mission Navshakti extended beyond Uttar Pradesh, touching lives in Veerpura village, Udaipur, Rajasthan. The excitement and enthusiasm among these women are contagious. Many of them, who had never imagined themselves as business owners, now eagerly anticipate setting up their own ventures with the basic aquarium setup provided to them. The transformation taking place is more than just economic—it is social, psychological, and deeply personal. Mission Navshakti is not merely a project; it is a revolution in the making. It is changing the way rural women perceive themselves and their potential. It is proving that with the right opportunities and support, women from the most marginalized backgrounds can rise to become business leaders in their own right. The empowerment of these women through skill development is not just altering individual lives but reshaping entire communities.

This movement is a testament to resilience, to the power of collaboration, and to the strength of women who refuse to be defined by limitations. Through ornamental fish rearing and aquarium fabrication, they are not just earning an income—they are rewriting their stories, one fish, one aquarium, and one bold step at a time. As this initiative moves into its next phase, it carries with it the aspirations of hundreds of women who now dare to dream. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern skills, Mission Navshakti is doing more than just creating livelihood opportunities—it is rewriting narratives, fostering resilience, and shaping a future where rural women no longer wait for opportunities but create them. This is not just a project; it is a movement, a promise, and a testament to the incredible power of women when given the right support and belief in their potential.



One year of Mission Navshakti at Village Dhankutti, Barabanki from 50 women reaching to 100 women microentrepreneurs



Creating Microentrepreneurs: Rural Women from Kanpur Dehat learning the art of aquarium Fabrication



Backyard pond construction for ornamental fishes



Rural Women from Kanpur Dehat Visiting ICAR NBFGR



Rural Women from Kanpur Dehat Visiting Ganga Aquarium of ICAR NBFGR



Backyard pond construction for ornamental fishes