



**Not greener on the other side... Mumbai's Sunita makes brooms that do not lift her out of poverty**

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Sunita Kuncikorwe, 58, has been making brooms for the past 5 decades, that is, her entire life. She sells these skillfully made brooms locally in Dharavi. Each broom fetches her Rs. 10, and she is able to make about Rs. 400 a day. Her husband too, helps her in this work. They both travel to the forests of Naigaon and Boisar districts near Mumbai to get the raw material. These forest rangers allow them to cut the branches of the dry trees with dry leaves. These trees often also have thorns which can prick the skin while sorting the branches.

These brooms are made from reed-like dried grass. Either they get the dried grass from the jungles themselves, or buy it from farmers in the nearby rural areas at the rate of Rs.25 per bundle. The process begins with clearing the grass bundles. The basic cleaning of rotten parts is followed by fine-combing or 'polishing' to remove any uneven layers. A special handmade tool is used for polishing. This tool is a piece of wood, mounted with approximately 25 nails with the pointed side upward, atop a

taut velcro. This is a custom order made specifically for this job by the local cobbler for Rs.150. After cleaning and polishing, the grass is cut with a heavy iron knife. After neatly laying one streak on top of the other, the base of the broom is tied individually with the use of an iron stick in the ground.

Broom-makers like Sunita mostly belong to a community called the Kunchikurwes. They originate mainly from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. Historically, they were the makers of 'Kunchi' or 'brushes made of grass', which were used for starching sarees. This traditional skill continues to live on among the members of this community, which is used for making brooms of different kinds. The Kunchikurwes are also referred to as Makadwale (The monkey-people) because they were also engaged in conducting street-shows with monkeys. Historically, they have been a marginalised group, devoid of rights or recognition.

Sunita has three sons who work as plumbers and daily-wage construction workers. She also has two daughters who did not go to school because of their financial situation. They also help her with the brooms. To make an order of 200 brooms, Sunita purchases 16 bundles from her small rented home, which has been taken on the 'heavy deposit' system. Then, to make the brooms they sit on the footpaths, as these cannot be made from a small space. On an order of 200 brooms, Sunita makes Rs. 6,000 (i.e. Rs. 30 per broom).

She says, "My husband once injured his leg with a broken glass. We had no money, so we did not see a doctor. That led the wound to fester, and now we are having to dish out heavy sums of money for his treatment." Sunita also remembers her struggle during the pandemic lockdown– they could not go to the forests in Boisar or Naigaon and as a result, broom making work came to a stop. They survived by selling vegetables and *vada paav* (Indian burger) during the partial lockdown. They did not take any loans. For a short period during Covid-19, they also worked as cleaners in a hospital from morning 11am to 8pm each day, which earned them a joint income of Rs. 12,000 per month. After the lockdown, Sunita continued to work in the hospital as a housekeeper for 4 more months. Gradually, she and her family resumed their livelihood of broom-making and are now fully back to their original work.