

## At 70, visually-impaired jumps in to help

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**MUMBAI:** The lockdown may have brought neighbours closer, but for Matunga residents Varsha Padia and Varsha Shah, the love extended a lot further. One hot day in May, in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown, they got down to work, kneading, rolling out, cooking and packing 60 theplas (flat breads) that would be delivered to the city's stranded migrants and daily-wage labourers. A few days later, they prepared 68 more.

This is no mean feat. Padia is 70 and has been visually impaired for half her life. But

she's refused to get left behind, says Shah, 49, who lives next door and has known her for two decades. "She knows what's happening in the world—news, films, events," Shah said. So it's no surprise that when Padia heard of a crowdsourced food relief initiative, both women jumped in to help. "We wanted to do something useful with our time," said Padia. "And making large batches of food is not difficult; most Gujarati homes have 5kg of flour at home at any given time."

They divided their tasks, with Shah taking over the cooking, and their first round went smoothly. "We were done in just over an hour," Padia said. With a

little encouragement from Padia's daughter, locked down in Juhu, a suburb of Mumbai further up north, the women repeated their contributions a few days later. The thepla-making was part of a massive city-wide drive organised by the non-profit Circle of Love and Care.

The volunteer-run non-profit work is involved in activities as varied as building hospitals and schools to offering elder-care assistance and vocational training to underprivileged women. During the lockdown, they also set up meal deliveries for front-line medical workers, government officials and policemen.

Volunteers set up an open platform on Google Forms, mobilising contributions from residents. Housing societies signed up en masse, cooking as many theplas as they could, for contactless pick-up and distribution. The thepla is particularly

well-suited to this kind of project. It's small, dry and nutritious. It travels well, can be stored for days, and tastes good. You can chomp down on the go, without cutlery, without fuss. It was the food of choice in 2017, when another Mumbai non-profit sent over 50,000 to flood-hit Gujarat. So it's no surprise that Circle of Love and Care's drive generated 25,000 theplas so start with. Across the 21-day project, 500 volunteers collected and passed on over 24 lakh home-cooked theplas, neatly packed into sets of four.

The theplas, along with other snacks and beverages, reached over 9.81 lakh migrants, says Alpa Gandhi, 46, a volunteer with the group for 10 years. "Every community contributed, Muslims, Maharashtrians, Sindhis, even families who'd never made theplas before and got in touch for help with the recipe."

In Matunga, Padia and Shah needed no instructions. "The ingredients and technique are secondary," Padia said. "To make 60 good theplas, you first need the will." They made their theplas extra thick, "so the migrants could get the most out of them".

The women are close. Through the lockdown, the families have taken turns to host dinner once a week, to give each woman a break from the kitchen.

"We tell our neighbours things we don't even share with relatives," Padia said. "Making those theplas was a way to spend time together, and help the people who needed it. We can't leave it all to the government, and if you want to help someone in need, nothing should stop you."

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