Meet the team:
Maati Paani Asha Visionaries
Our Team

Nicole Civita, JD, LLM
Graduate Faculty & Sustainable Food Systems Specialization Lead
Masters of the Environment - University of Colorado - Boulder

Nicole is a food systems innovator, educator, ethicist and attorney. Her work is grounded in systems thinking and stewardship, is attentive to relationships of care and reciprocity, and is framed by comprehensive law and policy knowledge. She has experience leading multi-stakeholder, community-based projects to support the development of vibrant and resilient place-based food systems and to propose systems-aware agri-food policies. Nicole’s recent scholarship and service identifies ethical values and explores dilemmas across the food chain, with particular attention to the well-being of workers, producers, their families and communities. Through this work, she produces ethical guidance, actionable policy recommendations, and transparency-enhancing tools that enable nourishing, informed, and values-aligned choices about food. Nicole is nationally recognized for her work on food waste and conservation. She also advises food system actors of counsel to Handel Food Law, LLC and serves on the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council. Nicole holds an LL.M. in Agricultural and Food Law from the University of Arkansas School of Law, a J.D., magna cum laude, Order of the Coif, from the Georgetown University Law Center, and an A.B. in American Studies and Creative Writing from Columbia University. As a pracademic at CU Boulder and consultant to the Student & Education Support Association, Inc, Nicole has spearheaded the development of the Maati-Paani-Asha vision. The visioning process has renewed her own “asha” (hope) for agri-eco-social renewal -- especially in parts of the world that have done the least to accelerate the climate crisis yet stand to suffer the most if change remains a unidirectional force.

Sumeeta Gawande, JD
Strategic Advisor
Gopikabai Sitaram Gawande Mahavidyalaya (GSG College) Umarkhed, Maharashtra, INDIA
Director (SESA)
Student and Education Support Association, Inc. Boulder, Colorado, USA

Sumeeta is a Director of SESA, Strategic Advisor to GSG College, and a business lawyer. She was born in Brooklyn, New York, spent her childhood in Appalachian Ohio, and completed her education at Cornell University (B.A) and Rutgers Law School (J.D.). She visited her paternal family in Umalkhed, Maharashtra often and was struck by the contrasts in fortunes. At age 4, Sumeeta didn’t understand why the village children were pressing close to touch her dress, until she realized theirs were torn and could be washed only in a pond where wild boars bathed. At age 12, she wondered why girls her age were home all day, until she realized they had no school to attend. At age 27, when she graduated from law school, she received the shocking news that her same-age cousin in Umalkhed had committed suicide, perceiving no better option. The inequities sparked in Sumeeta a commitment to improve options in the Umalkhed region. In 2012, she assumed management of SESA & became an advisor for GSG College. Sumeeta nurtures collaborations between GSG College and US-based institutions such as Ohio University, Rotary Clubs, and the University of Colorado Boulder. Sumeeta facilitates projects at GSG College which improve education, technology, health, and quality of life. After a College Trustee asked her for help addressing the worsening water shortage and GSG College students beseeched her to do something for those whose farmer-fathers had committed suicide, Sumeeta committed herself to building a team of experts and stakeholders who could work together to create solutions. Sumeeta facilitates and oversees the development of the Maati-Paani-Asha vision as one that is rooted in and informed by Umalkhed stakeholders while drawing on a wide-range of resources and sources of knowledge.
As Vice Principal, Dr. Vadrabade guides the development of GSG College. He has worked closely with SESA for over eight years, implementing projects that transformed GSG College into a solar-powered, digital Wi-Fi campus and that engage international collaborations in education, food security research, and child health, among others. As a Professor of Physics with twenty-three years’ teaching experience, he strives to create a learning environment that stimulates students to undertake projects of social importance. He obtained his Masters in Physics and Ph.D. in Physical Science from Nagpur University. His areas of research include zeolites, nano materials, and biogas. He worked as a research fellow on the development of a biogas plant sponsored by the Government of India, Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources. He is enthusiastic about the potential for biogas to be a source of energy in rural India and for manure, a biogas plant effluent, to help farmers regenerate the soil. Working with College Trustee Yadaorao Raut and Professor Dhanraj Tayade, Dr. Vadrabade oversees the development of the Maati-Paani-Asha (MPA) Vision at GSG College. He meets regularly with the MPA team, manages communications with GSG College’s trustees, students, and faculty in natural sciences, crop science, horticulture and dairy science, and organizes student interviews of farmers, food preparers and other stakeholders.

Dr. Tayade has taught Zoology for 31 years at GSG College and published over 80 research papers. He also has 20 years’ farming experience, including ploughing, sowing, cultivation, weed control, fertilization, pesticide usage, irrigation, farm labor management, yield storage management, and marketing strategies. He has knowledge of organic farming, organic pesticides, soil health boosting, livestock diseases, and related human diseases. Dr. Tayade is also a poet, singer, public speaker, and skilled communicator. Through his personal experiences, Dr. Tayade deeply understands the sorrows and problems of farmers in Umarkhed. He believes it is his social responsibility to extend a helping hand, and the Maati-Paani-Asha (MPA) project gives him an opportunity to do so. His vision is that, if the project is run efficiently, it will transform conditions in Umarkhed in an unbelievable way. Working with College Trustee Yadaorao Raut and Vice Principal Someshwar Vadrabade, Dr. Tayade guides the development of the MPA Vision at GSG College. He meets regularly with the MPA team, meets with food system stakeholders in Umarkhed, and supervises student interviews of farmers, food preparers and other stakeholders. He is also guiding post-graduate Zoology students on a project studying the effect of diet on the mental and physical health of farmers and farm laborers in Umarkhed and nearby villages.
Dylan holds an undergraduate degree from the Ohio State University in English literature. Beyond this he has experience in grassroots organizing and community outreach. He believes food and agriculture hold the unique ability to nourish, empower, and bring together humanity. He also understands that a lack of access to a robust nutritional food supply can have an equally catastrophic effect. Unfortunately, underprivileged communities and developing nations will pay the greatest price as the effects of climate change evolve; the time to adapt is quickly disappearing. Therefore, he believes major systemic changes must take place in order to create agricultural and economic resiliency within the most vulnerable communities. The work done in the Umarkhed region has the opportunity to create a solutions based blueprint applicable well beyond the borders of India. Dylan’s work on this project includes assisting with initial project development, systems mapping, stakeholder survey development, narrative storytelling, student team coordination, and research development.

Mikkela holds an undergraduate degree in political science and has experience in teaching, grassroots organizing and lobbying, and writing and editing. In addition to working towards a world where everyone has access to healthy food, Mikkela is interested in international systems and development that is sustainable, equitable, and ethical. Her primary contribution to the Food Systems Vision Prize project has been in the form of reviewing other submissions in order to gain a better understanding of grounded visioning, systems thinking, and opportunities for collaboration.
Anjani values an economically viable food system that benefits both the social and environmental well-being of a community. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Public Health, and has experience in program planning, community engagement, and teaching. Recognizing that access and affordability of healthy food in a changing climate is at the heart of the problems she wishes to improve has led her to pursue a graduate degree in environmental studies with a specialization in sustainable food systems. Her work on this project so far includes aiding in farmer survey translations and providing context for the current policy programs in place in the area. Her participation in this project has been inspired by her vision of a promising future for her home country of India.

Danny’s background is in water resources engineering, both in academia and industry. After completing his PhD at Arizona State University in 2015, he worked as a water resources engineer in a consulting firm. He then joined Ohio University in 2016 as an assistant professor in water resources engineering. His research uses a systems approach to tackle water resources problems. This is because water resources problems are very complex, interconnected, and overlapping. Water resources management considerations often involve water allocations, economic development, and environmental preservation. His research primarily involves developing optimization models for sustainable water resources solutions. Danny believes that water is so fundamental to our way of being that it is absolutely paramount to work with farmers in Umarkhed to develop sustainable practices when facing climate and drought crisis. Danny has conducted research projects on water resources sustainability from a systems approach in arid and semi-arid regions. He contributed information about Umarkhed’s water resources and forecasted the impact of climate change on water resources if they are not optimally managed.

Sanika lives in Umarkhed and is completing her final year in the Bachelor of Science program at GSG College. She is especially interested in Environmental Science. Her father is a junior lecturer (teacher), her mother is a homemaker, and her uncle is a farmer. In addition to interviewing farmers, she and Priti Gawande reviewed 30+ farmer interviews, translated them to English, and discussed the farmers’ responses with the MPA Team. She observed that water supply is insufficient for farming in the Umarkhed region, which can eventually lead to loss of the farmer. She believes that Umarkhed will have a new identity if water supply is improved and more farmers learn about the harmful effects of pesticides.
Betsy Briju, PhD
President
The Ohio State University
Master Gardeners for Athens County

Betsy’s undergraduate degree enabled her to have a feel for what farmers go through as they plant a crop and wait for rain or wait for the rain to stop. That’s when she decided to be of help to Indian farmers whose livelihoods depend on rain or lack thereof. Although she earned her PhD in Plant Molecular Biology, her passion continues to lie in being a source of information and seeking creative ways to solve everyday problems of farmers. Currently she is an active Master Gardener Volunteer who serves as a link between the research university and the general gardening public. Being a link - is how she sees herself in the future. Betsy appreciates that this visioning process enables us to explore how to accomplish the task of helping farmers realize that they are not doomed, but will achieve success in farming even with the constraints they are facing now. Betsy helped formulate the part of the vision that aims at healthy food for the community by suggesting the involvement of women and the bartering of excess crops with neighbors. She also helped prepare the questionnaire for surveying farmers and homemakers. Being a resident of the US for about 14 years, but having been born and brought up in India, she adds cross-cultural perspective to the project.

Pronoy Rai, PhD
Assistant Professor, International & Global Studies Portland State University, Oregon, USA
Visiting Professor, Social Sciences GSG College, Umarkhed, India

Pronoy has been conducting fieldwork to obtain qualitative data for social geographic and development research in Umarkhed since the Summer of 2012. His research in the region has produced new knowledge about the politics of food access and changes in social relations in labor migrant home communities. His research is published in major peer-reviewed journals, in his thesis (Ohio University), and in his dissertation (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Pronoy was drawn to collaborate on the Maati-Paani-Asha Vision because it brings together multiple local and international stakeholders and draws on an integrative approach to nurture a promising agro-ecological and social future that can be an inspiration for all developing regions of the world. These aspects align well with his own personal and professional philosophy. Pronoy has written sections of the proposal that describe current levels of food insecurity in Umarkhed and has provided information and information resources regarding Umarkhed's characteristics and challenges.

Priti Gawande
Bachelor of Science Candidate
Gopikabai Sitaram Gawande Mahavidyalaya (GSG College) Umarkhed, Maharashtra, INDIA

Priti lives in Umarkhed and is completing her final year in the Bachelor of Science program at GSG College. Her father is an office clerk at GSG College, and her mother is a homemaker. They have a farm, but someone else does the farming. In addition to interviewing farmers, she and Sanika Jadhav reviewed 30+ farmer interviews, translated them to English, and discussed the farmers’ responses with the MPA Team. She observed that most of the farmers have problems accessing electricity. She notes that the farmers’ lifestyle is simple, but they have to work very hard to survive. She wants to see Umarkhed develop in both agricultural and educational aspects.

Yadaorao Raut, MD
Medical Physician Umarkhed
Secretary Yavatmal Zilha Akhil Kunbi Samaj

Dr. Raut is a former farmer & owner of a farm managed by his son. He has received a Service Above Self Award from Rotary International for overseeing multiple major grant projects. As physician, Dr. Raut has seen how the environment, diet, and other circumstances can negatively impact health. Some examples of these issues in his community are diabetes, death from over-exposure to pesticides, and mosquito-borne diseases.
Sushila Gawande, MD
Retired Pediatrician
President
Student and Education Support Association, Inc.

Sushila grew up in India, became a pediatrician, and settled in Ohio with her husband. She has a deep connection to Umarkhed through her husband, Atmaram Gawande, who grew up in a village near Umarkhed, and through personal relationships she has built with people in the region over the past 50 years. Sushila and Atmaram Gawande helped develop GSG College in Umarkhed, and they engaged Ohio University, Rotary Clubs, and friends in the USA to help the college and the region. Troubled by increased rates of farmer suicide, Sushila supports SESA’s work because of the potential for regenerative agriculture to improve the lives of farmers and also to improve the environment and develop resilience to climate change. She is inspired by her father-in-law, whose farm outside Umarkhed was mortgaged and the only food he could afford was a piece of roti-bread with salt, but through old-fashioned farming without chemicals, he farmed successfully enough to acquire 200 acres of farmland. Her cultural knowledge of Umarkhed and her half-century-long relationship with the people and place have been influential in the formation of this Vision.