

AKHILESH SHARMA

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# BUILDING TRUST WITH THE SURJAPURI COMMUNITY

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Reminiscing about his early days as Development Apprentice in the village, the author muses on his learnings and challenges as he begins to understand the challenges and tries to build inroads of trust with the women in the community

## Beginning My Journey

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**U**NDERSTANDING THE Context of a community, I learned, is the first step in being able to work with them. My first realization of this was when I was in Kalpeer village. I had freshly joined the Bahadurganj team of PRADAN in Northeast Bihar and was accompanying my colleague to the village.

It was getting late and among the few persons there was a young man with luggage. He said he was going to Punjab to work. Out of concern for him, I said that he should leave soon otherwise he would face

a problem because this was such a remote area. The young man took umbrage and in an annoyed tone said, “Aap to sheher ke rehne wale hain, humein kuch samajhte hi nahi, kya nahi hai hamare pas, kyonki aap padh likh liye to aap achche hain aur hum pichhde (You belong to an urban area so you demean us. We have everything we need; just because you are educated, you think you are better off and we are backward).” I was dumbfounded by this statement. Perhaps, he was right. Born and brought up in a metro city, I did have a perception that rural areas were backward and downtrodden.

Soon after this incident, as part of my assignment as Development Apprentice in PRADAN, I entered the life-world of the community. To understand the context of the village and of the community, I was

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to stay in Aambari village for 15 days. Aambari mainly comprises the Surjapuri Muslim community, who speak the Surjapuri dialect. I must confess, here, that being a Hindu, I initially, had many reservations about staying in a Muslim village. I had to stay with them in their homes and I feared that I would not be accepted.

My fear came alive when I began to feel unwanted in this village of 35 families. I noticed that the people would change the subject of their discussion when they saw me approaching. There were women SHGs in the village and whenever I sat in on their meetings, they would only address me to ask me when they would receive the loan and of how much. I had no answer to these questions. The women would not interact directly with me and the men would always posture as if they knew everything and did not need to take my opinion on anything. They would talk about mobile phones, bikes, refrigerators and everything except for themselves and their life-world.

This indifference of the people was painful. I also came to know that there were some arguments among some of the families about why a Hindu boy was living in their house. They questioned the purpose of my stay.

I became frustrated and fearful. It was becoming difficult for me to complete my village stay. I was about to quit, when I thought that, maybe, I needed to understand the community better. I needed to understand their point of view and 'why they were the way they were'.

### **Taking the First Step**

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None of the villagers was keen to enter into a dialogue with me except the house owner where I was staying. I found it difficult to start conversations. I, then, started observing their life from close quarters and realized that the community, which comprised around 60 per cent of the total population, and were in a majority in Kishanganj district, felt neglected and insecure. The market in the area was controlled by upper-caste Hindu migrants, who had arrived and had settled here from other districts of Bihar. The community was very religious; yet they felt insecure. The insecurity was largely because of what they were seeing and hearing in the media and in the local conversations at the haats (market squares), where several discussions took place around the current situation of minorities in the country. It was making them hold on to their faith more strongly.

I found that their reservation towards me was mostly because they didn't trust me and thought that I would not respect their religion, their way of living or their food habits. I realized that I also had reservations about being a Hindu living a Muslim area. Understanding their point of view helped me, and I realized that I had to break the ice and had to build a rapport with the people.

To build a relationship with the people, I began to enter every household of the village. I had random talks. Initially, they did not respond to the way I tried to engage with them such as scheduling a group meeting with them and talking about various things. I remember the first meeting I had organized with two SHGs and to which only four women turned up. The members didn't find any kind of excitement in an SHG meeting. The sole question that they had was when they could get a loan. Other than that, the women were not interested in any discussion. I myself was confused as to what the role of an SHG was. Whereas the SHG programme had so much scope, in this area of Bihar, I only saw the people consider it as a medium to get credit. I began to lose patience. Once, in my frustration I told my team mates that we should not work in that village because the people were

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not really interested in anything but getting a government subsidy and loans.

All my efforts at building a rapport with the people did not work. My stay in the village ended but I continued working in the village and with the Surjapuri community. Although not very clear about how to crack the nut, I remained persistent...sitting with the women in their SHG meetings, chatting informally with the men. I continuously questioned the reasons and the need for setting up an SHG in this community and particularly in this village; it was obvious that if I wanted to engage with them for a long period of time I would have to get to know them. I would, at some point, have to ask them why they didn't do anything for their hamlet and why are they were continuing to live in subaltern conditions.

### **Surfacing the Skull**

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My discomfort mainly came from their practices of giving a religious angle to all their activities. People, by and large, have the habit of linking everything to religious beliefs, even if it is not mentioned in the religious scriptures. I believe that societies (Hindu or Muslim), have interpreted texts as per

their convenience to maintain the status quo of certain systems or an ideology. However, I could see a lot of contradictions in what the Surjapuris were saying and what they were doing. People in the village told me that they were followers of Islam, and because of that, a woman needs to be under the veil and under no circumstances should she be seen by other men. In practice, there was a contrast; the women were engaged in livelihood activities such as poultry and goat rearing, and I found them quite open in interacting and haggling with male hawkers.

As time passed, the situation changed a bit in my favour and I began to be more accepted by the community. For me, being in a Muslim community and listening to them freely expressing themselves was a learning opportunity. Contrary to my earlier notion, women were confronting the men on some of the discriminatory behaviour that they were exhibiting against women, and the women were also talking to strangers like me with ease. Gradually, the men also began to participate proactively in the discussions. And the women began to take part in the local discussions, in which usually only the men participated. My perspective on discrimination shifted as I took

part in discussions and debates with the villagers and began to build personal connect with the families.

One day, during a conversation on women's health, Nazli Begum, a resident of Aambari said, "Jab wo aate hain to humein karna hi hai, hum mana nahi kar sakte (Whenever the husbands return, we need to submit to their sexual desires; we cannot say no)." At first, it was awkward to hear this as well as hard to believe that the women would have this conversation in my presence. I was rather shocked because I did not expect they would ever trust me enough to share such personal details. I realized that this was a result of the amount of time that I had spent in the community. They now felt connected and comfortable.

I heard Meinaz Khatun saying that they were not allowed to use contraceptives. These stories, and the pain with which the women shared them were disturbing. At the same time, it emerged that these women are hopeful that the situation would change. They said that the men have restricted their mobility in the garb of protection; however, in their homes, they suffer pain and humiliation. I saw how the young girls of the village were not allowed to go to the market on their own or to

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buy the things that they wished. They were always accompanied by an older woman or some man of the household. They could not do anything without taking the consent of their guardians. I wondered why this was so. The primary reason for this was the fear in the community that the young girls would elope and they used this fear to refer to the restrictions imposed by their religion as a last resort, stating that the girls and women are meant to be protected. These young girls and women did not hesitate much in interacting with strangers like me, for example. But the villagers feared what society would think or say about this.

The women said that the girls always have restrictions but that these restrictions increase manifold, once a girl gets married. After a Nikah, the girl's husband and her in-laws take control of her movements. I tried raising this issue in the village, but the villagers, at best, gave a dull response and said, "What is in our hands, if we are not going to allow this practice, our sons-in-law might annul the marriage or it might lead to other atrocities on our daughter. Where will we find a man, who will provide us all the freedom we all want?"

Sakina, a 16-year-old girl, said, "Hum taiyyar the hi nahi shaadi

ke liye, par usne dhamki diya tha ki jaan de dega (I was not ready for marriage, but the groom threatened me with committing suicide)." Sakina's husband belongs to the family into which her elder sister is married and for the sake of saving her sister's marriage, she had no choice but to submit.

In almost every Surjapuri hamlet, there were a few families, who controlled the affairs of the hamlet. These families were mostly well-connected and had political clout. They made the norms based on their own vested interests. Some of the villagers shared that if they were to try to overturn these norms, they would be discarded by the community.

Be it any kind of government contract in the area or any facility or scheme provided to the village, these few families were the first ones to avail of them. In Aambari hamlet, Md Islamuddin's family holds authority and power. He was an ex-Ward Member of the village; his son is the current president from the hamlet and his daughter-in-law is the member of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI).

Once Md Manjur, the eldest son of Md Islamuddin, sought my help to accompany him to the Block Development Office to have a discussion on a scheme related

to an overhead water tank for his hamlet. I was overwhelmed, as well as excited, to see how much this person cared for his villagers, that he was ready to offer his land for an overhead water tank and was also trying to convince the officer that it would be for the well-being of the hamlet.

Eventually, I realized that his family would always grab any opportunity that was coming for the village. I got to know that another person of the same hamlet also wanted to build the overhead tank on his land, but was unable to do so. When I asked him why, he kept mum for a while and then said, "Dada wo log kar rahe to hum nahin kar sakte hai (Brother, since they are installing the overhead tank, we won't get the chance)."

In another instance, an old man named Dalu, aged about 72 years, who resided at the extreme end of the hamlet, along with his five sons, was still waiting to get those entitlements from the Indira Awas Yojana, which he was supposed to get in the 1990s. His entitlements were deviated to other villagers and, even in the same hamlet, to the people who offered bribes. He was, in fact, certain that he could not avail of the facility without offering a bribe to Md Islamuddin. He waited for the PRI elections and approached the new Mukhiya for

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his entitlement. All his entreaties fell on deaf ears. He did not get his entitlement because of Md Islamuddin's son's objections, and all that remained with him was a painful story to tell.

### **Dream or Need**

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Once, in a meeting, discussing the entitlements in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, the women said that they rarely get such provisions. The women of Aambari, then, made a resolution to fight against the malpractices in the centre and to try to get their entitlement from the nearest ICDS Centre. This was the first time that the women understood the strength they wielded if they worked together. I helped the women get more information about their entitlement in the ICDS and we discussed what action they could take.

The women wrote a letter to the Sevika (anganwadi worker) and stated the issues they were facing. Such a step, taken by the women, was bound to create some turbulence. The first to react was Md Manjur, who told me brusquely that this would not solve anything and by such steps the villagers would not even get what they were receiving at

present. He, then, threatened me that he would take stern action against me and block my entry into the village if I did not stop instigating the women.

I tried to talk to him but he was not ready to listen and so I, finally, told him to talk with the women. If they did not want my intervention, I would not come to the village. He left the place in anger. He again came and started shouting at me and this time it was not me but the women who confronted him. The women said, "Tumko mahine ka ration aur baki saaman milta hai, humein nahi milta; isliye tum chup raho (You get the monthly ration from the Centre and additional benefits; we get nothing, so don't interfere.)"

Later, the SHG members told me that these families would not allow any change to take place because they were the perpetrators of all such malpractices. The movement was successful in a sense that the Sevika acknowledged their problems and later, in the evening, the Sevika's husband paid a visit to Aambari, apologized for the inconvenience and assured the villagers that they would get their due benefits from the ICDS Centre, as sanctioned.

When I interacted with the women on the health issues, I got to know that those who are better off prefer private clinics to government hospitals. I met a woman, who lost her first child during delivery; the reason was that the child was delivered by the help of local dai (midwife) at home. This is one of the common practices in the area. I asked why, in modern times, they preferred the dai over the government hospitals and the reason they gave was quite shocking. They said that they didn't believe in the government-run hospitals because the staff was very rude and offensive. They also did not take proper care. The villagers, largely, either preferred private hospitals or got treatment from the local quack or dai.

Rozina Begum, said, "Dada, humko kya pata hai kahan jana hai, pehli baar tha ye, didi log batayi paanch hazar taka lagega haspatal mein; hum to kama kar khate hai, zameen bhi nahin hai to ghar mein hi kara liye. (I didn't know where to go, it was my first time, and some women told me that I would need Rs 5000 to get hospitalized. We are daily wage earners and don't own any land, so I went for delivery of my first child at home.)" With sorrow in her eyes, she shared that her child had died. She delivered her second child in a private hospital

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and paid a hefty amount of Rs 15,000.

There was a strong perception in the village that government run hospitals and the nurses along with the ASHA were of no use because their services were not adequate. Md Halim, a local quack, further added that government hospitals were also not affordable because the people needed to buy all the medicines required. They also needed to bear the extra cost of the ambulance and other travel expenses, and women, who did not have the available cash, opted for delivery at their house.

### Musing

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What is the purpose of my telling these stories? Does it really provide any solutions? When I reflected on the instances that took place, I found that the community was trying to move ahead in their life and in doing so were not conscious of those around. I began to engage more in my new field and spent relatively less time in Aambari. One day, it occurred to me that my absence or sporadic presence was not fair to the village. With this regret, I went to the hamlet and had a discussion with the people. They welcomed me with jokes and

several rounds of sharing. I came to know about the status of the movement they had undertaken on ICDS.

Kamrun Begum shared, “Kaha ‘bhaiya’ ek mahine se to hadtal hi chal raha hai. Abhi hartal band hua to ek bar mila (The ICDS staff have been on strike. The strike ended, and we got our entitlement this month).”

To this, I asked how much ration they had received; giggling, Nurzabi Begum answered, “Hum log ko to pura mila (We got our full ration).”

I asked them about the others in the village; they said, “Why should they get any? They were not with us during the movement, so they cannot reap the benefit. If they want to get something, they would also need to go to the centre and claim their entitlement.”

I was in agony after listening to this and realized that they were leaving behind other members of the hamlet and were only concerned about themselves. My engagement had not brought the effect that I had desired to bring.

As I venture into new villages, my belief is getting stronger, day by day, that there are many factors that affect people and

poverty. The one factor, however, which I consider very dangerous is the polity and the power play. Everyone seems to be busy holding and exercising power for the benefit of themselves; the villagers are no different, as if they are a part of the same system. This power game has tied everyone's hands, making the vulnerable more vulnerable, wherein people cannot express themselves and, even if one rare being does so, he or she will be suppressed.

I am not sure whether I understood the Surjapuri community. However, I am happy that I was able to build some trust with the Surjapuri community, especially with the women. People no longer stop their conversations when they see me passing. No heads turn in suspicion when I enter a house and chat randomly. This building of trust continued when I was transferred to Koraput district in South Odisha in the beginning of 2018. The community changed, the context changed but still when I walk around the villages of Koraput, I feel connected. I see a little of Surjapuri here in this tribal land too.

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