

The Road Less Travelled

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Showing remarkable steadfastness of purpose and undeterred by the hurdles and rejections they faced, the women SHG members of Kalachandpur doggedly pursue the block officials to sanction the building of a road to their village and relieve them of untold misery

“*HAAMRA HAAMADER GOLPO BOLA SHURU KORLE eto joldi shirabek naai, saara din laagbeke* (If we start sharing our stories, it will take the whole day),” said Sadmoni Soren excitedly, her eyes shining with pride and confidence. She is a Santhali and a member of the SHG, the Malamiru Swanirbhor Gosthi, and also a Board Member of the Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh. Not only Sadmoni but all the other members of that SHG also were glowing with pride. They have maintained a notebook in which they have written their achievements from the beginning till date.

“*Tui pore ne ihate ki ki likha aachhe, haamra suru le aaj porjonto ki ki korechhi* (Read what we have written in this notebook. We have recorded all our achievements till date over here),” said one of the members of the SHG when I asked them about their achievements.

The most interesting story of all is the story of the construction of a concrete road in the village.

Kalachandpur and Tilaboni are two adjacent villages in Bansbera *gram panchayat* of Barabazar block. The villages are so close physically that the villagers call

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Kalachandpur the *upor para* and the two hamlets of Tilaboni the *maajh para* and *neech para*. Both the villages had concerns about the road. The *kuccha* road became an awful sight in the rainy season and caused severe problems for the residents. Negotiating the *kuccha* road on a regular basis during the rains was a major nuisance because the road became muddy and slippery. Ambulances and other vehicles did not want to enter the villages or, rather, could not enter the villages. In case anyone was unwell, the villagers had to carry the patient to the main road on a cot. It was very tough to carry material to these houses because vehicles couldn't reach them. The primary school teacher used the state of the *kuccha* and muddy road as reason not to come to teach in the school.

The Sribari cluster decided to take the issue to the concerned department. The Sribari cluster includes members of SHGs from four villages: Tilaboni, Kalachandpur, Sargo and Hullung. The cluster has 10 SHGs and its representatives meet at a fixed place in Tilaboni village once every month. The application for the construction of concrete roads for both the villages, Kalachandpur and Tilaboni,

was submitted to the Block Development Officer (BDO). The application was approved in principle; however, due to the shortage of funds, the road for Kalachandpur was not approved of whereas the road for Tilaboni was sanctioned. The people, however, were not informed about this nor were they aware of it.

A problem arose, owing to this, during the inspection and survey of the road. The officials from the block surveyed the site at Kalachandpur, which had not been approved, and even started the excavation work in the village instead of in Tilaboni, which had been approved. The excavation was just about to be completed, when the block officials realized their mistake. They stopped the work at Kalachandpur and shifted to the actual site sanctioned at Tilaboni village, leaving the work in Kalachandpur unfinished. The process of shifting of the work actually bemused the people. They thought that the work had been stopped due to political reasons. When the excavation work was going on at Kalachandpur, Chepu Murmu, the elected representative from the Sansad, or Ward, of the Bansbera *gram panchayat*, had come to the site with his followers

and had ordered the people to stop the work. Chepu Murmu did not tell villagers that the road had actually been sanctioned for Tilaboni village, and that the work at Kalachandpur that had been started was a mistake.

The construction work for the road started in Tilaboni the following month, that is, in June 2014. The shifting of the work from Kalachandpur to Tilaboni, leaving the road dug up, created a great deal of trouble not only physically but also socially between the villagers, who assumed that the decision to change the construction of the road was political.

When Chepu Murmu asked that the work in Kalachandpur be stopped, the other political party got into action. They tried to take the Malamiru Gaonta SHG and the other villagers of Kalachandpur into confidence. They aggravated the situation by saying that Ramdon Majhi of Tilaboni village had influenced the Bansbera *gram panchayat* and the Barabazar block officers through his political allegiance to shift the road work to his village. The allegations impacted the women as well. Ramdon Majhi's wife Khunki Majhi was an influential leader in the cluster.

The SHG women, however, did not give up hope. The members followed up with the BDO every week and insisted on the construction of the road. They tried to negotiate with the government staff in all possible ways. Sometimes, they even had heated discussions and arguments with the BDO and the Joint BDO

She took the allegations against her husband personally. Because of this, the SHGs in both the villages became polarized.

In the next cluster meeting, Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti raised the question regarding the violation of their interest and said that the people of Tilaboni could have let the work be finished at Kalachandpur, and they could, instead, have appealed to the Block Administration for the construction of a road at Tilaboni as well. And that could have been done through the Cluster. But the SHG of Tilaboni did not take this feedback well and showed no interest in listening to the women from Kalachandpur. This eventually led to a fight between the SHGs of the two villages. SHG members of the two villages stopped talking with each other. Not only this, the women from both the villages stopped going to each other's villages and even the men-folk stopped interacting with each other. Cluster meetings were not held for two months because of the road.

The members of Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti decided in the SHG meeting that they would get the road in their village constructed and decided to meet the BDO to have it sanctioned. Led by Sadmoni Soren, they

went to the BDO of Barabazar block. He did not respond to them favourably. Instead, he asked them to leave the block premises. A couple of weeks later, they again went to the BDO and appealed to him regarding the problem in the village, and once again they returned without an answer.

The SHG, meanwhile, had conducted a meeting with the villagers to search for solutions to their problems but did not get any support. The SHG women, however, did not give up hope. The members followed up with the BDO every week and insisted on the construction of the road. They tried to negotiate with the government staff in all possible ways. Sometimes, they even had heated discussions and arguments with the BDO and the Joint BDO.

They continued to make their request and asked the officials to visit the site to see how the villagers were suffering because of the unfinished work. They kept on visiting, applying, forcing, debating and requesting for over a year. Finally, the BDO gave them a date for meeting the SHG members. The women of the Malamiru SHG met the BDO and the Joint BDO and spoke of the hardships they were facing. The

site for the road at Kalachandpur had been dug up and it was had become like a canal in front of their houses. During the rains, the entrance to the village was slushy and difficult to use.

The people had no other means to reach their village. The BDO showed them the sanction papers, which clearly stated that the sanction was only for a road to Tilaboni village and the excavation in Kalachandpur had been carried out by mistake. The women understood that a mistake had been made by the block officials and that the decision had not been influenced by either of the villages. Sadmoni Soren told the BDO angrily, "*Torai toh haamader jhogra ta laagayen dilis. Haamader gaayer lokeder modhye je kotha bola bondho hoilo seta kikore thik hobek?* (You caused a dispute between us. How are you going to repair the damage already done to the relationship of the villagers)?"

The SHG members then met the Joint BDO because they had had a positive experience with him earlier. He had helped them in implementing MGNREGS work in the village. He suggested, informally, that they block the entrance of the road to the villages (the entrance of the Tilaboni and Kalachandpur are common) as a sign of protest, so

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that no one could use the road and no vehicle could enter either of the villages.

All the SHG members did not agree to this action. They were apprehensive that it may escalate to some bigger issue, which they may not be able to control. The SHG members wanted to hold a joint meeting of the two villages in Tilaboni, in which men and women would be invited. The purpose of the meeting was to share with all of them the information that they had got from the BDO regarding the road. However, the men of both the villages did not turn up for the meeting and the joint meeting could not take place. This fuelled the members of Malamiru Gaonta SHG to take extreme steps, and they decided to act on the suggestion of the Joint BDO. “*Sojhe katukte gotom bang rakaba, undo katuk bankaayte laaga aa* (When the straight finger cannot extract butter from a pot, the curved finger needs to be used),” said the SHG members and went ahead with the decision to block the road.

Blocking of the road affected the construction in Tilaboni village because vehicles could not enter with the required construction material. The SHG members also disallowed anyone

from taking any diversion to approach the village. This action fuelled the imbroglio between the two villages. The extreme step of protesting transformed the situation into a huge issue throughout the area. Tilaboni and Kalachandpur, being very close, have a common *sholoyana* (forum of men of the village, in which they discuss and take decisions on matters affecting the village). Women are not allowed in the forum although the forum takes decisions on issues regarding women. In such cases, only the accused woman/women are asked to attend. The headmen of that forum called a meeting to discuss this matter. As the members of Malamiru Gaonta MS were all involved in creating the chaos, the *sholoyana* called them to the meeting.

The main concern of the forum was not to generate a discussion on the issue that the people of Kalachandpur were facing, but to demean the women of the SHG for their action. When addressing the forum, one of the headmen said, “*Aatu rin aayo horko nuna sahos tako hor eset lagit* (How dare the women close the village road)?”

The *sholoyana* meeting was held in the area between Kalachandpur and Tilaboni villages. Since the

women of the SHG were called, a few women from the other SHGs of Tilaboni village also attended the meeting. However, they were not there to support the women of Malamiru SHG but solely to see what happens in a *sholoyana* meeting because women had never been to such a meeting.

The members of Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti were asked why they took such action. In response, Sadmoni Soren along with Lugu Hembrom, Suradhoni Hansda and Chumki Hembrom, shared their experiences that they had had while dealing with the block officials. The work at Kalachandpur village should not have been started; but because it had been, it should have been completed. As it is, they have been facing too many problems because of the unfinished road. And there was no way that the villagers could fix the situation.

The headman, however, was not ready to listen to the women and insulted the SHG members. The tension did not end there. It had become an inter-village issue, and because the women-folk had been called to a public meeting and insulted, the men of Kalachandpur village were angry and boycotted the *sholoyana* meeting. As a result, the *sholoyana* also became divided. However,

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because the women of Tilaboni were also there in the *sholoyana* meeting, they understood the plight of the SHG members of Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti. They revived their Cluster meeting after the incident. The members of Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti got the opportunity to take their fellow SHG members into confidence, and receive their support.

However, the men of Tilaboni village didn't leave the matter there. A few of the men went to the Bansbera *gram panchayat* office and the Barabazar Panchayat Samiti office, to lodge a complaint against the women of Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti. This group of men included Ramdon Majhi, the former Sansad Member of Bansbera *gram panchayat* and a member of a political party. A couple of weeks later, a meeting was held at Tilaboni village, in which representatives from the Panchayat Samiti, the Gram Pradhan of Bansbera GP, the BDO and the Joint BDO of Barabazar block were present.

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In reply, Sadmoni said to the BDO, "*Haamra bhul korle toh tora ekhaner le pulice pathayen dis, aar liye chole aase. Tui je bhul ta korlis itar ki hobe ekhon* (When we make a mistake, you send your police force to bring us to you. Now you have made a mistake, what will happen)?"

The BDO said in response, "*Aami kotha dichchhi tin maser vitore tomader raasta ta toiri kore debo. Aar ekmas pore ese tomra khoj niye jaabe* (I promise that your road will be constructed within three months. You come to my office next month to get updates)."

All the efforts by the SHG members had borne fruit. The funds for a road in Kalachandpur were sanctioned as per the

timeline given by the BDO. Here also, the Malamiru Gaonta Mahila Samiti played a vital role. They called a meeting of the villagers before the construction work started. All the villagers, men and women, participated and they decided that they would all work sincerely so that road could be completed as fast as possible. The SHG monitored the quality of the material used for the construction of road. It is on record the fastest constructed concrete road in the entire area and the quality of the road is also commendable.

With this, I closed the notebook, thinking how the women of this SHG had overcome all the odds to connect their village with a road. I feel happy to be associated with women like these. I am also aware that there have been some other serious issues in the villages that have come up in the intervening years that might not have been resolved had this SHG not been active.

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