

SANTOSH KUMAR MANDAL

My Experiences with the Kulhaiya Community

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Initiating a women's group in this Muslim-dominated area of Bihar and introducing cucumber cultivation as an alternative farm-based livelihood was challenging and sometimes frustrating for the new team. Their success is their reward

IT WAS AN EXCITING DAY. My team members—Trisha, Anup, Tarannum—and I were going to visit the successfully initiated cucumber field. An intervention of this sort was taking place for the first time in the operational area of PRADAN's Araria team in Bihar. On arriving in the village, we were glad to see the people in the cucumber field. A pick-up van was parked beside the road; women, men and children were plucking the cucumbers in the field, while the traders at the collection point were busy packaging the produce in gunny bags.

Fatima, the owner of field, expressed her sheer joy, "*Bhaia ji sapna pura ho gelei, aisan kheera kabhi*

ne dekhlo chili (Brother, this is a dream come true. I have never seen such cucumbers in my life)." Fatima's words provided us with respite from the concerns that we had had during the exposure visit of this village to Jalalgarh, a cucumber production area in the Purnia district. In fact, these words were immensely satisfying; it was like our dream was finally taking shape.

Dream! What was the dream? Where did the word 'dream' come from? To respond fully, let's travel two years back in time when a new team was started in Araria and I became a part of it. The socio-economic condition that we encountered, the various struggles, challenges and excitement we faced, and

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how we overcame these, and moved forward as a team—all need to be chronicled.

I have had much experience in working with the SC and ST communities of Bihar and Jharkhand but I had not had any experience of working with Muslims, especially in north-east Bihar where the conditions were very different. Therefore, it would be appropriate to talk briefly about Araria and describe my journey with Muslims. I would also like to talk about the team's intervention in cucumber cultivation: how and why it started in the area, and the impact of this initiative.

Team Araria was initiated in December 2014. This area was chosen because it is one of the most backward and flood-affected districts of Bihar and stands at the bottom of the 90 minority concentrated districts of India. It is backward, both in terms of its socio-economic standing and its infrastructure indicators. There is a substantial proportion of Muslims in the district. Against the state average of 16.2 per cent, the Muslims constitute 44.4 per cent of the total rural population in Araria. In the three blocks that PRADAN is operating, the proportion of the Muslim population stands at 77.5 per

cent in Jokihat, 62.70 per cent in Araria and 46.8 per cent in Palasi blocks.

Although 60 per cent of the families are involved in agriculture, only 30 per cent of them have their own land. The other 70 per cent are landless families whose livelihoods are dependent on wage earning in the landlords' field. About 30 per cent of the landless households also engage in agriculture through leasing land. Agriculture is not the mainstay of the household income, which is reflected in the subsistence level of cropping practices. Migration is a prominent source of income for the majority of the households. You will find people saying, "If we don't migrate, we won't be able to feed our families."

The majority of the community is Kulhaiya Muslims. Kulhaiyas are one of the four sub-groups of the Shaikh community in the area. The overall condition of the community is poor, in terms of educational, financial, social and political status. And it is one of the fastest growing castes of Muslims. The prime source of income of this community is agriculture. However, owing to population growth and the growing number of nuclear families, the land has been

divided over time, leading to many families becoming landless. The Kulhaiya women observe the *purdah* (veil) system, are mostly engaged in household chores and do not participate in agriculture. The health condition and the literacy rate (20 per cent) of the women are very poor in the area.

I became a part of this new team in April 2015. My colleagues, Abhishek, Jyoti and Drasti, who joined earlier, had started the initial discussions with the villagers. At that time, mobilizing the women into an SHG was a big challenge and only two SHGs had been formed in Araria till March, 2015. I heard many stories about their struggle to mobilize women. I was aware about such challenges with this community, having heard stories about it from my colleagues at Kishanganj (Abhishek, Sachin, Sudarshan). At the same time, I was also excited because for the first time I was going to be a part of a newly formed team.

I started to understand the area through my development perspective. However, there was some fear in my mind. How do I work with Muslim women? How will the villagers react? What type of approach should we use in a new place? Such questions passed through my mind, considering

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that we had a lot of experience working with the ST, SC and OBC families but only a very limited experience in working with Muslims.

I started a discussion with the villagers and tried to mobilize the women to form an SHG but for the first 25 days I was not able to form a single SHG. During my field visit, the women were not even ready to talk to me. I got various kinds of responses from the community, “*Jo baat karna hai hamara malik se kijiye* (Whatever you want to discuss, do so with my husband).” “*Humlog bahut paisa jama kiye lekin sab bhag gaya* (We deposited a lot of money earlier, but the organizations fled away).” “*Ye sab sirf thagne ka tarika hai* (These are different ways of deceiving us).” “*Yahan ye sab nahi chal sakta hai* (Here, these things don’t work),” and so on and so forth. I became frustrated and anxious because I was unable to find a way to mobilize Muslim women, who were not even ready to talk to me because I was a man.

During my field visits, I understood that without convincing the men and the so-called important persons of the village such as the Maulvi and the Hafij, it would be difficult to proceed with our work. I began

conversing with them. I started visiting the villages at around 6 a.m. in the morning and after 6 p.m. in the evening because it was difficult to meet these people in the day time. Many a times, I stood near the mosque and tried to initiate a discussion but the responses were always disheartening like, “*Hamari aurte noor hoti hai paraye murd ke samne nakhun dikhana bhi napak hota hai* (Our women are divine, and for them to even show their nails to other men is immoral).” “*Jo kaam karne aaye hai hum mardo se bolkiye auroto ka kya kaam* (Whatever you have come for, talk to us, what is the need of women)?” “*Jaldi se yahan se bhagiye warna masjid se elan kar denge ki kafir aaya hai ek bhi haddi wapas nahi jayega* (Go away quickly from here, else we will announce through the Mosques that a disbeliever has come, you will not be able to go back).”

Such comments were utterly frustrating; yet I never lost hope. I strongly believed that one day the people would understand. I, therefore, continued to approach the men from different hamlets. Whenever I sensed some openness, I showed them various videos on my laptop. Finally, the day arrived when my relentless efforts showed the first signs of

bearing fruit. On 28 April, 2015, I received a very heartening response from Kudus, a former *mukhiya* of Bagdehra *panchayat*, giving some much-needed hope.

He said about me, “*Ye neik banda hai aur neik irade se aaya hai, ye hamare gaon ko sudharne aaya hai* (He is a good person. He has come up with good ideas. He has come to develop our village).” He told me to visit him again after two days and assured me of lending his help in organizing the people in the village. I was excited to hear this response and immediately went back to the location and discussed the development with my colleagues.

After two days, on 30 April, Abhishek and I went to the Gamharia village, where Kudus gathered around 15 women and briefed them about our objective. Afterwards, some more women and men joined the discussion. Sensing the opportunity, we showed them a video of PRADAN’s outreach programmes. We then facilitated a discussion, which generated so many questions among the community such as: What is the profit in forming an SHG? How many days will we have to continue to save? What benefit will we get from the government? What will you give

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us? After a prolonged discussion, a few people exclaimed, “*Ye achha cheez hai. Is se gaon ka achha hoga. Is me koi nuksan nahi hai*” (This is good. It will help the villagers. There’s no loss in doing this). As a result of this intense discussion, 10 women formed a group named Gulab Mahila Samiti, and started saving Rs 20 each. We felt jubilant that we had crossed the first hurdle.

The very next week, two new members joined the group and, in no time, one member took a loan of Rs 500 for the treatment of her son. The impact of the internal loan in the crisis helped people realize the importance of the SHG; other village women also came forward to form new SHGs. Subsequently, Gulab Mahila Samiti and I facilitated the formation of eight more groups in the same hamlet over a period of next two months. The experience was no less than a miracle!

During my journey, I learned some hard lessons on the importance of understanding the social milieu and acting accordingly. In one meeting, I asked the women to read the *kalma* (Muslim prayer) before starting the meeting; when it was over, the women clapped their hands in appreciation. However, hearing them, the men came and

started shouting at their wives, “*Bhago yahan se. Yahan paisa jama karne bheje hai ki kawali gaane*” (Go away from here. Have we sent you to deposit money or to sing)?”

Following this incident, these women withdrew their money and left the group. In another meeting that I facilitated, the discussion was on how to ensure norms in the group; the meeting continued for about three hours. When the meeting was about to finish, a man entered and threw the SHG savings’ box and shouted, “*Ye kya tamasha ho raha hai. Teen ghanta se aurat ke beech mein baithkar ras lila chal raha hai. Bhago yahan se, koi group nahi chalega yahan*” (What’s going on? A man sitting among women for so long! We will not allow any group here). To my surprise, not a single SHG member opposed him and this group also got dissolved subsequently. These incidents taught me to be cautious in our approach.

I also experienced many good things in the area. After three to four months of savings and credit, the women understood that the SHG was very beneficial for them, leading many of the SHGs to increase their savings rate to Rs 50 per week. Meanwhile, people started trusting me and this helped me

to mobilize around 300 women in 35 SHGs at the end of the first year. I also demonstrated some good agricultural practices in the villages such as Direct Seeded Rice (DSR), vegetable cultivation and System of Wheat Intensification (SWI), which helped to establish us further in the area.

Meanwhile, I happened to visit Jalalgarh village of Purnia district when I was returning from Katihar on 25 March, 2016. Some farmers were busy loading cucumber in a carrier-van beside the road. I became eager to know what they were doing and after some time I heard about a patch where almost 500 farmers grow cucumbers instead of wheat in the summer season. I planned to visit Chatar village in Jalalgarh block of Purnia district, which is only 35 km from our location.

I discussed this with my teammates and together we planned to make a visit there. The next day, Arshad and I went to Chatar village. We were surprised to see three trucks from Patna and Darbhanga standing on the road. Farmers were busy loading the cucumbers in the truck. It seemed that no other crops grew in this area; we could only see cucumbers in the field. After talking to the farmers, I understood that they have been

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growing cucumber for the last 20 years and earning around Rs 1.25 lakhs from their one acre of land. Growing wheat would give them a return of merely Rs 15,000 from one acre.

I started dreaming...Can cucumber be a good option in our area? Will the farmers adopt it? If so, why have they not started yet? These questions came to my mind because the farmers in our area were also growing only wheat and had told us about the losses they faced in wheat cultivation. I thought about the impact it would have if the people in our area successfully initiated cucumber cultivation. The season was about to end, and we would have to wait for one year before we took on cucumber cultivation. I wanted to discuss this with all the SHGs in our area.

I went to the Parkan village the next day for a SHG meeting. I called some men to the SHG meeting as well. After their savings and credit transactions, I shared my experiences of Chatar with them and asked whether they were aware of it. I was shocked to know that most of them were not aware about the area just 50 km away from their village. However, they showed their eagerness to visit the area. We planned an 'exposure' visit

the very next day. I was excited and the women were excited too. Asmati, said, "*Hum pehli bar ghar se bahar ghumne ke liye sath milkar jaenge* (This will be the first time that women are going together out of the village)." Some of the members were fearful and said about me, "*Pata nahin kahan le jaega* (Don't know where he will take us)." About 16 women and six men were ready to visit Chatar. They took responsibility for arranging for a vehicle that would take us there.

The next morning, a woman named Salma from the village called me and said that no women would go as they had not been given permission by their husbands. I was surprised and rather sad. I immediately reached the village and sat with the SHG. After some discussion, I understood that they wanted to go but were afraid to do so. I again tried to motivate them and after some time 12 women and six men got ready for the exposure visit and we reached Chatar after two hours.

The experience in Chatar was exciting. All of us enjoyed seeing the huge cucumber fields. "*Baap re baap kaisan kheera faral chhai* (What a production of cucumber)!" was the instant remark by one of the members.

After visiting the field, we called some farmers from Chatar and requested them to share their experiences in cucumber cultivation. The farmers said that about 12 years back, they also used to grow only wheat in the rabi season. After they learned about cucumber cultivation, all the farmers of the area abandoned wheat cultivation. Earlier, they were earning only Rs 5,000 from one *bigha* of land, whereas now they were earning Rs 30,000 to 40,000 on an average from their one *bigha*.

Listening to the experiences of the farmers at Chatar, the SHG members were delighted and said, "*Hum log isi liye garib hai, hum log kheti karna nahi jante hai, isi liye kamane ke liye bahar jana parta hai, ab aankh khul gaya* (That's why we are poor, we don't know how to do agriculture; and we always migrate to earn money)." Most of them said that they would change to growing cucumber and would share these experiences with the other women of the village.

The next day, I arranged a meeting in the village and invited those who went for the exposure visit to share their experiences. After the meeting, 12 members made a commitment to grow cucumber next year.

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I continued the process of exposure visits and conducted two more. About 40 more SHG members and their spouses visited Chatar. From that time on, I always tried to keep alive the discussion around cucumber cultivation. The coming year, during the *rabi* season, as we got involved in wheat cultivation, we asked those farmers who had committed to experiment with the change the previous year following the exposure visits to leave some land for cucumber. More than fifty persons retracted. Yet, about 100 farmers were ready to experience cucumber cultivation for the first time.

Although, we were ready to grow cucumber, no one had any concrete experience of cucumber cultivation. So, we called a resource person from Chatar village for four months to provide continuous technical support to the farmers. We formed a Kisan Sabha in each hamlet, where farmers met every week to discuss the issues, progress, challenges, inputs requirement, etc. The trainers also provided technical knowledge in these meetings. Often, seed sellers also reached the meetings, with the required inputs.

After much struggle, we were able to initiate cucumber cultivation

in 40 bighas of land with 98 farmers. It was really a great moment for the area. Other farmers also visited the field and shared, "*Is baar dekhte hai agla bar lagaenge* (Let's see the result this time, will do it the next season)." After seeing the cucumbers in the field, the farmers and the other villagers were so excited; it was as if they had won the World Cup. Their happiness was somewhat dampened, however, when the cucumbers reached the market. The rate of the cucumber in the *mandi* was at an average of Rs 2.5–3 per kg, which reduced the net income of the farmers drastically. We were expecting an average realization of Rs 5–6 per kg.

Despite this, many farmers earned Rs 5,000–20,000 for the first time, which was more than ten times what they earned from their traditional wheat crop. The farmers and the villagers were very happy and they were eager to grow cucumbers in the coming year. The other farmers also showed interest in cucumber cultivation for the next year. They were reassured that cucumber could be grown in their land and they could earn as much as Rs 30,000 in just four months from their one bigha of land. We were also confident and saw the

potential in cucumber cultivation in changing the farm-based livelihood of the area.

Although farmers did not get as much money as they hoped to, due to the differences in the rate, it made a great impact in the area. The confidence of the farmer and that of the team grew. Many farmers said that they would not migrate in the season; instead, they would stay home and earn money from vegetable cultivation. We are also planning to scale-up cucumber cultivation along with some other vegetable crops next year.

We tried to link the farmers with the local market but were unable to do so due to limited production. We will have to ensure mass production in the coming years so that a link is established with the outside markets and the area could be developed as a hub of vegetable cultivation. The staff of the Bihar Rural Livelihood Promotion Society (BRLPS) also visited the cucumber fields and discussed the cultivation with the farmers. They were excited with the initiative and planned to demonstrate it in their area.

Usually, the women of this area were not involved in agriculture; however, they were engaged from

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the start to the marketing in cucumber cultivation. This set a precedent in the area and could lead to more participation of women in agriculture, especially in vegetable cultivation.

In my two-year sojourn in Araria, I found that my motivation fluctuated greatly. Often, I was frustrated by people's comments; nevertheless, I did not lose hope. I am inspired by the words of Og Mandino, "Failure will never overtake me if my determination

to succeed is strong enough." I believed that the people would understand me at some point.

Now the situation has changed. People from the area respect me. When I enter the village, I hear, "*Salam wale kum, bhai,* (*Greetings brother*)," and many *didis* say, "*Bhai khana khakar jaiga, aapka manpasand saag banaye hai.* (*Brother have the food, we have made your favourite food*)."

It provides me great satisfaction to see the changes in the village.

Now the women talk to me without any hesitation as if I were their own. I can enter any house without any hesitation.

The challenges are many. We are now confident of overcoming them. The success of the cucumber cultivation has also provided a way to develop farm-based livelihoods. This can now be scaled-up, which will change the culture of farming in the area.

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