

SHIFTING MINDSETS: A Roadmap of Arajū Village Organization

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Needing a strong collective to enhance their understanding about social and political agendas, to practice a changed culture, the women of Arajū village, through their Village Organization, have collectively overcome the barrier of societal pressure and have understood the real sense of democracy.

IN THE LARGE AND COMPLEX socio-political arena we live in, people often talk about their helplessness. As individuals, they think that they are not capable enough to influence or change the system. They, therefore, choose to remain beneficiaries rather than struggle for their basic rights and entitlements. The daily struggle for livelihood, rigid societal norms and an enormous sense of powerlessness place a three-pronged pressure on the people and they prefer to maintain status quo rather than fight the hard battle against injustice.

This principle has a greater impact on women because they belong to the most vulnerable sections of society. The existence of deprivation in society is more structural than natural; therefore, there is fear coupled with an attitude of disinterest among the people. They lack the will to raise their voice and to participate in governance. The higher

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castes dominate the social structures in the rural areas; the state mechanism has only strengthened this by entrusting this privileged section of society to perform the developmental role.

The privileged are bestowed with all the information on the processes for accessing government facilities. They, therefore, occupy local governance systems in large numbers and influence Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in their favour. This has led to a non-equitable distribution of government benefits, out-casting the marginalized sections and depriving the helpless citizens.

Poor governance at the local level creates an environment for bureaucrats to indulge in corruption, with the help of the local elite. For a small incentive, they easily promote exploitation at various levels. Societal norms, rituals and taboos restrict the marginalized, especially women, from participating in the developmental processes or to raise their voice against injustice. They have the least access to resources and knowledge, leading to poor livelihood opportunities. There is no option for the marginalized sections of society, except to request or beg for access

to their rights and entitlements. These people, especially the women, need a strong collective to enhance their understanding about the social and political agendas, to practice a changed culture and build their self-confidence, raise their voice in different forums and believe they are capable of bringing about change.

Realizing that they have the potential to change the situation, the women's collective of Araju village has overcome the barrier of societal pressure and has understood the real sense of democracy. As a co-traveller of this movement, I am sharing my experiences of this journey.

MY INITIAL INTERACTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

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During my initial days of engagement in late 2014 when I visited the village and talked with some of the SHG women, they complained to me that they did not get any benefits from being a part of the SHG and asked what I was going to do for them. Upon further discussion, I found that they were irregular members of the organization and contributed very little of their time to SHG meetings. Most of them had no record of their own savings

because they usually sent the money to be deposited through their children. They rarely checked the accounts.

The women had constituted a Watershed Committee to run the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP), with three members elected from each SHG. When I attended the meetings, I found that the women there were completely dependent on me for their decisions and also expected to be compensated in cash for the time they spent in the meetings.

I began my facilitation by asking them why they were there, what the purpose of Watershed Committee was and what the responsibility of the members was. The import of the questions bounced off them because they just repeated the same thing. "What is our benefit in working for the whole village? We are putting our household work on hold to come here and are getting nothing in return."

After a while, I began looking at it from their point of view and also critically analyzing the reason behind everything. I realized there was an ideological gap between my understanding of the role of an SHG collective and the women's expectations from

Thus, our first focus was to help them realize the power of collective strength and action. For complete involvement of the community and for them to feel the need for collective effort, they needed a concrete, common agenda

it. They considered themselves as beneficiaries, who looked to external agencies to help them develop, without their putting in any effort and time. The collective, for them, was a mere medium to get government subsidies. There was need to talk with each SHG, discuss why they had formed the SHG and rearticulate their expectations of the collective.

THE BEGINNING

In early 2015, a strengthening and needs-identification exercise was conducted with all the SHGs of Araju. During the training, it became clear that the SHG members had many issues regarding the proper functioning of SHGs, livelihood opportunities, the functioning of PRIs, the lack of government services, and violence against women.

We compiled a list of the issues and shared it with them, to help them realize the commonality of the agenda. However, the SHG members were not confident enough to take action on these issues because they saw themselves as powerless without adequate knowledge about how to handle these problems. Thus, our first focus was to help them

realize the power of collective strength and action. For complete involvement of the community and for them to feel the need for collective effort, they needed a concrete, common agenda.

Issues were raised sporadically in the SHG regarding water scarcity, violence and government services but the women regarded these to be individual problems. The broader village-/panchayat-level picture was missing. Although I had lots of data and analyses to share and discuss with them, my endeavour was to always generate an interest among the women to look into incidents and their effects.

Many times I had to hold my anxiety and curiosity back and just remain as an observer of the situation. This provided immense data for later on discussion and analyses into the successes or failures, and for exploring the need for a bigger collective action.

In one incident, Kalpana Devi of Kamar *tola* was beaten by her brother-in-law over a land dispute. Drunk, he abused the SHG members of Jai Maa Kali Mahila Mandal, who tried to protect her. At that time, her husband was not at home. The women of the SHG were scolded and threatened for raising their

voices. Later, they shared the helplessness they had felt. When this incident was discussed in the SHG of that hamlet, my role was to highlight the feelings of helplessness and to promote conversations that would lead to a positive change rather than to further de-motivation.

For example, I asked them why they felt bad about a woman being beaten. I checked with them the frequency and the extent of such incidents and what possible steps they could take to change the situation. I used our discussion to highlight their strength in terms of numbers, unity and commonality. The women understood the need for collective strength and initiated discussions with other SHGs.

The women of the other SHGs also started discussing the issue and came forward to act. However, because of the absence of a definite forum, it was becoming difficult to communicate information and to take decisions. In a meeting with all the SHGs, a solution for this was discussed and a village-level organization of women was conceived of.

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SHGs earlier. The women realized that even though they had come there for a single agenda, there were many other issues common to them, which were neglected because they considered themselves powerless.

They started discussing these common issues and found that the so-called individual problems were not just individual problems; they were actually generic problems. They agreed that a village-level organization was required if they were to take action on these common issues. After much discussion, the issues were divided into four broad categories: institution building, livelihood promotion, justice delivery, and ensuring rights and entitlements.

As a result, a bigger collective called the Village Organization (VO), came into existence. Four representatives from each SHG would meet regularly to discuss these issues and take action to support the SHGs in solving them.

The values of the collective were discussed critically and thoroughly; the group decided that they would be inclusive, participatory and transparent. During the discussion, the villagers realized that they had

minimal say in their entitlements; they blamed the government mechanism for their problems, without realizing that they had a role to play in resolving these issues through influencing the PRIs and the stakeholders.

There were also some critical areas that needed to be understood such as group processes, local governance, legal rights, social security programmes and advanced agricultural practices. The women needed to be aware so that they could take proper action. The VO, therefore, needs to act in collaboration with the PRI, to resolve these issues.

Coming back to the case of Kalpana Devi, the village women were indignant. They wanted to know how a brother-in-law could beat his younger brother's wife when he was not even allowed to go close to her shadow, especially when her husband was not present at the time. The women shared that there were many cases when a husband beat his wife but for a brother-in-law to do so was unacceptable.

My thoughts about this were, 'Why should a husband be allowed to beat his wife?' As far as I was concerned, beating a person was a violation of human rights. I remained silent, however, because

I saw that a common agenda was bringing the women together. I held myself back thinking that if they were to become organized, I would get many chances to discuss these issues further.

In the very next meeting, they called the family members of Kalpana Devi to the VO meeting. All the facts were examined from all perspectives. After hearing them, the VO members gave strict instructions to her brother-in-law to bear all the costs for her treatment and to give up alcohol consumption. In case he disobeyed this decision of the VO, a heavy fine would be imposed upon him.

Realizing that all the women had united to form this powerful collective, he agreed to pay for the treatment costs of Kalpana Devi and to give up alcohol from that day. This incident also challenged the views of many other villagers, who had been waiting and watching the situation, doubting the women's power to influence. Feeling threatened by the outcome, the husbands of some of the *didis* started forbidding them to attend the meetings. The taste of collective strength, however, was irresistible for the women, who insisted on attending the meetings. This case also helped to abate other such

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cases of violence in the village and created a fear against open alcohol consumption.

MOVING AHEAD WITH GATHERING KNOWLEDGE

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A training programme was organized to analyze and reflect on the government and the PRI system, how they functioned, their expenses, the role of the citizens in the proper functioning of the government, etc. This has helped the women understand the government and the institution of the PRI, its functions and functionaries, and the role of the people in the selection of a leader, in governance and in monitoring the actions being taken.

Linking this knowledge to practical applicability and making the community aware about their needs is very necessary to actualize understanding with experience. PRI elections were about to be held at that time. We discussed and planned the participation of women and their institution in the election process. For the first time, the women of the village created awareness among the voters of the *panchayat* about the importance of selecting a responsive PRI leader and also about the malpractices that exist

in the election campaign.

They decided to set a rule that nobody would take money or alcohol from the contestants. They also called for an *aam sabha* to hear from the contestants about their idea of development and to let them know what the villagers expected from the PRI representatives and from the PRI as an institution.

The major demands of the people were that the *gram sabha* be regularized, the *panchayat* office remain open regularly, women participate in forums, drinking water be available, and some other developmental needs. The women discussed who they should select to ensure good governance. Finally, many of the candidates they expected to win were elected.

My role was to be in close contact with the women and to be aware of what was happening; to project the various ways of action to work towards what the community wants to establish; to provide moral support; and to predict consequences. It is necessary for a development professional to establish a consultative relationship with the villagers so that the members of the community are able to gain confidence, knowledge,

awareness of dimensions and, above all, an ability to carry out the functions of the collective in a non-dominating, non-directive and non-confrontational environment.

Immediately after the elections, a *swagat samaroh* was organized, in which the women of the entire *panchayat* invited the elected representatives to congratulate them and to remind them of their promises. The elected members reiterated their commitments and showed their obligation to follow public orders. This boosted the confidence of the women to such a level that, from then on, they overcame their fear of interaction with the PRI representatives. They realized that because they were in a collective, they had a greater say in society and a greater influence over the PRI.

In order to tap all the available opportunities, it is important to be aware of the many needs of the community, to be in sync with the bigger movements, to understand the role of the people in the change process and to build ownership in the changing scenario. Anticipating the community's needs and recognizing the benefit of engagement can help build a sense of importance among villagers, leading to their

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increased involvement in the process of governance.

After the PRI elections, the government ran the Yojna Banao Abhiyan (YBA), to prepare a detailed developmental plan for the *panchayat*. Here again, we conducted a training with the VO members to help them understand the components of this Abhiyan and the role of the community in preparing this plan. As a result, the women participated in YBA and also monitored the process. When the women found that in some places the planning team was skipping the *gram sabha* meetings, they sat with the Panchayat Planning Team (PPT) of the YBA and demanded that the proper process be followed.

Hearing that the members of the planning team were bypassing the process due to shortage of time, the women proposed that they would help them in completing the plan. The women submitted the plan following the proper process within the timeline. The collective also started pressurizing PRI representatives to consider the views of the collective on various issues, thus, creating a more inclusive decision-making forum. The women also started participating in the *gram sabha*.

Finding the women's forum helpful and influential, the villagers and the defunct SHG members began to show trust in the institution and to bring their issues to the VO. The VO promptly extended its support to revive SHGs, to resolve the issues. To improve time management and understand various group processes of the VO, a training programme was conducted for the members. This exercise helped them understand their strength and the importance of the process in strengthening their institution. The procedure of the VO meeting was designed as also was norm setting. Select members of the VO, along with some PRI members, were given training on citizenship and government social security schemes, to build knowledge and ownership. This was further linked with the Right to Food (RTF) movement. The status of women and the involvement and participation of women in the development of the village was always an important agenda in the VO meeting.

Women's participation in the *gram sabha* was set as an important agenda for the VO. The VO works as a forum to help the women gain confidence, practice values and experience change so that they can participate in bringing change by engaging with

mainstream systems. The purpose of the VO is not to create a parallel system but to put forward the women's opinion strongly in public forums.

One morning, a member of the SHG found a notice at the *panchayat bhawan* stating that the *gram sabha* was to be conducted that day. She called for an emergency meeting and shared this information with the other members. The women immediately rushed to the *panchayat* office. In that meeting, they were selecting members for a sub-committee. First, the women raised the topic of the lack of communication about the *gram sabha*. Those responsible for it began to blame each other. Finally, the *mukhiya* took responsibility for the non-communication, apologized to the *gram sabha* and also committed to, henceforth, inform everyone. The women also demanded equal seats in the many sub-committees, and the *gram sabha* had to give in to their request. As a result, women came to be placed in crucial roles of monitoring and executing *panchayat* work.

The women also asked the *mukhiya* to present the expenditure details of the

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panchayat, which he agreed to produce in the next meeting. VO members are now aware of what is happening and are following up on the progress of the *panchayat* work. They helped the *panchayat* enlist Indira Awas Yojana for the needy and also prepared the work-plan for 2016–17. They also have fought against the bribes taken by ward members and PDS dealers while giving gas connections and taking PDS registrations. They raised their voice in the *gram sabha* in front of government officials, to make the people honest by refunding the money to the villagers, and have shown the true power of citizens. They are also being selected as mates for MGNREGA work. Recently, they have also been actively engaged in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP).

The Araju VO has actively participated in the RTF campaign and has taken considerable action to ensure proper PDS service in its *panchayat*. The members discussed PDS issues in the VO several times. They sat with PRI members and PDS dealers and formulated the rules for distribution. Because of continuous fights at the dealers' shops, the villagers did not get proper rations. Also, the dealer

scolded them and threatened to take away their ration card. The same issue was discussed in nearby *panchayats* and the villagers were agitating against it. Knowing the situation, a common meeting was planned with the government officials such as the Marketing Officer (MO), the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO), the Block Development Officer (BDO), the District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO) and the State Advisor to the Supreme Court on the RTF Act.

The women participated in that meeting held in mid-2016, to share their problems. Several grievance redressal mechanisms were discussed. This was followed by the *mukhiya* writing a letter to the MO and the SDO, with the complaints of the card holders, stating their issues and demanding immediate action. As a result, one dealer of that *panchayat* was suspended. The other dealers, however, still provided half a kilogram less rice, saying that they were helpless because rice was in short supply.

In November 2016, the women of Araju *panchayat* organized a *gram sabha*, and with the help of the *mukhiya*, issued a complaint letter against the other dealers of the *panchayat*. Not finding any action from the responsibility

bearer, they went to the ration shop and demanded full rations and ensured it in the presence of PRI members. They also met the District Collector and the *panchayat* presented the whole case in writing to the MO and the SDO, demanding the cancellation of dealership. As a result, two more dealers of Araju were suspended. Now, the dealers distribute the allocated rations to the VO members; they are still depriving those who are not in the SHG of the full amount. The VO members plan mass mobilization, through rallies and campaigns, to fight against the corruption in PDS.

People have recognized the effort and success of the collective; more women have become interested in becoming members of the SHG. Also, the VO decided to increase its strength by linking more and more SHGs under its umbrella. The next step is to fulfill the increased demand for knowledge inputs around various themes. The VO has come out with a solution by selecting women resource persons, trained by PRADAN.

They have selected six women to deliver training in 18 SHGs of this village. These resource persons support the women in building an understanding about

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SHGs around themes such as livelihoods, SHG functioning and social security programmes. The VO is developing a mechanism of task delivery and monitoring for its trainers. It has extended support to other VOs in this *panchayat*, to make them aware and motivate them to participate in development agendas. Meetings and rallies have been held to create awareness among the women of the *panchayat*. As a result, two other VOs of this *panchayat* are now actively participating in the meetings and are challenging the existing system of society. They have also constituted a *panchayat*-level women's collective to be in touch with all the villages of the *panchayat* and the PRI.

Cases of violence against women were being brought to the VO sporadically. Feeling the need to build a broader understanding on the implications of gender discrimination within the community, a workshop was organized on Gender with the VO members. In the workshop, women gained clarity on the differential treatment meted out to the boys and girls, the division of labour and the different forms of violence against women.

To increase solidarity among women, the VO planned a

Mahila Diwas, which included all the SHG members in the nearby *panchayats* as well. The objective was to help women realize their strength, create solidarity and build recognition around the stakeholders. The event was financed, planned and organized by them, with minimal involvement of PRADAN. The event was a great success and achieved its purpose.

The Arajú VO has addressed many cases of violence over time. In late 2016, an incident of violence came to the notice of the VO. Parvati Devi of Mohali *tola* married a man from Gosandih village in West Bengal. Her husband migrated for work and when he was away, her in-laws accused her of not doing any work at home and sent her back to her parents' house. Although many efforts were made by the family to arrive at a compromise, the in-laws sent her back with a different excuse every time.

The case was brought to the VO by the family members of the woman and the SHG of that hamlet. All the facts were documented and attached to a letter from the head of the family requesting the VO to solve this issue. The VO members, then, discussed what could be done and how they should act. They

also talked to the in-laws of Parvati Devi over the phone and called them for a meeting. The in-laws refused and asked the VO members to come to their village. The VO members booked two trekkers and conducted a meeting with the VO members of Gosandih village, along with some *panchayat* representatives.

After a long discussion, they came to the conclusion that the in-laws of Parvati Devi needed to keep her with them and to take care of her otherwise legal action would be taken against them. The VO members prepared a written bond stating all these terms and had it signed by both the parties. But after two months Parvati Devi again fell ill and her parents took her back. Now, the VO has advised the family to go for legal action and is ready to support them in the case.

In another case, a 10-year-old girl of Thakur *tola* was accused of stealing Rs 5000 from her uncle's house. The mother of the girl was a single woman and was a member of the Saraswati Mahila Mandal. The case was brought to the VO, which enquired into the matter. After a long discussion, the truth was revealed. Somebody had put a dead chicken into the well of the man and he thought that this 10-year-old girl was the

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culprit. Finding no proof, but wanting her punished, he accused her of stealing money from his house. After the truth came to light, the VO members forced the uncle to apologize and beg for forgiveness as well as contribute Rs 10,000 for her marriage, as a compensation for defaming her.

Many more cases are being raised

at the VOs and are being tactfully resolved by the women of Araju.

One of the main objectives of the VO is to extend itself to include as many marginalized women as it can. Recently, the members had conversations with the Muslim community, in a bid to bring Muslim women into the SHG fold. This is a challenge because taking an interest in the affairs of

the community and women going outside of their homes are seen as going against the Islamic culture.

“This is only the beginning and there is a long way to go!” With this motto, this VO is unstoppable.

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Tulasi Pradhan is based in Jainamore, Jharkhand



SHG members make *rangoli* as part of Women's Day celebrations.
