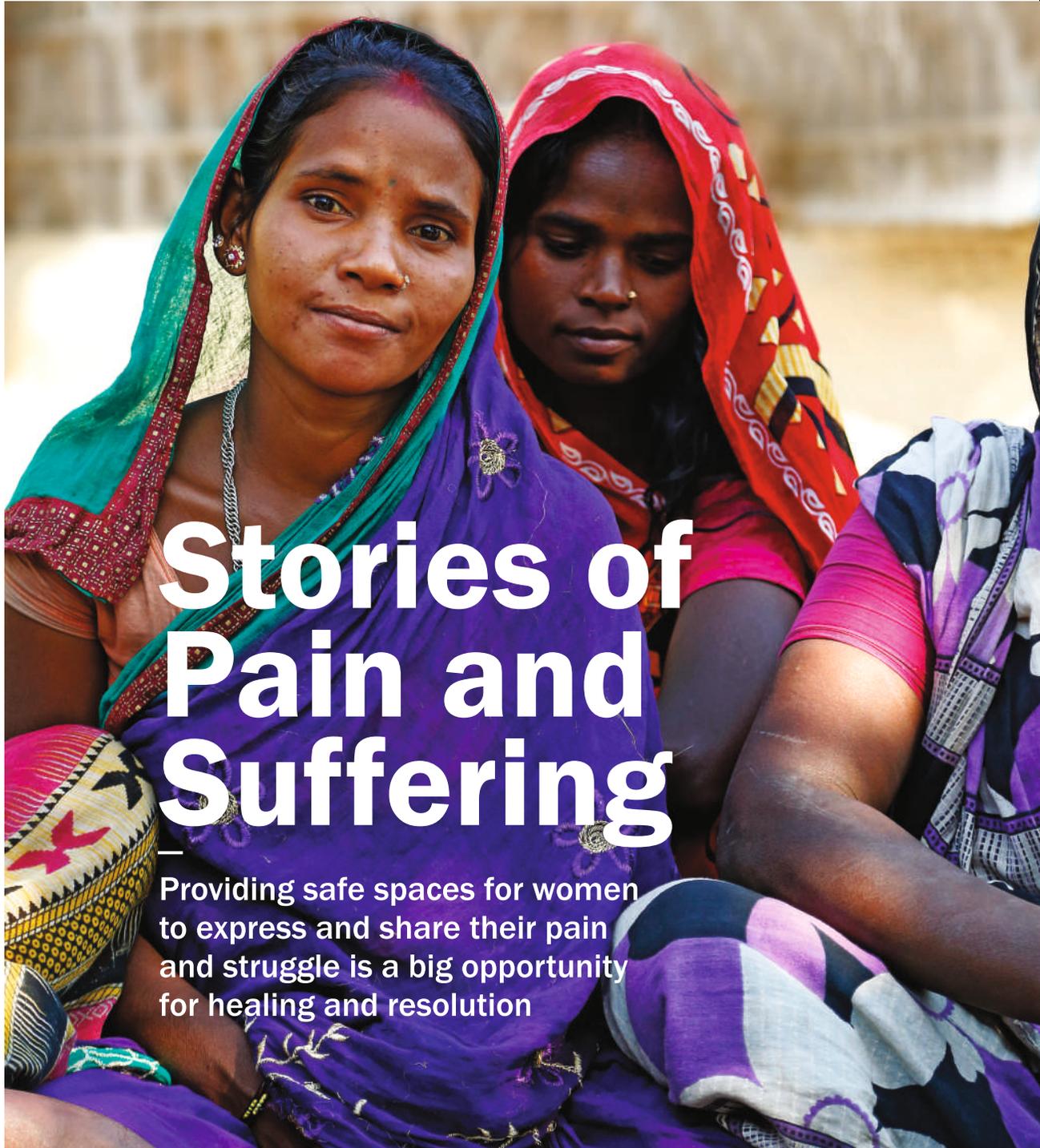


# newsreach

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

JUL\_AUG 2017 • Vol 17 No 4



## Stories of Pain and Suffering

Providing safe spaces for women to express and share their pain and struggle is a big opportunity for healing and resolution

### LEAD

Nari Adalat: Justice for Women by Women

### CASE STUDY

Blinded by Superstition: A Case Study on Witch Hunting

### JOURNEY

Transforming Community and the Self: The Story of Ramkol Village

SHG members playing games at their annual *panchayat*-level meeting, Latta Dikwani *panchayat*, Poraiayat district, Jharkhand (p 20)



## 02 LEAD

### Nari Adalat: Justice for Women by Women

Tackling gender issues that lie at the heart of women's empowerment by setting up alternative justice systems saw the competence and compassion of the SHG members rise to the fore; they are now a force to reckon with

AVIJIT MALLIK

## 11 CASE STUDY

### Blinded By Superstition: A Case Study on Witch Hunting

Encouraging critical thinking through open discussion in public forums, thereby challenging traditional beliefs about witches being the cause of all the misfortunes that tribal communities face, is perhaps the only way that the bane of witch-hunting can be eradicated from society

MAROOF KHAN

## 17 MUSING

### SHGs: Changing Perspective of and Impact on a Development Practitioner

Realizing that SHGs are not merely credit-and-savings entities but have immense potential to be instruments of development and change is a huge discovery in the writer's professional journey

MANAN PATHAK

## 23 JOURNEY

### Stories of Pain and Suffering

Promoting SHGs for credit and savings and livelihoods is one important way of empowering village women; what is equally important is for women to be able to express and share their pain and struggle in their Lives Providing for safe spaces where the women can do so is a big opportunity for healing and resolution

TRISHAGNEE BORUAH

## 32 VIEW

### Development and Resistance

Reflecting on the assumptions and beliefs that a development professional has as he enters a community, the author explores the need for greater awareness, sensitivity and acceptance of villagers' abilities, requirements and choices

DIBYENDU CHAUDHURI

## 37 JOURNEY

### Transforming Community and the Self: The Story of Ramkol Village

Bringing about social change is a slow and painstaking process and must be based on an inherent faith in the ability and wisdom of the people one is working with. The women of Ramkol prove this as they are shepherded by a young development professional

KANIKA AGARWAL

# Nari Adalat: Justice for Women by Women

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Tackling gender issues that lie at the heart of women's empowerment by setting up alternative justice systems saw the competence and compassion of the SHG members rise to the fore; they are now a force to reckon with

“THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN OUR area has changed in the last six or seven years. Now they can speak up and raise their voice against discrimination,” says Kumari Ragini Ranjan in a bold voice. She is the President of the Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh (DMMS), Chandwara, Koderma, a Federation of Self- Help Groups (SHGs). She also told us that the Nari Adalat (Women's Court), which is part of this Federation, has done significant amount of work to change the situation. The Nari Adalat was formed in 2008, with a special focus to resolve various issues of women. 'Nari Adalat...Insaaf Ki Awaaz' is a body that is constituted of experienced women leaders, who handle issues related to domestic violence and

gender inequalities present in the operational area of DMMS.

The concept of women's courts came about with the judicial reform movement in India that dates back to the early years after the country gained its independence from Britain. In the late 1950s, a system of judicial councils, or *nyaya panchayats*, was introduced; although these councils were modeled upon the existing rural community or caste *panchayats*, they differed from the latter in a number of ways. Most important, their members were democratically elected, rather than drawn from a self-selected group of influential local elders. Furthermore, they were to administer the law of the land, rather than to enforce local custom.

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists also began to actively press for judicial reform. This was a time when the issues of violence against women, including (but not limited to) domestic violence, were arousing increasing public concern.

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This attempt to devise an alternative route to justice at the village level ultimately proved to be unworkable and by 1970 the institution became 'moribund' (Meschievitz and Galanter 1982). Soon, thereafter, legal reformers began advocating the establishment of a different kind of alternative dispute resolution system, the so-called 'people's court' (*lok adalat*). Thousands of cases have been 'settled' or people have arrived at a 'compromise' through the *lok adalats* since the first one began operating in 1982. Critics have cast doubts upon the extent to which these bodies actually deliver 'justice' to the weaker party.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists also began to actively press for judicial reform. This was a time when the issues of violence against women, including (but not limited to) domestic violence, were arousing increasing public concern. At present, many cases of social conflict have transformed into legal disputes, which accentuate problems rather than resolve them. Promotion and popularization of alternative methods of dispute settlement is, therefore, the need of the hour. Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms not only facilitate speedier justice but are also a process wherein the

parties involved have control over the eventual outcome. By and large, some salient features of such dispute-resolution are: participation, accommodation, fairness, voluntariness, neighbourliness, transparency and lack of animosity.

DMMS is a federated body at the block level, promoted by PRADAN's Telaiya team. The formation of SHGs in Chandwara block and in the surrounding areas of Koderma district of Jharkhand was initiated as long ago as in 1991–92. In the initial period, forming SHGs was a tough job due to the lack of trust in the promoting organization, as well as among the members themselves. Through some training programmes at the SHG level, we were able to build trust and, gradually, mobilize SHG women to show their solidarity and federate at the block level. During this period, PRADAN helped SHG members promote livelihoods with their existing resources, thereby strengthening the economic portfolio of the area.

Under the livelihoods promotion chapter, the PRADAN team helped women promote improved agriculture, set up small businesses, bring improvements in livestock rearing, etc. To

promote livelihoods, SHG members mobilized a programme fund from the block, the banks and from contributions from their own savings. PRADAN was involved in the transfer of technical knowledge to them through exposure visits, demonstrations, hand-holding, training, etc.

For the entire journey of 14–15 years, PRADAN's focus has been to stabilize the different tiers of SHGs and to promote livelihoods among people. The change in the area is visible in the form of eradication of the *mahajani* system, development of the savings habit, availability of some money in individual savings accounts, investment in livelihood activities, creation of trust among members, show of solidarity at the block level through Mahadhivesans, etc. Our facilitation has strictly been in the areas of savings and credit, strengthening Community Based organizations (CBOs) and livelihoods generation.

During our engagement, we noticed that the status of women was poor. Domestic violence in the family was rampant, the situation of single women was deplorable, the social position of women was extremely low and their participation in decision-

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Many SHG members became quite vocal at that time and requested PRADAN's support to change the situation. The journey began that day when SHG members voiced their concerns.

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making was minimal. We did not encourage SHG women to discuss these issues with us because of our own lack of competency in the field. Most of the time, the women did not even discuss these issues of atrocities against women in the presence of PRADAN professionals.

The participation of SHG members in livelihood-promotion activities fluctuated significantly and sometimes went so low as to be embarrassing for the livelihood-promotion organization. In 2005, we organized a camp to map the future direction of the Federation. In that camp, the Federation members prioritized many issues pertinent for their development. Of these issues, 'improving their status' emerged as the first priority.

During further discussions, we heard details of the issues related to women. Many SHG members became quite vocal at that time and requested PRADAN's support to change the situation. The journey began that day when SHG members voiced their concerns. The Federation began to discuss the issue of violence in their monthly meetings. In every Federation meeting, there was a long line of SHG members, who wanted help to resolve their

problems. Often, the issue could not be resolved in one session and had to be heard over a few days before any justice could be dispensed.

In 2007, the Federation members visited Disha, a Civil Society Organization, in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, to understand how it worked. For the first time, the women experienced an alternative dispute redressal system in the form of a '*Nari Adalat*'. They observed the various processes followed during the redressal and the impact it had for women at the societal level. DMMS took a prompt decision to promote an alternative dispute redressal mechanism, to address the issues raised by its members in various forums.

In 2008, the Federation initiated a body comprising experienced women leaders as members, on a voluntary basis. One criterion for being a member of this body was that the person had to have shown her concern for women's issues. The other criteria were: a) Engagement of the member would be purely voluntary and no remuneration would be paid; b) The member should have a good understanding about women's issues, try to resolve them and extend a helping hand to those in distress; c) The member should

have a good understanding about gender and patriarchy; d) The member should be able to facilitate discussions on gender issues; e) The member should engage with the line department without any hesitation and; f) The member should have patience to listen to the issues.

Initially, there were 20 women leaders, who volunteered at the Federation meeting, and a separate platform was formed to deal with women's issues. At that time, the name of the forum was Nari Sahayata Kendra (NSK). In the first meeting on 16 September 2008 at Tham Panchayat Building, some 20 women leaders, along with PRADAN professionals, met and discussed the purpose of the forum. The roles and responsibilities of the members of this forum was discussed; from the very beginning, it was clear that all the women leaders would work in a voluntary capacity. Also discussed was how this forum would be more acceptable in society, particularly in comparison to the caste *panchayat*.

The drawbacks of a caste-based *panchayat* was discussed at length and we tried to incorporate its best practices in NSK. From the very beginning, it was decided that there would be no charge

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From the very beginning, it was decided that there would be no charge to any party and at all times the gender lens would be used to solve the cases

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to any party and at all times the gender lens would be used to solve the cases. Apart from that, it was decided that the local administration such as the police station, the block officials and other influential people would be informed about the forum and that support would be drawn from them, as and when required.

In that first meeting, no cases were taken up. Another important decision taken was to identify two SHG members and have them trained as paralegals to support NSK. The date and venue of the next meeting were finalized. A significant number of women leaders from Tham and

the Madangundi *panchayats* were present. Therefore, it was decided that the next meeting would take place at Madangundi *panchayat*.

Once it was formed, Federation members transferred the cases of violence against women, handled in its monthly meetings, to NSK. The Federation members also informed the people in their areas about the formation of NSK.

From the second meeting onwards, cases began to come in and these were registered in a systematic manner. In the fourth meeting, an SHG member from Madangundi brought up a case of a land dispute. NSK, however, did

not take it up. During one of its review meetings, members shared that the SHG member's husband was trying to capture the land illegally and that the issue was not related to women. Later, a decision was taken to avoid any land-related issue unless the land was in the name of a woman.

There was a huge struggle to establish NSK in the area. The villagers usually organized a *panch* (village-level informal court), based mainly on caste lines. The general practice at the *panch* was to receive some funds from both the parties as fees, discuss the issue amongst themselves and provide the verdict. Most times,



**Hearing proceedings in the Nari Adalat**

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NSK volunteers collected information from the neighbours and the relatives of the complainant, discussed the matter with the family members and tried to identify the causes behind the violence

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these verdicts were influenced by the strong patriarchal thoughts of the *panch* members. Sometimes, their verdict was influenced by the hefty bribes they received. The villagers, and especially the women, were not always happy with the verdicts the *panch* gave.

After NSK was formed, women complainants were accompanied by the trained women leaders to the village court; these women leaders confronted the *panch* during the discussions. They argued with the *panch* about their patriarchal mindsets and challenged their decisions.

This was the very first step to dismantle the *panch* in the local area; sometimes, the *panch* refused to handle any domestic violence-related cases.

Simultaneously, PRADAN focused on developing three things at the local level to strengthen NSK. The first was to create awareness about gender issues at the SHG level, the second to promote paralegals and the third to create linkages with the concerned line departments such as the blocks, police stations and district-level legal bodies to draw support for NSK, as and when required.

Initially, most of the cases were of domestic violence, largely because PRADAN had initiated training programmes around discrimination, violence and gender issues. NSK volunteers collected information from the neighbours and the relatives of the complainant, discussed the matter with the family members and tried to identify the causes behind the violence. A significant number of cases have been resolved through NSK, mainly through facilitation. NSK members also provide women with a different perspective and, in difficult cases, they even drew



**Paralegals document the statements of the victim and the accused**

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## Gradually, the number of cases being handled by the NSK forum has increased and there has been an acceptance of the organization in society

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support from the local police station for punitive measures to be taken. During discussions at the family level, sometimes NSK volunteers invite the well-wishers of the family, to facilitate the process.

In 2009, NSK volunteers first visited the local police station for support to resolve a case. That was the first time the police officers came to hear about the existence of this platform to resolve cases related to women's issues. At this juncture, PRADAN realized the need to orient volunteers on the laws of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), specifically about the laws relating to women.

The issue was discussed at the Federation level and the women identified five SHG members from among themselves (all of them were literate), to be trained as paralegals to assist NSK volunteers in handling legal issues. All the five women have been trained by MARG (Multiple Action Research Group), a resource organization in the field of legal aid. Once trained, the volunteers became more aware about the laws protecting the interests of women in society. Gradually, the number of cases being handled by the NSK forum has increased and there has been

an acceptance of the organization in society.

Initially, the redressal system was open only to SHG members; slowly, several non-SHG members began to bring their issues to NSK for resolution. At the same time, the police officer of the local station began to advise the people to first take their issues to NSK; if NSK could not resolve the matter, they could bring it to the police. The officer said, "Please approach NSK because the members have the heart and the head to resolve any case. We, on the contrary, don't have any heart when resolving cases."

Of the 20 members, three usually play the role of the jury, and the others act as advisory members for the day. After registering the case, a group of volunteers try to understand the issue through interrogation of the complainant, and determine the nature of the case as to whether it is a case of domestic violence or of sexual harassment. Cases of the second nature are usually transferred immediately to the police station.

For the domestic violence cases, two to three volunteers go to the concerned village to gather information about the case; during this visit, they speak with the complainant, the relatives,

the neighbours and the women leaders of the village. This 'investigation' usually takes place within a few days so that the volunteers can present their findings in the next meeting. A letter is then sent to the complainant and the parties are summoned for a physical appearance in the next NSK meeting. The letter also mentions that in case either party does not want to appear, the case can be transferred to the appropriate authority.

During the hearing, the three judges usually ask questions to ascertain the issue and finalize the verdict. Before the finalization of the verdict, the judges also seek support from the Advisory Committee. Finally, both parties receive the verdict in writing, which they both sign, along with some witnesses, as a token of acceptance of the verdict.

In almost all the cases, NSK keeps a watch on the complainant's family for at least three to four months after the verdict, to ensure that the situation has improved as per the intervention. No fee is charged from either party. This is a forum created by DMMS for its SHG women, where they can share their issues without any fear, draw

This is a forum created by DMMS for its SHG women, where they can share their issues without any fear, draw support, lead a violence-free life and gradually move towards a fear-free vibrant society, which was their aspiration, as per their visioning exercise of 2005

support, lead a violence-free life and gradually move towards a fear-free vibrant society, which was their aspiration, as per their visioning exercise of 2005.

In 2011, PRADAN initiated a programme on gender awareness; SHG members underwent a series of trainings to build their perspective of gender. Discussions on the subject became very common after such trainings. The women leaders also began to keep a close watch for issues of violence in the villages and created an environment wherein women could raise their voice. Their attempt is to resolve most of the cases at the village level and transfer only the complicated cases to NSK.

In 2014, in one of the review meetings by Jagori, volunteers

realized that the women no longer required any assistance to resolve their issues; they just wanted justice. After getting an approval from the Federation, the forum renamed itself '*Nari Adalat*'.

At present, the *Nari Adalat* meets twice a month. It meets on the 16th of each month at the panchayat building in Tham, and on the 28th of the month at the panchayat building in Madangundi. Besides this, when it receives a case, a few members go and visit the village of the complainant to serve notice to the accused and to also gather first-hand data about the case. Based on the requirement, two or three of the literate members of the *Nari Adalat* constantly nurture the linkages with different stake-holders.

There are currently 21 women leaders who are members of the *Nari Adalat*. Eight of them act as judges and the others are helpers, who assist the judges. The volunteers of the *Nari Adalat* are experienced women leaders of the area and continuously raise issues related to women. They believe that women are equal to men and can take charge of their own lives. They also wish to see an equitable society. They have to devote a significant amount of time, on a voluntary basis, to bring about a change in society.

Initially, their focus was on SHG members only; however, now they extend support to all the women of the area. Mina Devi of Pipradih village, a volunteer said, "It is our role to create a violence-free village for women." Some positive help from the

**Table 1: Cases Handled So Far**

| Year         | Domestic Violence | Separation | Rape     |
|--------------|-------------------|------------|----------|
| 2008-10      | 14                | 4          | 0        |
| 2011         | 10                | 2          | 0        |
| 2012         | 18                | 2          | 1        |
| 2013         | 22                | 2          | 0        |
| 2014         | 28                | 1          | 0        |
| 2015         | 10                | 0          | 0        |
| 2016         | 13                | 0          | 1        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>115</b>        | <b>11</b>  | <b>2</b> |

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They believe that women are equal to men and can take charge of their own lives. They also wish to see an equitable society.

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#### **Case Study: Rani**

Rani (name changed) is a married woman and belongs to a scheduled caste community. She is around 20 years old and got married at 18. She has two sisters and one brother and is the eldest child. Although her parents are very poor, she had enjoyed a happy life with her family. She lived in Rembo Karma village, in Chouparan block. She got married to Ravi (name changed) of Basaria village of the same block. Initially, she was happy with her in-laws; however, after a year, she was physically and mentally tortured by her husband and her father-in-law. Their main demand was more money as dowry. Initially, she did not share this demand with her parents. When the torture increased, however, she left her in-laws' house and returned to her native place, around 10 km from her marital home.

Her mother-in-law lodged a complaint against her at the *Nari Adalat* stating that her daughter-in-law is quite rude and likes to stay at her native place and also threatens them with dire consequences if they force her to return to her marital home. She didn't say anything about the physical and mental torture faced by her daughter-in-law.

The *Nari Adalat* registered the case and began investigations. When the volunteers of the *Nari Adalat* approached Rani, she did not reveal anything but refused to return to her in-laws' house. The volunteers could not understand Rani's behaviour. As per the procedure, the volunteers then tried to question her sisters and the neighbours of her native village, who shared the real story of her mental agony. To cross-verify the facts, the volunteers visited the in-laws' village and made their enquiries. The neighbours gave them a similar response.

The *Nari Adalat* asked both the parties to appear before it and asked them to speak about the issue. Her husband and father-in-law admitted to their actions and accepted their mistake. At the same time, her mother-in-law also shared her inability to protect her daughter-in-law due to her ignorance. The *Nari Adalat* gave the verdict in favour of Rani and asked her in-laws to create a violence-free environment at the family level. Both parties accepted the verdict and signed a copy of the verdict for future reference.

A follow up from *Nari Adalat* revealed that Rani is now very happy to stay with her husband and her in-laws. She is blessed with a baby boy, who is now six months old.

#### **Case Study: Amina Khatoon**

Amina Khatoon (name changed) got married to Latif Mian (name changed) at a very early age. She has two children. Latif Mian was a migrant labourer and worked in Mirjapur (Uttar Pradesh) as a porter for a warehouse. He has a small piece of agricultural land, the produce of which is not sufficient to feed his family two square meals. He lives with Amina, their children and his parents in Bagro Baramasia village in Domchanch block, Koderma district. Amina's health does not permit her to take on heavy work on a daily wage basis. In the absence of her husband, she could not share her difficulties with her in-laws. Meanwhile, they pressurized her to bring money from her parental home to pay for her treatment as well as for their basic needs. She tried to talk to her husband to convince him about her physical state. Her father-in-law did not allow her to talk with her husband over the phone. She, somehow, was managing her life and bringing up her children.

One day, when her father in-law was away, she spoke with her husband over the phone and narrated her story. To her utter shock, her husband refused to believe her and asked her to leave the house so that he could marry

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## Another volunteer, Uma Devi, said, “The village society recognizes us now as judges, capable of providing effective solutions to resolve family disputes

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someone else and enjoy his life. She was speechless for some time and then took a decision to return to her native place with her two children. Her in-laws also facilitated her decision and asked her to leave their house without wasting any time. This is a very common phenomenon in this place.

Amina came back to her parents’ house at Pipradih village of Chandwara block of the same district. Her mother was a very active SHG member of her village and approached the *Nari Adalat* to intervene in the matter without any delay. The *Nari Adalat* summoned both the parties on a stipulated day. In the meantime, the volunteers visited her in-laws’ village to gather information about the incident. Most of them provided information in favour of Amina and confirmed that torture had occurred at her place. Amina’s father-in-law appeared in the *Nari Adalat* but her husband was not present on that day. Her father-in-law denied all charges and was not ready to take back Amina. The volunteers tried to talk with her husband on phone but he refused to appear or accept the importance of the *Nari Adalat*.

The very next day, the volunteers approached the women’s police station with a petition from Amina, to resolve the case. There is a good rapport between the *Nari Adalat* and the police, having worked together to handle such atrocities occurring against the women of this area. Then and there, the Officer-in-Charge talked with the father-in-law and asked him to appear at the police station. Again, Amina’s husband and his father did not take the summons very seriously and deliberately missed the date. With a strong follow-up from the *Nari Adalat*, the Officer-in-Charge once more ordered him to appear before him. Finally, Amina’s husband and his father came to the police station. The police officer invited the volunteers of the *Nari Adalat* to discuss the issue. He announced that if the men did not comply with the verdict of the *Nari Adalat*, the police would act in the case.

The volunteers asked them to discuss their issues in the light of gender perspective. Both (her husband and her father-in-law) accepted their fault and agreed to bring back Amina and her children without any delay. Before leaving the police station, they signed their agreement of the verdict of the *Nari Adalat*. Amina is very happy with her husband now. He stays with her and is doing some business in the village itself.

administration at the right time also helped the *Nari Adalat* build its confidence. Another volunteer, Uma Devi, said, “The village society recognizes us now as judges, capable of providing effective solutions to resolve family disputes.”

In most villages in the operational area of the Federation, there is a visible change in the status of women. Incidents of domestic violence have declined

considerably. SHG members are well aware of domestic violence and can easily spot instances of discrimination issues; they now raise their voice in various forums. Sunita Devi said, “Due to our awareness and the presence of the *Nari Adalat*, our status has improved.” Some men are also very thankful to the *Nari Adalat* because their families have been saved. In almost all the cases, domestic violence usually

originates over a trivial issue and, gradually, becomes a more complicated issue. A police officer said, “We arrive at a conclusion by applying our brains; but the *Nari Adalat* usually uses the brain and the heart to come to a conclusion, which is very helpful in maintaining harmony in the village.”

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Avijit Mallik is based in Koderma, Jharkhand

# Blinded by Superstition: A Case Study on Witch Hunting

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Encouraging critical thinking through open discussion in public forums, thereby challenging traditional beliefs about witches being the cause of all the misfortunes that tribal communities face is perhaps the only way that the bane of witch-hunting can be eradicated from society

**O**N THE FREEZING MORNING of 9 December 2016, at around 5 a.m., when there was relatively low visibility and a deep silence had enveloped the area, three people barged into a house in Tapkara *panchayat* of Torpa block and attacked a 60 year-old woman named Susari Budh. They attacked her from behind without saying a word. She was dragged mercilessly out of the house, her hands and neck were tied and kerosene was poured on her. The poor frail lady begged for her life but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Nature was a mute witness to the men lighting a matchstick and setting her on fire, burning her alive in front of her rented house.

An innocent woman lost her life, accused of indulging in witchcraft. Hatred and violence enveloped the area. Hearing about such incidents always had me wonder whether witches actually existed or was someone pronouncing an innocent person a witch. Why would a human being pronounce another a witch? How did this start?

I barely knew anything about witch-hunting except that it was a social evil. When trying to understand the above incident, many facts, myths, beliefs and superstitions came to the forefront. On 18 December 2016, a community meeting was called to examine the facts and to demystify the event that took place. The meeting was held in the Panchayat Bhawan, where about 150 people had gathered,

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## An innocent woman lost her life, accused of indulging in witchcraft. Hatred and violence enveloped the area.

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although only 25 to 30 were expected.

The participants included the Governing Board members of Torpa Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation in Khunti district, Jharkhand), a PRADAN professional, SHG members, change vectors, the local administration, Auxillary nurse midwife (ANM), journalists, regional NGOs, representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Subhash (a resource person from JAGORI for the gender initiative) and several people from the neighbourhood. Some people, who attended the meeting, were aware of the purpose of the gathering, and some were not. The meeting started with a briefing about the case; following this, the incident

was discussed in detail with all the participants, in order to gather as many facts as possible.

The people present were told that on 15 November 2016 at around 2:30 a.m., a woman named Aneeta Sabhasoy was taken to the Torpa Sadar Hospital by the ANM because her labour pains had started. At 6:30 a.m., she gave birth to a daughter and after one hour to another, and the weight of both the infants was critically low, that is, 2.4 kg and 1.2 kg, respectively. Despite the low weight of the infants at birth, the mother and the twins were discharged from the hospital late in the evening the very same day.

The woman already had three children and she had conceived after a long gap of 11 years,

which apparently had been an overwhelming and immensely emotional moment for her. And because she had given birth after a long time, she was not able to breastfeed her baby girls and fed them powdered milk. Unfortunately, the younger daughter died on 3 December 2016 and the mother was grief-stricken. She was unable to contain her emotions and then, tragically, the older twin also died on 8 December 2016 at around 12:30 a.m. In a matter of 23 days, the lady's world turned upside down.

The cause of death of the girls was not known because the public health system in the area is extremely poor and none of the doctors or nurses came to examine the infants. The



**Community meeting at the Panchayat Bhawan**

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In places like Jharkhand, where we have a large population of tribal communities, elderly women/widows live in fear of being killed as 'witches' when neighbours become ill or their livestock die unexpectedly.

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yellowish body colour of the children at the time of death was an indication that both the baby girls were suffering from jaundice.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of the matter. The mother of the twins went into a frenzy, and blamed a lady living in her neighbourhood for the death of her daughters; she pronounced the lady to be a witch. And, in Jharkhand, witches have no right to live.

Witch-hunting involves the branding of people, usually women, as witches, either after an observation made by an *ojha* or *bej* or a witch doctor. The victim, branded as a witch, is then subjected to numerous forms of torture—from beating, burning, being paraded naked through the village, being forced to eat human excrement to, sometimes, even being raped. In some cases, their hair is cut off, the victim and her children are socially ostracized and even put to death, and that too, in a brutal manner.

As described in the newspaper, *India Times*, "Witch-hunting dates back to the 14th century when certain people were labelled as 'witches' and executed across Europe, Africa and Asia. The victims included Joan of Arc, who was burnt alive at the stake, at

the tender age of 19 for heresy, on 30 May 1431." In places like Jharkhand, where we have a large population of tribal communities, elderly women/widows live in fear of being killed as 'witches' when neighbours become ill or their livestock die unexpectedly.

Jharkhand represents a modern-day paradox. Superstition, health, illiteracy and property dispute are the four major reasons for incidents of witchcraft in the tribal areas of Jharkhand. Cerebral malaria, TB (tuberculosis), diarrhoea, malnutrition and anaemia are very common in the villages here. The cause of death could be an illness or lack of healthcare centres or because people cannot reach the hospital in time because of the distance, the bad roads or just because they believe in superstition more than science. Regardless of the cause, however, witch-hunting is an evil practice that has been continuing.

"The Santhal theory of the origin of witchcraft attributes gender tensions as the reason for witch-hunting. The Kharia women were excluded from religious festivities and rituals because the tribal people feared that menstrual blood attracted evil spirits. Women in the tribal communities were left out of Adivasi rituals

and religion because of fear and suspicion of their sexuality," says Sashank S. Sinha in a research paper 'Adivasis, gender and the evil eye: The construction of witches in colonial Chotanagpur'.

Allegations of witchcraft that result in community murder have long been a part of rural India's history. Scholar Ajay Skaria, for instance, explored the torture and murder of women accused of being witches in British India. This practice has continued, although with increasing irregularity, into the present. The modern practice of witch-hunting in India includes violence and torture and murder of alleged witches.

The practice of witch-hunting is also connected to the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and an opposition to women's right to property. The emerging patterns suggest that independent, strong-willed women, who might have challenged the status quo, have been targeted, and subjected to suspicion and violence. Women have been blamed for everything from a bad harvest to an unexplained illness. Behind these targeted attacks are reasons such as property disputes, local politics and power control, which develop into allegations of witchcraft and then to violence.

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## Witch hunts are so rampant in the state that whenever a new disease sets in that affects either people or cattle, and the villagers fail to comprehend it, they look for witches to kill so as to propitiate the spirits

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Lack of education and health services have contributed to the continuation of this antiquated practice of witch-hunting.

In the rural areas of present-day Jharkhand, instances of women facing humiliation and brutalization, after being branded as witches, are common. The practice of sorcery to identify the witches and to prescribe a cure for various troubles and diseases often end in allegations that lead to branding, banishing or murdering of women.

The data of the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) show that as many as 464 women, a majority of them from tribal communities, have been branded 'witches' and killed in cold blood in Jharkhand between 2001 and 2014. India has seen the killings of 2,290 persons, mostly women, for practising witchcraft in the same period. Jharkhand clearly is the worst-affected state, accounting for more than one-fifth of the victims.

Whereas NCRB is yet to post updated figures for post-2015, it is unlikely to present a better picture than before in Jharkhand, which has continued to witness the mindless killing of women. Witch hunts are so rampant in the state that whenever a new

disease sets in that affects either people or cattle, and the villagers fail to comprehend it, they look for witches to kill so as to propitiate the spirits. Reportedly, Jharkhand has again topped the country with 32 murders in 2015. In all cases, the victims were killed after being branded as witches.

Social interactions at micro-levels have also confirmed that superstition is so deep-rooted in Jharkhand that it easily prompts villagers to murder witches. In the case of Susari Budh, there were multiple factors that led to her being branded and killed, although poor health services in the area is the prime cause of it all.

Several malpractices and some chilling facts also came to light during the community meeting, causing more anger among the people. Initially, the ANM of the area refused to participate in the public meeting; however, she was pressurized to do so by the *gram panchayat mukhiya*. Participating against her will, and filled with anger, she tried her best to falsify the facts about the registration and check-ups of Aneeta Sabhasoy. When she failed in her attempts because some of the neighbours questioned the facts given by her, she eventually

changed her story and blamed her superiors for mismanagement.

However, the superiors had already cleared their names by telling the local media that such incidents only take place due to the careless and casual attitude of the ground-level staff. The mother of the twins was registered by the ANM at seven months of pregnancy and other than some random weight-taking, there was no follow-up. There were no regular check-ups and no ultrasound was conducted, that is required as per government rules. The mother was not breastfeeding her newborn babies; the ANM was unaware of this fact till the death of the younger daughter.

When the people asked for accountability to be assigned for the incident, the PRIs and the *gram panchayat mukhiya* gave an amusing response, saying, "See, in this case both the perpetrator and the victim were living as tenants in the *panchayat* and they were not permanent residents, so in no way am I accountable for this."

Interestingly, when the discussion went deeper, it was revealed that the *panchayat* was not keeping any records of births and deaths, and none of the representatives of PRI including the *up-mukhiya* (deputy *mukhiya*), the Ward

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Superstitions are so deep-rooted that these can only be eliminated from the minds of the people by community-led action under the guidance of women's collectives and with support from PRIs.

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members and the block *pramukh* had any clue about the pathetic functioning of the health department in the area, be it at the *panchayat* level or at the block level.

No one had any idea why the Public Health Centre (PHC) had not been functioning for the last six months and whether it even had a doctor posted there. More shockingly, some of the participants in the meeting revealed that the *panchayat* office remains closed on most days, and even if opens for a couple of days in a week, there is no representative of the PRI. At best, you can meet with the *panchayat sewak* or the *rozgar sewak*.

This situation was not new to anyone but after hearing of these series of lapses, the community was alarmed at the extent of compromise in service delivery before and after this horrific incident. It left almost every person present in the room wondering about lack of accountability and responsibility of the PRIs and the front-line functionaries. They questioned whether there was anyone who was serving the communities.

The Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act 1999 was enacted in Bihar and adopted subsequently

by Jharkhand as the Prevention of Witch Hunting (Dayan Pratha) Act 2001, to protect women from inhuman treatment and to give victims the opportunity for legal recourse. Despite the enactment of this Act, there are barely any breakthroughs made by the government in checking the menace of witch hunting.

In several cases, the perpetrators are many and, at times, includes the relatives of the victim, and the case remains unreported. If reported, there is not much progress due to the absence of witnesses. Changing attitudes includes exposing fraud and also teaching critical thinking about superstition, which sometimes runs counter to long-held, indigenous beliefs. Indeed, legislation is not a cure for superstition; improving critical thinking is the key.

Education and medical care in the tribal areas is an urgent necessity to bring an end to witch-hunting. Moreover, medical bodies, educational bodies, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), PRIs, and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) have to work collaboratively to educate people so that the next time they hear some stories, they can make an informed choice rather than becoming a part of a violent mob.

Superstitions are so deep-rooted that these can only be eliminated from the minds of the people by community-led action under the guidance of women's collectives and with support from PRIs.

In the meeting, many participants took an oath to fight this social evil; yet, one can still hear whispers that witches do exist. This clearly indicates that there is need for numerous meetings like these because without a concerted effort, it is not possible to pull out the root of this evil. The *mukhiya* of the Tapakara *panchayat* took responsibility for organizing campaigns for creating awareness and educating people and also for ensuring meticulous record-keeping of births, deaths and other health-related information. The *panchayat* office is also planning to start a helpline number, with an objective to save people from being victimised and will also ensure that people are educated through wall paintings about the Prevention of Witch Hunting Act.

In conclusion, we can say that witch-hunting is based on false beliefs and deep-rooted superstitions and is practised as a weapon by patriarchal societies so as to deprive women of their rights and keep them restricted to being second-class citizens. Even

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though women are not the only victims of witch-hunting, the facts clearly prove that it has been a major threat for women and has not harmed men much. In fact, in this case, the victim was a woman and she was killed by multiple perpetrators, including men, but only the woman (Aneeta Sabhasoy) was accused for committing the crime, giving the other perpetrators a clean chit.. The powerful figures of the community often use the label of 'witch' to misguide the people and create crowd frenzy in order to meet their hidden intentions, social, political or economic in nature.

People often say that poor development and infrastructure

have led to the continuity of these social evils in tribal areas despite various efforts to end them. It seems to be the truth because tribal communities are often sandwiched between government apathy and Maoists insurgency. Today, witch-hunting is a blot on Jharkhand, which ranks 26th out of 29 states, in terms of literacy, and has consistently ranked first in the number of witch-hunting cases. The facts and figures of witch-hunting paint a pathetic picture of Jharkhand, and the glory and resplendence of tribal culture gets lost under this cloud.

Communities have to take charge and begin a community-led action, aimed at educating people and changing their beliefs and

attitudes. Outside intervention in rural communities is frowned upon, and development practitioners find it challenging to win the support of people, who have deeply ingrained beliefs about witches. Witch-hunting has not only led to violence and murder but also to collateral violence in many cases. PRIs and the CBOs need to work hand-in-hand to create spaces for discussion and build platforms such as the *gram kachehri* so that women can voice their issues with confidence and a sense of security. There is need for strong social and political will, to eliminate the roots of this deep-rooted social evil.

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*Maroof Khan is based in Torpa, Jharkhand*

# SHGs: Changing Perspective of and Impact on a Development Practitioner

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Realizing that SHGs are not merely credit-and-savings entities but have immense potential to be instruments of development and change is a huge discovery in the writer's professional journey

**W**HEN I FIRST BEGAN WORKING AS A development professional, SHGs seemed to have the solitary function of being a savings-and-credit entity; a body in the records of mission-mode projects, with *sutras* to follow, just like how students are treated in school—made to comply, administered upon, and told what to do, ignoring the multi-faceted and far-reaching potential of children. Less than a year ago, I viewed SHGs as a group of 10–20 women meeting regularly, saving a fixed amount, lending the money internally, being linked for credit with the outside, and gradually starting a social enterprise.

This idea of what an SHG was had its basis in the understanding I gained as a student, which was mainly in the context of micro-finance

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and 'financial-inclusion', an idea that was reinforced in my first job. During my brief professional experience of working with SHGs elsewhere, I saw the institution function, with micro-finance as its focus, so much so that we used to refer to SHGs as *bachat gats* (savings groups).

In the SHGs' quest for change and development, external motivation (credit eligibility) was made central, and whether or not the groups met regularly, saving money and repaying debts appeared most important, ignoring the potential a group has as a forum for sharing and solving problems of individual women, and for raising issues pertaining to gender, patriarchy and development. The interpretation of SHGs being a forum for 'mutual help' was limited to money. And, therefore, I did not see SHGs as a collective of women; I saw it as a collective of their individual savings, and viewed the success of an SHG on the basis of the total amount of money the group had in its account.

Over a period of eight months of being in PRADAN, during which I engaged directly with SHGs and participated in focussed and routine discussions, I began

understanding the organization's concept of an SHG and its role in development; my perspective changed completely. I now see a more holistic role for SHGs in development, and this has given me, as a Development Practitioner, a broader view of the potential of SHGs.

### **My initial understanding about SHGs**

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*Rooted in Micro-Finance*

My initial understanding of SHGs was rooted in the context of micro-finance. The need for SHGs was arrived at (and, more important, kept limited to) through such arguments or facts such as the deprived in rural areas have a need for credit; they do not have access to mainstream finance because of eligibility and affordability issues, and also they usually require small amounts of credit, which is a different need than that of the mainstream; credit needs are critical because one drought or severe illness can push a family further into poverty and deprivation; banks do not find it efficient to reach out to such small individual needs for credit; if a number of households came together to form SHGs and saved money regularly, they would have a substantial

amount to lend to a member in need or it can serve as collateral when applying for a bank loan. It is easier for a bank to reach out to such a group (instead of individuals); banks would take interest in them because the collective credit required would be large.

### **Centrality of savings and credit**

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An SHG, thus, to my mind, served the credit needs of the deprived. Its function was saving and extending credit. The main aim of SHG 'meetings', therefore, was that members be present, save money, take and return their loans. Later, a group would go to a bank for loans, and still later, plan to start a social enterprise. An SHG was a collective, a pool of money of individuals. An SHG is where the pooling of individuals' money happens. One's money for all and all's money for one! Members could take loans from the group as per their requirements, and return the amount with interest. The only discussion that the group would have was to decide whether or not a member should be lent the amount; and that discussion, too, would focus upon accounts and calculations that would determine the member's worth for credit.

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As groups, SHGs had norms. However, these norms were not arrived at by the groups themselves but were rather prescribed to them by agencies that have helped in forming them

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“Why are women’s SHGs formed?” was a question that was never given space for discussion in my rural development classes. When that question popped up, it was dismissed through words such as for ‘women’s empowerment’. Clear also was the fact that men of deprived families often tend to spend all their money on things such as liquor. The women save money by, for example, hiding it in sugar or rice jars.

The root idea of forming collectives with women, therefore, was traced back to this habit of thrift. To this would be added arguments such as keeping such thrift money in the group or in the group’s bank account, which keeps it secure from the getting spent or destroyed/spoilt! Looking back to my student days, I believe that not only did this rationalization sideline or ignore the role of women’s collectives in development, and their potential but it also promoted the association of economic behaviour with gender.

The two dominant players that have been engaging with SHGs for some years now—National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and micro-finance institutions—have in their mission, though different, focussed on credit that

may be utilized in strengthening the livelihoods of households or in meeting various needs and purposes. The dominance of these two players greatly shaped my initial understanding of SHGs and their role in development. Institutions such as NABARD have made available handbooks on SHG formation and training, with savings and credit as the main focus.

As groups, SHGs had norms. However, these norms were not arrived at by the groups themselves but were rather prescribed to them by agencies that have helped in forming them. Groups are monitored and evaluated against these norms so that credit is extended from funds such as the Community Investment-support Fund (CIF), the Revolving Fund (RF) under NRLM or loans from banks.

NRLM guidelines provide the groups five principles known as the *panch sutra*, which they must follow in order to receive credit. In such a process, external credit becomes the end-goal, and to get this credit certain behaviour must be displayed. Because the norms are prescribed to them and groups are not encouraged to form their own norms, SHGs become highly administered groups, with little scope for the

realization of their potential for creativity and autonomy.

### **Instrumentality of peer-pressure**

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Further, in this understanding of SHGs, with finance as their focus, peer-pressure—the fact that members stayed close to each other, saw (faced) each other every day and needed to uphold their dignity in front of other members—would ensure that the member who borrowed money would repay it. Of course, the group’s source of income is the interest earned on the loans; repayment is important to be able to rotate its money to all the members and meet their credit needs. This model, however, prefers peer-pressure and emotional pressure over empathy and feelings of ownership and responsibility to the group, and threatens a person’s sense of dignity.

### **New understanding of SHGs**

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During the last ten months in PRADAN, I encountered a different understanding of SHGs and their role in development. There is a difference in how PRADAN views SHGs and how NRLM and other micro-finance institutions view them. In fact,

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I began to realize and experience the greater potential of SHGs and collectives. Earlier, I had seen micro-finance and livelihoods SHGs; here, in PRADAN, I saw the SHGs for development and change, with the former being a sub-set of the latter.

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initially, as I tried to understand processes and focussed on NRLM's objectives and outputs, my initial understanding about SHGs as learned in class, became stronger.

Placed in a block that is NRLM-intensive, much of PRADAN's efforts also reflected the former's view of SHGs. However, PRADAN's views included aspects other than savings and credit. Over a period of time, through discussions—focused, routine, general, in workshops, and through my direct engagement with about 50 SHGs, journeying with the 15,000 women-strong block-level Federation and its Annual Mega Gathering—I began to realize and experience the greater potential of SHGs and collectives. Earlier, I had seen micro-finance and livelihoods SHGs; here, in PRADAN, I saw the SHGs for development and change, with the former being a sub-set of the latter.

### **How it came about**

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It came about through questioning. "They are not meeting. Why are they not meeting?", "They are not saving. Why are they not saving?" were

some exploratory questions that my team-coordinator would ask me. It came about through discussions. "All they do is save and we call them SHGs? It's like someone adding sugar in water and telling you that it's nimbu paani," remarked Nivedita Narain, a veteran PRADAN-ite. It came about when I myself began visualizing the full potential of an SHG that was required to bring about change and development. It also came about by understanding the groups better practically, to a great extent through the Learning-Group trainings—honest expression, trust, a conducive environment, confrontation, etc.

During the team-sessions focused on the annual action-plan, the emphasis was not just on whether or not SHGs held discussions on issues important to them or the problems faced by them, etc., but upon the intra-SHG power-relations and the participation of the weakest member of the group. During a week-long central event on transformative grass-roots action, we discussed inter-sectionalism, structures and power. We realized that women, organized in collectives, could be a counter-institution against mainstream patriarchal institutions, and that the

historically most-oppressed should be encouraged to lead change and development. This should be the reason for the formation of women's SHGs.

Once, I returned to my location in Jharkhand after almost a month, in order to organize a *panchayat*-level annual event with the women of SHGs. There were songs and plays that covered areas such as collectivism, novel agricultural techniques, vaccination of livestock, domestic violence, sex discrimination, early marriage, dowry, etc. The variety of their activities gave me a glimpse of their potential to bring about change. I saw the women engage in vision-building and planning at various levels, chalking-out priority areas, setting indicators, and taking responsibilities.

I saw the women contest *panchayat* elections, fight for justice, plan for their village and agriculture, and act to realize these plans. I began seeing the potential of SHGs as platforms for sharing, discussing, problem-solving, planning and executing. My perspective about the engagement of SHGs broadened from micro-finance and livelihoods to one that encouraged greater potential.

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## Going beyond money, in my new understanding of SHGs, mutual help, lives the ideal of 'All for One and One for All'

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### **Mutual help the core driving force**

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Mutual help, as I see it now, is central to SHGs. It includes, but is not limited to, savings and credit. Mutual help is also evident when one of the members shares her problem—be it that of harassment by in-laws, a husband having an extra-marital affair, exclusion from social services or schemes, etc.—and the other members figure out ways to solve the problem. Going beyond money, in my new understanding of SHGs, mutual help, lives the ideal of 'All for One and One for All'.

### **Feelings and ideals instrumental for responsible behaviour**

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Feelings, ideals and the like such as belonging, ownership, responsibility, 'we-feeling', honest and free expression, and a conducive environment, coupled with empathy and love, will enhance the functioning of the group, including in matters such as repayment. Some SHGs (I have been engaged with about 40 SHGs in the last few months) have a sense of understanding of, and empathy for, its members. Issues such as non-repayment of internal loans are dealt with, keeping in view the situation

and the circumstances of the individual member. SHGs, for me, are no longer entities, the existence of which is defined by their status in project records alone. They comprise women, who are connected to each other and have a desire to help one another out, and participate in their struggles and victories.

### **SHG as a forum and counter-institution of women**

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The full potential of SHGs includes finance, and extends to sharing, discussing, planning, learning, enhancing knowledge and awareness, problem-solving, creating and living a vision for themselves, their fellow members and the place they co-habit. It is about questioning the impositions, structures, systems, norms and practices, etc., and emerging as a pressure-group and active stake-holders in the struggle for change and development.

Women form such groups not just because of their innate ability to save and be thrifty or because the men have a habit of spending all the money but because SHGs are a powerful platform, that emanate power. They become a counter-structure

to the institutions that uphold, say, patriarchy. In these SHGs, the most oppressed may re-imagine their future so that power may be wielded by them as well. This happens when women establish their identity as farmers, when they inform the men about newer and more efficient techniques of farming, when they contest elections and do so in large numbers, and when they become important in securing credit for the household.

### **Impact of the new understanding of SHGs upon me as a development practitioner**

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Because they are administered by some and facilitated by others in very different ways, SHGs and their members do not have a common idea of what an SHG is and what its role is in development. There are various reasons for individuals to join SHGs; and each one has a different perspective of SHGs. What I have understood is that focusing on just one function of an SHG gives people a false sense of the idea of 'self-help'; also too much focus on one aspect contradicts the holistic understanding of the role of an SHG in development—its potential to bring about a much

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This change in my understanding of SHGs has changed me as a development practitioner. The formation of SHGs may be something that is imposed on them from the outside; however, for true empowerment to take place, the community must take upon itself the ownership of the SHGs

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greater change; the kind of change that is desired to create a just and equitable society.

This change in my understanding of SHGs has changed me as a development practitioner. The formation of SHGs may be something that is imposed on them from the outside; however, for true empowerment to take place, the community must take upon itself the ownership of the SHGs. I see my role as a facilitator and as a co-traveller, understanding how the group is coping with challenges and facilitating planning and problem-solving within SHGs rather than insisting that they follow the *panch sutra* and questioning them if they do not.

SHGs must be a collective of individual women, exploring their potential. SHG members must work together and share a sense of belonging, ownership, responsibility, a 'we-feeling',

communicating freely and honestly and building a group environment conducive for this. I wish that all the members of a group are able to, and feel free to, speak-up and put across their points of view, and that decisions are arrived at through debates and confrontation, and not just as per the desires of some its members. I prefer to focus on the kind of discussions they have. And whether or not they have had a discussion concerns me more. I take a look at the participation and the access to credit for all the members in the group, the power-dynamics within a group, and the ideals discussed above. I try to understand the reasons for women missing meetings, how they perceive SHGs, the challenges they face in SHGs, and why they are not saving.

As someone who has studied Psychology before studying rural development, the first time I

encountered the term SHG was with reference to Alcoholics Anonymous—an 'SHG' that has experience-sharing and mutual help at its core. However, the mainstream theory in rural development and the little professional experience I have had were both so focused on finance, that I started seeing the role of SHGs, in Psychology and in rural development, as having nothing in common. It feels amazing to now have a more holistic perspective on SHGs. I look forward to the possibility of building on it, or even, changing it.

Till then, the next time I speak in an SHG, I will not ask the women whether they are holding their meetings regularly and if not, why not; instead, I will ask how they are coping as a group.

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*Manan Pathak is based in Poraiyahat, Jharkhand*

# Stories of Pain and Suffering

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Promoting SHGs for credit and savings and livelihoods is one important way of empowering village women; what is equally important is for women to be able to express and share their pain and struggle in their lives.

Providing for safe spaces where the women can do so is a big opportunity for healing and resolution

‘AND HER LIFE STORY BEGINS’... I THOUGHT AS I LOOKED at the newborn baby girl in Sadar Hospital in Araria. Sujita *didi* had called me early in the morning. “*Didi beti janmi he. Aap ayiye dekhne ke liye.* (Didi, a girl has been born...come and see!)” She insisted that I suggest a name for her and I named her Bhavna.

It has almost become routine to be woken in the mornings by phone calls from the *didis*, asking me to visit their village. Every day, I ride on my scooty and follow the beautiful zig-zag road leading to my destination Masuria, a riverside village. This village is one of the three villages of Gerki *panchayat* in Araria district, and has 1,200 households. The majority of the households are Kulhaiya Muslims, and a few belong to the Barhi and the Tiyar communities as well.

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I hear and see the tragedy in their lives; their unspoken pain breaks my heart and I just want to shout out to the world, "Look at these women, see their pain, see their tragedy"

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I have been visiting this village since 2015, and the women here are very close to my heart...I play with them, sing, dance, share food, laugh, fight and cry with them, which makes me feel like one of them. I always discover a new aspect of their world. Unwittingly, I, somehow, have become a witness to their stories of pain and struggle, as well as of joy and happiness.

I hear and see the tragedy in their lives; their unspoken pain breaks my heart and I just want to shout out to the world, "Look at these women, see their pain, see their tragedy. See how they are married off so early in their life, doing hard tough chores daily, going through multiple miscarriages, whispering amongst themselves about forced sex, crying about triple talaq, being a widow or single woman, or old and deprived, going through many sexual diseases, undergoing immeasurable brutality daily and the list goes on."

In this article, I want to share some stories of these women, each belonging to a different class, caste, religion, age and marital status. I want to tell of their struggles in their everyday life. And I also want to highlight their relationship with patriarchy, violence, marital rape,

discrimination, gender, dowry, early marriage and my experience with them in Masuria.

In my initial days in Masuria, I faced many difficulties in connecting with the community. They rejected me, believing me to be a swindler who had come to the village for money. For them, I was a girl riding a scooty, not wearing a *dupatta*...they could not relate to that and they wondered why I came to their village at all. They would see me and begin to shout out instructions. I would hear them yell at me to wear a *dupatta*.

My initial exposure to the whole Kulhaiya community was quite unsatisfactory. My first impression of them was that they were aggressive, dominating and very vocal. They did not even hesitate to ask about my sex life. One day, when I had just started to interact with some of the women in one of their homes and tried to get to know them, a man (about 25 years old) came and asked me, "Who are you? Why are you here?"

It was a question that had been asked of me several times, I answered politely. Then he suddenly responded, "*Hamare yahan auroton ko ghar se bahar nahi nikalne dete hai, jo aurat*

*bahar nikalti hai wo besharam hoti hai* (We do not allow our women to go out, one who goes out is shameless)."

I asked him, "Do you mean that I am *besharam*?"

That day we got into a long discussion—five women and that lone man. Through the whole discussion, he continued to give instructions about what women should do and what they should not do...from wearing a *hizab* (a head covering) to not talking in front of *paraya mard* (men from outside), and he related it to *allatalla* (God) and *gunah* (crime); all the other women, which included his mother, wife, sister and in-laws, heard him in silence.

Later, when the man left, his wife Shama told me, "*Didi aap hi ka zindagi achha hai, hum log to jahannum mein ji rahe hai* (Sister, your life is better, we are living in hell)."

I was quite angry as I made my way back to my office. How could that man tell us what we should or should not do? But this is the reality. I remembered my own childhood days when I was always stopped from doing certain things and the reason given was that I was a girl. I was taught to be a good girl and not to be a

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I could relate to her and how she had been feeling for the last 10 years. For her, this village was a completely different world. She had left her identity and all that she was familiar with, for a man who had not come home for the last one year. I felt a sudden pain in my heart. She said “*Didi humko ek dost mili aaj* (Sister, today I have found a friend in you)”

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characterless girl. That day, I felt close to the women I was working with.

Masuria village is divided into three main hamlets—Khikharmani, Rahariya and Pharsadangi. Every hamlet has approximately 300–600 households. Of these, only 14 households in Rahariya are Barhi, who think of themselves as upper caste and have distanced themselves from the Kulhayia Muslims and have named their hamlet Parheshpur *tola*, which comes under the sub-hamlet of Rahariya. Khikharmani has 60 households of the Tiyar community and they have named their hamlet Choudhary *tola*. The whole village is situated near the Bakra river and experiences floods every monsoon.

My earlier engagement in the community was confined to promoting SHGs; and I failed to do so because the community rejected me. I was turned away from one door to another and they assumed that I must have a hidden agenda for coming to their villages. So, I decided to concentrate only on two SHGs, comprising the Barhi and the Tiyar communities. I believed that these two SHGs would then further promote more groups in the area.

I was disappointed that I could not help create an SHG with the Kulhayia Muslims; therefore, I just talked to whoever I found in the village, not with the intention of promoting an SHG but to get to know more about them. I believe that spontaneous connections and friendships are the best, and so it was when I met Sabana *didi*, a ravishing young lady from Khikharmani. I met her in the market. One morning, she stopped my bike and asked me for a lift. I asked her if she knew who I was.

She replied that she had seen me many times in her villages. That day she took me to her house, she served me very delicious food and we talked for hours. Her name was once Jasmeet Kaur, and she was born and brought up in Punjab. While working in a cloth factory, she had fallen in love with Akram. She had eloped with him from Punjab some 10 years ago and no longer had any connection with her family. Now, she was called Shabana and her husband Akram had migrated to Delhi. “*Hum bohot akele hai didi, mera kahin jagah nahin, ghar ka yaad karke ab to aasu bhi nahi nikalte* (I am alone, I don’t have any place. I can’t even cry remembering my home),” she said with a stoic face.

I could relate to her and how she had been feeling for the last 10 years. For her, this village was a completely different world. She had left her identity and all that she was familiar with, for a man who had not come home for the last one year. I felt a sudden pain in my heart. She said “*Didi humko ek dost mili aaj* (Sister, today I have found a friend in you).”

We became friends. Immediately after that, I went to attend a group meeting in Choudhary *tola*. Aruna *didi*, a very vocal member from the group, was very angry with me, “*Didi, aap Hindu hoke Mohammadan ke ghar khana khake aaye* (Being a Hindu, you ate in a Muslim house)?”

Aruna *didi* was forty years old. She was very dear to me because she was the first one in the *tola* who understood the concept of an SHG. I asked her, “*Khana khane se aur mere Hindu hone ka kya rishta hai* (What is the connection between being Hindu and having food with Muslims)?”

Mira *didi* replied, “*Woh log bakra khate hai* (They eat meat!)” Then there was a round of discussion on Muslims, what they were, how they were, and then followed a complete hate speech from the group. After hearing Shabana *didi*’s story, I was very emotional.

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## Gradually, the expectation is that these women emerge as grass-roots entrepreneurs, managing a specific component of the rug supply chain

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I couldn't take this round of discussions. This group was the first group I had promoted. The group consisted of 15 members from the Tiyar community and I had attended every meeting for the last two months and in each meeting, we had discussed about unity and the need for women to come together.

I asked the group that if they all had similar thoughts about women from the other community and if yes then why did they need groups? I told them, "You can save money in your home also. I would prefer not to come to your group." As I said that, I got up, and left for my home.

It was dark outside and on the highway. I was feeling sad, I had put in so much effort to form the group and it had been two months of hard work. I felt that all my effort had been wasted. I could not understand how I could work with the community where a large population was Muslim and I worked with the minority who had secluded themselves from the society. After two weeks, Aruna *didi* called me and informed me that they had formed a group in Khikharmani. When I visited the place, I was happy to find that Shabana *didi*

was also a member of the group, and my first group in the Kulhaiya Muslim community had been formed.

It was a rainy day in the month of July and it also was the day before the local *panchayat* elections. The whole road was crowded and campaigning was going on from door to door. I rode my red and white scooty on the same road, to attend the SHG meeting. Every day, I used to cover my face while riding the scooty and that day was also the same. The road-side travellers, as usual looked at me. Young girls stared at me like they did every day, and as every day, I heard their voices. "Ei dekho chhori gari chalaisi (Look a girl is riding a scooty)!"

My scooty stopped where the road ended. I headed towards Farhana *didi's* verandah. When I approached the group, everyone greeted me, "Sallam Wallai-kum *didi*," and I responded "Walle-kum salam *didi*."

I saw Nahida *didi*, wiping her tears. I asked her, "*Didi* what happened to you? Why are you crying?"

Upon being asked, she cried out loud, and Fatima *didi* stopped her "Are *chup ho na tum* (Keep quiet)!"

Nahida *didi*, a 17-year girl, with her baby boy on her lap, continued to weep, "*Meri zindagi barbad ho gayi didi* (My life is ruined)."

"Let's talk, *didi*," I responded.

All of us 18 members sat on a rug. Farhana *didi* frowned and said, "*Hum aurat ka zindagi bekar hai didi, mard ko khush karo to khushi aur dukhi karo to dukh* (Our life is of no use, if you please your husband, you are happy and if not, your life is a misery)."

There was a sudden silence in the group. Only Nahida *didi's* weeping could be heard in the verandah. Her baby also started crying with her and in the whole commotion I could not understand why.

Farhana *didi* started again, "*Mard log bahar rehne se hi humlog khush rehte hai, abhi election ke samay sab log ghar aa gaye hai* (We are happy only when the men have gone out. But due to the elections, they have all come back)."

Her statement made me curious and I asked her why it was so.

She replied, "*Nahida pet se thi aur uska bachcha mar gaya, uska pati usko jabardasti karta hai didi* (Nahida was pregnant and her child died, her husband forces himself on her)."

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My heart cried for her! I had never heard such a statement before. Nahida got married at the age of 14 and now she had a two-year-old baby. She is a very thin and small. She was still an adolescent and here she was, playing a very adult game in her life.

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Oh! My heart cried for her! I had never heard such a statement before. Nahida got married at the age of 14 and now she had a two-year-old baby. She is a very thin and small. She was still an adolescent and here she was, playing a very adult game in her life.

Wahida *didi*, her mother-in-law, scolded her “*Aisa sabke saath hota hai, tu rona bandh kar* (It happens with everyone! You stop crying!).”

Israti *didi*, a very silent member of the group, said, “*Mard jab bhi bahar se aata he, humko pet se karke jata he aur wo bhi ladki* (Whenever the men come home, they make us pregnant and that too with a girl).” Saying that, she starts to laugh! I could not understand how in the same situation, two women could have such different emotions. I took out my diary and opened it to a page with a poem on it.

I asked Nahida *didi* to read it. She wiped her tears and read aloud...

कभी तुम्हारा सही गलत लगा  
कभी तुम्हारा गलत लगा सही....  
तमाम उम्र यु ही गुजर जाती है  
तुम्हारे सही को गलत  
और गलत को सही साबित करते  
करते...

While I was returning, Nahida *didi's* face appeared before me continuously, and I reached home with a heavy heart and mixed feelings. The next day, while crossing the village, I decided to meet Nahida *didi* to see how she was doing. She greeted me with a smile and hugged me as if nothing had happened to her the day before. I asked her if she was okay now. She replied, “*Didi pati ke sath to sona padega hi, man ho ya na ho, ek bachcha mara to dusra hone me thori der lagti hai* (One has to sleep with one's husband even if one wants to or not. So what if one child has died; it doesn't take much time to have another one).”

With a smile on her face, she made tea for me. One day, Nahida *didi* had told me that she had not met her husband before her marriage although he was her relative. “*Humko apna mard se bohot dar lagta hai, didi. Woh aate hi to hum kaanpte hain* (I am very afraid of my husband. I start trembling in his presence).”

She is trapped; she knows what happens with her is wrong but she is afraid to recognize it. She does not want to say it aloud; if she screams, society will not allow her to. It was really hard to see their plight. I thought about it.

I wondered what I could do and I realized that I could only be a good listener!

Like Nahida, I have encountered many other girls in the village, who got married very young. “*Jab ladki kurta pehnegi samjho uska shaadi dene ka umar ho gaya* (When a girl starts wearing a kurta, it means the time has now come to get her married),” Imrana *didi* told me when I asked her about Salma, her 12-year-old daughter, whose marriage to her cousin was fixed; I was invited too for the wedding. I had taken an initiative to form a young girls group in the village. All the girls in the village were interested in the idea; and within a month, almost 16 girls had joined the group. Salma was a very bright girl and was a member of the group.

“*Didi, humko shaadi nahin karna* (I do not want to get married),” Salma had once said she wanted to become a police officer. Everyone had laughed at her because her aspirations were different.

Nigar, another girl, had told her “*Yeh sapne bekar hai, sirf shaadi hone ka sapna dekho* (These dreams are not good, only dream of getting married).”

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Salma had become very angry at that time. However, she got married at a very tender age. Her dreams were crushed. After Salma's marriage, five more marriages took place within a month. The group size kept getting smaller and dwindled to four within a few months and my interest in the young girls' group also began to disappear with time.

One day, Salma called me and cried for an hour. Her in-laws had beaten her. She wanted to escape. "Didi, humko aap le chalo, hum aapka sab kam kar denge (Please take me along with you, I will do all your work)."

I had no answer for her that day. Salma is now a mother of a three-month old boy, and like everyone else, she has buried her dreams deep in her heart.

"Mard ke maarne se, hum logo ka sarir ka gunah jharta hai, didi (When a husband beats his wife, it reduces the sins of our body)," Naima didi said with a faded smile.

I asked her who had told her that. "Ye Hadith me likha hai (It is written in the Hadith, a practical interpretation of the Quran)," she replied.

I was in Saira *didi's* verandah. I had gone there in the morning for a *rabi* vegetable training. After the field demonstration, we sat in Saira *didi's* verandah for an after-meeting chit-chat. Saira *didi* showed me her burnt hand, "Didi, dekhiye kal rat ko kya hua (See what happened last night)."

I saw that four fingers of her right hand were burnt. One day, her husband had asked me, "Tum isko kya sikhate ho, iska jubaan

*aajkal bohot tej ho gaya he* (What do you teach her? Her tongue has become quite sharp)."

In reply, Saira *didi* had told him, "Jitna tumhara hath chalega, utna mera jubaan (The more you use your hand on me, the more I will raise my voice)."

I have known Saira *didi* for the past two years. She is only 24 years old and is already a mother of three children. I remembered



**Salma in the playful mood just before her marriage**

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She had not wanted to get married, but she had to get married. After her marriage, her life was beautiful for a year; then everything faded after that

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her from a group training. I asked the group to tell me any one thing, they were afraid of.

Saira *didi* had replied that *talaq* made her most fearful. “*Mere ko ek talaq par chukka hai, didi, agar aur do parega to mera zindagi barbad* (I have already got one *talaq*; if I get two more, my life will be hell).”

After she said this, I found out more about *talaq*. Of the 30 members in the group, almost everyone was fearful of *talaq*. “*Mard ko kya tension, ek ko talaq dia to dusra din usko naya bibi milega* (Men have nothing to lose. After divorcing one woman, the next day he will get a new wife),” said Sanobar *didi*.

Sanobar *didi* is the third wife of her 50-year-old husband. He had divorced her also for another woman. Now she lived with her three girl children in her parents’ house. “*Hum ma-bap ka bojh hai aur meri betiya meri bojh hai* (I am a liability for my parents and my girls for me),” she said with tear-filled eyes.

That training on *rabi* vegetables was the my first step to get close to them. After that, they often

spoke of their pain to me. And, looking at Saira *didi*’s hand, I became emotional again. “*Hum to man mein tassalli de rahe hain ki mera sara gunah jhar gaya* (We are reassuring ourselves that we are getting free from our sins). Saira *didi* laughed. I often wondered how they could be so calm in these situations. If I had been in their place, my hopes for life would have been lost. I derived strength looking at these women. I had the strength to stand up with them.

That day Saira *didi* told me about her childhood days. Her aspiration had been to become a nurse. She used to go to a Madrasa and had done Maulbi from there. She wanted to administer injections to the people. She had not wanted to get married, but she had been married. After her marriage, her life was beautiful for a year; then everything faded after that. “*Humko apna pati se mohabbat tha, ab nafrat hai* (I loved my husband; now I hate him).” She continued, “*Aaj kal humko dard nahi hota hai, didi, man ka dard ke samne sarir ka dard kucho nahi* (Nowadays, I don’t feel pain. The physical pain is nothing compared to the mental agony),” cried Saira *didi*. After two years of her marriage, her

husband married another woman called Afsana *didi*... who was also a member of the group. “*Uska jab man tab bistar badlega aur jab man lathi* (Whenever he wanted, he would change his partner and whenever he wished, he would beat),” she cried out loud.

I could not stop my tears that day; I was so pained. I had gone there for an agricultural meeting. My aim was to increase the number of women farmers and I had been successful too. By this time, more than 100 women had come to the field and participated in improved agricultural techniques. Somewhere, however, I was not satisfied. After hearing her story, I could not be happy simply by giving her ideas on how to increase production. It was not enough.

There was another incident in the village. Soni *didi* called me early one morning because they had organized a meeting in the village. I, along with one of my colleagues, went to Rahariya, for the meeting. When we reached the village, we found that the group was sitting in Soni *didi*’s verandah. Soni *didi* started the discussion, “*Didi, Gudiya didi ko uske bhesur bohut burhi tarah se peeta hai, wo abhi hospital mein*

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Gudiya didi was in bed for five months. Whenever I went to the hamlet, I stopped at her door... sometimes just to say hello and sometimes to sit and talk with her. Some members of the hamlet also joined me

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*hai* (Gudiya *didi* has been brutally beaten by her brother-in-law. She is in the hospital).

Kiran *didi* added, “*Pura nanga karke mara hai* (He tore off her clothes and beat her).”

It took us a few moments to come to terms with the whole situation. We asked the group to tell us as much as they knew. What I understood from the discussions was that Gudiya *didi* was brutally beaten up by her brother-in-law and his sons at night. Her husband had migrated and she was alone in her house. It started out as a small fight about food; within a few minutes, it turned into a big fight. When the neighbours reached the spot, they found Gudiya *didi* lying on the ground bleeding and all her clothes torn off. Nobody moved to help her, as her in-laws were very powerful in the hamlet. The group members were disturbed by the situation and expected me to do something.

“*Bhesur hoke kaise peet sakta hai* (How can a brother-in-law beat the woman)?” Janki *didi* frowned.

I asked her whether it was important who had done the beating? “*Pati to hath uthata hi*

*hai, par woh paraya mard hai* (Our husbands can hit us but this man is a stranger).”

I got the sense that the group was disturbed because the violence was perpetrated by a *paraya mard*. We discussed the situation through the day, “*Aaj tak humlog kabhi bhi is tarah ke charcha nahi kiye the. Aage se humlog is tarah ke ghatna kabhi nahi hone denge* (We have never discussed such type of issues. From now onwards, we will not let such incidents happen again),” Soni *didi* said at the end of the meeting and the group agreed.

Later, I discussed the situation with my colleague and came to the conclusion that we had moved at least one step as a community and had come forward to sit together and discuss these issues; we still had miles to go, however.

Gudiya *didi* was in bed for five months. Whenever I went to the hamlet, I stopped at her door... sometimes just to say hello and sometimes to sit and talk with her. Some members of the hamlet also joined me.

Sunita *didi*, who is very emotional, always cried out seeing Gudiya *didi*'s condition.

She said, “*Pati ke maarne se hum log sahte rahte hai, sehte gunga ban gaye hain* (We endure our husbands beatings; we've borne so much, we've become dumb).

The women had begun to talk about the violence, “*Sirf maar ka dard hi dard nahi, muh ka boli se jo dard hota hai, uska kya* (The pain of physical beating is not the only pain; what about the pain from the abusive words they say to us)?” Munni *didi* asked.

Some days, Farhana *didi*, Nahida *didi*, and Israti *didi* from the other side of the road would join us. Having tea with them had become my habit. Sometimes, the discussions would get intense and sometimes, we would just laugh out loud.

I have learned many things in these years. As a professional, sometimes, my role was very clear to me...to unite the women, who had a common agenda; I got stuck somewhere while doing it...I was getting stuck in outputs, numbers and figures. The women have formed village organizations in Khikharmani and Rahariya, and now the whole village is saturated. Gudiya *didi*, Saira *didi* and Nahida *didi* were

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We talk about a just and equitable society for women; however, these women suffer so much discrimination that it is difficult to know where to begin to help them.

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active members of the Village Organization (VO).

*“Mere saath jaisa hua aur kisike saath na ho* (I hope no one else has to go through whatever I endured),” Gudiya *didi* said aloud in one of the VO meetings.

Saira *didi* urged, *“Pati ka maar mat saho, didi, awaaz uthao* (Don’t endure your husband’s beating, raise your voice).”

Everyone nodded.

On another note, Nayra *didi* was happy that her potato crop this time had tripled. She told her husband proudly, *“Maine kiya he ye kheti* (I did the agriculture).” Now, she has become a volunteer member of the groups and is guiding women on agriculture.

We talk about a just and equitable society for women; however,

these women suffer so much discrimination that it is difficult to know where to begin to help them. Where should I start and where should I go...? I wonder what my role is. Every day, I would go to the village with an agenda; when I reached there, I would find another situation to deal with. There are miles to go...!

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*Trishagnee Boruah is based in Araria, Bihar*



**Nayra didi with her family members in her potato field**

# Development and Resistance

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Reflecting on the assumptions and beliefs that a development professional has as he enters a community, the author explores the need for greater awareness, sensitivity and acceptance of villagers' abilities, requirements and choices

**C**olonialism needs to be looked at from a global perspective to understand how the colonisers plundered wealth from the colonies all over the world. By and large, the erstwhile colonisers are present-day developed nations although not all developed nations have been colonisers and not all colonisers became developed. Many of the developed nations have become so as a result of the unprecedented 'loot' conducted during the colonial period of more than 200 years, in the name of 'civilizing the uncivilized natives'. These countries are, at present, the richest countries in the world and, as a result, the most powerful countries too.

They decide and dictate (through IMF and World Bank) what needs to be done for the underdeveloped countries in the world and they do it in the name of development. These countries, in a way, decide the fate of this planet.

The colonial period was characterized by loot and plunder (Habib, 1975). Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee claim that loot and plunder are still continuing to fuel the current neo-liberal regime (Chatterjee, 2008), only the form has changed. The vast Central Indian Plateau, the homeland of tribes, is rich in mineral resources. Minerals are being extracted for capitalist development and, as a result, either forests are getting destroyed, impacting

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Significantly, the term 'community' is used by development agencies, especially NGOs, to mean something similar to 'natives' as used by the colonizers

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tribal life, or entire tribal villages are getting displaced. At the same time, big,/multinational companies are steadily capturing this vast market to sell their products, which include luxury items as well as items such as pesticides and plant hormones. This leads to change in the tribal way of living. The discourse on 'development' rationalizes all these changes. However, there are instances of resistance against development at the micro-social level. In this essay, I am going to narrate three instances of resistance against development, based on my own experience.

### **The development-*wala***

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After the end of the colonial era, the discourse of development needed to be kept up in order to continue the power-relations that existed during the colonial time, at the international as well as the national level, argued post-development scholars such as Arturo Escobar and Gustavo Esteva. The concept of underdevelopment, as postulated by Harry Truman, helped to build a discourse around development (Escobar, 1995) (Esteva, 1992).

Franz Fanon (1963) argues that due to the long colonial history,

for the colonized people, race becomes as important as class: "You are white, so you are rich." At a micro-social level, within the underdeveloped nations, the discourse of development makes a group of people white. These new white people are rich, cultured and, above all, developed. These are also those who set the boundaries of the discourse (Foucault, 1980) of development and these include scholars, NGOs, donors and corporate houses.

One of the manifestations of this power, and resistance (Foucault, 1980) to it, can be observed in the relationship between the implementers of development projects and the community. Significantly, the term 'community' is used by development agencies, especially NGOs, to mean something similar to 'natives' as used by the colonizers; communities are also considered non-white—underdeveloped and backward, and, above all, homogeneous—in its suggestion of horizontality, not recognizing the vertical power relations within and with the outside. And just as the colonizers were on a mission to civilize the 'natives', development-*walas* (those who promote development) are on a mission to develop the 'communities'.

The community shows resistance to both the idea and discourse of development and against development-*walas*. This resistance comes up suddenly and it also disappears very fast. In this write-up, I will show how the strong resistance of a community can drive out a development-*wala*, at least temporarily. I will share three incidents, very briefly, to show how I've experienced strong resistance in the community against my development intervention and how even then I didn't change my idea about development, because my development discourse taught me to treat these incidents as isolated failures.

### **1. Makra village, Lohardaga district**

In 1997, I was working in a tribal (Oraon tribe) village called Makra, situated in Lohardaga district, of the then Bihar. It is a very small village, where the houses were situated in the foothills of three small hillocks. To enter the village, one had to cross a culvert, constructed over a very narrow stream. I formed a lift-irrigation group from among the villagers for the implementation of the lift-irrigation scheme. The work of the group included collecting cash contributions, opening bank

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I asked him why no one had started preparing their land for the winter crop. He said that no one was interested in *rabi kheti* (the winter crop)

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accounts, contacting the Block Development Officer (BDO) for the schemes; organizing labour for digging up channels for laying the underground pipeline, etc.

Once the lift-irrigation was installed, I initiated a discussion around improved agriculture (which meant, at that time, HYV/HB seeds plus chemical fertilizers plus pesticides plus irrigation) with the group. However, even after four or five consecutive meetings, no one from the group began work on preparing the land for their winter crop. One day, I went to the village and I saw Bhukla Oraon standing on the culvert—the entry point of the village. Bhukla was around 25–26 years old at that time and was the most educated person in the village, having studied up to class VIII; he was the Secretary of the lift-irrigation group.

I asked him why no one had started preparing their land for the winter crop. He said that no one was interested in *rabi kheti* (the winter crop). Surprised by his response, I asked him why they had installed the lift-irrigation then. His voice was loud now and he said, “*Aap us samay ghar-ghar jaake kutta jaise bhonkte the, is liye humko lift lagana para.*” (You used to go to every house and bark like a dog and that’s why we had to

install the lift-irrigation). I was absolutely shattered, speechless, and slowly went to my motorcycle to return to office. I didn’t tell this to anybody in the office.

Two to three months later, a women’s Self-Help Group (SHG) was formed in the village through my initiatives. I was so sure about my idea of development that I kept on pushing the agenda of an irrigated, winter-crop cultivation in that group. Subsequently, I could convince some of the villagers to try out a winter crop.

## **2. Hudu village, Lohardaga district**

This happened in a village called Hudu, adjacent to Makra, a year after the first incident. A Watershed Committee was formed through my intervention, to plan and implement the watershed project sanctioned for the village. My role was to influence the plan to utilize resources better. A vast field lay unused in Hudu. The villagers used it mainly to graze for their cattle.

My training on watershed management had taught me that land could be used more productively through timber plantation, that free grazing should be stopped and that cattle

should be stall-fed. However, the villagers were reluctant to plant timber on this land; they said they wanted to have the plantation on a rocky hillock. This hillock, according to them, was once covered with trees and they used to collect firewood from there. I did not like the idea of planting trees on a hillock because the grazing land looked much more fertile and I assumed that the growth of the trees would be much better if planted on that land.

The matter was discussed in the meeting of the Watershed Committee and they were apparently convinced that if they could raise timber species on that land, they would be able to fetch a huge income; also, at the same time, they would get grass to stall-feed their cattle. One day, therefore, as per schedule, the Watershed Committee planted saplings on that field and fenced the field with bamboo and GI wire. I was present for the planting. The very next day, when I went to see the condition of the plants, I was taken aback. The entire field was empty, all the saplings had been uprooted and the fence had been completely removed. When I asked what had happened, the Watershed Committee members said that it

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When I asked them why they hadn't expressed this earlier, they told me that they had tried, but they were not educated enough to explain things to me.

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was I who had insisted that the plantation be on this land; the villagers, however, needed this land for grazing. When I asked them why they hadn't expressed this earlier, they told me that they had tried, but they were not educated enough to explain things to me.

Subsequently, they planned for a plantation on a hillock and that plantation survived.

### 3. Purulia district

This happened as recently as in 2016, in Purulia district, West Bengal, 19 years after the two incidents in Lohardaga. I would attend the weekly meeting of a women's SHG. I did it for six consecutive weeks to see if the women could identify the reasons for their plight from the perspective of gender, caste and class. After the first three weeks, I was very happy to see that the women had started discussing how social norms made men more powerful than women and how women faced injustice in their family and in society.

The situation changed in the fourth week. On that day, the women didn't let us facilitate their meeting. Instead, they started asking us direct questions such as, "You are telling us that

our Santhal society is unjust, what about your society?" We admitted that our society was also unjust. Then they said, "Then why are you not doing this kind of meeting with your women, why are you coming to tell us about inequalities when your own society has so much inequality?" This reminded me of my earlier incidents at Lohardaga all those years ago. I had no answer to their question.

### Conclusion

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I have tried to demonstrate here, through my personal experiences, how development is a hegemonic idea (Gramsci, 1971), wherein the involved parties believed that development was better than underdevelopment. However, I found that even if there was an apparent acceptance of the idea, there were also voices of resistance that challenged the idea of development. I have also tried to show that subalterns could not only think, they could speak and they could act to take the reins of power back into their own hands, as happened in the third incident. All the acts of resistance were small, and didn't last long, and yet these were very powerful. However, it was difficult for the development-

*wala*, that is me, to accept and acknowledge this resistance because it means a loss of power that s/he/I was enjoying.

The development-*wala* has a particular idea of development which claims that, a) societies/nations that haven't followed a particular path of economic growth are underdeveloped, b) some communities such as the tribals are backward, c) it is possible to convince them that, in order to catch up, they need to efficiently use their resources, d) once they are convinced, they participate in development activities. The third story, though, doesn't talk about resource-use efficiency but moves around the theme of backwardness of tribal society. It also shows, like the other two stories, how tribal people, (in this case, the women) spoke out against what appeared as a progressive discourse.

The stories also tell us how the so-called backward tribal people *also* accept that the non-tribal, city-dwellers are better off—a phenomenon described by Fanon (1963). In all the three stories, the community first accepts the development-*walas*.

The incidents reveal that although there was occasional resistance to

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## Blocking of the road affected the construction in Tilaboni village because vehicles could not enter with the required construction material

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the discourse, the development-*wala* did not reflect on this. It is true that he was too shocked, to further explore the setback at the time of the incidents; he did not explore it later, either.

In the first story, if the villagers did not like the lift-irrigation, was there any attempt to explore whether the community had any alternative views on how to revive agriculture? Or did they have some understanding of why they were in a situation where there was need for lift-irrigation, a concept contrary to their understanding of how agriculture must be done? Or did they simply feel that the push from my side was very overpowering and, therefore, the resistance was

just to stop me from pushing for things and to let them do things in their own way and at their own pace?

The second story also displays the capacity of the community to understand their own realities much better than the development-*wala*! I now realize how the people in the village displayed a complex understanding of land use, a harmonious sense of coexistence with different species (human, animals, flora, fauna) and, of course, a crackling disregard to run after MONEY.

Probably, the development-*wala* didn't want to reflect. Was

this was because he thought his knowledge of development made him powerful? Definitely, this knowledge and power made the development-*wala* view underdevelopment, and hence development, as true facts (Foucault, 1980), whereas these are also socially construed concepts just as any other concepts. However, if the resistance is accepted as a fact, the truthfulness of development is then under question. This will, in turn, challenge the power of the development-*wala*. Nobody wants to lose power. Definitely not the development-*wala*!

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*Dibyendu Chaudhuri is based in Adra, West Bengal*

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*The references in this article are available on request at [newreach@pradan.net](mailto:newreach@pradan.net)*

# Transforming Community and the Self: The Story of Ramkol Village

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“Clay is just a lump unless persistent efforts transform it into a pot.”

Bringing about social change is a slow and painstaking process and must be based on an inherent faith in the ability and wisdom of the people one is working with. The women of Ramkol prove this as they are shepherded by a young development professional

**T**his article covers the essence of my most memorable journey as a development professional, my journey with the women’s collectives in Ramkol village. The story of my journey includes my sad and happy feelings through the challenges I faced, my struggles during my engagement with the community and my joy at its final outcome. There is a bond that I developed with the women of Ramkol and I would like to share with the readers the story of our journey as co-travellers. There was a transformation that took place in the women of the community and they emerged as very different from who they were earlier. The status quo

was shaken and their lives changed. With the shake-up, I moved, I reflected, and had realizations about myself and changed with the women and because of them. I cherish the journey. In any journey, there are ups and downs but what makes it worthwhile is to see the travellers keep themselves motivated and to see them stay hopeful and positive that they will emerge victorious.

## About Ramkol

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Ramkol is a village in Daldali Gopalpur panchayat of Boarijore block, Godda district, Jharkhand. It is very diverse in term of its inhabitants; there

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I noticed one thing about myself during this time. When I was with the women, I introduced the SHG as a place for women to unite and a space for them to share their happiness and sadness; however, when the men come around, my narrative shifted to savings and credits

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are five hamlets in the village. Two hamlets are predominantly occupied by people of the Santhal tribe, one by the Pahadiya tribe, one by the people of the Mohli caste and one by the Muslim community. Ramkol is largely known for its stone quarries. Unlike the people of the Santhal tribe, who are dependent mainly on agriculture, the Muslim community of this village is dependent on the stone quarries for their daily wages whereas some others prefer migrating to Delhi, Gujarat, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Mumbai and other places.

I entered Ramkol alone on the second day of my field work. The Muslim hamlet lay on my way so I stopped there in front of a house where two middle-aged women were sitting. Soon, I was surrounded by around 15–20 children. When I started talking to the women, many men came and stood nearby and gradually began asking questions about me. Initially, I was afraid. However, I kept my calm and explained to them about PRADAN and how we formed collectives so that the women could save money so that in times of need they could take loans and, over time, eliminate the dependence on the ‘blood sucking’ local moneylenders.

To my astonishment, one man was so convinced with this idea that he started telling the women that it was a very good thing and that they should start saving from that very day onwards. However, I thought that an SHG formed on the spur of the moment, and so haphazardly, would not be sustainable. I told them that I would return in few days and that, in the meanwhile, they should think about our discussion and that we would take the process further, the next time we met.

I noticed one thing about myself during this time. When I was with the women, I introduced the SHG as a place for women to unite and a space for them to share their happiness and sadness; however, when the men come around, my narrative shifted to savings and credits. Upon reflection, I think this was because of my belief that the men would not like the women to come forward and discuss their issues because that would lead to the women becoming empowered and the men might fear their loss of control over the women. Also, somewhere, I had the thought that my encouragement of women to empower themselves might hamper my acceptance among the men. To articulate my state of mind at that time and to

express the fear I felt in sharing the same thoughts with a group of men as I shared with women, I wrote a few lines in a language which I feel more comfortable in, that is, Hindi:

“बराबरी की बात है तो डर क्यों?  
बात सबसे करूं तो शर्म क्यों?  
पित्रसत्ता के खिलाफ है,  
मात्रसत्ता के ना साथ है”

(Why this fear when discussing equality?)

Why the shame in discussing this with everyone?

Though against patriarchy

It does not support matriarchy either)

I went back to Ramkol three days after my first visit and stopped in front of the same house, and the same middle-aged woman I had spoken to earlier said, “*Hamein koi group nahi uthana* (We do not want to form any group).”

I was taken aback; I said that I was just passing by and had stopped to meet her without any intention of forming groups. Once again, as I stood there I was surrounded by many children and young girls. I began to talk with the young girls. I learned that child marriage and early

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I learned that child marriage and early motherhood were quite prevalent in that community. A few girls, of about 15–16 years, were holding babies. It felt wrong on my part to talk about the advantages in SHGs of savings and credit in a community where as the burning issue was something else

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motherhood were quite prevalent in that community. A few girls, of about 15–16 years, were holding babies. It felt wrong on my part to talk about the advantages in SHGs of savings and credit in a community where as the burning issue was something else. I realized that I should have spent some time with them to understand their lives and their needs before introducing the benefits of savings and credit.

On my third visit, many women gathered and made seating arrangements; we sat and discussed the importance of an SHG. This time, communication was a two-way process, in which some of the women shared their distrust of handing over their money whereas some others reassured them saying that money would be in their own hands and not given to any outsider. I was disturbed that the focus of all their discussions was around money. I regretted that I had introduced it at the start.

To guide the discussion in a different direction and demonstrate the larger goal of setting up collectives, I asked the women to hold a wooden stick and asked them to visualize that stick as themselves. I asked them to think of a problem that they face in their homes or in the

community. They came up with the problem of lack of educational facilities in their village. I, then, asked one woman to imagine that she had gone to visit a government official to talk about the issue. I asked her what she thought she would experience

She said that she would either not be entertained or she would be scolded. I asked her to visualize how she would feel and to exert that pressure of those feelings of anger, humiliation or helplessness on the stick. When she did so, the stick broke. I asked all the other women to imagine that they went there together and to bundle their sticks together. When they applied pressure on it, they could not break the bundle.

After a silence of around a minute, one woman said, “If we were to come together, we would become strong and no one would be able to break us.” They had a long discussion around what all they could do by coming together. Most of the discussion was on community issues only, and I was glad that at least they were thinking of the collective as strength.

On my fourth visit, they were eager to form a group; once again, the focus was mainly on money. I was, therefore, a little

less convinced about forming the group. I decided to give them some more time. Also, because I was the only professional engaged in that community, I somehow did not trust my own ability to take the group forward and to facilitate it effectively.

### **Collectivization**

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I learned that everyone takes time to come to a realization of the strength in unity; forcing the issue before that does not help. I also learned that once the realization comes, it is so strong that positive changes seem to begin happening quickly. Something similar happened in Ramkol when the women decided to form groups.

A week after my fourth visit, I got a phone call from one of the women from Ramkol saying that they had formed the group and had started collecting money. She asked me to come to meet them. The women in Ramkol had formed two groups by themselves. Although, as an outsider, I tried to delay forming the SHG early, the desire came from within the community when it felt the need for a forum. They took charge of the formation themselves. For the initial two weeks, I explored with them the purpose of the group,

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I explored with them the purpose of the group, which remarkably had moved far beyond the initial idea of savings and credit, to a place where they could share their feelings and spend their leisure time, and a space where they could be themselves without any barriers

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which remarkably had moved far beyond the initial idea of savings and credit, to a place where they could share their feelings and spend their leisure time, and a space where they could be themselves without any barriers.

### Initial challenges

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A dark phase for one of the groups came when they decided to disband the group because they had heard from some distant relatives that to take the group forward, the women would have to go for trainings away from the village for a few days at a time. This was disturbing because they said that, for Muslim women, going out of the house was forbidden and they could not do it.

Another issue was that the woman who was the accountant of the group, despite my urging her to share responsibilities, had taken on all the work upon herself. She was responsible for calling everyone for the meeting, keeping the money, etc. Over time, she began feeling burdened.

To sort out all these issues, I was called for a meeting in the house of one of the women. There I met one of the husbands. He asked me why I was forming these groups;

that the women would not be able to do anything on their own and that if I was getting some benefit out of this group, as far as my job security was concerned, I should run the group or else I should leave the community.

While he was saying all this, the women covered their faces and hid their smiles. They were laughing at being told that they were incapable of doing anything on their own. I thought that my whole engagement with them had been worthless if they were not able to utter even a single word when he was disrespecting them.

After this incident, one group decided to break up and distributed the money they had collected equally among them. I felt sad but maintained my calm thinking that forming the group was their own decision, so breaking it should also be their decision. I could only push them but the realization about the value of having a group was something they needed to arrive at on their own.

### Exposure to older SHGs

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I had planned to take the groups for an exposure visit to some of the older SHGs but because one group broke up, the plan was

reduced to just one group. Before the exposure visit, however, I faced many challenges. On the morning of the departure, the women refused to go, saying that many of them had gone to bring wood from the cliff. I tried to persuade them; later, I found out that the men had been making allegations against me, saying that I might do some harm to their dignity or that I would dope them with sedatives, etc.

Although the women trusted me, they were being pressurized by their men not to go. However, I left with the women who were ready to go. The members of the older SHG interacted with the visitors. They spoke of their achievements, showed them the process that their group followed...lighting incense sticks, saying prayers, taking attendance and collecting money. They talked about all religions being the same and that the condition of women was not good in any community. They also talked about the strength they experienced as a group.

I was apprehensive about whether the decision to take them for the exposure visit had been the right one; however, to my surprise, when I went to Ramkol after a week, the opening sentence of a woman who spoke about

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"*Ye baksa humari taakat hai* (This box is our strength)." She told the women, "This box will make 'we' women independent and during a time of need we won't have to look to any men for help."

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her experience was, "*Ye baksa humari taakat hai* (This box is our strength)." She told the women, "This box will make 'we' women independent and during a time of need we won't have to look to any men for help."

She was cross-questioned by the other women, "*Aur ye paisa aata kahan se hai? Wo to mard hi deta hai na to uski to zaroorat padegi hi na?* (From where does this money come from? Our men give us the money to save; then how does the dependency end?)" The first woman answered that she had an equal right on the money although she hardly seemed convinced by her own statement. I felt a strong need to intervene and introduce the concept of importance of the 'Self' to the women.

Discussions around the drudgery of women had already been initiated earlier but this time I took the discussion forward by demonstrating the activity of division of work in a house. I asked a child to bring some small pebbles. I told the women that we would count the different things they do and put one pebble down for each work. I asked them to start spelling out what they do from the beginning of the day when they get up, so that they do not miss out anything or count

anything twice.

They began by saying, "*Pahad jate hain* (Go to the hillside for sanitation)." I interrupted them asking whether this counted as work. They understood and started enumerating the actual work that they did in their households. The women counted as many as 26 different things that they performed on a regular basis. These included cleaning the house, making food, taking care of children, sending children to school, making the bed, fetching water, washing clothes, washing utensils, making bed sheets out of old clothes, pressing the feet of their husbands before sleeping, etc. For the men, they were able to list only seven things, which included taking care of the children sometimes, going to the market, going to work to earn, etc.

Did they get any money or even recognition for their work? If they were to stop doing all this work, would their household run? I asked. Then followed a long discussion. They acknowledged that it is because of their own ability that they were able to save and that they had equal right on that money. Some of them recognized that reproductive work is as important as productive work.

### Norm setting

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The groups discussed the process by which the money should be collected and counted. Once when the accountant wrote Rs 20 against each name without ensuring that the money was being collected. I tried to intervene but very little attention was paid to my words. Later, when the money was counted, there was a mismatch between the amount collected and what was written in the books. The group realized the need to take collective action when collecting money wherein one person would write the amount, one would collect it and the others would keep an active eye on the process. I understood the difference between listening and realizing. A person can listen to what I am saying but may not realize what I mean until he/she sees the discrepancy personally.

Once I was away for a month and was apprehensive about what I would find when I went back to the community. I wondered about the groups. I was astounded by what I came across. The women told me that they had learned a song from some of their relatives in the nearby block, regarding the strength of the group, and they now sang it in each meeting.

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They had also learned to sign, introduce themselves and most of them remembered the five principles of the group that they said out loud in each meeting: weekly meeting, weekly saving, timely loan taking, repaying, and maintaining proper accounts

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They had also learned to sign, introduce themselves and most of them remembered the five principles of the group that they said out loud in each meeting: weekly meeting, weekly saving, timely loan taking, repaying, and maintaining proper accounts. They remembered this from their exposure visit and they practised it because it made them feel good. I felt happy that even in my absence they had remained committed. This commitment had taken them forward and it would keep them motivated in the future. They had taken ownership of the group.

### Coming out with flying colours

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As the group moved forward, the women started discussing issues such as domestic violence, pornography, marital rape, menstruation, the ill-effects of early marriage and motherhood, the negative impact on their health of having too many children, etc. During one such discussion, one woman spoke of the issue of pornography and marital rape saying, "*Din me aadmi mobile par picture dekhta hai aur raat ko suhaag raat manata hai* (In the day time, man watches movies on the mobile and at night applies the same on his wife and celebrates it like his

wedding night)." This statement was acknowledged by most of the others as well, some with shyness and others with nervous laughter whereas some others elaborated upon it further.

Another woman, talked about her experience of domestic violence and said, "*Raat ko kamre ki batti bhuja kar, zameen par angochha bichha kar, mote danda se marta hai* (My husband switches off the light at night, spreads a sheet on the floor and beats me with a thick stick)." This statement regarding violence is derived from a song in their local dialect, which talks about love instead of violence. She had changed it to explain her situation. I was disturbed to hear this; however, I did not react, thinking that it may stop them from sharing further. This sharing strengthened my belief that I needed to engage with them further around issues related to gender inequality.

Soon, some of the women began questioning why their men beat them; by and large, however, most of them were still uncomfortable discussing these issues. This question came up more and more frequently and the women started thinking of splitting one group into two, according to age, so that they could talk more freely about

such issues. I pointed out the importance of the role of each member of the group and left the decision to them.

Today, they are all comfortable sharing about their situations; the older ones talk about their young age and the younger ones about their present situation. They collectively believe that early marriage, early motherhood and too many pregnancies have spoiled their health; they still have not figured out a way to deal with this because, according to them, in their community any family planning method is considered anti-religious. I was taken aback by this conversation because, for me, the first step towards any change is recognizing the gaps in the existing scenario. They had arrived at that and were not doing anything about it. I realized that their construct around religion is so strong that taking a leap over it is very difficult.

The women who had gone for the exposure visit changed the name of their group from 'Salma Mahila Mandal' to 'Nari Shakti Mahila Mandal'. This was such a joyous moment for me. The conviction with which they did so filled me with hope and motivation. When I asked them why they had changed the name, they said that

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Nari Shakti Mahila Mandal soared high even without my intervention. The women from this group motivated the women of the other disbanded group and the latter re-grouped with some new women joining in and some of the old ones leaving

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they, as women, were coming together through this group, that this would indicate their strength and that this group was their collective shakti (power). Once again, this realization, which they came upon themselves, played its part in taking such a bold decision.

Nari Shakti Mahila Mandal soared high even without my intervention. The women from this group motivated the women of the other disbanded group and the latter re-grouped with some new women joining in and some of the old ones leaving. So far, four women have taken their first loans and used it for reclaiming their jewellery mortgaged with the local moneylender. Navratan Bibi, who was the first person to take a loan for her jewellery, came to the meeting wearing all her ornaments to show them to everyone and there was a loud cheer because every woman present there cherished her joy. Their sharing in her joy showed their consideration of each others' feelings, and a group, based on what we call 'mutual help'.

The women who, earlier, did not leave their homes alone now go to the nearby village to meet the CSP (Community Service

Provider) of that *panchayat*. They are also ready to attend the trainings for running the group more effectively and are now more confident about meeting strangers, especially men. This was a step forward because earlier had refused to even meet one of my male colleagues.

Although their husbands are still affected sometimes by the other men of the community, who disapprove of the women's actions, by and large, they themselves see it as a benefit for their family so they do not object to the women stepping out. There was a case where a man had beaten up his wife and had warned her not to go to the meeting but she still came, without letting him know, because she felt good in meeting everyone and felt financially more secure by being in the group.

Many other women in the community wished to form a group and the women from both the existing groups want to help them do so. They are willing to share their understanding of the need for a group and to show them how to maintain accounts. With this, an organic collectivization, which is community driven, is falling into place. I feel hopeful about a better

life for all the women and I would love to witness the continuing change in their journey ahead.

### My Experiences

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I was earlier strongly opposed to the influence being exercised by just one or two women as I thought that they would dominate the group; however, during my engagement, I realized that these strong women help gather all the others and are mostly considered leaders by the community. As a facilitator, I learned that I needed to ensure that I engage with all the women equally so as not to reinforce this identity of some women as leaders and that no one should feel left out. I learned that I needed to guide the influential woman in a way that they extend themselves for others and not take advantage of their influence by dominating others.

One Sunday morning, I looked at my phone and found around 8-9 missed calls from a woman in Ramkol. When I called her back, anxious to know whether everything was alright, she said that she just wanted to talk to me, and therefore, had called. She then talked to me for several minutes, asked me about what I was doing, what I was eating and

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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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she told me what she was doing, etc., and ended the conversation. I was surprised. She did not talk to me about anything regarding the group. It was just personal sharing. I was happy that I had gained some space in her heart that had made her talk to me. My relationship with her, and may be with most of the women in Ramkol, is beyond professionalism and benefit seeking. We have developed a bond and we share a kind of love.

Looking back, I can say that my journey with the community of Ramkol has been like a roller coaster ride where, at times, I felt so high and full of hope that the women were emerging strong together and, at other times, I was so afraid of entering the community, believing that

the group was going to break up. I now wonder why I was so anxious. It was their group and it would be their decision whether to keep it going or to break it. I realized that I am very attached to the women in that community; that I did not want them to fall apart and wished that they continue to make progress, to make their lives better and raise their status in their families as well as in society.

### Conclusion

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Change is a very slow process; social change is both slow and difficult to measure. Also, the change we talk about can only be seen by engaging with people, and during this engagement it is not only the community that

changes but also the person who engages with them. With the women of Ramkol, their increased level of comfort in discussing their precarious condition, their increased mobility and their willingness to collectivize more women are signs of change. I, too, grew as an individual. I got to know myself, by relating their lives to mine, and now I have started trusting my own abilities as well. It is a symbiotic relationship where everyone involved gains equally. I realized that no matter how many challenges one comes across, there comes a time when things seem to fall in place when one has faith in the ability of the people.

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*Kanika Agarwal earlier worked with PRADAN in Godda, Jharkhand*

### THE CHANGE

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When I see the cruel world around  
Haunting images of which surround  
I hope to see the change  
But reality is so strange  
The struggle is on,  
To make it a better place  
But everyone seems in such haste  
I feel as if it's already too late  
But, then, what is the strife for?  
Hope for change is still not torn  
Change is to see an equal and just place  
A smile on each face  
A place where everyone is accepted in good grace  
And oppression is not the case!

SHG members of Rahariya village, Araria district, Bihar, understand gender dynamics through games (p 27)



PRADAN is a non-governmental organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Working with small teams of professionals in several poverty clusters in seven states across central and eastern India, PRADAN builds and strengthens collectives of rural women, in order to stimulate their sense of agency and help them occupy space as equals in society. PRADAN professionals work through these collectives, to enhance the livelihoods and overall well-being of women, thereby striving for a just and equitable society.

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*Newsreach* is published by the National Resource Centre for Livelihoods, housed in PRADAN.

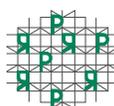
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Trishagnee Borua  
with SHG members  
in Masuriya village,  
Araria district, Bihar

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