

From the Field Diary of a Development-*wallah*: Arriving at a Cacophonous Harmony

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Struggling to make inroads into a new community, the development practitioner swings between despair and hope, optimism and pessimism, enthusiasm and self-doubts, till perseverance pays off. Three years on, as many as 2000 women have been impacted by these efforts

RAIN CLOUDS ARE HOVERING IN THE SKIES and a heavy downpour is expected soon. The thunder showers and the flashes of lightning set the ambience, spelling out that the monsoon is about to hit the grounds of Bahadurganj. Within days, the dry soil will be perforated by millions of tiny droplets falling from the sky. The continuous rainfall will soon fill the fields with water and the surroundings will become greener and darker.

Sulemaan will be busy in *dhaan ropai* (rice transplantation) in his paddy field, along with Talamai and a group of labourers (locally known as *jan*). His *biwi* (wife), Shehzaadi, and six of their children contribute by bringing food for their *ba* (father) and for the *jan*.

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The scenario was something like this: It is afternoon time and the food train is arriving. One is holding a jug of water, while the other is carrying the *handi* of *daal* and *ammi* (Shehzaadi) with the new-born, is carrying the *handi* of rice on her head, draped tightly with a cloth. The other children are following their mother through the *aal* (a narrow bund) within the field that connects one with the other. The last one (generally without any piece of clothing on his body) deliberately slips through the *aal* and falls in the mud so that he can have a *chaska* (taste) of the *kichardh* (mud) in the form of a mud-bath.

Amidst these mundane-yet-lively happenings, somewhere by the side of a road, a bike stops. A cigarette is lit. With a deep drag of the first puff, I gaze upon these heartening stimuli for quite some time. Through the artificial cloud of smoke that has just been exhaled, I see these kids and their mothers form the shape of a small train traversing upon a narrow bund in water-filled surroundings. I gaze and gaze. Time does not permit me to stay for long. This small train is soon to reach its destination, and mine is still far. I have to traverse another 7 km to reach my destination (Dulali village). The engine is thus...ignited again!

Webbing up the tale

“*Os os Didi, Agent ose gel!*”

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This has become a regular scene for me. As soon as my bike stops in a corner of any village, I hear the familiar call. Although I don't like myself to be referred to as an 'agent', I can't stop the vox populis...Can I?

Welcome to Surjapur!

It is a place where the plains, its people and its rivers have a tale to tell. I also have a story to tell, a small chapter to add to this bigger story. Let me walk you through a journey...a journey without the description of the picturesque, magnificent hills and the beautiful rivulets that sometimes break down and become mesmerising springs...a journey that has no tranquil woods that make you feel spiritual. No, I am not going to talk about that at all! Neither am I going to talk about some fantastic and some marvellous happenings out here,

which the world has not seen or heard of before!

Instead, here, the land is plain with numerous streams, tributaries and rivers meandering on its surface like long pieces of swirling thread lying on the ground of a tailor's shop, unnoticed. The monsoon heralds many hues of greenery in the area, with the land being coloured in shades of green in the form of crops. This mostly follows a pattern of paddy cultivation after the jute, and the land is impregnated with maize during winter when the clouds shelter the ground in a fog. Downstream plays a crucial part in this as if a paint brush has been taken to a canvas. And, sometimes, the hues painted on the landscape are washed away by flash floods that take place during the monsoon.

Now, to be factual, the Surjapur of which I am talking does not exist geographically. However, it is an area where a majority of the population likes to address themselves as Surjapuris and, therefore, I suppose it would not be an offence to refer to the land where they live as Surjapur.

So, where is the Surjapur that I am talking about actually located? Who are the people that live there? What do they do?

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You probably have heard of a region named ‘Chicken’s neck of India’. If you zoom into a political map of India, you will see a region sandwiched between two international boundaries from the north-west and the south-east directions to be precise (Nepal to the north-west and Bangladesh to the south-east). Geographically, this is called the Terai region of the Great Himalayas. In the early morning, if the sky is clear, and with a bit of luck, you can get a glimpse of the mighty Kanchenjunga from the terrace of our office building. The region is popularly known as Seemanchal, which means ‘end of the boundary’. The name of the region denotes the end of Bihar’s political boundary.

Surjapuri is not one particular community. As the local people explain, it is a homogenous term, which denotes a conglomeration of multiple communities and religions. The Sheikhs, the Gangais, the Sadgops, the Rajbanshis, the Mushars, the Santhals, the Shershawadis and many more are the people who live here. They practice various religions, traditions, customs and ways of livelihood, but what unites them is a common thread—‘the Surjapuri dialect’.

Looking at this region through the development perspective, the area has its own set of challenges. It fares poorly on almost all the indicators of development. It is one of the most backward regions of India, with high political chaos, shocking HDI figures of maternal mortality rate (MMR), infant mortality rate (IMR), education, health, basic infrastructure, etc. These are a few among the many reference points that are used to define the area. It is an area riddled with vulnerabilities and the uncertainty of livelihood, and fares negatively on several other development indicators.

Amidst these diversities and complexities, PRADAN began operations in Bahadurganj (one of the seven blocks of Kishanganj district of Bihar) in 2013. Soon after I graduated as a Development Professional from Koderma, Jharkhand, in 2014, I was posted to this location. Seriously speaking, I had never heard of Kishanganj or Bahadurganj. I assumed it was some place near Nepal, because I associated the term ‘Bahadur’ with Nepal and the Nepalese. Talk of stereotyping!

Things have changed quite a bit since then! Recalling when it all

started, I see my younger self being desperately gloomy about being posted here, on being separated from my colleagues. On my last day in Koderma, with a heavy heart and tearful eyes, I bid adieu to the beautiful hills, the *galis, chacha* (the *chaiwala*) my friend, with whom I chatted over a glass of tea and a cigarette in the evenings, the energetic people I met and, most important, the birthplace of my career in development, which had been my home for a year. I had come to love my dear ‘Jhumri Talaiya’.

On a foggy wintery afternoon, carrying with me a bagful of stuff and old memories, I reached this place called Bahadurganj.

Kathaakar and the Manch

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Over time, these villages have become my *manch* (stage). The community and I are the characters, and the plot is Surjapur, of course! I had never thought that a theatre and film loving person like me would start off trying to be a ‘development-wallah’. Now, as four years have gone by, at times, I feel like Kamal Hassan (the famous actor, known for playing multiple characters in a single

Now, at this juncture, it seems that I have come a long way. In the beginning, however, the emotions were raw, the experiences fresh, the hurdles innumerable, the perceptions building and the assumptions varied. Over the years, it has been a process of 'learn to de-learn' and 'de-learn to learn'

film) having different ways of greeting different communities. It is 'Assaalam-waleiqum' for a Muslim community, 'Johar-Johar' for a Santhali and 'Pranaam' for a Hindu community. Versatile, isn't it?

To me, these greetings are my assets. These are not merely an offering from the community; rather they are a hard-earned gift! A lot of blood, sweat, tears and, of course, money has been shed for it.

Why?

Initially, upon my arrival, I worried that there would be no one who would greet me with a 'Bhaiyya, pranaam' and there would be no one to whom I could greet with a 'pranaam, didi' in return."

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The early days

Carrying the memories of having worked with a much older team, I landed in a location where I knew no one. There were no hills, no forests and the community that nurtured me as a development professional was no longer with me. The PRADAN Bahadurganj team was, at that time, a newborn. It was the offspring of the organization's re-structuring process, which was only a few months old. As I recollect, sipping a hot cup of tea and eating some *pakodas* with the nine team members (Abhishek Gaurav, Abhishek Kumar, Amit, Arindom, Anup, Arshad, Illora, Sudarshan and myself) on a wintery afternoon was always an event for us.

What struck me, at first, about the new place was the dialect. It was neither Bengali nor Nepali and not Maithili or Angika. At times, I would hear it as a form of Bengali, at times as Nepali and, to some extent, Maithili. Later, I found out that the Surjapuri dialect had its origins in the Rajbanshi dialect and sounded very similar to it. This, for me, was a matter of immense pleasure because I found that the dialect

had a link with my mother tongue—Assamese.

There was no real team base. Our area of work was concentrated in a few tiny pockets, stretching roughly up to 20 to 30 km in length and breadth, in a few villages that largely bordered Nepal. Our main work was to explore the areas in and around the 15-km radius from Bahadurganj town, keeping in mind the new re-structuring policy of working close to the office.

Thus, 'professionals roaming around and doing absolutely nothing (PRADAN)' would be an apt description of our work during those days (recalling how Deep Joshi shared about the initial years of PRADAN and how the PRADAN people were being referred to). I was desperately missing the huge community base of PRADAN in Koderma, the established functioning system in community mobilization in the form of Federations, Clusters, Village Organisations (VOs), SHGs, women leaders, Community Resource Persons (CRPs), etc. And here...there was no one. All we had was a shared dream of building this team.

To be honest, I also questioned why we were working there. My mind was constantly comparing my past experience with PRADAN with what we were doing now and arriving at a judgmental analysis and creating a 'chemical-*locha*' in my brain. I had to consciously put that aside to be able to focus on my work

We would sit every evening and plan for the next day on who would transact which area and who would accompany whom. At the end of the day, we would again sit and discuss and reflect upon what had happened during the day and plan for the next day. I still laugh when I recall the series of incidents that occurred during those days. Whenever we would stop in a village and start a discussion with the villagers, they would take us to be some Inspecting Officers of NREGA or the 'Vridhha Pension' and start complaining about what was not happening in their areas.

In some places, out of curiosity or even suspicion, people would ask us to show our identity cards to validate who we were. To their innumerable questions, we would sometimes humbly reply, "Dada... we also don't know what we do! Now, we have come to you people to know what we should do!" Poor fellows, not finding any answers, they would vanish one-by-one never to be seen again! Such was the situation of us 'dare-devil' development-*wallahs*!

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arriving at a judgmental analysis and creating a 'chemical-*locha*' in my brain. I had to consciously put that aside to be able to focus on my work.

At times, I was compelled to think that I didn't know anything about the development sector. What I had learnt during my Development Apprentice (DA) programme and the experiences that I had had in my previous team were hardly working to my advantage. The distance, and the big difference from the other work areas of PRADAN, was also adding to my struggles. Moreover, the community and the set-up were totally different from rest of the work areas where PRADAN had so far been basically engaged.

Working with a predominantly Muslim community was also a new experience, not only for me but also for PRADAN. The organization's prime focus had always been the indigenous communities (tribals) belonging to the poorest pockets of mainland India. This made for a more challenging situation, leaving us handicapped as far as formulating and rolling out tested and proven strategies was concerned. We were not sure how this community would receive these initiatives of PRADAN.

Well, the nut had to be searched for, and found, so that we could try out ways to crack it! We kept up a constant thrust to build a rapport with the community. We tried out multiple ways to get an inch closer. Some of us tried the tested and proven technique of 'exposures' to older areas like Hazaribagh whereas others tried to rely on their own, that is, 'let-me-toil-on-my-own' strategy. I relied on the second one. Most certainly, no one in my team was as disappointed as I when attempting to implement this strategy in the field. One failure after another almost devastated my morale. As all attempts, based on the previous learning experiences did not work; out of frustration, I was plagued by questions such as, "*karein toh karein kya?* (What to do?)"

Tangled in these doldrums, the team kept on trying something or the other. Most of them ended in failure. However, the nut had to be cracked! The dire need to deliver was the only burning passion alive during those times. All else was silent. I would often wonder whether the same struggles plagued the process of establishing PRADAN's work area, perhaps a little bit less—perhaps a little bit more.

I would often question, why we were working here? Why am I here? What change will I bring here, where things are already in a certain stage of development? Is there a real need for us to work here?

The Good Old Bad Days

It was 2015. Probably the toughest year in my life till now. After an unsettling period of transacts and area exploration, the team and I needed to settle down somewhere. Thus, various patches were demarcated, keeping in mind the proximity of within a radius of 15 km, with Bahadurganj town as its centre. We named these patches 'Development Patch (DP)'. Each patch comprised four to five *panchayats*. Accordingly, four patches were identified per professional and I was allotted the fourth—DP 4, comprising four *panchayats* connected to each other. This is where my tough phase began!

Each day I would go on a field-visit and each day would be a disappointment. As I traversed through the small roads crossing one village after another, not knowing where to stop, I would often end up in a nearby *hatiya* sipping a glass of *chai* with a cigarette in my hand, thinking about what was happening to me!

My experiences were not the same as my earlier experiences in Koderma and I did not have the same feeling of accomplishment. In Koderma, I had to cross

multiple hills with no roads (literally) to reach a village. The remoteness of the villages was the adventurous and the fun part in working there. I saw how people toiled to make a living and the dependence on the forest as their resource. In comparison, in Bahadurganj, the houses were better built; the settlement was dense, the roads were inter-connected, the land was favourable for cultivation with very scarce forest cover (in fact, no forest at all).

I would often question, why we were working here? Why am I here? What change will I bring here, where things are already in a certain stage of development? Is there a real need for us to work here? My answer to myself was often 'no'. Most of the discourse that I had with myself would either end up with negativity inside me or would leave me more troubled and disturbed. Truly speaking, those days were really 'bad-bad days'!

My enthusiasm and energy levels dipped and I was not able to see any long-term strategy. I just worked at what came my way at that moment and acted accordingly. All the reasons and rationales stemmed from the negative corner of my brain,

leaving me more pessimistic towards the stimuli that I was experiencing on a day-to-day basis. I did not utter a word about this to my team. They had no hint of what was happening to me! The team and the members were all new to me and we didn't really know each other well. So, I decided to just carry on in my own way. Other than the struggles outside, every day I was fighting my own war with myself without anyone noticing it!

Quite often, I would look in the mirror and ask, "Do I really look like a Nepali?" This was a situation I faced on a daily basis. I would stop by the roadside or stop for a tea in a *chaiwala's* shop or would stop by in a village trying to make a conversation with the villagers and the first thing the people around would do is to scan me from top to bottom. Why wouldn't they? A kurta-clad oriental-looking lad, with a *jhola* on his shoulder and a motorbike with a Jharkhand registration number and speaking Hindi?

After the scanning, they would begin whispering among themselves. Then...then what? The question and answer round would begin! First question, "... Are you a Nepali?" or "How is everyone there in Nepal?" To

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their humble, and intriguingly innocent questions, I would reply, "I am not a Nepali! I am from Assam."

The obvious second question would follow, "Assam! Guwahati! *Itna dur se hain* (From so far away)? What do you do here?"

I would often reply, "I work in an NGO named PRADAN. We work in the villages."

The third question in their beautiful minds would be, "Is it a government enterprise or a private company? How much do you get? Is it enough for you to run your life?"

By this time, I would begin to get irritated. How do I make them understand that there is another sector known as *gair sarkari* (non-profit). I would reply a little irritated, "*Paintees hazaar* (Rs 35,000)."

They would get a look of shock on their faces and with a mocking smile on their face, "*Kya baat karte hain? Itna toh master* (teacher) *logon ko bhi nahin milta hain, aapko kyun itna paisa dega gaon mein kaam karne ke liye?* (What are you saying? Even a teacher doesn't get so much. Why would you get so much money to work in a village?)"

They would usually end their querying at this point and return to their work or continue their own gossip. Sometimes, someone would ask, "*Isme kaisa kaam hota hain?* (What work do you have to do?)" This would be my opening. I would give an elaborate description of the work that PRADAN has been doing for such a long time!

A couple of months passed without clearly understanding how I should approach the community and what could be the entry point activity for the community. It might have been out of desperation or an inclination to a certain community that I ended up in a Santhali village called Hasanganj, situated in a less accessible area than the others that were all inter-connected to each other. As usual, I was trying to communicate with the villagers, but they were communicating in Santhali among themselves and I didn't know a word of it.

Suddenly, a person among them, with the same tone and pattern of the 'question-and-answer round' that I usually faced, asked me where I was from. After I answered, he asked me if there were any books on 'Ol-chiki scripture'. As I had no idea whether there was something

available around his interest area, I apologetically replied that I didn't know whether there was any book available, and I could surely search on the Internet and provide him the information. Hearing this, he made a request that I come another day along with this specific information. During this discussion, he took me to his home and offered me a hot glass of tea. It was after months that someone had invited me into their home.

Accordingly, I went. Not only this once; he invited me multiple times subsequently. Through him, I met the other villagers. They gradually started inquiring about me. The kids started peeping from their homes and began to rush towards me as soon as my bike would stop. We would giggle, make faces and, at times, would play together. Through them, I was introduced to their mothers. I don't clearly remember when I first started discussions with the women members of the village about their lives, the work they did (as I became clear that the women of the village worked as agriculture labourers), and the lives they led. I also shared with them my purpose. I explained to them why we worked in the villages and how we worked with the women.

Time flies by very fast but teaches you something every single minute. It has been more than two years since the above series of events occurred. Bit by bit, the foundation of the team's work was laid and I saw it grow in front of my own eyes, felt the pain and toil that we had to undertake for the cause

After multiple visits, dozens of hours of discussions and facilitations, a few women hesitatingly shared that they also wanted to be in one such type of group, at least to understand what it was that I was talking about. It took me four long months to form the first formal group—my, or you say, 'our' (along with the community) first SHG. It was like, *doobte ko tinke ka sahara milna* (A drowning man clutching at straws). Thus, an SHG of Santhali women was formed in an area where the 'minority is the majority' and Santhals only comprise roughly five per cent of the total population of the district!

The Beginning

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to more than 200 SHGs. From a 'no community base' to a base of more than 2000 women, from 'agent' to 'manager' to 'Sir' to 'bhaiyya' and much more.

With the good lies the bad. How can I forget the good-old-bad days! I remember the incidents of neglect and the many rebukes by the same community, which now accepts me as well as my work. I remember the tears of utter desperation, frustration and agony of not being able to do what I desired and aspired to do. I remember the times when I was called a fraud, when my team members shared that I was biased towards a certain community, when I was called a Dharm Parivartak (Religion converter) and broke four SHGs for singing the song, "*Mandir, Masjid, Girjaghar ne baant diya insaan ko, dharti baanti ambar baanta mat baanto insaan ko.*"

Today, when I am go to a village that once shunned me and see that there is a VO, don't I have cause to be filled with a sense of internal bliss? Has the nut finally been broken? I say, "Yes!" partially.

A long way has been traversed on a road that we have never travelled before, in the land where the plains, its people, its rivers

all have a tale to tell. It's only the beginning. The project is just like a child who has gradually stepped into his/her adolescence. And adolescence, we all know, is a time for more stress. It will be a time for more growth, more enterprise, more adventure and more rebellion.

Let us pause and not discuss the present discourse around community engagement and other numerous nuances stirring in the PRADAN ideology today. Frankly speaking, I have just penetrated skin-deep in the process of becoming a Surjapuri. Amidst the cacophony of struggle, pain, grief, happiness, sorrows, aspirations, dignity, morality, rigidity, a Surjapuri tends to survive.

"*Surjapuri'r bichhot rohbe toh, tuk surjapuri'ei toh bonua hobe* (If you are with the Surjapuris, you will have to be one among them)!" These words of Domni *didi* are a reminder of how 'Us' and 'They' can become 'We' one day. The question lurking in my mind is ...

Can there be cacophonous harmony?

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Juba Pratim Gogoi is based in Bahadurganj, Bihar