

# Born Into Penury: Failing to Make the Cut

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*Representing the struggle of thousands of people living below the poverty line, Dugi Mai Bodra's life-story is one of steadfast perseverance and dogged determination that finally culminates in her finding her own power through the SHG to which she belonged*

In the past six decades, India has seen huge leaps in development...both economically and socially. The percentage of people below the poverty line (BPL) was 50.1 per cent in the rural areas in 1993–94. It dropped to 25.7 per cent in 2011–12. In absolute terms, nearly 404 million people were poor in 1993–94 and the figure stood at 269 million in 2011–12 (Tendulkar Estimates). Thus, some 135 million people have moved out of their 'destitution' as per government reports and estimates. In terms of health, the life expectancy of people has gone up to 65 years in 2012 from 32 years at the time of Independence. Literacy levels have gone up from 16 per cent in 1951 when the first Census was conducted, to around 74 per cent in 2011.

However, the following is a story of one amongst those 269 million people who failed to make the cut.

This 58-year-old woman, an old gentle lady left me in awe of her boldness and spirit when she walked all the way in the scorching heat of May (covering her head with some leaves) to the Federation meeting. Along with her hamlet women, she walked 10 km to submit an application regarding the non-issuance of PDS ration in the village for over six months.

"My name is Dugi Mai Bodra. My name in my Aadhaar card has been incorrectly recorded as Durga Bodra. It didn't matter much until now when the bank-*babus* asked me to submit my Aadhaar number so that it could be linked to my account. I've since then paid four visits to the centre to rectify the error, paying an additional Rs 100 for the process. I fear my pension will be scrapped if I don't submit it soon. When I go to the bank with my current Aadhaar card, the bank *babus* reprimand me and ask me whose Aadhaar card I have submitted.

I was born to Bacho Chaki and Gurubari Hansda in 1958, third in line to five siblings, in a tiny village named Pukurimunda, in Sundargarh district of Odisha. My mother didn't live through our childhood. My father struggled hard to feed us. We had land but no hands that could cultivate them; thus my father worked on others' lands and grazed their cattle. We had our own cattle too, 12 of them. It

was our responsibility to graze them in father's absence. As children, we grew up eating *kheer* in the morning from milking these cattle. Our lunch and dinner was usually rice-water, occasionally flavoured with vegetables or pulses that the landlords sometimes provided my father.

School was a distant dream—we neither had the resources nor the time to entertain the idea of education. Those who had the luxury had to take the trouble to cross a stream that separated our village from the school while we grazed our cattle and did household chores.

I often wished to be attired like many other kids, to have braids like they did, to go to *melas* to buy toys. I ended up going to a railway track construction site (1968–70). I was paid six annas (1 anna = 6 paisa; 1 rupee would roughly translate to 16 annas) per day for 15 days of work every month. My sister had got married and it was me and my brother along with my father who were now the bread-winners of the family. I was around 12–13 then. I remember how the contractor used to hide us somewhere whenever some *bada babu* was going to visit us. We knew he'd be rebuked if we were caught working at this age. And he knew why we needed to work at this age.

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I was happy when I earned my first wage, joyous to contribute to my family, elated to support my father. Rice, then, was priced at 8 annas/kg. My wage helped us get some more of it. We also started utilizing our fallow lands for growing paddy, now that there were three of us.

A few years later (1972–73), I moved to Karampada. I heard they paid better wages there. It

was there that I was once accosted by a man while on my way to work. As fate turned out, I married him a few months later (in 1974, aged around 16 years). It was painful to leave my father behind, but I was also excited to leave Odisha and go to Bihar (now Jharkhand, Bhalupani *gram panchayat*, GP, in Bandgaon block, West Singhbhum district). Within a span of 5–6 years, I gave birth to three children (two girls and a boy). Soon the children kept falling ill; we were advised by my father-in-law to migrate to some other place (guided by the belief that evil spirits were the cause of the illnesses). Migrating would also ensure us our family needs. Our move affected my children's education (thereafter they were never able to continue schooling) but feeding them was more important. We migrated every season to Talicher for two years and then to Sankarnagar in West Bengal (around 1983–84), returning to the village during the monsoons and then heading back. I worked as wage labourer for Rs 20 for every 1,000 bricks I carried. My husband worked as a mason, earning Rs 40–50/day. My eldest daughter (aged 10–12) took care of her siblings occasionally; and as she grew older, she helped me to carry bricks.

We were provided 15 kg of rice per week by the manager for 60 annas, and devoured fish curry and other delicacies nearly every single

day, during our stay in West Bengal. We also built our own shelter from unbaked bricks from the kilns.

We moved back to our village (probably around 1993–94) after my husband fell ill and subsequently died of his sickness. Unlike these days, there used to be no doctors then. We had to mortgage part of our lands for Rs 1600 for seven years to bear the cost of his treatment.

After the death of my husband, life moved on as usual. My daughters got married. My son migrated to Kolkata and I worked as wage labour at Rs 5 a day during the paddy season. Post the season, I started going to the forest and I learned to collect and sell various forest produce such as *sal* leaves, *mahua*, char and timber to sustain myself. Rice was priced somewhere around Rs 3–5/kg, they sold it in *batis*, with one *bati* of paddy for Rs 1. To make ends meet, I also made liquor from *mahua* and sold it.

Around 2001–02, Anil *dada* from PRADAN came to our village and explained to us the idea of SHGs—and how these would help us in savings and loans. We liked what he said and formed our own group: Sude Sagen Mahila Mandal. I remember the wages around that time were Rs 15 and rice was priced around Rs 12/kg. We started with Rs 5/week as the saving amount. My son was also married by that time. We had two cattle, but couldn't make use of them because my son was not around much. One of those was sold when a need arose and the other died.

We were provided various trainings and we played many different games through our years in the SHG. We also went on 'exposure'

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visits to see horticulture plantations as well as wells and ponds constructed in the fields for irrigation. I liked it very much; after a meeting at the village level, many of us planted (around 2006–07) mango, cashew and *amla* trees in our up-lands. My children and I worked hard to plant and protect these trees. My son also

stopped migrating to the city and stayed back to take care of the plantations. Our SHG also got Rs 25,000 loan from the bank, out of which I borrowed Rs 3000 to purchase a goat.

Things seemed to improve until my daughter-in-law was diagnosed with TB and eventually succumbed to it (around the year 2009). We had to mortgage another chunk of our lands in return for Rs 1500 for the treatment. She left behind five kids to be taken care of, four of whom didn't live beyond 7–8 years. My son remarried and now has three more kids. He lives in the adjacent village, sustaining himself and his family by selling timber and chopping wood. We still haven't been able to free up the land. The mango orchards have started bearing fruits too. But they are an asset of my son and his family now.

And I live in my own solitude, owning, in terms of my asset, a goat and a house that has its roof blown off by the storm that hit a few months ago. I still work whenever I get the opportunity, at wage rate that has now gone up to Rs 60. During other times, my daughters feed me well and sometimes my son provides me with the savings to contribute to my SHG. Rice is now fetched at Rs 20–25.

I worry about my house. That is a thought I sleep with every passing day. Repairing it will require another Rs 5,000–6,000. I also worry

for my grandchildren. And I still have an outstanding loan of Rs 1,600 that I need to repay to my SHG; Rs 600 taken this season for paying to the quack when I had malaria.

The happiest moments I can recall from my life have been with the SHG, especially when I could travel to places (probably for the first time without the purpose of earning) and learn different things. I also loved the *mahadiveshans* in which we used to participate and light the *diyas*. I feel happy when I see my daughter taking care of me. And I feel happy when somebody comes and talks to me because usually people prefer to stay away. Who wants to talk to an old lady who has nothing?"

Fifty-eight years down the line and nothing has changed for this woman... and as a matter-of-fact, for many others like her. When she narrated her story, I realized the meaning of the 'vicious cycle of poverty'. Her children went through the same phase that she had been through, and her grandchildren are not very different circumstances either. Did education (or rather the lack of it) or health or resources or economy or gender inequalities (in terms of control over assets) play any role in running the cycle? I wonder.

More than 60 schemes are being run by the state government as poverty-alleviation programmes, in addition to the flagship schemes of the central government. A look at the budgetary spending of these governments for the implementation of these schemes reveals shocking details. For example, up

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to November 2005, Rs 8,067 crores have been allocated for the SGSY scheme (and not a single penny of that was received by Dugi Mai Bodra). Considering the medical and public health expenditure, there has been a 71 per cent increase in expenditure for the 1996–99 period, from around Rs 56 billion in 1995/96 to around Rs 96 billion in 1999/2000 (yet the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) doesn't reach the village in times of need, and Dugi Mai has to shell out Rs 600 for the treatment of her malaria). MGNREGA was launched in 2005, promising 100 days of employment. That would add to 11,000 person-days generated per household—yet not a single day of employment was received by the woman.

Ironically, computing the total budgetary expenditure of the government on poverty alleviation programmes in the 1999/2000 period (850 billion) divided by the poor population (approximately 350 million) would provide the woman with Rs 2,431 in her pocket, more than she had ever got. Considering the budget allocation for 2016–17, Rs 87,765 crores to be precise, and averaging it with the rural poor population of say 269 million people, would make way for Rs 32,259 in her kitty, nearly close to repairing her house eight times over, and more than what she can earn for and has ever had in whole life. Just a thought!

Of course, the thought follows its own argument that would suggest depriving many others by denying the infrastructure

development that has taken place over the years, and economic development (if direct cash transfer over budget allocations to various schemes is considered) may not necessarily imply overall human development. And that is not what I intend to conclude either.

However, I wish to counter the belief that intervening in and impacting only one of the elements of the poverty cycle breaks the cycle as a whole. That would have meant that livelihood intervention in the life of the woman, to enhance her income, should have changed the picture of her life...which it didn't. That was because the ownership rested with her son, who has had final control over it. Similarly, an agricultural intervention taking place in a village may get a woman's entire family involved. And her children may still be robbed of education. Thus, the intervention may mark a temporary 'push-up', which may or may not persist with her children in the future (degrading resources, divided properties, etc., could well play the 'pull-down' factors).

If education were to be considered as the only critical factor, the children may still not attend school because they are often used as extended hands in a family, grazing the cattle or working in the fields, as can be witnessed in low attendance figures in schools, in spite of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* reaching the remotest corners to build a school building. And if educated, they may still not find work, given the unemployment ratio of the country. One of the mothers says, "This (formal) education has left our children with neither jobs nor with agriculture."

Similarly, health interventions may have their fallout if the food on the plate is still the traditional 'high-carb', that is, if agricultural practices and local resources are not taken

into account. For example, awareness can be created around different health schemes and nutrition, but they may fail to sustain if agricultural practices continue the way they have been (like monocropping with singular focus on paddy) and natural resources (forests, lands, etc.) are not concurrently considered in the given context.

Do we need to consider that it is necessary to impact all the dimensions of a poverty cycle? Should the people working at the grass roots be aware of this perspective? Should a whole family be considered as the unit of development? Should the focus be shifted beyond the SHGs? Should men, children and the youth of the community also be included in the process of development? That might include education intervention for children and women, livelihoods intervention with the men and women, and health interventions with the entire family, all simultaneously. Government programmes today have evolved to cater to all these ages but it is the implementation that has always been in question. And that is also the challenge that lies before those amongst us who work at the grass roots.

That's my conclusion from the story of Dugi Mai Bodra. She has shown courage, perseverance and hope, despite all these years of struggle, by taking the lead after the cluster meeting that focussed around Food Security, PDS in particular, and concluded with the members resolving to write letters as a means of Grievance Redressal. On being asked why did she take all this pain of going to the meetings and with the letters, she replies, "This is my necessity". Beyond those words, I can only assume that times have strengthened her resolve and the collectives have given her faith to never lose hope.