

# My Journey into Kishanganj

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*Realizing that there is no single approach to engaging with women in order to organize them into SHGs, the Kishanganj team found success when it was willing to let go of its biases and identified the pressing needs of the women in the Muslim-dominated hamlet, supporting them in the areas of health and nutrition before considering savings and credit*

In mid-July 2013, one of my senior colleagues in Hazaribagh asked me whether I would like to work in Bihar. My instinctive reaction was a blunt reply, "No, I am not interested."

Later in the evening, back at my place, I began to brood over why he had asked me whether I wanted to move to Bihar. Was it because the organization had already decided to place me in Bihar? What if I was going to be asked to leave Hazaribagh where I had spent seven years of my life? What if I didn't like the new place and found it difficult to adjust to the new milieu? The 'what ifs' continued until I retired for the night.

The next morning, I felt quite agitated, now questioning why I was so troubled by the idea of leaving. I could not understand my apprehensions. There seemed to be a fear associated with moving away from my comfort zone. Not ready to face my fears, I told myself that it was because Jharkhand was the place where I wanted to spend the rest of my life, that there was no place as poor as Jharkhand and I could definitely make a difference here.

A month passed. While I was occupied with work, the thought of the possibility of having to leave Jharkhand continued to haunt me. One day, I came across a quote from Lao-Tzu which said, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be." Something shifted in me. I made up my mind to let go and not worry about something that had not yet happened. After another month, I finally got the call from our Head Office asking whether I would want to move to Bihar or Chhattisgarh.

I was surprised to find myself answering, “Yes, I am interested.”

I was asked to join the Kishanganj team in Bihar as soon as possible. I began to think of the area, its history, its geography, its culture, its society, its people as well as the issues of the area, the developmental challenges and the possibilities. The area seemed to be interesting and exciting. On 1 October 2013, I moved to Kishanganj to start my new stint in a completely different setting; I must admit I was very anxious and yet looking forward to it.

The first thing which caught my attention was the geographical location of the place. It is situated in the north-east corner of the state of Bihar, bordering West Bengal and Nepal. A narrow strip of West Bengal, about 20 km-wide separates it from Bangladesh. Small trading and the exchange of labour are the most crucial part of the economy for the people on both the sides of the border, especially with Nepal, which shares a porous border with India.

I had heard that there were cases of human trafficking and cross-border smuggling of narcotics, petroleum products, fertilizers, etc. Whereas there was no evidence of any of these on the surface, the continuous chaffing between the Shashastra Seema Bal (SSB) and the locals showed that everything was not quite well.

I would like to narrate the experience of my one year in Kishanganj and will attempt to draw a picture of it as I saw it.

First of all, I would like to share an interesting story about how the area had come to be known as ‘Kishanganj’. During the Mughal period, the area was a part of Nepal and was called Nepalgarh. On the instructions of the Mughal emperor, Mohammed Reza captured

the fort in Nepalgarh and the name was changed to Alamganj. During the period of the Khagada Nawab, Mohammed Fakiruddin, a Hindu saint arrived in the area. He was worn-out from his long travels and wanted to rest. But on hearing that the name of the place was Alamganj, that the river that flowed through it was called Ramzan and that the area was ruled by Fakiruddin, he refused to enter Alamganj and chose to stay on the outskirts. The Nawab, as a gesture of courtesy towards the holy man, announced that the portion of land from the Hindu saint’s place of rest to the river Ramzan would be known as Krishna-Kunj. Over the centuries, the area has come to be known as Kishanganj. This reflects the tradition of tolerance and respect for another culture and rituals that exists in the area.

The climate of Kishanganj is humid and the temperatures range from as high as 41°C in May to as low as 5°C in January. There are three seasons: winter, summer and monsoon. The average rainfall is 1800 mm, of which 80 per cent occurs during the monsoon. The main rivers of the district are the Mahananda and the Kankai that flow across the Kishanganj, Thakurganj, Kochadhamin, Bahadurganj, Dighalbank, Terhagachh and Kochadhamin blocks and the Mechi, the Ratwa, the Ram Chandra and the Kaul rivers flow across Thakurganj, Terhagachh and Kochadhamin.

The soil in the area is light, sandy loam to loam, and its physical range is 5.8 to 8.0 (mostly natural soil but some of it is slightly acidic and some slightly saline). The nutrients in the soil are low to medium, with a deficiency of zinc and phosphorus pent-oxide. The geographical area of the district is 1,93,855 ha, of which the total cultivable area is 1,73,574 ha and the total irrigated area is 27,018 ha. The irrigation facilities available in the district are mainly in the form of hand pumps, tube wells and wells. The land is divided into highlands (33,700

ha), medium-lands (50,700 ha) and lowlands (42,979 ha). The forest area of the district, which is merely six per cent, is mainly situated in the two blocks of Thakurganj and Terhagach.

As per the 2011 Census, the total population of Kishanganj is 1.69 million with approximately 90 per cent of the people residing in the rural areas. The population density of the district is 897 persons per sq km. The population growth in the last decade has been about 30 per cent. The sex ratio of the area stands at 950 female per thousand males. The child sex ratio stands at 971. The average literacy of the area is marginally over 55 per cent.

Situated in the north-eastern part of Bihar, the Surjapur region has adopted a distinct language over the years called Surjapuri, which is a combination of Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Oriya, Nepali, Rajbonshi and Maithili, and is recognized by the Government of Bihar as a special dialect. Although Surjapuri is the spoken language of the area, there is no information about the origin and history of Surjapuri. Some say that it has been spoken since the Mughal era whereas some say that the language came into existence during the British period. In fact, the term Surjapuri represents a community of people living in Surjapur area that sprawls over six districts, including four districts of Bihar, namely, Kishanganj, Katihar, Araria and Purnia, and districts of Uttar Dinajpur and Malda in West Bengal.

The district has diverse communities that dwell in the area. The Muslim population is 71 per cent of the total population. There are the Surjapuri Muslims and the Shershahbadi Muslims. Surjapuri Muslims are one of the

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initial settlers in the area whose origin can be traced to the western parts of the present state of Uttar Pradesh. They traditionally own land resources but there has been a gradual decline in their land-holding because people from other areas have brought their lands. They can trace their history back to the era of Nawabs; therefore, they have a sense of pride and are well-accepted among the Muslim and the Hindu

population of the area.

The Shershahbadi Muslims are considered to be progressive and diligent entrepreneurs. They are the last settlers in this area and are a part of the larger Sheikh community of Bihar and the Bedia community of Bengal. They still speak Bengali, but most can speak Hindi, which is the official language of Bihar. They are a community of settled agriculturists but as their population has grown and the lands have become fragmented, many have become landless, and now work as agricultural labour, daily wage labour, teachers and businessmen.

The Rajbongshi community claim to be the first settlers in the area and can be found in present lower Assam, Malda, Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal, Kishanganj in Bihar, Nepal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh. Their language is Rajbongshi and they also speak Surjapuri or Hindi. This community worships nature and is animist; in Kishanganj, however, they get subsumed as Hindus and can be seen worshipping Hindu deities although in their homes they still have animist symbols. Traditionally, they were landed, and agriculture was the main occupation. Due to a decline in land-holding, many families are landless and migrate to cities for skilled and unskilled work.

Mushars, also known as Rishidevs, are a Scheduled Caste community who have migrated from Darbhanga, Supoul and other areas of Bihar. Maithili is the primary language of this group. When the Mushar community immigrated to this area, they were given two or three decimals of land by the zamindars to build their homes. Neither the Mushars nor the zamindars have the power to sell the land. This type of land is known as the *baskit parcha*. The ownership of the land, however, remains with the zamindar. Mushars subsist mainly on wage labour and migration. The community is almost illiterate and struggles to survive. The landed families in the area prefer not to lease out their land to the Mushars for agriculture.

The Adivasis migrated from Jharkhand and parts of West Bengal around 70–80 years ago and live on the banks of rivers, towards the Nepal border. They settled on the land that belonged to the Bihar government or had arrangements of *baskit parcha* with the landlords. The striking feature of this Scheduled Tribe (ST) is that all groups—Santhal, Oraon and the others—are called Adivasis and are landless.

The tribal population in the area still speaks Santhali and Sadri. Their livelihood mainly depends on wage earnings and remittances from migration but many families have taken up agriculture by taking cultivable lands on lease. The main problem with this arrangement is that the lease is on a seasonal basis and the community is not assured whether it will get the land for the next season.

Education is a major problem although there has been a slight improvement in the literacy rate, owing to the presence of Christian

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missionaries in the area. Many tribal families have adopted Christianity and those who have not are quite sceptical of it, and their relations with the Christian families, is not amiable.

Apart from these major communities, there is a small population of other castes such as Basaks, Yadavs, Sadgops, Singhas, Brahmins, Gangais, Hanris, Chamars, Dusadhs, etc.,

who have come to settle here from other parts of Bihar and Bengal.

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The PRADAN team, at the onset, tried to organize the community on the basis of issues prevailing in the area and left no stone unturned to mobilize the women into SHGs but met with little success. One of my colleagues was told by a 12-year-old boy, “In our community, women do not go outside of their household.” On numerous occasions during our interaction at the village level, women did not come out of their homes, preferring to peep at us from the safety of their homes while the men spoke to us. We faced arguments such as:

1. What can women do which we men can't do?
2. How can we trust you strangers and allow you to sit with our women?
3. Women in our area do not talk to strange men. How can you think of promoting groups with women?
4. Our women don't have any problems; we are the decision-makers, so talk to us.

With the area being largely Muslim, our own presumptions about the community became a hindrance in our work. We were prejudiced by the fundamentalist image created by the media and society.

We, therefore, started promoting SHGs with the Adivasis and the Mushars with whom we were comfortable. But we realized, over time, after we had promoted about 20 SHGs in 10 different villages, that the women of different communities did not interact with or relate to each other. With such a handicap, we wondered how we were going to build a community organization to take up multi-dimensional development challenges.

To have a larger impact, we realized we could not afford to overlook people from any caste, creed or religion. We, in fact, recognized that the population belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the STs was just 10 per cent of the total population, so just working with them would not bring about the cultural change that PRADAN, as an organization, was endeavouring for.

The men resisted the attempts to organize the women because they feared for the safety of their women. In Bandarjhula village in the Thakurganj block, two of my colleagues, Abhishek Kumar and Abhishek Kumar Gaurav, and I were sitting in a meeting to promote an SHG in the area. About 20 men from the Muslim community gathered around us and sat down.

As the discussion started, we tried to focus on the issues of the village—education, health, road connectivity, market infrastructure,

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basic livelihood needs for living a dignified life, social backwardness as well as political participation; the list was endless. It was important to focus on forming an SHG that would help address these issues. But it was difficult to hurry the villagers. After long-winded discussions with these men, we ultimately came to the conclusion that the hamlet needed to come together to deal with situations in the area.

We fixed a date for the meeting and asked the men to invite the women to the next meeting. As soon as we made this suggestion, there was a shift in their attitude. One of the women, who was a standing Ward Member of the Bandarjhula *panchayat*, tried to say something from a distance but was stopped by a man. We were categorically told, "It is not possible to have a meeting where men and women sit together. You are strangers; we cannot allow our women to sit with you on their own."

We were taken aback. Later, we realized that the situation of the women in other places was the same. Women are seen as possessions, whose honour has to be protected. We realized that such incidents were bound to happen anywhere, and this being a new place, the people would have reservations and suspicions. The apprehensions of the men included:

1. Why did we want to mobilize women?
2. How could multiple issues be dealt with by organizing women?
3. How could just common citizens bring about change?
4. How could change happen without

political will and the support of the administration?

These worries were further enhanced by our unease in approaching villages where people still doubted our objectives. We were clear that savings and credit alone would not lead to speedy mobilization because micro-finance institutions (MFIs) were already lending credit support to small groups formed by them. If we were to try to introduce the same principle for forming the SHG in an area like this, the idea would not be accepted.

We needed to recognize that there were multiple issues, and that savings and credit was just one of them. In fact, in most of the human development parameters, the district was far behind most of the regions of India. Only 10 per cent of the households had electricity and just a little more than five per cent of the people had closet latrines. Some of the villages had a Public Health Centre (PHC); however, institutional child delivery was less than nine per cent and only ten per cent of the children were vaccinated. Many of the villages were inaccessible during the rainy season and less than ten per cent of the villages were connected with all-weather roads. We needed, therefore, to introduce the women's collectives for large-scale mobilization, which would, in fact, build social capital to tackle the multi-faceted issues.

We were not sure of the processes to adopt that would lead to large-scale mobilization. We were also clueless about how to bring women out of their homes in the face of so much resistance from the men. We thought of organizing camps at the village level on the theme of the need for women to come together but were unable to figure out the

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modalities for it. We thought of many different ways to organize women into SHGs.

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Towards the end of August 2014, we discussed the need for community building with the existing members of the Laxmi Mahila Mandal of Bhendrani village of the Thakurganj block. We asked them whether they could arrange an event, to which more women could come and listen to their experience as SHG members. We believed that the onus of organizing camps or workshops should be in the hands of the existing SHG members so that they could feel ownership and could be made responsible for bringing the marginalized women of their village into the community fold. Frankly, we were concerned about whether these new SHG members could organize such an event without support; to our sheer amazement, the preparations and arrangements were beyond our expectations.

On the day of the event, it was raining heavily. We considered cancelling the event because we thought that people might not be able to come because of the intense downpour. Abhishek went to the village to talk about the possibility of another date. But this idea did not sit well with the SHG members and they took a firm decision to hold the event at any cost. For them, it seemed to have become an issue of their reputation because they had already informed the villagers about it and had made all the arrangements.



**Fig. 1: Workshop on 'Women Getting Together' at Bhendrani village in Thakurganj block**

To our amazement, they gathered more than 100 women from the adjoining hamlet and held a wonderful event. This was a great learning for the team, and we realized that at times we need to loosen our grip on the affairs of the community.

Three or four workshops were organized and we could see that the women were energized and the men had softened their stance. We were excited and hopeful. We then decided to organize exposure visits for SHG members to some of the projects of PRADAN so that they could see and understand the potential of a women-led community organization. Ten members were selected from different villages for an exposure visit in September 2014.

One of our colleagues, Illora Rabha (a PRADAN executive), took the women for a four-day visit to the Damodar Mahila Mandal Federation in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand district. The idea was to take these motivated women from our area to experience how a women-led-Federation was striving towards a just and equitable society.

We expected members to be so inspired as to initiate large-scale mobilization of women into the SHG fold.

On the third day of the trip, we received a belligerent call from a man called Prithvi, asking about the whereabouts of his wife, Sunita Ekka, an SHG member from Kharkharia hamlet of Lohagara village in Dighalbank block of Kishanganj. Abhishek tried to calm him down by assuring him that all was well and told him that he could speak to his wife and be reassured about her. But the man was not ready to listen. He threatened Abhishek with dire consequences.

On our return, Sunita was afraid to go back to her village alone. We agreed to accompany her and help her face the situation. Four of us went with her to the village. It was almost nine at night when we entered Kharkharia. As soon as our vehicle stopped, Prithvi came aggressively out to meet her. We realized that he was completely drunk.

Standing there tottering, he shouted, "Go back from where you have come and spend the night with the person you were with since the last few days." Abhishek tried to intervene. Holding the man's shoulders, he asked him why he was so angry. Prithvi became more enraged and brushed away Abhishek's hand from his shoulder and yelled, "Don't interfere in my personal affairs. I can thrash you if I want and no one will come to save you from me." We were at a loss about how to react.

Trying to reason with him, we assured him that other women from the nearby villages had also gone for the visit. He was not ready to discuss the matter and continued to repeat that he would not keep her with him because she never obeyed her *pati-parmeshwar* (husband-god) and she was trying to humiliate him before the villagers.

"There is a rumour in the village that my wife has gone for prostitution and I can't live with a prostitute," he shouted. All Sunita's pleas and requests fell on deaf ears. Suhagani Devi, another woman from the village, who had also gone with the group, tried to reason with him but to no avail.

After almost two hours, when he was almost passing out with exhaustion and intoxication, we asked Suhagani and the other SHG members of the village, who had gathered by that time, to take care of Sunita and promised a meeting the next morning in the village to sort out this issue. As we drove towards our office, exhausted and embarrassed after the scene in the village, we were all contemplative. The group for the exposure visit had three Muslim women, and we had expected rigidity

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The next day, we invited some of our SHG leaders, who were also a part of the exposure trip to be present in the meeting, to help sort out the issue. News from that village was disturbing. Suhagani had called to say that Prithvi had beaten up Sunita and

had tried to electrocute himself.

Abhishek and I went to the village with four SHG members from other villages. Sunita and the SHG members from her village and the adjoining areas had assembled there but Prithvi refused to come until men were also part of the congregation. The SHG members invited the men from the village to be present; Prithvi took another two hours to come and when he did, he was completely intoxicated.

He continued to repeat his arguments from the night before and was in no state to listen to anyone. Fortunately, the men of the village came out in support of the lady and dismissed any rumours about Sunita going into prostitution. We were able to ascertain that the main problem was Prithvi's complex, arising out of his wife getting acclaim in the village and the vicinity because of her role as an SHG member and making her own identity in the village.

For the last few months, she had taken the lead in many of the social affairs such as arranging workshops in her SHG and negotiating with the landlords to get access over land for agriculture. All the arguments put forward by



Prithvi showed that he was not able to accept the rise of his wife and was jealous that she was getting recognition.

He left the meeting; the incident unified the two SHGs in the hamlet and the members assured the gathering that Sunita would come to no harm. To our relief, the SHGs of Kharkharia took charge of this and was able to influence Prithvi to accept her and take care of her with due dignity.

This news spread far and wide, and to our amazement members of about ten SHGs in Lohagara village staged a meeting, to take a pledge to support women in their vicinity if any such incident were to occur in the future. We had never thought that the exposure trip would create such a conflict. It also gave us the insight that confrontation and its resolution can lead to new openings.

A week later, Sunita called Abhishek and said, "Don't worry, brother, this is part and parcel of our struggle. I hope we women can come together and move towards liberation." Seeing the way the women handled this issue strengthened our belief that we needed to forge connection among women, and if we could do so, no force could stop them from coming together.

Another challenge of the team was to build in-roads into the Muslim community. We conducted various meetings and workshops but were not able to form a single SHG exclusively for Muslim women. We knew that unless the Muslim women came forward, the dream of building a community based organization of women was unlikely to take shape. Initially, the team thought religious rigidity was the main reason the Muslim

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women resisted our attempts to form SHGs with them. However, we soon realized that our own biases left us blind to the real issues of the Muslim community. Without understanding and appreciating this, we could not move forward.

What happened in Rasuldangi hamlet of the Maltoli village of Dighalbank *panchayat* is a vivid example of this. Illora Rabha of PRADAN joined in May 2014 and worked hard to mobilize Muslim women. She tried a number of ways—holding meetings and organizing workshops on the need to come together. None of these inspired them. She used agriculture as a tool to generate enthusiasm amongst them as was our practice. People usually listen to you if you know or can demonstrate better practices or yield. This helped mobilize people yet restricted our reach to the men of the village who, in fact, are at the forefront of the farming practices.

That the Census of 2011 identifies only 17 per cent of women contributing in the total work force is striking; the fact is that the labour of women in most of cases goes unrecorded. Women, at best, are restricted to the unrecognized form of labour in the household, in the fields or in post-harvest processing activities. In Rasuldangi, we first tried to discuss the possibilities of forming SHGs of women wherein thrift savings and credit could be one of the activities, and the village outright rejected any such option.

Therefore, we continued with our agriculture intervention approach and initiated work with tomato and brinjal cultivation, with the hope that we would develop a bond with the men of the village, who would then let the women of the village come out of their houses.

This did leave an impact on the hamlet, which has 100 per cent Muslim population; however, the women of the village were nowhere visible in these activities. Illora, being a woman, had some access to their houses; this helped build some sort of a relationship with the wives of the farmers involved with us; nevertheless, this was limited to their courtesy of providing us with tea and snacks.

One day, while having a discussion on agriculture in a community meeting, Illora raised the issue of the lack of women participation with the men of the village. They immediately justified it by saying, "Women are mostly engaged in day-to-day household chores and they don't have much time or interest to get involved with outsiders. We are concerned about our children and women; that is why we are focusing on improved agriculture so that we can provide well for our families."

These arguments were coming from the perspective of a provider-receiver relationship, largely prevalent in our society. During the

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meeting, Farzan Khatun, a woman who had come to serve tea to the persons sitting in the meeting signalled to Illora to come with her. Illora followed her to the place where almost ten women were listening to the discussion from inside their houses. One of the women, while offering a seat to Illora, smilingly said, "I always see that you come to our village and talk

with our men. We also have issues that we can't share with anyone."

Illora was surprised. "But you have never shown any interest in meeting me. And all my efforts to meet you were rejected by the men."

"That's true, *didi*," Farzan responded. "Our main issue is health because most of the women in the village suffer from huge blood loss during menstruation. Some of us have irregular periods and we go through enormous pain every month."

Illora observed that most of the women seemed anaemic and were probably underweight. She realized that most of the children and women



Fig.2: Farzan Khatun and her daughter in Rasuldangi hamlet, Maltoli village, Dighalbank block

in the village were suffering from malnutrition and that the food intake of the households was limited to the consumption of rice and potatoes, with an occasional helping of green vegetables and meat.

Illora shared her experience with the team. We realized that the central theme around which the women could be brought together was health and nutrition. Most of the agriculture done at the household level met the consumption and cash needs of the families but did not completely address the nutritional needs, especially those of women and children.

On her next visit to the village, Illora discussed the issue of nutrition at length with the men. Some of them did understand the severity of the problem and did not have any idea how to tackle the issue. They then relented and allowed us to work with the women to form groups to deal with this concern.

During the first organized meeting with the women of Rasuldangi, the main discussion was around the food habits of the household, especially of the women and children. They began by discussing how much water they should drink every day. It was important for them to understand the connection between drinking clean water and their health. Interestingly, the issue of safe drinking water and the amount required for a healthy body was instrumental in the formation of the first SHG in the area, the Bismillah Mahila Mandal.

In the next meeting, some of the women raised the issue of stiffness in their body. The SHG decided to have a regular exercise session during the meeting to promote better health. We, in the team, were quite amused to hear

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that an SHG could be formed by prescribing drinking water and exercise. But the women of the village were excited. The news soon spread in the hamlet and, within a span of one month, three SHGs were formed.

Gradually, we introduced the concept of a small kitchen garden. Each of the women in the SHGs was to grow 12 different types of leafy vegetables for their nutritional needs. This elicited a huge response from the women and

almost 15 women in the hamlet have already started this activity.

After the third meeting, these SHGs decided to participate in a savings and credit activity and sought our support, which we readily extended. We had first entered the village with the intention of forming SHGs, in which savings and credit could be one of the activities. The villagers had rejected the idea then; yet now, we were doing exactly that. How had that happened? The learning for us was that perhaps one prototype could not possibly be used to mobilize the women at all places. It was evident that people could not be organized into groups or organizations unless their needs were identified.

In the last year, there have been many occasions during which my spirit has been low; yet, there have been many occasions that were fulfilling and meaningful. Each interaction with the community, my team members or in other situations has contributed to my learning, re-learning and de-learning of ideas, perceptions and wisdom. I hope the coming years will be as fruitful and that we continue, as a team, to seek new ways to connect with people and to strive towards crossing the uncrossed.