

Sanu Bibi: An Exemplar of Transformation

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No adversity was too big to stifle and snuff out Sanu di's indomitable spirit that saw her through life's myriad challenges, compelling her to support others suffering in a similar manner. Today, she walks tall and urges, encourages and supports other women to break free of the shackles of tradition and convention

Scene 1: Bhendi, a 14-year-old girl, walks to her school with her friend, Padma. Both of them study in the 9th Standard. One day, as they walk home, Bhendi shares with her friend that after passing her exams, she will continue to study for the higher secondary examinations because she wants to become a doctor. While they are walking, some young boys standing on the crossroads pass some lewd comments about them. Bhendi becomes irritated but doesn't say anything and quietly walks away. After some time, Bhendi's brother Bhenda, who studies in college, passes by the same place and the boys again pass comments regarding his sister and her character. Bhenda gets very angry and decides to talk to his father about Bhendi.

Scene 2: Bhenda comes home and tells his father, Dharani, about the comments he has to listen to about his sister. Dharani says that there is to be no more studying for Bhendi and it is time to marry her off. They contact Bablu, Bhendi's uncle, who has a prospective groom for Bhendi. Bhendi's mother is not convinced about the marriage but she doesn't say anything. When Bhendi comes from school, her brother tells her that she will not be going to school anymore.

Scene 3: Bablu brings home the prospective groom but Bhendi tells them that she does not want to get married and that she wants to study further. Her father and brother get very angry. Her brother brings a chain and ties Bhendi's hand saying, "You are born as a girl and you will die a prisoner of someone."

The Theatre of Oppressed (participatory theatre that fosters democratic and cooperative forms of interaction among participants) ends there; Sanu di, who plays the role of Bhendi, starts engaging with the audience, who are dumbfounded by the intensity of the play.

I first saw Sanu di acting as Bhendi and was awestruck by her performance. Again, I saw her in an evening class of the Adult Functional Literacy (AFL) Centre of Karmabera village in Barabazar block, where she as a Shiksha Sathi (teacher) was teaching women. In the next few months, I saw Sanu di in different roles—teacher, actor, SHG member, attending a Cluster meeting, and organizer of a Mahaadhivesan (annual event of SHG members). Sandhya di, a member of the Federation Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh (SSNSS), once said, “Sanu jodi groupe naai aaiso, tahole etodine morei jeto (If Sanu hadn’t become a part of the SHG, she probably would have died).”

Curious to know more about her, I telephoned Sanu di to ask if we could meet. She readily agreed but not at her own house because her in-laws would be around and she would feel uncomfortable talking about her life in front of them. We met at Shikha di’s house at Bansbera.

Sanu di, alias Rupsun Bibi, is a short, slim, lively woman from Ransi village in Barabazar block. She lives with her in-laws and her ten-year-old daughter. Sanu di says that her story is no different from the story of Bhendi. She belonged to an ultra-conservative Muslim family from Sukhtawar, Purulia. Her father was a serviceman and his earning was just enough to run his family. Sanu di has two brothers and two sisters. She was the third child of her parents.

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Sanu di did not want to get married so early; she wanted to study and told her parents so. No one listened to her, however, and they forced her to get married. In the end, she had to say yes. Sanu di married Rafique Ansari of Ransi village, Barabazar block, when she

was just 16 years old. She had just passed her Madhyamik examination from the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

Her life, at her in-laws house, was miserable. She was afraid of her husband. She was also scared of his physical proximity. He used to force her to get intimate and perform things that she didn’t like. She bled as a result of this, but she never got treated. If she asked to consult a doctor for the problem, her husband and in-laws would refuse. They asked her to go to her father’s house for any medical treatment that she needed. He would beat her for small things. Within one month of her marriage, when she visited her father’s place, she shared all that was happening with her and said that she didn’t want to return to her husband. In spite of knowing all that had happened to her, her father and the other family members said that she had no right to stay at her paternal house. She was asked to leave and return to her husband’s place. Helpless, she returned to her husband and accepted it as her fate.

A year after the birth of her daughter, her husband died of an illness. She was plunged into another phase of life after the death of her husband. Her in-laws started blaming her for

his death as if she were the cause. The family treated her worse after that. She was not given enough food to feed herself and her daughter. She was restricted to within the boundaries of the house.

After the death of her husband, her father came to take her back to his place. But Sanu di refused. She told her father that when she had urged him not to give her in marriage to this man, she had not been heard. Even when she had told them that her would-be-husband was a diabetic patient, it had not counted. After her marriage, when she was facing torture at her in-laws' house and had requested her father to allow her to stay at his house, her request had been denied; she had been told that she had no right in her paternal home and she had to return to her in-laws house. Now she had reached a point in life where she realized she had no one in this world. And, if she died, she would prefer to die in her in-laws' house.

Sanu di's elder sister-in-law was an SHG member; she introduced Sanu to the SHG and asked her to accompany her and observe the group meeting. She said, "Hamaar saathe haamader group meetinge jaabi chol, dekhbi kotogulo mohila eksonge boshe taka joma korchhe, nijeder bhitore golpo korchhe (Come with me to our group meeting. You'll see women sitting together, talking to each other, collecting money)."

She liked the group meeting and joined the SHG. Becoming a member of the SHG came like a blessing for her. The women in the SHG kept her alive. They helped her mobilize and break out from the prison that was her house. They listened to her, provided the required advice, stood by her in her tough times and, above all, constantly encouraged her.

Sanu di is a member of the Sitaram Mahila Samiti in her village. The SHG was formed

in 2003. She joined the group in 2008. She began saving Rs 10 per week in the group. Her father used to send her some money from which she used to save. Today, she saves money from the remuneration she gets as a trainer and a Shiksha Sakhi.

Because she used to go to the meetings with her elder sister-in-law, no one objected. Sanu di gained confidence and courage after joining the SHG. Her education stood her in good stead and she was asked to manage the books of accounts of her SHG, to which she readily agreed. Her efforts and honesty were noticed by the others and she was praised by members of the group. She underwent PRADAN's 'membership training' along with her other fellow group members.

When the Cluster was formed, she was selected Cluster Representative for her group. It was not an easy decision for her to accept because now she would have to go outside her village for the meetings. She negotiated with her in-laws to be able to go to a neighbouring village to attend the meetings. She was allowed because her elder sister-in-law convinced the in-laws that Sanu would not be alone but that there would be other SHG members from the village going to the meeting as well.

Sanu di was a member of the Parikalpana Cluster. In the Cluster meetings, she met women from other villages. It was a wonderful opportunity for her. She enjoyed being a part of these meetings. These were like a breath of fresh air to her, supplying her with the much required oxygen to survive. She took her daughter along with her for the meetings.

She was very shy initially, and did not talk much with the other women; regular interactions with them, however, brought about a change in her. Being a Cluster Member, she attended the Leadership Training conducted

by PRADAN. "Aaj jante paarli bhalo neta kemon hoy. Bhalo neta chinir moto hoy, je sobar songe thaake aar sobar songe mishe jaay (Now, I understand who a good leader is. A good leader, like sugar, is one who is present to the people and mixes with them easily)."

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When, in 2009, the Education Programme started, she became the Shiksha Sathi in an AFL centre. This was another turning point in her life. She not only became independent, she looked at it as a continuation of her education. In the AFL Programme, many learning centres were opened at the village level. The focus was to provide primary education to illiterate women, beyond the conventional way of education. The teaching was through games, props, mutual learning. The centres were open in the evenings so that women could take out time for classes after they had finished their work for the day. For the programme, a Shiksha Sathi was required. The names of the aspirants were given by the Clusters to the Federation and the Shiksha Sathis were chosen through a selection process. To manage the programme, another body called the Education Management Group (EMG) was formed by the Federation.

Sanu di strived to perform her best and that reflected in her work. Very soon, Sanu di became famous as a teacher and the women of her centre appreciated and valued her work very much. When the AFL programme started and Sanu di joined it as a teacher, her daughter was merely three years old. She used to take

her daughter with her to the centre and to the trainings. As Rehana turned four years old, Sanu di left her daughter at her father's place to provide her a better education and a better environment. Sanu di attends many trainings, meetings and performances of the Theatre of Oppressed; it, therefore, is not

always possible to take her daughter with her; moreover, it affects her daughter's studies. The remuneration from the AFL centre was a great help for her. Being the Shiksha Sathi, Sanu di got Rs 1200 per month as honorarium in the initial period. After the working hours increased, the honorarium was revised to Rs 2500 per month.

Around 2012, she underwent training in the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), which included Babu-Munur Khela (a training game played to understand the different discriminatory practices between girls and boys that take place in the households and society), 24 Ghontar Kaajer Bhaag (another form of gender training, in which participants reflected on the work a woman does in a normal day, vis-a-vis what a man does, and the difference in the kind of respect and recognition that they get.). Bandhoner Khela (a training to understand the barriers a woman faces all her life). In one of the games in this training, a woman stands in the middle and the others stand around her in a circle. One of them names a barrier she faces; she goes and ties a ribbon around the woman. When all the participants tie a ribbon for every obstruction or restriction they face on the woman at the centre, they stand back and look at the woman. They see that all the parts of her body are covered with ribbons.

This visual representation of the restrictions on a woman generates a discussion. The women

are also asked to identify the similarities between that woman's life and their own lives and whether they want to change the situation or not.

Playing and teaching these games during trainings, Sanu di learned that many customs of our society are made to deprive women of their rights and to curb their wishes. After one such gender training, Sanu di started crying. She said, "Haami bhakti sudhu haamar uporei eto bandha, ekhon janchhi haamader samaj sob mohilader baandhe rakhechhe (I thought I was the only who had so many restrictions. Today, I realize that all the women in our society are suppressed)."

Sanu became more and more confident with these trainings. She has been selected as a trainer and provides trainings on gender, rights and entitlement, domestic violence, child protection, early marriages, nutrition and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, etc. She started challenging the practices she had followed like all the other women. She cites an example. In her family, the women went to work in the fields early in the morning and returned after finishing work in the evening. They left home without eating anything in the morning. Just because that was the custom. Because she did not eat at the right times and worked long hours on an empty stomach for many years, she became very weak.

After the GEP training, she started challenging this practice. She was severely criticized by her family members but she didn't change her stance. She said, "If I get weak by working on an empty stomach, why should I work to grow food? How will that food grain help me if I die." Khadijan Bibi (the elder daughter-in-law of the house), who had also undergone gender trainings as part of the SHG, appreciated Sanu's efforts and supported her. Today, the

women cook in the morning and eat before going to work.

Sanu di also shared that women had to wait till all the men of the family had eaten before they could eat their meals. She challenged this norm as well and started eating whenever she felt like eating, even if it was before the men had eaten. Now, these practices have changed in her family. Her elder sister-in-law also eats food before going for any work and eats whenever she wants to eat.

Initially, Sanu di was not allowed to go outside her home alone. Today, she goes to trainings, meetings, performances in Theatre of the Oppressed, her father's place and other places on her own. Criticism by her family or the villagers no longer bothers her. She either ignores the criticism or answers with due logic. She participates in residential camps that last for three to five days. She works as a trainer in residential camps and she does stage performances on the occasion of Mahadhivesan of SSNSS. She either ignores the criticism or answers with due logic.

She has challenged age-old norms. She now wears colourful sarees, which widows are forbidden to wear. She was not allowed to wear salwars but she now wears them when she acts in Theatre of Oppressed performances and even at other times. She uses sindoor (vermilion), alta and ornaments when required for her role in any play, even though it is forbidden for her.

Sanu di's deceased husband, Rafique Ansari, had some savings, which, after he died, she had deposited in her bank. Some years ago, her elder brother-in-law asked her to give the money to him so that he could start a business. Sanu di refused. Everyone in the family put pressure on her but she didn't bend. She was

threatened and asked to leave the house, but she remained adamant.

She brought up the issue in the Cluster meeting and sought help. The problem was discussed there and a few women from the Cluster visited her house and talked with her family members, which minimized the tension.

Sanu di says that she has had to face many challenges while bringing about change in her life and influencing change around her. She has been criticized and has faced many obstacles when she started moving out. She was humiliated by her family and others in the village. Her in-laws did not have a good opinion of her. They expressed their anger against her by doubting her and accusing her of having illicit relationships with other men, including with a nephew of the neighbouring family.

Her in-laws still try to restrict her from doing many things. But she no longer cares about their views and what they say about her. She believes that the work she is doing is very noble and that she can bring change in the lives of other women like her.

Sanu di is an active member of the Theatre of Oppressed troupe and plays the central character. In a drama called 'Early Marriage', she played the role of the girl Bhendi, who was forced to get married at an early age by her father and her brother. In another play, 'Discriminatory Practices with Girls and Women within the Family', she plays the character of the girl, who raises her voice against all the discrimination happening with her and the violence taking place against her mother.

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In January last year, an incident took place during the performance of the play 'Early Marriage'. That evening at Bankati village in Barabazar block, a girl voiced her opinion as a 'Spect-actor'.

Suddenly the father of the girl came and started beating her and saying, "How dare you to speak over here?"

The troupe stopped their performance and rescued the girl from her father's rage and took her to the Barabazar police station. They lodged a complaint against the man and urged the Officer in Charge (OIC) to arrest him. They waited till 11 pm while the police went to the village and arrested the father of the girl and brought him to the police station. Sanu di was present throughout. She was appreciated by the SHG women and the Cluster appreciated her efforts to support the girl.

Sanu di has set an example among women, who work to stop violence against women just as she has overcome many such challenges in her own life. She is now a role model and inspiration for many. Women believe that if Sanu Bibi, who belongs to a conservative Muslim family and is a widow, is able to cross so many hurdles, they too can change their situation.

Sanu di is present in every meeting, taking part in all the discussions. She shares her life experiences with other members and listens to theirs. She, with other Gender trainers of the Federation, accompanies victims to the police station and other places. Through trainings, she shares the stories of women who have fought and have overcome their struggles,

and trains them on what to do if they face the same. She takes active part in all the activities of the Cluster and the Federation.

When I asked her what obstacles she had been able to overcome, she listed out the things that she had achieved.

1. Freedom of movement: She was able to counter restrictions on going to places on her own and of her own choice.
2. Freedom of expression: She was not allowed to talk with others, especially any men other than her family. She fought to express her views openly and began to protest against those who spoke badly about her. She says, "Aage kaarur sathe kotha bolte naai paarti, bhoy paati jodi keu dekhe ley. Aar ekhon haami bhoy naai pai (I could not talk to anybody earlier. I was afraid if anyone saw me. Now I'm not afraid)."
3. Freedom to dress: Being a widow, she was not allowed to wear coloured sarees or any ornaments. Now, she wears colourful clothes much against her in-laws' wishes. She even dresses as per the demands of her character in the various plays that she acts in.
4. Freedom to spend (purchasing power): She had no right to buy things earlier. Whatever she needed, she had to ask her husband and later from her in-laws' permission. If they thought it was right for her, they would buy it. She had to use whatever they bought for her, whether she liked it or not. Now, she buys things as per her wishes and she does not take permission to do so.

Gradually, the girl who wanted to earn her own living and to paint, sing and dance had to depend on someone whom she did not know. She was a graduate, but her degree was to be used for reading her daughter's school books to her

5. Freedom of choice of food (eating whatever she likes): Sanu is choosy regarding food and does not eat if she does not like it. Earlier, she had to eat whatever food was available at home. She had never been able to express her choice over food. She can now cook for herself any food she likes and which is good for her health. She has even started eating things that are forbidden for a widow to consume.
6. Freedom to eat (right to serve enough food for herself): In her family, the women had to eat after all the men had finished their meal. The women ate the leftover food, and sometimes there was not enough. She was also not allowed to serve her own food. She had to eat whatever her mother-in-law served her. Now, Sanu eats whenever she wants, sometimes even before the men have eaten and she doesn't wait to be served.
7. Freedom to be healthy (giving importance to her own health): Now, if she feels unwell, she goes to the doctor by herself before the ailment worsens; she follows the doctor's advice. Over time, she has improved her health (as noticed by the women who have been seeing her over a period of time) and has started consuming many things that she didn't eat earlier and which are good for her health.
8. Freedom to learn (capability to educate herself and her daughter): Sanu *di* is educated enough to earn for herself. She dreams of educating her only daughter. She negotiated with her brothers to help her in providing a good education to her daughter. She and her brothers bear all

the cost of Rehana's education. "*Hamar swapno haamar betike manusher moto manush korbo, aar hamar moto mohilader jonyo kaaj korbo* (I dream of raising my daughter as a good human being, and I'll continue my work for the women who are in situations like mine)."

Sanu di wishes to study further. She is inspired by her colleague, Shikha Rani Mahato (a Shiksha Sathi of Bansbera), who also got married after the 10th Standard and is now pursuing her final year of a three-year Graduation (Bachelor in Arts) programme this year. Sanu di is preparing to restart her studies once again.

She has become an example for other women in society, who appreciate her struggles

and her achievements. Whereas she knows that she is a role model, she says that her biggest challenge is still ahead of her—that of making the women in the villages believe in themselves. Although the women appreciate her work and efforts, they still think very little of themselves and consider themselves incapable of bringing similar changes in their own lives. It saddens her to see the injustices against women in society and she cannot do much about it. Just talking with them doesn't help. Her main concern now is to highlight these issues on a bigger platform and bring a mass change in society.

She proudly says, "Aage morte ichchha korto, ekhon baanchte ichchha kore. (Earlier, I wished to die; now I want to live)."