

A Group is Born—The First Meeting

ARUNDHATI

Twenty women, twenty lives and twenty stories—together they begin the journey of transforming their own lives and building new stories and dimensions for themselves

My first visit to Dokrichua was on a crisp monsoon day a few months ago. The sky was dark with clouds and yet the sun's golden rays were shining through, flirting lazily with a playful and gentle drizzle. Dokrichua is a small, neatly organized hamlet, with about 50 houses, made of flat slabs of stone, neatly packed with mud and smeared with red earth.

That day the hamlet wore a deserted look. The woven bamboo doors of the houses seemed to tell me, "They left for the *khet* side, with four *jangaams* (the indigenous bottles made of dried bottle gourds) of *pej* (rice porridge). They will return in the evening."

Dokrichua was different from the other hamlets I had visited so far. The land in other hamlets in Bastar is lush green, with two-feet-high maize crops. In Dokrichua, there was very little maize. Instead, paddy crop was favoured by the people. Was it because of smaller landholdings? Or was it because of greater food insecurity? Or was it just different food habits? With all these questions and thoughts in my mind, I rode away from the village, planning to re-visit at a later time.

I next visited Dokrichua seven months later. The people of the village had heard about and were acquainted with the concept of women's Self Help Groups (SHGs). They were eager to form their own group, and I was going to help them do so.

"Come closer, *didis*, let's sit in a circle!" I said, my hands demonstrating a circle. A couple of them blushed and looked at each other. One of them was trying to look serious but seemed to be trying hard to suppress her giggles. "*Egga vaa da* (Come here)," said Maahse *didi*, "*Gorla ne uddakim* (sit in a circle)." The women, sitting on their haunches across the courtyard, moved slightly. They shifted their body weight to their feet and duck-walked their way into the circle. A cash box, a lock and key, a cash-book and passbooks had been placed in the centre of the circle that they formed.

"How long you are taking! Come fast, come fast!" Maahse *didi* scolded a woman who came in late. The women immediately made space for the newcomer to sit. "I had gone to get the coconut! That is why I took time to come!" she responded. She

kept the coconut at the centre of the circle, with the books and box. Another woman took out a printed polythene cover from under her saree *palla* and kept it in the centre. The polythene had white fragrant flowers called *hazari*. She also had brought some *agarbattis* and a matchbox, which she placed with the coconut and the flowers. Her eyes crinkled and her cheeks filled out as she smiled happily and re-joined the circle.

"My name is Arundathi," I introduced myself, "and I work with an organization called PRADAN." I felt the curiosity in their eyes as they focussed on me. "PRADAN," whispered a couple of women in awe. "Arunbati," said another.

"Eh, *didi*, Arun Mati is it?" asked a woman from across the circle. "No, *didi*...Arun Dhati", I said and smiled. She repeated it after me. Arun...Dhati. She comes from a faraway land, with a name so different—her gaze and smile seemed to suggest. One woman said, "You visited the *samhoohs* at Mangalpur also, no *didi*? I have heard." I nodded and grinned. Then I asked, "What are your names? Will you introduce yourselves?"

There was a sudden and slight gush of energy in the group. Even the woman, who had earlier put on a serious face to hide her giggle, broke into a grin. 'Where should we start? Who will speak first?' seemed to be the buzz around the group. One of the women looked at everyone, with a mischievous sparkle in her eye, while another covered her mouth and

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smiled to herself. A couple of women pointed to each other and suggested that the other start. "My name is Maahse. I'm Somaru's mother," Maahse *didi* said, making a start. "Somaru is the person who will write and maintain accounts for us." A

stern and authoritative woman, Maahse *didi* was the only one in the group who spoke Halbi, the language of Bastar, fluently. In a village that predominantly conversed in Koyamatha, a tribal language spoken by the Marias, Halbi was a language that was considered 'more learned' and maybe 'more civilized' too. Maahse *didi* was tall and broad shouldered. Both her children attended school and were well-versed in Hindi—which in a typical Koya village like Dokrichua was a rarity, a matter of pride. So far, it seemed that Maahse *didi* was the louder and more assertive one amongst the group.

Boda, Sukri, Aite, Pando...seated successively after Maahse *didi*, the women introduced themselves. No prefix, no suffix. No daughter, son, parent or spouse accompanied their introduction. It was only their names.

Boda wore a fingertip-sized maroon *godmala* (*bindi*). She was the one who had come in late, the one who had gone on a coconut-hunt. It seemed as if she had put in some extra effort to dress up for the occasion of the first *samhooh* meeting. Her hair was neatly combed and tied into a bun at the right side of her head. Her face looked freshly powdered and her saree was bright yellow and relatively new. Boda had bright eyes, determined and sharp. She seemed very observant, eager and keen. 'You may have come from the *shahar*, but we in Dokrichua are no less smart. We are pretty smart too,' her glance seemed to communicate to me.

The woman sitting beside Pando suddenly got up and joined the circle farther away. There was a quick discussion in Koya-matha that I couldn't grasp and the round of introductions continued. "But why did she go away and sit elsewhere in the circle?" I asked, curious. "Oh, that's because her name is Pando too, and she was sitting next to a woman whose name was also Pando. So she moved away to avoid repetition," explained Boda *didi* in a single, long breath.

After the round of introductions, Boda *didi* suggested that there be a *pooja* to inaugurate the beginning of the *samhooh* meeting. Many others nodded in approval. Palo *didi*, quickly got up, went out and brought in a wet, just washed rock—the size of a fist. They placed it next to their box and the books, the flowers and the *agarbattis*. This rock was to serve as God for the occasion.

By this time, a number of other women, men and children had gathered around the group, all very intrigued, wondering what the women were up to. Among the observers was a young girl of around 10. Her name was Savita. She wore a navy-blue tunic (the ones that are given annually to young school girls as a part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) and carried her younger brother on her hip. Savita's mouth was slightly ajar as she keenly observed the group. She may have wondered what the books and box were for—maybe this was a school for the older women. Perhaps they are all going to learn to read and write!

Her younger brother, Nagesh, sat on her hip, his legs embracing her waist, his plump cheeks streaked with dried tears. His curly golden brown hair was dusty and had grains of sand in it. His nose was stuffy and blocked, so his mouth was also open like his sister's. At that moment, they both looked so alike. His big dark eyes were focussed on the group and

the clean washed stone that Palo *didi* had just brought in.

But if they were in school, why were they not sitting in rows? Why were they sitting in a circle? Where is their building? Savita's mind may have been trying to find the answers. Maybe she thought I was a teacher. She noticed that I was watching her and gave me a wide and shy grin. I smiled back and she became very embarrassed and covered her face with her hand. Still shy, she turned and ran away to hide. Nagesh, unhappy with the sudden movement and the literal turn of events, broke out into a fresh bout of tears.

Meanwhile, amidst the group there was a buzz. Who was going to do the *pooja*? "Go call Somaru! He can do the *pooja* for us," Maahse *didi* told someone in the crowd. "*Didimann* (womenfolk), why don't you do the *pooja*? After all, it is your *samhooh*," I suggested. The idea seemed to appeal to the women. There were some raised eyebrows, some frowns and some excitement. "How can we do it? It is the *dadamann* (menfolk) who always do the *pooja*!" Maahse *didi* exclaimed. "*Arre*, so what? This is our *samhooh*, *na*? We're not sacrificing a pig or a chicken or a goat or anything! Just a simple *pooja* with coconut and some *aggarbattis*," said Aite *didi*; to which Boda *didi* and a couple of others nodded vigorously. "You tell us, *didi*, what should we do?" Maahse *didi* asked, feeling outnumbered and trying to seek support from the Madam who had come from outside. All the women looked at me, expectantly, waiting for me to solve this issue for them. "I don't know, *didi*. It would be best for the group to decide," I said, throwing the ball right back into their court.

"*Arre*, let us just do the *pooja*, *na*! And let us do it quickly and move ahead," the short and petite Sukri *didi* said. Her voice was sharp and sweet.

It was a girl's voice...coming out of a woman's mouth. She was probably just 19 or 20, but bore the responsibilities of an entire household on her lean shoulders. She had three children, a girl and two boys—the youngest of who had accompanied her to the meeting. The little fellow, who was peacefully suckling on her breast, suddenly awoke at his mother's assertive voice. Mouth still sucking at her nipple, he turned towards the group with some effort. Seemingly reprimanding the group for disturbing him, he gave one look around and turned right back to sleep in the comfort of her bosom.

Aite *didi* came forward, took some of the white flowers from the printed plastic cover and put some on the rock-god, on the books and on the box. She washed the coconut with some water and with a smash across the floor, broke the coconut exactly into two. The coconut water was drained empty on the rock-god while she muttered some prayers under her breath. She sprinkled some coconut water on the books and the box as well. "Oye, Oye, Oye! Don't wet the books!" a few of the women cried out loud.

The rest of the group members, then went one-by one to the centre of the circle, to offer flowers to their newly obtained books and box. Pando *didi* lit the *agarbatti* beside the rock-god whereas Aite *didi* cut the coconut into smaller and almost equal pieces. "We'll distribute the *prashaad* and then start with the meeting. Okay, *didi*?" asked an enthused Aite *didi*, quite excited by the fact that she had done the inaugural *pooja* for her *samhooh*. Everyone paid their respects to the rock-god and returned to their positions in the circle. Aite

I asked each of the women to take a passbook and come up and give it to Somaru when her name was called out so that he could make the entry of the transaction she had made with the group. I asked the women to declare the amount of money they were saving for the day loudly and place the money at the centre of the circle.

didi and Pando *didi* distributed the *prashaad*. While Aite *didi* distributed the coconut pieces, Pando *didi* moved around the circle, fixing white flowers onto the ears of everyone seated. The remaining coconut pieces were given to the people, who were gathered around the group to observe. The group was now ready to start.

"*Didi*, last week we decided to name our *samhooh* Hazari Pungar!" said Sukri *didi*. "That is why these flowers were brought here today. In Koya-matha, we call this flower Hazari Pungar!" she explained. 'Hazari Pungar Mahila Swah Sahayata Samhooh' wrote Somaru wrote on the first page of the register. Following this, the names of the 20 women were written.

I explained the relevance and significance of the cash-book and the passbook to the group. I asked each of the women to take a passbook and come up and give it to Somaru when her name was called out so that he could make the entry of the transaction she had made with the group. I asked the women to declare the amount of money they were saving for the day loudly and place the money at the centre of the circle. Some women nodded; others just observed quietly.

"Budri!" Somaru called out. "*Bees*," Budri said, giving him her passbook and placing two ten rupee notes in the centre of the circle. "Sukri! *Bees*. Jhimo! *Bees*. Paiko! *Bees*."

Paika, a member of the group, looked around inquisitively as each woman's name was called out and the money was placed in the centre of the circle. She peered at me from across the circle. She seemed to be apprehensive

and maybe mistrusting. 'What if...?' seemed to be on her mind. When her name was called out, she was startled. She gave Somaru her passbook and said, "Bees." Pando *didi* asked, "Arre, where's the money? Keep the money in the centre." Paike

looked anxiously towards Pando. Pando *didi* understood her anxiety. "It's okay; we're all in this together!" she said, "Don't worry." Paike *didi* took out a 20-rupee note that she had safely tucked away in her blouse and kept it in the centre with the other notes. As the process of recording the savings progressed and just about when Somaru seemed to have got the hang of the cashbook and passbook entries, there was a disruption.

"Ayyyyyyyyyeee! What are you all doing here?" We heard a deep drunken voice from behind the compound. It was Budru, Bade *didi*'s husband. Having consumed a little too much *mond* (liquor distilled from the Mahua fruit), he had set out to look for his wife and find some more money to drink. He came staggering over towards the courtyard and started swearing at the gathering. "So much money!" he exclaimed. "Give me ten rupees. Please. Ten only," he said. Bade *didi* seemed embarrassed and angry at her husband's bad behaviour. She was a small-built woman, with strong arms. Arms that had become strong as a consequence of lifting so many heavy pots of water, carrying large bundles of firewood on her head and walking for miles and miles from the forest to her home. Bade *didi* had seemed timid and quiet in the meeting, smiling only when something was really funny and speaking only when absolutely required.

Seething with anger, yet outwardly calm, Bade *didi* got up and quickly walked towards

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Budru *dada*, away from the group. She held his hand and led him behind the compound. "Aye, mad woman! Give me ten rupees, I say!" He was yelling at her when there was a sudden THABB THABB THABB sound. I heard yelps of pain escape the

drunken Budru *dada*'s lips. "Now go home, I'll see you there," she said and returned to her group and sat down, waiting for the meeting to resume as though nothing had happened. The group continued with the meeting in a very matter-of-fact manner.

With everyone having deposited their savings, the meeting was drawing to an end. Entries were made in individual passbooks and recorded in the cash book as well. "Count how much money you have saved today, *didi*," I said. Maahse *didi* came forward to count the money. Her dark, clean and wrinkled hands, which had so much experience in collecting *harra* (a forest produce) and *mahua*, locating and pulling out weeds from their roots during the wet monsoons, making *sal* leaf *donas* (cups and plates) at tremendous speed, cooking a tasty fulfilling meal for 30 people at once—suddenly seemed so young and clumsy when counting money. She was finding it difficult to hold all the notes together, let alone count it. "Le, Somaru. You count it for us," she said holding out the notes to him. "Na na, *didi*. No *dada* or outsider will help you in counting your money. You have to do it yourself," I explained the norm of only the women of the group having the authority to touch and count their notes and money to them. "It is also an opportunity to learn..." I tried explaining to a frowning Maahse *didi*.

"Okay. Come, let's do it together," said Bode *didi*. Budri *didi* too came forward. Bode *didi*

took half of the notes from Maahse *didi's* hand and started counting it loudly. '*Ondu, Rend, Moond, Naalu...*' (One, two, three, four...) and every time she came across a 20, 50 or 100-rupee note, she would hand it over to Budri *didi*.

Twenty pairs of eyes were focussed on the counting. I could even observe some of the women lip-syncing with the counting... Each woman had saved Rs 20 that day. Some had given 20-rupee notes whereas others had given two notes of ten rupees. A couple of the women had given 50-rupee notes and one gave Rs 100. Each note was different from the others even if they were of the same denomination. Each note smelled different from the other, each had different stains, had passed different hands, travelled different places and had different stories to tell. Together, it came up to Rs 400 that day. Saved and counted together—one of the many things that marked the beginning of the journey of this group.

"Total 400?" exclaimed a thrilled Maahse *didi*. She had done it! With the help of her other two group members, she had successfully counted the savings of the day! "Yes, 400 is correct" replied Somaru. She had achieved it. The trio had achieved it. The group had achieved it.

The box was locked, the lock was tugged at and tested...it was given to Budri *didi*, the first person on the list of names; the key was given to Sukri. "Come again next week, *didi*?" Aite *didi* invited me. "I will," I said.

After a round of fond farewells, I kick-started my bike and started on the return journey. It was then that it dawned on me: Twenty women from Dokrichua—20 women, with 20 different lives and 20 different stories—had formed a group today. A group through which each of their lives would be transformed and through which they would build new stories and dimensions for themselves. A group was formed...and the story of the group would be built by each of the women who had been a part of it. That day was the first meeting of the group...