

Collective Action—My Dream of a Village

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Seeing the women of Darbha standing upto domestic violence, organizing themselves into a sangh and taking part in the gram sabha proactively, the author dreams of a time when they stake their claim to equality and dignity, raising their collective voice for their rights and entitlements

Aite *didi* lives in a home that she can confidently call her own. It's a home that she has built with her husband, Sonsingh, and their three children. The journey was not easy; and she covered the distance nevertheless. Aite stood up for herself against domestic violence, displaying strength and courage and, in the process, became a role model for many.

Over the years, Aite has learnt to assert herself and firmly communicate her stand to Sonsingh. Over and over again, she had to tell him that she was his equal in the relationship that they shared in marriage and that he had no right or business to physically and emotionally abuse her. She also had every right to stand up against his misdemeanours and abusive nature. Aite's fellow SHG members were her backbone in the journey. "It would have been simply impossible without my *samhooh* (SHG) *didis*," she says. "The village *kotwar* and the block *thana* inspector were very understanding of my plight and helped sensitize Sonsingh too."

Aite *didi*'s son, Anantram, recently graduated from ITI and is working with Samsung in the Jagdalpur–Darbha division. His job is to install the Samsung TVs that people buy, in their homes. Earlier, when he was studying in the sixth standard, he had contemplated quitting his studies. The situation at home was difficult, with his mother being the only earning member, his father drinking away all his earnings and his youngest sister being ill. However, his mother wouldn't hear of it. "We'll work something out," she used to say. "I am not alone now. My *samhooh* is with me, my *sankul* (cluster) is with me and my *sangh* is with me too. I'm hopeful, something will work." And true to what she said, things did work out. Aite *didi* and several other *didis*, all *samhooh* members across Darbha, worked hard to form a Federation, their very own *sangh* (federation). Besides being registered as a Society and being financially independent, the *sangh federation* gave Aite *didi* and her *sakhis* a collective voice to claim their rights and entitlements.

The *gram sabha* in Aite's village is spearheaded by the *didis* and the *dadas* (women and men) of the village (which unlike a few years ago used to be controlled by a powerful few) meet once every month, to discuss the progress in the village. They monitor and ensure the quality of roads, drinking water, schools, the quality of mid-day meals in schools and the *anganwadis* (village level health workers) give a report of the health status of the village during the *gram sabha* meetings every month. For example, they presented a longitudinal study conducted by them. According to this study, malnourishment amongst children in the age group 0–3 had decreased from 64 to 12 per cent over the past seven years. The *anganwadi karyakartas* workers, the school teachers, the *sarpanch* (head) and the *sachiv* (secretary) also present their monthly reports to the *gram sabha*.

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On the agenda for discussion in meeting is the MGNREGS works planning for the coming year. Jaymani *didi* says that she wants a water harvesting structure to be constructed in her *beda zamin* (fallow land) in Kadri *beda*. The other *didis* and *dadas* agree that constructing a water harvesting structure there would, indeed, be useful. "How would this be useful?" questions the newly appointed *sachiv*. "Wouldn't simple land-levelling and bunding be better suited?" "No *dada*," explains Kamli *didi*, "The structure on Jaymani's land will be in continuation with the structures of 30 x 40, plantation, land development and harvesting structures done on the upper side of Kadri *beda*. This will not only help save, store and harvest water in her own land but also increase the ground-water level of all our lands around her piece of land." Tula *didi* adds, "And Jaymani is a single mother. Such a tank in her *beda zamin* will give her



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an opportunity to do fishery also. With that, she will be able to successfully save for her son Rohit's future studies."

Jaymani *didī* separated from her husband when she was five months pregnant. For a very long time, her single-mother status was either spoken of with ill favour or not spoken about at all in the village. Things are different today. The villagers recognize her as a woman brave enough to be a single mother, and they support her in her struggle to educate Rohit.

As the *gram sabha* comes to an end, the *didis* and *dadas* linger on to discuss the festival of *Diyari* that is just around the corner. The *didis* discussed how many *poylis* (a unit of measurement used which holds 2^{1/2} kg of rice) *dhan* they would grind to make *landa* this year for *Diyari*. Pide *didī* said, "This year I'm going to make three full *poylis* of *landa*. A local beer a delicacy which is a must for every occasion of significance in the village." The other *didis* also agreed on similar quantities and then walked happily back home.

On her way home, Pide *didī* thought of how things had changed over the past few years and smiled. There was a time when the *dhan* harvested from her land was just about enough to feed her family for a mere three months. There was a time when she had borrowed three *poylis* of rice from her neighbour to make *landa* for *Diyari*. Today, things are different. Along with discovering the best paddy seeds and best practices in paddy cultivation, Pide *didī* has also learned what it takes for a *dhan* plant to grow and multiply into several tillers. It was so simple yet so essential, she thought.

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Like a human child, a plant child or a sapling also needs proper nutrition to grow well and healthy. The more it grows, the more it eats and the more it needs to be fed, she had learnt. She had logically and scientifically understood paddy cultivation. This knowledge and some new technology helped her increase the productivity of her paddy fields exponentially. To clear any

doubts that she may have regarding paddy cultivation or diseases and pests, she could call Balman, who was earlier a Community Service Provider (CSP) and was currently the Agriculture Officer for a cluster of three *panchayats*. He had become an employee of the Agriculture Unit, which is a sub-part of their *sangh*. Balman provided support and services for anything—from inputs to market linking the agriculture produce. He either would attend to the matter himself or guide a CSP to provide the help and support required.

Along with the blossoming paddy fields and the flourishing *imli* (tamarind) business with the *samhooh didis*, Pide *didī* also ran a small tailoring shop. She works on the sewing machine, less for the money that it brings her and more because she enjoys stitching and making clothes. She has overcome her financial problems. Her smile as she walks back home reflects more than just the joy of financial security; it is full of confidence and courage that she has gained over the past few years. She now has the strength to move ahead boldly.

Pide *didī* skipped and hopped the last few yards to her home. She was going to take the three *poylis* of rice to the river to wash and dry and grind to make sweet *landa*.

Very soon, it was *Diyari*. Aite *didi's* mother-in-law from Jagdalpur and her brothers-in-law visited them. She had made *landa* and *chaapra chaakna* (a chutney made of raw red ants) for all the guests. Before offering them the drink with a twist of *chaapra*, Aite *didi* gave her guests mugs of water and some soap to wash their hands, "Washing hands with soap before eating saves us from contracting many diseases," said Aite's youngest. This made Aite and Sonsingh look at each other with

raised eyebrows and a smile on their faces and the guests teased her, saying, "*Accha aase madamji.*"

That night on *Diyari*, all the *didis* and *dadas* of the *para* (hamlet) got together to drink, sing and dance just as they had been doing over the past so many years. The songs and dances applauded their spirit, with every beat and every step.