

Examination Day: Passed with Flying Colours!

DISHA MEHTA

Working closely with women at the grass roots, helping them gain the confidence to find their voice, blurring the divisive lines of caste and religion, and uniting them to work towards their dreams of living vibrant and dignified lives is a reality we can work towards

The sun was about to reach its peak in the sky and the mercury was on a constant rise. I was visiting Namatanr, a part of Bareria village of Baghmundi block, Purulia. Bareria is a small, crowded village growing rice twice in a year. The village is a mélange of all sorts of people—from people who own a lodge in town to people who are struggling to earn their daily bread. It has the usual drunkards, who often created chaos, and it has people, who work hard in the fields and brick kilns, all for 100 days of work.

I cursed the bumpy and dirty roads and the open drainage so close to the houses. The children were playing barefoot on the roads where grey water flowed like a stream. I made a note in my head to bring this up in the meeting. It was going to be one of the usual meetings with the landless women of the village and my head was filled with the tasks I had to finish before calling it a day.

The *Didis*, as we called the women, began to arrive soon, and they gathered and sat forming a circle. As I opened my diary and wrote the date—9th February—I realized that I was into the sixth month of my Development Apprenticeship. The training, so far, had already been somewhat of a life-changing event. This organization had given me one year to gain an understanding of and to familiarize myself with rural life. I realized that, in the process, I am also being able to explore and connect with myself.

In the last six months, with the constant support of my field guide and other executives of the team, I had changed. These months had been an incubation period and my only job was to learn and make mistakes and experiment and improve. After six months of gathering knowledge, I realized that I had started to enjoy the experimentation. Time had really flown by.

As I reflected upon these last few months, little did I know what was in store for me that day!

The assembled women approached me with the *alochana* (discussion topic) for that meeting. They were concerned about how to avail of money for emergency purposes such as a pregnancy or the monsoon when they need extra cash the most. The male members of the family had control over the money they earned, and the women had no say in how it was to be spent. They knew well that having cash at home was asking for trouble because, at any time, the men could take it to buy liquor.

To my delight, the women themselves came up with an idea. They planned on saving a handful of rice from their kitchens every day, in a separate container.

"Taka ta or, kintu ranna gharer dhaan er upore aamar adhikaar (The money is his but I have rights on the grain in the kitchen)."

They could sell the rice and save the money for the future or sell the rice in an emergency situation. I felt very happy and proud. Seeing them take cognisance of their situation and come up with solutions meant a lot to me. The change that we were trying to bring about was really on its way. The wheels had started to roll.

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After the discussion ended, members of Namatanr Adivasi Mahila Swanirbhar Dal, Asha Mahila Swanirbhar Dal and the Maa Durga Swanirbhar Dal began to walk in. There was a contained excitement in their manner and a gleam in their eyes as they came up to me. They had something they wanted to

share.

Jeetni Lohar from Asha Mahila Swanirbhar Dal spoke up: *"Didi*, it has been quite some time that we have been learning. We think that it is time for an exam, time for us to test how much we have learned." This took me by surprise.

"What kind of an exam?" I asked.

They continued, "We were thinking of hosting a stage event in our village, where we will invite everyone. And we, along with the ladies of other SHGs, will go on stage and talk in public. We will give our own introduction."

This was a huge thing coming from them because these were the same women, who used to be extremely shy. In fact, I recalled the times when they were so shy that, even to talk to me, they would cover their faces with their saree. And all this was so until a couple of weeks back.

They wanted to take up this challenge to fight off their fears and shyness. They wanted to come out of the shadow.

I asked them, *"Eita kore ki hobe? Keno korte chao eita?* (What will happen if you do this? Why do you want to do it?)"

"Lojja katanor jonnyo, bhoer katanor jonno. Aamader mone onek kichu aache, onek kichu bolar aache kintu ushraate pari na, lajja laage.

(To overcome our shyness, to overcome our fears. We have a lot of things to say but we cannot speak because we feel shy.)"

Next, they asked me for my help. They wanted me to help them arrange for the *mancho* (stage), the microphones and the speakers. I wanted to help and was about to say yes, when something crossed my mind and I stopped.

"I think I should not help you. I think that because it is your fear, it would be best if you were to take it up as a challenge and manage things independently."

"*Tomader ke swanirbhar hote hobe, aamar upor nirbhar nei.* (You have to become independent and not be dependent on me.)"

After an initial wave of hesitation, they decided to go for it. I was happy and admittedly a little anxious; they were very excited. This was the first time they were going to do something like this in their lives.

I had not seen this coming. And that too, so soon! I had felt that their self-confidence had been growing but had not foreseen that they would take such a big step. I was amazed. When I asked them about how they were planning to go about everything, they seemed to be pretty confident with their plan of action.

"*Aamra ekta mancha toiri korbo tetul talaee, sobai ke nimantran korbo, graamer lok, tomar office'r lok ke mic aana korabo* (We will prepare a stage beneath the tamarind tree, invite everyone from the village and your office, and they will bring a microphone too.)"

"*Kintu jaano ei sob korar jonne prochur taka dorkar hobe?* (Do you know that you will need a lot of money to do this?)" I asked them.

They were prepared for that too. They planned to collect funds from among themselves (SHG

members) for all their expenses. The stage, the microphones and everything would be paid for with that money.

I further inquired about how they were planning to go about arranging the stage and the audio systems. A few suggested that their sons could take care of it. I wanted them to take the full responsibility themselves and not to involve or take help from anyone else. To my relief they agreed.

"*Taale miker baibostha ke aar kokhon korbe?* (Who will arrange for the mic and when?)" I asked.

"*Oi ta beta cha gulo korie debe.* (The boys will handle that.)"

I was a little upset at this.

I asked them. "*Ei anushthan ta kara korche?* (Who is hosting this event?)"

"*Aamra.* (We)" they chorused.

"*Kaader jonno?* (For whom?)" I asked.

"*Aamader jonno.* (For us)" they replied.

"*Taale baibostha ke korbe?* (Then who should make the arrangements?)" I asked them.

There was silence for a while and then they smiled. Their smile told me that they had understood what I wanted to say and their next sentence confirmed it.

"*Aamra. Aami giye miker baibostha korbo, aaro keu cholo aamar saathe.* (We. I will go and arrange for the microphone. Someone please accompany me.)" Malati *di* said.

I gave them two days to plan said that on February 11, I would come back to see the progress. And I left.

Due to my schedules and other commitments, I was unable to be there in Bagmundi on the 11th and had been unable to contact them since the last time we had met. I was scared that the excitement and initiative would become diluted with time and that they may opt out of the plan. I was scared that they wouldn't have planned anything. Because the group had just started to flow properly,

I was worried that they would lose the spark because somewhere deep inside I believed that they needed an external stimulus.

Finally, the next day I went to see them. To my amazement, everything was taken care of.

I realized that the stimulus was not an external one.

They had collected the money—from four groups, each having ten members. They took 20 rupees from each, adding up to 800 rupees. Later, they added some 100 rupees more for tea. They had also arranged for everything that might be needed for the event. Seeing that everything was in its place, I asked them if they had decided how they would conduct the proceedings on the stage during the event and in which order they would go. Also, I wanted to know what they would speak on stage. At that, they went blank and with an apprehensive look they said, "*Oita toh bhaabi ni, bhaabte hobe.* (We haven't thought of that yet. We will have to think about it.)"

They immediately realized how chaotic it might get on stage and they decided that they should have an order and someone to call out the names. The idea of having an anchor finally came to their mind.

I informed my team about it and they were really excited. They guided me to explore the reason the women were so motivated, why they wanted to do it and how much I should be intervening in the process. Their advice really helped me be efficient

So they planned to choose anchors for the event. I left them to work on that for the day. I told them that I would call them up and check on their progress.

Their phones were again, unreachable. I was tense. The reason for my concern was that this group was like an unguarded candle in the wind, flickering. I was worried that the flame, of proving themselves, might become extinguished.

I informed my team about it and they were really excited. They guided me to explore the reason the women were so motivated, why they wanted to do it and how much I should be intervening in the process. Their advice really helped me be efficient. I tried to understand the group of *Didis*, individually. The team members were also very excited about what would happen on the final day; however, some had their own engagements and could not come to the event. A few of them did join us, however.

It was the morning of 14th February—Valentine's Day for the whole world but Examination Day for the women of Bareria village.

I reached early to see what was happening. I was astonished and also relieved when I reached the spot. The field was filled with anxiety, excitement and tension. The *Didis* were dressed up more beautifully than I had ever seen them. They were so busy and a little confused.

They had all combed their hair properly. I noticed that a couple of them had made a different style of braid. They wore bright and glittering *sarees*. The children were also wearing new clothes.

On enquiring, I found that almost everything had been decided, planned and they were ready for the show. The women had selected two of their daughters for anchoring the whole event.

I hadn't expected them to be so prepared. I had thought that they would ask Binod *da* to write the introductory speech for them. I had also feared that they would be late as usual, or that the women would not turn up, that some of them might back out at the last moment due to stage fright. But everyone seemed to be there. Everyone was ready!

The girls, both studying in the 6th Standard, prepared themselves for the task at hand.

A crowd of around 150, mostly women and some 20–30 men gathered in front of the tamarind tree in the village. Tarpaulin sheets were spread out on the ground for the audience. The audience consisted of people from the adjacent paras. Neighbours, elders, family members, husbands, children... everyone was present. To my amazement, the show started with the National Anthem.

The two girls took to the stage. One was very lively and had braided her hair. Probably her mother had taken a little more time to make sure her daughter looked her best on stage, before dressing up herself. The other girl was a little timid. Together, however, the two of them managed the whole show. Soon, both were comfortable on stage and started having fun anchoring. "*Nomoshkar! Shobai k amontron janachi...* (Namaskar, welcome everyone...)"

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Ratni Lohar, Jeetni Lohar and Sabitri Kalindi offered to sing. They looked at me first. Then looked at the audience and announced that they had prepared a song for the occasion. The song spoke about

their group, which was on the way to learning something new, to seeing the world with a new pair of eyes. The song also invited women from other villages to come join them at the *tetultola* (under the tamarind tree), where a girl from Kolkata had come to help them in their quest.

Another *Didi* was pushed onstage to sing; she made up a song on the spot. It went like:

"How will we know how to sing, we spend our whole time working in fields, in kitchen,

I don't know how to make a song, I don't know how to sing"

Some took a few moments before they could speak. Some went up with shaky legs and came back laughing at their own mistakes and a few were spontaneous enough to make up songs on the spot... impromptu. When one *Didi's* name was called out to go onstage, her little three-year old son started crying and held on to her and would not let her go...she broke that barrier, releasing herself from that shackle; she handed over the crying baby to the lady by her side, and went up on stage.

After introducing themselves, some spoke about themselves while a few spoke about the problems that their village was facing. Bharati Kalindi spoke about building unity in

the groups and among women. Some talked about issues such as the lack of cleanliness in the villages, which led to many diseases. A few talked about the fact that alcohol consumption had become a nuisance and was creating a lot of problems for them. Malati Mura and Santara Kalindi talked about a demand for the shops selling liquor to be shut down. Some talked about the fact that they wanted to learn more, go out and see and know more about the world. They wanted to go to banks and other important places to know how things work so that they feel more confident. Every time a lady came back after addressing the crowd, she had a victorious look on her face. Relieved and happy!

The members of the audience were amazed for they were seeing something like this for the first time in their village. This was all very new for them. The event went on for more than a couple of hours. The children got very excited and took over the stage after the event was over. They sang many songs. The programme ended on a happy note. It was definitely a success. They had passed their examination with flying colours.

The following day, I went back to the village. The women had diligently noted down all the details of the collections (funds) and expenditure in the register. Their resolution had been written down. After showing me all this, they told me that there was a problem, a serious problem. The morning after the event, a few men had come to the women and had taunted them about their pledge to shut down the liquor shops in the area. The men had challenged them to do so.

The men said, "*Tomra kichu korte parbe na.* (You will not be able to do anything.)"

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The women had replied, "*Jodi tomra mod bondh kore dao, aamar haat tola e chul berobe.* (If you men stop drinking, hair will grow on our palms.)"

I asked them: "Do you know why they are saying this?"

"Yes, we know! They think we are not capable of taking any steps. They are saying this to scare us off," they answered.

"And are you scared?" I asked.

"We are not scared. They have challenged us and now we need to prove ourselves," they replied, confidently.

As a group, they wanted to unite over this matter. They wanted to contact other groups regarding this problem and ask those members to join hands with them to fight against alcohol consumption. However, planning this was not easy because there was a huge communication gap between the groups. I gave them time to think over it.

I also asked them about the after-effects of the event and the changes that it had brought. They said that now they can speak to anyone confidently. They no longer need to suppress their feelings.

It was a moment of joy and pride for me. I had always wanted to focus on building people—making people strong so that they could build a life of their own, in the way they wanted. And this was my first step towards it. As I saw them becoming strong and confident, I also gained strength, confidence and conviction. I am very new at this, so even a step as small as this made me feel so happy as if I had received some award. I felt happy that the effort I had put in had paid off well. I realized there was

so much more I could do. And then the next moment, I knew that the SHG women had put in so much effort and had done so much.

What became very clear was that unity was the answer to all the problems. The women needed to stand united, and I began to brainstorm about how to facilitate that.

Two weeks passed.

The *Didis* wanted to call an *upashangha* meeting, in which they would approach the other groups and talk about the issues of men making fun of them and would discuss ways by alcohol consumption could be stopped.

I thought to myself that it would be a good idea to talk about unity there. The problem was that the women often missed these meetings and would be absent. Convincing everybody to come and listen would be a big challenge.

To overcome this problem, the *Didis* planned to send out official letters to each group and they would make it compulsory for everyone to attend the meet.

I wondered if it would turn out like the day of the event on 14th February when many more women from all the SHGs were supposed to take part but had not turned up. I decided to enquire why the ladies from *upor para* (upper hamlet) and *majh para* (middle hamlet) had not come to the event. I found out in due course that caste and class again played a role. The area where the stage event of 14th Feb had been organized was considered supposedly lower caste; this stopped many of the upper castes from joining the event.

My task was to bridge this gap. I needed to do something to bring the people closer, bring

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them under one umbrella. I needed to convince them that they were firstly all humans and not Machuaar, Mura, Mahato or Kalindi. I planned to host an event for this on 18th March.

This event would be more like a game. It had however, a deeper underlying message and would possibly make a bigger impact. I had learned it in Field Course 1, as part of my Development Apprentice programme.

A couple of days before the event, I asked the women of eleven groups of *Bareria* and three groups from *Kudna* village to think of ten sentences on the topic *Aamader Swapno* (Our dreams)—personal dreams or wishes or what they wanted from their SHG. I had some activities planned for them. I prayed that things would work out the way I wanted them to. The goal was a tough one but I had faith.

I divided the day into three slots to accommodate everybody. Groups from *Kudna* were invited to *Bareria*. There was a morning slot (9:00 a.m. –12:00 p.m.), an afternoon slot (1:00–3:30 p.m.) and an evening slot (4:00–7:00 p.m.). The slots were given to the groups in such a way that there would be at least one group from the *upor para*, the *majh para* and the *neech kuli* (lower area). Along with this, there was also the presence of women from all the castes under the same roof—one OBC Group with one ST and one SC in every slot. I was hoping that this might lead to bridging of the gap between them. *Tetultala* (*neech kuli*), where the people belonging to the SCs dwell, was selected as the venue for the morning slot. Ganesh Paramanik's house (*majh para*) was chosen for the afternoon slot, and the primary school (*upor para*) was to house the last slot. The plan was to make the OBC, ST, SC and the general members sit together and not in their

own *para*. It was an exercise in trying to mobilize them, and to break the 'your and mine, upper and lower' barrier. Everything was set!

Unfortunately, the day started on a foul note. Barsha Dol SHG from the *upor para* bailed out of the event in the morning. The reason was something that I had feared the most.

"We are not ready to step into the *neech kuli*. We will allow them to come and continue the event in our area, but we are not going there!"

This was the first obstacle of the day for me and it annoyed me. I was very disappointed. I controlled my emotions and tried to talk sense into them. But I knew that forcing them was not going to take us anywhere.

I left saying, "*Jodi nah aashte chao, taale aar aamar kichu korar nei.* (If you don't want to come, there's not much I can do.)"

The first slot of the event kicked off in the morning. All groups except *Barsha Dol* were present. When I reached, the members of the *neech kuli* enquired about the absence of Barsha Dol. I tried to wave off the question to avoid similar feelings in their minds but they already knew the reason. Disappointment was in the air.

On a happier note, there was a surprise waiting for us there. Women from other places had come to participate. They had heard of this event taking place and wanted to be a part of it. This was the first positive sign of the day. I stayed optimistic.

The first slot had around 38 women. Initially, they sat in their own groups. Women who

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hailed from the same region, who belonged to the same class of the society and who knew each other, sat together. This was what we had to overcome through the event. So I planned to randomly divide the whole crowd, by serially counting from 1 to 19 and again repeating it from 1, to make 19 couples.

This shuffled them around so that no two women who knew each other well or belonged to the same class or group were sitting together. Everyone had someone new as their partner. This move would surely take them out of their comfort zone. It was supposed to catalyze the goal of the event. After everyone settled down in their places, I briefed them about their first activity.

Each one had to come up and introduce themselves. But I strictly prohibited them from saying their surnames while giving their introductions. If anyone mentioned their surname, they would be penalized. The penalty was in the form of tasks that they would have to do, which would be decided upon by the members sitting in the crowd. Introductions were to be based on something that they really loved doing. My hope was that this activity would make the women ponder upon what they do for themselves, if anything at all. The women were to come up, say their names and introduce themselves and share something about what they love doing. A few of them made the mistake of speaking out their last names and were to face penalties. But the group decided to let them go without any penalties.

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Some talked about their love for cooking, some said they loved to play with children, some spoke about how much they loved to speak while some said they liked being religious and taking the name of God. Savitri *di*, one of the members, said that she loved to attend these meetings and to learn new things from them. This message was inspiring for me. Binarani *di* said she loved to study and wanted to be able to teach her child. Lakkhi *di* said she loved to roam around in the town. Suchitra *di* said she liked to do clerical work of the groups. Their eyes twinkled as they spoke about what they really loved doing.

The next activity required them to get to know more about their partners. They had to hold hands and stroll around the fields and talk about themselves to the other. I was hoping that as they held hands they would overcome the issue of untouchability when they found out that some of them were *harijans*. My mind was reeling. I was anxious in case it turned out otherwise. What if they rebuked or blamed me for deceiving them into breaking their customs? But I held on to a blind faith in the connection I shared with the *Didis*. I carried on with the activity. It was a leap of faith.

After ten minutes of getting to know each other, they had to give each other nicknames. The names had to be unique to the person and were meant to describe the person in some way.

Initially, there was a lot of hesitation and confusion, among the women, regarding the activity. It was explained to them once again and they were given some more time to spend with each other. They took their time. After they were done, I asked them about the nicknames they had chosen for their partners.

What soothed my heart the most was seeing these Didis run around in the fields holding their partner's hand, giggling and talking as though they were teenage college girls...free and happy! They were oozing enthusiasm

Some had chosen names of fruits because that was their favorite fruit. Some had chosen vegetable names for the same reason. One of them named each other *dal-bhaat* because they felt they complemented each other and the qualities of both were necessary for a healthy life! That amused me. Another named her partner

golap because she was very beautiful. And one simply gave a beautiful '*Sasuri-Bondhu*' (Mother-in-law-Friend) name to the other because she was her cousin mother-in-law. Some made sisters. And some simply called the other '*Bondhu*'. The communication between them was finally increasing. The ice wasn't just breaking, it was melting... 'love-fully'. They were joking around and laughing and really seemed to be enjoying themselves.

As they declared the nick names, they were asked to praise their partners. Each one of them did and they were delighted as they heard their praises. Some were praised for their beauty, some were praised about cooking, about cleanliness, about handling their family and so on. As I watched them smiling, it confirmed to me, that they had built a connection and had also realized how beautiful and worthy each one of them was. I am hoping that this has given birth to some self-confidence.

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There was one final activity for them. They had to sit down in their groups and share the goals or dreams they have for their group and for themselves.

As I had guessed, most of the groups shared the same goals and dreams. They all aspired for the same things—better functioning of the SHG, education for themselves and their children, a healthy environment, better income, a healthy family, etc.

I sat by the side and realized that in spite of the bad start, things had finally worked out in our favour. The women had made friends. They were happy and were crossing the caste and class barrier

It all went as planned and this was the opportunity that I had been waiting for. It was time to bring to their notice that there were so many similarities between them. And that they were all so similar to each other. They were like each other—all of them humans, all of them women!

Then I asked them, “Why should you allow a mere tag of caste or class to divide you?”

As I spoke my heart out at the end of every slot, everyone seemed to give it a thought and discussed how true it was. They came up and confessed that they had had many assumptions about their new friends who had been strangers till then; they had now found that they were actually so good. And their caste didn't matter anymore. They promised that they would be friends from then on. Everyone voluntarily spoke about how they felt and how good their new friends were and how wrong their assumptions had been. Probably they had understood. And even if they hadn't understood, I knew that it had triggered a chain of thoughts in their minds—thoughts leading to unity, love and peace and oneness.

The groups then went on to share with each other about how they worked and their achievements. The groups with a lower attendance and the ones that were less efficient received the much-needed inspiration from their peers, who had been performing excellently. They also discussed the various

problems that they had been facing. Together they worked on a problem statement and also tried to come up with a solution through discussions as one group. Now it was with their new friends that they were discussing the problems and seeking the solutions. I was in

the background.

I sat by the side and realized that in spite of the bad start, things had finally worked out in our favour. The women had made friends. They were happy and were crossing the caste and class barrier. In fact, they had started talking so much to their new friends that sometimes I had to literally beg them to listen to me or pay attention to me.

The last slot came with a surprise. Barsha Dol contacted me. They wanted to join in. They wanted to come for the last slot. I wondered whether I should allow them to come but I accepted their request and invited them. As the activities rolled on, the women from Barsha Dol also held hands of the women from the *neech para* and showed a lot of enthusiasm. We were almost there. The goal for the day was almost achieved. The finish line was in sight. But questions kept popping up in my mind. I wondered what had suddenly made them join. Meanwhile, the activities went on smoothly.

During the last activity of sharing in the group, Jeetni *di* came over and asked me if she could address the crowd. She shared something about the event that they had organized on 14th February. She talked about how alcohol was ruining everything for them. She boldly put forward the facts that everyone was aware of. She spoke about how the husbands were stealing food and money from the homes for alcohol, how useless they were becoming

and how the women were being beaten up. And then she shared with the group how after the event, the men had made fun of their movement against alcoholism.

Everyone in the other group united over this issue. Shock and anger was visible on their faces. They swore to help the women of the village. They were ready to stand beside them and fight for the cause. They wanted each and every group from both Bareria and Kudna to unite and fight for this. Everybody agreed. The numbers were increasing. I was filled with happiness and pride. The curtains of caste were finally disappearing.

Jeetni *di* continued.

“What I am going to say now may hurt a few of you.” She looked at me and then at the members of the *Barsha Dol*.

I realized that she was going to speak about the members of *Barsha Dol* and the fact that they had, initially, bailed out of the event due to the caste issue.

Before she could continue any further, I interrupted. I felt it would be better if both the groups talked it out like grown-ups instead of fighting over the issue like children in school. They agreed to hold peaceful talks!

I was speechless, I had no words. It was like witnessing magic. It was the moment. All my efforts had paid off. The women, all cheered, talked and made much noise. But all I had was a peaceful silence around me. It was one of my greatest victories

The members of the *neech kuli* very peacefully and boldly pointed out that if incidents like the one today, when the *Barsha Dol* had refused to go the *neech kuli* was repeated, the women would not be able to unite. They also shared how sad they had felt and how it had hurt their feelings.

In response *Sarathi di* from *Barsha Dol* very wisely stated that they had not thought of it from that perspective. They agreed that now was not the time to think of caste. They apologized for their mistake and promised that they would no longer commit such mistakes. To my amazement, they also added that there were a couple of women who discriminate on the basis of caste and if the next time such a situation arose they would rather eliminate those women and stand by their new friends. And every woman from the *Barsha Dol* agreed to that.

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Deep inside, I knew just the blueprint had been made. The monument still had to be built. And I started my journey to reach the next milestone.