

Girvar–Where Differences Unite!

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Forming an oasis in the desert of caste divides, women SHG members recognize and uphold the underlying unity of their humanity, honouring their interdependence and displaying tolerance and compassion for each other

INTRODUCTION

It was a regular SHG meeting in the Rebarivas hamlet of Awal village in Abu Road location, Rajasthan. The meeting proceeded like every other meeting, with familiar transactions and discussions, and facilitation. When the meeting ended, the group members asked me if I would like to have some tea. I knew that they belong to a community that specializes in dairy. They milk their own cows and sell the milk to a regular milkman. So the milk that was going to be used in the tea would be pure and freshly milked. I was never going to say no.

Soon the tea arrived. The woman, who served the tea, came in with a tea container and two different types of cups. One was made of brass and the other was a regular porcelain cup. The woman asked me, "To which caste do you belong?" I admit I was surprised because in my entire work experience, I was never asked such a question; I had no clue what a cup of tea had to do with my caste. I replied that I was a Thakur-Brahmin. Immediately, the lady poured the tea in the brass cup and served it to me whereas the community facilitator, Savita Bai, who belonged to the same village and stayed in a hamlet that was a stone's throw away, was served tea in the porcelain cup. She belonged to a caste called Meghwal, considered a low caste compared to the Rebari caste, to which the other members of the group belonged.

This discrimination had a mind-boggling impact on me. I knew that Savita Bai, with whom I had been working in the village to form so many SHGs for the past one-and-a-half years, was comparatively well-off and well-educated as compared to the Rebaris. Yet, she was being discriminated against because she belonged to a lower caste!

The Caste Divide Within

The Rebaris are considered to be one of the highly placed castes in rural Abu Road. They neither dine in the house of a low-caste family nor do they invite them for a meal to their own homes. During community functions organized by low-caste people, the Rebaris take their own utensils, in which they are then served food and water. I noticed this during a tailoring training session organized under the MPOWER project. Tea was served to all but three girls, who were Rebaris. Although I was aware that a divide exists, the realization hit me hard that day. On enquiry, I discovered that the members of each of the SHGs belonged to a particular caste. There were separate SHGs for the Rebaris, the Garasiyas, the Meghwals, the Bheels and so on. In fact, the hamlets in the villages were divided on the basis of caste. Names such as Rebarivas, Bhilvas, Kolivas and Meghwalvas made this amply evident. It was natural for groups to be formed according to caste. I was worried. I had planned many activities in this village because there were 11 SHGs in the vicinity. I thought that this village would be the first one to have an SHG cluster. When I saw this deep divide, however, I wondered whether it would ever be possible to have a cohesive cluster of groups despite such deeply rooted divisions? Will these women be able to keep aside their caste differences and establish a functional entity that will require overall co-operation and understanding of each other?

The group under consideration, Mamaji SHG, initially did have three members that belonged to the Garasiya tribal community. But this group was made in haste because the project demanded only BPL members in the group and only those three Garasiya members were available in the vicinity. There was constant

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friction between them and the other members. The Rebaris never trusted the Garasiya members because they feared that the latter would take loans from the cash box and not return them, and that it would be difficult to force them to repay the loans once they default

because the Garasiyas formed a majority of the population. Ultimately, the Garasiya members stopped attending the meeting saying that they lived far off and could not walk every week to the meeting. At that point of time, these members had taken loans up to Rs 1,500 from the group. The Rebaris would never enter the Garasiya women's houses, to recover the outstanding amount. With such a live example of discord between the residents of the same village, my hopes began to shrink.

During my sojourn in the area, construction work of various village infrastructure projects under MGNREGA was being carried out in the villages. The women, working on different projects, belonged to different castes. What was most shocking was that the workplace had separate provisions for drinking water—a telling sign of the prevailing discrimination. Water was kept in pots alongside the project site—steel pots for the upper castes and earthen pots for the lower castes. Women, who were working together for the same constructive purpose, were not regarded as equal. They were discriminated by these pots—one for lower caste and one for upper caste.

My mind was in a buzz through the day. I wanted to believe that this was an isolated case. So I picked up the data of all the SHGs we were promoting in Abu Road and studied them. What emerged was predictable. This was not an isolated case. As I kept on turning the

pages of the SHG data, I found that every SHG had members of a particular caste or community.

I continued my search and hit a pocket of four SHGs in a village named Girvar. I was intrigued to see that these four groups had members that belonged to variety of castes—Bheels, Garasiyas, Ranas, Meghwals, Rebaris and Muslims! This was significantly different from the others. When I shared this discovery with my colleague, K.R. Yadav, his comment was, “It will be an achievement if these groups continue for more than two months!” His comment was not a knee-jerk reaction. He belongs to Rajasthan and has a village background. He understands the caste structure that prevails in the state and how the dynamics play out in rural pockets.

However, it turned out that only one group of the four was 4 months old. The three others had been functioning for more than 8 months. It was like finding an oasis in a desert! In such a caste-ridden set-up, I found four SHGs that had a diversified caste composition. Although I was excited, I was not sure whether these groups actually understood this diversity or whether it was deliberate or they were ignorant of this fact. In a society where the caste system defines almost every aspect of the life of the people, any institution formation by default will have a homogenous caste composition. So was it by mistake that this had happened? Had these women formed this group just to procure the benefits of a government project? Or had they actually understood the dynamics of their community and were liberal? There were so many questions in my mind. I decided to explore this further in order to get more clarity.

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Intervention—The Story of Group Formation in Girvar

I had been facilitating these groups for over one year. This aspect of the caste of each group with a specific caste composition had never crossed my mind until my experience in Awal. In Girvar, I had a good rapport with most of group members. During the formation of the groups in Girvar, I was helped immensely by a very active and intelligent lady called Hawa Banu. Prior to PRADAN entering the village, several NGOs and individuals had approached the people of this village with their schemes

and had duped them. They had formed groups of women in the village and had collected money from them, promising to open accounts for them in the nearby rural bank and had eventually fled without any trace.

PRADAN needed some local support to enter in the village and convince people about its intervention. Hawa Banu had some influence not only in Girvar but many other hamlets nearby and other *gram panchayats*. She helped us form the village's first SHG. She became a member of that group too and, in due course of time, was elected as the group leader (*adhyaksh*). The seeds of a diverse group were sown that very day because she joined a group that was formed in a hamlet of the Bheel community. She belonged to the Moyala (*kumhar*) community and was a Muslim by religion. At that point of time, she was the only woman in the group, who could write her name.

Within six months of its operations, the group picked up the vital and basic concepts of SHG. It was named Rekha SHG. SHG norms were established before the first transaction

meeting. All the members sat in a circle, according to their number in the SHG register, with the accountant. Inter-loaning started in the 8th meeting when they were in need of money for the *kharif* crops; later, women took loans for medical care for their children and to repair their houses. A bank account was opened and they received a grant of Rs 10,000 as revolving fund from the government under the MPOWER project; they are still rotating this money among the SHG members. By 2012, the cash available with the group including cash box and the bank account crossed Rs 22,000. The SHG received Rs 4,000 as interest from these loans. From the beginning, it became evident that women from different castes could come together to form an institution in the village. However, the functioning of the group throughout needed to be studied.

Two weeks after the formation of this group, another group, called Khimat Mata SHG, was formed close by. The villagers belong to a community called Rebaris and their primary occupation is goat and sheep rearing. They sell milk and wool to earn their living. Three women in this group of 12, however, belong to the Meghwal and Lakhara communities. Rebaris belong to the Other Backward Class (OBC) category; Meghwals and Lakharas are considered two of the lowest castes of society. The group started functioning harmoniously and many of the traditions witnessed in Awal were not followed. The group members ate and drank together...and that too in brass cups! In fact, Lalita Bai, a Lakhara, was elected *adhyaksh* because she was intelligent and the only one in the group who was educated up to the VIII class. She was also an active speaker, giving logical reasons and asking relevant questions to the facilitator. She had a tea stall

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opposite to the *panchayat* office and an ornaments shop in the village.

Within 5 months of operations beginning in these two groups, three more groups were formed in the same village. They shared a common venue for their meetings—Hawa Banu's house. The groups had a mix of all castes and communities of the region. There were Garasiya, Meghwal, Bheel, Muslim, Brahmin and Harijan members! This was as diverse as it could get. All these groups revolved around three women, the respective group leaders—Hawa Banu, Hanja Bai and Lalita Bai. In due course of time, Hawa Banu helped me form four more groups in the same village but in different hamlets and a little farther from this cluster. At 50 years of age, her energy level is the point of envy for many people, including myself.

This was how these groups were formed. What would prove that women in these groups were not discriminatory? A couple of incidents happened during my observation period. The women from these groups, working at a site, abolished the custom of having separate water pots of drinking water for upper castes and lower castes. The women refused to discriminate their group members on the basis of caste. This was revolutionary, to say the least, in a society that not only discriminates on the basis of caste but also on the basis of gender and religion.

One of these groups included Sharda Bai, a Harijan, in their group. Not only was she a Harijan, her family was an outcaste in the society because her husband, son, daughter and she were HIV positive. They were not treated well in the village. They had to shift their residence to a corner of the hamlet. They

had no land for agriculture and sold brooms for their living. They required monthly medical check-ups for which they were dependent upon a government scheme. Wherever they went, they would be made to sit away from the regular villagers—be it the *gram sabha* or any other congregation. The group opposed this treatment and insisted that they sit with the other members and treated them like any other member. Sharda Bai could take the group register, key and cash box just like the other members in the groups would do on a rotation basis. There was no discrimination. The group members themselves took me to Sharda Bai's house to show me the misery that this Harijan family was facing. And even before groups were formed here, these women used to pool in money to help this family.

Such incidents assured me that these people lived in harmony, irrespective of caste divisions. I stopped worrying about the future of this cluster of groups any more. I had no more doubts that self-help institutions would keep functioning here and I could go ahead and facilitate them towards further development that would impact their lives. It was time now to speak to them directly about the topic of caste distribution.

The occasion arose when the leaders of 8 groups met at Hawa Banu's residence. It was a heart warming scene where these women from different backgrounds, castes, religions, communities sat together, played games, talked, discussed, sang songs, ate and drank tea. When I was asked for a feedback on the training, I voiced for the first time my delight at seeing women from such diverse castes and communities coming together under one roof.

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"Sahab! We don't care who belongs to which caste or community. We have been living next to each other for more years than we can count on our fingers. And we do not want any of us to miss out on any opportunity through which the lives of our children could improve. If we discriminate among ourselves, our groups will not function and we all will miss out on this."

Lalita Bai

"Arrey, Sahab! Before you spoke of this, we did not even realize that our group members belonged to a diverse community. Once we are in a group meeting, we forget who is a Garasiya, Bheel, Muslim or Rebari. I am a Muslim and I have rented one of my rooms to a Brahmin family, who has been living with us for past three years. All the food arrangements for this training have been done by her and everyone has eaten the same food. You tell me does food become something different inside the mouth of a hungry Bheel from that of a Garasiya?"

Hawa Banu

"We are all struggling with poverty. If we start discriminating among each other on the basis of these things, how will we do business with each other? If we do that, we decrease our opportunities to earn our living and improve the lives of our children."

Hanja Bai

Understanding the Anomaly

I was delighted with these responses. Clearly, these women do not care about the caste distribution of the SHG members. What could possibly be the reasons behind their thought process? It was true that they were passionate

about their unity in diversity; however, what were the practical realities that created such a situation? For such an 'anomaly' to exist in an area where caste division was rampant, there had to have been concrete and more pragmatic reasons.

That the SHG members live in harmony despite the differences in their caste and community seems to have been reinforced out of a strong interdependence on each other for sustaining their livelihoods. There are several examples of this within the SHGs under consideration. Ganga Bai is a member of Chamunda Mata SHG. She is a Brahmin woman and runs a grocery shop, which she has rented from Hawa Banu, a Muslim woman from the Rekha SHG. Ganga Bai pays Hawa Banu a sum of Rs 700 per month as rent. So this is a give-and-take relationship. Also, she buys a large chunk of her supplies directly from many women from the other SHGs. Mira Bai (Garasiya) of Chamunda Mata SHG supplies

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her with vegetables such as spinach and coriander. Indra Bai of Rekha SHG supplies her with onion and garlic. Gerki Bai (Rebari) of Santoshi Mata SHG supplies her with gourd, radish and milk for the tea Ganga Bai sells. Additionally, Ganga Bai provides a retail outlet for the broomsticks made by Sharda

Bai (Harijan). Hawa Banu also makes earthen pottery and sells it to the villagers and almost all of the SHG members are customers of her products.

Hanja Bai (Bheel) of Rekha SHG has a water pump that she has installed on a large water reservoir in the village; it remains full of water that accumulates during the rains throughout the year. She provides water for irrigation to other group members such as Naseem Banu (Muslim), Gerki Bai (Rebari), Hawa Banu and Devi Bai (Garasiya). She charges Rs 70–80 per hour for running the pump as maintenance and fuel costs. Many such examples of



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interdependence abound within these groups.

Most of the SHG members come from different places in Rajasthan, some from the neighbouring Reodar block, Gujarat; two members came from Nainital after their wedding! This diversity is deep-rooted and, in a course of 4–5 decades, the bonds have been strengthened further.

The location and dynamics of the village also present an explanation. This particular village is the junction of three *panchayats*, Chandela in the north, Chanar in the west and Bahadurpura in the south. The village is the common point of these three *panchayats* and villagers from Chandela, Bagheri, Ambaveri, Bahadurpura, Mahikhera and Fatehpura come here for several services including veterinary and public health services. It also has a hostel for both boys and girls, in which students from Bahadurpura, Girvar and Chandela

panchayats stay. It also houses a very famous temple complex called Patnarayan, a religious centre, which is visited by people from various communities in Gujarat. The village is also a centre for Ayurveda, and ailing people from far away come here for treatment.

Conclusion

I stayed in the village for long hours to observe the movement and dynamics of the villagers. I spent time talking and noting down what the villagers had to say while being extremely cautious not to affect the social fabric. That this fabric was not fragile gave me great joy. Livelihoods can cut through all barriers and walls created by castes, communities and classes. The livelihoods and daily transactions of these people have bound them together—this augurs well. The dynamics of this village is certainly encouraging and it is an example that can be presented universally.

Tribe	Cat-egory	Primary Occupation	Origin	Description
Garasiya	ST	Agriculture labour	Mewar and Marwar regions	Some Rajputs, who were persecuted by the British, fled to the hills of southern Aravallis, married Bheel tribal women and settled here. Some stories even date them back to the times of Alla-ud-din Khalji (13th century AD). The tribe is further divided into numerous sub castes and clans.
Rebari	OBC	Animal husbandry	Thar desert	Consider themselves as the highest class. It is said that they are the decedents of Lord Shiva himself. They used to be nomadic tribals, who moved from place to place.
Bheel	ST	Hunting, Agriculture	Forests on the foothills of Aravalli	The original tribals of the Aravalli and Vindhyaachal hills. Most aggressive people and expert hunters. References of them are found in epics Ramayana (Shabari) and Mahabharata (Eklavya).

Tribe	Category	Primary Occupation	Origin	Description
Meghwal	SC	Weavers, Artisans	Marwar region	In ancient times, they were assigned the duty of praying for rains and that's why the name Meghwal. Expert weavers and leather workers.
Others: Moyala, Bhangi, Lohar, Rana, Lakhara, etc.				Have specific occupations such as potters, cleaners, blacksmiths, etc.