

Lata *Didi* : From Distress Migration to Successful Farming

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The journey of Lata Markam of the sub-primitive Baiga tribe and her fight against abject poverty to survive with honour and dignity, her economic and social challenges and her hope for a secure tomorrow...

THE BAIGAS

The Baigas are a few of the surviving sub-primitive groups (SPG) in India. As per the 1981 Census, they number 2,48,949. They are predominantly found in Mandla district and in Baihar *tehsil* of Balaghat district. They are also scattered in small groups in several villages in Paraswada and Balaghat blocks of Balaghat district.

The Baigas are one of the most exploited and impoverished communities in the Central Indian belt. Most of them are either landless or have insignificant landholdings. Usually dependent on forest produce (they are heavily engaged in bamboo basket making) for their sustenance, the dwindling resources and strict regulations of the forest department have pushed them further to the brink of a steady but sure extinction in this area. In addition, there is the rabid problem of rampant alcoholism. The *mahua* flower, used for making country liquor, important from the point of view of the much-needed cash income, is destroying the social fabric of the Baigas. Alienation from the system and a decline in their way of life and local culture have resulted in the Baigas resorting to heavy drinking to cope with their identity crisis. Their semi-nomadic way of life also puts them at high vulnerability. Distress migration to urban centres such as Nagpur and Jabalpur is a rising trend among the Baigas. Added to all this is the Baiga belief that the Earth is Mother Goddess and that ploughing the fields is equivalent to ploughing the breast of a mother. This prevents them from ploughing the field for agriculture. However, many Baiga families, driven to desperate poverty, have now starting venturing into agricultural practices.

Baigas also have a love-hate relationship with the majority Gonds in this area. According to legend, the Gonds and the Baigas are descendents of two brothers—the Gonds being the children of the older brother whereas the Baigas of the younger. And whereas both are *adivasi* tribes, the social status of the Gonds is higher than that of the Baigas. Moreover, the social standing of the Baigas is further degraded in villages where there are Other Backward Caste (OBC) people. In many villages in Balaghat district, the Baigas live near the edges of a village bordering the jungles, usually where there is no access to clean water, roads or electricity.

THE DURENDA VILLAGE

Durenda village is a part of Sirvi *panchayat* in Balaghat block of Balaghat district. The village comprises three hamlets: Rayatwadi Tola, Katoli Tola and the main *Basti* (settlement). One has to travel more than 10 km of *kachcha* road to reach this village. There are 103 families in this village, 69 families from the Gond tribes, 21 families from the Baiga tribes and 13 from the Other Backward Caste (OBC) families. The OBCs are the dominant as well as the better-educated group in the village, with greater access to resources; followed by the Gonds, whose access to land resources ranges from one to five acres. At the bottom of this resource hierarchy are the Baigas, who are mostly landless and have very little land resource. Like in other places of the district, the Baigas have settled down at the very periphery of the village bordering the forest. Most of the Baiga households are not connected by road and do not have power. The OBC families of the village are engaged in agriculture and some of them are moneylenders. Some OBC families also play the role of middlemen, buying forest goods from the Gonds and the Baigas and selling them in the markets outside. The Gonds in this village are engaged in agricultural activity, forest-based activity such as bamboo cutting and labour whereas the Baigas rely on forest produce and manual labour for their survival.

LATA MARKAN: LIFE BEFORE HER SHG JOURNEY

Lata Markam is 40 years old and lives at the far end of Durenda *basti*, which is also called Baiga Tola. There are seven Baiga families in this *basti*. She was born here and when she was about seven years old, her parents expired.

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She went to live with her uncle in Lamta, where she worked as a maid in different households for 10 years. She was married to Pawal, from Tingipur village in Baihar *tehsil* when she was 17 years old. Drinking was endemic in that village and Lata had to live in an extremely inhospitable situation. There were times when it would be hard for her to feed her family, which comprised her husband, her two sons and a

daughter. Finally, about seven years ago, she decided to come back to her native village with her family. Her aunt gave her 10 decimals (1/10th of an acre) of land to construct a hut. But life was still a struggle for her. On the positive side, her husband, who had grown physically and mentally weak due to excessive liquor consumption, gave up drinking. Like most members of her tribe, she lived in the jungle, periodically cutting bamboo. She also worked as a manual labourer on the farms of the other families in the village. On many occasions she had to borrow money for her sick husband from the local lenders at very high rates of interest. She was so dejected that at one point of time, she had even entertained thoughts of migrating to Nagpur permanently with her entire family.

THE FIRST SHG JOURNEY

PRADAN started its intervention in the Durenda village in May 2009 through Self Help Groups (SHGs). Lata *didi* had heard about these groups from other women when she went to work as agricultural labour in one of the households in the village. The system of savings and easy credit appealed to her. So, when the PRADAN staff organized a meeting in Baiga Tola, and an SHG was formed by the name of Vikas Mahila Samiti, Lata Markam joined it. It had nine Baiga women and two

women from the Gond community. Little did Lata know that, in the coming years, her life would take a new direction and that she would face unseen challenges, shake all traditional views and move forward into a future—one which she truly deserved and had always hoped for, during all her years of struggle.

Three more SHGs were formed in this village at different points of time. At a village-level meeting, a PRADAN professional shared with them the new ways of vegetable and paddy farming that were being introduced in other villages and how poor families were benefitting from these. The representatives of the agriculture department were also invited to this meeting and they were also keen to take the process forward. However, the community was reluctant to go for vegetable production in a village where, so far, vegetable cultivation had been confined to a few plants in the backyard, meant for their personal consumption only. The risks such as technicality, market linkage, input cost and even the very idea of a commercial scale vegetable production seemed to deter them. To build the confidence of the community, a video show was organized and members from the community were also taken for an exposure visit to the nearby areas where these interventions were already in place. The members of the community interacted with the farmers who were engaging in vegetable cultivation on a marketable scale.

After the visit, five farmers took the initiative and for the very first time in Durenda village, vegetables were cultivated, with the intent of accessing markets. And Lata Markam, with a *barri*, or a backyard, of seven decimals, was one of the farmers. The agriculture department also supported this new venture by constructing eight vermi-compost tanks in the village. Of these, four were constructed to help the new vegetable farmers.

PRADAN facilitated the process at every step, giving not only technical support but also moral support. Lata *didi* became motivated and for the first time in her entire life she was growing vegetables and that too with commercial potential. The construction of the compost tank boosted her confidence and the making and usage of organic fertilizer, *jeev amrit*, significantly brought down input costs.

There were other developments going on simultaneously. She took a loan of Rs 2,000 from the group to acquire an acre of farmland on a two-year lease to grow rice. Interestingly, though she was motivated after watching a demonstration plot in the village where the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) was being promoted, she however, went for the traditional paddy in this plot.

There was excellent all round production of vegetables in all the five plots. The production details of Lata Markam on her seven-decimal backyard *barri*, during the first year are as follows:

Table 1: Production of Vegetables

Name of Vegetable	Area under Cultivation (in Decimals)	Production in Kilograms	Average Rate Per Kilogram (in Rupees)	Total Amount (in Rupees)
Chilly	2	92	20	1,850
Long yard beans (<i>Barbati</i>)	3	210	22	4,620
Brinjal (Egg plant)	2	225	18	4,050
Total Sale				10,520

Lata put in a tremendous amount of hard work to get a good harvest. Post monsoon, she would regularly irrigate her crop by fetching water from the nearby hand pump. It paid off rich dividends, not only in terms of production, but also in terms of social acceptability and mobility. Moreover, for the very first time in her life, many people from the village came to her household to check the

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high quality vegetables and to learn from her the technicalities. In addition, breaking every barrier, Lata Markam loaded the vegetables into a bamboo basket, placed them on her head and went to sell them from door to door in all the villages in the vicinity. She also sold them to a vegetable vendor in the Charegaon market. Her husband, who had started actively helping her, now shouldered major responsibilities. He sold earthworms from the vermi-compost for more than Rs 2,000. That year, she married off her son and her daughter, and a major portion of the expenditure came from the profit from various interventions suggested by PRADAN.

For the first six months, the Vikas Mahila Samiti functioned well. In spite of the fact that many of its members periodically migrated to the forest, they would sit in meetings whenever possible. A village-level committee (VLC) was initialized and there was a steady but sure change in the economic dynamics of the village. Three events during this period led to the politicization of the whole process and ultimately the collapse of the SHG some months later.

a) Easy access to loans: Before the formation of the SHGs, the families in the village, especially the Baigas, relied on one of the OBC moneylenders in Durenda for even paltry loans. Within six months, this

system changed. All members were now availing small loans from the SHGs.

b) Work demand: In a VLC meeting, work was demanded from the *panchayat* for the very first time. The villagers got work for more than a month and the payment, albeit with a minor delay. This meant that cash, normally unavailable in the hands of the Baigas, now started flowing and the dependency on the moneylenders decreased.

c) Breaking of the *molai* tree monopoly: The bark of the *molai* tree (used for making ropes) was brought by the Baiga families from deep inside the forest and sold to the moneylenders of the village for a pittance, who afterwards made a good profit by selling it in the market. Empowered by the process of the last six months, the Baigas refused to sell it to the lenders at a cheap price.

However, in a community, which has been exploited to the hilt through the ages and where most male members are chronically alcoholic, it is easy to spread rumours and create discord. The slow change in the economic dynamics of the village was met with hostility from some of the more affluent OBC families. The men from the Baiga households were provoked with baseless allegations. All this culminated in many instances of domestic violence in inebriated condition and, finally, despite many pleas from Lata didi, after about a year of its inception, the Vikas Mahila Samiti had to be closed, literally to restore some sanity in the Baiga households.

A NEW BEGINNING: MAA BAMLESHWARI SHG

The confusion in her hamlet meant that Lata

Markam and the other Baigas had to return to the old way of life of living under the shadows of the more prosperous families in the village. During this period of upheaval, her husband and the eldest son migrated to the jungles to cut bamboo for a period of one month. When they came back, there was a discussion in the family about migrating to Nagpur to work as manual labour. Many Baiga families, who her husband and son had interacted with in the jungle during the bamboo cutting, were heading to Nagpur to work at construction sites. Even Lata Markam was giving that prospect a second thought. She shared this idea with the PRADAN professional working there. The closing of her SHG had been a great setback to her. However, three other SHGs were functional in the village: one made up of Gond families, another of Gond and some Baiga families while another was a mixed one with even some poor OBC families in it. The first was in the Durenda *basti* whereas the other two were in the Rayatwadi and Katoli hamlet, respectively. In January 2011, Lata Markam attended the weekly meeting of the Maa Bamleshwari SHG and expressed her desire to join the group. The rest of the *didis* readily accepted her. She provided excellent inputs to the group by sharing her experience of vegetable farming at the VLC meeting. In addition, in the second year, the number of families going for vegetable cultivation scaled up to an impressive 23 families.

To reduce the drudgery and further promote vegetables as a viable commercial option, eight *jalkunds* (small rainwater harvesting tanks) were constructed in the village. Lata Markam was one of the beneficiaries. The *jalkund* ensured that Lata Markam could concentrate some of her energy on paddy cultivation and

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this time she decided to adopt the SRI method.

In 2011, the family sold earthworms worth Rs 6,000 from their vermi shed. The vegetables gave Lata Markam a profit of about Rs 8,900. However, it was her graduation from traditional paddy to SRI

in her leased farm that saw hordes of visitors come from near and far for exposure visits. The number of tillers in her SRI plot ranged from 30 to 90 per plant and this was quite an unbelievable experience for anyone growing paddy in that area. In a steady social change, even resourceful farmers belonging to the better economic strata began asking her about the methods and technicalities. Villagers from other places were taken to her SRI plot and her vegetable cultivation for exposure visits. In an interaction later, Lata shared that she had never felt so proud and happy. It had been quite an incredible journey from being a destitute in the village to a successful farmer who was known far and wide. The harvest from that plot was a staggering 16 quintals, in a village where the average rice production per acre was usually just four quintals. She sold 10 quintals of rice and fed her family with the rest. With the profit earned from her paddy, vegetable and earthworms, she repaid all debts incurred by her family for her son's and daughter's marriage.

Unfortunately, the landowner, who leased Lata didi the land saw great opportunity and has refused to extend her lease. He, however, has agreed to go for shared cropping this year. That meant that the SRI harvest will be shared equally between the two parties in the future. It is also uncertain whether her lease will be further extended. Dynamics such as this one pose a major challenge not only for Lata

didi but also for the PRADAN professional engaged in that village. Allied activities such as poultry farming could be a way out of this situation. Other avenues need to be explored soon.

LATA'S DREAM FOR THE FUTURE

Every time, the delayed payment under NREGS has deterred her family (and others) from demanding work from the government. Instead, they still prefer to migrate periodically to the jungles for bamboo cutting for which they get cash in hand. Migration, however, leads to instability in the family. With her meagre land resource, she is exploring other avenues of durable income. For a start, she has built a small chicken shed and has bought one fowl. She has also inspired the other Baiga women in her *tola*/hamlet and most of them do not drink anymore (Lata was always a teetotaler). But to bring the other woman from her hamlet into the SHG institution is a

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daunting task, migration and alcoholism among the men being the major deterrent. There has been a sea change in the behaviour of her husband and he is now ever supportive and stands like a rock in all her endeavours. The marriage of her two children was a major

responsibility and Lata is delighted that she has managed that with her own hard work. Her youngest son dropped out of school last year to support the family. She wants to put him back to school this year in his uncle's village in Baihar and hopes that she will be able to support him financially.

Lata talks with such warmth and has a calm aura. She has set an example for not only the downtrodden Baiga families in Durenda but for the entire village. As we sit outside her hut, she offers us some small sized local mangoes. She points to her chicken shed and smiles radiantly. And we know in our hearts that a new way will be found!