

# Matiyas—A Changed Person

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*Transforming the doubt and suspicion of the villagers into trust, their inability to capability, and poverty to self sufficiency requires patience, perseverance and perspective...Matiyas' is one such story.*

## INTRODUCTION

A *gram sabha* meeting is on in a remote village; suddenly a man calls out in a harsh voice, “*Ni hodo ko loan re phasowako aar ko seno ga, kabua abu ko.* (These people will trap us with a loan and they will move on)” And the meeting is over. That was the first time that I heard Matiyas' voice. I thought he was impressive—a person who just speaks once and a meeting is called off. What was going on over here? It is all over within a minute. I had not even brought up the word 'loan' in the *gram sabha*.

One-and-a-half years later, on a Saturday, at Bandgaon bazaar, I heard the same voice saying, “*Dada tisin do aam ke mithai jom kate sen howa ga!* (Today you have to eat sweets and then only you can go anywhere!).” I smiled and went with him to the hotel.

What a transformation in one-and-a-half years! Matiyas had changed. Let's trace what happened.

## MATIYAS' TERRAIN

Matiyas is considered to be a very influential person. He lives in Tuyugutu (a remote village, barely connected by road). This village falls under Erki block of Khunti district. Erki is one of the poorest (by government estimates) blocks of Jharkhand. The terrain is hilly and 90 per cent of the area of this block is covered with *sal* forests.

The population of this block is mainly dependent on forest-based produce. Due to the high undulating slopes, 80 per cent of the land comes under the category of forests and uplands. The other 20 per cent is categorized as homestead, medium lands and lowlands. The major problem of the terrain is the runoff because the land is largely uplands. The water holding capacity of the uplands is low and the water flows from the high slopes to the lowlands. There is, thus, lack of water in the uplands and the medium lands after the rainy season, and the land is

unproductive. The Jharkhand Tribal Development Society (JTDS), a wing of the Government of Jharkhand, introduced a watershed project here so that the water holding capacity of the uplands and the medium lands may increase. One of the villages chosen for the project was Tuyugutu.

### THE WATERSHED PROJECT IN THE GRAM SABHA

In June 2007, the JTDS gave clearance for a watershed project and we, the team of PRADAN, began visiting the villages to talk about and explain the concept. The nodal point of a village is the *gram sabha*, and that is where we began. At the first *gram sabha* meeting in Tuyugutu, we talked about the concept of Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM). Some of the villagers seemed convinced about its viability. At the next meeting, we explained how to operate the watershed project we were going to begin. We convinced some of the villagers (the opinion leaders) about going ahead with the project. But where was the money going to come from was the question in the villagers' minds. They invited us to open an SHG in the village. At the third meeting, we arrived with the necessary cash books and pass books. But when we reached the meeting venue, we faced a different *gram sabha* that day.

During the meeting, one of the villagers said, "We need wells for drinking water." I replied, "That is possible." Another villager said about us, "They will take the ownership of the well after completing it because they are spending the money." I said "Let's take a trip to the other villages and see how they are working this out." But they were not sure and said, "If we agree, you will sell us in the market."

That is when a villager shouted, "*Ni hodo ko loan re phasowako aar ko seno ga, kabua abu ko.*" These were the first words that Matiyas spoke in three *gram sabha* meetings, and immediately people began to leave the meeting. Such was his power in the *gram sabha*.

I was shocked when the meeting ended so suddenly. I thought nothing more could be done and began walking towards my bike. Yakub (another villager) came up to me and said, "Don't get angry. I will talk to them." He explained to me how some of the villagers were suspicious of NGOs. "They have made up their minds that NGOs make money for themselves and the villagers remain in the same condition." I wondered if the villagers would ever understand how PRADAN, our NGO, works.

Joseph, from a nearby village, came and tried to explain to them about the watershed project. Matiyas shouted at Joseph, "You are getting money from the NGO and that's why you are talking in their favour." Joseph said that he would never come to this village again because he did not want to be insulted. I agreed that it was tough but I knew that it was only because they did not know how PRADAN works.

We convinced the villagers, after two more meetings with the *gram sabha*, to form two more SHGs. At the same time, we spoke with Matiyas' wife regarding the SHG, the watershed project and PRADAN's work.

Matiyas' family—his wife, four sons and a daughter—live in the hamlet of Gugripiri in Tuyugutu. He is a converted Christian by religion. His house has two rooms and a kitchen. People know him as a person who drinks every day and does not do much for

his family. His eldest child gave up studies in the 8th class and now loiters around in nearby villages. Besides his house, Matiyas owns four acres of land. His only other assets are three oxen. His wife and daughter go to the forest to collect *mahua*, *karanj* seeds and tamarind to sell in the market. Matiyas engages in paddy cultivation and is always in a financial crisis. Whenever he needs money, Matiyas sells some trees and, thus, manages to feed his family.

### **PRADAN'S INTERVENTION WITH MATIYAS AND FAMILY**

I was buying some fruits at the Khunti market when someone asked me, "Dada, how are you?" I turned and saw Matiyas. I was surprised and replied, "I am fine, how are you?" He replied "Things are not okay. My son had an accident." I went with him to the hospital to see his son who was lying on his mother's lap. I spent some time with them at the hospital. Although, from then on, Matiyas' attitude to me seemed to be softening, we had a tough time convincing Matiyas to join us. However, his wife supported us.

That was our key strategy—to influence Matiyas' family! We knew that it was necessary to convince Matiyas because he could influence people. We asked Matiyas' wife to cultivate tomato during the *kharif* season and to convince Matiyas to do this. Tomato cultivation had never been done in this region. This was our chance to prove that we stand by what we say. We started the cultivation of tomatoes with Matiyas on 10 decimals of land (1/10 of an acre) in three phases. Some other farmers in the area were also encouraged to plant tomatoes. Everything went well the first month. The problem began when fungus attacked the crop. We controlled it by using

an anti-fungus spray. By then, some of the plants had died. Matiyas was upset. We told him to have patience and that this happens during cultivation. We took protective measures to save the tomato plants from damage.

It went well until the fruit came. As they ripened, the lower part of the fruit began to rot. We had to throw away 40 per cent of the yield. Matiyas became angry and said he had no more patience and that he was going to cut all the plants because he was not going to earn anything from these plants and that it all had been a waste. We persuaded him to wait and see what his income was from the tomato cultivation. After 10 days he went with his wife to Bandgaon market to sell his produce. One trader bought all the baskets of tomato at Rs 18 per kilo. That day he earned Rs 1,800. This was his first income from the tomato crop and he was very happy. After four days, he met me in Bandgaon market and took me to a hotel. He said his income until then was Rs 3,100. I asked him what he would do with this money and he replied that he would deposit Rs 2,000 in the post office for next year's tomato cultivation.

That year, over three months, Matiyas earned around Rs 20,000.

Matiyas never looked back. He cultivated crops—tomato, brinjal, chili, cabbage and cauliflower—round the year and earned Rs 38,000. He is now one of the leading farmers in the area and people also consider him a progressive farmer. He owns a water pump. Using machinery to irrigate his fields, the next year he earned around Rs 45,000. We do not go to Matiyas' house too often now because

he can plan for crops round the year himself, and does not require too many inputs from us. His whole family is engaged in vegetable cultivation. His son says that he is going to cultivate vegetables only. It is really heartwarming for me to see a boy, who was wandering around aimlessly a few months earlier, confident enough to do something for himself and the family. His mother smiles and is happy.

### **MATIYAS' TRANSFORMATION**

During a training of leaf plate making that took place behind Matiyas' house, a man, whose mother was in the training, came and threatened to destroy the leaf making machine. Matiyas said to him, "It is because of PRADAN that we are able to work in the watershed project and get money and rice. You are threatening to destroy this machine that is for us. What are you angry about?" The man simply went away. Matiyas was a transformed person.

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Matiyas invited me to the *lota pani* (engagement) of his daughter. He also invited me home during Christmas. He now has respect for PRADAN.

### **MY LEARNING**

One of my major learnings from his experience is that when dealing with a community, we should have patience. The community may be harsh, at times, but

ultimately, if you persist, things will improve. During this journey with Matiyas, I did not know where we were headed and what we would get after investing so much time, but it all turned out well.

One of my most memorable moments was when he asked me to have sweets in Bandgaon bazaar and held my hand and said, "Let's go."

My journey with Matiyas has been memorable. From being completely against the NGO, he became one of its staunchest supporters. Our efforts and persistence bore fruit.