

## **Our Perceptions Shape Our Attitudes: My Experience at Sunderpahari**

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*Realizing that our perceptions determine our approach to any person or situation, a Development Apprentice recounts how his negative impressions about the people of Sunderpahari marred his engagement with them and how change happened once he was willing to allow a shift in his perceptions about their innate nature and strengths.*

When I joined PRADAN in Sunderpahari, my colleagues, who had been working there for many years, told me that the community in Sunderpahari was not an easy one to work with. The people were lazy, indifferent and unpredictable. I blindly believed this and formed a negative perception about the community. However, after working for almost two years, I have discovered that the people of Sunderpahari are not what I had thought.

Sunderpahari is one of the poorest, remotest, tribal-dominated blocks of Jharkhand's Godda district. It is a part of Damin-e-koh (the Rajmahal hills). It is home to Santhals and Paharias. Geographically, the block is divided into two parts, the hills and the plains. The Paharias reside in the hills and the Santhals mainly live on the plains.

PRADAN began work in Sunderpahari in 1989 by introducing Arjuna plantations for tasar (pre-cocoon) activity. The project further expanded to tasar rearing. In 1995, the women of the area formed a Self Help Group (SHG).

I joined PRADAN's Godda project in 2008 and spent the first few days visiting villages in the area such as Beldang, Salaiya, Dhenukatta, Harla, Kelawari and Bara. I saw the schemes that were underway—horticulture, paddy cultivation through System of Rice Intensification (SRI), dairy, reeling and spinning centres—and got a glimpse PRADAN's promotion of livelihoods for the rural poor. I reached Sunderpahari on 6 August 2008, and was told by the Team Leader of Godda and my Field Guide, Binod Raj Dahal, that I was going to be based in Sunderpahari.

This was the beginning of one of the most difficult times of my life. When I reached the office, I met Praveen, an accountant in the Sunderpahari block. He welcomed me warmly, showed me the way to the room that had been hired for me and

helped me settle in. The tradition in PRADAN is that whenever a new Development Apprentice (DA) joins, all the basic requirements are arranged for by the existing staff.

The first challenge I faced was that there was no toilet or bathroom facility in the room. I asked Praveen how he managed and he said that he used the fields just like all the other villagers because none of the houses in the block were equipped with toilets. I had never been in such a situation in my life and discussed this with my senior colleagues. They suggested that I use the office toilet. The distance from my room to the office was around 200 m. I felt odd but realized that that was the best possible solution, given the circumstances.

No sooner was this solved, I faced the next problem. I was hungry and I asked Anurag, the Project Executive, where the nearest eating place was. He said it was about 3 km away. I was shocked. He suggested that I take his bike. Unfortunately, I did not know how to drive one. He then asked Itwari, one of the staff members, to drop me to the hotel. These were novel experiences for me. I was amazed that there were no toilet or bathroom facilities in any of the houses in the block and that there was no *dhaba* close by. 'Where have I come?' I thought to myself and wondered how the people working in PRADAN, who were so qualified, stayed in this place.

Over the next two days, accompanied by my local Field Guide, Bikash Laha, I saw the villages, the people, the roads, the terrain, the forest, the houses, the market, etc. On the

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third day, I went for my Village Stay—the first task of a DA in PRADAN. Bikash made the arrangements for my stay. This was a long procedure, and the protocol had to be followed. I was introduced to the villagers at a meeting of the SHG. Bikash explained to them the purpose of my stay in the village. He asked the villagers for permission to stay and also where I could stay. They

took so long to finalize an accommodation for me that I began to think that they didn't want to accommodate me. I even thought that these people were being selfish and rude to be so reluctant to do something for PRADAN when the organization was doing so much for them. My belief that the villagers were selfish were only strengthened during my stay. One day, some members of the SHG came and requested that I share my 4 ft x 2 ft cot with a 15-year-old boy, reinforcing my thought that the villagers did not want to give anything in return for all that they received from PRADAN.

My second Village Stay was in a non-tribal village. After just four days in the village, I fell ill with brain malaria (Malaria PF). I didn't know what it was, however, until much later. It began with a fever, which I thought was because I had walked 5 km that day. But as the day progressed, I started to shiver and at night my headache was unbearable. Gradually, my hands and my legs stopped working and I thought I was going to die. I began to think of what would happen if I died; how my body would reach home; what would happen when my body reached my home; how my parents would react and how they would feel. All these thoughts plagued

me because I knew that the nearest hospital was 25 km away; the village and the nearby villages had no doctor. I didn't even have a mobile phone to call Sunderpahari.

I finally asked the family I was staying with to help me. They gave me two blankets but I continued to shiver. The lady of the house, Seema Devi, massaged some mustard oil in my head, and their 16-year-old girl, Anita, made a cup of tea for me. I started to pray, "Allah, forgive me for my sins, and I am coming to you. You gave me many chances for improvement but it is my mistake that I didn't obey you. Allah, have sympathy for my family. Give them the courage to face this situation." But the night passed and as the sun rose, so did my hopes of staying alive. I told Seema Devi that I wanted to go to Sunderpahari as soon as possible. She asked how I would get there because nobody in the village had a bike. I asked if anyone in the village had a cell phone so that I could make a call to Sunderpahari. Luckily, one person had a phone but he didn't want to make the call. He said that the battery was not charged. Seema Devi told me that he generally does not allow anyone to use his phone. I thought: 'Oh God! This is extreme. Here I am, dying and he says that the battery is not charged and I have come here to work for the development of people like him.' I went to his house and requested him to make a call. By that time I was unable to walk. I was breathing heavily like a TB patient and had to be supported by two persons to walk to his house. He gave me his mobile but there was no network in the village.

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I needed to reach Sunderpahari somehow, because I knew that I would survive if I reached there. I asked Seema's husband to drop me to Sunderpahari on his bicycle but he refused, saying he was not feeling well. I asked several people and finally I found a person who was ready to drop me to Sunderpahari. I almost felt like a beggar when I was

asking people to drop me to Sunderpahari and as more and more people were refusing to do so, my perception, that they were not actually human, became stronger. But one young man, Suneel, came forward to rescue me. He dropped me to Sunderpahari on his cycle.

After these experiences I decided not to continue in PRADAN. But my colleagues in the organization, my seniors in the university and my friends in the NGO sector, with whom I discussed the matter, all suggested that it was too early to come to this conclusion. They asked me to stay a few days more and then, if I was still not happy, I could leave.

I went for my next assignment, another Village Study. Here too I faced many problems. When I asked the villagers a question regarding their village, they would ask me many questions about myself before answering my question. I had to introduce myself over and over again. As the Village Study progressed, it seemed as if the villagers' mistrust of me increased. Some people started to say that I had come to their village for trafficking girls; some said I was collecting the data to capture their land, etc. I felt very insecure in the village. They mistrusted

everything about me—my name, my identity. It was a painful experience for me.

After completing the Village Stay and study, I went for Foundation Course I (a month-long programme for apprentices in PRADAN). It was like coming to heaven. I was dreading going back to Sunderpahari, to those selfish and unhelpful people. But I had no choice. I had to go back there.

On my return from the Foundation Course, I was assigned to work with the women's SHGs. There were 34 SHGs in 20 villages in that area. Of these, only a few SHGs were functioning well; some were functioning moderately, and a few were not functioning properly. I decided to focus on those SHGs that were not functioning properly. Wherever I went, I asked the SHG members why they did not run their SHGs properly. But they did not respond. I thought the problem was within the community, with the people. I thought of what a fantastic concept the SHG was and that these people deserved it and really needed it. Why then, I wondered, were they not running it properly?

There are two SHGs in Jogimarna village, the Kiskuchurabaha *mahila* Mandal, and the Maradbaha *mahila* Mandal. One day, I went to attend an SHG meeting of the Kiskuchurabaha *mahila* Mandal. I had sent a message to the SHG members that there would be a meeting on Thursday at noon. I reached the village and found only one SHG member, Karmi Murmu, there and she was also at home, I asked her about the other SHG members. Instead of answering me, she

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ran away. I returned from the village wondering why this had happened. Out of frustration, I decided not to go to that village again, I sent a message to Manjiharam (the *pradhan* of the village) that both the SHGs of his village would be closed down.

I spent almost four months doing rigorous field work to improve the condition of the

SHGs. I went door to door gathering the members for meetings, asking them to run their SHGs properly, arranging accountants for writing their books of accounts and sometimes writing them myself when there was no accountant available. But there was little response from the people. I also organized various trainings but the villagers were not participative. Once I organized a training for accountants with the help of a senior colleague, Arunavo Ghoshal. He came to Sunderpahari to conduct the training but only five people came to attend the programme, and that also because I found them walking by and requested them to join. When I asked them why they had not come, they said, "*Hirhing kida, dada* (We forgot)." The next day, I asked the others, who did not attend the training, what had happened. They also had the same answer, "*Hirhing kida.*" It was an embarrassing moment for me. I had invited an external resource person for the training programme and the participants did not turn up. During that period I organized many training programmes, but the participation was low. "*Hirhing kida, dada*" was the response I got from them every time. I was not able to understand the people. In spite of my repeated efforts, I was not able to increase

the number of participants in the training programmes. I was becoming certain that these people were not going to change and that it was a waste of time to be here.

I also observed that the people of Sunderpahari had the resources and the structures. I also saw the pathetic condition of some of the schemes which PRADAN, as well as the government, had implemented, especially the land and water development-related schemes. I saw water in the wells, in the ponds, even in the summer, but the people didn't use the land for agriculture. I saw that the people's interest was in earning their wages through making wells, ponds, etc., but not in utilizing these structures for agriculture. I saw the micro-lift irrigation systems—one had been damaged by the elephants and another one was broken down but no one from the community had taken the initiative to repair these. Many of them were in good condition but were of no use, unless repaired. I saw the pathetic condition of the water pumping machines, which the villagers had got free of cost, but were not being used. Some of these were old, but some were absolutely new and the community had not used them even a single time. One SHG, the Rajbaha *mahila* Mandal, of village Damruhat, asked me to take back the pumping set, which they had got through one of the schemes of the Tribal Welfare Commission (TWC). They said that they didn't have space to keep the machine in their homes and it had never been used.

After 10 months in Sunderpahari, I faced the first and the most important livelihood season (after *tasar*), the *kharif*. I worked with the SHG members to plan the activity—how many acres would be under paddy cultivation, using the SRI technique; how many decimals would be covered with

vegetables (through improved techniques); etc. Once the planning was completed, I began work with the families (my target was to involve 375 families, but I managed only 204 families). I was way off my target—another embarrassment in front of all the team members, and in my first livelihood season when the first impression was important in PRADAN's livelihood mission's context.

But not meeting the targets was not all the trouble that I faced. Seeds and fertilizers were not available in the block. SHG members were to deposit money and PRADAN professional would make the necessary arrangements to procure them. Some of the SHG members paid their money whereas the others said that they would give the money at the time of delivery. I believed them and asked the suppliers to send the required amount of seeds and fertilizers. At the time of distribution of inputs, the seeds and fertilizers were in PRADAN's Sunderpahari office. I wanted to hire a vehicle to take these to the villagers but the *vehiclewala* was demanding huge hiring charges. I realized that if I pay this much for transport, the cost of inputs to the villagers would increase. Since I had to go to the villages to provide training to the SHG members, I decided that, wherever I went, I would carry the inputs with me and distribute them among the SHG members. In some cases, as in Towabaha *mahila* Mandal, village Bariyarpur, the SHG members started to bargain with me, as if I was a *beej-khad wala*. They said " *Hurhu itte do bang jarura, kareli itte emua tabe em main, bang khai do bang* (No need of paddy seed; give me bitter gourd seed if you want, otherwise not)."

I had worked so hard from planning to distribution—collecting money from every

SHG member, making packets for every SHG member, and delivering them at their door step. I had carried 50 to 60 kg of weight, that also in separate packets (one packet of seed, one packet of DAP, one packet of MOP, one packet of urea, etc.), on a bike on a *kachcha* road, full of small stones, in the heat of summer, in May and June, when I had just learned how to drive the bike. I remember falling down a couple of times, trying to balance the packets on the back seat of my bike, as I drove. Those three months of the *kharif* season were very difficult for me personally. The result was that I lost Rs 6,000, which the SHG members didn't give me.

I shared my stress with the senior colleagues, who had been working in Sunderpahari. They said that they also faced similar situations and problems, working in that area. My negative perceptions of the community crystallized. I began to think, "These people are really bad, and if somehow they become good, everything will become all right."

The intensity of my negative feelings for the community increased day by day. Whenever I thought of the people, it was on the lines of "Oh! These people, I am quite sure they will not come to attend the SHG meeting." "Oh! I have not gone to the last meeting; I know that they themselves must not have organized the SHG meeting etc."

With the passage of time, I also started to disbelieve the people. Whenever I tried to encourage or motivate them through meetings or through trainings, I myself didn't

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seem quite confident that they would do the task properly and on time.

Gradually, I started to lose interest in working with these 'type of people'. My enthusiasm for community development faded. I became irritable and began to believe that we lived in a hopeless world, and that every development professional

was a loser and I had joined a loser's club. I felt I was wasting my time and I had to leave soon.

After working for a year—a year full of frustration and suffering, I decided to quit, I reached PRADAN's Godda headquarters to tell the Team Leader that I was leaving the organization. This was the first time I was going to share something negative with the Team Leader. In my earlier meetings with him, I had told him that the community was difficult but I was planning to apply some strategies. I had never shared what was actually going on in my mind.

There was a horticulture workshop that I was attending and I decided that at the end of it I would tell him. But before I could share anything with him, he came up to me and said "Mehmood, you are the last professional in Sunderpahari. We are not going to deploy any more people there unless some transformation takes place. Many professionals have come to work in Sunderpahari but they were less interested in the development of the community and more in their own career growth. No change has taken place in the life of the people of Sunderpahari for a long time. It is you who can do that. I have full confidence in you."

His confidence in me stopped me from sharing with him what I was going through. I postponed the idea of quitting and started to focus once more on work with some new strategies and plans, but only half-heartedly.

Change is the rule of nature. In some cases, it happens in a fraction of a second whereas in others it takes millions of years. Similarly, change in perception can happen with just one incident or it can take months or years. Or, it may be possible that change in perception never takes place.

So, did a change take place in my perception of the people of Sunderpahari? I must say I had been so busy focusing on the negatives that I had not paid enough attention to the positives. For example, sometimes, when I went to organize a meeting of the SHG, it had already been held. Sometimes, when I said that an activity had to be done in a particular way, they had done exactly that and on time. During the *rabi* season in 2009, the people of Sunderpahari cultivated cauliflower, radish, wheat, etc. I worked on training them on how to cultivate these crops, especially cauliflower. I could not believe that in some of the villages, the farmers were cultivating cauliflower for the first time and because of that I gave more time to the cauliflower farmers. And they followed whatever I told them.

What happened during the *kharif* season in 2010 was not expected—either by me or by my team members and not even by my senior colleagues of Sunderpahari. Amazing results were seen: More than 500 farmers, a collection of Rs 1,47,000 and no bad debts!

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Many questions arose: How had the people of Sunderpahari, who in the previous year had invested just Rs 32,000 during the *kharif* season, suddenly this year invested Rs 1,47,000? How did the number of farmers increase from 340 last year to more than 500 this year? And most importantly for me, 'Who

were these people who had invested'? Was it the people of Sunderpahari? These lazy people had done that? Their achievement opened my eyes. I was not able to understand this? What was it that I had missed?'

That was not all. There was another miracle. All the work on the mango and timber plantations under the Special SGSY project, was done on time—from digging the pits and filling them, to fencing them—everything was done on time and within the given cost, without any fuss. My other team members were crying for the estimates of mango plantations but I was very comfortable because there was no issue of costing there. I had planned for just 3 ha because of my conservative thinking. Everyone asked me how this had happened. For me the question was not how but who? What had brought about this change in the people, who until a few months back, could not do anything and were now achieving some great things? I began to understand that the problem was not with the community, as I had thought, but within me. It was not the community who was the villain in this film; it was my thinking of them, my thoughts of the tribal communities of Sunderpahari, which were the villain.

After some of my doubts about Sunderpahari's tribal community were cleared, I felt the impact of my changed attitude in my working. Earlier I used to roam around in search of what the villagers were doing wrong, but now I began to search for the things they did right and did them well. For example, I began to appreciate their involvement in the highly technical activity of producing tasar, which needs microscopes for testing diseases in the eggs of moths. This testing was being done by the tribals of Sunderpahari and not by scientists.

Since 2004–05, the people of Sunderpahari have cultivated paddy, using the SRI technique. What is amazing is that these tribes of Sunderpahari cultivate more paddy through SRI than the non-tribals of Poreyhat block of Godda district, who are far ahead of Sunderpahari, in terms of agriculture. The people of Sunderpahari have welcomed and adopted this technique. And a majority of the families, using SRI, in PRADAN's livelihood intervention in Godda comes from Sunderpahari!

I introspected about what could have made me form such a negative perception about the community of Sunderpahari? The questions continued to trouble me: Why had the villagers taken so long to decide where I would stay during my Village Stay? Why had the women SHG members wanted me to share that small cot with a boy of the village during my stay? Why had that one SHG member run away when I went to organize the SHG meeting in Jogimarna village? Why had all these things happened?

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I needed clarity. Upon deep reflection, I realized that the answers were not what I had understood of the situation at that time. Let's see what the answers are:

Why had the villagers taken so long to decide where I would stay, during my first Village Stay? When my senior colleague introduced me to the villagers, he had said I was from Delhi. The villagers

thought that this new *dada* (new professional) must be an important person, if he has come from Delhi and he needs to be given the best place of the village to live in. And that is what they did. They gave me the only *pakka* house of their village, where I stayed alone. It had taken them some time to finalize that.

Why had the women SHG members wanted me to share the small cot with one of the boys of the village during my stay? The villagers were superstitious and believed that there were many ghosts in the village. They wanted me to be safe and the little boy was sent there for my protection!

Why had one SHG member run away when I went to organize the SHG meeting in Jogimarna village? That SHG meeting in Jogimarna village was not held because there was a festival in the village that day and everybody, including the women, were drunk at that time. Nobody had come out from their houses and that one SHG member, with whom I met, was also drunk and that was why she ran away. I had fixed the date of the meeting without consulting with the women. If I had asked the villagers before fixing the date of the meeting, they would have told me



that there was a festival that day and perhaps this confusion would not have happened.

Why had I formed such negative perceptions about the community of Sunderpahari? It just happened. I did not even know that I was forming misperceptions. I had just heard of some bad experiences from my senior colleagues in Sunderpahari and had made up my mind about the people there; their behaviour just seemed to fit in with what I had heard and this reinforced my perceptions.

When I changed my perception and started to think neutral, I realized that it was not the people's fault; it was my mistake. My perceptions were incorrect. They always wanted to say something to me but I didn't focus on that. For me, this was the root cause of all problems. The community was crying in front of me but instead of helping them I had added oil to the fire, as they say. During my dark era in Sunderpahari, I had closed three SHGs and stopped going to many villages. I now think that those SHGs need to be revived.

I have heard that Karan in Mahabharata was a great warrior and that he was even better than Arjuna at archery. But because of his negative thinking, he went with the wrong

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side and hence was defeated by Arjuna. Similarly, my negative perceptions were responsible for passing almost one-and-a-half years in exile, full of suffering and frustration.

Of course, there are still various unresolved issues about the tribal communities of Sunderpahari such as are they really lazy or are they just indifferent? Are they innocent or just very shrewd? One thing, however, is very clear, that they are really lagging behind the rest of the world. Whether they are innocent or indifferent or lazy or unpredictable, I am not sure, but I do know that they are in need of our help. They are not as bad as I used to think earlier.

The *nazaria* (perception) of a person plays an important role in determining his actions. After this experience, I realized that one person could be wrong but not an entire community. The role our perceptions play is not limited to our attitude to the tribal communities of Sunderpahari but also influences our daily life, where we differentiate on the basis of caste, creed, class, race, and of course, religion. We make our perceptions the basis of stereotypes such as, "Oh she is doing that because she is a Punjabi or he is doing that because he is Muslim." We all need to rethink and re-look at our perceptions.