

Single Women: Stories of Despair and Survival

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One of the reasons for the economic, social and political subordination of women in India is their lack of effective rights in property, especially land. Having rights over land is necessary for more equal gender relations, both within and outside the household. The situation is worse for single women—those who are abandoned, deserted, separated, divorced, unmarried or widowed.

Low-income, single women comprise the most vulnerable 10 per cent of the entire female population in the country. According to the 2001 Census, there are 36 million single women, and these are only the legally divorced or separated women and widows. Abandoned or unmarried women remain outside the government's policy and welfare schemes, and struggle to live life with dignity. They are not eligible for ration cards, job cards or BPL cards. More important, they face problems accessing property rights, including access to land. The five women—Ganga Bai, Bisaniya Bai, Gulia Bai, Shyama Bai and Kalavati Bai—of Betul district in Madhya Pradesh, whose stories are recounted here, have either been deserted by their husbands, are unmarried or are widows. Some have accepted their fate and do not dare to confront societal norms whereas others believe that owning and cultivating even a small patch of land has helped them live a life of dignity and respect.

GANGA BAI: CAN A DESERTED WOMAN ASK FOR HER RIGHT TO LAND?

Ganga Bai, 35, lives in Dodramohar village, Bhoura *gram panchayat*, with her mother, daughter, younger brother Ram Das and his family, that is, her sister-in-law and their three children—two sons and a daughter. Her father died a year ago. Her elder brother lives in another house in the same village with his family. Ganga Bai has three other sisters, who live with their marital families in nearby villages. Her daughter, Preeti, is 11 years old.

Ganga Bai returned to her parents' house around 11 years ago with her two-and-a-half- year-old daughter when she was pregnant with her second child, Preeti. She was married to a man named Govind at a very young age. However, she was frequently abused and beaten by her husband and her parents-in- law. The violence increased after she gave birth to a baby girl.

The situation became worse after her husband brought another woman home one day and started living with her in the same house. Luckily for her, the *gram panchayat sarpanch* came to her rescue and asked Ganga to leave the village and return to her parents' village because he feared that if she continued to stay in her marital home, they would probably beat her to death. He gave her some money and helped her to return to Dodramohar.

Ganga Bai belongs to the Pradhan sub-tribe of the Gond tribe. Among several tribal practices, polygamy, domestic violence and denial of property rights to women form three cardinal societal behaviours of Gond and Korku men. Whereas several community practices of these tribes substantially differ from the mainstream Hindu and other communities, an uncanny similarity prevails about how communities deny women their property rights. Like in Hindu and other communities, these tribal women are systematically denied their right to inherit land in their natal and marital families. Ganga Bai's case is not merely one of abuse and domestic violence; her story assumes greater significance as her dignity and freedom as a human being were further compromised by her own acceptance of the belief that men had and enjoyed the right to property.

Her elder daughter did not live long because of lack of medication and healthcare facilities. In the meanwhile, Ganga gave birth to her second daughter, Preeti, at her brother's house. Govind, from whom she is not legally divorced, did not bother to keep in touch with her and visited her only once when her

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daughter was eight years old. For all practical purposes, she is a single mother. Ganga ekes her living by working with her brother in his field, growing maize, lentils and other crops. Owing to PRADAN's efforts, Ganga, like many other women in the area, is the owner of a poultry shed where she has 400 chicks, from which she gets an annual income of about Rs 15,000. She built this poultry shed with the help of a local co-operative called Kesla Poultry Co-operative Society, the staff of which trained her in poultry farming. It also gave her a grant of Rs 30,000 to build a poultry

shed. She has now survived the shock and trauma of an abusive marriage.

Ganga Bai recognizes that her existence has two key determinants—successful poultry farming and the shelter given to her by her younger brother and his family. Her natal family has about 10 acres of land, which was not partitioned or divided among her father and his five brothers. Each family cultivates their portions of the land. Ganga Bai and her brother farm their patch of land, which is non-irrigated. She does this in exchange for the shelter provided to her by her younger brother, with whom she has a very good relationship.

She is aware of the fact that every woman has a right to her parents land and property: "*Baap ka haq milna chahiye* (Daughters should get a share of their father's land)." But in spite of knowing this, she would rather have her brothers get her share of parental land. She will never stake her claim because she does not want to spoil the good relationship that she has with her brothers, especially with Ram Das her younger brother, who has assured her that

he will build a separate house for her in the near future.

Ganga Bai also remembers that when she was married to Govind, they had together bought 50 decimals of land at Rs 5,000. She had mortgaged her jewellery in order to buy the land. Her husband was a furniture maker and she used to help him in his work. The land was registered in Govind's name, who had visited the *tehsil* office for registration and mutation. She could not go with Govind to the *tehsil* office because she had a small baby to look after at home. Luckily for her, she got her jewellery back. She said, "When we bought the land together, I had no idea that he would leave me one day...." implying that she regrets that she had not insisted that the land should have been in her name as well. She recognizes the importance of land rights as a basic means of a dignified and secure life.

She is a changed person today, earning her own living, taking all efforts to get her daughter educated, participating in activities of the co-operative and her Self-Help Group. She has stopped short, however, of acting on her rights enshrined in law; for her, the mutually agreed arrangement with her brother is enough for the rest of her life.

BISANIYA BAI: UNMARRIED ADULT WOMAN LACKS RECOGNITION IN HER VILLAGE

Bisaniya Bai of Kundli village looks much older than her age. Her hair has turned white and her face is wrinkled before time. Unlike most other women of her age in her village, she was never married, which is rare in rural India.

She lives in a small mud hut behind her sister's house. She is the youngest of her siblings and has two brothers and a sister. Her elder brother, Inder Pal, has two children whereas

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the younger brother, Johari Lal, has four children. Her sister Savitri has three sons. After her elder brother's wife died of illness, Bisaniya Bai took up the responsibility of looking after his two children, a son and a daughter. Her parents did not get her married because they did not find a suitable match for her and they did not want her to get married to an alcoholic.

Bisaniya's family owns land in Kundi village. She and her sister are not aware of how much land they have. She knows that the land is in her elder brother's name and that the documents are with him. Here again, social customs and state norms are in conflict. Tribal society accepts partition of the land and recognizes the brothers as owners of two separate plots whereas the state recognizes only Inder Pal as the sole owner.

Bisaniya works on her brother's land, where she does the weeding, sowing, reaping, harvesting and all other farming-related work, usually done by women. During the off-season, she works for daily wages in road construction or any other manual labour that is available. She gets about Rs 150 per day whenever she works as agricultural labourer or in non-farm work. Her brother gives her a share of the produce for her sustenance from the land on which she works.

Bisaniya has never felt the need to own land because she was brought up with the idea that land is always owned by men. She has spent her life working on her brother's farm and believes that because her brother has children, the land will finally belong to them. In spite of toiling relentlessly on her family land, she has no control over the income generated from the land that she cultivates. She is totally dependent on her brother for her economic security.

Inder Pal has re-married and lives as a *ghar jamai* in his wife's house in Tawa Nagar along with his son from the first marriage. Inder Pal visits Kundi once in 15 days to enquire about Bisaniya as well as to look at his land. Her other brother, although in Kundi, has not bothered to keep in touch with his two sisters Savitri and Bisaniya. He owns and cultivates his own piece of land.

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For Bisaniya, life revolves around her labour in the field and searching for enough work at other times. Her major decisions in life are still in the hands of her elder brother. The dominance of social norms ensures that she thinks and behaves exactly in the way that the norms are set. Modern institutions such as the state and civil society are struggling to penetrate these norms that are so deeply rooted in rural India.

GULIA BAI: LAND-OWNING WIDOWS ARE TREATED WITH MUCH GREATER RESPECT

Tribal societies have a complex pattern of land ownership, which has to be adjusted and defined within polygamous relationships. The Gond society in the villages of Shahpur Block has evolved its own ways, as is evident in Gulia Bai's land ownership and inheritance. It describes how within the existing social norms, adjustments are possible, and that there is, indeed, scope for social mediation at a local level, to make land rights for women more equal.

Gulia Bai is a resident of Raipur village, which is one of the larger villages with around 400–450 families. She is an elderly widow, who lives in a small two-room mud house at the centre of the village. She got married at a very young age to Bishram and had three daughters Saroj,

Sakun, and Sunita. She lost her husband about 14 years ago, when her daughters were still in school. As a widowed mother and as the sole supporter of her off-spring, Gulia Bai was forced to withdraw her children from school and press them into work, to earn a living for the family. Bishram had been married earlier and had two sons, Barelal and Dhanaram. Barelal lives in a hut

adjacent to hers and Dhanaram lives in another house slightly away. Gulia Bai's grandson, Rabi (Barelal's son from his first wife) lives with her.

However, unlike many widows from low-income rural families, who are either disowned by their relatives or are thrown out of their homes because of land and inheritance disputes, Gulia Bai did not face these problems. This was probably due to the fact that she has five acres of land (in three patches of 2.5, 1 and 1.5 acres) registered in her name by her husband when he was alive.

So not only is she operating as the household head but she is also the legal owner of the land. Of this, she has given one acre to her eldest daughter Saroj and the rest is being cultivated by her two step-sons. She has divided the land into four parts: in her name, Saroj's name and in the names of her two step sons—Barelal and Dhanaram. According to Gulia Bai who is unlettered, she gave the most fertile piece of land to Saroj because this is the only parcel of land which has a well.

Gulia Bai realizes that her ownership of land helped bring up her three young girls after her husband's demise. She said, "If I did not have land, I would have had to work as a labourer all my life to bring up my children." Land ownership helped her overcome two common challenges that widows in India generally face:

loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances.

Saroj, Gulia Bai's eldest daughter, is 23 years old and is the mother of a six-month-old baby boy. She was only 10 years old when her father died. At that time, her step-brothers did not help them much, leaving young Saroj to bring up her two sisters and to look after her grieving mother, who had become an alcoholic after her husband's death. She decided to give up her studies and work in their fields and on others' fields, and whenever possible go out to work in nearby towns and villages. She got her two sisters married and was the last to get married. Initially, she was reluctant to marry because she feared that there would be no one to look after her aging mother.

Today, Saroj is happily married to Mahendra Singh Uike, who is very supportive of her and helps her in cultivating her mother's and her share of land in her natal village. Her two sisters, Sunita and Sakun, also regularly send money and things to their mother. Saroj has realized the importance of land in a woman's life, especially widows who have only daughters and no sons. She says, "During difficult times after my father's death, having land gave me the courage to bear the responsibilities of looking after my mother and younger sisters. We need a little bit of land to live on and to earn a bit of money for household expenses."

Gulia Bai's case stresses the fact that land-owning widows, who live with their adult sons or step-sons, are treated with much greater respect and consideration than those who are landless and economically dependent.

Owning land and having a secure title deed gives both tangible and intangible benefits. The tangible benefits include the use of land for farming, collateral for credit and an increased income and the intangible benefits is the sense of empowerment because women with a secure land titles experience economic and psychological security

KALAVATI BAI: VAN ADHIKAR PATRA PROVIDES A SENSE OF SECURITY

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Kalavati Bai, 63, lives in Bara Dhana mohalla in Handipani village, one of the 92 forest villages in Betul district. The village has 360 households and is inhabited primarily by the Korku tribe. It is 10 km from Bhoura, the closest market on National Highway 69. The other Korku-dominated villages are more remote and farther away from the highway. Handipani is one of the three villages that makes up the *gram panchayat*, the others being Kuppa and Sonadai.

Kalavati Bai lives with her younger son Paras Ram, daughter-in-law Premvati and two grandsons. Kalavati's middle son's (he died a few years ago) widow, Malti, and her two daughters also live with her. Kalavati's husband died about five years ago. Her eldest son, Chait Ram, and his family live separately in the same village. Kalavati is the head of the household. Paras Ram, a daily wage earner, works with the forest department as a casual labourer and gets about 8–10 days of work every month. Malti cooks the mid-day meal in a nearby school and gets a salary of Rs 1,000 per month.

Before the implementation of the FRA, most households in this village cultivated about 15–20 acres of land each. As such, the forest dwellers (mainly tribal) had usufruct rights in forest villages, where a 15-year lease was granted to them by the state forest department because the ownership rights were held by the latter. It is only when forest villages are converted into revenue villages that the lessees acquire *bhumiswami rights*. Many areas, as per the Indian Forest Act 1927, were often declared as 'Government Forests', without any record of who lived there and what land they were using.

Forest dwellers, in such cases, have no legal rights, either to their homes or to the land. Owing to this, many were subjected to harassment, eviction, etc., and were considered encroachers in their own homes. FRA has granted legal recognition to the rights of traditional forest dwelling communities, partially correcting the injustice caused by the forest laws. One of the key features of FRA is that it provides title rights, in the form of *Van Adhikar Patra*, that is, ownership of land that is being cultivated by the tribals or the forest dwellers as on 13 December 2005, subject to a maximum of 4 ha. The ownership is for the lands being farmed and no new lands are given.

Kalavati Bai, today, is the legal owner of 3.345 ha of land in her village and she has a copy of the *Van Adhikar Patra* that was given to her in 2010. It is in her name first and then her husband Penchu's name. Although unlettered, she is aware of what is written on the title. With help from the others present, she tells us that the title also has the names of her two sons—Surat Ram (who died about 2–3 years earlier), her younger son Paras Ram and Malti her daughter-in-law, Surat Ram's widow.

Her elder son lives separately and his land is yet to be measured in order for him to get the *Van Adhikar Patra*. The certificate mentions that she has a total of 3.345 ha, which is in five plots. Of the five, she cultivates the *talab vala khet* and *bari vala khet*; the rest has been left fallow due to lack of water. In the former, wheat is cultivated and in the *bari zameen*, or homestead land, they grow lentils (*chana*), chillies and brinjals. The family of eight members consumes 4–5 quintals of wheat and vegetables. She also has 10 *mahua trees* and two *jamun trees* on her land and a well, the water from which is used to irrigate the land in winters when water is available (*thandi ka kua*). During the summer, the wells run dry. She sells approximately 405 quintals of mahua for about Rs 10,000.

The certificate of land ownership has given her a sense of security as well as access to several benefits. When asked how she got the certificate, Kalavati could not recall the formation of the FRC in her village. But she does remember that they had been informed by the *gaon kotwar* about a meeting being organized by the Forest Ranger (commonly referred to as 'Deputy Saab' by the villagers). At the meeting, each of them whose land had been measured was given a *Van Adhikar Patra*.

She says that the *Van Adhikar Patra* is very important because it is not only the proof of her land ownership but it helps her get entitlements such as fertilizers and seeds from the government. She says, "*Jab bhi zaroorat hain to patta jama karke khad lete hain. Patta hain to khad mila aur gehu boye. Patta aur zameen hume haq deta hain.* (Whenever we need it, we deposit the certificate and collect the fertilizer. Because we have the *patta*, we get the fertilizer and sow wheat. The *patta* and our land give us our rights.)" She informs

us that she has the photocopy of the document because the original certificate is with the co-operative society for procuring the fertilizer. She needs to pay Rs 4,000–5000 to the society for the fertilizer, after which she would get the certificate back.

On being asked if she would partition the land among her sons, she replies that the *Van Adhikar Patra* has given her a sense of confidence and she has decided she will not give the land to her children as long as she is alive because she knows that as she grows older, the land will provide her with food and shelter. She proudly tells us, “*Kaiko denge....hume kaun khilayega? Na beta na beti.* (Why should I give the land? Who will feed me then? Neither my son nor my daughter).”

SHYAMA BAI: A SMALL FIELD OF HER OWN AS SECURITY AGAINST POVERTY

The death of a husband can spell doom for a woman because it threatens her psychological and physical well-being. However, this can be overcome to a large extent if she has access to and control over land, which is crucial for a family's well-being and food security. This is Shyama Bai's story. Shyama Bai is a feisty woman in her early fifties, who lives in Polapatthar village in Salimet *gram panchayat*. She looks happy and content and is proud of her newly built brick home, one of the few pucca houses in the village.

Shyama Bai has two sons and three daughters. Her elder son is married with two children and her younger son, who is 18 years old, is still studying in school. All her three daughters are married. Though Shyama Bai is financially

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well-off today, she has seen hard days and has struggled to bring up her five children after she lost her husband, Ram Kishore, after a cerebral stroke and paralysis, 15 years ago. All her children had to leave school as she could no longer afford their studies. Ram Kishore used to work as a truck driver till he suffered a paralytic attack and was bed-ridden for 6-7 months before he died.

Luckily for her, her father had given her two acres of land in Polapatthar village when she had gotten married 25 years back because at that time her in-laws had no land. After her marriage, she continued staying with her parents along with her husband, who stayed as *ghar jamai*. Her other sisters, however, did not get any land. Her elder brother was unhappy about her being given land and did not speak with her for three years. The rest of the land was given to her brothers.

After her father's death, her mother came to live with her and stayed for seven years until she died. The land was initially in Shyama's husband's name. After his death, her name was included in the *Bhu adhikar avam rin pustika*, along with the names of her two sons and three daughters.

This piece of land has helped to sustain her and her family during the difficult period after her husband's demise, highlighting the fact that ownership and control of assets are the greatest protection against deprivation for widows. She says, “*Agar zameen nahin hoti to basne mein mushkil hoti* (If I did not have this land, life would have been very difficult),”

She cultivates it along with her son and grows maize, *tuvar* (split gram) and sesame on her land. She gets food for about four months of the year from this piece of land, which is 3 km away from her house. As a land owner, Shyama knows she can avail of a number of benefits and she did try and succeeded, to a large extent. She has piped irrigation facilities on her land and has also benefitted from many government schemes. When she is not working on her own land, she works as an agricultural labourer in villages close to Itarsi.

However, with the advent of combine harvesters in these parts, much of the farming has become mechanized. She also has a job card under MGNREGA. As an agricultural labourer, she gets paid Rs 146 per day. All this was possible because, she had land, which gave her a permanent address, a source of income, and most importantly for her, a clear sense of security.

The social norm and the understanding of that norm by the community fundamentally differ from that of the state. Although Shyama consistently said that she got the land from her father, on specific enquiry we learned that the title of the land was given to her husband and not to Shyama. Social norms dictate that, in case of a *ghar jamai*, he could get the land from the bride's father as dowry, with the understanding that after his death or in case of separation, the wife would have the sole ownership on the land. The condition is also that he would not sell this land.

The state practice on the other hand dictates that a widow will inherit her husband's land along with their sons and daughters at par; she does not have any sole right on her husband's land. And, upon divorce, the woman is entitled to her husband's property as decided by the Court.

Shyama Bai was lucky in more ways than one. Though she lives in her natal village, the land on which her house is built was bought by her father-in-law for Rs 400. He used to work as a gang-man with the Indian railways and was posted at Polapatthar. He purchased the land for his only son, thinking that his son would one day inherit that land. After her parents died, Shyama Bai shifted to her father-in-law's house along with her family.

In 2011, she re-built the old house that had been built by her in-laws, with the help of a grant of Rs 45,000 under the Indira Awas Yojana, a Rs 10,000 loan from her SHG and Rs 10,000 from relatives. Her son-in-law, a mason, helped to build the house for her and also made the bricks used in the construction. Her house is perhaps one of the few brick houses in the village with four rooms and a kitchen. It has a front and back yard and is situated opposite the *aanganwadi* centre and is quite close to the national highway. She is keen to start a poultry farm in the space next to her house (where her in-laws' old house used to be and which she had broken down when she built her new house). With a piece of homestead land, a *pucca* house and a two acre irrigated crop land, Shyama Bai has survived the shock of the death of her husband and overcome the challenges of raising her family of five children.

The role of other social institutions cannot be underestimated. For example, Shyama Bai has been a long-standing member of the Saraswati SHG, a leader of the SHG Cluster and an active member of the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS), an association of tribal women promoted and nurtured by PRADAN. These have certainly contributed to Shyama Bai's life in several ways—access to information, savings-credit, collective action, individual and collective courage and enhancing her agency.

The land provided her the economic and social base whereas the other social institutions provided her with the skills, access, courage and agency. As a result, Shyama Bai's life has definitely changed for the better. Shyama Bai's experiences emphasize the fact that the right to land, especially in poor households, reduces the household's risk of poverty and destitution.

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CONCLUSION

The two stories of Ganga Bai and Bisaniya Bai highlight the fact that, in rural India today, single women remain outside the government's policy and welfare schemes. Ganga Bai's story highlights the plight of the abandoned women who, unlike widows, are not even eligible for pensions and have no financial support whatsoever. Having been deserted by their husbands and in-laws, they usually do not ask for maintenance, with most of the marital property remaining in the name of the husband or the father-in-law. This is because in India there are no laws for the division of marital property when a separation or divorce takes place. Usually, the husband gets all the moveable and immoveable assets of the household, resulting in an unfair and discriminatory situation for the wife, who has no legal rights to any of the assets that she has also helped to acquire, as in the case of Ganga Bai. As a result, these women are left with no farm land, no property and usually no marital home.

In the case of Bisaniya, despite her performing all agricultural tasks except ploughing and marketing, she does not have any rights over her family land, even though she has not

married. Her usufruct rights to land are limited and are subject to decisions of her elder brother. In effect, she has been reduced to the status of a mere worker on her family land and is being provided basic maintenance. Her case reflects the fact that

an unmarried adult woman belongs to no recognized social category and consequently lacks a definite status in her home village or in the wider local community.

In both the cases, Ganga and Bisaniya are dependent on their relationship with their brothers for their economic as well as social security. In spite of them working on the fields, they are considered merely the workers on the farms of their brothers, who are seen as the owners of the land.

The stories of Gulia Bai, Kalavati and Shyama Bai, on the other hand, highlight the fact that even a small patch of land has helped these women to stay independently and take care of their children and family, without being dependent on the male relatives. These women survived the shock of their husband's death, and with the land available, they are much more secure economically and socially. The women, being independent, take their own decisions and are also treated with respect.

These stories favour the argument that women should have independent access to economic resources such as land because it serves as a security against poverty—a means to meet basic needs. For households headed by women with no adult male support, the link between direct access to land and physical well-being needs no emphasis.