

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: Maramai Kisku

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Tracing the life of Maramai Kisku, a landless Santhal, who progressed from being a 'labourer' to a confident and assertive Ward Member of her *panchayat*, this article touches upon the changes in her attitude and style of functioning once she is a successful farmer, and leaves us with the searing quote, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberalization, tend to become oppressors."

WHenever anyone visits the Surjapuri community, she/he is offered a cup of tea, some biscuits and *supari* (betel nut). I noticed this unique custom when I started working in Bahadurganj district, northeast Bihar. I rather liked the custom and soon became used to it, and, on some days, I would have endless cups of tea.

Later, when I went to the Santhal hamlet for the first time, I was surprised when I was not offered any tea. I learned that this custom is very typical of the Surjapuri community, comprising Muslim or upper-caste Hindus, and is not practised by the marginalized Santhals and Harijans. The customs and practices of a community tell us about their social and economic status.

Three years later, when I visited Maramai Kisku's (a Santhal and an SHG member) house, I was

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served the customary tea with biscuits and *supari*. What led to this change? Was this the result of a rise in the social status of Maramai Kisku's family?

Introduction

Let me introduce Maramai Kisku. She was born in the small village of Chauria, located in Jhapa district, Nepal, which is about 35 km from Bahadurganj block town in Bihar. She lived there with her mother, father and brother for the first few years of her life, and also did her basic schooling there. The financial condition of the family was not very good because of the lack of regular livelihood opportunities in the area. The entire family was dependent on her father. He was the only bread winner, working as a daily wage labourer because that was the only available option.

Due to the ease in travel between the two countries, Maramai's father and others moved freely and frequently between India and Nepal, depending on the availability of livelihood options. They gradually began to stay in India for longer periods and finally became citizens of India.

Maramai tells us that her ancestors owned some land but

had gradually sold these off in difficult times. In search of work, these Santhal families were forced to migrate to India; they found work easily and were able to at least get three meals a day.

She was 16 years old in 1996 when she first came to Sameshar, Bahadurganj, in India, with her parents, to work as labourers in agricultural fields. At the age of 17, she was married to Loksha Murmu in Kunjibari, who also lived in Sameshar with his parents and worked as a wage labourer. She soon gave birth to two children and migrated to Sitagachh village in Bahadurganj, with her children and husband.

They lived on a small plot of land provided by the landlord who had nearly 20 acres of land in Sitagachh. The landlord provided them a piece of land in the central part of his property, so that it would be easier for them to access the land they would be working on.

After them, many other Santhali families came to Sitagachh and started living on the same plot of land. The landlord became worried he would find it difficult to get his land back once people began settling on it. He got the land vacated and sent the Santhali families to a piece of

barren land on the banks of the river, which belonged to the government.

There were very few Santhal families; therefore, they stayed together, afraid of being bullied by the majority community. There was always a fear of being chased away by the local people. They lived far away from all settlements and without considerations of settling down near a school, a market or basic facilities. Their main objective was to protect themselves and to get some minimum wage to feed themselves. As the number of labourers increased in that hamlet, they started doing menial work for other people. They soon began to be known as labourers and, as the time passed, the local people began to call the Santhals the 'labour *jan*'. People began to seek out the Santhals for all menial work and the Santhals were happy to get food and remuneration on time. The regular availability of work and on-time payment led many others from Nepal to migrate and settle in India.

Life of Santhals in the hamlet

They named their small hamlet Kachhari Tola. This is in Bhatadari *panchayat* and is 1

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km from Basbari Hat and 7 km from the town of Bahadurganj, the block headquarters. The local people call the Santhals 'Satar' and they call the hamlet Satar Basti. This hamlet remains cut off from nearby villages, markets, schools, the block town and other amenities for six to seven months every year, due to floods. The area is flooded even in the years when there is normal rainfall.

Flash floods are a major setback; people use boats to reach the nearby markets in the rainy season. Water enters their houses every year. Their huts get damaged, the roofs collapse and people lose their lives in the fierce thunderstorms that hit the region. This repeated devastation hampers development because the people spend their time and money recovering from calamity and returning to the same stage as earlier.

The land here gets degraded and eroded every year; this changes the pattern of houses in the hamlet. Since the people are living on government land and do not have a *patta* (registration) in their names, they do not take the risk of investing in the construction of *pucca* houses or work towards making the land fertile for agriculture. They live in fear that the land can be taken away from

them at any point of time. All the houses are made of bamboo and jute sticks and only some of the houses are layered with mud. Most of these temporary houses are in a dilapidated condition and there are no roads in their hamlet, which connects them to schools, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), the *panchayat* and the market. They do not demand any amenities because they fear they may be inviting attention to the fact that they have settled on government land and may be evicted.

In the market and outside their village, the Santhals are known for their labour work. This has proven to be a hindering factor for this community and for their children. Many people treat the children as labourers from childhood and de-motivate them by saying, "*Jitna bhi padh lo, labour hi banoge* (No matter how much you study, you will remain a labourer)." The Surjapuri children treat these children as untouchables and usually do not play with them. People do not touch these little children even if they are crying while the mother is working in the field. The Santhals are not allowed to enter the homes of the Surjapuris and are given food in disposable plates and glasses, outside the premises.

Getting Together

The image of the Santhal community among the majority Muslim or Hindu (upper caste) community and the way they were being treated are very disturbing. The Santhals had accepted that they would not be treated with respect by the people of other communities. I wondered how to work towards the Santhals being accepted as human beings at least. I did not have any solutions; but I hoped that this image would change gradually. I formed an SHG in the hamlet, which became a platform for members to hold discussions.

Once when I was taking the SHG members for an exposure visit, I deliberately stopped the vehicle in the marketplace for lunch. The women were very hesitant to even come out of the vehicle. One of them said, "*Dada hum log gaadi mein hi rahenge; aap sirf biscuit ka packet de dijiye, khana hamaara ho jaayega* (Brother, we'll stay in the vehicle. Please bring us some packets of biscuits; that will be enough for our lunch)."

The women were afraid that the people would scold them for having food with the people of the major community. I insisted. The people around were shocked at how politely I addressed the

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This incident shocked me. I hadn't expected that the women would feel so intimidated. I could sense how disturbed the women were. Among the women was Maramai Kisku, who later said she felt uncomfortable with the way the people look down upon her community; she would like to change her fate. She shared that she no longer wanted to work as labourer but would like to be a farmer herself. She said that she wanted to build a good image of the Santhals in society. She took the initiative to bring other members from her hamlet to join the SHG and make plans for agriculture.

Maramai Kisku tried to convince the other members from her SHG but they were fearful. They feared that their land would be taken away if they made themselves conspicuous. They also mistrusted PRADAN. They could not understand why anyone would invest time on them and train them. They thought that they would be cheated. When

an agriculture planning meeting was scheduled, none of the members turned up. Maramai, however, was very confident. She kept herself engaged in various activities such as participating in block-level SHG trainings, SHG expansion and agriculture training. In order that she is not cheated, Maramai continuously engaged herself in helping villagers make an informed choice in participating in the SHG, and the SHG meetings continued as usual. Often, when Maramai had to go for meetings and when she had to bring other members in the group, her husband would scold her. Nevertheless, she never gave up.

Venturing into Agriculture

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In this area, more than 80 per cent of the land (the cultivated and the uncultivated) is owned by the Sadgop, Surjapuri Muslim, Gangai and Rajbanshi communities. Some of the land is on the banks of the river; it is sandy and has been barren for years. For the landlords, it becomes difficult to access these lands in the rainy season, the production is low, and managing it after the monsoon season is tough; they prefer, therefore, to give these lands on lease to the Santhals. However, because they

are poorly informed about the farming system and do not have the initial capital required for starting agriculture on their own land or the land they lease, the Santhals are reluctant to take up farming.

If they do venture into agriculture, they usually select crops that have either a low input cost or one that is less risky such as a variety of jute (locally named as *chana patua*). Because the Santhals have been working on fields of their landlords, they have learned how to transplant paddy but are unaware of how to manage the crop. Less production and an onslaught of diseases were also de-motivating factors; many abandoned farming, and thought that working as wage labour was the best and least risky option.

The Santhals, however, were not happy with the way they were treated by the landowners. In an SHG meeting, a *didi* said, "During the labour work, people treat us like machines and they want the maximum output with minimum wages. They do not even allow anyone to rest for a second and always keep an eye on us."

Maramai Kisku had a similar experience; she was looking for a source of livelihood other than labour. In a meeting, she

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announced that she was going to stop working as a daily wage labourer and instead farm on her own field with the limited resources available to her, and that she would earn money with respect. She admitted that she had tried to plant many things in her own field but due to lack of knowledge and awareness, she had failed.

She shared, “*Ek baar hamein koi dawa aur tareeka ke bare mein bata dega to hum karlenge* (If someone tells me just once about the method and practice of cultivation, I can do it on my own).”

In one of the SHG meetings I proposed a one-day training session on agriculture in the Bahadurganj office. I invited almost all the members of the SHG to attend the meeting. Some of the members showed interest in farming, even though they didn't have land. They were taken for an exposure visit to Chapati village in Thakurganj block to see Lalita Devi's vegetable farm. Maramai Kisku was interested and asked many questions about tomato cultivation by the rain shelter method. On her return, she made plans to cultivate tomato and brinjal for the first time on her two-decimal plot of homestead land.

Other members did not have their own fields so they decided to work with Maramai and learn in her field. Manju Hembram, one of her fellow SHG members, shared, “*Inke khet mein ek baar fasal lagakar sikhenge, uske baad aadhi mein lekar sabji lagayenge* (We will learn cultivation practices in Maramai's field this time; next season onwards, we will take land on lease to cultivate vegetables).”

Some of the members had homestead land and space in their courtyard, where they could plant a few saplings. Some others decided to cultivate together and divide the profits among themselves equally, after selling the produce. A common group farming system was proposed and it was finalized that all the members would do farming collectively on a plot of 3.75 decimals, owned by Maramai, and would each take away their respective share after sale.

Maramai was happy to share her land with everyone. All the 35 members of that hamlet came out with their tools—their *kudal*, *khurpi* and *tokri*—and began work in their fields. Some dug the land, others helped pick grass and some engaged in preparing manure.

The active engagement of the women did not sit well with the men. They were very angry to see

the women working in the fields on their own. Some men took their wives away from the field by force. As many as 15 members went back in fear of their husbands. The others, somehow, convinced their husbands. Maramai Kisku cheered the women again saying that these obstacles would certainly block their way; they must continue, however, to move forward undeterred by all this. One day, they would find meaning in their efforts. Taking heart, the women prepared the raised nursery for brinjal and tomato.

After a few days, when the saplings grew bigger, Maramai Kisku's husband, who till now had not supported her, became interested. He had earlier worked in Himachal Pradesh and had some experience of tomato cultivation. He started engaging with Maramai Kisku and, together, they planned to prepare a rain shelter for tomato cultivation. They asked me about the expenses for developing the rain shelter. I told them that it would cost Rs 1200.

I was apprehensive that because they did not have enough money they would not invest this amount. But to my surprise, the next time when I reached the village, they were ready with the

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construction material. With the use of locally arranged bamboo, plastic and ropes, they made the rain shelter. The shining rain shelter could be seen from a distance. It became the centre of attraction in their hamlet and soon the news spread widely in the Surjapuri community as well.

This raised the curiosity of the Surjapuri community; some came to visit the plot and were amazed by what they saw. Whereas some were all praise for them, there were others who laughed at them and said that they were wasting their time and money. They taunted them by saying that whoever was supporting them would take all the money from them at the end of harvesting. Some said that the PRADAN people were making a fool of them, to not waste their time and get back to doing what they were doing earlier.

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She later said, "*Bahar se koi log aate hain to inko jalan hota hai,*

inko darr hai ki sikhne ke baad, unko log puchhna chhor denge (Whenever someone comes from outside, they feel jealous because they fear that after learning something new, we will not depend on them)."

She transplanted the tomato plants under the shelter without listening to the unwanted suggestions and advice given by the Surjapuris. After a few days, the flowers and fruits blossomed in the field and almost all the members of her hamlet went to see the sight. I saw the happiness on her face when she was sharing with the other members the experience of her struggles and challenges when she took the decision and during the cultivation. I was there in her field when she was harvesting tomato for the first time. It was *kharif* season and the prices of tomato was high. In the local market, people were surprised to see tomato being sold by a Santhali woman in that season. She got higher value for her produce, bolstering her confidence.

Next, she took 100 decimals of land on lease and asked for my support in planning crops that would give her a higher return. It was time to plan a brinjal nursery and plant ginger in the field.

Maramai, and her husband, were engaged in farming now. Soon, a lonely green field appeared amidst the brown barren field, seeming no less than a dream.

Seeing that Maramai Kisku was able to reap good benefits, the landlord increased the lease rate from Rs 3,000 per *bigha* to Rs 5,000 per *bigha* the next year. She knew that no one else would take this land for the amount that the landowner was proposing, so she was quite calm and left the decision to the landlord. She told him, "*Dada, is se jyaada koi deta hai to unko de dijiye, hum itna daam mein nahi le paayenge* (If someone gives you more than what I am offering for the land, give it to them. I cannot take the land at such a high rate)."

The landlord did not expect a Santhali woman to speak to him with such confidence. He had no choice but to agree to her terms. She took 200 decimals of land on lease and earned Rs 70,00 from selling maize and Rs 1.2 lakh from ginger. She said, "*Hum apna kheti karke bahut khush hain; kisi ke khet mein kam nahi karna par raha hai* (I am happy farming my own fields for myself; I no longer have to work in another's field as labour)."

Maramai Kisku was slowly becoming a known face in the area. She would regularly touch base with other farmers and had developed a good rapport with some traders. She became a key figure in the SHG promotion drive in the area.

New Opportunities

Maramai Kisku's story did not end with her becoming a self-sufficient farmer; farming became a turning point in her life. During an SHG meeting, a discussion was held on the challenges faced by the members in their day-to-day life. The members came out with a list of difficulties they faced. They then prioritized the issues that could be solved through the group's efforts. The two issues that were brought up were the lack of roads and the non-availability of electricity facilities in the hamlet. They planned to raise these issues with the *mukhiya*.

The members approached the *mukhiya* many times but they were always ignored. The SHG members became despondent. In an SHG meeting, Maramai Kisku said that they needed to get together and meet the *mukhiya* as a group in spite of the not-so-good experiences they had had with him. Maramai Kisku and some other members approached the *panchayat* representative and gave him a written application.

The first time, all the 26 members of the SHG went to meet the *mukhiya*; gradually, this number decreased and finally only eight members, including Maramai,

continued the struggle. Although the issues they raised were not resolved, Maramai Kisku got to know many PRI members and block officials in the process.

Maramai Kisku was slowly becoming a known face in the area. She would regularly touch base with other farmers and had developed a good rapport with some traders. She became a key figure in the SHG promotion drive in the area. The movement by the group for promoting SHGs and availing of the basic facilities in the *panchayat* made her known in the community. Her increased confidence also helped in promoting the SHGs in the Muslim and other Hindu communities in the area.

In the same year (2016), a member from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) had to be selected for the post of Ward Member in the Bhabari *panchayat* elections. The villagers found Maramai Kisku to be the best person from the ST community to lead the ward. In her hamlet, all the members insisted that she file her nomination.

There were two other members from two hamlets fighting for the same seat. However, Maramai won the seat in the election with an unexpected number of votes

and became the Ward Member. I met her in the market and she expressed her gratitude for our support and invited me to a tea shop. She and three other women of the SHG sat on the bench and ordered five plates of snacks. I recalled how conscious these women had been some two years before. I realized that they had reached a position of power, which was respected in society, and they no longer faced any discrimination.

The first thing Maramai did after becoming the Ward Member was to raise the issue of electricity and roads for her hamlet, with the help of the SHG members. She said that the electricity connection had not been provided by PRI members and they needed to go to the block and the Electricity Department for the same. She submitted an application to the block officials and the Electricity Department and followed up regularly.

If someone was to go to the hamlet now, they would find electricity in the homes and the roads being constructed. These achievements have boosted her self-confidence. She is now planning to get the patta of the land on which they have been living for a long time without any identification. She said that

No effort has been made by the block to preserve traditional food crops or to probe the declining interest in traditional food-growing habits. No market has been created for the traditional Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), especially edibles

if the homestead land could be transferred to their name, the next task for her would be to buy some land for agriculture.

Becoming 'Mainstream'

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Today, Maramai owns land in her name. As Ward Member, she conducts transactions with various institutions daily. She is busy with various tasks of the block and the *panchayat*, and addresses the issues of the people. Besides these engagements and changes, still goes to every house in her village before the SHG meeting and attends every Village Organization (VO) meeting in the village. She has now become an example for other Santhal families in the hamlet.

However, there have also been some marked changes in her personality and her attitude. She is slowly becoming part of the system. I have seen her talk with the people in the same way as the earlier representatives used to. One day, as I was in her house, a Santhal woman of her own hamlet came to her house to apply for an old age pension. Maramai's response shocked me; she said, "*Tumko block mein arji jama karna hoga aur thode bahut paise kharch karne honge, tabhi hoga* (You will have to go to the

block to apply and you will also have to spend some amount of money; only then will it get done)."

I also heard that the Ward Members were taking Rs 1000 as a bribe to register the names of the households for flood relief from the government; she did not share that with me. Recently, Maramai's husband bought a new bike and told me, "*Ab toh kamai ho raha hai, toh bike kharid liye* (Now we are earning, so I bought a new bike)." In the PRI system, apparently, every person is forced to follow certain norms made for each section and department.

During *rabi* planning, she announced that everyone should cultivate vegetables in at least two decimals of homestead land. There is a change in her expression from the earlier period. Earlier, she used to discuss the issues in her SHG and with the community to arrive at a decision; now, she directs people to act and doesn't hesitate to put forth her final say in her hamlet without consulting the others. People, however, are accepting her views and decisions today. They look forward to hearing her views.

There are changes in her appearance as well. Her house,

her children's clothing, their food patterns have all become almost similar to that of the Surjapuri Muslim community. Her way of welcoming guests is quite similar to theirs and she follows the norms of the Surjapuri because many people come to her home for various tasks.

Of course, one cannot judge her for following the majority community but her actions are similar to theirs. Interestingly, within her own community, Maramai Kisku and her family now enjoy the same privileged position that she had earlier disliked about the Surjapuris when she was venturing into independent farming. Her husband once told me, "We don't make liquor now, but people in my hamlet are still backward. They make liquor and don't stop their children from drinking and that is why our children don't mingle much with their children."

While I am happy with the rise in the social position of Maramai Kisku and her family, I also remember the quote from Paulo Freire, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberalization, tend to become oppressors."

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