

Small Changes on the Road to Development

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A story of small changes leading to the visualization of bigger changes at the grass roots; a story of a tribal woman, eager for a life of dignity, of a life other than that of an agricultural labourer, a life of equality and agency, wanting the betterment of herself and her community, making the best use of the opportunities that come her way

THE MEANING OF GRASS-ROOTS development was, at one time, very simple in my mind. When I was studying Agricultural Engineering, I used to think that rural India only had agriculture-based livelihoods. We, therefore, just needed to increase agricultural production through advanced technology to bring prosperity at the primary level. It was a revelation to me that development was more complex than that. Does increasing agricultural production really not change the life of rural under-privileged people? If not, what are the actual factors that can change their lives on the path to development? With this curiosity I joined PRADAN,

to explore the development process and its impact on the people at the grass roots.

I did not know that soon after joining PRADAN, all my old notions would take a backseat. Amartya Sen, in his capabilities approach, says: "Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities for living a tolerable life. Poverty, seen from this approach, will be in terms of a shortfall of 'basic capabilities' or 'basic capability failure'. Such failure involves the inability to achieve certain minimally adequate levels of crucially important functioning: such as being educated, being free from caste or gender discrimination, having access to resources, being nourished and being sheltered."

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As I engaged with the community, my own development theory shifted its focus from economic prosperity to caste and gender issues. In PRADAN, I learned that many communities are landless because even in the ownership of land, caste has played an important role for many centuries; the result is that most of the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have become landless. As a practice in India, the ownership of land belongs to the man of the family and is inherited from father to son within the family. Farming was not a direct livelihood for the landless and, therefore, an increase in production could not bring any change for those landless, marginalized people.

I found myself questioning how a landless tribal woman, who belonged to the lowest rung of the ladder in the social structure of caste, class and gender, could become a part of development. My fundamentals were shaken. I needed a new conceptual paradigm for development. I was eager to find a model that would bring change in the lives of landless tribal women, perhaps the most vulnerable in our society.

I joined the Development Apprenticeship Programme of

PRADAN (2016–17), in the team based in Bahadurganj, Bihar. I searched for ways to bring about development changes at the grass roots. For my Village Study, I was based in Dogirja village, Satkauwa *panchayat*, Dighalbank block in Kishanganj district, Bihar. As per Census 2011, the *panchayat* comprises five revenue villages, namely, Satkauwa, Haribhitta, Kast Karmali, Haruwadanga and Dogirja. The total population of the *panchayat* is 15,774, of which only six per cent belong to the Scheduled Castes and nine per cent to the Scheduled Tribes. The *panchayat* includes many communities—Thakur, Mandal and Ganesh, which belong to Hindu Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Sheikh Muslims (General), Shershahwadi Muslims (OBCs), Rishidev aka Mushars (SCs) and the Santhal tribe, who were either Hindus or Christians (STs). The OBCs of both the religions owned most of the land of the *panchayat*. The other communities (SCs and STs) were merely potential agricultural labourers in the OBC community's fields and had been there for generations.

From the Census, I found that the tribal people lived in only two villages of the *panchayat* viz. Satkauwa and Haribhitta. And they used to work as agricultural

labourers for all the nearby villages in the agricultural season and as construction labourers in the off-season.

My first introduction to the Santhali women was as agricultural labourers when they came to work in the fields in Dogirja village. There were no SHGs in their hamlet of 60 families. Their language, culture and traditions were very different from those of the nearby communities and were very new to me. Because these women worked for the local people, they had learned the local dialect, that is, Surjapuri. They had been given land by the government for building houses at Shakti Nagar in Satkauwa village; this was land that had been occupied by the government during the land reforms in 1960 under the Zamindari Abolition Act. The land had belonged to Zamindar Shakti Singh then and, therefore, the hamlet was called Shakti Nagar.

I wanted to know more about the life of the Santhalis, especially the women. I made frequent visits there, and in January and February 2017, two SHGs were formed by the Santhali community in Shakti Nagar. The life of the Santhali women was tough. The men of the families migrate to cities in Punjab,

The women wake up early, prepare food for the family, look after the old members and children of the house, pack their own lunch and leave for work by 8 a.m. to return home by 5 p.m.

Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, etc., and this generation of women have become even more burdened by this. The women wake up early, prepare food for the family, look after the old members and children of the house, pack their own lunch and leave for work by 8 a.m. to return home by 5 p.m.

All the 30 Santhali women of the two SHGs were excited to start the savings and credit activity, especially because between agricultural seasons, they do not get much work. They took loans during the lean months and repaid it in the agricultural season. The agricultural season comprises two peak work periods, that is, sowing/transplantation and harvesting. During those peak periods, the SHGs hold their meetings late at night; no other activity can be planned with them. Other than those peak work-periods, the women were open for training programmes, vision building, health workshops or discussions about their hamlet and the community's current situation and development.

Life went on in this familiar pattern and eight more SHGs (1 SC, 1 ST, 4 OBCs, and 2 General) started in that area, under a project of the Bihar Rural Livelihood Promotion Society

(BRLPS). Because there were 10 SHGs in the Satkauwa *panchayat*, a woman Community Mobilizer (CM) was required to maintain the accounts of these SHGs and to form a VO (Village Organization) of those SHGs. The CM had to be an 8th class pass woman from the area, preferably an SHG member.

This was offered to all the members of the SHGs as an opportunity to work with women for development and also as a way to enhance their own capabilities of being community leaders. The women of the OBC SHGs, both Hindu and Muslim, rejected this opportunity because the monthly honorarium was only Rs 1500. Fulbati Murmu from the Santhal community who had left school after Class 8 came forward for this work. She said, "*Didi main hun to aathvi paas par pata nahi yeh kaam kar paungi ki nahi* (Didi, I am an eighth class pass but I don't know whether I am capable of doing this work or not)."

She sat for the test for the post of the CM and the result was satisfactory. It showed that, with support from professionals, she could learn the work and would be able to handle the accounts. One day, after an SHG meeting, she asked me, "*Didi baki jaat ke log to mujhse bhi jyada padhe likhe hai, to woh log yeh test dene kyu*

nahi aaye (Why did the other SHG women, who had more qualified academically, not come for the test)?"

I told her, "*Didi, aapko pata hai na isme Rs 1500 hi milega mahine ka, baki log isiliye nahi kiye ki kam paisa hai* (As you know the honorarium is only Rs 1500. That's why the other women prefer not to do it)."

I asked her for her reasons for taking on the work. She responded, "*Paise ki baat nahi hai didi, main to ek din ka Rs 300 jan kaam mai hi kama leti hu, yeh kaam to izzat ki baat hain. Aisa padha likha kaam karne ka mauka mujhe zindagi mai pehli baar mila hai, jo ki main kabhi sochi bhi nhi thi ki main karungi* (It's not about money, I earn Rs 300 daily as agricultural labour. It is about the dignity of work as an educated person. I am getting such an opportunity for the first time in my life; I never dreamt of getting such work.)."

Looking back at my time with Fulbati *didi*, I recall my first interaction with her. Her parents were landless agricultural labourers. She had studied till class eight and had taken admission in class nine; but at the age of 16 she got married to Bupesh Tudu of the same hamlet, who had never been to school.

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She gave up her studies after marriage, to handle household chores and earn money as an agricultural labourer. She is now 22 years old and has two children. Her husband has migrated to Himachal Pradesh and visits the family only once a year. She works as a daily wage labour in nearby agricultural fields. In 2017, it was seven years since she left school.

Puja Kumari (A Hindu OBC girl), who is book-keeper in BRLPS in Satkauwa *panchayat* was her classmate up to 8th class. Puja had, however, continued her studies and now is doing her B.A third year. I felt Fulbati's pain of not having had the same opportunity as Puja. She told me, "*Puja ki abhi tak uske gharwale shadi nahi karaye hain, wo aapke jaisa bada wala phone chalat hai aur 12 pass karne ke baad apni job kar rahi hai* (Puja's parents have not gotten her married yet. She has a Smartphone like you and is doing a job after clearing her 12th standard)."

She compared her life with Puja's saying, "*Aur yahan mai sirf ek anpadh jan jaisi ban gayi hu jo ki do bacchon ki maa bhi hai* (And here I have become like an illiterate agricultural labourer who also is a mother of two young children)." She added that "*Hamari jaat*

mai ladkiyo ka yahi hota hai, didi, padhi-likhi ho ya anpadh, khatna hi hai unki kismet mai to (In our community the situation of girls is like this, whether illiterate or educated, we have to struggle throughout our life)."

Fulbati always showed great interest in the SHG and other activities such as health workshops, SHG vision building, and in supporting and grooming other SHGs in the hamlet. She was punctual for the SHG meetings and attended them regularly. She used to urge others to help with the proper functioning of SHG meetings. She had all the capabilities and potential of a good leader but lacked the opportunity to explore and display her abilities. The CM work gave her that opportunity to excel with her capabilities and mark the change story on the development road.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach delves on the opportunities available to people and the opportunities that they value: "It emphasizes the importance of freedom of choice, individual diversities and the multidimensional nature of human well-being. The emphasis is not only on how people actually function but also on their

having the capabilities, which are practical choices, to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value."

On becoming a CM, Fulbati was very excited about doing something different from her daily grind. In her first CM training, however, she was withdrawn and shy. She compared herself, and quite naturally, with the others on the basis of education, clothes and presentations. She was self-conscious and shared with me that the other participants were good and confident and she was nervous. She promised to herself that she would learn and perform better from the next training onwards.

In the SHG meetings, she struggled with the big calculations when doing the accounts. Initially, she would get tense when SHG issues were raised by the women and with the responsibilities of the Cluster-level Federation (CLF). She was worried about making mistakes and about her pace to learn things. To be uncomfortable about the new territory that she was venturing into was, perhaps, natural; what was a little unjust was that she put so much performance pressure on herself.

She put in extra effort, challenged herself at every SHG meeting and pushed the barrier, learned everything required and never said no to learning. She attended each meeting of all the 10 SHGs and asked questions over and over again until she got things right

I had a talk with her, but she was unrelenting in her determination.

She said, “*Meri zindagi mai mila yeh aage badne ka mauka mai khona nahi chahti* (I don’t want to lose this opportunity that I have got in my life).” She put in extra effort, challenged herself at every SHG meeting and pushed the barrier, learned everything required and never said no to learning. She attended each meeting of all the 10 SHGs and asked questions over and over again until she got things right. She overcame her initial shyness and never hesitated to ask for help, if required. She had a strong urge to learn new things and overcome hurdles. The learning process and the execution of the learning amazed me. It was as if she wanted to make full use of this opportunity to explore and expand her capabilities.

After her selection as a CM, I asked her to give me her bank account number so as to transfer her payment. She shared that neither she nor any other woman in her family had a bank account. They used to work in the agricultural field or on constructions sites only and never had to go to the bank. As the CM payment was payable to a bank account only, her father

accompanied her to the bank and she opened her bank account.

She was so happy that day. She called me in the evening to tell me that the Bank Mitra (Bank Mitra works as a representative or agent of Bank and is appointed to provide banking service to citizens) had shown her respect amidst all the people when she had told him that she was the CM of the Satkauwa *panchayat*. She also shared that the Bank Mitra had asked about her SHGs and their bank account opening process. She proudly told me that although she had been apprehensive that she would not be able to talk to the bank officers, she found the bank manager of Central Bank very supportive.

She told me the whole story with pride. She shared, “*Jab manager ne poochha kya tum kahin kaam karti ho, to maine khush hokar bola ki mai Jeevika mai CM hun. Mujhe kafi achha laga batane mai ki main bhi kuch padha likha wala kaam karti hun* (When the manager asked me if I work somewhere, I happily told him that I work as CM. It gave me immense pleasure to share that I am also educated and do such work).” She further added, “*Jab se maine yeh kaam sambhala hain na, mujhe kafi log*

janne lagein hai, mujhe ab kahin bhi jane mai aur logo se baatein karne mai dar nahin, balki achha lagta hai (Since I have started working as a CM many people have started recognizing me. Now I don’t fear talking to people or going to other places. In fact, I like doing that).”

A day after one of the SHG meetings got over, I asked her whether her father liked her new job or not. She shared that her father was happy and had told her, “*Tum karo apna group ka kaam ab kheto mai khatne ki jarurat nahi hai* (You do your SHG work. There is no need to work as a labourer in the fields).” She feels proud to hear those statements from her father. Curious, I asked if she would stop working as an agricultural labourer. She said, “*Nahi, didi, season mai to main bhi jan ka kaam kar lungi, wo to hamara kamai ka season hota hai. CM ka kaam to izzat ke liye karti hun jo ki sirf mere padhe likhe hone se mila hain* (I will work as an agricultural labourer during the agricultural season as that is our earning season. The CM work gives me dignity, which I got due to my education).”

Her husband came home after more than one year. He had been updated about this new opportunity of his wife’s on the

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benefits of SHGs and shared all her understanding with other SHGs members. She asked them to prepare documents for the SHG bank account opening even before the notice came for the same because she had heard about it at the CLF meeting. She also told me about how the CMs of the other areas had shared with her about all the benefits they got from the SHG, the VO and the CLF. Her focus was on maintaining the timings of the SHG meetings, the presence of each member, savings and the repaying of loans.

After having skipped two SHG meetings, I attended some meetings, and found a few mistakes in accounts. When I asked her to correct them, she confessed, "*Didi bahut samay ho gaya hai na padhai chhode mujhe, isiliye galti ho jati hai, par didi aata hai mujhe, aap ek baar aur bata do, main samajh jaungi* (Didi, it has been a long time since I left my studies, that's why I make errors, but if you tell me again I will understand)." It was inspiring for me to see how she always accepted her mistakes and how eager she was to correct them, to learn and to understand things. I did not see her being hopeless about mistakes or accounts.

Her confidence boosted my morale about her capabilities. When my colleague Akhilesh came on a visit, she told him, "*Group ki har didi ko iske fayde ke baare mai samajh honi chahiye, agar unke man mai koi bhi dar hoga to woh group mai aana hi band kar degi, isi liye SHG meeting mai main hamesha aage bhavisya ke baare mai aur dusre gaaon mai jo didi logo ko fayda mila hai uske baarein mai baatein karti hu* (Each SHG member should have an understanding about the benefits of the SHG for better functioning of the SHGs. If they have fears, they will lose interest in the SHG. That's why I always have a conversation in the SHGs about the long-term vision and success stories of other villages)." Seeing her in conversation with Akhilesh, I smiled to myself and was confident about her capability as a CM and, moreover, as a vibrant SHG woman leader.

The life of Fulbati *didi* has changed in the last three months. Simultaneously, I observed the impact of this change in the life of other women, especially those from the Santhal tribe. Sukhmaya Marandi and Mungli Hembram also shared that they were ready for any such work. They said that their families, especially their

husbands, have no objection to their working. In the Village Organization's Board of Members election, two Santhali women got elected out of five members. The SHG women also planned to rent land for collective maize cultivation, to earn profit from cultivation for themselves. The Santhali women now believe and visualize a life and work beyond agricultural labour. Many of the women were eager to do other things, along with their agricultural labour work.

Thinking about Fulbati *didi's* journey from an agricultural labourer to a CM, I wondered: What if the BRLPS project had not offered the CM's post to her? Fulbati *didi* would have spent her life as an agricultural labourer. And what about the many other women with potential, whose skills are never recognized merely because of their identity (in caste, religion or gender)?

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach talks about development for people. That it is an expansion of their capabilities. As a girl from a tribal community, Fulbati *didi* could not complete her education, which limited her development and the chance to explore her full potential. As the

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capability approach explains, for development, the significant fact is that people must have options and not whether people make use of the options they have or not.

Imagine Fulbati *didi*'s life had she continued studying. She would have had options for education and marriage like Puja. However, because she belonged to the bottom-most rung of the ladder of caste and gender, she had no option but to discontinue her studies, get married and work as an agricultural labourer like other women of her community. The lack of freedom of choice would result in the potential of being a motivated and inspiring woman

leader remaining unused all through her life.

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This is a story of small changes. It became a ray of hope for me as a Development Practitioner. It helped me visualize the bigger change that is possible at the grass roots, a change beyond the concept of agricultural prosperity. Fulbati's story strengthened my resolve to find ways of

development for the lowest section of caste, class and gender, just as this landless tribal woman found her wings to fly high in the sky, making the most of the opportunities made available to her.

The other question that pops up is: What would have happened if Fulbati *didi* had been an illiterate woman. Here again, I am, as an executive in the Abu Road team of PRADAN in Rajasthan, searching for ways and opportunities that allows an illiterate, landless tribal woman change her life.

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