

A CYCLE OF CHANGE

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Coming together as a group, collectively staking their right to making decisions about what crops to grow, challenging prevalent traditions, the women of the SHG find their confidence and strength by becoming forces to reckon with in their community.

THAT DAY WAS LIKE ANY OTHER NORMAL DAY. I was on my way to Sundari village for an SHG meeting at Bartoli...my head buzzing with plans. I reached the meeting and was welcomed by the *didis* of the SHG with folded hands and smiling faces. This SHG was not new to me. I had been here several times earlier, to plan their agriculture.

I was greeted with the 'dream come true' words by Sther *didi*, "*Agle saal ke liye hum sab abhi se tayyari kar rahe hain* (We are planning for the next year now)." She was a member of the Champa Baha Mahila Mandal. The confidence in her voice and the sparkle

of pride in her eyes amazed me and took me back the timeline and her transformational journey flashed before my eyes.

Several questions erupted in my mind. Is this the same SHG that was apprehensive about practising agriculture last year? Is this the same Sther *didi*, who had given up all hope of earning from agriculture in summer? Is this the same SHG that was always seeking support from me in every decision on livelihoods? That day...I felt that my continuing efforts to bring change in their existing practices was successful. 'What has happened to them?' I wondered. The courage, the confidence, the decision-making ability...where had these all come from?

The low confidence and the misery in the voices of the *didis* told of their past failed experiences in agriculture during the cruel drought season. The wrinkles above the eyebrows, the corners of their lips touching the chin and their cold tired breath tugged at my heart.

What was their driving force, and from where had they drawn the energy to take a stand? I realized that some questions could only be answered by turning back and looking into the pages of past and reflecting on the journey.

BACKGROUND

Sundari *panchayat* is located in Torpa block of Khunti district, Jharkhand. Just as its name suggests, it is a beautiful *panchayat* surrounded by a hilly terrain, divided into 12 hamlets and two villages. Sundari Bartoli is one of the hamlets of the *panchayat* and it was the very first field handed over to me as a fresh recruit and where I first directly became engaged with the community. It was quite easy for me to build a rapport with the community. Very soon, the unfamiliar faces turned into known names and, with the flow of time, I developed a relationship with the people and the hitherto-unknown tribal women became my *didis*. I became connected with their lives; the SHG has given me the opportunity to take a sneak peek into their joys and their sorrows.

The summers were almost upon them when I first reached, and

I could see the anxiety on their faces. On exploration of their problems, I discovered a long list of difficulties that restricted them from practising agriculture. The non-availability of water for irrigation, the lack of knowledge about the seeds and nursery, etc., stopped them from cultivating their land. The low confidence and the misery in the voices of the *didis* told of their past failed experiences in agriculture during the cruel drought season.

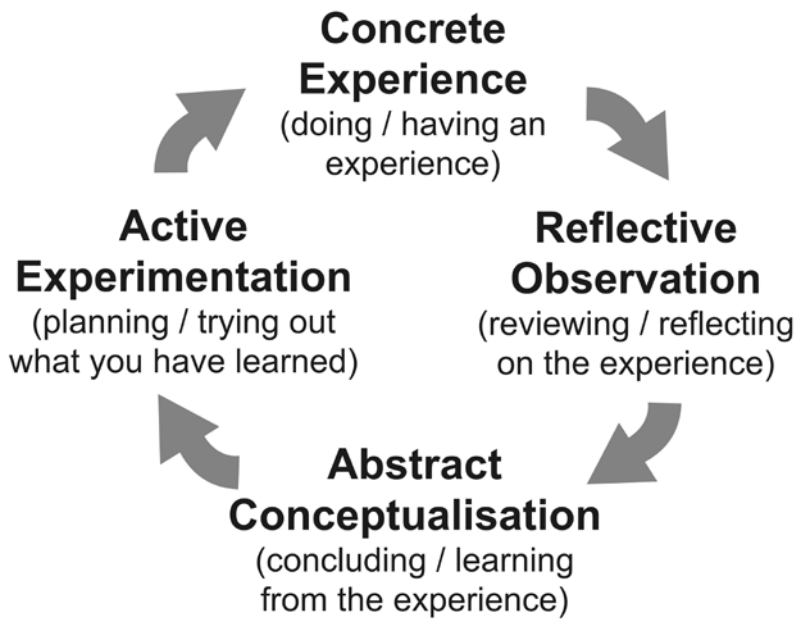
The wrinkles above the eyebrows, the corners of their lips touching the chin and their cold tired breath tugged at my heart. That was the day when the initiation of a new chapter had started. The SHG Chameli Baha Mahila Mandal came together and decided to experiment with planting bitter gourd (locally known as *karela*) for the first time in their hamlet because it required less water and was less prone to diseases. Although they had planted the local variety of bitter gourd earlier, it was a new experience for them to plant the hybrid variety of the vegetable. I remember seeing the mixed expression of happiness, to learn new things, and a curiosity to see the awaiting changes, on their faces.

FROM THE PAGES TO THE GROUND

Back then, during the initial days of my Development Apprenticeship, I tried to understand the concept of the learning cycle. David A. Kolb with Roger Fry created this famous model out of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts, and active experimentation, testing it in new situations. I tried to understand it and replicate it with the SHG members. The principle of Kolb's learning cycle is that we all follow these four stages of learning as we acquire knowledge, experience and skill.

1. Concrete Experience: A new experience of a situation is encountered, or an existing experience is reinterpreted.
2. Reflective Observation: Of the new experience. Of particular importance are any inconsistencies between experience and understanding.
3. Abstract Conceptualization: Reflection gives rise to a new idea or the modification of an existing abstract concept.
4. Active Experimentation: The learner applies these to the

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world around them to see what emerges.

Learning is an integrated process, with each stage being mutually supportive of, and feeding into, the next. It is possible to enter the cycle at any stage and follow it through its logical sequence.

However, effective learning only occurs when a learner is able to execute all four stages of the model. Therefore, no one stage of the cycle is effective as a learning procedure on its own.

All this may happen in a flash, or over days, weeks or months, depending on the situation, and

there may be 'wheels within wheels' of processes at the same time. Although this was a kind of learning-by-doing phase for me, I underwent each of the phases of the learning cycle with the villagers and saw a transformation in myself and my partners, that is, the SHG members.

CHANGE BEGINS

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For me, agriculture is not natural; it is a human invention. From here, the journey of learnings and experimentations began...by gathering appropriate learning experience and awakening

the mind to observe, evaluate and recall what we experience. Initially, the ruthless words from the husbands and the demotivating comments from other SHG members prevented the women from walking on this road of transformation. I remember in the very first meeting on agriculture, the women were quite low on enthusiasm. Although they wanted to do something...for the family...for their livelihood..., they were afraid of failure and of non-acceptance from their *dadas* (husbands). These fears stopped them from taking quick and confident decisions.

For the women of the community, it was an attempt to try a new vegetable crop for the community; for me, it became an attempt to make the SHG a platform to draw out the thoughts in their minds and convert them into reality. Not only this, I was looking at the whole scenario, which was a different perspective. Women worked from dusk to dawn for the families, from the fields to the kitchen, but still could not take a decision about which crop to cultivate. In the second SHG meeting with the same group, there was nothing different except that I noticed that a few of the stronger voices were taking the lead.

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These voices were quite confident and expressed a desire to cultivate vegetables in the summer. They tried to convince the other SHG members to agree. A large number of women resisted; they spoke about their earlier bad experiences and said that they were afraid of being beaten up by their husbands for taking their own decisions. That day, Sther *didi*, along with other members, visited the houses of those members, who lived in fear of their husbands and talked to the men. John *dada*, husband of Margaret *didi* of the same SHG, replied, “*Paisa pani me dubane ke liye nahi de sakte...aisa kya kar degi ye* (Can’t give money to waste... what is she going to achieve?)”

After some persuasion, he agreed but with a condition that she should make a profit out of the agriculture. The women took up the challenge with a faith in their togetherness. I had asked one member of the SHG what made them take this risk. She replied, “*Kuch to karna hi padega... alag...sabse alag...nahi to ek hi jaisa zindagi jeena padega...parivar ke pet ke liye karna hi padega* (Something has to be done... very different...otherwise we will continue to lead the same life...for the family we have to do this).” It was an initiation...

an initiation to bring a change...a change that had never happened before. The stronger voices of the group managed to convince the reluctant members; they later told me that they had felt a strong force compel them to stand up against all odds.

The transformational wheel of the SHG started to move at a higher velocity. I overheard a few *didis* of the Mahila Mandal murmuring within their group, “*Iss bar to kar ke dikhana hi padega. Sab mil ke karenge to shayad ho jayega* (This time we have to prove something. If we work it together, it will happen).” These words were a source of motivation for me. In fact, I started imagining myself as a co-traveller, with a troop of warriors, prepared to move into the battle of life.

When a series of trainings were given to them, the SHG members were able to reflect on the past experiences and were able to compare them with the present practices. They began to observe the gap between these. They realized why they had failed back then and why it would work now. They were curious and excited when filling the polythene tube with the seeds for the nursery. At the time of transplantation, they handled the plant with

such care as if a mother were handling a child for the first time. I remember the day when Sther *didi* suggested that the SHG purchase fertilizers and pesticides in bulk and store them in one of the *didi*'s houses because it would reduce their drudgery. The whole group accepted it wholeheartedly.

The unity, the enhanced knowledge, the timely monitoring and the evaluation by the SHG and the will to fight with the self and to win this time—all made their journey easier and gave them a joy that they had not experienced before. Disease and pest management were implemented in their fields. They had done this every year and they knew about the quantity but this time they had also successfully managed the preservation of the fertilizers and pesticides. They had the expertise to identify the diseases and the insects in their local language but were unable to save their plants from them. I remember the day when Sther *didi* called me and told me that the red fly had infested their fields and was destroying the fruits. The women organized a quick SHG meeting on the same day. As I arrived there, the women shot so many questions about how to save their fruits from diseases and insects. They

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talked to me as a parent, whose child was ill, would talk to a doctor. Their anxiety was visible on their faces.

The SHG *didis* streamlined the process of learning and the flow from one phase to another was not always smooth. They found it difficult to understand the dosage and efficiency of the pesticides and fertilizers. The year before, several plants had died due to stem borer bacteria and also excessive use of pesticides. Soon, the women learned how to handle the quantities. SHG members possessed analytical skills and used them well. As the concepts became clear to them, they became more confident. With the passage of time, the plants started bearing fruits and so did their hard work...the bitter gourd found its place in the local *haats* and, very soon, bicycles carrying baskets full of bitter gourd headed to the block *sabzi mandi* every Tuesday.

I visited the *sabzi mandi* to encourage my ladies and to purchase a few kilogrammes of happiness in the shape of bitter gourd. As the cash started flowing into the SHG, I saw the organization and the women transform. They sat with registers and calculators in hand, counting

the profits and dividing the money among themselves and also saving some percentage of the earnings for the next cultivation season. The SHG members were confident in their decision-making, were good at problem-solving, and had the skill to use new ideas and to learn from experience.

I was happy and content to see that they had actually proved their potential and calibre. Their husbands started seeking their help and suggestions in the financial issues of the household. The other SHGs of the village started taking advice on SHG-related matters. The villagers, who earlier abused the SHG women with filthy words, "*Kuch nahi hoga in aurton se...chali hain kheti karne* (Nothing will happen with these women...And they are headed out to do agriculture)" are now surprised to see the women selling vegetables in the market and giving the men cut-throat competition. Everything seemed to be going as planned.

All these memories flashed in front of my eyes. I stood speechless at the entrance of the SHG meeting room, Sther *didi's* words rang in my ears. I was delighted. The SHG members were willing to be actively

involved in the experience and continue with agriculture in the next season, and this time all by themselves. This is what I had dreamt of...a sustainable agriculture practice by the women.

I reflected upon my own journey in this time and realized that the transformation had not only taken place in the women but also in me. Working with the community had made me realize that our actions affect the others because we do not exist alone in this small world and much of our learning about ourselves comes from our interactions with others. We learn from each other.

Being with women in their time of struggle and understanding their personal problems, the dynamics and the role differentiation between the *didis* and the *dadas* helped me understand them. When I first came to Sundari, I was not the same as I am now...the trust of the members of the SHG boosted my morale and has given me the courage to dream.

I gained technical knowledge about the creepers and the trellis as well as practical experience about planting and, more importantly, I soon realized that I had built a deep connection

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with them. My day begins with going to their fields and meeting them. There is an emotional cord that binds us. I laugh with them, cry with them, fight with them, eat with them, dance with them...and, moreover, I learn with them. Being with them, I have learned how to understand, reflect, conceptualize and finally experiment. Getting involved in the experience has made me a true learner. Some of the things that I have learned from them are...the traditional way of using ash as an insect repellent, the proper management of irrigation,

and how to be patient and to keep the enthusiasm alive at all times. Reflection upon my experiences and my engagement with the women of the community has helped me recognize the extent of my growth. This insight has encouraged me to continue my work and to incorporate my learnings from my work with other SHGs.

PRESENT SCENARIO

In this journey of bringing change in the tribal community, I realized

that success cannot be achieved alone. Many times, success in life comes through learning new skills, knowledge, capabilities and attitude, and working with a feeling of togetherness. My learning came from becoming engaged in agricultural work with the women, in order to make them self-sufficient and to enhance their knowledge. The learning cycle that they adopted had not only made them efficient but had also enhanced their decision-making capabilities, their problem-solving skills, their judgment, their capacity



SHG members prepare *pranamrit* (organic manure)

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to shoulder responsibility and, above all, it boosted up their confidence in themselves.

At present, they find themselves more equipped just because of the continuous repetition of the process. Although they have faced some failures in the past few years, their consistency and perseverance has led them to the path of success. In the current scenario, the *didis* can make plans on their own, select the seeds, study the market status and then plan their planting accordingly. Taking up agriculture is not just the initiation of a sustainable culture among them; it has been instrumental in building cohesion amongst them as well as with me. It is a process of liberation from man-made bondage through sustained struggle and resistance.

“Life is different now,” says Sther Bodra, who is 38 years old, and lives with her husband and two daughters. Like the other tribal women, she is quite hard-working, and is optimistic about the future. The practice of agriculture is not new to her. She tells us of how, as a young girl, she used to help her mother sow seeds. I remember, she was the one who initiated the idea of a cumulative nursery and motivated the other members of

the Gulab Baha Mahila Mandal to do something different this summer.

She brought other SHG members into the loop and started this transformational process. She experimented with it on her 10 decimals of land and was extremely happy with the bitter gourd produce. She sold it at the market price of Rs 40 per kg. When I had asked her how she feels now, she replied with a glittering smile on her face, “*Bahut accha lag raha hai... himmat baddha hai...Agle saal teen guna kheti karenge* (I am feeling very good...my confidence has increased...I will do three times as much agriculture next year).”

From the income earned, she purchased a motor pump and paid the school fees for her daughters. She is not just an ordinary woman; she symbolises the strength, the energy and the charismatic power which every woman possesses. Like a true leader, she has made plans with the remaining SHGs of the hamlet to develop a cluster of vegetables and is also making strategies for market linkages. Empowerment, for women like Sther Bodra, is all about self-awareness, consciousness and confidence.

The empowerment of tribal women means creating an environment in which they can make a choice and a decision for social transformation. From where I am standing right now, I am able to see me and my SHG *didis* riding bicycles. As we made the journey, several things changed before our eyes, from deciding to practice agriculture to reflecting on the experiences, choosing the crops and planning to cultivate them on a large scale through the SHG collective and extending it like a chain process. Finally, I want to say that this is all about change...a cycle of change, a reincarnation, a positive reinforcement, a transformation that has given the women of the community a powerful tool, an empowering weapon that they will continue to experience throughout their lifetime.

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