

THE UNSUNG Story of Janki Devi

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Struggling to survive in extremely challenging circumstances, and finding hope, meaning and purpose in the SHG, Janki Devi becomes pivotal in helping the women of her village to gain confidence in their worth and capabilities

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and, behold, service was joy." Rabindranath Tagore

HELLO, EVERYONE! Some of you may know me and many of you may not; so I will take this opportunity to introduce someone, who is very close to me, and in the process, I will also introduce myself.

I am a huge, mountainous banyan tree with large, aerial roots. I have seen many years and many seasons in my Karma village. Each day is very different from the previous day. I have seen dawn breaking out in the sky accompanied by smoke from the chullhas filling the air. The rich and heavy morning air mingles with the smog and I watch this

interplay from my vantage point in the centre of the village and feel a sense of joy. Young birds wake up early from their perches in my branches and fly to new heights to give wing to new accomplishments but baby birds wake up lazily, yawning and waiting for the food their mother and father are already on their way to get. People and animals gather under my shade to talk before starting their day. Through the day I feel happy because children come to play and elders come to rest beneath me. I am very happy to hear them sharing their joys, sorrows, successes and failures. Their discussions and their offerings of trust and support to each other have made me very empathetic to humans.

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Some 180 years ago, five Ghatwar families came and settled in the village. In those days, rain would bring new hope and prosperity to the inaccessible forest of Karma, and quench the thirst of humans and animals. Mother Earth would blossom with various flowers and fruits, assuaging the hunger of all creatures. Summer would be the toughest time when some of the creatures would starve to death.

In 1951, a big dam was constructed by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), and it submerged the north-east and the west side of my village. I was sad to see the plight of the people when they were asked to leave the land they had lived on for a century or more. They were neither given any compensation nor did they have any right to draw water from the reservoir or to cultivate on the lands around it. It was big setback for all the people. Families had to build new houses and prepare fresh land for agriculture, mainly on the southern side of the village. Meanwhile, in some of the nearby villages, Prajapatis and Muslims cleared up pastures for agriculture and settled in the village in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1970s, one Thakur family was brought to the village to help people shave their moustaches,

beards and hair. Six Bhuiyan and one Harijan family were brought to the village in 1994–95 by the SHG women during the Bhudan movement and one Adivasi family came from Ranchi in the 1990s to work in DVC. My village is divided into three hamlets. The west side is known as Sahpur, the north side as Khaira and the south side is Karma. The original Ghatwar families are located in all the hamlets but the Bhuiyans and the Harijans are located in Sahpur and the Thakurs are located in Karma hamlet only.

In olden times, families were very dependent upon rain and, therefore, only *kharif* agriculture was practised. Farmers grew maize, millet and paddy; however, the amount grown was not sufficient to feed the families. The villagers used to look for support from each other; and because the whole village had the same story, the farmers used to go to the *mahajans* (moneylenders). The *mahajans* were usually *baniyas* and belonged to an economically prosperous class. The *mahajans* lived in the Kariyatpur area, about 8 km from my village.

The villagers would borrow grain and seed from the *mahajan*; in return, the *mahajan* would take double the amount at the time of harvest. If the crop failed, the

farmers would have to give him four times the amount the next season. It was very sad to see how the *mahajans* behaved with my villagers. They had no mercy and they used to exploit the farmers and almost everyone in the village was in their debt. On the other hand, DVC was another gouger. The farmers were not allowed to cultivate crops near the submerged area and were also denied water for agricultural purposes. DVC also eyed the farmers' lands, which it was slowly capturing by planting trees and developing the fields. The farmers had no option other than working in the DVC fields. I could see that the villagers were very frustrated and felt hopeless with the existing life cycle; but Karma village had a different *karma* (destiny) and its *karma* was about to change. The change was going to be brought about by a very special, high-spirited woman, the kind I had never seen before.

In the 1980s, a 14-year-old girl from the north got married into our village. Her name was Janki. She was a short and dark complexioned woman. Just like any other woman in our village, she came wearing a red sari, her face covered in a veil down till her chest. Over time, I noticed that there was youthfulness and

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restlessness in her eyes and it seemed as if they wanted to say something. Unlike her eyes, she was a very reserved woman. She would smile at everyone, winning their hearts. Women began to gather around her household to see her, compliment her and comment on her eyes, smile and nature. She was the fourth and youngest daughter-in-law in the family.

Janki came from a relatively more prosperous household, but her own *karma* (destiny) had something different in store for her. The *mahajan* would take away her family's hard-earned crop and they would barely get food once a day. After a few years of her marriage, I remember a time when, for four consecutive days, her family did not get anything to eat. The family decided to cook *munga* (wild) leaf and eat it, but Janki could not digest it and she vomited all day. There was no money to take her to the doctor, thus she was left to her destiny. The situation was similar for the whole village.

Later, in the evening, her mother-in-law went to several houses and borrowed some rice and prepared food for her. After that incident, I saw perseverance in Janki's eyes. She was determined to change her destiny. She approached her

sisters-in-law and told them a plan. The plan was not to give any of the crops to the moneylender and instead use the grains to prepare liquor. But none of them agreed. They were worried about the retaliation from the *mahajans*. They had seen how the *mahajans* used to force the farmers and get their dues and if the *mahajan* were to stop giving them rations, they would definitely starve to death.

Janki did not lose hope and she started preparing liquor by taking *mahua* flowers from the *mahajan*. Slowly and steadily, her sisters-in-law also started getting confidence. They also started preparing liquor. Once their confidence grew, they started preparing it on a large scale. In around 1984, her family situation improved but not completely. They were still very much dependent on the *mahajans*. Janki told her sisters-in-law, "If we want to really change our situation, we must act and we should not give any single grain to the *mahajan*."

Her sisters-in-law trusted Janki, but they did not know how to take this action and were not sure what the consequences would be. But her mother-in-law was completely against her idea because she was the one who used to bring the ration for the

family from the *mahajan* and she knew what it could lead to. Janki told her mother-in-law to let her deal with the issue. In the next season when the *mahajan* came to take away the ripened crop, Janki refused to give it to him. She told them "You have not given me the ration and, therefore, I will not give you the crop. You should ask from that person to whom you have given the grains." The *mahajan* threatened her mother-in-law that he would make her pay for this action.

Janki was pressurised by her mother-in-law to pay the debt but she refused. Her sisters-in-law morally supported her on the issue. In the years to come, the *mahajan* started to put pressure on the family and refused to give any rations or any credit to them. The *mahajan* pursued this matter for a couple of years but later, he let it go after some settlement. Janki was very happy with what she had achieved. She knew that from then on, the cultivated crops would be theirs.

In around 1986, I was very happy to know that my village would soon welcome a new guest because Janki was pregnant. Unfortunately, this news was accompanied by the sad news of her husband's death. The whole village was in shock and in

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mourning. I cried, and with me, so did everyone in the village. Janki was in such deep pain that she lost consciousness. The villagers and her family members gave her the much-needed support. The coming months were more difficult for her because her body did not permit her to do hard work; despite this, she had to work. There was had no food at home.

Even after putting in hard work, she was barely able to manage to eat once a day. Soon a baby boy was born. Her mother-in-law celebrated as if her own son has reborn. I was happy too. But I sensed that Janki's sisters-in-law were very jealous of her. They wanted her to leave the household and give her child to them. She stayed for a few days in the village and she found that no one supported her in the family. She did not want to leave; she had to take care of her child, therefore, she decided to go to her mother's place with the conviction that she would come back again.

She made frequent visits to my village but did not stay long. She was given a small room in the household. Her house was not very far from the reservoir, at a distance of barely some 30 to 40 ft. And, as time progressed, the moisture from the reservoir

seeped into her room and affected the wall; she knew she needed to find a new place before the wall fell. She wanted to construct a house but she did not have any land. Therefore, she approached Bhattu Singh, her maternal grandfather. Bhattu Singh was very aware of her plight and he agreed to give her a piece of land. By the time her room wall fell, she had constructed her own house and had come back to live in my village with her six-year-old child.

Around 1993, Jui Gupta, a PRADAN professional, came to my village. She spoke about a savings and credit activity in women's groups. Initially, I thought that she must be a crook and so did most of the village women. They did not believe her; nevertheless, they gave her a chance. A group was formed. Janki heard about the group but was skeptical.

After a few months, Janki started to understand the functioning of the group. She also got a chance to meet Jui and was very impressed with the idea of an SHG. Slowly, we all began to trust the group. Unlike the others, however, Janki did not remain confined to her group only. She believed in the process and was confident that the SHG could free her villagers from debt. That

vision compelled her to mobilize and educate many women in the group.

She, along with Mohini Devi and Bhuneswari Devi, would go to many places to attend meetings and they would come back and educate the other members of the group. Mohini Devi was another firebrand leader in the village. She could defeat any politician in a discussion and no one in the area had the courage to debate with her. Bhuneswari Devi was very dedicated and a soft-spoken woman. Together, these three women were a very good combination in the village. They attempted to collectivize the women in the village. In spite of their efforts, however, some families were still left out of the group because they did not trust the idea.

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In 1995, like Janki, 45 households in the village were very dependent upon DVC for their livelihood. Janki along with Mohini and Bhuneswari *didis* were aware about DVC's intention

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of acquiring land in the village because they were part of the larger network constituted to deal with the issue of re-habilitation and resettlement. One day, a meeting was held underneath my branches. I heard the villagers discussing how DVC had already captured 100 acres of our land and was now eyeing another 35 acres. If all the village land were to be taken by them, where would our animals would go? Where would we get wood for fuel? And where would we do cultivate crops, etc.? Such questions worried the villagers.

Janki and Mohini led the discussion. Only a few people said we should fight for our rights. Most of the people were reluctant, and feared that if we protest against DVC, our source of livelihood would go away. The majority of them feared that they would lose everything. The next day, under the leadership of Mohini Devi and Janki Devi, around 15 women went to the DVC plantation site and knocked down the planted trees. The DVC staff immediately reached the scene and called their bosses.

The officials came with the police force and started to threaten the villagers. They reminded the people that this was no longer their land. "Your parents have

sold it to DVC and, therefore, you cannot claim your rights here. These lands belong to DVC and it is for DVC to decide what is to be done on the land." The police threatened the villagers that they would be put behind bars.

Mohini Devi, who was at the incident site, challenged them, "This is our land and you cannot take anyone from here. If I shout, 56 *maouja* (village) women will come and they will not let you go." By that time, Janki Devi with the other villagers reached there and they all stood by Mohini Devi. They stood together in support of each other.

Meanwhile, Janki Devi also gave a very strong speech and reminded everyone that this land belonged to the villagers. The police and the other staff panicked and lowered their tone. They said, "We have a duty to perform; you people should approach the higher authorities to resolve this issue." The police left. That day, my village witnessed a different Janki and Mohini. They were bold, precise, aggressive and upfront. No other villager had had the courage to speak in this language to the police, like Janki and Mohini had. Janki gained respect in everyone's hearts. After discussions with her fellow villagers and Jui, Janki decided

to meet with the higher officials of DVC.

Janki, with around 20 villagers, went to meet the officials, who said, "The land does not belong to you. Your fathers gave the land to DVC." The villagers had no records to show the officials. Some of them came back very low spirited and almost gave up hope. Janki and some of her fellow villagers, however, had something else in mind and they decided not to let it go.

Together, they decided not to allow DVC to do any further plantation in their village. They also decided to cultivate near the submerged area and to use the water of DVC reservoir for agricultural purposes. In the group meeting, they discussed with Jui how best to use the water for cultivation. Jui helped them to get a lift-irrigation machine, provided by DVC under their Social Integration Programme. With Janki's initiative the machine was set up in the village.

All things were set; for the first time, the farmers were ready to cultivate crops in summer. When the time came, however, only three farmers were ready; most of them backed out because they were worried about the cost

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of diesel, the grazing issue, the technology, whether DVC would destroy their crops, etc. In spite of this, Janki convinced three farmers to cultivate summer crops. Meanwhile, she also learnt various agriculture technologies. She demonstrated vegetable cultivation to them and it turned out to be a big success.

The villagers were also concerned about the maintenance and diesel cost of the lift-irrigation machine. The next season, four more farmers were prepared to take the risk. That year too, the villagers harvested a good winter tomato crop and sold it in the local market. However, the lift irrigation operational cost was very high; they stopped using the machine and it became non-functional. The success of the cultivation, however, gave farmers some hope. Slowly, more of my villagers started cultivating the winter tomato crop and Janki Devi helped them. It attracted everyone's attention and Janki's leadership was a much-discussed topic in the village.

In 1998, DVC under the Social Integration Programme made a Samudayik Bhawan, and we, for the first time, saw a concrete building in our village. Initially, the villagers used the space for

meetings; soon Janki started discussing how they could use this space differently. In my village, there was no school; therefore, most of the people were illiterate. Janki started the discussion with the villagers about using the building to teach children. Nearly all the villagers raised their concerns about the fact that they had no teacher. The village people had questions and Janki had the answers.

She discussed the situation with Mahendra, a Bhuiyan boy, who had completed his schooling from Kariyatpur and had recently settled in the village. Mahendra was also not sure what to say about the new proposal. He knew that if he were to go back to work in Kariyatpur or Barhi, he would surely get a job and earn something. He was not sure about the teaching. He voiced his concerns to Janki, who organized various meetings, but the people did not understand. She persuaded the villagers to make a monetary contribution to pay Mahendra. Thus, the first generation of school-going children started in our village.

Till 2001–02, the school was run and operated by the community. Later, the state government acknowledged the contribution

and took the teacher under its fold. Mahendra, thus, became the para-teacher in Karma village.

In 2003, the SHG meetings became irregular; many members were illiterate and a group accountant, who came from a far-off village stopped coming. Most of the members used to complain about not being able to do any work because there was no accountant. Janki persuaded Mahendra to write the books of accounts for the SHG. After some struggle, he did it. However, the group remained irregular because the members were not confident, the accountant was not able to give support regularly and also because it did not get any support from PRADAN. Janki, at this time, made many home visits, discussed the advantages of the SHG, motivated members and organized meetings to restart the group.

In 2010, when our village was about to witness the first Panchayati Raj Election, I heard men and women discussing who should be our ward member, *mukhiya*, etc. For the ward member, they were almost sure who it should be. They went to meet Janki and asked her to represent them. She agreed and became the unanimously selected

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ward member of Karma ward. She became the representative of her Ward in the *panchayat*.

At regular intervals, Janki used to take part in the *panchayat karyakarini* meetings and whatever new information she received, she shared it in the village. Once, she became aware that if pensioners did not get the pension, they could apply for it through the *panchayat*. She told everyone in the Ward and helped eligible candidates to complete the documents, submit them and have them sanctioned by the *panchayat*. Today, because of her initiative, except for three, almost all the eligible candidates are receiving pension.

Somewhere, in June 2010, I was a little shocked to see that Janki had decided to grow a tomato crop in the rainy season because of PRADAN's influence. In my lifetime, I had not seen anybody doing so. I was almost certain that she and the PRADAN people had gone insane. In the following days, she influenced more women to do so and, thankfully, all of them did not agree. Only four, including her, started doing so. When the plants were transplanted in the field, they looked good in shape and size; at the time of flowering and

fruiting, however, the plants looked weak. I was sure that tomato could not be planted in the rainy season.

I was in for another shock when the next year, even after the previous season's failure, she convinced 14 farmers to grow rainy season tomato. In the coming days, I saw Janki was more prepared. She visited the field regularly and was aware about the various interventions required. She consulted the women farmers regularly and influenced them to put stakes, spray insecticide and fungicide, etc. Jaswa Devi, who cultivated tomato that year, earned Rs 25,000 by selling the produce and Sakhiya Devi from the nearby village earned Rs 30,000.

It was an overwhelming situation for all and Janki's efforts paid good results for women farmers. In the years to come, Janki intensified her engagements around collective quality seed, insecticide and fungicide purchasing. She also influenced women farmers to grow creepers in the rainy season, using the *machan* system. She convinced them to participate in collective nursery-raising so that quality plants could be raised. She ensured the timely application

of tomato staking and the application of insecticides and fungicide—interventions that helped women farmers get a good crop. Today, women farmers such as Baleswari Devi, Jaswa Devi, Geeta Devi and others earn an additional Rs 75,000 to Rs 1 lakh through tomato cultivation and the *machan* system of agriculture.

Almost every family is impressed with Janki's initiatives. They now consult and take advice from her whenever required. She has contributed in myriad ways to improve the condition of the village; if I were to start narrating those stories, it would take many days. Janki mustered the values and hopes of her fellow villagers. Today, trust, mutual support and collective action have become the bywords. My village is witnessing a different culture.

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