

Transforming Community and the Self: The Story of Ramkol Village

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“Clay is just a lump unless persistent efforts transform it into a pot.”

Bringing about social change is a slow and painstaking process and must be based on an inherent faith in the ability and wisdom of the people one is working with. The women of Ramkol prove this as they are shepherded by a young development professional

This article covers the essence of my most memorable journey as a development professional, my journey with the women’s collectives in Ramkol village. The story of my journey includes my sad and happy feelings through the challenges I faced, my struggles during my engagement with the community and my joy at its final outcome. There is a bond that I developed with the women of Ramkol and I would like to share with the readers the story of our journey as co-travellers. There was a transformation that took place in the women of the community and they emerged as very different from who they were earlier. The status quo

was shaken and their lives changed. With the shake-up, I moved, I reflected, and had realizations about myself and changed with the women and because of them. I cherish the journey. In any journey, there are ups and downs but what makes it worthwhile is to see the travellers keep themselves motivated and to see them stay hopeful and positive that they will emerge victorious.

About Ramkol

Ramkol is a village in Daldali Gopalpur panchayat of Boarijore block, Godda district, Jharkhand. It is very diverse in term of its inhabitants; there

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are five hamlets in the village. Two hamlets are predominantly occupied by people of the Santhal tribe, one by the Pahadiya tribe, one by the people of the Mohli caste and one by the Muslim community. Ramkol is largely known for its stone quarries. Unlike the people of the Santhal tribe, who are dependent mainly on agriculture, the Muslim community of this village is dependent on the stone quarries for their daily wages whereas some others prefer migrating to Delhi, Gujarat, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Mumbai and other places.

I entered Ramkol alone on the second day of my field work. The Muslim hamlet lay on my way so I stopped there in front of a house where two middle-aged women were sitting. Soon, I was surrounded by around 15–20 children. When I started talking to the women, many men came and stood nearby and gradually began asking questions about me. Initially, I was afraid. However, I kept my calm and explained to them about PRADAN and how we formed collectives so that the women could save money so that in times of need they could take loans and, over time, eliminate the dependence on the ‘blood sucking’ local moneylenders.

To my astonishment, one man was so convinced with this idea that he started telling the women that it was a very good thing and that they should start saving from that very day onwards. However, I thought that an SHG formed on the spur of the moment, and so haphazardly, would not be sustainable. I told them that I would return in few days and that, in the meanwhile, they should think about our discussion and that we would take the process further, the next time we met.

I noticed one thing about myself during this time. When I was with the women, I introduced the SHG as a place for women to unite and a space for them to share their happiness and sadness; however, when the men come around, my narrative shifted to savings and credits. Upon reflection, I think this was because of my belief that the men would not like the women to come forward and discuss their issues because that would lead to the women becoming empowered and the men might fear their loss of control over the women. Also, somewhere, I had the thought that my encouragement of women to empower themselves might hamper my acceptance among the men. To articulate my state of mind at that time and to

express the fear I felt in sharing the same thoughts with a group of men as I shared with women, I wrote a few lines in a language which I feel more comfortable in, that is, Hindi:

“बराबरी की बात है तो डर क्यों?
बात सबसे करूँ तो शर्म क्यों?
पितृसत्ता के खिलाफ है,
मात्रसत्ता के ना साथ है”

(Why this fear when discussing equality?)

Why the shame in discussing this with everyone?

Though against patriarchy

It does not support matriarchy either)

I went back to Ramkol three days after my first visit and stopped in front of the same house, and the same middle-aged woman I had spoken to earlier said, “*Hamein koi group nahi uthana* (We do not want to form any group).”

I was taken aback; I said that I was just passing by and had stopped to meet her without any intention of forming groups. Once again, as I stood there I was surrounded by many children and young girls. I began to talk with the young girls. I learned that child marriage and early

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motherhood were quite prevalent in that community. A few girls, of about 15–16 years, were holding babies. It felt wrong on my part to talk about the advantages in SHGs of savings and credit in a community where as the burning issue was something else. I realized that I should have spent some time with them to understand their lives and their needs before introducing the benefits of savings and credit.

On my third visit, many women gathered and made seating arrangements; we sat and discussed the importance of an SHG. This time, communication was a two-way process, in which some of the women shared their distrust of handing over their money whereas some others reassured them saying that money would be in their own hands and not given to any outsider. I was disturbed that the focus of all their discussions was around money. I regretted that I had introduced it at the start.

To guide the discussion in a different direction and demonstrate the larger goal of setting up collectives, I asked the women to hold a wooden stick and asked them to visualize that stick as themselves. I asked them to think of a problem that they face in their homes or in the

community. They came up with the problem of lack of educational facilities in their village. I, then, asked one woman to imagine that she had gone to visit a government official to talk about the issue. I asked her what she thought she would experience

She said that she would either not be entertained or she would be scolded. I asked her to visualize how she would feel and to exert that pressure of those feelings of anger, humiliation or helplessness on the stick. When she did so, the stick broke. I asked all the other women to imagine that they went there together and to bundle their sticks together. When they applied pressure on it, they could not break the bundle.

After a silence of around a minute, one woman said, “If we were to come together, we would become strong and no one would be able to break us.” They had a long discussion around what all they could do by coming together. Most of the discussion was on community issues only, and I was glad that at least they were thinking of the collective as strength.

On my fourth visit, they were eager to form a group; once again, the focus was mainly on money. I was, therefore, a little

less convinced about forming the group. I decided to give them some more time. Also, because I was the only professional engaged in that community, I somehow did not trust my own ability to take the group forward and to facilitate it effectively.

Collectivization

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I learned that everyone takes time to come to a realization of the strength in unity; forcing the issue before that does not help. I also learned that once the realization comes, it is so strong that positive changes seem to begin happening quickly. Something similar happened in Ramkol when the women decided to form groups.

A week after my fourth visit, I got a phone call from one of the women from Ramkol saying that they had formed the group and had started collecting money. She asked me to come to meet them. The women in Ramkol had formed two groups by themselves. Although, as an outsider, I tried to delay forming the SHG early, the desire came from within the community when it felt the need for a forum. They took charge of the formation themselves. For the initial two weeks, I explored with them the purpose of the group,

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Initial challenges

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A dark phase for one of the groups came when they decided to disband the group because they had heard from some distant relatives that to take the group forward, the women would have to go for trainings away from the village for a few days at a time. This was disturbing because they said that, for Muslim women, going out of the house was forbidden and they could not do it.

Another issue was that the woman who was the accountant of the group, despite my urging her to share responsibilities, had taken on all the work upon herself. She was responsible for calling everyone for the meeting, keeping the money, etc. Over time, she began feeling burdened.

To sort out all these issues, I was called for a meeting in the house of one of the women. There I met one of the husbands. He asked me why I was forming these groups;

that the women would not be able to do anything on their own and that if I was getting some benefit out of this group, as far as my job security was concerned, I should run the group or else I should leave the community.

While he was saying all this, the women covered their faces and hid their smiles. They were laughing at being told that they were incapable of doing anything on their own. I thought that my whole engagement with them had been worthless if they were not able to utter even a single word when he was disrespecting them.

After this incident, one group decided to break up and distributed the money they had collected equally among them. I felt sad but maintained my calm thinking that forming the group was their own decision, so breaking it should also be their decision. I could only push them but the realization about the value of having a group was something they needed to arrive at on their own.

Exposure to older SHGs

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I had planned to take the groups for an exposure visit to some of the older SHGs but because one group broke up, the plan was

reduced to just one group. Before the exposure visit, however, I faced many challenges. On the morning of the departure, the women refused to go, saying that many of them had gone to bring wood from the cliff. I tried to persuade them; later, I found out that the men had been making allegations against me, saying that I might do some harm to their dignity or that I would dope them with sedatives, etc.

Although the women trusted me, they were being pressurized by their men not to go. However, I left with the women who were ready to go. The members of the older SHG interacted with the visitors. They spoke of their achievements, showed them the process that their group followed...lighting incense sticks, saying prayers, taking attendance and collecting money. They talked about all religions being the same and that the condition of women was not good in any community. They also talked about the strength they experienced as a group.

I was apprehensive about whether the decision to take them for the exposure visit had been the right one; however, to my surprise, when I went to Ramkol after a week, the opening sentence of a woman who spoke about

"*Ye baksa humari taakat hai* (This box is our strength)." She told the women, "This box will make 'we' women independent and during a time of need we won't have to look to any men for help."

her experience was, "*Ye baksa humari taakat hai* (This box is our strength)." She told the women, "This box will make 'we' women independent and during a time of need we won't have to look to any men for help."

She was cross-questioned by the other women, "*Aur ye paisa aata kahan se hai? Wo to mard hi deta hai na to uski to zaroorat padegi hi na?* (From where does this money come from? Our men give us the money to save; then how does the dependency end?)" The first woman answered that she had an equal right on the money although she hardly seemed convinced by her own statement. I felt a strong need to intervene and introduce the concept of importance of the 'Self' to the women.

Discussions around the drudgery of women had already been initiated earlier but this time I took the discussion forward by demonstrating the activity of division of work in a house. I asked a child to bring some small pebbles. I told the women that we would count the different things they do and put one pebble down for each work. I asked them to start spelling out what they do from the beginning of the day when they get up, so that they do not miss out anything or count

anything twice.

They began by saying, "*Pahad jate hain* (Go to the hillside for sanitation)." I interrupted them asking whether this counted as work. They understood and started enumerating the actual work that they did in their households. The women counted as many as 26 different things that they performed on a regular basis. These included cleaning the house, making food, taking care of children, sending children to school, making the bed, fetching water, washing clothes, washing utensils, making bed sheets out of old clothes, pressing the feet of their husbands before sleeping, etc. For the men, they were able to list only seven things, which included taking care of the children sometimes, going to the market, going to work to earn, etc.

Did they get any money or even recognition for their work? If they were to stop doing all this work, would their household run? I asked. Then followed a long discussion. They acknowledged that it is because of their own ability that they were able to save and that they had equal right on that money. Some of them recognized that reproductive work is as important as productive work.

Norm setting

The groups discussed the process by which the money should be collected and counted. Once when the accountant wrote Rs 20 against each name without ensuring that the money was being collected. I tried to intervene but very little attention was paid to my words. Later, when the money was counted, there was a mismatch between the amount collected and what was written in the books. The group realized the need to take collective action when collecting money wherein one person would write the amount, one would collect it and the others would keep an active eye on the process. I understood the difference between listening and realizing. A person can listen to what I am saying but may not realize what I mean until he/she sees the discrepancy personally.

Once I was away for a month and was apprehensive about what I would find when I went back to the community. I wondered about the groups. I was astounded by what I came across. The women told me that they had learned a song from some of their relatives in the nearby block, regarding the strength of the group, and they now sang it in each meeting.

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They had also learned to sign, introduce themselves and most of them remembered the five principles of the group that they said out loud in each meeting: weekly meeting, weekly saving, timely loan taking, repaying, and maintaining proper accounts. They remembered this from their exposure visit and they practised it because it made them feel good. I felt happy that even in my absence they had remained committed. This commitment had taken them forward and it would keep them motivated in the future. They had taken ownership of the group.

Coming out with flying colours

As the group moved forward, the women started discussing issues such as domestic violence, pornography, marital rape, menstruation, the ill-effects of early marriage and motherhood, the negative impact on their health of having too many children, etc. During one such discussion, one woman spoke of the issue of pornography and marital rape saying, "*Din me aadmi mobile par picture dekhta hai aur raat ko suhaag raat manata hai* (In the day time, man watches movies on the mobile and at night applies the same on his wife and celebrates it like his

wedding night)." This statement was acknowledged by most of the others as well, some with shyness and others with nervous laughter whereas some others elaborated upon it further.

Another woman, talked about her experience of domestic violence and said, "*Raat ko kamre ki batti bhuja kar, zameen par angochha bichha kar, mote danda se marta hai* (My husband switches off the light at night, spreads a sheet on the floor and beats me with a thick stick)." This statement regarding violence is derived from a song in their local dialect, which talks about love instead of violence. She had changed it to explain her situation. I was disturbed to hear this; however, I did not react, thinking that it may stop them from sharing further. This sharing strengthened my belief that I needed to engage with them further around issues related to gender inequality.

Soon, some of the women began questioning why their men beat them; by and large, however, most of them were still uncomfortable discussing these issues. This question came up more and more frequently and the women started thinking of splitting one group into two, according to age, so that they could talk more freely about

such issues. I pointed out the importance of the role of each member of the group and left the decision to them.

Today, they are all comfortable sharing about their situations; the older ones talk about their young age and the younger ones about their present situation. They collectively believe that early marriage, early motherhood and too many pregnancies have spoiled their health; they still have not figured out a way to deal with this because, according to them, in their community any family planning method is considered anti-religious. I was taken aback by this conversation because, for me, the first step towards any change is recognizing the gaps in the existing scenario. They had arrived at that and were not doing anything about it. I realized that their construct around religion is so strong that taking a leap over it is very difficult.

The women who had gone for the exposure visit changed the name of their group from 'Salma Mahila Mandal' to 'Nari Shakti Mahila Mandal'. This was such a joyous moment for me. The conviction with which they did so filled me with hope and motivation. When I asked them why they had changed the name, they said that

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they, as women, were coming together through this group, that this would indicate their strength and that this group was their collective shakti (power). Once again, this realization, which they came upon themselves, played its part in taking such a bold decision.

Nari Shakti Mahila Mandal soared high even without my intervention. The women from this group motivated the women of the other disbanded group and the latter re-grouped with some new women joining in and some of the old ones leaving. So far, four women have taken their first loans and used it for reclaiming their jewellery mortgaged with the local moneylender. Navratan Bibi, who was the first person to take a loan for her jewellery, came to the meeting wearing all her ornaments to show them to everyone and there was a loud cheer because every woman present there cherished her joy. Their sharing in her joy showed their consideration of each others' feelings, and a group, based on what we call 'mutual help'.

The women who, earlier, did not leave their homes alone now go to the nearby village to meet the CSP (Community Service

Provider) of that *panchayat*. They are also ready to attend the trainings for running the group more effectively and are now more confident about meeting strangers, especially men. This was a step forward because earlier had refused to even meet one of my male colleagues.

Although their husbands are still affected sometimes by the other men of the community, who disapprove of the women's actions, by and large, they themselves see it as a benefit for their family so they do not object to the women stepping out. There was a case where a man had beaten up his wife and had warned her not to go to the meeting but she still came, without letting him know, because she felt good in meeting everyone and felt financially more secure by being in the group.

Many other women in the community wished to form a group and the women from both the existing groups want to help them do so. They are willing to share their understanding of the need for a group and to show them how to maintain accounts. With this, an organic collectivization, which is community driven, is falling into place. I feel hopeful about a better

life for all the women and I would love to witness the continuing change in their journey ahead.

My Experiences

I was earlier strongly opposed to the influence being exercised by just one or two women as I thought that they would dominate the group; however, during my engagement, I realized that these strong women help gather all the others and are mostly considered leaders by the community. As a facilitator, I learned that I needed to ensure that I engage with all the women equally so as not to reinforce this identity of some women as leaders and that no one should feel left out. I learned that I needed to guide the influential woman in a way that they extend themselves for others and not take advantage of their influence by dominating others.

One Sunday morning, I looked at my phone and found around 8-9 missed calls from a woman in Ramkol. When I called her back, anxious to know whether everything was alright, she said that she just wanted to talk to me, and therefore, had called. She then talked to me for several minutes, asked me about what I was doing, what I was eating and

The success of the cucumber cultivation has also provided a way to develop farm-based livelihoods. This can now be scaled-up, which will change the culture of farming in the area.

she told me what she was doing, etc., and ended the conversation. I was surprised. She did not talk to me about anything regarding the group. It was just personal sharing. I was happy that I had gained some space in her heart that had made her talk to me. My relationship with her, and may be with most of the women in Ramkol, is beyond professionalism and benefit seeking. We have developed a bond and we share a kind of love.

Looking back, I can say that my journey with the community of Ramkol has been like a roller coaster ride where, at times, I felt so high and full of hope that the women were emerging strong together and, at other times, I was so afraid of entering the community, believing that

the group was going to break up. I now wonder why I was so anxious. It was their group and it would be their decision whether to keep it going or to break it. I realized that I am very attached to the women in that community; that I did not want them to fall apart and wished that they continue to make progress, to make their lives better and raise their status in their families as well as in society.

Conclusion

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Change is a very slow process; social change is both slow and difficult to measure. Also, the change we talk about can only be seen by engaging with people, and during this engagement it is not only the community that

changes but also the person who engages with them. With the women of Ramkol, their increased level of comfort in discussing their precarious condition, their increased mobility and their willingness to collectivize more women are signs of change. I, too, grew as an individual. I got to know myself, by relating their lives to mine, and now I have started trusting my own abilities as well. It is a symbiotic relationship where everyone involved gains equally. I realized that no matter how many challenges one comes across, there comes a time when things seem to fall in place when one has faith in the ability of the people.

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Kanika Agarwal earlier worked with PRADAN in Godda, Jharkhand

THE CHANGE

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When I see the cruel world around
Haunting images of which surround
I hope to see the change
But reality is so strange
The struggle is on,
To make it a better place
But everyone seems in such haste
I feel as if it's already too late
But, then, what is the strife for?
Hope for change is still not torn
Change is to see an equal and just place
A smile on each face
A place where everyone is accepted in good grace
And oppression is not the case!