

The catalyst within: Women SHG that transformed a community

(A Case Study)

For the residents of Majhi Sahi, a hamlet in Jhatiada village in Rasgobindpur block of Mayurbhanj district, Orissa, leading a marginalized existence both socially and economically for long, winds of change are here. A woman's self-help group has marked its presence in the predominantly Scheduled Caste population of the hamlet in the face of male apathy and the general inhibition to look beyond everyday realities. The beginning has been small, yet incisive. The baby step promises to turn into a big stride soon and transform the way the Majhi community is looked at by others.

The Majhis, living on the northern fringe of Jhatiada, are an economically weak community with wage labour and sal leaf collection as their primary occupations. The families there are 32 in all - are landless and have an average two decimal of homestead land as their only tangible property, on which they have erected their tiny mud houses. Generally treated as social outcasts, the members of the community had earned notoriety and the scorn of other villagers by getting involved in anti-social activities. To make matters worse, the men folk were addicted to country liquor and they shirked all household responsibilities. All that is changing, thanks to the courage of some women of the community.

When Unnayan, already involved in livelihood and woman empowerment issues in the area, broached its unique programme, Mahila Shanti Sena (Woman Peace Corps), to the women of the community and explained the merits of forming a self-help group in January 2007, the response was lukewarm. The participants were apprehensive because participation in the SHG would mean extra burden on them. Family chores consumed most of their time and their men were just not involved in anything. In addition, they feared they had no education to comprehend the idea of an SHG.

The challenge was accepted by Gayatri Behera who was already impressed by the work of other SHGs in nearby villages. She took the mantle of the leader and tried to motivate other women. A lot of counseling and hard work later, she formed Balukeswari Swayam Sahayak Gosthi, an SHG comprising 17 women, on 29.01.2007.

More than two years on, Gayatri and other members are happy to note what they have achieved for their community.

An unfolding success story

Gayatri narrates the SHGs brush with success and the challenges her group overcame.

Despite the initial opposition from the male members of our community, each member of our group has been able to save Rs 25 per month without interruption and we are using the group's savings as internal thrift and credit. Today we have accumulated Rs. 30325 (members' monthly savings and interest generated from the internal credit), she says.

We are no longer dependent on local money lenders for our minimum basic needs such as emergency medical expenses and education of our children. Our group has also got a bank loan of Rs. 18000/- that we used in doing share cropping in summer. We got a good harvest from this and as a result our food was secured for the lean season last year, she adds.

We participated in training programmes such as SHG concepts and management, gender, cornerstone etc. conducted by Unnayan which has capacitated us in many ways. Since we are able to earn from our group activities we have now a say in our domestic decision making process. Earlier we used to be victims of domestic violence which has now been substantially reduced. We have also been able to put pressure on our male folks against consumption of liquor. Many have given-up and others reduced the consumption considerably.

A significant change has occurred in the temperament of our male folks. We feel a sense of sharing, caring and respect towards the female members. The training and exposure have made us aware about health, good hygiene practices and education of our children.

This year, we applied to the government and brought pipe water connection to our village under Swajaldhara scheme. The government had sanctioned grant for road connection to our village 5 years ago, but it remained unutilized due to differences within the community. We conducted a meeting involving the Sarpanch (head of the local self governance at Gram Panchayat level) and other members of the village and sorted out the differences. Now the road is being constructed.

We have realized the importance of literacy. All members in our group have learned signing their names except one disabled woman who can not write. We are involved in income generating activities. We have kept goats by taking internal loan from our own group. Unnayan has supplied us with Banaraja chicks 4 months ago. Though many of these died of a sudden disease, we have taken utmost care rest of the chicks that could survive from this disease. There has been excellent growth of these chickens which can fetch Rs.400/- each if sold now. We are socially and financially much better-off nowadays.

Members of our group have spontaneously contributed to the persons in the community unable to meet a medical need or doing the rites after the death of a member in his/her family. We felt the need of a community hall where we can sit together. One of our fellow members got motivated by our work who donated a piece of land for the purpose. Then we generated Rs.4000/- from individual donations, contributed our labour and constructed a thatched hall which we are proud of as our own community hall. The most gratifying of all is that our Majhi community has now been accepted by our neighbours who used to treat us as outcasts two years back. We have got due recognition in the neighbouring villages as well.

The interesting and fulfilling part of our life is that the people who were once considering our community as assailants and untouchables are now inviting us for solving problems in their villages. We are happy in transformation of our community.



(SHG members assembled in a meeting in their newly constructed community hall)



(SHG members with their Banaraja chickens pose for a photograph)



[Gayatri (4th from left) sharing with Secretary of Unnayan about her group's activities]

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