

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 17

While I was working in the poverty reduction program implemented by the government, my main work was to identify women from poor and poorest of the poor households in the project villages and form them into Self Help Groups (SHGs). All the schemes that were planned for the poor by the project were to be implemented through these groups. That's the reason we worked hard day-in and day-out to bring each and every one of the poor households into the SHG network. However, to be in a SHG, members had to follow some rules, including doing compulsory savings of at least Rs. 30 per month and attending weekly meetings. These rules, unfortunately, meant that despite numerous visits and appeals by our staff, some people just did not agree to join SHGs. I and my colleagues used to feel really frustrated at the fact that these people couldn't bring themselves to save even one rupee per day. This exacerbation with their attitude coloured our interactions with many of them.

One day, I went to a household as part of my duty. It had only two members - an old husband and wife duo. As we had already identified the household as belonging to the poorest of the poor category, I was determined to make the woman join a SHG. The woman wasn't too keen on joining, so I thought of explaining the benefits to the couple to make them see sense.

When I reached their small hut, the couple were sleeping on the ground. While the old man continued to sleep, the old woman woke up and started talking with me. I also didn't want to get right into business so I began chit-chatting about this and that. A few minutes into the conversation, the woman told me fearfully that she and her husband hadn't been able to go to labour work for four days as it had been raining and that they hadn't eaten a morsel of food since two days. As they had already taken groceries from the local Kirana Store on credit, so even that avenue was closed, she explained.

I immediately told her that I would be right back and bought some milk, rice, vegetables and gave it to her. I told her that I would make some tea while she got ready to cook. While she was preparing the food, I and the old man started drinking tea and got talking - the couple have one son. Due to lack of livelihoods in the village, he had migrated to a far-off place as migrant labour. What he was earning was barely sufficient for running his family, let alone, sending some to his parents. So, the old man explained, they were

dependent on their hard work for day to day survival. It didn't matter how many days they worked, all they earned was just barely enough for a hand-to-mouth existence, forget saving for a future, he lamented.

After the woman finished cooking, all three of us ate together. I couldn't dare to speak about the purpose of my visit or ask them why they couldn't save just one rupee per day.

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