

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 23

While working in the government's poverty elimination programme, our main work was to convince women from the poorest of the poor households in the project villages to form into Self Help Groups (SHGs). Institutional building and capacity building were crucial aspects of our project. As community coordinators (CCs), we had to work on forming SHGs for the poor and building their capacities so that they can manage the groups on their own.

Crucially, all the schemes that were going to be implemented by our project were meant for the members of these groups. That's why all of our team members had put in a lot of hard work to bring each and every poor household into the SHG network. As with every other institution, there were certain rules and regulations for a person to be in a group - each member had to save at least 30 rupees per month in the group and had to attend its weekly meetings. As the implementation of our schemes hinged on the completion of the institutional building process, we CCs used to put in a lot of focus on it.

Unfortunately, however much we went and appealed to people to join a group, there were always some people who just wouldn't listen. They had their own reasons for not joining.

One day, while I was in the middle of some work, Rajupalem mandal (block) CC, Sambasivarao, suddenly came to me and stated seriously that we needed to go to a village and took me with him.

It was a small hamlet near Kondamodu junction which falls on the way from Piduguralla to Narasaraopet in Andhra Pradesh. A little far from the village, around 30 families lived in huts covered with tarpaulin sheets.

Upon reaching, Sambasivarao turned towards me and said, "Look at these people. I think they can be safely concluded to be the poorest of the poor people. Shouldn't our project work for exactly these kinds of people? I have been running behind them, trying to get these people to agree to join SHG, but in vain! What should we do to convince them?"

I came to know that they belonged to a nomadic tribe. Going around from one place to another and selling small miscellaneous items was their main occupation. They stay at a place for 2 to 6 months. After that, they migrate to another place. None of their children go to schools. As they don't stay at a single place for that long, schools are not ready to

admit their children. Even if they did give admission, due to the constant migration of their families, the children can't attend school regularly. Let alone education, none of these families even had ration or any other identity cards.

If they were to be formed into a SHG, how can they do monthly savings and organise weekly meetings? Even if we allowed for meetings to be suspended for a few months in between, how will banks allow for accounts to be opened for people with no identity proofs or residential certificates? Which bank will give a loan to those who migrate to other places for months on end? Supposing that we were to ask them to stay in the same place, what sort of livelihood can we give them that will give them income all year round. For us to even dream about providing loans to them to do small businesses, they had to be part of the SHGs. For them to be a part of a group, they had to have a permanent address, assured income, and papers to prove them. We were in a conundrum!

We couldn't see any answer to our problem. To be honest, these people weren't even included in the official Census. What would we say was their region, village, mandal while forming them into a group? As much as we racked our brains, no solution was in sight! We asked them, in which place do you stay the longest? Tell us where you are from originally, we will go there and try to search for birth certificates, identity proofs. We couldn't manage to do anything. But we did make them understand that without these proofs, they will not be able to avail any government benefits.

Whenever I hear the words "Inclusive Growth", I remember all those people who have been excluded from society and have been denied access to education, health, etc. Have the people been included at least now? Do we have any information about who they are, where are they from, how many are there? I have no clue! We work with people who are able to come forward and utilise the schemes designed for them. While people who don't know about these entitlements, or are not able to utilise these opportunities, or those who don't even have a clue about the existence of such schemes are doomed to be excluded.

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