



Taking collective responsibility for our problem



Taking collective responsibility for our problems; a lesson from so called beneficiaries

These are ironic times we live in.. On one hand we are grappling with the massive flooding of Chennai and adjoining areas while in Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand, farmers are struggling for their lives and livelihood in a drought like situation. Here's an inspiring story from the deep interiors of tribal India that hints at taking collective responsibility for our problems. The tribal

communities routinely considered the receivers and beneficiaries have been a constant source of wisdom and wellspring of courage and determination in our 17 years of work in rural India.

Langoti is a village in Khalwa block in Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh. Back in 2012, a few tribal Korku women from this village, decided that they had had enough.. making umpteen requests to the local administration for getting water to their village. The fact is, there was no water here in the summer.. The common sources of water dried up, forcing the women to walk to a well outside the village to fetch water twice or thrice a day. Since the men folk went out to work in the day this distressing duty of carrying up to 3 vessels of water on their head and one on their waist came to the women of the house. Tulsi Bai, from the village says, “Even in the scorching summer heat, at noon we have gone to fetch water when the water finished in our houses.” Though there are 12 hand pumps and 2 tubewells in the nearby area but in summer all water sources dried up, except this well, which serves around 2000 village people in the vicinity.



Ram Kali Bai from the village says, “When we went with our problem to the CO (Collector officer) of our block, we were told, “Tumhare gaon mein 12 handpump aur tube well hai, nadi aur dam bhi hai tumko kya dikkat hai,” (There are 12 hand pumps and a tube well in your village, there is even a river and a dam, so what’s your problem?”) Ram Kali Bai asked the official to visit them personally to see the reality for himself.

The year was April, 2012.. of Langoti, like Ram Kali Bai, knew

Something extraordinary was about to happen.. the women that nothing would happen till they didn’t take a strong step to solve their problem. These women came together (now named as USHA, an SHG group) and decided to dig a well. The work began with 17 women and by the end of the two years (the time it took to dig the well) 30 women along with some concerned men folk came together to dig a well for themselves.

The land was given by Ram Kali Bai and Ganga Bai while the traditional practice of Pediyar was used to decide the exact spot for digging. Digging was a tough and tedious job. With the rocky ground and houses all around, the traditional option of blasting wasn’t possible. The women started with using basic hand tools like chisel and hammer. They worked a little every day to dig the well. In the beginning the women were mocked by many people in the village. Seema (one of the diggers) shares that it took a lot to keep up their motivation. “Sometimes we kept on digging and would hit a big rock.’ She says. The will to improve the situation and the desperate need for water kept



the women working every day. Under Goonj's 'Cloth for Work' initiative they were given clothes, footwear and ration (rice, daal).



After working continuously for 2 years, water was found at 15ft below the ground and a well was ready with a circumference of 22 ft (approx).. This journey of hardships, challenges, opposition from local to district level authorities was not a smooth one though.. The big relief was that now there was water within their reach.. "Pani nikal gaya toh maza aa gaya" (when we found water, that was the best thing) said Tulsi Bai, one of the few who did back breaking work to make this happen.



The well in Langoti now serves more than 250 people for various purposes like cleaning, washing, watering plants around etc. Now this well is cemented and made of concrete by Goonj's partner organization, Spandan Samaj Sewa Samiti. It's truly humbling and inspiring to see this local citizen action initiative. It's perhaps another reminder for us to remove words like 'donor' and 'beneficiary' from our language. It's time to listen more and put more value in the wisdom and will of the grassroots. It's also perhaps time to stop thinking of money as the only currency in

the world.

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