

## An Intervention Succeeds with Sacrifices of People behind the Scenes

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What are the qualities in a personality that can determine his ability to become an agent for social change?

My professor whose words inspired me – and I have been using those words as light whenever I find myself in darkness – once said: “A set of people who allow *Ideas* (love, truth, justice, social service, science, beauty, god etc.) and *Social Collectives* much larger than families (e.g., nation, community) to shape their existence, become their reason to be and to live; to be their guiding ideals and their fund of hope” (Prof. Balmurali Natrajan).

As we completed half of the Fellowship journey, AIF called for our Fellowship Midpoint Conference. Part of the conference involved field visits to a few development organizations working with the communities. I was a part of the group of Fellows interested in the Livelihoods Thematic Conference and were taken to SRIJAN, an organization working in Bundi and various other districts of Rajasthan. The exposure to the works of organization and the interaction with some of its staff left me enriched and further pushed my motivation level for my own project, which is based on community initiatives.

It was an opportunity to understand the nuances of a community-led intervention and seek answer for the doubts. Any major community initiative or a revolution has a leader with charisma. This charisma many times overcast the crucial role that few others have played with their lively involvement in the initiative. The success of such initiatives is driven by the sacrifices of these people, the firm trust on the idea of change – and they are keen to embrace the goal that the initiative is designed for. The field visits from the thematic conference offered the opportunity to meet some of those people who worked tirelessly from behind the stage.

“The belief that my struggles of today can lead to the empowerment of other women in the villages tomorrow, pushed me cross every hurdle raised by the society.” – Meera Bai



Meera Bai narrating her journey from a household women to the treasurer of Maitree Dairy Company.

SRIJAN is one of the biggest development organizations working with communities in India. SRIJAN in the Bundi district of Rajasthan started its intervention in 2003 by promoting women self-help groups (SHGs) in the villages. Expansion of women SHGs was a difficult task while operating in a highly patriarchal society where women have been mostly confined in their houses. The intervention also required women to take command over various livelihood activities which demanded regular interaction with stakeholders like banks, local government officials, etc. Now it has been well received by the community and it appears to be well functioning. But it was not so easy in those initial days, as Meera Bai narrates her journey.

Meera Bai is one of the early members of one of the SHGs. She believed in the idea of change that SRIJAN endorsed through their intervention model. It was this trust that pushed her to move out of the house to mobilize women and take every step to ensure that SHGs are expanded and run efficiently. Initially she had to face a lot of resistance both from within the family and the larger society. But as she moved ahead with her motive, people joined and overtime, it took a shape of SHG movement in the villages around. With sufficient number of SHGs formation, it was the time to aggregate the SHGs into a cluster federation. She was elected as the secretary of the federation. With education only till grade 5th, she got herself well versed in managing accounts, giving presentations and interacting with every stakeholder related to her work while working as secretary of the federation. In 2011, the federation established Maitree, a dairy producing company. Started at a much smaller scale, Maitree's worth today is about 15 million INR with more than 2500 shareholders from about 250 SHGs.



Gathering of the federation members for the inauguration event.

Another day at SRIJAN, we attended an event which was organised for the inauguration of newly formed SHG federation, where I got to meet Sushant Saurav. Sushant is working as a project associate at SRIJAN. Coincidentally, we were in the same batch of our master's degree in Development at Azim Premji University and also, we come from the same state of Bihar. Soon after graduating he joined SRIJAN. That was in May and now it's been almost eight months, he has been rigorously working to mobilize the SHGs into a federation. Busy in the work, he couldn't find time to visit home all this while. Fortunately, we were there to witness the date on which the federation was officially formed. With a membership of about 3025 women, a SHG federation was formed in the Bansi cluster/panchayat. To celebrate this, the members of this federation came together to perform a rally. It was great to see the energy in this public demonstration, which was attended by more than 2000 women.



With Sushant Saurav – happiness of meeting after long time.



Sushant being felicitated for his efforts at the inaugural ceremony.