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Breaking the Silence

A Visit to Sitamarhi, North Bihar,

November 2004.

The floods in Bihar were worse than usual this year. In July and August, the rivers burst their banks and sometimes changed course. Whole villages were swept away and the land was covered with water. Roads were flooded, and bridges collapsed. All communications with the rest of Bihar were cut off and any relief had to be brought through Nepal.

In November, as we drove from Patna to Sitamarhi, there was still much visible flood damage: great stretches of water covering fields and surrounding buildings, often ruined or leaning to one side. Where the water had receded, land was often covered by layers of infertile sand. Parts of the way, any appearance of a tarmacked road surface vanished, and a dry mud track was all that was left. Some bridges were folded in two into the river, and others had been shored up with bricks and sand. It was like travelling through a dust storm as trucks, buses and jeeps threw up clouds of sand.

We were travelling from Patna, along the famous bridge across the Ganga River, through Muzaffarpur to Sitamarhi - the birthplace of Sita. In Sitamarhi, I spent a few days with Manasi Samaddar and her colleagues who run a women's NGO, based in Dumra Block, Adithi-Dumra.

Adithi-Dumra has been working in Sitamarhi for over fifteen years with poor rural women. An independent NGO, they are working under the umbrella of Adithi, based in Patna, and have recently supported the setting up of an independent federation of rural women, with about 4,000 members..

Background

Sitamarhi is a beautiful area. In November, the rice that had survived the late rains of this year was turning golden and the plentiful water feeds banana, palm and fruit trees, like mango, guava or lichee. Jute and other plants used for making rope, thatching and baskets also grow by the side of fields and roads, along with clumps of bamboo. People were preparing their houses for the holiday of Diwali, and in Muslim villages for Eid which this year fell at the same time.

But the rich green and gold landscape, the plentiful water and fertile soil hide a place a great inequality and violence. Sitamarhi District is one of the poorest in India. While there are some big landowners or wealthy government officials or politicians, the majority of the people are poor and landless. And the poorest of all are at the bottom of a pyramid, structured by class, caste and gender.

The area is predominantly agricultural. In Bihar as a whole, over 80% of the people still live in rural areas and over 90% of the land area is under food grain production. Yet agricultural productivity is low and the state still imports food grains.ⁱ Large numbers of people, especially low-caste groups, are landless and their main form of employment is sharecropping, officially illegal but still widespread. The most common form of sharecropping, known as bataiya, is an informal arrangement with a landlord, by which the sharecropper farms the land, usually providing all the inputs but dividing the produce, fifty-fifty, with the landlord. Although both women and men do sharecropping, in many families men migrate to do agricultural or other work to richer states such as Punjab or Haryana, for at least some months in the year. Women are left with main responsibility for agricultural work.

The main crops grown under this arrangement are wheat, rice, vegetables, sugarcane and pulses. However sharecropping leads to low productivity, not least because many landlords are reluctant to take on sharecroppers permanently and frequently change them. This leads to lack of security for the sharecropper who has no incentive to make long-term improvements to the land she or he is farming. In the survey done with sharecroppers, many said that they used organic methods on their own land because they recognised its longer-term value for fertility of the soil. But on the sharecropped land, they used chemical fertilisers or pesticides for quick results.

ⁱ See Socio-Economic Dynamics of Sharecropping vis-a-vis Food Security, Adithi Dumra, 1999.

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The extent of sharecropping was shown by the Adithi survey which covered fourteen villages and identified 2,110 households. Over 70% of the sharecroppers individually interviewed were women. Sharecropping was the primary means of livelihood but some women also worked as wage labourers, doing small-scale selling, as traditional birth attendants or raising farm animals. Sharecroppers came either from scheduled or backward castes, while landlords were more often from general (higher) castes.

Some of the programmes run by Adithi have focused on improving agricultural techniques and setting up savings groups which provide loans to women for alternative economic activities. Some landless women have also waged a successful struggle for land rights for their community. But Adithi also addresses the wider social and political issues facing poor women. A study published in 1999, for example, looked at the range of 'Atrocities on Women and Girl Children'.ⁱⁱ

In the villages studied, dowry related violence, including murders and domestic violence were common. In most of the villages, beating of women by husbands or other men was found in all households, as was child marriage in four of the ten villages. Other crimes all too frequently found were girl baby infanticide, rape and cases of dayan, the beating and expelling of a woman from a village under the pretext that she is a 'witch'

Underlying this culture of violence and discrimination against women, is the control of village leadership by men and the failure of government to implement laws or uphold the rights of women, or indeed the complicity of politicians and bureaucrats in the oppression of women and all poor people.

At one level this means that basic programmes on health, education or flood relief are not implemented. Teachers draw their salaries but do not attend schools, and medical staff at local health centres do likewise. Medicines and relief goods are sold for private profit instead of being distributed. The legal system ties poor people up in long, expensive procedures which rarely bring them justice, and instead bring countercharges from those responsible for violence or mal-administration.

The situation faced by women and poor people cannot simply be attributed to backward, feudal ideas, although these are widespread. In the study of sharecropping and food security, for example, Adithi found that twenty years ago poor people grew a wider variety of crops and ate more nutritious food than today. The change has come about as a result of the spread of cash crops, particularly the introduction of new hybrid seeds and the need for cash. As a result, families grow a more limited number of crops and sell more of their produce.

Girl infanticide too has a more modern face in the increasing number of abortions, following a scan identifying the baby as a girl. The killing or neglect of girls can also be linked to the spread of large dowry payments, once confined to upper caste households. The marriage of a girl is likely to cost a family 20,000 rupees, an amount which will normally be out of the reach of a poor family unless they go to a money-lender. In Dumra, the result is that for every 1,000 boys there are 840 girls, with one block being identified by Adithi as having less than 500 girls for every 1,000 boys.

These are just some of the facts of the lives of women in this area. An Adithi report summarised the situation:

"Bihar has a patriarchal system where women have been confined to the private sphere, where illiteracy and social taboos prevail. More general difficulties are caused by the lack of infrastructure in Bihar, which suffers not only from the extremes of inequality and poverty but from the dysfunctional government of the state."ⁱⁱⁱ

Working with Women^{iv}

Adithi-Dumra is working in twenty five villages in Sitamarhi implementing a number of programmes on health,

ⁱⁱ Atrocities on Women and Girl Children, A study report of 10 villages in Dumra Block of Sitamarhi District, Bihar, 1998-199, Adithi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adithi Annual Report, 2002.

^{iv} Thanks to Manasi and Paranita for organising the visit, translating and enabling me to meet many women who gave the information in the rest of this article.

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education and flood relief, among others. At the core of their work, however, are groups made up of the poorest women in the villages. Using the methodology known as Reflect, the groups aim to educate women to support them in working together to bring about change in their lives. Whereas the Reflect methodology was developed with the main aim of developing a participatory approach to literacy teaching, the main focus of Adithi-Dumra's work has been on the process of building the women's confidence and capacity to work on issues that are important to them, both large and small. What use is literacy to us? they asked, when we do not have land, water or food.

Adithi carries out a number of training programmes on skill development in relation to agriculture, animal rearing as well as for savings and loans. They also organise workshops on particular issues, such as legal rights, when women request more information and education. Another programme involves training the dais - traditional birth attendants - in basic hygiene and modern medicine.

Teaching literacy and numeracy is still important, even if not the main aim. In 1991, the literacy rate for women in the area was about 13%. Two of women now leading groups in their villages told the story of how they were determined to learn to read and write. Rubi, a young Muslim woman, came to Adithi and insisted that they teach her literacy. They agreed, on condition that she, in turn, passed on her knowledge to others. Now a Reflect instructor herself, she has been employed by the National Literacy Campaign and runs two Reflect circles. She is now full of ideas and confidence, and even stood for election to the local panchayat (village council), narrowly missing being elected.

Another older woman, Sudhama, smiled mischievously as she demonstrated how she used to hide her reading materials inside the folds of her sari. Her husband and other family members would not have approved of her learning to read and write. But now they are happy because she was also able to take a loan from their savings group which she used to do some small-scale trading and went on to buy some rickshaws to hire out.

Sudhama is also an instructor in a village group. She explained how she teaches numeracy. In their group, they draw a picture of the day's work, with women's work on one side and men's on the other. They draw a stroke for every hour worked by the woman, usually between 16 and 18 a day, and the same for the men, usually between 8 and 10 hours a day. It is easy then for women to calculate the difference and learn simple arithmetic.

Sudhama also explained how she saw the wider achievements of their women's groups. "Through this circle," she said. "Women lose their fear. We are no longer afraid. We get recognition. And we get a place to sit and talk together."

The story of how these women of Sitamarhi have lost their fear and how they work together to change their lives is not short or straightforward. At its core is the committed long-term work of women activists who have set in motion this process of change and have supported the women through many difficulties and tragedies, as well as their day-to-day struggle for a life of dignity.

It is not a story which focuses on one single issue, whether this is land rights, agricultural productivity, savings and loans, income-generation, health or education, caste class or gender, although there are many struggles around all these issues. The main theme is the change in the women themselves, in their growing confidence and capacity to act brought about by the long-term process of education in their village groups. This process is based on valuing women's experience and knowledge in a way that builds their confidence and encourages them to work together to take action for change.

Many stories to tell

In a few short days spent in Dumra and nearby, women from the village circles, told me many stories of changes they had brought about through their actions.

Some were stories of simple solidarity. A poor pregnant woman, whose husband had migrated and not sent money home. The women collected money so that she could get medical checks and went with her to the hospital. Another poor family had no money to pay for the funeral of a woman who died. The women's group collected this money for them.

Other stories involve activities in the community such as regular village clean-ups or working with the polio-eradication campaign to check that all children have been immunised.

Often the women have organised to take some action to demand their rights. For example, they make sure that

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women entitled to receive rice, wheat and oil under the food security scheme actually receive it. When flood relief rations were not given out, women went to find where they were being stored and distributed it themselves.

Earlier, Adithi ran many centres for non-formal education for children in the villages. Now they have moved on to lobby for the government to provide education for the children. Parents' committees have been set up to monitor the performance of teachers and women leaders have to sign before a teacher can draw her or his salary. Many of those who have learned to read and write in Adithi circles have now gone on to get paid employment in government schools. A current campaign being carried out by many of the groups is to make sure that children in government schools get the midday meal that they are entitled to.

Sheil, a dalit leader, told the story of how she had led a struggle for land for 23 families in her community for land. In theory, they were given land in 1976, as part of a scheme to redistribute land to landless people. But they never saw this land, even though they regularly received demands to pay tax on its produce. She and women from the other families, however, led a long struggle, involving many meetings with officials, violent attacks and even a High Court action. After nearly thirty years, they were finally able to farm their land. Not only have some families managed to win land, but in some cases it is in the women's name.

Ownership of houses is another issue that women have taken up. In several villages, the women's group has ensured that a government scheme for housing has been properly implemented, and in many cases have even won the right for the house to be registered in the name of the women of the family.

Other activities involve solidarity with women labelled as witches. Usually, this is a way for relatives to steal land from single or widowed women, or get hold of other assets such as cattle. Women have been successful in acting in solidarity with such women. In one case, they called a village meeting and told the leaders that if one woman was to be thrown out as a witch, then they were all witches and would all go.

This year all the groups are looking in detail at discrimination and crimes against women. In their discussions and circles, they are drawing charts showing the differential treatment of boy and girl children. One chart showed how boys got an additional meal in the day and only boys were given milk or eggs. Other discussions have been around the new law against using scans to diagnose the sex of a baby and the groups have been actively monitoring the lives of baby girls. Many groups are keeping a register of all the births and deaths in their village and lobbying also for the local authorities to keep proper records. Where a group judges that a baby girl is at risk, they liaise closely with the mother to try to ensure her well-being and health and give practical support where necessary.

The activities of the women's groups do not develop without many struggles within the family and the community. Mantonia, for example, a founder member of one of the groups was the first in her village to take a loan and travelled to Patna by herself for training. She faced opposition from men in her family and the community. Shail, the leader of the group of landless women claiming their land, explained that it caused a lot of trouble in her family and community when she first became active with Adithi. Her husband used to beat her. Rubi and other women in her village faced opposition from religious leaders who said that women should not meet together. At one point, a religious leader threatened to throw out of the village any woman who went to the Adithi group. The women's group replied: "Fine, if you throw out one woman, then we will all go."

An important arena for struggle is the village council, the panchayat, traditionally dominated by higher-caste men. The panchayat is supposed to hold a general assembly, at least once a year and if this is not done with the participation of women, the women can invalidate its decisions. When a particular issue arises, for example a woman declared a witch or an incidence of violence, the panchayat can take a decision and impose fines or other punishments. Hence the women often call a meeting of the panchayat to expose an injustice and make their views known. They are often successful in arriving at a solution to particular cases this way.

The growing strength and confidence of women in the villages is also reflected in the elections to the panchayats. In Bihar, the policy of reserving seats for women has not yet been implemented. Nevertheless, thirty four women from the village groups have now been elected.

Another success is the reduction in the number of child marriages. Whereas earlier, many girls were married at twelve or thirteen, now this is almost unknown and girls are rarely married before sixteen and some even refuse to consider marriage until they are older. As part of their campaign this year, one village has been declared 'an

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ideal village' because none of the crimes against women have been committed this year.

Another aspect of women's growing confidence is their new-found mobility. Whereas previously many had been confined to the home, village and surrounding area, many now travel far and wide. Some travel to Patna and others to Delhi finding their own way and determined not to be cheated or misled. One woman went by herself to Haryana, another state, to trace her child who was working there and bring her home.

Some of the most difficult cases to resolve are those of rape, where frequently families are afraid or ashamed to file a case, and the culprit escapes free, or where a case is filed against him, escapes through bribery. This year, the women's groups in all the villages have taken up the case of the rape of a one-year old girl. They have held meetings and protests, including a dharna for one day involving 5,000 women.

The women's groups still face many problems. Sometimes their actions are too late or they cannot prevent a tragedy. There are also many more villages where women face similar problems but have not yet been mobilised around them.

The floods that come to the region every year cause great economic problems. It is difficult to pay back loans when the fields are flooded for three months in the year and there is no work. Alternatives to agricultural work are also still difficult to develop and many of the infrastructure problems can only be changed through large-scale intervention. The problems of bad communications and infrastructure are difficult to solve at local level, as are those of the annual flooding caused by environmental problems in Nepal.

One afternoon, we had a discussion at the Adithi centre in Dumra about the way the women's groups work together. As the light changed from the bright light of day to the soft pinks and greys of the Indian dusk, the women said they had to go home. As we ended the meeting, they sang together:

Break your silence
Break all bonds
All women come and forget about old customs
When the storm comes
Take a boat.
Don't be afraid
All people are equal, there is no class or caste
There is no need for darkness
We need only light.

In Sitamarhi, a new Sita is being born, who is no longer silent or afraid. The starting point is a place where women can sit together, talk and sing. Step by step, women are transforming their lives both individually, and together, breaking down ancient barriers of caste and religion to build a new future for themselves and their children, both boys and girls.

Jane Tate, November 2004

Notes