Critical Stories of Change - IV

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Critical Stories of Change

'Tomorrow Will Not Be Like Yesterday'
Sahariya Tribals Emerge From the Shadows

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Glossary

AA	ActionAid
APL	Above Poverty Line
AJAM	Adivasi Janjati Adhikar Manch
ASHA	Accredited social health activists
BDO	Block Development Officer
BGVS	Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CID	Centre for Integrated Development
DM	District Magistrate
FRA	Forest Rights Act
FHFC	Freedom from Hunger and Fear Campaign
GP	Gram Panchayat
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
IAY	Indira Awaaz Yojana
JMS	Jagrath Mahila Samiti
LARR	Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013
MAF	Manav Adhikar Forum
MAK	Manav Adhikar Kendra
MFP	Minor Forest Produce
MDM	Mid Day Meal
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MoEF	Ministry of Environment and Forests
MP	Madhya Pradesh
NAPM	National Alliance of People's Movements
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection Of Child Rights
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
PDS	Public Distribution System
PESA	Provision of Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PTG	Primitive Tribal Group
PSSS	Parhit Samaj Sevi Sanstha
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
PWDVA	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act
RTE	Right To Education
RTI	Right To Information
SAJAG	Sahariya Jan Gatbandhan
SDM	Sub-divisional Magistrate
SDO	Sub-divisional Office
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes
YSS	Yuva Shakti Sangathan

Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –

women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this story, **'Tomorrow Will Not Be Like Yesterday': *Sahariya Tribals Emerge From the Shadows***

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra,
Executive Director, ActionAid India

Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend.

ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

It was the thick of winter. The sky was overcast and the mornings were enshrouded in a mist that always seemed to thicken as we nudged towards the forests in our journey. But we were fortunate to have Saurabh Kumar, Programme Officer, ActionAid, pilot us through the villages of the Freedom From Hunger and Fear Campaign, first in Madhya Pradesh's Shivpuri district and then across the state border in Rajasthan's Baran district. Also very familiar with the programme was Itishree Sahoo, Manager, Monitoring and Evaluation, at ActionAid's head office. She often chipped in when time was running out by interviewing people. For

that effort and care, she has my grateful thanks. Umesh Vashisth of Centre for Integrated Development and Raghvendra Singh of Parhit Samaj Sevi Sanstha, both Gwalior-based organisations, which were partners in this programme, accompanied us and shared their many insights about the situation in Madhya Pradesh. In Rajasthan, we stopped over at the Sankalp campus in Bhawargarh. While we could not meet Moti Lal, Sankalp's founder and secretary, it was possible to catch up with him later on the telephone. Meanwhile we spoke at length to Gajraj Mehta, Vijay Mehta and Chandalal Bhargav, key Sankalp representatives, as well as Jagrath Mahila Samiti's Gyarsi Bai, Kalyani Bai and Jasodha Bai, who spent a lot of time briefing us on many challenges they faced over as social activists. An interaction with the Baran collector, Sumati Lal Vora provided a glimpse of how the administration perceived the Sahariyas.

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About the author

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‘Tomorrow Will Not Be Like Yesterday’

Sahariya Tribals Emerge From the Shadows

“We women could not wear slippers before the men. When we had to go to the jungle to collect wood, we would walk barefoot until we left the vicinity of the village. Only then did we put on our footwear.”

– Guddi Bai
Pipronia village, Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh

“Once we got our freedom, we went to the landlords and said that we will no longer be working on their fields as we once did. They wanted us to give them another year of our labour but we walked away.”

–Pritam Sahariya
Sunda village, Baran district, Rajasthan

Introduction

Guddi Bai Sahariya knew the forests that adjoined her village of Pipronia in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh like the back of her hand. Like her mother and mother's mother, she was familiar with every tree that grew there, every leaf that could be picked, every tuber that could be dug up and cooked. She may not have gone to school for more than a few years but nobody could take away the education that she had gleaned from her daily trips to the forest. But Guddi Bai's abiding fear every time she went into the forest was that she would have to encounter the men of the Forest Department who would abuse her and threaten to throw her out for daring to collect a handful of forest produce. It was only when the Sahariyas of Pipronia came together to struggle against such repression that Guddi Bai could confront the forest guards who had threatened her with eviction earlier and say, "This forest is ours.urs."

So often did that visitor called Death take away their newborns, that the Sahariyas were to regard all the children born to them as "god's progeny" (*bhagwan ke bachche*) until their little ones had reached a stage where their chances of survival up to adulthood seemed a little more certain. What were the circumstances that had created an attitude of such tragic resignation? Infant mortality levels in the Sahariya populated areas were sharply higher than for the rest of the population.

The Sahariyas lived largely in central India in the region where the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh converged. Once they were termed as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG), a nomenclature that was subsequently changed by the Government of India to that of Particularly

Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). Tribals who came under this classification were marked by three broad characteristics: use of pre-agricultural level technology; very low levels of literacy; and a declining or stagnant population. PVTG communities have generally led isolated lives and traditionally depended on the forest for their basic requirements of life. They figured low in human development indices, whether it was in terms of levels of education, health or the capacity to earn a livelihood. Among the largest communities within the PVTG category were the Sahariyas – the 2001 census put their number at 4,50,217, a little less than four per cent of India's total tribal population. Their name in itself pointed to their forest origins – 'sa' translating as 'companion' in the local tongue, and 'haria' signifying the tiger.

Recalled Saurabh Kumar, a programme officer with ActionAid, "When I first visited the village of Kolaras in Madhya Pradesh's Shivpuri district in 2006, five children had died there within a span of seven days. I remember sitting at the door of one home writing something, when the man of the house told me that he had had been very busy that day because he had had to cremate one of his children. When I expressed my condolences, his reply astonished me. He said, "Saab, that child was not mine but God's, it is only after our children complete five years of life do we consider them as ours."

It was said that at one time the Sahariyas were a proud, strong, independent people, who developed their own systems of community governance and followed distinct religious and cultural practices. Their knowledge of their local environment was unassailable; they knew the ways of the animals and birds that had inhabited their jungles and the medicinal and nutritive properties of its flora.

How did the Sahariyas traditionally use the forests? They practiced shifting cultivation on forest land and their animals grazed within its grassy spaces. They also collected a wide range of minor forest produce, including wood, fodder, flowers, leaves, resins, gums, seeds and medicinal plants. Some of this, like tendu leaves, became an important source of income for the community. They also used the ponds, wells and other water bodies within the forest for their household needs, for bathing and for fishing. They buried or burnt their dead in the forests and here too were the sacred spots where their deities lived. The forest for the Sahariya had always been more than a place of habitation; it was the very source of life, constituting in itself an all encompassing universe.

Loss Of A Resource Base

Over a period of time, the community was slowly dispossessed of this resource base. Draconian forest laws ensured that the land they had once considered their own was no longer theirs to cultivate. Their access to the jungle was increasingly denied to them by forest guards and the hirelings of the timber mafia. Thus, the poorest and most marginalised of people could no longer gather the sources of nutrition they had once obtained from the forests, nor the minor forest produce (MFP) that had brought them a little income.

The model of development that gained currency in post-liberalised India from the early Nineties dealt a particularly cruel hand to the Sahariyas community, leaving the majority in a state of limbo. Apart from environmental stresses caused by urbanisation and unregulated mining and extraction of water, which caused the forest cover to shrink, in several pockets a spate of constructions showcasing a "shining" India – dams, roads, sanctuaries and tourist hubs and the like – resulted in the displacement of a large number tribal villages. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, 24 villages were shifted out of the Palpur Kuno sanctuary to create the right environment for the introduction of the Asiatic Lion into the sanctuary. The Manikheda dam in Madhya Pradesh's Shivpuri district that was built on the Sindh river and completed in 2008, saw at least 13 villages being submerged. Similarly, in Rajasthan, the Sahariya community has been directly and adversely impacted by land acquisition to create the Shahabad wildlife sanctuary.

Alienation from the forests left the Sahariyas landless and without the necessary skills that may have allowed them a toehold in the formal economy. The literacy level of the community in the early 2000s said it all. According to the 2001 census, only 28.7 per cent Sahariyas were literate in Madhya Pradesh, with women having a literacy level of just 15.9 per cent. The majority of those deemed literate – 62.2 per cent – had only primary school education, with just 1.8 per cent from the community having made it to the matric/higher secondary levels, and a negligible 0.5 per cent having graduated. The figures in Rajasthan were only marginally better – an overall literacy level of 34.2 with 18.7 per cent women considered literate. Given this, the community had no survival

option apart from taking up wage work, either as agricultural labourers or workers in mines, stone quarries and brick kilns. Seasonal migration thus became a part of the pattern of their lives, which left them unable to benefit from state's welfare measures.

The high levels of indebtedness within the community reflected their failure to negotiate the demands of a monetised economy, which meant that they could easily fall into the clutches of unscrupulous elements that robbed them of their resources and reduced them to a pool of cheap labour. Here again a lack of general awareness and information meant that the ability of the community to secure justice or benefit from existing regulatory measures was minimal.

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The government on its part, while claiming to be concerned about the plight of tribals, proved ineffectual. On paper there were departments like the Sahariya Vikas Abhikaran in Madhya Pradesh and special "ghar-badis" for Sahariyas in Rajasthan, but the record of service delivery to the community was uniformly poor. Bureaucratic delays, lack of accountability and corruption marked most state interventions. Even when situations of bondage were as clear as daylight, governments refused to acknowledge it. For instance, the widespread phenomenon of "hali" in Rajasthan's Baran district – a system of bondage, where people were made to work at any point of day or night without account or just compensation for those whom they were indebted to – was routinely dismissed as a traditional agricultural practice, despite the fact that it has been specifically banned under The Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act, 1976.

The lower bureaucracy, local administrators and police would even seek to benefit from such exploitation, after painting the tribals as "lazy", "drunken", or "good-for-nothing", and therefore by implication responsible for their own impoverished status.

Loss of Cultural Identity

Along with the loss of traditional habitat, came another enormous loss – that of cultural identity. Once categorised as 'animist' in religious belief, the proselytising activities of dominant religious elites led to the Sahariyas to adopt, or being forced to adopt, majoritarian practices of worship. Festivals, forms of worship and ceremonies of marriage and death also got transformed in the process, with even government schemes meant for tribals marked by mainstream nomenclatures and rituals.

Ramhit Sahariya, a community tribal leader and former panchayat member of Amola village in Shivpuri district, explained how Sahariya wedding rituals have undergone a change in recent years, "Earlier, the brother-in-law of the bride would preside over the marriage ceremony in which the bride and groom would apply a tilak on each other's foreheads after they would be considered as married. Today, no wedding is complete without a pandit (Brahmin priest) in attendance. Now we also have dowry, something unheard of earlier."

Despite such assimilation, however, the Sahariyas could not breach rigid caste hierarchies. Their neighbourhoods, termed as Saheranas, invariably straddled the outer boundaries of villages they inhabited. The upper castes regarded the tribals as they would the dalit – untouchables and outcastes. Even Sahariya children were not spared the abuse and maltreatment, whether in schools or on the streets.

Transformation in the dominant patterns of life brought with it changes in dietary habits, which held catastrophic consequences. Traditional sources of nutrition like forest fruits, shoots, roots, jungle birds and animals began to disappear from the daily diet. This was both because of the denial of access to the forests as well as pressures to conform to practices of a larger society that had proscribed

meat-eating. Staples like local millets and coarse grains were also difficult to procure and, at least in the early days, even the substandard wheat distributed by the government at subsidised prices, was either insufficient to support the entire family or could not be accessed because of the lack of PDS cards.

The cumulative impact of all these developments resulted in widespread malnutrition among the Sahariyas, which also made them extremely susceptible to diseases with tuberculosis. To get adequate medical attention meant the expense of travelling long distances to a nearby town, and even then there was no guarantee of proper attention. "They give us the same medicine, whether it is for fever or for diarrhoea, or they will put us on a drip (*ek bottle chadhathe the*) and charged us Rs 250 for it," was the wry comment of one elderly Sahariya.

Patriarchal Order

If the community at large experienced repression in manifold ways, for Sahariya women it was far worse. The responsibilities of keeping the household going meant that they were the ones who had to trek long distances for water or go deep into the forests to collect firewood and fodder. This left them vulnerable to assaults of all kinds, including sexual harassment at the hands of vagrants and forest guards. Since the Sahariyas feared the police almost as much as they would their assaulters, such attacks were hardly ever recorded and the criminals continued to conduct themselves with impunity.

But it was not just the outsiders. Since Sahariyas were a patriarchal society, for women discrimination marked every aspect of the life, right from their infancy. Not only did they have no inheritance rights, they had no decision making powers within the family. Not only were they reduced to being the household's beasts of burden, they received no education worth the name. The Sahariyas traditionally practiced polygamy and child marriage and male progeny were privileged in various ways. Significantly, according to the 2001 census, while the sex ratio of Scheduled Tribes in India was 978, the Sahariyas recorded a much lower

figure. In Rajasthan, their sex ratio stood at 961, while in Madhya Pradesh it was still lower at 938

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Perhaps nothing symbolised the secondary status of Sahariya women more than the fact that they were traditionally not allowed to don footwear before the men. As Guddi Bai of Pipronia village, in Madhya Pradesh's Shivpuri district explained, "Ten years ago, when we had to go to the jungle to collect wood, we would walk barefoot until we left the vicinity of the village. Only then did we dare to put on our sandals."

The story is told of a case from a Shivpuri village. A Sahariya was taking his wife to the hospital and because she was seriously ill, he had instructed her to wear her sandals as they left their home. This information reached the local jati panchayat members who summoned the husband and fined him two hundred rupees because his wife had contravened the iron law of the community. His protests that his wife was seriously ill made no difference. The incident figured in the mainstream media because it had occurred just when Uma Bharati had been being sworn in as Madhya Pradesh's first woman chief minister in 2003. The government, embarrassed by headlines comparing the fact that Madhya Pradesh was getting a woman chief minister with jati panchayats ruling against women wearing footwear, got the Collector to rush footwear for all the women in the village!

The government's response in this case indicated that it was only looking to quickly paper over the serious gender divide within the community for the sake of appearances. It had never taken undertaken the task of ending the structural inequalities that had resulted in such a divide. Indeed, various state programmes and policy interventions tended to perceive Sahariya women largely through the prism of their domestic roles and the approach adopted was paternalistic and protective rather than based on a recognition of their rights.

An Engagement Begins

It wasn't until consecutive years of drought in the early 2000s took their toll and evidence surfaced of starvation deaths of Sahariyas and their children, did the country even realise the magnitude of the tragedy that was unfolding.

The states of Madhya and Rajasthan had both experienced a poor monsoon in 1999 and by early 2000 were experiencing a punishing drought. The next three years also saw poor rainfall in this region with devastating consequences. According to some reports at least 300 Sahariya tribals died between 2000 and 2003. It was in fact the starvation deaths of Sahariyas in Rajasthan's Baran district, that had prompted the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) to file a Public Interest Litigation in 2001 before the Supreme Court seeking the legal enforcement of the right to food and which ultimately led to national Right to Food legislation.

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In 2002, a study quoted by the Commissioners of the Supreme Court in the PUCL versus UOI and Others, 2001, documented the destitution that marked the community. It noted that Sahariyas had an annual per capita income of Rs. 2691 and that half the Sahariya households were deep in debt. One compelling piece of data highlighted that while the average life span of an Indian in 2001 was 63 years, for the Sahariya it was around 45 years. The district of Baran was designated by the United Nations World Food Programme as a food insecure hotspot, while the report filed by the State Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court had noted that no fewer than 50 hunger-related deaths in Shivpuri district had taken place in 2004-05 alone. Recalled Moti Lal, one of the three founders of the Baran-based organisation, Sankalp, "Nobody in the community in those days had a ration card and getting a sustainable source of livelihood was next to impossible. Starvation was the inevitable result." The Sahariyas were

disproportionately hungry during years of drought because they no longer had access to forests, their cattle were perishing by the day, and there was no agricultural work to be had because of drought conditions. With the Supreme Court having cracked down on illegal mining, even the option of working in mines was limited. At the same time, even as the national and international media was covering the situation, state governments in both Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh had no real strategy to address the problem. Commented Umesh Vashisth, of the Centre for Integrated Development, Gwalior, "What was particularly tragic was that even in this state of absolute destitution, Sahariyas were not accepted as equals. The ruling elites only perceived them as a pool of cheap labour."

Representatives of ActionAid had begun to visit the affected regions along with civil society activists as early as 2002. Raghvendra Singh of the Gwalior-based Parhit Samaj Sevi Sanstha was part of a small initiative to collate data. "With the help of ActionAid and volunteers who were paid a modest stipend, we collated data from 200 villages around this time. The data indicated that numerous Sahariya families were on the verge of starvation, but even clearer was the fact that government schemes were not reaching them."

ActionAid joined local social activists in mobilising on the issue and Singh remembered going along with members of the Sahariya community to participate in a public meeting in Delhi, in which many who were part of the Right to Food movement, like Jean Dreze and N.C. Saxena had also participated.

Driven by the fact that the state was either unable or unwilling to address the problem, a joint campaign was mounted by five groups to focus on starvation among the Sahariyas. They were the Centre for Integrated Development (CID) and

Parhit Samaj Sevi Sanstha (PSSS) – both working in the Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh – and Sankalp, Doosra Dashak (DD) and the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), working among the tribals and other marginalised communities in Rajasthan's Baran district. With Sankalp anchoring the Rajasthan part of the programme, the Manav Adhikar Forum (MAF) was set up as a common platform to anchor the Freedom from Hunger and Fear (FHF) programme that was supported as a short-term intervention by ActionAid in 2004.

The title of the programme, which translated in Hindi into *Bhay Aur Bhook Se Mukt Karyakram*, held a certain resonance for the Sahariyas who knew what it was to be hungry and fearful. Said Saurabh Kumar, "ActionAid did not want the FHF programme to be just another project; we wanted to perceive this issue not through the prism of welfare but that of rights. It was clear to us that if the Sahariyas were to rid themselves of hunger, it was crucial that they were not intimidated by the feudal order."

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It was understood that if you eliminate the fear factor, food would not be a problem. In other words, if people had the power to take on a system that made them fearful, they will be able to access their full rights as human beings including their right to food. That fear was all-pervasive, was all too evident. Both Singh and Vashisht recalled how even the sight of a car would terrify the Sahariyas in the early days. If the "*saab log*" came their way, they would kneel before them in abject surrender This submission, Moti Lal pointed out, was the result of decades of repression.

The initial objective of the MAF network was to make Sahariyas aware of their rights, particularly their right to food. Once the short-term intervention ended, it was felt that addressing hunger and fear in the Sahariya community demanded structural transformations that could only come about through an extended engagement. ActionAid therefore decided to support MAF's FHF as a long-term programme in 2005. The immediate

mission of the FHF was to strengthen the Sahariya community to the point where it would no longer be dependent on any outside entity and had gained the confidence to steer its own affairs and regain its lost identity. The vision of the initiative reflected the principles of the ActionAid's second Country Strategic Paper, 'Taking Sides', which had urged the building of sustained partnerships with marginalised communities.

The FHF programme was a complex one that often seemed liked several interventions combined into one. It involved five partners located in two states – MP and Rajasthan. In MP, it covered five blocks – Kolaras, Pichhore, Karera, Khaniyadhana and Pohri – all of them in the district of Shivpuri, while in Rajasthan the focus was on the south eastern district of Baran, specifically the Sahariya dominated blocks of Kishanganj and Shahabad. Over time around 200 villages were indirectly influenced by the programme, while 40 villages came directly under it.

If the geographical dimensions of the programme presented a challenge, an even bigger challenge was to bring each partner on the same page. This was not easy because each came from different backgrounds and locations and read the prevailing political and social situation in its own distinct way. Initially, there were tensions, even accusations that some groups were only using the Sahariyas to get credibility. If some partners voiced reservations on becoming dependent on external funding – one partner in fact had serious ideological issues about taking support from an international agency like ActionAid – there were also disagreements on how the funds should be distributed. Those from Madhya Pradesh argued that since the area of work in their state happened to be larger, the funds should also be proportionately allocated. The Rajasthan groups felt they were entitled to an equal share.

Such issues were ultimately sorted out through discussions, especially after the MAF partners met in Delhi during the India Social Forum of 2006 and decided to leave their differences behind. The ultimate goal, everyone agreed, was to ensure that the Sahariyas were enabled to lead a life of security, dignity and confidence. As one MAF partner put it, "Each partner in the network had its own distinct strengths and could therefore complement the other. To smoothen intra-group functioning, the post of chief functionary – initially envisaged in the programme – was removed. Instead it was decided that should a dispute break out, one among them would be given the authority to address it."

ActionAid, on its part, did not seek to impose any agenda of its own on the group. Since a sustainable network required the hard work of coordination that no one group could singly handle, ActionAid stepped in as a unifying entity during the initial phase. It instituted a field office in Shivpuri town that functioned both as a resource and coordination platform. Recalled Saurabh Kumar, who had worked as a regional officer in Shivpuri, "The field office was set up given the complexity of the programme. In 2007, once the MAF had stabilised and the community based organisations had acquired confidence, it was shut down."

Community Ownership

The discriminations the community experienced were multi-layered and understanding them meant peeling away each veneer and coming to the root cause of specific oppressions. In order to do this, extensive discussions began with the community and within it. These conversations were a two-way process: while the Sahariyas were made aware of their rights and entitlements, the MAF network constituents comprehended better the repression the community faced. What emerged was that the main reason for hunger and fear among the Sahariyas was their alienation from the forest and lack of access to land.

The vicious circle of hunger and fear, therefore, needed to be broken and for this the institutions of the forest guard, the patwari, and the police needed to be demystified. Over time, the FHF programme attempted to break these hierarchies in interesting ways. The MAF partners revealed how during

programmes organised for the distribution of land pattas, for instance, the patwari would be called and be made to sit on the mat spread on the floor, while the Sahariyas who were to receive these pattas would be given chairs. This symbolic inversion of the power pyramid at first caused discomfort among the community members. According to one account, community members would prefer to squat on the floor rather than sit on a chair – many of them, in fact, did not even know how to use a chair.

Since the MAF network wanted each member of the Sahariya community to get personally involved in the programme and take ownership of its processes, it was important to have a community based organisations. That was how the Sahariya Jan Gatbandhan, better known by its acronym SAJAG, came into existence. The basic unit of SAJAG was a core group of eight members at the village level, each representing a cluster of five to seven villages. Every core group had two women, two adult men and women, two youth and two children – the four broad categories that formed the human resource base of the FHF programme. Core group members were initially nominated but over time elections became institutionalised.

To ensure that the network had a physical grassroots presence, Manav Adhikar Kendras (MAKs), or centres for the empowerment of Sahariya rights, were also set up – one for every cluster of five to seven villages. These centres were envisaged as dedicated meeting places, where coordinators of the network, SAJAG representatives and members of the community could come together, hold discussions and plan their strategies of change. This was also where the resources of the network – documents, registers, books and other publications, as well as copies of relevant acts – were stored for safekeeping.

The strategic direction for the FHF programme was given by the MAF partners through monthly meetings with SAJAG representatives, while a campaign coordinator was responsible for executing the overall programme, which was supervised at the grassroots by cluster coordinators who looked after around 10 villages and were drawn largely from the community.

"Both the creation of SAJAG and the instituting of the Manav Adhikar Kendras served to enthuse the community a great deal and give them the confidence that they too can conduct their own affairs. Every time they saw a SAJAG banner, every time they visited a Kendra, they perceived them as symbols of their rights and aspirations. We also trained members of core groups in the principles of basic book keeping, filling forms, maintenance of files," revealed Chandalal Bhargav of Sankalp, who was closely associated with the running of the MAK in Shahabad block of Rajasthan.

Initially, it was the men from the community who were more prominent in SAJAG activities, but from the very beginning it was made clear that women had to be active too – in fact, a greater presence of women was encouraged. This approach paid rich dividends. For a community like the Sahariyas, where women had once had to remove their footwear before the men, this spoke volumes for the programme's relevance. "We found our tongues but, more importantly, through our meetings we learnt to use them," commented one woman.

This exposure to new ideas and actions helped many women to emerge as leaders in their own right, making their own presentations, addressing public meetings and strategising on

a range of issues. In Pipronia village of Shivpuri, local Sahariya women not only staged their own programmes on occasions such as International Women's Day and Human Rights Day, they learnt how to use the Right to Information law to gain

information on entitlements. Once they got this information, they learnt to confront forest guards who tried to keep them away from the forests. Recalled Guddi Bai from Pipronia village, “Once some police officers who were holding a party for Holi came into one of our villages and took some Sahariya girls to dance for them. Our core group took immediate action, the girls were released and the policemen were punished.”

In Baran, the Jagrath Mahila Samiti (JMS), which had been set up earlier by Sankalp (see box) in Bhawargarh village, got involved in FHF activities and led many initiatives. Having taken part in the social audits organised by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and leaders like Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey, its members were well versed in scutinising muster rolls and identifying cases of corruption. They also learnt to file FIRs in cases of domestic violence and rape. The JMS, now registered as a society, has set up its own Self Help Group that manufactures *amla muraba*, preserves and squashes to generate employment and income for community women.

Explained Gyarsi Bai Sahariya, a senior leader in the JMS, “We decided to focus on forest rights, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act,

Right to Information, Right to Food, and domestic violence. In our region, land alienation was major concern. So we did a survey of 2,500 to 3,000 people who were alienated from their land in the Shahabad and Kishanganj blocks of Baran and unearthed 982 cases.”

From the very beginning it was the women who were responsible for developing forest enclosures. Around 2006, JMS, through its interaction with state officials, successfully lobbied to allow tribal women gain access to degraded forest land that was lying vacant and to develop it by planting trees. Over the years, JMS women have revived 10,000 hectares in this way. This was women power at its most effective. Said Saurabh Kumar, “Even the men soon understood the impact of women’s activism

and how it changed the face of their village. So the old opposition to them attending meetings, and so on, also disappeared with time."

Children were the other, largely overlooked, category within the Sahariya community. From the start, MAF partners had been convinced that bringing children into the process of community empowerment was vital for the FHF programme. Explained Raghvendra Singh, "Children were important for two reasons – one, because it is they who will constitute the future of the community. Two, because Sahariya children themselves were in a very bad way. You just had to see their faces to realise their hunger. Their schools were non-functional, their teachers were indifferent, they were pushed into the labour force and into marriage before they were old enough."

Instead of adopting a welfarist attitude towards children, the programme recognised them as equal citizens with inherent and inviolable rights, including of course the right to food and education. Even before the GOI's Right to Education law, the FHF recognised school education for every Sahariya child as a non-negotiable principle and, from 2006, a dedicated network of child rights centres – or Bal Adhikar Kendras – were set up in the FHF villages. Over the years, 35 such centres came up, emerging as spaces that the children could call their own, furnished with sports goods and games. Through this network that almost paralleled the SAJAG one, Sahariya children were provided an understanding of their rights and given the confidence to claim them. For instance, when Sahariya children in Dongarpur village of Madhya Pradesh's Kolaras block, were asked to bring their own vessels for their mid day meal, the children immediately protested and got the school to back down. Today, they are alert to any act of discrimination (see box). They also got opportunities to interact with children from other villages and imbibe the spirit of democracy through Bal Panchayats.

As they grouped up, many of the Bal Adhikar Kendra children began to participate in community programmes as youth activists. Sankalp had its own dedicated youth platform, the Yuva Shakti Sangathan (YSS), and its young activists have assisted JMS in all its actions. The words of young Banwari Sahariya of Sodana village, Kishanganj block, a YSS activist, revealed the multiplier impacts of mobilising children and young adults, "When I was in Class VII we were taken to a health camp.

They told us there that although Sahariyas are poor and powerless if we all get together nobody can attack us. I have never forgotten those words and that's why I want to work for the community."

While it was true that some individuals and groups were more effective than others, a structure was nevertheless built by the MAF network that could potentially take on an exploitative order. By 2009, five years after FHF was flagged off, major shifts were already apparent. The deathly hunger of the early years of the decade had dissipated considerably. Each family in the community could now get 35 kilos of food grain per month thanks to the antyodaya cards they now had. Levels of schooling had risen and every family could also get work for 100 days under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which was later to be renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Besides this, there were grain banks in several villages to ensure that there was something to fall back on in times of drought and family reversals.

Seasonal migration, although still evident, had also declined noticeably. More children were in school and Bal Adhikar Kendras had been established in 88 villages with a combined membership base of 2474 children, 1165 of whom were girls. SAJAG had also spread its wings. Not only did it now collect an annual membership fee of five rupees from each family, it was increasingly taking over the running of the FHF programme, which was a good augury for future sustainability. Above all there was a clear understanding of rights and entitlements among all sections of the Sahariyas, from the child to the adult. The comment of one observer of the programme in 2009 was significant, "An index of sense of independence of people is visible... None of the villagers including children asked or complained about lack of services."

Activism On the Forest Act

But there were gaps nonetheless. One major lacuna was that while everyone knew there were many useful laws, the lack of legal literacy came in the way of the community's ability to make use of them.

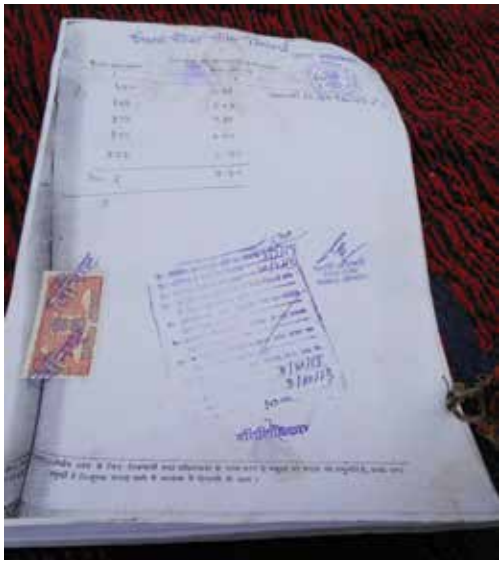
One such law was the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), which was enacted in 2006. The great importance this law had for a traditional forest community like the Sahariyas was slow to be realised. The programme had hitherto focused on laws like the Right to Food, Right to Information and MGNREGA, now it had to train its efforts in a new direction. Claim making under the norms set down under the FRA needed to be understood clearly and there was anxiety that other powerful sections may be quicker in asserting their claims at the expense of the Sahariyas.

"It took a while to understand the new law and how it could be deployed for a PVTG category like the Sahariyas. This is where MAF's links with other groups helped immensely. We benefitted from the legal and activist expertise from a range of sources," stated Saurabh Kumar. At a time when a lot of vested interests had come together against the FRA, the MAF, SAJAG and JMS began to join networks lobbying for its immediate implementation.

Vashisth recalled, "A parliamentary committee, set up to notify the governing rules on the Forest Rights Act invited us to present our views. It was difficult to reach Delhi at short notice but we did, making sure to explain to the committee the fears of the Sahariya community of being evicted from its forests. We argued that they should all be given 'below poverty level' status and that the pattas issued should carry the names of both husband and wife."

The hard work really began after the law came into force in 2008, two years after it was enacted. There were many aspects of the law that had to be explained to the community, including the differences between forest land which they could access and revenue land they could not. The various types of rights that the law granted needed to be understood: rights that allowed beneficiaries to access the forest land that they had been cultivating prior to December 13, 2005; rights to those who had a patta or government lease but whose entitlements had been illegally taken away by the

Forest Department; usufructuary rights to make use of forest produce, grazing lands, water bodies, etc, which fall within the limits of the forest; the right to protect and manage the forest, and so on.



"In the FHF programme villages, we distributed booklets that explained the Act in simple Hindi in a FAQ format," said Vashisth. There was a great deal of activity around the FRA. One of the requirements under the law was the listing, on a government document, the various resources in the forests that the Sahariyas had traditionally accessed. This was the nistar patrak, or usufructuary deed, which was to be attested by the patwari and submitted to the gram panchayat as part of its records. The FHF activists expedited this process by explaining the procedures to the community. Through extensive discussions and resource mapping, details like where the water bodies existed or where cattle were taken for grazing, were noted (see box). There can be no doubt that FRA brought a new confidence to a community that had lived in great uncertainty about its status for decades. Once the Sahariyas had given up their traditional practice of shifting cultivation, they had begun cultivating patches of forest land, often without the pattas that recognised their right to that land. Forest officials – often working in tandem with local landed interests – exploited this uncertain status. They would swoop down on the

hapless community, seize the land they tilled, mow down their standing crops and evict them.

MAF mobilisation on the forest law made it clear to the community that such practices were illegal. Also joint pattas were upheld. As Moti Lal explained, “If it were not for this programme the principle of joint pattas may have been overlooked. We kept harping on it and the authorities had to listen.”

The stories the women told us reflected their new understanding of the law. Said Guddi Bai of Pipronia village, “Earlier, the forest guards would abuse us and tell us to get out of the forest. Today, if they dare stop us, I tell them that it is my forest, and I have the papers to prove it.” In the settlement of Dongarpur village in Madhya Pradesh’s Kolaras block, Guddi Adivasi traced the history of her community, “Once we had lived in peace, subsisting on forest resources. We women used to collect produce like achar, mahua, amla, ber and our men would sell this in the market. About 20 years ago the forest guards suddenly began to stop our entry, saying it was against the law. They beat up many and even tortured them. Several families were left with nothing to eat.”

Now, not only have the women of Dongarpur understood their rights under the FRA, they have decided to proactively claim them. Revealed Guddi Adivasi, “After several meetings, we Sahariya women of Dongarpur decided to capture the forest rest house and its surrounding forest which, rightly, had belonged to the Sahariyas. These days we collect forest produce from this land and nobody stops us. But we don’t have proper papers and the next phase of our struggle is to get pattas for this land.”

The Displaced Find Voice

Change was the only constant as far as the FHF programme was concerned. Since it covered a large area over a span of a decade, the issues in dealt with also varied a great deal. Itishree Sahoo, Manager, Monitoring and Evaluation, ActionAid, put it this way, "What was striking was that each area that came under FHF had its own specific concerns – if forest rights was the issue in Kolaras, it was to address the consequences of displacement that was the requirement for the villagers of Amola in Madhya Pradesh, and tackling the aftermath of bondage in Sunda village in Rajasthan."

As a community living in forested regions or near them, the Sahariyas have always been under the constant threat of displacement, either because of conservation projects or infrastructural ones. The state, using its powers of eminent domain, appropriated vast tracts of land for what it deemed as the "greater common good" but which had severely debilitating consequences for those so displaced.

In Shivpuri district, the Manikheda dam on the Sindh river washed away the homes, fields – and indeed lives – of several thousands of people, predominantly tribals. One of the affected villages was the largely Sahariya hamlet of Amola. "When the Manikheda dam was being constructed and the whole of former Amola village was slated to go under water, the tribals living there – many of them from Sahariyas – were rehabilitated on a barren rocky tract of land adjoining the highway," explained Raghvendra Singh.

To reach Resettlement Colony 3 for the displaced people of Amola, one passed through scenic vistas framed by the soft, undulating outlines of the Upper Vindhyas. Below Bridge No 20/2 on the Sindh river the skeletal remains of trees could be spotted indicating a habitation that had been submerged fairly recently – parts of Amola lay under those waters.

The arrival of the displaced Sahariyas created social tensions. The original residents of the area were hostile to the community, and Sahariya children were not allowed to sit in the same classes as the local children.

"For us, it was like coming to hell," stated Ramhet Sahariya, a community leader and former zilla parishad member. Once dumped in their new

location, the community had practically no prospects of a sustainable livelihood. “We used to farm our lands, but later all the work that was available was to load and unload stones. But even this backbreaking work was not always guaranteed. If the dumper came, the able-bodied would scramble on to it and earn something like 80 rupees a day. If the dumper didn’t come, they would just have to wait until it did,” said Ramhet Sahariya. Young men like Santosh Sahariya, a Class Eight dropout now in his early 20s, would sit all day waiting for work. “The moment my family came here, my education ended. Today, all I can do is to lift stones and I find it difficult to feed my children on the little money I get,” he revealed.

The forests from where the Sahariyas had drawn their strength had once adjoined their former village. Now they were just a green smudge in the distant horizon. Earlier, water sources were abundant, but here a large overhead tank built in the name of rehabilitation stood empty. It had never been filled with water and perhaps had never been meant to hold water but only line the pockets of contractors. So the never-ending task of keeping thirst at bay in the heat of the summer fell on the shoulders of the perpetually exhausted, prematurely old women of Colony 3.

The older ones in the settlement still carried the memory of a past life. Said Kuwar Lal Sahariya, now in his seventies, “We lived well and on our own terms. Our children were healthy, we had access to the jungle, we had our cattle, there was no shortage of milk. Since we came here, we have been reduced to being beggars.”

The FHF activists have been working with the residents of Colony No 3 from 2007, and although life for them continued to be extremely difficult, there are important differences discernible. When a group of Sahariyas met with an accident on the highway while on their way to the old panchayat office that was located 15 kilometres away to get ration cards made, the community organised a demonstration for a proper PDS system on

Human Rights Day 2008. They ended up shutting the collectorate down. “It was only after this that the authorities gave us ration cards and a closer PDS facility. It was the *Bhay Aur Bhook Se Mukt karyakram* that had taught us how to speak out!” underlined Ramhet Sahariya.

Now, everyone in the camp had an antyodaya card, an MGNREGA job card and every family had a free health insurance policy for Rs 25,000 per year. In November 2013, when assembly elections were conducted in Madhya Pradesh, the people of Colony 3 wrote up their own manifesto. They agreed to vote for a candidate from their area, Sakuntala Khatik, but only after they got an assurance from her that she would work towards getting four resettlement colonies in the area declared as a separate panchayat.

Commented Saurabh Kumar, “I am fairly certain that if we hadn’t intervened, there would not have been a single Sahariya in this settlement because the region is a hotspot for human trafficking. Of course, the community still has many problems, but our achievement was that we have got them to demand their rights. Even five years ago, one would never have imagined that they would have come up with their own manifesto.”

The MAF network's experiences in working with the displaced, both for Amola's villagers and elsewhere, helped to clarify its own stance on the issue. SAJAG is now fully on board the fight for proper rehabilitation and resettlement measures and to challenge, whenever possible, proposed projects that could potentially threaten Sahariyas habitations. It has also reiterated the principle that no act of force should be used when there is conflict over resources. Citing the recommendation of the 28th report of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commissioner, it also demanded a law prohibiting the use of force in cases of disputes arising over resources in tribal areas.

The Bonded Unshackled

Another major issue surfaced five years into the FHF programme, and that was the issue of bonded labour in the Sahariya community. Since the bonded labourers were themselves too afraid to take on their exploiters and speak out against them, and since state governments invariably claimed that bondage had been abolished, the widespread nature of the phenomenon was hardly realised.

The song that greeted us when we visited the village of Sunda reflected in a few rhythmic lines the life story of a people: *We have drawn the hal (plough) and made the fields green, we have dug the earth, we have fashioned bricks, we have made the pillars that you see, we have laid the rails, we have tarred the roads, yet there's nothing for us...yet there is nothing for us.*

"What was striking about the relationship between the bonded Sahariya labourer and the landlord was that there was nothing documented about it. Everything – from the conditions of work to conditions of payments – was verbal," noted Saurabh Kumar. The loans when paid by the landlords, too, had no documents to substantiate them, but those who availed of such loans found each loan draining their very lives.

The stories we heard at Sunda were strikingly similar. The life of bondage began very early. Hemraj Sahariya was just a child when he was asked to take the smaller animals of the landlord out for grazing. Sometimes the death of a father hastened this process, as in the case of Kishore Sahariya. When his father, who was working as a

bonded labourer, died, he was not yet a teenager, but he was drafted by the landlord to replace the older man. Kishore ended up working for the landlord for the next 20 years of his life.

"To make the situation worse, we were often forced by circumstances – a wedding in the household, the death of a relative – to borrow money from the landlord. When my own family borrowed Rs 12,500, we did not know was they would be charging a compound interest on that sum," revealed Hemraj Sahariya. That amount ended up imprisoning him – every time he thought of fleeing and working elsewhere else, he came across the stone walls of that loan. "If I did not go to work, the landlords' goons would come after me. They could be very cruel, even tying people up and thrashing them," he said

According to Pritam Sahariya, as long as there was life in a body, work would be squeezed out of it. "When my father was alive he would work in the sardar's fields and my mother with him. As long as they could work, they worked in the sardar's fields – from morning to evening. When they had no strength left, they were discarded and younger ones in the family replaced them," he said.

While the cruelty and injustice of the landlords was obvious, the Sahariyas felt this was their lot because the zamindars were a law unto themselves, "*Thane unke the, collectri unki thi (the police station was theirs, as also the collectorate)*," as Pritam put it. One woman explained how she had been picked up by the sardar's men and locked me in a room for defying them. It was a clear case of abduction, but the local police recorded it as a case of beating.

Many, especially among the younger generation, had been long searching for ways to get out of the quagmire they found themselves in. In 2010, as part of the FHF campaign, Sankalp and JMS had organised a two-week 'Mazdoor Haq Yatra' (rally for workers' rights) that covered four blocks in Baran along with the Soochna evam Rozgaar Adhikar Abhiyaan (right to information and work movement). When news of this reached the bonded workers of Sunda, they decided to take action. That October they participated in a non-violent dharna at Jaipur's Statue Circle and presented their testimonies.

The revelations had a cascading impact. Rajasthan's Chief Secretary directed the Baran Collector to immediately ensure that the 135 bonded workers

of Sunda and other villages were freed and rehabilitated. Soon after, they stopped working on the fields of their persecutors and accessed MGNREGA work to support themselves. Said Pritam Sahariya, "Once we got our freedom, we went to the landlords and said that we will no longer be working on their fields as we once did. They wanted us to give them another year of our labour but we walked away."

The revelations had a cascading impact. Rajasthan's Chief Secretary directed the Baran Collector to immediately ensure that the 135 bonded workers of Sunda and other villages were freed and rehabilitated

By the next year, the government had waived off their debts and granted them 200 days of work under MGNREGA, instead of the normal 100 days. A public hearing was then held for people to register their claims and subsequently, in 2012, the administration surveyed the land on which the bonded labourers had once worked. It was then officially recognised that the land had been alienated from the Sahariya community by local landlords, through a combination of deception, repression, debt and influence-peddling. The landlords, largely Sikh farmers from Punjab who had settled in the region over the years, had slowly come to acquire these vast tracts of fertile property that had once been the ancestral lands of communities like the Sahariyas. Their political and social clout, as well as their power to influence the local administration and patwaris, helped them consolidate their holdings over the years.

Once the extent of land alienation among the Sahariyas was recognised, 135 families were given joint possession of 625 bighas of land. What followed was evidence of how a people, once they were released from repressive conditions, could make their own destinies. With the land now in their possession and with assistance of government agencies in terms of farm equipment, fertilisers and seeds, the community began to cultivate the land awarded to them. They cultivated a combination of mustard, wheat, chick peas and smaller crops like coriander on it, which in turn brought in good income. When we went to the fields, they stretched out as far as the eye could see, the yellow flowers of the mustard set off against the bright green of the young wheat crop.

The community set up a 'credit fund' by pooling together a little money and a grain bank too, so that there was something to fall back on in times of stress. In 2013, the Sahariya villagers here had been able to earn Rs 14 lakh from their combined harvest, an amount that was shared equally by the 135 families.

"There was a time when the community feared that the landlords would retaliate. But we had shown our strength and claimed only what was our entitlements. Today, we work on MGNREGA sites, till our own fields and support ourselves. And now that we have been freed, we are going to free others," stated Pritam Sahariya resolutely.

But he also knows that the struggle is not over until every one of them has been given their Mukti Praman Patra (certificate stating that they were released from bonded labour) issued by the sub-divisional office (SDO) and the sum of Rs 20,000 that each released labourer gets to start a new life. According to Sankalp coordinator Vijay Mehta, who has been closely involved with this mobilisation, 63 applications are still pending.

The MAF network, in particular Sankalp and JMS, has proved to be a constant source of support for the community in its efforts to stand on its feet. It has now raised the argument that the Rs 20,000 given to the released workers to begin anew is inadequate and that since in situations of bondage the whole family gets implicated, each member of the family should rightly be paid Rs 20,000. But that is a struggle for another day.

Remarked Vijay Mehta, "The freedom gained by these bonded labourers have constituted a high point for the *Bhay Aur Bhook Se Mukt Karyakram*. They have been able to get them to leave behind their bhay ka jeevan, their life of fear, which ultimately was what we had set out to do."

Change and Challenge

Glimpses of the difficult past of the Sahariyas were captured in the words of Gyan Dada, a frail man in his eighties who is respected as a community elder in Dongarpur village. “When I was a young man I remember how our land was taken away. They would give us two kilos of jowar and take away one bigha! In this way they left us without even a tree to call our own. We were ignorant and could do nothing.”

Gyan Dada went on to relate how many young men of his generation had succumbed early to tuberculosis and silicosis contracted while doing hard labour in mines to earn a living. He also revealed how the community was cheated by government after government. “Every time some big man in Bhopal would announce that land was being distributed to Adivasis, but not one of us knew where this land was, or who was getting it. I myself have travelled at least ten times to Bhopal for the land they said they were giving to us. We never got any. And it was because we didn’t have land, that many died of hunger.”

Those starvation deaths were what prompted ActionAid and the MAK network to come together

on a long-term mission. Food security for the Sahariyas had been the first and most urgent aim of the FHF programme, but has it been achieved? Today there was, clearly, no longer the endemic starvation of the kind that Shivpuri and Baran had witnessed a decade ago. Everybody got their rations everybody has a ration card and a MGNREGA job card. Yet, hunger has not completely departed from every home. It needed only a visit to the Malnutrition Treatment Centre at Shahabad, where a disproportionate number of emaciated infants there are from Sahariya backgrounds (see box) to confirm this.

Malnutrition: Removing malnutrition is a challenge and Gyarsi Bai of JMS would be the first to acknowledge this, “In Rajasthan, through our

combined efforts as activists both within the MAK network and outside it, we have been able to get the state government to give every Sahariya family a special package of not just 35 kilos of wheat or rice that we were entitled to earlier, but 2 kilos dal, 2 kilos cooking oil and 1 kilo ghee free of cost every month. This has helped, of course, but our children are still malnourished and vulnerable to illness, even premature death," she said.

Throughout the campaign SAJAG activists, working with other child rights groups at the state and district levels, kept their attention on juvenile food security. Many interventions were attempted. Bal Adhikar Kendra children were taken to Bhopal to participate in public hearings organised by the NCPCR, and fact-finding visits to the area by NCPCR teams were expedited. These efforts had two direct consequences: discrimination against Sahariya children during the serving of mid day meals in schools was effectively countered and anganwadis finally came up in the Saheranas. Supervisors in these units, most of them from Sahariya women themselves, could now monitor the health status of the local children. Malnourished children were identified and their caregivers were encouraged to include in their hitherto solely cereal-centric diets, nutritionally rich, locally available food items like palak (spinach), pumpkin, papaya, amla, banana, and groundnuts.

The fact that from 2011 onwards, no reports of children dying from hunger-related causes have come in from the project villages was evidence that the approach was working. Once food security had been achieved in large part, the effort shifted to food sovereignty by combining the right to land with the right to food.

Women's Empowerment: When it came to women's empowerment, there can be no doubt

that the FHF programme helped to create a cadre of confident Sahariya women activists who understood the issues that affected their gender and community. Moti Lal put it this way, "To my mind this is one of the most important gains of the FHF programme, and indicates its future sustainability."

Individuals like Guddi Bai Sahariya, Gyarsi Bai, Kalyani Bai Sahariya, Guddi Adivasi, all of them strong women, now had no hesitation in taking on the might of the state – whether by confronting a police superintendent, collector or chief minister. In March 2011, when then Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot was visiting Sahariya villages in Baran, Kalyani Bai had no hesitation in letting him know the innumerable ways in which her community is being neglected. The fear factor that had once prompted tribals like her to flee whenever they spotted a sarkari car had been banished forever. Rambati, from Kolaras block, has been part of ActionAid's national level mobilisation on food security and has shared public platforms with people like Shabana Azmi. These tribal women have in fact emerged as icons and changed notions of leadership and gender relations in a community that had once ruled that its women cannot wear footwear before men!

Patriarchal norms, however, have not completely disappeared. In fact, as women increasingly assert their agency within their communities and families, they are in greater danger of physical attack at the hands of the men. "We have had to deal with a growing number of incidents of domestic violence, fuelled by rising alcoholism. It is happening in every village, every home (har gaon, har ghar)," revealed Jasoda Saharya of Kherwa village, Baran, a senior JMS leader. For JMS and SAJAG, addressing such issues has proved difficult precisely because they are so sensitive and could potentially polarise the community.

This is where the failure to conscientise the larger community became apparent. An understanding of patriarchy undermined the welfare not just

of women but also of men, did not seem to have been adequately internalised. Although the FHF programme had tried to impart legal and para-legal training and begun conversations on violence against women and land rights, the impact of all this on the community was not very discernible. While the SAJAG and JMS leaders may have a grasped the modalities of laws like PWDVA or the Vishaka guidelines, the larger community has remained unaware of the import of such laws.

For instance, the unfair way in which all the household drudgery had fallen on women was not an issue that provoked wider interest. This emerged clearly during random conversations with villagers. When the displaced women from Amola village spoke of their day beginning at 4 am because they had to collect water for the household, the men who were present argued that this was "women's work". Meanwhile, the passing years had seen the emergence of new forms of gender exploitation. The MAF network had helped the local administration rescue a couple young Sahariya women who had been targeted by the trafficking mafia but those instances only highlighted the widespread nature of trafficking operations in the region and how unprepared the community was to take on the traffickers.

The one shift that could change gender relations in the future lay in land ownership. Women now exercise control over forest land with 11,000 community and joint pattas being issued under the programme. These include 70 in the names of single women. The other hope rests in the emergence of a new generation of young, aware Sahariya women – women like Tirath Adivasi of Dongarpur village, Kolaras, MP, who defied her father's plan to get her married young and now dreams of being a doctor. This was because she could get a placement in a free government supported residential school in Shivpuri with the help of CID and FHF workers. If girls like Tirath can continue to study and dream big, they will certainly be equipped to overturn the patriarchal order that rules the community today.

Threatened Tribal Identity: The future is marked by many shades of complexity. Both the states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have seen the rise of majoritarian religious fundamentalism and one of the consequences of this has been the undermining of the tribal identity through proselytisation drives and efforts to create a vote bank out of them. The anxiety is that the Sahariyas could be used as pawns by such rising religio-political forces for their own ends, especially against

the minorities in the regions. Observers of the programme have suggested that more effort needs to be taken to make the Sahariyas as a group more alert to such strategems.

The FHF campaign had always believed that the cultural base of the Sahariyas was their ultimate resource and it needed to be preserved at all costs. Traditional knowledge, including the use of medicinal plants, also needed to be revived and documented. "We have tried to do this. At every FHF event we made sure that Sahariya identity was celebrated. Their folklore, dance forms, art, food and agricultural practices were showcased whenever possible and we even tried to make children more aware of their history and identity as tribals," Saurabh Kumar said.

Despite these efforts, Sahariya identity in FHF villages did appear to be under grave threat going by local observations. Perhaps this issue needed more focused attention than what a broad-based programme like this can achieve. Both local politicians and administrators want the community to meld with the larger society and economy. Argued Sumati Lal Vora, Collector of Baran district, when we met up with him, "Development demands

a price. The Sahariyas should give up their old ways, use their resources, adopt better practices, upgrade their skills, and join the mainstream." The community has however realised that unthinkingly joining the mainstream could spell the end of their distinct identity and rights to forest resources.

Politics and Policy: There is, in fact, re-thinking about how they should engage with the ruling elites. During the run up to the 2013 state elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, as well as the 2014 General Election, SAJAG came up with the strategy of writing manifestoes which reflected the community's interests. Among the demands being proposed are community specific ones like the designation of tribal dominated habitats as 'tribal villages'.

Steps were also taken to get more Sahariyas, especially women, into panchayati raj institutions. The last panchayat elections that took place in 2010 in MP and Rajasthan saw 71 Sahariya men and 64 women win as Panchs, while 24 men and 12 women were successful in become sarpanches. This, in itself, represented a significant power shift and the hope is that in the next elections – slated for 2015 – this number would rise significantly.

The FHF campaign has helped to initiate policy changes at the national and state levels – whether it was during the parliamentary discussions on the FRA or when the first drafts of the National Food Security Bill. Sahariyas participated in the national level dharna that was staged before Yojana Bhavan in April 2011 to ensure that the unsatisfactory early draft of National Food Security Bill did not become the law. Then, in October 2010 SAJAG had taken part in the 47-day dharna at Jaipur's Statue Circle, after which the Gehlot government sanctioned 200 days of MGNREGA work for the Sahariyas and relief bonded labourers of the community.

Community Based Organisations: Under the FHF programme, both SAJAG and JMS have emerged as important community based organisations recognised even by government

departments. Today, SAJAG has a total membership of around 53,000 members of which a little less than half are women, and has a membership fund of Rs 1,59,314. It now runs the MAKs without any assistance from MAF partners, and files its complaints on its own letterhead. JMS, similarly, has been able to spread its wings. A registered organisation with 1,500 members with a presence in 12 blocks, it has a well-deserved reputation for standing by the community at all times and articulating the concerns of Sahariya women.

Struggle for Land: But the struggle for land still remains central for the community. A survey that JMS conducted in the Kishanganj and Shahbad

blocks of Rajasthan helped identify 982 cases of land alienation – about 322 cases have been resolved, efforts on the other cases are carrying on. Underlined Moti Lal, "The struggle for land was a foundational struggle and should continue uninterrupted, despite the tensions it inevitably brings." The fear of the feudal forces has not fully disappeared from the community and the possibility of even released bonded workers slipping back into the clutches of their former persecutors is still alive. One strategy proposed was to take advocacy on the issue to the next level and approach the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

New Laws: While government entitlements have been largely realised by the community, the Sahariyas are still on the learning curve when it came to understanding the nuances of old laws like the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled extent and. Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The FHF programme has seen around 50 to 60 cases filed for atrocities against Sahariyas, but a better understanding of this law could help book many more transgressors. There is also relatively little understanding about a new law like the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR) and the older but equally important Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA). Both had direct implications for Sahariya well-being.

The years have brought their share of challenges, but they have also seen important changes. A community that has almost no schooling until fairly recently now has 400 men and women in the police force, according to Collector Sumati Lal Vora. But nobody can beat Bogilal Sahariya, a former member of the Panchayat Samiti of Kishanganj, Rajasthan, in keeping a track of members of his community who have excelled in the outside world. When we met up with him at the Sankalp office in Bhawargarh village in Baran district, he proudly claimed that the community presently had at least 700 teachers, 45 forest officials, 40 anganwadi workers/ASHAs and 30 patwaris. He also added with rising excitement in his voice, "In the old days, every man, woman and child lived in fear. We had no information, no education, nothing. Today, we have Munna Lal Sahariya who is an accomplished folk dancer and appears on TV and – yes – there is a doctor in our midst – Satish Sahariya, who is practicing medicine in Gwalior!"

Pathways To The Morrow

Along with the rights based approach that ActionAid brought to the FHF programme a decade ago, came the social justice paradigm. ActionAid's Country Strategy Paper IV for the period from 2011-16 aimed to allow people to expand the notion of rights based on their ground level experiences and

participate in democratic processes so that these ideas get translated into reality. In this formulation was a template for the Sahariyas as they negotiated their future – long after the FHF campaign itself had wound down.

This decade of community mobilisation has ensured that "tomorrow will not be like yesterday", as Dhani Ram had put it when we met him at Pipronia village of Shivpuri. Dhani Ram himself is an inspiring symbol of the power of such mobilisation. Not only did he display the rare courage to take on higher caste goons who were controlling the developmental work of the government and siphoning off funds, as a SAJAG leader he ensured that roads were built in Sahariya villages and the MGNREGA jobs were made available to community members.

But if tomorrow was never to be like yesterday, the route ahead demanded careful planning on at least four major parameters. First, it demanded sustainability in terms of a continuing programme, which in turn is crucially dependent on the strengthening of SAJAG, the existing community based organisation. It was SAJAG that had to now take the process of the empowerment of the Sahariyas forward. What was striking to observe was the evolution of this organisation. It now had the necessary expertise and vision to run the MAKs pretty much on its own without the constant supervision of the MAF network. It had a mass base thanks to the various bodies, from women's groups to the Bal Adhikar Kendras that came up over the

years. Also significant was the fact that SAJAG had acquired its own distinct identity, expanding far beyond the FHF blocks and even acquiring a presence in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, which has a Sahariya population as well. SAJAG has also launched a membership drive in villages the FHF areas.

In the discussions over the AA withdrawal process, one of the proposals that came up was to make SAJAG a union of workers based on the collective identity of forest workers. Such a body could have significant representation of community members from each block, trained in fighting for tribal rights. Once registered, such a body can also raise funds and support itself in the future.

The second requirement was the forging of sustainable alliances. The FHF campaign and MAF network have been fortunate in their partnerships and SAJAG had close links with people's movements like the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), the Adivasi Janjati Adhikar Manch (AJAM) and the Jan Pahal, or alliance of the marginalized. It had jointly taken part in rallies at the district, state and national levels and made representations to bodies like the NCPCR, the NHRC, the Supreme Court and Parliament. The FHF years also saw mass mobilisations by groups like the MKSS on the RTI and MGNREGA, the Ekta Parishad on land rights, and the gender rights bodies like Women Rights Resource Centre. This meant that SAJAG, as part of their struggles, has acquired expertise to deal with a wide variety of social issues.

A new imagination of activism was the third requirement. The areas of intervention needed to be constantly expanded so that activism of the community could be more inclusive. The recent attempt to bring the elders into activism was involvement of SAJAG and JMS in the Pension Parishad campaign, anchored by the MKSS. Many Sahariya elders travelled as part of the Pension Parishad campaign to places like Delhi and Jaipur,

demanding a universal pension of at least Rs 2,000 for every woman and man over 55 and 50 respectively and around 4000 elderly people in FHF villages were identified as eligible for such support.

Finally, if the future has to be secured, the Sahariyas will have to ensure that they are kept in the information loop with regard to proposed conservation projects and developmental infrastructure. Both MP and Rajasthan are expected to witness major displacement in the years ahead, whether because of the Chaitikheda dam at Sheopur, MP, or the sanctuary coming up at Shahabad, Rajasthan, which would directly affect the Sahariyas. It is important that SAJAG, having learnt from the experiences of those affected by the Manikheda Dam, becomes more pro-active in reaching out to targeted populations and forging joint actions with other affected people.

Tribal India is still a long way away from gaining the promises the Constitution made to the people, with 81 per cent of its population in the category of the "multi-dimensionally poor", according UNDP's 2010 Human Development Report. The FHF programme has shown that the ways to leave the past of want and repression behind are multiple, just as the pathways to a more just and equal future for tribals in India are also many.

Hemraj Sahariya, 22, of Acharpura village is a volunteer for the Yuva Shakti Sangathan, which worked closely with the JMS and MAF network in helping 135 bonded workers of Sunda village gain freedom from the local landlords. Hemraj documented personal histories by talking to each worker, prepared relevant documents and accompanied each worker to the police station to get an FIR registered. He explained, "Only after a police inquiry can a bonded person be issued a certificate by the SDM pronouncing that the man or woman is free of bondage." This meant that Hemraj had to visit the area several times, inviting the suspicion of the landlord's men who on a couple of occasions even roughed him up. Despite the threats, he documented the cases of several people, and has now emerged as a valued community worker. The future of the Sahariya community hinges crucially on young people like Hemraj.

Case Studies

Gyarsi Bai And Friends Make Space For Women

Many strong women have made Jagrath Mahila Sangathan what it is: a platform for Sahariya women to articulate their issues, organise against injustice and work for change. A registered non-government organisation, with its base in Mamoni village in Rajasthan's Baran district, it has tackled issues ranging from bonded labour to health care delivery.

How have ordinary tribal women with hardly any schooling – the 2001 census indicated that in Rajasthan only 18.7 per cent Sahariya women had basic literacy – been able to emerge as significant agents of grassroots change? "First we had to change ourselves before we could do anything about our community," says a smiling Gyarsi Bai Sahariya, in her late fifties, who has been awarded by the Rajasthan government for her community services.

Change came literally knocking at her door in the form of Charu Mitra, a social activist. "In the early nineties, I was just an ordinary village woman afraid to even step out of my home. Then Charu behenji came to do a gender training in the village. She wanted me to get involved in getting girls to go to school. I was reluctant but she kept insisting, saying that it was my duty to help the Sahariya community. Finally, with my husband's permission, I agreed," she recalled.

Once Gyarsi Bai stepped out of the home, there really was no going back. Her first exposure to social activism came in the form of the Lok Jumbish programme that focused on girls' education. Slowly she got exposed to the work of Moti Lal, one of the founders of Sankalp, an organisation working with the Sahariyas in the region, and Aruna Roy, whose campaign for right to information was gathering pace.

At the same time, the idea of setting up an organisation for Sahariya women was taking shape and in 2002, Charu Mitra, along with Moti Lal and others in Sankalp, had it registered under the name of Jagrath Mahila Sangathan (JMS). Today, this organisation has a presence in 12 blocks in the region. "We registered our organisation so that it would able to raise funds and keep our work going. Recently, Moti Lalji has transferred all the assets of Sankalp to JMS and each of our 1,500 members pays an annual fee of Rs 25," revealed Gyarsi Bai.

Learning about women's rights was itself a journey for JMS members. It began with the

question: 'If a boy can get education, why shouldn't a girl?' One question led to another, one of which was: 'Why is it that women get beaten by their husbands?' "When we first began, we believed that there was nothing wrong with this, women were always beaten in our families. But as we spent more of our time in activism, taking part in meetings and dharnas, we began to understand that women enjoyed rights, too," explained Gyarsi Bai.

Her sister-in-arms and senior JMS member, Jasodha Bai Sahariya of Kherwa village, talked about how difficult it sometimes was to address domestic violence. "We often faced the anger of the husbands – gali dete the, they would abuse us. But we have learnt not to be deterred. If we felt a woman under assault needed to go back to her parents' home, we ensured this happened. If an FIR had to be registered, this too we did," she stated. Interestingly, the mobile phone came in handy. Everybody in the villages where JMS worked had the phone numbers of JMS leaders and they could always be called in an emergency. Predictably, emergencies invariably arose. For instance, once there was a dispute that involved a local Bengali couple. When the wife – who had just given birth – wanted to return to her family home, the husband's family insisted on keeping the child. "We intervened at the time, explaining that the mother was still feeding the child, and finally we were able to unite the baby with the mother," recalled Jasoda.

The JMS has had to intervene in several rape cases as well, and here their credibility has stood them in good stead. "Two years ago, two sisters were raped but the local police station had refused to register a case. Then we approached the Nahargarh police station. They registered it as a bailable offence. We had to talk to the chief minister for it to be registered properly and the perpetrators brought to justice," Jasoda said.

Kalyani Bai, another JMS leader from Kherwa village, is convinced that it is because women don't have power that they are subject to such violence. "Although the law recognises women's equal right to property, they are discriminated against even when land pattas are distributed by the government. That is why the JMS demanded equal rights to land and the issuing of joint pattas," said Kalyani Bai, who, incidentally, came into the movement through an early association with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). "I was 15 when my mother died. My father then married me into a poor household, where we had to even clear the gobar of the sardar's family. But I always wanted to do something with my life. My chance came when the MKSS organised a group in our area," she revealed.

Once, when she was headed for a meeting, wearing her ghunghat over her face, she happened to spot some men measuring the land that the community was tilling. "I immediately went back and told the others, and a group of us confronted the men and chased them away. The fact that we could stop them encouraged me to carry on. Ever

since my youngest child turned 12, I would leave the children at home and go out even when people whispered that I was up to no good," she added.

The JMS's interventions have been many and varied. Not only do its members accompany poor women to the hospital, the organisation has been closely involved in liberating the bonded labourers of Sunda village and fighting for forest rights in Shahabad.

"We have learnt about right to information and right to food. I have been able to go to places like Mount Abu, Udaipur, Bhopal, Shivpuri, Gwalior and Mumbai. I have been to Niyamgiri in Odisha to express my solidarity with the Dongria Kondhs. We are all tribals, after all!" concluded Gyarsi Bai.

Sahariya Children: Dreaming About Tomorrow

There is very little that is enlivening about this resettlement colony for the Sahariya tribals of Amola village who had been displaced by the Manikheda Dam. On rocky landscape stands this cluster of sheds that are not quite dwellings. Living there is one very unhappy little girl. Nima is 13 and has studied up to Class Seven. But then she fell ill with a cough that just would not go away. "Because of this, madamji has cut off my name from the school register," she whispered as tears welled up in her eyes.

Would her health have been better if she and her family had not been bundled up and discarded at this resettlement colony located not far from the highway? When the adults in the village pile into dumper trucks that take them to stone quarries or marble mines to work for the entire day, children like Nima are left alone to cope as best as they can. When we asked one community woman about who looked after her children when she and her husband went out for wage work, she put it this way, "God looks after them, who else?"

Children are the most vulnerable when upheavals of the kind that Nima has been subjected to in her short life take place. This is why the FHF saw child rights as a very crucial element of its intervention. Observed Raghvendra Singh of Parhit Samaj Sevi Sanstha, one of the five partners who anchored the programme, "Under this programme, Bal Adhikar Kendras or child rights resource centres, were set up, equipped with books and sports goods. For us, the future of the Sahariya community lay in its children and we believed that the children too should have a sense of themselves as citizens, understand discriminations they face and acquire the ability to argue for their rights." Every Bal Adhikar Kendra sent two representatives, a girl and a boy, to participate in the Bal Panchayat. Special child rights coordinators ensured that there were regular interactions between the children in this way.

But how did the children themselves respond to this? Puran Singh Adivasi and Raju Adivasi, both 13 years, have been a part of the Bal Adhikar Kendra of their village Dongarpur in

Shivpuri's Kolaras block. They now understand that child rights includes not just the right to life for children, but the right to nutritious food, education, development and clean surroundings. "We meet regularly, take part in games, write and sing songs, as well as stage plays.

There were other things too that we learnt – why toilets are important and why we need to wash our hands before we ate," said Puran. Raju, meanwhile, sang with great pride a song the children of his centre had composed, "Gaon ke bachche padte rehna, padte rehna, padte rehna... Children of the village keep studying, keep studying, keep studying...." In a situation where children like Nima drop out of school routinely, the urgency in his melodious voice struck a poignant note.

Young Arjun of Pipronia village in Shivpuri block was not particularly keen on school. "Earlier, I went to school only when I felt like it. But the child rights coordinator came to our village one day and told us that every young person can also make a difference," he said. Once a Bal Adhikar Kendra was set up in Pipronia, Arjun not only started going to school more regularly, he began taking an interest in whether or not masterji was coming to take classes regularly. "This awakened an interest in school for me. I realised it was something for my good. Also I saw how we were often cheated out of our dues."

Many Sahariya children faced discrimination at school. As 12-year-old Kaliram Adivasi of Dongarpur village, the sarpanch of his village's Bal Panchayat revealed, "Those who served the mid day meal at school would give us food from far, door se khana dete the."

With the Sahariya children now empowered to speak out, the matter could be taken up. Added Raghvendra Singh, "We were able to take a case of untouchability to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and take action."

The very fact that most children in villages where FHF was present were going to school regularly indicated that the Bal Adhikar Kendra approach was working. In fact, it is the children who identify those among them who are not in school, or whose parents are considering marriage for their wards. It has also helped to build self-confidence. Arjun, who represented his village in the Bal Panchayat was able to go on trips, "We went to different places and talked to others our age. I have been to Pichour, Sipri, and Bhopal and also attended a big meeting in Hyderabad in 2007. We learnt how to address older people – with respect but with equality."

According to Umesh Vashisth of the Centre for Integrated Development, Sahariya children demonstrate a keen sense of the environment, identifying trees by their leaves and different forest birds. "One of my Sahariya children even got to attend the Rio Plus 20 meet in 2012," he said, with pride.

But Vashisth also underlined the reality that reversals are inevitable given the difficult circumstances of these children. Arjun's trajectory was evidence of this. The big change in his life took place when his mother died a couple of years ago. His father, a wage labourer, had to keep the family going by working on distant work sites and on Arjun's young shoulders fell the responsibility of cooking for and looking after his younger siblings. He dropped out of school after completing Class Ten and options to study further are now eluding him.

Progress was often about one step forward, two steps back, but introducing children to a world of possibilities, that the Bal Adhikar Kendras and Bal Panchayats have been able to do, helped greatly to keep young hopes alive.

The story of Tirath Adivasi of Dongarpur village illustrated this. The youngster may have become a young wife by now if she had not had the chance to attend the Bal Adhikar Kendra in her village.

"I was studying in Class Eight, when Papa said that I had done enough schooling and that I would soon be getting married. When I said I wanted to continue with my studies, he said I could always do that after marriage. I begged him to let me attend school till Class Ten at least. He scolded me but reluctantly agreed," she said.

A short while later Tirath got the opportunity, through the FHF intervention, to get into a free residential hostel for school girls in Shivpuri. The hostel functioning under the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) as a component of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme has given her a sense of self. She has now decided that since she is not spending her parents' money, she will not get married until she got her degree. Said the young girl, her face a picture of determination, "I have this dream of becoming a doctor and given that my marks in science are good, I will make every effort to realise that dream!" If Nima had got her chances like Tirath, she too would have been reaching for her dreams.

Inside A Malnutrition Treatment Centre

The Shahabad Malnutrition Treatment Centre would perhaps never have existed if the deaths of malnourished Sahariya children had not rung alarm bells in the corridors of power a decade ago, and little Satish Sahariya (name changed) would probably never have received any medical attention.

In 2008, the government of Rajasthan took the major step of setting up Malnutrition Treatment Centres (MTC) in district hospitals, which offered treatment based on the guidelines set down by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to those guidelines, a child's height, weight and appetite were to be noted on admission, followed by the enforcement of a diet, drug and monitoring regime that could take two to three weeks to complete depending on the child's level of malnutrition. Meanwhile, progress was to be tabulated carefully on a grid that outlined the various parameters.

When two-year-old Satish was admitted, he weighed 6.4 kilos – less than what a normal Indian baby of one year should have weighed. His distended abdomen, reddish hair and listless eyes indicated a very severe case of malnourishment. Two weeks after his admission, he had gained almost one kilo. Although little Satish is still less than what a one-year-old baby should ideally weigh, the doctor attending to him, Dr Sudhir Mishra, who is the block level chief medical officer in the Shahabad government hospital, is satisfied with the progress that he has made.

"Severely malnourished children like Satish should gain weight slowly but steadily. According to the WHO protocol, before a baby moves from the initial phase to the next, it is important that stabilisation in terms of nutritional intake sets in. A quick weight gain could put too much pressure on Satish's heart, or could have other negative outcomes," explained Dr Mishra.

But what were the reasons for Satish's condition in the first place? According to Dr Mishra, it was a combination of several factors including high anaemia levels in the mother, early withdrawal of breast milk, and frequent bouts of diarrhoea. "It is a cyclical process. A malnourished child who has diarrhoea loses valuable nutrients and becomes more susceptible to bouts of secondary infections that drain his or her body of nutrients," he pointed out. A study conducted by the National Institute of Nutrition in 2004 found that 72 per cent of children of the Sahariya tribe were underweight. What was disturbing was that the parents of such children did not even perceive them as needing medical attention, as a recent paper published in the Indian Journal of Public Health, entitled 'Dimensions of

Nutritional Vulnerability: Assessment of Women and Children in Sahariya Tribal Community of Madhya Pradesh in India' noted.

But things have improved greatly over the last five years if one were to judge by the experiences of Dr Mishra and others at the Shahabad Malnutrition Treatment Centre. "Earlier, no one came to these centres on their own. We had to send a team to the villages. Today, the Sahariya community seems more self-motivated. They are actually bringing their children here, which is a heartening change," Dr Mishra added. In response, this centre has expanded its facilities from six beds to 12.

The MTC room, which has other babies like Satish, attended by their mothers is enlivened with bright pictures of Donald Duck, a very grey elephant and a bright green parrot., has other babies like Satish, attended by their mothers. One young mother had a black eye. Her face, a picture of sorrow, did not even seem to register the cries of her emaciated baby as it mewled. When asked how she got her injury, she said that she fallen and hurt herself.

According to the attendants at the Shahabad MTC, it is only the mothers who come and stay with the children – most of them appear to be helpless and alone. Alcoholism is very high among many Sahariya households and it is the women who bear the brunt.

Dr Mishra sees this as a challenge. "If parents together take the responsibility of looking after their malnourished child, one feels more confident about their future prognosis. The problem is that usually it is only women who come to the hospital and stay with their children," he said.

This seemed to indicate disturbed family circumstances that have a negative impact on the care given to the children. Every malnourished child needs at least two full weeks in situ attention to make an adequate recovery, during which their liquid intake is increased in a measured manner from F-75 (enriched formula milk) as a starter diet to F-100, as part of the "catch-up" diet. The government even provides an allowance of Rs 200 for every day spent at this centre to allow for out-of-pocket expenses. Despite this, most families are in a hurry to leave – a trend noted not just in this centre but in others in the state as well.

"We have not been able to get a clear idea of why people want to leave. The child gets enriched milk and clearly stands to benefit from remaining at the centre but patients sometimes leave even by stealth. Whether this is because of a stigma associated with such treatment or because of economic reasons like an anxiety to rejoin work, we haven't been able to fathom," said Dr Mishra.

The premature curtailment of treatment does have negative repercussions on the efficacy of the protocol and medical doctors like Mishra are trying to address it by counselling the families of the patients. They would also like a more effective outreach system to be put into place. "We are serious about our Malnutrition Treatment Centre and have asked for an ambulance, two nurses, one medical officer and one driver to be envisaged as part of the team. With such a team we could greatly increase the number of beneficiary children and continue to reach those whom we have treated but who are presently all but lost to us because they are very difficult to access at present."

A Map Of Our Own

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006, "recognise and vest forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling" to tribals. It also acknowledges that, over the generations, the rights of these people to reside in the forests "could not be recorded". For the Sahariyas, the FRA is particularly relevant because it covers the rights of primitive tribal groups like them to community tenures for habitat and habitation.

Under the forest law, it is the gram sabha that has been designated to initiate the process of deciding the nature and extent of individual and community rights to be given to tribal groups. Gram sabhas are supposed to receive claims, consolidate, check for their accuracy and maintain maps delineating the areas where the community had traditionally exercised its usufruct (nistar) rights.

After the FRA came into force, the Madhya Pradesh government passed orders that the patwari of each village should prepare lists of claims, hereditary rights and community rights to forests resources made by forests dwellers. It also laid down that "those forest dwellers who are dependent upon forest and forest land for their basic livelihood needs" must be assisted in presenting its documents to avail of its rights with the involvement of the gram sabha. This information would then be entered into a nistar patrak (usufructory deed), which would be attested by the patwari and would henceforth be part of the village panchayat's official documents.

Explained Umesh Vashisth, whose organization, CID, has been working in the Kolaras region every since the FHF intervention began, "We began by raising awareness about the FRA. The community was not always aware of their entitlement to the forest land and also did not know the difference between revenue land, which they could not own, and the forest land which they had a right to because they had always traditionally used such land."

By 2010 SAJAG had published small booklets in simple Hindi on the main aspects of the law in an easy-to-follow format. In January 2011, when the state forest officials met the local gram sabha members on the law, residents of the Sahariya settlements in Kolaras were encouraged to go and engage with them.

Through discussions the Sahariya landscape in Kolaras was mapped in a way that revealed the close links between the community and the local habitat. Neera Soni of CID, who has been working closely with the community for the last seven years under the FHF and has seen the evolution of the SAJAG in the resettlement village of Dongarpur, explained how this was done. "People spoke about their places of worship, the places where they buried their dead and cremation grounds, the paths by which they accessed the river," all this was noted in what came to be the village nistar patrak.

The document carried details like the paved and unpaved roads of the village, the schools, health centres, water sources like hand pumps, fishing ponds and grazing lands – even the fauna of the places, with trees like imli, lemon, ber, bael, jamun, food sources like edible tubers and roots were all carefully noted.

"We explained how they had to draw up their map, get the patwari to endorse it and then submit the document to the gram sabha," recalled Soni. One concern was that the community could fall prey to touts who promised to furnish them with such documents, so it was explained that the document that needed to be filled cost only Rs 50 and that an additional modest sum would be entailed in getting it registered.

In this way, a community that was not aware of its basic entitlements acquired a deeper understanding of their traditional rights and could argue for them should a dispute arise. What was more, they now also had a government document that guaranteed them those rights so that future generations of the Sahariyas would not have to struggle to establish their entitlement to these resources.

In the village of Dongarpur there stands a tree revered by the community as the Kali Mata mandir. Resources like this, which will never figure in a government map, are defining elements of the Sahariya way of life and would make it into the nistar patrak.

About the initiative

In this edition- fourth in the series of Critical Stories of Change, we present to you the story of Sahariya tribals categorized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). They reside in contiguous areas of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Historically, they practiced shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, pastoralism, and sometimes also adopted a nomadic life. Over time they were displaced out of their traditional habitats under the pretext of forest conservation and development projects resulting in loss of identity, culture, tradition, and livelihood. Declared as encroachers over their own land and unable to cope up with the modern monetized society forced them to mortgage their land and compelled them into debt, and bonded labour. But what kept them there was the scale and severity of oppression by the upper caste that remained unchecked for decades. The Sahariya women were even further marginalized by the stranglehold of caste oppression, poverty and patriarchy. This resulted in a state of chronic starvation of adults and severely malnourished children and when coupled with a severe drought in 2000-03 resulted in the death of more 300 Sahariyas.

The story takes us through the efforts of Manavadhikar Forum-a platform of 5 civil society groups who decided to take on the issues of the state of fear, chronic hunger and exploitation of the Sahariyas through their own organisation called Sahariya Jan Gatbandhan(SAJAG).

SAJAG's efforts over the last decade have resulted in, freedom from fear, greater food security, improved access to government schemes , universal coverage of antodaya ration card, health-card and other social security schemes, release of bonded labourers and participation in governance structures of the village. Women have united under the banner of Jagrat Mahila Sangathan(JMS) and have addressed cases relating to domestic violence, atrocities and rape and have started challenging patriarchy within the community.

The change is visible though a lot remains to be done. The collective spirit and leadership of the Sahariya community has been a source of unending inspiration to us and hopefully it will be the same to the readers as well.

The real indicator of change in this story has been the realization by the Sahariya community that they have the power to liberate themselves from hunger and fear.

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