



Winds of change

10 little stories from Chhatarpur



UNFPA is the United Nations agency for reproductive health and rights. Through the Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) programme, UNFPA reaches out to the most marginalized adolescent girls in 12 countries. In India, AAG is being implemented in select districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha.

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10 little stories from Chhatarpur

The Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) programme of UNFPA is reaching out to some of the most marginalized adolescent girls across a dozen countries. In India, AAG is being implemented in select tribal districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha.

In Madhya Pradesh, the project is known as Samriddhi (prosperity). A partnership between SBI Foundation and UNFPA, Samriddhi spans 150 villages in the Bijawar and Badamalhara blocks of Chhatarpur District.

Vikas Gupta, the social media moderator at the UNFPA India country office, visited Chhatarpur to document the progress of the project. While he brought back detailed notes and countless photographs, this memoir is about those little discoveries that rarely make it to project reports.



1

Forgotten history

Have you heard of Khajuraho, the small town in India that draws people from around the world to see Hindu temples dating back to the 10th century? While Khajuraho's popularity continues to grow, much less is known about its parent district, Chhatarpur.

District Chhatarpur, is located in a hilly, sparsely populated part of Madhya Pradesh – India's second-largest state. Located in the Bundelkhand region of Central India, Chhatarpur acquired its name from Maharaja Chhatarsal, who ruled Bundelkhand during the 17th century, and fought valiantly against the Mughals, to safeguard his kingdom until his death. Within the district also lies its administrative headquarter with the same name – Chhatarpur!

At a dusty intersection of roads connecting the headquarter with Bijawar, a block in the state district, stands a statue of Maharaja Chhatarsal riding his horse. Like crumbling forts, vacant hawelis, dilapidated gateways and other amazing pieces of history in this area, the statue of the Maharaja also remains largely unnoticed as people pass by for their daily chores.



2

Darker shades of green

“At least 3 farmers committed suicide last week” said the driver of our car, as we sped along towards Bijawar - one of the two blocks where Project Samriddhi is being implemented. Looking at the tall trees lining the road, the statement came as a bit of a surprise.

Residents of Chhatarpur mainly survive on agriculture, with wheat, gram and beetle leaf being the main crops. Farmers here employ traditional methods of farming and are almost entirely dependent on the monsoon for their harvests. A good rainfall means a good reap, which hasn't been the case for the last 4-5 years.

“There is hardly any rain in the summers now, and the rivers too are dry”, added the driver. “This year, a massive hailstorm destroyed everything. They had no option, but to commit suicide”.

Our car silently meandered through one village after another. Each, perhaps, with its own set of stories. How many would we ever get to know? The answer was blowing in the wind.



3

Ray of sunshine

As we got off our car and walked towards the stairs of the office of our implementation partner Dharti, we could hear the chatter of women, which grew louder as we approached the floor above. The scale of their voices was unbelievable. It was almost like the loud chattering of sparrows that we hear during an evening stroll in the park, as the birds head back to their nests. Sweet!

These women were none other than the Cluster Coordinators of the Samriddhi Project that is being implemented to empower adolescent girls in two blocks of Chhatarpur – Bijawar and Badamalhara.

A cheerful “Namaste Sir” echoed from all quarters of a small, somewhat dim room as we entered. Fifteen smiling Cluster Coordinators (CC’s in short) welcomed us with folded hands, confidence exuberating from their faces. They belonged to different age groups and were from different communities, apparently travelling as much as three hours daily to reach Dharti’s office.

Their colourful smiles and equally colourful scooters were a combined result of their hard work put in during the past one year. With an unbeatable enthusiasm and passion for their work, they showed us the brighter ‘changing’ side of life in Chhatarpur. “Sir, don’t forget to Whatsapp the pictures to us” they said, as they began to leave for their villages one by one after our meeting.



4

Getting to know Samriddhi

“Who wants to grow up and make their parents feel proud?” asked the Cluster Coordinator.

Everybody raised up their hands.

We were in the midst of a “Cluster level Session” at a village in Bijawar block with a CC and peer educators from various Clusters. They were discussing gender equity and career choices. Let us first understand what project Samriddhi is and how it works.

The project is a part of Action for Adolescent Girls programme by UNFPA, and is funded by SBI Foundation in Madhya Pradesh. As per the UNFPA mandate to work and improve life-skills of adolescent girls, the project targets 4500 girls in Chatarpur with monthly sessions and activities implemented by a local NGO, Dharti. The project is managed throughout the district with life-skills-trained Cluster Coordinators, who impart life-skills training to peer educators, who in turn impart this knowledge to adolescents in their respective villages. Equation?

15 CC's, 150 Peer Educators, 4500 Adolescent Girls. Soon the number of hands raised will be much higher than this picture alone.



5

Dancing like Sapna

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Ms. Nikita, UNFPA’s project coordinator, asked all peer educators who were present at the Cluster-level session with peer educators.

Loud responses came from every corner of the hall, clearly indicating that new dreams and aspirations were blooming.

“I want to become a teacher”... “I will become a lawyer”... “Engineer, policewoman, doctor.....” One by one, the girls shared their life’s ultimate goals. And then, a moment of stunned silence followed a cheer of laughter when a 15-year-old raised her hand and said, “I want to dance like Sapna Chaudhary.”

Sapna Chaudhary is a stage dancer who began by performing in Haryana – a state infamous for stories of deep gender discrimination. Thereafter, she went on to become a national celebrity by appearing in Big Boss, a popular TV serial.

The young peer educator from Chhatarpur, not only stood up and performed passionately to the tune of a Haryanvi song blaring on a mobile-phone speaker, she also exemplified how a village girl can challenge the status quo.

Kudos.



6

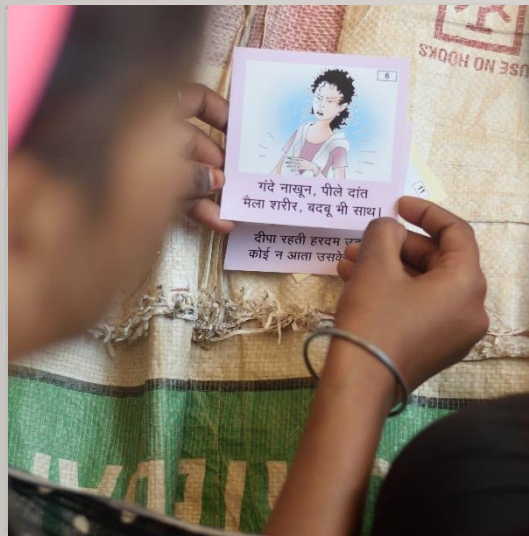
United we stand

“The village only gets water during winters. There’s just one functioning hand pump. Here... This one. Do you see the one on the other side of the road? It has not been repaired for years”, explained the village ASHA worker, holding onto her dupatta to cover her head, as the breeze kept trying to blow it away.

Many women here cover their heads. Some do that as a mark of respect to the elders, and others to merely save themselves from the prying gaze of men on the road.

“Meanwhile, a group of around thirty young girls had gathered in the dingy room that was the only space the local government school had to offer. The girls were being oriented on daily health and hygiene, by three peer educators. A Cluster coordinator stood nearby, watching the proceedings.

The Samriddhi Project has succeeded in bringing these people together, building a community of adolescents, who openly discuss their problems with peers they barely knew earlier. Transportation problems, restrictive parents, lack of resources and everyday chores haven’t kept them from attending these life-skill sessions. The string of colourfully aligned slippers outside the classroom testified this fact.



गंदे नाखून, पीले दांत
मैला शरीर, बदबू भी साध।
दीपा रहती हरदम उदास
कोई न आता उसके पास।

7

Imagining Deepa

Deepa doesn't cut her nails.

Deepa doesn't bathe.

Deepa washes her hands with sand.

Who is Deepa? Why is she so unhygienic?

Worried that the monthly sessions would gradually become boring, making adolescent girls eventually start dropping out, the CC's and peer educators made it a point to prove that the sessions will be 'nothing like at school'. In order to bring the discussions alive, they introduced an imaginary character called 'Deepa' who had all the habits that needed to be changed!

In each monthly meeting, peer educators briefly explain to the participating adolescent girls the objective of the session. After that, the girls break into groups, ready with placards, chart paper and sketch pens. Thus begin interesting discussions on identifying and distinguishing Deepa's healthy habits from her unhealthy ones, listing these habits on chart paper. This is followed by discussions, question and answers, and experience sharing.

With each meeting, Deepa's hygiene is clearly improving! And so is the hygiene of the girls around.





Say cheese

“How do you use this?”, asked Kanchan.

The 16-year-old peer educator was holding a professional DSLR camera for the first time in her life. She held the camera deftly in her hand, trying to peep into the Live View screen. Kanchan’s confidence and eagerness to know about new things is infectious.

A little demonstration on how to rotate the camera lens and how to focus on the object, and she was clicking away. “This is amazing! Can I use it for some more time, please?” she asked, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

When asked about her expectations from the project, she promptly replied, “The girls in the village hardly understand computers and the internet. I would like them to be trained on that as well”

What more? pat came the reply, “getting to travel and see the country”.

Kanchan possesses a panache that can be seen in many of other peer educators as well. Those who own smartphones can use all the features effortlessly, and they love to take selfies, much like the modern day urban crowd.



9

The new Justice League

Nisha, one of the 15 Cluster Coordinators, talked about one particular girl who had found the village shopkeeper shortchanging people. “That little girl fought so loudly with the shopkeeper, the entire village rushed across to find out what was wrong. Now, the man never dares to cheat anyone!” exclaimed Nisha, unable to stop laughing, as she proudly recounted the story.

The Cluster Coordinators are indeed the real super heroes of the Samriddhi project. And, thousands of adolescent girls inspired by them are going to be equally big change-makers in the days to come.

The Cluster Coordinators have just the right attitude and an innovative spark, to find new ways for the project to keep delivering on its key objectives to empower adolescent girls with life-skills. For instance, when they invited village influencers for a community event, they used the traditional practice of sending some turmeric and rice grains (haldi-chandan), along with the invitation. This got the expected results. People turned up in large numbers and treated the meeting as an auspicious ceremony, and have been supporting the Samriddhi activities ever since. No words can describe the deep sense of awe and inspiration one experiences when one gets to interact with these CCs

Choosing the right people for the right job has surely been one of the biggest achievements of the project.



10

Some change. Some transform.

“And this is how I convinced my parents to delay my marriage, at least for some years. It took a lot of convincing though!”, summed up the gutsy 16-year-old.

By now, it was evident that the adolescents influenced by Samriddhi were not just aware of the issues they faced, they were also now bold and confident enough to raise their voice against inequality and injustice, and take their own decisions with respect to their career, marriage and wellbeing.

As we travelled from one village to the next, inspiring stories of change kept surfacing. We heard about girls lodging an FIR against those who harassed them. We heard of girls openly talking about menstrual health and collecting money to ask the Cluster coordinator to get them sanitary napkins from the nearby town. We heard about how girls faced life bravely after the untimely death of their parents.

Lives are changing in the Bijawar and Badamalhara blocks of Chhatarpur. Soon, these winds of change will transform the entire community.



Purvi Raja Bundela, a Peer Educator from Para village, sang a song in a voice that echoed in the author's ears for many days. To know how well she sang, watch the video by scanning the QR code provided on top. In case, you don't have a QR code reader on your mobile phone, use the link: goo.gl/xMRuYw



More information available at
www.projectsamriddhi.com

