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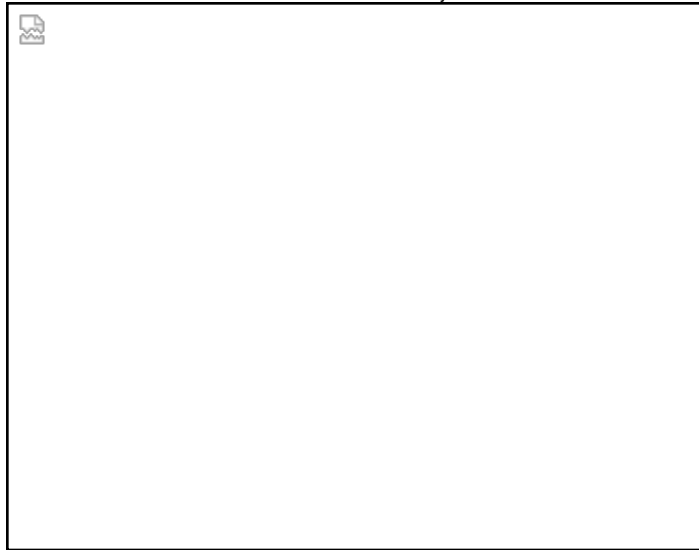
IN FIRST PERSON

## Under a mango tree

RUKMINI BANERJI

Deep inside Bihar, following the trajectory of changes that run silent and powerful...

Photo: Rukmini Banerji



**Winds of change:Women of the Jeevika programme.**

Under a grove of trees off the main dirt road, past a small village was a large shady spot. It seemed as if these trees had been planted many years ago to create a natural meeting place. It was afternoon in Damdaha block in Purnia district in Bihar. There were many women gathered there. It was a meeting of the federation of self-help group members of the Jeevika programme. This was a bi-monthly meeting for keeping track of loans and repayments. Turn by turn, representatives of each group were coming up to the bookkeeper, and doing the accounts. From all stories I had heard, these women were quite highly empowered and they had been successfully handling large amounts of money. But all claimed to be illiterate.

I moved closer to some of the women and asked, "Can anyone here read and write?" All of them laughed and in their own vocabulary replied that they were "illiterate and unschooled". The passbook of the group was lying on the ground in front of us. I asked how much money there was in the account. "Sixty thousand," said one woman. "How do you know?" I asked. "That we know, because it is our money", they said. I asked for some currency notes. I took

out a 100 rupee note. "How much is this?" Again there was laughter. " Sow rupiah (hundred rupees)". One by one, they told me how much each currency note was. "Now write," I said pointing to the numeral "500" on the 500 rupee note. "How can we write?" They protested. "We are illiterate." "All that is fine", I said. "Just write". With great reluctance, a few of the women picked up pencils and began to scribble. Their numerals were painstakingly shaky but very soon on the paper we began to see 100, 1000, 50, 500, 20.....

### **Quick learners**

One of my colleagues had a Std I textbook. We put it on the ground in front of us. In the book is a number grid with numbers from 1 to 100. I began to point to some common numbers like 10, 25, 50, 75, 30, 40. Women gathered around, pressing against each other and trying to see the page. Between them they could recognise many of the numbers. As soon as I read a sequence of numbers down a column ... 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, ....., they caught the pattern. Now my finger moved to a different column. I started off the sequence by saying 61, 62... The women could now continue on their own. They began to turn the pages of the book. Many said that they never touch the books that their children bring home because they are illiterate. Their children never show them the work they are doing in school because they say "Ma, you can't read. So how will you know?" I stopped for a minute and then I asked, "If you are illiterate, how are you recognising numbers? How are you writing?" I asked. " Aapne sikhaya, is liye kar rahein hai (You are teaching us so we are being able to do it)" they said. " Nahi, nahi (No, no)" I claimed. " Humne sikhaya nahi, sirf dikhaya hai (I have not taught you I have only shown you)".

"Do you all have mobile phones? Do you use mobile phones?" Many had phones and almost all could use them. "Tell me your number," I asked the lady in a bright blue sari. She replied "94-70-20-32-57". "Can you write it down?" She clutched the pen. Slowly and carefully, she wrote the numbers down. She wrote as she had spoken — each pair of numbers written as two digit numbers. Around her writing I wrote some more numbers. Above "94" I wrote 91, 92, 93 and below "94" I wrote 95, 96, 97, 98... Now I asked her what these numbers were. With a little prodding and a lot of nodding from her friends she could figure out what the numbers were. Again I asked. "You say you are illiterate but how come you know all these things?" The bright blue sari lady smiled shyly, "I do not know all this. You are making me know them."

A smiling woman in a black sari said, "My number is written down in a piece of paper. I look at it and press the buttons. You have to be careful. If you make a mistake it costs money." "What if the piece of paper gets lost?" I wanted to know. "Well then, you find the person in your phone" they said. "How do you look?" The women were amused. I think they were wondering if I knew how to use a mobile phone. Carefully, one lady explained to me. "You have to remember how it looks in the beginning of their name". A slightly older women sitting on one side had been listening to this conversation. Now she piped in. "Why worry about all this. In my phone the person's picture is there — I just look for the right picture."

I changed the subject completely. I pointed to a 100 rupee note and to the picture of Gandhiji. "Who is this?" I asked. There was silence. Everyone looked carefully. Finally, one woman said "He is everywhere, on every note and coin." "Is he dead or alive?" After some discussion it was decided that he is dead. A younger woman got a bit irritated. She complained. "Why don't you ask us about someone we know?" I explained. "Have you heard the name Gandhiji? Bapuji? Do you know who the British ( Angrez) were? Gandhiji was a great man. He was also called Bapuji. Many years ago he got us independence from the British."

### **Poetic connect**

The group was silent for some time. The small woman in a black sari with bright eyes suddenly chimed in, “ Aab samajh mein aya. Humko pata hai.....(Now I understand. Now I know....)” Something had clicked. Her eyes were clear and sparkling. She cleared her throat and began to sing. Soon all the others joined in... “ Sri Ram ne mara Ravan ko. Sri Krishan ne mara Kans ko. Mere Bapuji ne mara Angrezon ko. Desan ko ajaadi karaya hai.” (Ram killed Ravan. Krishna killed Kans. Bapuji beat the English and gave us independence).

The song made the link between Gandhiji, the British and independence. The census figures in India came out recently. The figures show big gains in women's literacy. But under the big mango trees in far away Bihar and deep in the villages of Purnia, much more is happening. Silently, quietly and powerfully.

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