

STORIES OF CHANGE



**Lata Verma
Unveiling Change**

Lata's parents did not encourage the education of girls. She, and her two sisters, had never been to a school. The only thing they learnt was buffalo-rearing and household chores. When Lata got married, she was seen as a liability by her husband, Laalta. He could not even travel to the city for work, because who would take care of the household and its expenses in his absence? He had to make a series of compromises, and survive on a meagre income. The children, too, performed poorly at school, because their father had no time to look after their studies, and their mother was not capable of doing so. How could one expect Laalta to manage everything alone? This thought was unsettling for Lata, who wanted to – but could not – do anything for her family.

When the TARA Akshar+ programme rolled out in Baghaura village, Lata saw hope for herself. She knew that learning how to read and write could put an end to at least half the miseries of her household. Her children, too, supported their mother's endeavour. They kept her motivated every time she lost hope, and ensured her daily practice of lessons. They saw the impact of literacy on their mother, and the transformation in her life. Lata once shared with her children, "Now I want to grow -- learn more, grow more." And she did. She set up her own grocery store, which she opens at 5 AM every day, drawing almost a 100 customers and an income of about INR 3,000 per month. She has also started travelling alone to cities – Hardoi, Lucknow and even Mumbai – to procure goods. This was made possible with Lata's new-gained confidence to talk to strangers – even men – and read signs to follow the correct route. She could do basic calculations to ensure the vendors did not dupe her, and could write the daily records in her diary to maintain a log of monthly expenditure and savings. She now deals with all customers and the finances single-handedly, with advice and support from her children and husband. Alongside this, Lata works at her husband's farms to lend support for about two hours each day. She also looks after the two buffaloes of their household, selling four litres of milk in the neighbourhood. When asked about her journey, Lata said, "I had lost hope at first. Then I started learning slowly. And then all I wanted was to gain more out of it."

She says, "Once I earn enough, I'll order a sewing machine, and stitch blouses and petticoats for women in my village." For this, she has already taken a one-month training on tailoring and stitching, from the vocational training course offered by TARA Akshar+ along with the Rural Self Employment Training Institute (RSETI). Lata describes the changes – the seemingly little changes that actually have had huge

impacts -- in her lifestyle. Having learnt the importance of hygiene through the modules at Gyan Chaupali, Lata got a toilet constructed in her house. This, she says, has been life changing, especially for her daughters. Further learning about the necessity of preventing flies from feeding on food, she got a small cupboard built for food storage. This small practice, Lata notices, has improved the overall health of her family.

Lata has also taken upon her shoulders the responsibility of renovating her house, and now talks to the contractors and labourers with ease. She feels confident enough to express her ideas and plan for the house, and commands the men to do it as per her will, rather than theirs. This is a radical transformation for a woman who earlier used to sit on the floor, practicing purdah. The Gyan Chaupali sessions made her exert her choice. She questioned herself, "Why purdah?", and sat unveiled, reading a newspaper, on the chair next to her husband. She also encouraged the womenfolk to raise questions rather than accepting their 'fate', and stand for their rights. She motivated her mother-in-law and sister-in-law to attend the TARA Akshar+ classes and bring a change in their lives as well.

Lata's husband now says with pride, "Today, when I go out for work, I am not worried, because I know the household is safe with my wife. She maintains records, manages the shop and buffaloes, and takes care of our children." He further adds how his burden has reduced, as Lata now brings additional income to the household, and this shall only increase going forward. Lata says, "I will now ensure that my daughters study well and get good jobs that bring both dignity and value."



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