

STORIES OF CHANGE



Malti Devi Mapping strength to weave success

Born in a small village of Uttar Pradesh, Malti had three sisters and three brothers. Just as the other households of the village, daughters in her family were not allowed to study. And just like numerous other women caught up in oppressive traditions, Malti too had to give up on her passion for studying. But she had planned differently for her children. She always wanted her girls to be well read and educated, and not face the same fate as her. However, checking on their studies and daily practice of lessons was not something Malti could do -- for she could neither read, nor write. Looking at her children's books and the figures these contained, Malti always wished she could understand what these conveyed. When her children would study, Malti would silently sit next to them, admiring how the pencil rested between their three fingers -- fingers that moved almost like waves, covering white sheets in grey. The sight always filled her eyes with wonder. And longingness to experience the same. When the TARA Akshar+ programme rolled out in Hasnapur, Malti expressed interest in enrolling for it. Her husband retorted, "Ab kya kar logi padhke?" (What will you gain out of studying now?) She then shared with him the disappointment she felt each time she could not support her children's studies. Her three immediate neighbours were women who could put their signatures on papers. She felt humiliated and ashamed of herself, being the only one unable to sign. She considered the three women "superior" to her -- a feeling she hated. Her husband, understanding his wife's state, supported her journey of literacy. The first day in class was "the best day" of Malti's life, she says. Once she started writing her name, she felt as though she was born with a new identity -- that of Malti Devi. Interacting with her classmates helped her learn a lot. Realising that she was not the only one to have never held a pencil in her hand, made her feel better about herself. After gaining literacy, Malti knew she could now sit with her friends as an "equal". She recalls how the classes taught her more than just reading and writing -- it taught her the ways of life. She learnt the "difference between the right and wrong" and imparted the same to her children. She understood the deeper and larger impacts that seemingly small quarrels had on the entire family, especially the children and their well-being. Since then, Malti has made a conscious effort to keep the family close-knit and happy. She realised how children learn more from example than preaching. And so she decided to serve the right example for them -- a composed woman, exuding the balance between generosity and self-respect.

Having gained the confidence to take charge of her life, Malti decided to work towards earning an income. Through a session on goat and buffalo rearing during Gyan Chaupali, she learnt about safe practices. She

bought ten goats and two buffaloes, and fed them well as per the lessons learned in class. She has now started selling milk in the neighbourhood,

earning about INR 4,000 per month. She shares how being an earning member of the family gives her the same respect and dignity as her husband. She feels empowered to stand for her rights and beliefs.

The most phenomenal change that Malti felt in her life was shattering gender stereotypes. When the team had visited her house to conduct her interview, Malti sat on the couch. She talked in a clear and firm tone, and shared her opinions. Juice, in disposable glasses, was served to the interviewing team. With the fan running at a high speed, one of the glasses tumbled, spilling the juice. Malti sat still, not budging an inch, simply pacifying the apologetic team. Her son immediately got up, without a word being said to him, and fetched the mop from another room. He squatted on the floor, and started cleaning the mess. He did not seem awkward or hesitant – as though it was a daily routine for him. He seemed to have mastered the skill. And in the corridor facing the room that bore witness to this incident, there was another couch. Sitting on it was Malti's daughter, engrossed in her books.

How often is it that in a village known for its backwardness, the daughter sits comfortably, studying, while the son, without as much a word from anyone, immediately starts cleaning the floor? This, perhaps, was the change in mindset that TARA Akshar+ brought in Malti, who now treated her daughters and sons as equals -- equals both in studies and in sharing household responsibilities.



THE PROGRAMME HAS TAUGHT ME ETIQUETTES – TALKING AND CONDUCTING MYSELF CONFIDENTLY.

