

STORIES OF CHANGE



Rinki Raidas
An Inspiration

Rinki's story is nothing short of a tragedy. It commenced in 1995, with the deadly floods of West Bengal. She was just two years old when her family lost everything in the floods, and the Government offered to take the baby under their tutelage until she hit adulthood. Rinki thus spent 15 years in an orphanage, where basic needs were met with, but schooling and education was not on the agenda. When she turned 18, and the orphanage called out to her parents through newspaper advertisements, impostors came in greed to take back "their child". They took her to Delhi, and kept her locked in a factory in the Kalkaji area. Two men even tried to impose themselves on her, but she was fortunate enough to be saved in time. By then, her biological parents had lodged a complaint, and the police was helping them find their daughter. When Rinki saw her picture on billboards, she managed to get hold of a phone and contacted the police. They immediately came to her rescue, offered her shelter for the night until her parents came from West Bengal, gave her INR 4000 for sustenance, and promised another INR 4000 the next morning.

But the night was not over yet. The impostor returned with a knife, and threatened her for the money she received. Rinki chased him away saying, "Had you been my father, you wouldn't have done all of this." The next morning her parents arrived, but Rinki saw the miserable state they were in. They had spent all their money on this train, and were left with nothing. Rinki gave them the amount of INR 4000 with which they could afford only two tickets. Rinki asked them to go ahead, and promised them that she would "earn enough and come home in a year or two if [she] stayed alive." After much resistance, her parents complied.

Years passed by, but Rinki was unable to earn. She had neither skills, nor basic literacy. She then came across an old man who offered her a considerable amount of money in return for marrying his son in a village called Baghaura in Hardoi. Hopelessness and desperation led Rinki to agree to the offer. But with the nasty turn of fortune, the old man passed away immediately after the wedding, leaving Rinki with no money. She did not deem it right to demand money out of her mother-in-law or husband who were unaware of the old man's offer. Rinki had given up, and expected her married life to be miserable as well. But, to much of her surprise, her husband turned out to be quite generous. He gave her money to buy a ticket and travel to her parents' home in West Bengal. A delighted Rinki was soon dispirited, when she could not navigate her way. Her inability to read and write rendered her helpless, sitting at the railway station for hours, unable to buy the correct ticket or board the correct train. Even looking at her parents' documents, she could not understand

how and where to go within the large state. She could not even read her parents' phone number to call and seek their help. After two failed attempts, she gave up. The fear of being mocked at by her husband prevented her from telling him the truth and so she painted false pictures as to why she did not visit her parents. Dejection took her over.

Her husband, however, had a hint of what was happening. And so he got her enrolled in the TARA Akshar+ programme, encouraging her to be literate enough to stand for herself and earn a living. He supported her at every point, wanting her to feel empowered. Once Rinki had gained enough confidence to set out in the bitter world again, the first thing she did was pay a visit to her parents nine years after they last met. This time, she could read the signboards, board the Paatal Rail and reach their place without getting lost. She could even use her mobile to call and inform her parents about her whereabouts. The reunited family cried their hearts out and felt thankful for everything they had. When they asked her if she knew how long she had been married for, she said with pride, "*ab mai gin sakti hu nau saal*" (I can now count nine years).

Passing the Gyan Chaupali phase, Rinki had gained much awareness. In a session with police forces, all women had been urged to save '100' on their phone. She recounts how this had come in handy soon after. She witnessed a drunk man beating up a young boy from her neighbourhood. She immediately called the police for help. While they advised her to step back and keep herself safe, Rinki did not want to risk the boy's life, and stayed until the police arrested the man. Her presence of mind was much appreciated both by the young boy's family and Rinki's mother-in-law. Today, she says, people are scared of her they know not to mess with her, for she can call the police.

Rinki was also able to bring a change in her children's lives. They had always been sickly, but Rinki now learned about nutritious diets. She purchased a cow for extracting fresh milk, and made rotis out of *gehun* (wheat), while earlier she used to stick only to rice-based diet. For this, she also goes fishing regularly, to prevent intake of preservative-based fish from the market. She also started bathing her children regularly, having learnt about the link between cleanliness, germs and good health.

"Understanding only the Bengali language, it was difficult for me to sustain in this Hindi-speaking belt. Thanks to TARA Akshar+ for equipping me with the language and helping me adapt to this region." Rinki Raidas.



**WITH MY SON IN ONE ARM,
AND A BAG IN ANOTHER, I
NOW TAKE THE TRAIN FROM
UTTAR PRADESH TO WEST
BENGAL ON
MY OWN.**
