

CASE STUDY

Conducted under the Project

“Mutually reinforcing the role of women in habitat based livelihood services”

– Researching the Case of India

Tilothu Mahila Mandal - Nirmiti Kendra



Keywords – Cultural History, Family Trust, Masonry, Building Centre

FACTS

Context

The Tilothu Rural Uplift club was started in 1930s, and within next 30 years it realized that women's empowerment is lagging behind (though there was a significant change in the attitude of men). For instance, the purda system was not evident and young girls were being sent to study in a co-ed school along with their male peers. Nevertheless, it was seen that the women were unable to make decision within the domestic sphere and the need was felt to handle the problem strategically. In this regard, in 1963, Mrs Leela Singh as the first secretary launched the Tilothu Mahila Mandal with the help of the local MLA and her husband Mr. Bipin Bihari Singh and then Chief Justice of India Hon'ble Mr V P Sinha.

Later the responsibility was handed down by the family to Mr Ranjith Sinha and his wife Mrs Ranjana Sinha who are currently managing the entire Mandal, which conducts several activities. It is under the initiative of Mr Ranjith Sinha, who by profession is an electrical engineer and has a passion for civil engineering that construction based activities of the Tilothu Mahila Mandal (TMM) began. He saw the concept of a 'roof over ones head' being a central aspect of an individual's/family's dignity. Influenced by both the building centre movement and the eco-construction activities taken up by other organizations such as Development Alternatives, they set up their own building centre called the TMM Nimriti Kendra in 1991 with the support from The Housing and Urban Development Corporation Ltd. (HUDCO) and provided training to the people from the neighbouring villages.

Objectives

The mandal was set up with the broad objective of empowering the women of Tilothu. They sought to attain this through work in three major sectors:

- a. education
- b. health
- c. livelihoods

In this regard, the TMM broadly runs a school, college, hospital, and several micro-entrepreneurship initiatives. One among the entrepreneurship models is the building centre model, the TMM Nimriti Kendra where both men and women are trained together, leading and working on several habitat and construction jobs. Broadly, the objectives of the building centre are as follows:

- to help construct low-cost buildings
- to provide innovative low-cost and environment-friendly solutions to construction
- to build the capacity of the local people in the area of low-cost construction
- to provide a healthy working environment
- to provide a steady source of livelihoods
- to empower the women

Scale

Till date (September 2010), the centre has trained over 120 women from Tilothu and neighbouring villages. However, it has retained the identity of a small centre. Currently, only eight women work at the centre on a regular basis. Several women who were trained have been married away to other places where they practice

The erstwhile Zamindars of Tilothu (a large village in the state of Bihar), Mr and Mrs Sinha decided to set up a school in their own living quarters. They managed to hire some of the best teachers from across the Bengal Presidency and ran the school on egalitarian principles. During that time, Mr Sinha decided that no governance decisions would be taken without consulting the local people. The principles of participatory decision-making were informally laid down and adopted in an organization called the **Tilothu Rural Uplift Club**. The people would make most of the decisions amongst themselves and would come to the 'leaders' only for final ratification of the same. By 1940, when the rest of India was still under-developed, Tilothu had access to electricity, telephones, and a road directly to Sasaram (the district headquarters). Post independence, this movement gathered momentum with the abolition of the zamindari system. Although the Sinhas were no longer the Zamindars, they became the revenue officers of the land and the people of the land continued to approach them for major decisions.

their learning and impart the same to other women on a smaller scale. Most of the women working here fall in the age bracket of 35 to 45 years. In association with the Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana¹, the TMM has taken up various large projects in the Jharkhand state. In Ranchi and Hazaribagh (large cities in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand) they constructed around 2,000 homes over a period of four years at the rate less than ₹ 200 per square feet. Due to the work undertaken by the mandal in these places, several governmental organizations from the states of Bihar and Jharkhand are currently requesting TMM to take up more projects. Although Mr Ranjith says that he is tempted to take up these large projects, he is refraining from doing so under the banner of the Tilothu Mahila Mandal. He states, “I want to do a lot of things with this place. I want to put Tilothu on the map. But, I am over 60 years old and I don't know how much of that I can achieve. I am looking for young people to take this up further and make this dream a reality.”

FEATURES

Work environment and social support

The building centre is located in an orchard that belonged to the Sinha family. The centre is situated across a total area of around 3 acres. Situated amongst lush fruit bearing trees like mango, leechi, banana, coconuts and other trees, the centre comprises of three residential facilities, a cooking/dining area, office complex, three sets of workshop sheds amongst the open spaces and orchard. The buildings in the centre were constructed by the active and dedicated staffs themselves.

Situated just outside the Indrapuri village centre, the building centre is easily accessible by the public transport system, which mainly comprises of 'tempo' (mini-buses). Women, who stay far away from Indrapuri, come by these 'tempos'. Some of them start from their homes as early as 7 a.m. to reach the centre at the regular opening time. The centre has been a steady source of livelihoods for the women working there. The women are paid on a monthly basis for their work. A key incentive of the centre has been the food that is served there. Every day, nutritious food and drinks are provided. The lunch served here is prepared from the locally cultivated vegetables with the masons being served first and then the senior management,

A hospital is run by the TMM, which provides them with adequate health facilities. Ms Khursheedar Khatun a woman working for the centre indicated, “when our Uncleji (another senior male worker with the building centre) fell ill, Bhaiyya and Bhabhi ensured that he received good medical attention. He was given a long leave. He has still not recovered and has returned only recently to work. This entire experience gives us the confidence that if any one of us were to be met with such a fate, Bhaiyya and Bhabhi will take good care of us. All my children were born in the hospital and the staffs in the hospital treat us really well. They don't even take any money from us...”

The degree of co-operation between the staff members is also commendable, although this has only been achieved over time, which was reiterated by some of them, “in our village, we are neighbours, we live next door. Twenty years ago when we were newly married and came here, I remember we used to fight over so many things... not only us... our entire families used to fight over trivial issues. Now, we don't fight at all..., our families also don't fight... our children can be found in each other's houses. (Smiles) We don't know where they are eating also. (Narrated by Ms Gunga Devi along with Ms Usha Devi)

Adequate toilets and waiting areas are also provided to the workers. According to Ms Usha Devi another senior woman engaged with the centre, “...even when we went to Ranchi and Hazaribaug to work on the VAMBAY project, the people there had taken good care of us. We had a separate place to stay, away from the male workers. One of the first things that we built there was a toilet. All of us used the toilets. Nobody went in the open.



Women workers making roof channel

Innovative approaches

The centre believes in the value of providing practical-based training as opposed to the classical alternative of classroom-based teaching. All the staff from the senior management down to the lowest rank have been trained or have honed their skills by dirtying their hands in the mud, starting from measuring out the various ingredients to mixing them and running the various machines.

The women associated with the centre approached the management at a time when they were helpless and were primarily seeking a livelihood. Therefore, the technical knowledge rested with the senior management. Since no classroom training was offered to the women, they were directly pushed into a situation where they had to adapt to the technologies, which were simple and easy for the women to understand. For example, in the case of concrete Jali, the women have to put the frame, arrange the reinforcement, and place the mortar as per the required proportion. It then has to be demoulded and cured. On-the-job training not only enhanced their understanding about the processes involved but also broke down their initial hitches and barriers.

The women were empowered to make their own decisions drawing from examples set by their seniors. Ms Sabila Khatun who has been associated with the Nirmiti Kendra since its inception said, “if Bhaiyaa and Didi and all the senior people were doing all this work and they had no problems, what did we have to fear?! We just went ahead and did what was shown to us.”

Skill enhancement

The women were trained well in the construction of the precast elements such as R.B. Panels (red brick panels), concrete jali's, RCC door and window chowkhats, micro concrete roofing, Ferro-cement channels and water tanks, precast hollow concrete blocks, pocket foundation (precast foundation blocks) and precast for columns. In fact, where the centre could not afford equipment for the training and work, they innovated. For instance, TMM could not afford to buy the MCR moulds. They came up with a fixed form made of concrete, which could act as the mould so that no compromises were made on the finishing.

The women were capable of doing all the activities involved in the making of the precast elements. The workers at TMM were trained in good practices as well. For instance, they made a dining table and bench from the waste materials generated from their work. Support was provided by Poly Vinyl Chloride (PVC) pipe of about 4 inch diameter, which is regularly used for plumbing activities,



Women workers making roofing blocks

The incidence which the people in the Centre can never forget

On one occasion... maybe eight or ten years back, a 'dacoity' happened here... at that time, Shobhana madam was living here... in that building (Pointing to the building that used to be Ms Shobhana Choudhary's residence). It was the time when salaries would be given and the people around knew that the salaries would be distributed. Some dacoits (around 8 or 10 men) came with guns... They tied up the guard on duty and entered straight into the main complex. They first tried searching for the money in the office complex. Hearing the commotion in the office, Didi called up Bhaiyya and Bhabhi. Soon after the dacoits realised that they could not open the safe without the keys, they came straight into the house and threatened Didi (Ms Shobhana Choudhary). Didi did not give in to any of their threats. When she refused to give the keys, they hit her with the butt of the gun on her shoulders. She still did not give the keys. She sent the two girls (two girls from a neighbouring village whom she had adopted as her foster children and was raising up) inside and continued to face the dacoits. They then hit her on the head leaving her unconscious. They snatched the keys from her and looted the money-box. Bhaiyya and Bhabhi were able to arrive only after they left and rushed Didi to the hospital. Some of us had heard the news, but still came to work the very next day, knowing that Didi would be happy if the work continued.

- Sabila Khatun

filled in with mud and cement mortar. This indicates that the benefits of providing eco-friendly low cost housing were ingrained into their daily work adequately.

LIVELIHOOD BENEFITS

The people of this region are primarily engaged in agriculture. They are dependent on the Son River for water. Given it is a rain-fed river; the people are left without water for several months of the year leading to unemployment and poverty. In this context, the building centre provides a steady source of income for the people.

“... before we came here, we were nothing! Whatever we would cultivate in the field would be taken away from us at such a low price... But, things have changed since we came here. Every month we get our salary. Our families respect us more. I think it is because we are able to earn our money and educate our own children. Earlier, my husband used to drink and cause lot of troubles. Initially, when I used to return home with the money, he would beat me and try to take the money from me to drink. Now, with Bhaiyya and Bhabhi and Didi talking to him and the others, he has not only stopped taking money from me but has also left drinking altogether. When he does not have work in the farm, he comes and helps us in the centre. However, he does this on a voluntary basis (smiles) I think he likes the food we serve here! - Ms Urmila Devi

There are women who leave their houses so early that they cannot dress up their children or leave them to school and perform similar household chores. Their husbands and the other family members have risen up to the occasion and perform these roles. This is seen as a major step in the achievement of the ultimate goal of the empowerment of the women. According to Ms Anita Devi, a woman engaged with the centre, “...we were all working in fields with our husbands as and when they needed help. It was very hard work and nobody thanked us for all the work that we put in all day! Now, because I go for work and have an income, my husband even takes care of the children and dresses them up for their school!”

The manager of the centre is another example of the kind of empowerment women have achieved after starting work at TMM. Ms Shobhana has been with the Mandal for more than 15 years now. However, she was not the project manager when she joined TMM. “Her dedication to the centre is remarkable... which is why she is now the manager of the place. - Ranjith Sinha

Ms Shobhana talking about her work says that she was challenged innumerable times by her family for working in the construction sector, as they thought it was a man's job. Even after she became the manager, many of the subordinates did not accept the authority by saying things like “no establishment can run under a woman” and “let's see if this centre can run for two months under you”. They even went to the extent of saying that “if you are the manager here, we will make the place close down”. Today with pride, she indicates that after nearly 20 years of working here, not even once has the centre been closed for any absurd reason. She says, “Even after a 'dacoity', I came back the next day and ensured that the centre was open and working well. Even if I am not there, the work will go on here without interruptions”.

The security that the centre provides with respect to livelihoods is creditable. The women are paid up to Rs 6000 per month as wages for their labour. The centre being associated with a broader Mahila Mandal has considerable support (for follow up of the income generated, such as home visits and savings groups), taken



Women workers under going in training

“...She (Shobhana Choudhary) is not trained as an engineer... but today, when a government organization like HUDCO wants to conduct a training programme for masons in low-cost housing, they insist on having her as a resource person. Maybe she does not speak, read or write like all these big people do... but she can make things and demonstrate just as well as any engineer or mason... in fact better! Once we were all sitting and trying to figure out how to reduce the costs of a particular building. We were all sitting in a room and trying to figure how to do it. Shobhana took us outside, made a sample of an RB panel and today that is what you can find in most of our buildings!

- Mr. Ranjith Sinha

up to empower the women. The women not only earn money here, but also the dignity and power to spend it the way they see fit. They educate their children with this money and also contribute towards the household budget. They have even saved up money to get themselves new clothes from time to time and gift for family members.

WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The women working in the centre have been able to make a strong impact in the sector. For instance, Ms Shobhana since she started work at the TMM has been involved in all the work being done in the building centre from mixing the 'masala' to making the bricks and the choukats². In fact based on the techniques taught, she came up with a decorative design of the roof for the centre, which she achieved by placing 'kullads'³ of various sizes before pouring the concrete in the fibrocement roofing. Today, she runs the entire building centre and mentions that the women are hard working and sincere than the men. She also commented that the work that the women do is more carefully crafted and has a better finish.

It was observed that the women could carry out the construction of the above-mentioned elements in a very efficient way. For example, in the making of R.B. Panels, the women could make the mortar with the correct and accurate proportion of cement, sand and water, place the bricks and reinforcement bars correctly, and place the mortar with proper thickness and finishing. The women also knew how to operate the machines for constructing the precast hollow concrete blocks, RCC door & window chowkhats and MCR tiles.

However, the women working in the centre feel that there is no difference in the quality or quantity of work accomplished by them when compared to the men. They do feel that the men tend to quarrel a lot amongst themselves, which in turn affects the general morale of all the workers. Even the men, who work here, reiterate this as they feel that the women bind the entire group as a cohesive force and keep the spirit of the centre alive.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

One of the major challenges faced by the women working in the building centre is that they have to be extra-careful while working with or close to machines. The reason for the same is that the women are all clad in saris. Almost all the women felt that they would not change their attire for their work. When suggested with the alternative of a jacket over their saris, many of them agreed to that. However, the cultural taboos against wearing 'western' attire continue to exist being strongly internalized. Mr Ranjith Sinha also explained how the attire laid a limitation on the women working on higher planes. This challenge has been addressed in a participative manner. The women have been informed about the advantages and disadvantages of altering their attire and are left with the choice to decide what to do while adhering to basic safety standards. Restrictions on the place and nature of work are imposed on them based on their choices. Premium medical services, that are otherwise readily available, are also withheld if the safety standards are not met.



Woman worker involved in making habitat product

The 'purdah' system is still practiced among Muslim women outside the centre, as it is a religious symbol for them. Some of the Hindu women also don the 'gunghat' (covering their head with the sari or dupatta) while working and outside (as is evident from some of the photographs). Thus, although the women associated with the TMM Nirmiti Kendra are empowered along several indicators, certain religious and cultural factors still withhold them from achieving their full potential.

It was evident that the women were not involved in the sales/marketing of any of the goods produced. The analysis reveals that there were no forward or backward linkages made between the women of the centre and any other organization or any other regular source of 'orders'. The orders were communicated to

them by the senior management and they were simply 'following the orders'. So it can not be said as to what extent these women are able to learn communication in terms of negotiation, bargain and similar issues.

The other major challenge that the women of the TMM building centre face is that despite their enhanced knowledge and skills base, they seem to be unable to consolidate their learning and display it when required. This, according to Mr Ranjith Sinha, may be due to organization's excessive persistence on the practical side of the training offered to the women. Although personal gains are well articulated, the women are modest about their contributions to the sector and to the overall development of the region. This is being addressed on an ongoing basis by giving on-the-job trainings about the repercussions of the technology used and the women's actions. There are frequent visitors to the centre and the women are encouraged to take leadership in demonstrating and articulating their work to the visitors. However, it may be noted here, that the women are seldom involved in design aspects, which hampers the facilitation of leadership skills.

Although, the women associated with the centre are extremely skilled at using technology, their articulation of the knowledge and skills required for the same needs enhancement. One can conclude that their procedural training has been more than adequate while the training on softer skills may need some more focus.

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1. Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana (VAMBAY) The VAMBAY was launched in December 2001 to ameliorate the conditions of the urban slum dwellers living below the poverty line without adequate shelter.
 2. 'Choukat' literally refers to the traditional entrance to a house. In this context, it refers to the pre-fabricated frame for a door or window.
 3. 'Kullad' refers to a small earthen pot, which is commonly used for consuming hot beverages like tea and cold beverages like buttermilk in rural parts of India.

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