

STORIES OF CHANGE



Baby
Paving ways
towards
Self-Reliance

Residing in Gauri Khalsa village, Baby had never received formal education. She had only attended the *Madarsa* to learn Urdu. Life had always been rough for her. Her family was caught in a vicious cycle of poverty. They could not afford decent food, and consumed only raw vegetables picked from the farm. The eight children and parents only got half a roti each in their share. Baby has got so tuned in to this routine that even today, when she can easily afford healthy food, she fasts for about 13-14 hours at a stretch, staying too engrossed in work.

Baby married into poverty too. A handicapped husband and weak financial conditions meant that she was the sole earning member of her family. Being the eldest, she had also taken upon herself the responsibility of her seven siblings. She started doing *kadhai* and *mukaish* (embroidery) work, for which she earned INR 35 per tola (10 grams). Simultaneously, she also worked on her husband's farms. She could not afford labourers for the field. And so, she, along with her children, worked together to sow seeds, water, harvest and sell crops. In the little amount she gathered, Baby got her seven siblings married, and four of her children enrolled in a school. She had always wanted her children to be educated enough to earn well for themselves. And thus, encouraged them to study hard. She, however, starved

In December 2017, Baby recalls how the wheels of fortune suddenly turned in her favour. TARA Akshar+ came to her village with the promise of literacy. Her daughter, Fahmina, was already working as a TARA Akshar+ instructor in a nearby village, Kahli. Baby used to always tell everyone, "I am so proud of my daughter. She has become the master ji (teacher) for all women in the village." And this time around, the TARA Akshar+ team came to Gauri Khalsa to spread awareness about the importance of literacy. They convinced even the older women that basic reading and writing is a necessity, so they do not have to depend on others in their old age. The opportunity to learn from her own daughter was even more fascinating for Baby. She said, "*ladki ko iss ohde pe pohocha diya ki aaj humko padha rahi hai*" (I have raised my daughter to this position, that today she is teaching me).

In the initial stages, Baby, and the other women alike, had to face opposition. Community support for women's studies and progress was not built with ease. Sons usually stopped their mothers, "Look at your age. You are soon going to *Allah*. Have some *sharam* (shame). You don't even know how to hold a pencil, what is the point of all this?" But together, the women broke out of these

shackles. Baby recounts, “First they laughed at us, then they saw our progress and joined us too. So, *dekha dekhi* (seeing each other), the entire village became literate.” Baby, thus, studied, took tests, and soon got her certificate, signifying all the hard work she had put in. Literacy had paved her way to the horizon of success. Baby can feel the difference after being literate, she says. To begin with, the simple act of joining the literacy classes brought her joy -- “The first day, even holding a pencil in my hand made me happy.” As time went by, she started enjoying reading Bhojpuri books. Later, becoming familiar with market trends, she realised she was being underpaid for her *mukaish* work. She, thus, confronted the vendor, and is now earning INR 90 per *tola*. She has also started a mini-enterprise for her *mukaish* work in Lucknow, providing employment to few others as well. Furthermore, in January 2019, she even went on to open her own *kirana* (grocery) store. She manages the shop all by herself, including procuring goods, dealing with vendors and customers, and managing the *hisab kitab* (accounts). Baby shares how her husband had been the owner of the shop since many years. He used to be the one managing it. But after paralysis struck him, he decided to close it down. Having been equipped with literacy and the confidence to manage things single-handedly, Baby decided to step up and inaugurate the shop again. She also felt motivated to travel far-off distances -- areas she had never seen before -- to expand her enterprise. Today, Baby feels empowered, and has enrolled two of her children in Universities for higher degrees. Her daughter shares how her mother now seems happier during festivals and rituals. Earlier, she relied on others to read out religious books and sacred texts. But today, she adds to the celebrations by fluently reading out and singing prayers.



LITERACY HAS MADE ME SELF-RELIANT. I HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGING WOMEN ACROSS MY VILLAGE TO JOIN THE PROGRAMME TOO, FOR LEARNING HAS NO AGE. AND AS FOR ME, I WANT TO KEEP LEARNING MORE.

