



Literacy Paved the Way for Leadership

Kalui Devi, a mother of five, belongs to Chakjudawan village in Aurai block, Bhadohi district of Uttar Pradesh. She did not only have aspirations to become independent but also wanted to see a gender-equal future for sons and daughters of the village. But lack of opportunities created obstacles for many like her to restart their lives with a different outlook. And at 40 years of age, she had started to lose hope.

Kalui's village is known for its rampant poverty and entrenched patriarchy that has existed for many years. Young women miss out on getting education, developing skills for employment, owning businesses, and having a say in matters of village management. Women, here, have historically been relegated to the private sphere due to archaic gender norms. And they are confined to the unpaid labour of managing the household and rearing children and are often not included in the public sphere.

When TARA Akshar+ set up a centre in her village, she decided to alter her destiny. She decided to join TARA Akshar+ in the hopes to gain literacy and build an identity for herself. She wanted to sign her name on documents, instead of using a thumb impression, read signboards, travel by herself, help in managing the accounts of the shop that her family runs, and most importantly wanted to be a source of inspiration for her children.

Through the 56 days ICT based programme, she learned to read and write and was then encouraged to join the Gyan Chaupali. Here she learned about nutrition, environment, finance, women's rights, and gained entrepreneurial skills. With newfound confidence and skills, she ventured into starting her own small business. She realised that unlike in yesteryears where everything was packed in paper, cloth, or glass, today plastic had taken over our lives. With the growth of the use of single-use plastic, her village would often be littered with plastic waste. This inspired her to start her own enterprise for making paper bowls, with the twin objective of starting a women-led business that would further employ other women, and would also create a positive impact on the environment. As her sustainable business for durable, cost-effective, and recyclable paper cups prospered, she started to earn around INR 5000 every month from it. The governmental bodies in the village also took notice of this and began to regard her as a 'change maker' in field of environmental protection and advocacy. A woman who until recently did not

possess literacy skills was now seen as an educated and socially aware leader in her community, who had not only turned around her own life but also managed to create an impact in her village.

For her efforts in this field, Kalui Devi was selected as a Sanitation and Water Conservation Motivator under the Swachh Bharat Mission, a Clean India Mission championed by the Indian Prime Minister. She was appointed by the District Panchayat Raj Officer (DPRO). With this huge honour and responsibility, Kalui stepped into a new role as an environmental advocate; she would often talk to villagers and even share the stage with governmental representatives at various events. She was also awarded multiple times for her contributions.

In one such event, a celebration for International Literacy Day, Kalui Devi decided to become a flag bearer of change, she brought the attention of the high governmental officials like the district magistrates to issues of women empowerment. She pulled examples from her own life, to speak about the hurdles women have to face, and how their lives can be transformed for the better through literacy and capacity building initiatives. The officials were impressed with her dedication and invited her to co-create solutions; they also supported her to start her own Self Help Group, a collective to transform their lives through social and economic empowerment.

The government further helped the SHG members to set up a poultry farm by providing 50 chickens and a fixed monthly amount for their feed and other essentials. 24 other women from the same area have also become literate through the TARA Akshar+ Programme. With her dedication to the cause of women's empowerment and sanitation, she has become an inspiration to many. Regional and National newspapers have visited her for her story, and she continues to engage with the government on issues of rural development.