

# Chalking Out Emerging Identities

... tracing journeys of the frontrunners



TARA Akshar+ Learners

## DISCLAIMER

This compendium is an outcome of a project titled 'Functional Literacy to 1500 Women in Kachhauna Block of Uttar Pradesh', funded by HCL Foundation, to make women functionally literate and numerate in six Gram Panchayats of Kachhauna and Behendar Blocks of Hardoi District from August 2017 to April 2019. This document is intended for use by policy-makers, academics, media, government, non-government organisations and general public for guidance on the matters of interest only, and does not constitute professional advice. However, the decision and responsibility to use the information contained in this document lies solely with the reader. The publisher(s) are not liable for any consequences as a result of use or application of this document. Content may be used/quoted with due acknowledgment to the Development Alternatives Group and HCL Foundation. All photographs contained in this compendium have been used with due permission.

## Chalking Out Emerging Identities ... tracing journeys of the frontrunners

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# *Meet the* Learners

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# The Initiative...

Is anything more powerful than the ability to read and write? Through written language, we convey beliefs, record knowledge, and explore our common humanity. The alphabet may be different around the world, but literacy -- that core ability to make sense of the written word -- is cherished across all cultures and traditions. Strong literacy skills serve as a foundation for positive social development, and this pattern is replicated all over the world. Literate mothers are better able to support their families' health, and literate children and adults develop empathy through the stories they read. Empathy leads to social awareness and fosters supportive communities. Unfortunately, too many illiterate people around the world are still not afforded the life-changing experience of learning how to read and write. And opportunities are particularly limited for women, especially those residing in rural areas. Heading in this direction is far from easy for women, who need to confront long internalised social constructs.

Over the last decade, TARA Akshar+, an ICT based literacy programme designed and developed by the Development Alternatives Group, has emerged as an alternative solution for addressing the problem of illiteracy in a fast and effective manner. Till date, TARA Akshar+ has made more than 200,000 rural women functionally literate across 8 states. The project, 'Functional Literacy to 1500 Women in Kachhauna Block of Uttar Pradesh', with support from HCL Foundation, was implemented in six Gram Panchayats of Kachhauna and Behendar blocks of Hardoi District from August 2017 to April 2019.

*This booklet encapsulates stories of some of these women – the ones who have emerged as frontrunners in their journey from literacy to self-reliance...*



## Lata Verma

(35 years, Baghaura)

Lata's parents did not encourage the education of girls. She, and her two sisters, had never been to a school. The only thing they learnt was buffalo-rearing and household chores. When Lata got married, she was seen as a liability by her husband, Laalta. He could not even travel to the city for work, because who would take care of the household and its expenses in his absence? He had to make a series of compromises, and survive on a meagre income. The children, too,

performed poorly at school, because their father had no time to look after their studies, and their mother was not capable of doing so. How could one expect Laalta to manage everything alone? This thought was unsettling for Lata, who wanted to – but could not – do anything for her family.

When the TARA Akshar+ programme rolled out in Baghaura village, Lata saw hope for herself. She knew that learning how to read and write could put

household. Her children, too, supported their mother's endeavour. They kept her motivated every time she lost hope, and ensured her daily practice of lessons. They saw the impact of literacy on their mother, and the transformation in her life. Lata once shared with her children, "Now I want to grow -- learn more, grow more." And she did. She set up her own grocery store, which she opens at 5 AM every day, drawing almost a 100 customers and an income of about INR 3,000 per month. She has also started travelling alone to cities – Hardoi, Lucknow and even Mumbai – to procure goods. This was made possible with Lata's new-gained confidence to talk to strangers – even men -- and read signs to follow the correct route. She could do basic calculations to ensure the vendors did not dupe her, and could write the daily records in her diary to maintain a log of monthly expenditure and savings. She now deals with all customers and the finances single-handedly, with advice and support from her children and husband. Alongside this, Lata works at her husband's farms to lend support for about two hours each day. She also looks after the two buffaloes of their household, selling four litres of milk in the neighbourhood. When asked about her journey, Lata said, "I had lost hope at first. Then I started learning slowly. And then all I wanted was to gain more out of it."

She says, "Once I earn enough, I'll order a sewing machine, and stitch blouses and petticoats for women in my village." For this, she has already taken a one-month training on tailoring and stitching, from the vocational training course offered by TARA Akshar+ along with the Rural Self

Employment Training Institute (RSETI). Lata describes the changes – the seemingly little changes that actually have had huge impacts -- in her lifestyle. Having learnt the importance of hygiene through the modules at Gyan Chaupali, Lata got a toilet constructed in her house. This, she says, has been life changing, especially for her daughters. Further learning about the necessity of preventing flies from feeding on food, she got a small cupboard built for food storage. This small practice, Lata notices, has improved the overall health of her family.

Lata has also taken upon her shoulders the responsibility of renovating her house, and now talks to the contractors and labourers with ease. She feels confident enough to express her ideas



and plan for the house, and commands the men to do it as per her will, rather than theirs. This is a radical transformation for a woman who earlier used to sit on the floor, practicing *purdah*. The Gyan Chaupali sessions made her exert her choice. She questioned herself, “Why *purdah*?”, and sat unveiled, reading a newspaper, on the chair next to her husband. She also encouraged the womenfolk to raise questions rather than accepting their 'fate', and stand for their rights. She motivated her mother-in-law and sister-in-law to attend the TARA Akshar+ classes and bring a change in their lives as well.

Lata's husband now says with pride, “Today, when I go out for work, I am not worried, because I know the household is safe with my wife. She maintains records, manages the shop and buffaloes, and takes care of our children.” He further adds how his burden has reduced, as Lata now brings additional income to the household, and this shall only increase going forward. Lata says, “I will now ensure that my daughters study well and get good jobs that bring both dignity and value.”

“ I questioned myself, 'Why *purdah*?', and sat unveiled, reading a newspaper, on the chair next to my husband.

– Lata Verma

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## Rinki Raidas

(27 years, Baghaura)

**R**inki'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 jin 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.

-- Rinki Raidas”





## Jannat-o-Nisha

(32 years, Baghaura)

**H**ailing from the Birua village in Uttar Pradesh, Jannat-o-Nisha had attended the *Madrasa* (Islamic educational institution) as a child. While her brothers were enrolled in formal education systems, the girls of the household were only permitted religious learnings. This, she always felt, was unfair on her. She, too, had the ambition to study and succeed in life. However, she could not transgress the boundaries of her community. When she got married in the village of Hasnapur, she expressed this desire to her husband. Sympathising with her situation, he promised that their children would not suffer the same fate. Jannat-o-Nisha had, obviously, crossed the age where anything could be done for her education. She was now an adult, a mother of five children.

On one of the monotonous days, Jannat-o-Nisha heard the neighbourhood women “giving their names” for

something new in their village. Intrigued, she stepped out of the house once her husband left for work. Her face was covered – she could not risk anyone seeing her. She asked the women at the booth what they were enrolling for. They said in unison, “literacy”. Jannat-o-Nisha smirked, saying, “Oh, my children already go to school.” She was taken aback when one of the women retorted, “This is for us, not for our children.” Her trail of thoughts started: Literacy classes for women? At this age? In our village? How is that even possible?

She thought about it all day. And when her husband returned from work, she shared the absurdity with him. But to her surprise, he was delighted, and immediately walked down to the booth to enrol his wife in the programme. Overcoming initial hesitation, Jannat-o-Nisha began enjoying the classes. She also encouraged her daughter-in-law to pursue the course. Women, who had hitherto remained within their 'closed circles', were now going out, interacting with other women from the village. The feeling of sharing experiences itself was a new thing for Jannat-o-Nisha. The computer software that transformed daily life objects into letters of the Hindi alphabet fascinated her so much, that she wanted her already-literate daughter to experience this as well. She, thus, encouraged her to join as a TARA Saheli. The mother-daughter duo started making new memories every day, learning and teaching together. Jannat-o-Nisha recalls how they shared a laugh when her daughter once said, “I am your mother now!”

With Gyan Chapauli, Jannat-o-Nisha's life began changing. She started filling out withdrawal forms at the bank, and navigating her routes by reading signboards. She also travels to the marketplace, the Gausganj *chauraha*, alone to fetch groceries from the *kirana* store, and purchase medicines that she now reads out from the doctor's prescription. A few months later, she even travelled to the Lucknow city, all by herself. The happiness of not merely sitting at home, but actually going out with confidence, is



Her daughter shares the most significant change she has seen in her mother – her new-found patience and composure. She says, “Earlier, *maa* used to always yell at me for working slow. But now she asks me to do things at my own pace. I have seen a huge change in her understanding of individual differences and personalities, and her response to the little things.”

“Earlier, I used to pass on the doctor’s prescription to someone who was ‘educated’. Today, I know that ‘someone’ is me.

– Jannat-o-Nisha

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## Baby

(40 years, Gauri Khalsa)

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, "*Iadki 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.

- Baby

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## Malti Devi

(35 years, Hasnapur)

**B**orn 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.

– Malti Devi

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Stories of Change

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## Zahira Bano

(38 years, Hasnapur)

**T**he graph of Zahira Bano's transformation has been exponential. The story begins with her husband's objection to her desire for literacy, her family's conservative outlook towards women, and the continuous reinforcement of women's silence and practice of *purdah*. Women had always been conditioned into believing

that speaking for their rights or taking a stand against the wrong connotes disrespect and poor upbringing. Zahira had, thus, always accepted what was thrown her way. When she heard about the TARA Akshar+ programme, she wanted to enrol for it, for she saw it as an opportunity to evolve out of this oppressive cycle. However, her husband was against the idea. He, like most other men, saw a woman's job as taking care of the children and household. Zahira tried convincing him that “their children were old enough to manage two hours

by themselves". But all in vain. Zahira did not want to lose this opportunity just because her husband was chained by societal constructs. She, thus, decided to "take a bold step". She started lying to her husband, stepping out of the house stealthily each time he went for work -- for the entire eight-month period of TARA Akshar+ classes and Gyan Chaupali. At first, she started questioning her actions and doubting her capability, shouldering the guilt of cheating her husband. Gradually, however, she realised this was in the benefit of her entire family.

After the course, looking at Zahira's growth and potential, the government offered her an opportunity to form a Self Help Group (SHG) of her own. All she needed was to show some confidence, and she would then be the *adhyaksh* (President) of 'Bismillah SHG', leading a group of ten women. At first, Zahira was hesitant. She knew she could not get away by lying at home this time around. But she also knew this was the moment she had always longed for, or perhaps, had never even imagined of. If she did not take a stand now, she would never be able to. And so, she gathered all the courage she could find, and told her husband all about it -- how she had been sneaking out for eight months, and how she, as an individual, had grown tremendously. At first, her husband threw a fit. But when Zahira wrote his name, and a few lines about the opportunity she was being offered, he could not contain his delight and pride in his wife. He apologised for not supporting her sooner, and encouraged her for forming the SHG.

Zahira started by mobilising women from her village encouraging them and their families for support. Once she managed to gather ten women, she ensured conducting regular meetings, and that each meeting was logged into the register. She herself would write down the names of attendees, discussion topics and fee contribution. She also made each woman sign against their name, and occasionally encouraged them to write the proceedings as well -- to ensure they did not lose their touch with literacy. Each woman had to pay INR 10 every week. Zahira would deposit this amount in a bank, and personally look after all paperwork. She reminded the women regularly, "[They] need not go anywhere else for loans. The SHG money was theirs." There were few instances where a member was unable to contribute the fee, owing to household needs. Zahira meticulously kept records of it, and ensured clearance of all dues in time. Till date, she has collected an amount of INR 7,000.

During each baithak (meeting), Zahira picks up topics of social concern. The women discuss water woes and how to resolve these, and the importance of cleanliness not just within their own



household, but outside of it too. They also discuss healthy ways of child-upbringing, and share their individual experiences, to propose better and concerted solutions. Zahira recounts how initially the discussions used to be more on the lines of 'teaching', but gradually these have evolved into participatory sessions with all women contributing enthusiastically and with ownership.

Keeping the women united and in harmony was a challenging task at first. Quarrels were very common, and women would often divide themselves into sub-groups, scapegoating the 'others' for each issue. It took a while for Zahira to bridge these gaps and create a cohesive group. Today, she says, the ten women are almost like sisters, supporting each other and collectively standing against all

Under one of the development schemes, the government had promised providing Zahira with 1,000 chicks and 20 goats, which she would distribute equally among her group. However, she was given only 700 and 14, respectively. Zahira knew that this would create animosity within the group that had just been united. She thus, using her network, arranged the remaining 300 chicks and 6 goats from elsewhere. With this, the group's respect for Zahira increased. She recalls how earlier she used to end up making mistakes every day, and feared that the women would quit due to their leader's inefficiency. But the TARA Akshar+ Sahelis motivated her all along, and supported her in resolving all challenges. They guided her from time to time, on the nature of discussions to hold in each meeting, and the ways of driving women towards empowerment.

Zahira says, she has “finally been able to differentiate *adab* (being cultured) from *buddhu* (fool)”. Her husband, too, is proud of how she talks with confidence and advocates standing for one's rights.

“ I tell my daughters that they need to speak for themselves and stand for their rights. And that is imperative.

– Zahira Bano

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## Mehsari Bano

(43 years, Hasnapur)

**M**ehsari's husband had been ill for a very long time, and was almost bed-ridden. He, obviously, could not work to provide for his family. The responsibility of their six children, thus, fell entirely on Mehsari's shoulders. She had to start earning a livelihood, while also taking care of the household.

In her village, women never worked outside, they simply depended on their husbands. So the avenue was fairly new for Mehsari. And her illiteracy was in no way working in her favour. Even for the simplest of jobs that required no educational qualification, employers would reject Mehsari because she “could not even sign”. She was stooping under the burden of failure.

Just then, the TARA Akshar+ programme rolled out in Hasnapur. Mehsari knew this was her opportunity to

become capable for a decent job. She learnt, and grew, every single day. Seeing her progress, her daughter also felt motivated to join the programme as a TARA Saheli. Mehsari's son was against the idea of sending his sister to work at a far off village. He was of the opinion that only his mother “needs” to work. Why should his sister go out too? But Mehsari stood her ground and fought for her daughter's rights. She said, “Why should my daughter stay back? The other village also has people just like you and me.”

After successfully completing the course, Mehsari first became the member of a Self Help Group (SHG), and later the *sachiv* (secretary) of the group. This not only empowered her, but also gave her the opportunity to motivate other women towards taking charge of their lives. Being in the SHG, she got the chance to buy 100 chicks. She reared them, but their poor health did not earn her more than INR 6,000 when she sold them in the market. For the next cycle, Mehsari has planned on purchasing another set of 100 chicks. This time, owing to her enhanced awareness through the Gyan Chaupali sessions, she plans to first get the chicks tested to eliminate the sickly ones. The session on health and nutrition of animals has helped her in understanding healthy rearing practices. Using this knowledge, she has decided to provide the chicks with nutritious food for about 42 days, and then sell them in the market at a price much higher than last time. Mehsari has also additionally taken up *mukaish* (embroidery) work. She completes one *kurta* a month, earning about INR 400. These *kurtas* are sold in Lucknow, through the contact person at Gausganj. Mehsari has also trained her daughter on this skill, and hopes to open up her own enterprise in the near future. Thereafter, she and her daughter would directly sell *kurtas* in the markets of Lucknow, thus getting free from the clutches of the middle man.

Mehsari has noticed a substantial change in her personality after joining the TARA Akshar+ programme. While earlier she could never travel alone or talk to people with confidence, today she goes to the market all by herself and buys medicines for her husband. She even takes him to the doctor in Lucknow. Until about 10 months back, she used to always ask someone to

accompany her, and do the bargaining on her behalf. But today, she exudes confidence and deals with vendors all by herself. She further recalls a recent incident where she boarded the wrong bus while going to the market. Just then, she saw another bus that read “Malawa”, and thus immediately got off to board the right bus in time.



Today, Mehsari contributes to her children's studies too. Her son, who prefers playing over studying, complains, “*Kya ammi, aap padh likh li toh hume bhi zabardasti padha rahi hain*” (mother, now that you're literate, you're also forcing us to study more). Mehsari's neighbours, too, describe the change in her -- she used to spend a lot of time with them earlier, indulging in gossip. But now, she calls this activity “meaningless”, and prefers practicing lessons instead. When Mehsari's eldest son, Sabli, was asked about the change in his mother, he laughed heartily and said, “At least our youngest brother does not have to suffer the same plight as us. In our generation, our then-illiterate *ammi* would give us names that were not only meaningless, but also embarrassing. But by the time Shehnwaaz was born, *ammi* had learnt the importance and value of words. She did not just keep a random 'sound', but a name that has a meaning.” This will reflect in greater self-esteem and confidence for Shehnwaaz, as compared to Sabli who does not interact much with outsiders – shying away from even introducing himself.

“Earlier, I paid extra amounts, because the shopkeeper was intimidating -- 'don't try to teach me my job'. But today, I have the confidence to rebuke him -- 'If you don't do your job correctly, I will have to teach you'.

– Mehsari Bano

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तारा-अक्षर  
बच्चों की किताब - भाग 2

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## Pramila Devi

(44 years, Hasnapur)

Hailing from a small village called Hewan in Shimla (Himachal Pradesh), Pramila had always led a decent life -- one she had no complaints about. She had friends in her neighbourhood, who played with her every evening once they returned from school. She spent all day waiting for them eagerly,

keeping herself busy with household cleaning and washing. When she turned 16, her parents married her off in the Hasnapur village of Uttar Pradesh. And thereafter, her life turned around.

Having spent her childhood with parents who encouraged their daughter to go out carrying confidence, adjusting with a man completely opposite was not easy. Pramila's husband would drink every evening, hurl abuses at her, and beat her up. If she ever dared stepping out of home, even to the *kirana* (grocery) store, her

husband would lash out at her. He would not even permit her to stand right outside the house to talk to the woman living next door. While initially Pramila used to cry all day and pray that her misery ends, after a couple of years she “accepted her fate”. She got so conditioned to this lifestyle, that she, herself, lost the desire to step out. As for her social life, a couple of women from the neighbourhood would visit her during the day to spend a short while with her, updating her on new gossip across the village. For 27 years of her married life, Pramila found happiness in simply hearing about others' social lives.

On one of the regular sunny days, during the usual banter in her verandah, Pramila heard about the TARA Akshar+ programme rolling out in her village. She, obviously, discarded the thought because she knew her husband would thrash her. But later that night, after a gruesome quarrel with him, Pramila questioned herself, “Till when will this go on?” She wondered why she had been putting up with her husband's idiosyncrasies all these years. Why she had to always depend on others -- on her husband to earn, her son to fetch things from the market, her daughter to read out the pamphlets slid at the threshold of the household, her friends to come visit her. She had now decided to put an end to this. She enrolled for the literacy classes. When her husband found out, he kicked and whipped her mercilessly. But Pramila's decision did not waver. There was nothing that could now change her mind.

As she started attending the classes, she got to interact with people. She realised, through others' stories, that the life she had been living was not “normal”. She read stories that described happy women, exerting their choice. She wrote her name, rather than her husband's, because she too was an ‘individual’. Completing 56 days' course, and entering the Gyan Chaupali phase, she encountered 'working women', pursuing different careers -- law, teaching, medicine, police forces, Anganwadis, and many more. All this was both new and surprising for Pramila -- the adult who had never stepped out or read about the real

world. Her exposure had been limited only to her two friends who fed her with daily gossip. One evening, she got a call from her family back in Hewan, that her brother had committed suicide. Pramila was shattered. She knew her brother would never do something like that, and thus wanted to probe further. Now that she could read and write, she went through the suicide note carefully, and immediately realised gaps in the made-up story. Action had to be taken. With the confidence she had gained lately, she confronted her family, telling them how the suicide story was cooked up. While they initially got angry at her for “not respecting the departed soul of her brother”,



Pramila asserted herself, backing it up with facts. A couple of months ago, her brother had gone to Ludhiana for work. His friend borrowed some money from him, for a surgery in the family. When he asked him to return the money, a gang of three threw him on the railway tracks. Pieces of his body were sent to his family, along with the fabricated suicide note.

The family begged for justice. Pramila recalled one of the Gyan Chapuali sessions on law, where the guest speaker had emphasised the importance of being aware of one's rights and appealing to authorities for taking required action. She, thus, went to the *Pradhan* (Panchayat leader) and put forward the case. She also called the *guruji* (teacher), who confirmed her brother's integrity. The *Pradhan* praised Pramila's discernment and courage, and cited her example to other women of the village.

Pramila had now realised she was capable of so much more. Her instructors had often told her that she was a quick learner, grasping concepts like none other. And now, she knew she had a voice too -- not just the meek one that said "yes" and "sure" to everything and everyone, but an assertive voice -- one that could express opinions and desires, one that could take a stand for oneself. Pramila has now decided to join a Self Help Group, and get linked to a livelihood opportunity. She wants to be self-sufficient and capable of affording her children a decent life, without having to rely on her husband.

“Today, I can talk to anyone, and confront anyone if I know I am right. As for my husband, it doesn't matter what he thinks. His views are just as pointless as the notion of caste.

– Pramila Devi

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## Zeenat Zehra

(52 years, Baghaura)

Zeenat was fairly 'better' than the other women of her village. She, too, was illiterate -- but unlike others, she hadn't always been this way. She had studied till class four in a government school. After that, owing to the weak financial condition of her family, Zeenat had to drop out. She, however, always knew that her children would, unlike her, pursue higher studies and grow into successful individuals. Unfortunately, two of her three children were crippled with polio. Zeenat consulted various doctors, in hope that they would give medicines to improve her children's condition. But all in vain. She lost large amounts of money on doctors that only misguided her. She wanted to start working to make up for the lost money. She, thus, bought two goats. Her plan was to rear them well, so that she could extract milk out of them and start her own home-based dairy. However, her goats were sickly too. They stayed ill most of the time, and did not produce sufficient milk. Moreover, their milk was not fit for drinking. The goats were on the verge of expiring.

Taking care of her children, goats and other household chores was getting extremely difficult for an ageing Zeenat. And so, her eldest daughter, Shazia, after having obtained the Bachelor's degree in Science, decided to drop everything and help her mother. Zeenat felt dejected when she saw her well-educated daughter sitting at home, instead of working like her peers. When the TARA Akshar+ programme rolled out, Zeenat immediately asked her daughter to enrol in it as a TARA Saheli. After the initial orientation of the Sahelis, Shazia shared her experience with her mother. She described the various modules that were part of the Gyan Chaupali. One such module was on health and nutrition, which was going to be taken up by a trusted, qualified doctor. Zeenat immediately felt the need to join the course. She was tired of travelling far off distances, visiting doctors that only saw ways of making money. She thought, the Gyan Chaupali would be a free-of-cost way for getting a qualified doctor's opinion on her sickly children and expiring goats.

The guest speaker at one of the Gyan Chaupali sessions emphasised the importance of a nutritious diet, particularly for children. Zeenat had never realised the importance of washing vegetables to eliminate all germs. She had never realised the impact of eating fresh, warm and covered food. Lately, Zeenat had also increased the frequency of meals, thinking this would make her children healthy. But the speaker made her understand that excessive food only made them sicker. They needed food at intervals, in adequate amount, comprising a balanced diet. Zeenat also started ensuring that her children washed their hands every two hours, especially before meals. She made them exercise regularly, so their immunity would increase. The speaker also gave her a prescription for her polio-infected children. Zeenat shares how the small changes led to considerable improvement in her children's health. She also asked the doctor to save her expiring goats. He pointed out the cause -- excessive heat -- and highlighted how simple home remedies, along with nutritious fodder, could prevent their illness. Following these, Zeenat

recovered her goats. She was able to extract their milk and earn decent money out of it. Later, she sold the goats and bought a house from that money -- a house that was cleaner, situated amidst hygienic surroundings, and well exposed to sunlight. She says, she was able to understand the need for all this only from the conversations struck during the Gyan Chaupali sessions.

Zeenat also shares how the classes brought her a lot more than just her intended takeaway of health related aspects. She had never realised how the ability to read and type on a mobile phone could induce a big difference. Half the things she walked far off for, could



be resolved through a phone call. She could even give a call to her relatives and stay connected to them on a regular basis, rather than meeting once in a while. Today, Zeenat also helps her younger children in their daily homework and studies. She checks their diaries every day for comments from teachers. This enables her to guide her children, and encourage them to do better. She is also able to point out their mistakes and correct them. And this holds true not just for her children, but for any person doing something wrong. She recalls a recent incident where she rebuked the bank manager who was trying to cheat another customer.

Zeenat has now started *mukaish* (embroidery) work to secure a stable source of livelihood. Recently, she has also begun crafting palm-fans, which are a common demand across the region with poor electricity supply. She also plans on purchasing goats again and fuelling her dream of starting a dairy. Her daughter, Shazia, says with pride, “Now I am confident that after I get married, ammi will be able to carry out household work efficiently.”

“Now, having learnt how to read and type on my phone, I can easily check on my daughter who often gets late from work -- rather than panicking, thinking the worst of all, and asking everyone around.

– Zeenat Zehra

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## Savitri Devi

(66 years, Hasnapur)

Savitri's story begins as a six-year old girl from a small village in Kanpur. With her five brothers and two sisters, Savitri had also started going to school. The first grade, she says, was a wonderful experience. She had learnt the Hindi alphabet and simple formation of words. When she entered the second grade,

however, things got harder. While she was a quick learner, she was low on confidence. She clearly remembers the incident that changed her life. The teacher had taught the multiplication-table of two, and asked the students to memorise it for the next class. Savitri had enthusiastically completed the task. But when she was asked to recite the table in class, nervousness overpowered her. Despite knowing the table by-heart, she was unable to answer. The teacher, then, thrashed her, and said, "Savitri is incapable of learning". She felt so

demotivated that she could not gather the courage to go back to school. With that came an end to her education. And she suppressed her desire for studying, deep within.

Savitri was married off in the Hasnapur village when she was barely 12 years old. Her immediate neighbour was a primary school teacher. Savitri always looked up to her as an inspiration -- someone who not only completed her own education, but was also passing it on to the next generation. Though Savitri always wanted to ask the lady to teach her as well, she was too afraid of being mocked at. As years passed by, her son got married. And he, too, brought a teacher home. This made Savitri feel worse about her illiteracy. She shares the thought that disturbed her every night -- "*sab padhe likhe, bas hum nahi*" (everyone was literate, except me). She wanted to study, too, and this time, more for her self-respect and dignity, especially in front of her children.

The TARA Akshar+ team was once visiting Hasnapur for conducting a preliminary survey. The moment Savitri got to know about the literacy initiative, she dropped everything to be a part of it. Her children, at first, questioned their ageing mother's decision, but Savitri said, "*gyaan toh kabhi bhi aa sakta hai, budhape mein bhi*" (knowledge can be gained at any point, even in old age). When the classes commenced, she got flashbacks of her prior experience, where she was deemed unfit for learning. But with constant motivation from her instructor, who ensured pointing out the strengths of Savitri on a regular basis, her confidence increased. And with that, her interest in studying soared higher.

Now, Savitri has a broad understanding of her children's studies and their everyday life. She feels more connected to them, rather than ashamed of herself. She has planned on starting home tuitions for the first graders, which will also help strengthen her basic concepts. She says, "Even if the students don't pay me any fee for this, it doesn't matter, for the idea is just to teach, and learn." Years down the line, Savitri plans on joining the nearby government school as a teacher. And she will ensure that her students see her as a mentor -- she will encourage and guide them well, so they do not lead a life of



low self-esteem, just like she had to.

Savitri shares her happiness on “feeling capable now”. She has started going to the bank to fill in withdrawal forms and complete basic formalities. The greatest change for her has been her confidence to openly discuss her health problems, such as constipation, with the male doctor in the nearby hospital. She had been suffering from it for long now, but could never overcome the embarrassment of discussing such things with a man. Today, she has got a complete check-up done, and is taking medicines to get better. She also regularly calls the doctor and updates him on the improvement in her condition. Savitri's confidence and enhanced communication skills have changed her life in more ways than one. And this, she says, has been the gift of literacy.

“ I always aspired to study, grow, and become ‘The Savitri Devi’.”  
– Savitri Devi



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The HCL logo consists of the letters "HCL" in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## HCL FOUNDATION

HCL Foundation was established in 2011 as the corporate social responsibility arm of HCL, a diversified global enterprise active across varied sectors including technology, healthcare and talent management. It is a gold standard not for profit organisation that matches the national and international development standards, and brings about lasting positive impact in the lives of people through long term sustainable programmes implemented in full engagement with HCL's own employees and partners.

Though HCL Foundation officially came about in 2011, its humanitarian journey pre-dates its inception. As an organisation, HCL's business model has always been aligned with the interests of the society at large. HCL Foundation's overarching mission of 'spreading smiles, touching lives' is thus consistent with its CSR trajectory. Guided by the belief that each one of its 1.1 lakh employees can contribute to a better tomorrow, its CSR efforts commenced with funds received from employees and the organisation. Over the following years, the practice of collective participation matured into one of the core founding principles of HCL Foundation.



The Society for Technology and Action for Rural Advancement (TARA) is a social enterprise set up in 1985 at New Delhi, India. It is the "incubation engine" of the Development Alternatives Group, TARA incubates green business solutions for entrepreneurs and community groups. It designs institutional and business ecosystems for promoting green economy in India and the developing world.

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