

Chalking Out Emerging Identities

... bringing to light the torchbearers



TARA Akshar+ Field Anchors

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 ... bringing to light the torchbearers

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The Initiative...

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 India, in a fast and effective manner. This has been made possible by the TARA Akshar+ Instructors and TARA Sahelis who form the trunk of the TARA Akshar+ programme. They are the ones who impart *Akshar Gyan* and *Ganit* (functional literacy and numeracy), and ensure its sustenance for each learner. The project, 'Functional Literacy to 1500 Women in Kachhauna Block of Uttar Pradesh', with the support of HCL Foundation, was implemented in six *Gram Panchayats* of Kachhauna and Behandar Blocks of Hardoi District from August 2017 to April 2019. For leading this, TARA Akshar+ trained and onboarded 14 instructors and 17 TARA Sahelis.

While stories of the TARA Akshar+ learners have always been captured, marking their journey from literacy to self-reliance, this booklet attempts to bring forward the ones that stay behind the main stage. The Instructors and Sahelis are the ones who take the programme forward in the real sense. While the former focus on imparting functional literacy and numeracy, the latter serve as facilitators for reiteration of learning and mitigation of problems. They use innovative games aimed at practicing word formation, expanding general knowledge, bringing awareness on important aspects of health, hygiene, financial literacy, how to be better prepared for livelihoods, and so on. In the process, while the learners definitely felt positive changes in their lives, the Instructors and Sahelis experienced a transformative journey as well. They felt more organised, disciplined, mobile and confident – ready to take on bigger life challenges.

This booklet encapsulates stories of the Instructors and Sahelis, attempting to bring to light the real torchbearers of the programme...



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“The strength to overcome all obstacles came from the thought that when I teach other women the importance of fighting for their adhikaar (rights), how can I not stand for mine?”

”

Mamta Devi (23 years, Baghaura)

TARA Akshar+ Instructor at Kahli

Mamta completed her Bachelors of Arts in 2014, post which she started teaching students of class nine. She pursued this purely out of her passion for teaching, which reflected in the kind of fee she collected *sarson* (mustard seeds), rather than money. When she first heard about appointment of instructors in the TARA Akshar+ programme in her area, she immediately thought of challenging herself with this endeavour. Her brother, however, was against the idea of her being a part of something so unconventional-- the idea of 'teaching elderly women' was almost disruptive. This meant sleepless and anxious nights for Mamta, who felt like she was being pulled back from what seemed like an opportunity for growth. However, with

support from her uncle, she prepared her resume and enrolled herself in the programme.

Once the TARA Akshar+ classes started, Mamta had new challenges confronting her. Initially, the hectic schedule was a bit much for her to handle. She almost wanted to give up. But the thought of proving her family right on the initiative being fated for failure, kept her going. Once she adapted well to the routine, her passion intensified to the extent that she could not sit at home any longer. All she wanted was to work endlessly.

The journey, however, was far from smooth. Casteism was quite pronounced in the region, which prevented the Scheduled Caste women (who accounted for a high proportion of the total illiterate population) from enrolling in the programme, and the culture of marginalisation prevented the 'upper caste' women from co-habiting the same learning space as them. Mamta, however, with support from the supervisors, engaged in tactic mobilisation and strategic segregation of learner groups, ensuring equitable participation from all sections of the society.

But the men, were not so easy to influence. During one of her classes in Kahli, Mamta encountered what she recalls as the “most frightening incident of [her] life”. The *chacha* (uncle) of one of her students was vehemently against literacy of older women. He indulged in vandalism, and in the state of drunkenness, kicked the locked gate inside which women sat with books. He started hurling abuses at

them. While this provoked the learners who wanted to retaliate, Mamta surprised everyone with her patience. This, she recalls, was a recent development owing to the instructors' training as part of the programme. She immediately called the Facilitator and informed him about the incident. While he travelled all the way from Gyanpur to the teaching centre to help Mamta, the women joined hands to form a human chain preventing the drunk man from entering the centre and reaching his niece. The Facilitator soon arrived with the police, and the man was arrested immediately. A few hours later, when the *Pradhan* got to know about the case, he too picked up his *laathi*, wanting to teach a lesson to the man who had attacked Mamta and her classes. Mamta says, she was touched to see how “despite being members of the same village, everyone supported [her] – an outsider – rather than their own community member.”

The police, concerned about Mamta's safety,



advised her to withdraw the complaint, but she stood her ground and went ahead with the case. She knew the learners looked up to her admirable strength. And if she backed out at this moment, she would serve the wrong example. However, later, she says, “The drunkard's wife came to me, touching my feet, apologising for her husband's misbehaviour. She saw how their niece had now learnt to write, and asked me to continue teaching her. She expressed her gratitude to me and my work, and begged me to forgive her husband, for now she would personally ensure he does not interfere. She kept her word, and I kept mine I withdrew the complaint.” Mamta soon became a popular figure across the village of Kahli, to the extent that the women refused to study from anyone but her.

Mamta shares how the programme gave her a platform to interact with women, and not only teach, but also learn from them. It gave her an opportunity to grow in life, and to make her family proud. She recounts how, during the mobilisation stage, most women were disinterested, and would often close doors on the face of volunteers. Even during the initial classes, the women mocked at the initiative -- “a child becoming a teacher? The programme is doomed!” Mamta, however, with utmost patience, explained to them the value of literacy and its scope for influencing transformation in the lives of women. Some women were also unsure because similar initiatives had started earlier too, only to disappear, leaving the women with shattered hopes. Mamta gave her word and convinced the women to keep faith in her and the initiative.

These experiences also enabled developing coherence in thoughts and speech for Mamta, who earlier found it difficult to express what she felt, often miscommunicating her ideas. Mamta was proud of herself – of the woman who could now go out with her head held up high, exuding confidence and dignity.





तारा-अक्षर+
TARA Akshar+
— सक्षर है सक्षम —

तारा अक्षर+

समापन समारोह कार्यक्रम

कछौना ब्लॉक, हरदोई, उत्तर प्रदेश

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“ I will do anything for women empowerment. And if I can bring just a small change even in one woman's life - it is a big deal for me. ”

Aarti Kashyap (24 years, Baghaura)

TARA Akshar+ Instructor at Gauri Khalsa

Born and brought up in a small city, Shahabad, of Uttar Pradesh, Aarti had always learnt to be vocal about her opinions and desires. However, after her father expired, she moved to Baghaura, a backward village where women's expression of ideas and thoughts was looked down upon. It was not until a day before the deadline of appointment of instructors for the TARA Akshar+ programme that Aarti gave in her resume. The last minute interest, however, left her only with the option of working in Gauri Khalsa village – the most dreaded and defamed region for its oppressive mindset and culture. Nobody opted for this village for it demanded a change in lifestyle, even for the instructors – change in clothing and the practice of *purdah*. Further, the village was located very far from Baghaura, and Aarti had no means of commuting. She had to walk for two kilometres, take a bus, and then walk again for another one

and half kilometre, all with a heavy laptop and bag on her back. While discussing this prospect with a few neighbours and family, Aarti was sternly advised against it, even by the women of Gauri Khalsa. Her mother, however, supported her and said, “What could be the worst thing to happen? In either case, you'll only get women's *dua* (blessings).” Her mother also knew that caste and religion were just societal constructs – people were just humans at heart, and Aarti had nothing to worry about.

However, Aarti decided to perceive this challenge as an opportunity for expanding her capability. She started by gaining an understanding of the culture, with support of the supervisors and facilitators. She gave up her relatively - 'western' clothing and adopted Gauri Khalsa's trend happily. Challenges were still manifold. Feuds between different families of the community were so pronounced that the women refused to enter any area in close proximity to their rivals'. This was overcome by creating separate batches within households of the women. In some cases, the women themselves offered undertaking the formation of batches comprising people from their 'side' of the community. Special attention was also paid on complete non-disclosure of any experience from the opposing groups.

Once the classes got rolling, new challenges came forth. The moment a male supervisor would enter the class, the women would throw fits, unhappy with the presence of men. This was especially true in case of the Maulvis' wives. Aarti ensured careful resolution of this challenge. She asked the men to first knock at the door and seek the women's permission before entering.

This kept the women happy, since it bought them some time to draw *purdah*. With various other customisations in processes from time to time, the classes operated successfully.

The transformation triggered through all of this was commendable. Earlier, cases were seen where men and their families rejected women for marriage because they were not literate. With TARA Akshar+, three women were able to marry out of their own choice. Women had always worked from home, taking up stitching and craftwork jobs. But their inaccurate calculations often incurred losses. Today, they can count the change and, as Aarti shares, “*ab koi beimaani nahi kar sakta*” (they can no longer be duped).

Aarti believes that the women of Gauri Khalsa had always aspired to be 'empowered'. They only lacked motivation and support to which Aarti, through the TARA Akshar+ programme, introduced them. Moreover, adoption of their clothing and



mannerism enabled Aarti to develop a good connection with them to the extent that some women even started stitching clothes and getting food for her. She says, *“unke humse zyada gyaan tha, hume bas unke rang mei dhalna tha, thoda pyaar dikhana tha, aur unki bhavnao ko samajhna tha”* (they always had knowledge and some awareness, we only had to blend in well with them, understand them, and treat them with love and care). Gradually, they even started opening up about their real issues. They had never stepped out of their homes earlier, not even till the threshold of their household to collect deliveries. Today, they have started going shopping, and also travelling out of town to meet their children at boarding schools. While earlier, the women did not talk to anybody -- they even shut the gate if a man ever came to talk -- today, they converse confidently. The classes also enabled women to develop market linkages and capitalise on opportunities through their interactions and exchange of information with each other.

A major change that Aarti influenced was in terms of the stereotypical outlook towards the village it was actually much warmer and welcoming than people claimed it to be. All that was needed was non-interference in their rituals and religious practices, for the rest they would cooperate more than willingly. Aarti, with help from the TARA Akshar+ programme, took a step in the direction of overcoming both caste and gender barriers to literacy.

Personally too, Aarti underwent a series of transformation. She learnt the value of time and punctuality. Through interaction with a set of people who thought, lived and worked very differently from her, she got to understand different points of views, and learned to accept these differences with dignity. She also expresses her delight in learning about a new culture and lifestyle. A major tool, that Aarti says was extremely helpful in motivating women towards literacy, was 'Seeto's story' depicted through a film, which encouraged the development of a school at home itself, emphasising the importance of contributing to children's studies. This resulted in women motivating their daughters, and even daughters-in-law in some cases, towards literacy. And all this was possible, she says, because of the unconditional support from her mother – who washed her clothes, cooked for her, and took utmost care of her daughter who would come home tired after each day full of new challenges and growth.







“ I was the first girl of Gauri Khalsa to go out for rallies and cultural programmes from school. And now I am the first woman of Gauri Khalsa to take up an unconventional job and show up for it on the first day of my marriage. ”

Shazia Khatoon (22 years, Gauri Khalsa)

TARA Saheli at Harijan Basti of Gauri Khalsa

Women volunteering for travelling to Gauri Khalsa -- the most dreaded village -- as an instructor or TARA Saheli is a thing to be proud for. But what leaves one astounded is hearing about a woman -- more so a newly married woman -- hailing from the dreaded village itself, breaking all shackles, setting out on the path of bringing change.

After completing her Bachelors of Science in 2012, Shazia had stayed home for six years. First, because her family needed her. And second, because women of the Shia Muslim community were not allowed to go out. More so, the concept of 'working women' was not so common. And for the relatively progressive ones, the only

condition was to wear purdah, keep their heads low and not talk to anyone. Shazia could never understand the logic behind it. Right from her school days, she had been a 'star'. She participated in all rallies and races where women were hardly to be seen. She always had the streak of rebellion in her. These six years were nothing but a major pullback from everything she desired. On hearing about the TARA Akshar+ enrolment forms being distributed, Shazia knew this was the opportunity for her. Now was the time to stand her ground and fight the long internalised social constructs. She filled the form, submitted her resume, and passed the interview. When she was told she would have to go to the *Harijan Basti* (Dalit community) as a TARA Saheli, Shazia knew what was coming her way. The Shia Muslims had a stern rule never to enter the “community of untouchables”. But Shazia was lucky, for her father valued her aspirations and supported her endeavour. He fought with her mother, the community, and everyone who opposed her choice. He ensured that his daughter got what she wanted – “other women to be literate, just as she was”, in Shazia's words.

But Shazia's ambition was not just imparting literacy, rather ensuring the sustenance of it. She says, “Even children forget what they learn in school, if not for application of those learnings later during further studies, jobs, or even daily routines. Then how can elderly women be expected to retain what they learn? They too need regular practice and application, and hence I advocate Gyan

Chaupali.” But convincing the women on this was not so easy. They preferred doing their *silai kadhai* (stitching) at home over “*gyaani banna*” (being scholarly). Shazia explained to them the importance of literacy a fundamental need correlating it with individuals' dignity and respect. She cited examples of how currently bank managers ridicule women for using their thumb instead of a pen, and their husbands do not trust them even with household functioning. She also made them realise how their stitching was of no use if they did not make deserving money out of it and were only being duped because of their poor math.

Shazia, with tools innovated by the TARA Akshar+ team, tried understanding the interests of women. The Laila Majnu book, in particular, grabbed their attention for they had heard the story since childhood, and reading it now with pictures made learning fun. Shazia recounts how women started



going to banks, and before the manager could say a word, they would announce with pride, “We are from TARA Akshar+”.

Shazia got married at 8 pm on 23 March 2019. And at 10 am on 24 March 2019, she came to the centre to narrate her story. She was the first married woman of her village to step out of her house -- that too on the very next day of her wedding. While she was telling her story, her mother-in-law called, and Shazia rejected the call saying, “She'll understand I'm amidst work right now.” When asked about the opinion of her parents-in-law on her job of a TARA Saheli, she said, “*sasur hain thode dikkat wale, unko samjha lenge*” (my father-in-law thinks differently, but I'll make him understand”), with a face exuding confidence and determination. She also narrated how on the morning of her wedding, there was a race in her village -- an all-boys race -- which she joined, and bagged the second position. Shazia had emerged as an ideal -- for her students, her family, and the entire village.







“ I started with the thought that if any woman of my village gets empowered, and becomes self-reliant, there is nothing that will make me happier. And today, my dream is that no woman of our country stays illiterate. ”

Keerti Devi (25 years, Hasnapur)

TARA Saheli at Subhan Khera

Currently pursuing the second year of her Bachelors in Science, it always disheartened Keerti to see the neighbourhood women unaware of fundamental things. This is what motivated her to join the TARA Akshar+ programme when it was first introduced to Hasnapur. Keerti personally mobilised the women and offered them additional assistance and support to keep them connected to the programme. Today, she says, her students are so invested in learning that some of them reach before time, and some others demand extra hours of studying, beyond the schedule. A particular case that warmed Keerti's heart was when a woman brought her daughter-in-law with her. In a society where women are known for keeping their daughters-in-law beneath their deserving status, seeing mothers-in-law encourage them towards literacy and empowerment

feels refreshing. Keerti says with pride, that her students are extremely passionate about learning, and are quick learners. They have realised the importance of literacy in their lives. They say, *“ab koi hume bewakoof nahi bana payega”* (no one can fool us now).

However, bringing this change was not easy for Keerti. While comparatively, women readily agreed for the TARA Akshar+ phase, ensuring their retention in Gyan Chaupali was tough. Most women were of the opinion that when the first 56 days had imparted them with basic literacy, why do they need to attend classes for six additional months? The idea of gaining literacy had already been served -- they could now sign on papers and read names of villages on signboards. So what more was required, if not for a linkage with livelihood opportunity? The women's children, too, discouraged them saying that what more did they want -- “to become a scholar? To win the Padma Bhushan?” But Keerti personally spoke to them, explaining the difference they would see in their own lives, with a literate mother.

Today, even the children have started liking their mothers' classes -- they ensure their mothers reach on time and do not get stuck in household chores. Some men in the community still call them out, “Are biscuits being distributed that you are so eager to go?” But the women have learnt how to deal with such obstacles. They do not hesitate in voicing their opinion and standing their ground. They have

also started taking up avenues that they could never think of earlier, being the “inferior sex”, the “disadvantaged”, the “illiterate”.

Keerti also recounts the change that transpired in her. Earlier, she used to prioritise her family's daily needs and demands over her studies. But today, if someone asks her to do something when she's leaving for her class, she tells them that she will, but only once she returns from teaching. And with time, her family too has become well accustomed to her passion for teaching. In case she gets late someday, her mother immediately points out, “Do you not want to go to school today?”

Troubles escalated for Keerti when she had to start another batch of Gyan Chaupali, filling in for a Saheli who had to quit because of personal reasons. The batch was acclimatised to the other teacher and took time in accepting Keerti as their new Saheli. They even threw tantrums and mocked



at her initially for being “just a substitute”. But Keerti did not lose confidence. She carried on with the work and put in extra efforts to develop a bond with the women. Keerti's students hailed from various backgrounds. Some had to undergo domestic violence, some had to put up with fights at home every day. But when they would come to the class, Keerti would ensure they talk about their issues, share, and come up with concerted solutions. Keerti herself would talk to them and encourage them to stand for their rights and attend all sessions. In case they would miss any class due to unavoidable circumstances, she would even volunteer to take extra classes in private, so that the women would not miss out on lessons or lag behind others. Her students soon accepted her, and gelled in well, treating her as their own daughter. Hearing about Keerti's commendable work and humility, women from the nearby villages have also started approaching her to enquire about commencement of the course in their respective villages. The men, too, started furtively peeping inside the locked doors, wondering what the excitement was all about.

Working as a TARA Saheli has also brought a change in Keerti's thinking. Getting to meet people from sectors such as Health, Law, Police Forces, *Anganwadis*, and others, expanded Keerti's knowledge and motivated her to continue with the work she was at. She would ask her students each time, “What do you want to learn today? Whom would you like to meet?”

Keerti has gained much respect and dignity in the family and community -- something she had never imagined. She plans on continuing working in the teaching field, even though teaching old women is a bit challenging. She shares that the pride she feels looking at her students' smiling faces while they write their own and their children's names, gives her unparalleled happiness.







“ Through this programme, I got an opportunity to meet other women, learn from them, and grow further in life. Our families are now proud of us.

”

Sehreen Bano (19 years, Hasnapur)

TARA Saheli at Hasnapur

Sehreen's mother was a TARA Akshar+ learner. She always came home excitedly, telling her daughter about her daily experiences. She would narrate to her the things her instructor taught, and stories that her co-learners shared. Sehreen would always feel happy and proud of her mother. She had just started her Bachelors in Arts at that time. Sitting in her class, she would wonder what her mother would be learning at that moment. Sehreen's professor at college was her role model. She always admired her passion for teaching and would be amazed by her interesting ways of explaining concepts to the students. Her professor always said that to truly educate someone, you need to first understand their mindset, and then impart lessons in a way they could relate to and would interest them. Sehreen started her own home tuitions, teaching the students of her locality. It

was easy. And she wondered whether her admiration of her professor was uncalled for, for teaching seemed like an easy job.

When the TARA Akshar+ programme commenced in her village, and announcements were made for appointment of TARA Sahelis, Sehreen's mother insisted that her daughter partake in it. Sehreen was reluctant for she wanted to be like her college professor. Her mother then said that teaching older women is more challenging, and classes such as these require people like Sehreen who can blend in well, understand the women's perspective and customise tools of learning accordingly. Her mother's friends too expressed that they would continue learning only if Sehreen was their Saheli. And so, she agreed.

As the classes started, Sehreen felt this was too challenging. She could not do it. Understanding the women's mindsets, keeping their attention grasped and explaining concepts in a way they could comprehend well, was extremely challenging. She almost gave up. And that's when it dawned upon her -- her professor's keenness for taking up challenges. And she realised that she never knew this is what she wanted to do. This is the experience she had dreamed of all her life. And thus she put in double the effort, and carried on with her classes. Understanding the daily hassles women had to go through, she arranged for tools that would cater to them. She would ask them what they wanted to learn about, and would arrange for

speaker sessions accordingly. Change occurred, and very soon. They learnt about nutritious diet and healthy living, and followed it in their lives. They started keeping their house clean and giving the right medicines at times of illness.

Sehreen felt proud of herself and the progress she made. She realised it was easy to voice her opinion in front of small children who had not developed a perspective yet. But to do so in front of matured women who had seen and experienced a lot more in life than Sehreen -- that was the real challenge. The questions they would ask were hard to answer because they had logical counter-argument to everything. But Sehreen learnt her way through, and emerged as a confident woman -- vocal about her thoughts and ideas. And she also enabled bringing this change in her students -- the wiser women -- who thanked her endlessly for her patience, perseverance and passion. And that is when Sehreen knew she was headed in the right direction, the one that makes her feel content.







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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