

MUSLIM WOMEN'S FORUM

VISIT TO KORAOON, UTTAR PRADESH

A REPORT

30 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER 2019

Koraon is a small town in Praygaraj district, Uttar Pradesh about 65 kms from Praygaraj city. A short distance, which could have been easily covered in little less than 2 hours turned into a 3 hours drive when the local bus stopped for almost everyone who stood on the side of the road looking for a lift.

We reached Koraon on 1 December, 2019 to assess the work of Muslim Women's Forum Fellows, Sahiba Khatoon and Jahana Bano under MWF project titled "Leadership and Capacity Building Training for Muslim Women." To look at the work of the Fellows at the ground level, capture the issues and challenges, and plan our future roadmap together with our Fellows here.



MWF Team with People's Voice Volunteers at Devghat, Koraon

Although we began our journey from Praygaraj at 7:15 AM, when we finally reached Koraon, it was 10 AM. At the Sabzi Mandi bus stand, we were greeted by friendly faces of Rajesh Kumar and Basant from People's Voice. They led us to the People's Voice office located behind the Sabzi Mandi where we met other Volunteers and colleagues from Dalit Foundation like Irfan Ansari, Ashish Ranjan, Kanchan and Antima Rao. In Koraon, Rajesh Bhai said there are about 10 Fellows and over 150 volunteers, a cadre of grassroots leaders to mobilize their constituencies, mostly young people from vulnerable groups, and finally to take leadership of their own communities. Rajesh himself has been working here for the past 5 years.

With them, we discussed about the work they have been doing, achievements and challenges on the ground. Ashish, formerly associated with a communist organization and is currently working with People's Voice for the past 3 years talked about the rampant problems of casteism in this area. He said that many government schools in the area still discriminate dalit students and are often asked to clean the toilets, and ordered to sit separately during mid day meal.

Rajesh reiterated, "Situation is slightly better in Koraon, largely due to the communist movement in the area which successfully implemented land reforms in 90s. Here we have a number of dalits with agricultural lands. However, in the nearby areas bordering UP and MP, we still have situation wherein Dalits are asked to take permission from the upper caste even to go out of town."

We looked together at the 2011 Census and found information like Koraon has a population of 14,821. Literacy rate is 75.29 % higher than state average of 67.68 %. While Male literacy is around 84.71 %, female literacy rate is 65.25 %. (Census India 2011). We were also told that Koraon has favourable and suitable climate, vast areas of fertile soils, sunshine and adequate water resources, which is ideal for rice cultivation. Badlam, a Fellow at People's Voice office said that rice produce from Koraon is better in quality than rice produce from Punjab or Haryana. They said that less urea and other fertilizers are used. Most people here make use of their fodders (purali) for their cattle. So situation like air pollution emergency in Delhi caused by the excessive burning of purali in nearby villages have been averted in Koraon.

Sahiba Khatoon:

We began our work by first meeting Sahiba at her house. At 11:30 AM, we reached Sahiba's house accompanied by Rajesh and the others. Sahiba, and her mother, Sitara and Sabreen, her sister-in-law gave us a very warm welcome. We were also offered food and lodging for the night, which we gladly accepted. Sahiba has selected 10 villages in Koraon areas where she was to carry out her work. Although she regularly opens her library for children and gives tuition to 8 students, she is yet to carry out MWF Baseline survey in these areas. Based on our talk with her, we feel that she will need more support in her work when it comes to building rapport with the people in her own constituencies. But given the right push, she will be able to overcome the obstacles, as she has already got a lot of support from her family. Her father proudly told us that despite what many people in the village said about sending their daughters away for training; he believed that sending Sahiba for the capacity and livelihood training was the right thing to do.

We continued to discuss about her monthly report – while Sahiba submitted her work report regularly, we suggested that she gives us a clearer picture of the area she would like to work on. She still needs to identify the issue that she wants to work with. We handed her the Baseline Survey form, and gave her training on how to conduct the survey.

DEVGHAT:

Next on our agenda was to visit Devghat gaon about 12 km from Koraon. On the way, we passed by Belan River, which is famous for prehistoric sites on its banks and earliest example of rice cultivation. Koldihwa, an archaeological site in UP is situated in the valleys of Belan River near Devghat.

We were accompanied by few volunteers and Fellows from the People's Voice office. After a backbreaking ride in this bumpy road from Koraon town, we reached Devghat village in 45 minutes. About 100 metres from the main road, we moved towards a small mud path. Along the way there were tiny decrepit mud houses with thatched roofs. Most people keep one or two livestock, buffalo or cow right next to their houses.



Few people were around, small girls running around barefoot. We saw a small child, scantily dressed in this cold December afternoon sitting on the ground crying, Poverty and malnutrition was evident.

We gathered outside the tiny mud house of Jamilunnisa. Niaz Ahmed her husband is a poor labourer and Jamilunnisa, herself a housewife, is also engage in beedi rolling. Soon more and more people came. Some women came there with their baskets, while rolling beedis they talked about their living conditions.

In Devghat, women engaged in beedi-rolling are paid Rs. 60 for rolling a thousand beedis. None of the women wore gloves to protect their hands or masks to cover their mouth, which puts them at the risk of developing skin diseases, menstrual disorders, and respiratory ailments etc. While they are not particularly happy with the amount, they accept the arrangement since it is a question of their livelihood, and that they are assured a regular sum of money. Besides, the women say, they aren't qualified to take up any other job.

2011 census indicated that the total population of Devghat is 4537. Child Sex Ratio is 844, lower than UP average of 902. Literacy rate is 57.90 % Male literacy stands at 69.06 % while female literacy rate is 45.97 %. Though parents sent their children to school, but beyond Class 8, they have to go to a nearby village so, many left schooling after Class 8. There is a school run by the Mosque, but many of them cannot afford the monthly fee of Rs. 200 per child. Moreover, the school only provides religious education. Asma Begum said, "We can hardly afford school uniform and books."

We asked about Mid Day Meal (MDM) at government schools. Jamilunnisa said that although Govt schools served MDM, the food they served is so bad that even children came back without eating it. Jamilunnisa also told us how earlier teachers in the Primary School were not regular and how after making several inquiries to the concerned authorities with the help of Sahiba, teachers are now attending school more regularly.



Qulabsa, 12 years old, class 5 student, still struggle with basic counting



On our way back to Koraon from Devghat, we stopped near the banks of Belan River and watched the sun slowly disappearing below the horizon. It was a beautiful sight. On the main road, we could see a group of labourers walking hurriedly back towards their village after a day's work. The words of the poet Robert Frost came to mind:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Jahana Bano
Kusfara Village

At about 6:30 PM we went to Kusfara to meet Jahana Bano, another MWF Fellow. Jahana is from a poor family, her father, a mazdoor died a few years back. Two of her sisters are already married and she is left with her mother who had a near-death accident while working in the field one year ago. The accident has left a permanent imprint on her, both physically and mentally. For her, Jahana was the only hope for their livelihood.

While in Delhi, we made several efforts to get in touch with Jahana but to no avail, so we made sure that we do not come back without seeing her and have a talk with her. However, she was not around when we went to her house, so we waited for her at Irfan's house, very close to where she lives. Few minutes later, she came with her mother. She rarely spoke and when she did, her voice was so low that it was hardly audible. All the confidence that she had gained in DSK was fast disappearing. We asked her about her work, the challenges she faced and also the reason for the delay in submitting her report.

Jahana's mother would reply each time we asked Jahana a question. Later on we were told that Jahana herself is not fully literate, so for her writing a report is a big challenge when she could only barely write her name. So when we inquired who wrote the reports we have been getting from her. Irfan said that he would mostly do the writing for her.

She told us about her overwhelming responsibility at home, both financially and emotionally, which makes her depressed and helpless. When we talked to her, she listened intently and almost tearfully. Few of the volunteers who accompanied us on this visit assured her of their willingness to support, but also emphasized that she needs to be more involved. We then asked her to come the next day for our field visit, which she readily agreed. However, the next day, she quickly made an excuse to go home before we could begin our field visit.



Jahana Bano came with her mother and family to meet the team



2 December 2019

Wali Mohammad Sharunisha Islamia Junior High School

On our way to People's Office, we stopped at the Private school just opposite People's Voice's office. The school is for children up to Class 8 and has around 400 students, 150 girls and 250 boys. Ritesh Mishra, the Sanskrit teacher told us that there are around 15 teachers. The school has option for both Urdu and Sanskrit as compulsory subject. The children we saw seems to be doing slightly better, they look relatively happier, and healthier than the kids we saw in Devghat or later on at Koilareha Village.

Haider Ali, Administrator for the school said that the school was established in 2014 in memory of his grandfather, a poor humble man, who used to repair umbrella on the roadside. But this man against all odds manage to send all his children to school and one of them even became a teacher in a government school later on. Acknowledging his father's commitment to education, his son with the help of other people from his community established this school. Later Rajesh Bhai who came to join us in the school told us **that this is the only school within 40 km radius of this area run by the Muslim community by their own initiatives.**

People's Voice Office

A group of 18 young volunteers and Fellows from DSK as well as 2 MWF Fellows, Sahiba and Jahana gathered at People's Voice office. After a round of introduction, we continued with a brief discussion about their work, the challenges faced as well as achievements. They reiterated that the biggest challenge would be caste discrimination, which is still prevalent in the area, and the callous attitude of some of the Pradhan. For Sahiba, it was the women who wore purdah even at home, thus making it difficult for her to interact with them.

Irfan said that there is a social cooperation between the Dalit and Muslim in Koraon. However, when it comes to education, Muslims lag far behind the Dalits. Due to acute poverty, many Muslims parents are not sending their children to school, and there is a very high school dropout rate. He also said that domestic violence is also rampant.

We brought with us a short film made by Iffat Fatima titled "Ujalay Ki Ore", a short puppet film about the Muslim Personal law. We screened it for awareness purpose regarding the rights of Muslim women under Islam. This was followed by a short discussion. Rajesh and the others in the group said that they were not aware that Islam has given so many rights for the women.



Meeting volunteers and Fellows from different parts of Koraon at People's Voice office

Koilareha Gaon:

Rakesh Bhai and the others took us to Koilareha village, about 8 km from Koraon. After a back-breaking ride for about 45 minutes, we reached Koilareha. Soon we left the main road and approached the mud track and stopped at Khalikhunisa's house. Here a group of young girls, men and women came to meet us. Among them was Anjuman Ali (67 years old) who regaled us with his melodious voice. He said that he used to travel all over the country, performing with a Notanki team. He sang two qawaalis for us.

*“Kisi ko kahin ki huqumat mili hai
Kisi ko kahin ka khazana mila hai
Khuda ki kasam meri Qismat to dekhon
Nabi ka mujhe ashigana mila hai”*



Anjuman Ali (67 years old) regaled us with qawaalis

A few metres away from the house of Khalikhunisha, there is a small mosque where they have recently made a room meant for a madrasa/makhtab. We saw that the mosque had some loudspeakers placed on top; we asked if there was any complaint about the Azaan in loudspeakers. Someone replied, “Hindus and Muslims are living together in peace here. In fact, the Hindus are happy to have a Mosque as the sound of Azaan helps them keep their time.”

The Muslims here follow a number of popular/cultural practices. They perform Tazia, and also go to Sufi Mazars. We find here Muslim women with ‘sindur’ and ‘sari’ which is considered to be ‘Hindu practices’ by other Maslaki/sectarian groups in Islam. The practice continues to this day, perhaps due to the absence of Islamic proselytizing organizations like Tablighi Jammāt and maslaks/sects like Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadees. Few Muslims here have small pieces of land ranging from one to three bigha. However, majority of the Muslims are landless.

People here spoke of the irregularities in the distribution of ration card, Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana and the pathetic road condition in the village. When we asked why not meet the local authorities. To this, one of them responded, “Most of the government schemes such as ration card, free cooking gas etc are now issued in the name of the female head of the family, so, men are now passing on the responsibility of dealing these issues to women.” We found this reply rather strange.

Khalikhunisha said that like many people of the village, she received her old age pension of Rs. 500 rupees per month. The village ration shop is located 4 km away from the village and because of the distance many people are unable to avail the facility.

Most of the women in the village are engaged in beedi rolling while the men are away in nearby towns or cities to work as wage labourers. There are also few people like Khalikhunisha's sons who are engaged in making steel almirah and cooler tin box. A number of labourers from the bordering area of Madhya Pradesh also come here for work, thus lowering the already very low wages in this area.

Just like Devghat, the women in Koilareha had come to talk to us came with their basket in their hand. Shabnam came with her 8-month-old child, while putting her child to sleep in her lap, she was simultaneously rolling her beedis.

She said that for every thousand rolls of beedi, they get a measly sum of Rs. 65. Though she knows that she's earning a low wage, she says she can't quit this job since she doesn't have any other skill. "We will die of starvation, if we don't roll beedis".

Another woman sitting next to her said, "Beedi is made of three things; Surti (Tobacco), Dhaga (thread) and Tendu leaves. Women put their skill and labour to make beedi. A woman with her household chores and child care, is able to roll about 500-700 beedis, which means we earn upto Rs. 30-35 a day."

To increase their income, women will go to nearby areas to collect the 'tendu leaves,' which involves the risk of getting caught by the forest guard, as it is illegal to take it without official permissions. When women use their own 'tendu' leaves they are paid Rs. 80 per 1000 beedis, a margin of Rs. 15-20.



Shabnam with her small child sleeping in her lap, simultaneously rolling her beedis and answering our questions



The women told us that there are various contractors of beedi involving politicians and businessmen who are selling these beedis under different brand names like "Sundar Pari Beedi", "Mor Chaap Beedi" and "Shyam Beedi". They get the government land on contract by bidding the highest amount of money to extract the Tendu leaves for a specific period. The middlemen provide the raw materials to the women. According to the beedi rollers, the middlemen can be very callous in extracting profits from this work. Moreover, beedis, which did not qualify a specific standard set by them, are discarded as waste without payment.

Most of the women complained about the health hazards of doing this work which effect their eyesight and lungs etc. When asked about the health system in the area, they informed us that there is one Homeopathic dispensary in the village. However, the women prefer to go to a private doctor.

Most of the families in Koilareha have toilet facilities. Interestingly, they informed us that many of the toilets were made under the previous government when the head of the village was a Dalit. However, till today many people still prefer to go outside for open defecation.

As we left Koilareha village, few of the village elders came to see us off on the road. These words of Faiz Sahib kept ringing in our ears all the way back from Koraon to Delhi.

We are told Your new dawn is already here;

Your tired feet need journey no more...

But there is yet no relief in the darkness of the night;

No liberation yet of our souls and our minds.

So let us keep marching, my friends:

- Faiz Ahmed Faiz

The following recommendations were made based on our visit to take forward:

- Meet MWF Fellows at least once in two months to assess the progress and change tracks if necessary.
- Fellows should prepare a list of other Muslim women working at the grass roots in their areas or those working towards empowerment of Muslim women who can be part of our initiative to spread the message.
- Encourage our Fellows to collect basic data at the local level keeping in view local factors that are affecting women's access to education, health facilities etc
- MWF should encourage its Fellows to document the small stories of social change in their areas, which are inspiring and are the result of personal and communal struggle against all odds.
- MWF should give credit for these stories of change to those who are engaged in bringing the change both at the personal as well as at the community level.
- Fellows should form a unit of MWF in their respective localities to increase their engagement with the community.
- Provide our Fellows - training on social and economic rights if they want to address the issues of their area.
- Plan to organize Understanding Islam workshop in this area.

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