

HOPE

H A S N O B A R R I E R S

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Rising from the clutches of poverty

Living in abject poverty, hope can take many forms. Fleeing your home with your young children in search for a better life to escape the clutches of domestic violence, takes a special kind of courage, reinforced with a strong sense of hope which Gita exemplifies.

“Run away with the children”, Gita’s mother-in-law told her amidst tears, “Your husband is losing his senses. He might sell your daughter for alcohol. Eighteen years ago, Gita was sitting on the floor of her small hut, crying and consoling her

daughter of three years and son of six months. Her husband was physically and verbally abusing her because he wanted money for alcohol.

That night, Gita’s mother-in-law told her to run away. She was both shocked and appalled at this statement of hers. She remembers the day clearly, “How can I run away from my family home? Wasn’t this my children’s home too? Didn’t my mother tell me that my husband and I would be together for life?”

But Gita realised the harsh truth – she had no support from her

husband. She also knew that in his greed, he could seriously harm her and their children. She would have to leave like her mother-in-law advised. But where would she go? How would she survive? How would she raise the children? All these questions worried her. However when her husband threw away their son’s milk and hit their innocent daughter, demanding money again, Gita decided to leave as soon as possible to keep her children safe. She packed her meagre belongings and moved out after taking the blessings of her mother-in-law.

What hope looks like

Gita fled to a nearby town to begin a new life. To ensure her children’s survival, she began doing all kinds of odd jobs – working as a house maid, an agricultural labourer and on construction sites. She worked for eighteen hours a day, with her young children in tow because she had nowhere to leave them. It was a strong sense of hope and ‘what could be’, that fuelled her.

Slowly, she earned and saved up enough to get a small room. Years passed by and Gita kept working and saving money. When possible, she also sent her children to local schools. Littered between the bad times were some good times. She made it through all of them and took care of her children despite all the odds.

I met Gita for the first time, when she attended one of our women empowerment workshops held in a rural hamlet. I was impressed by her strong sense of determination and her willingness to challenge the status quo. For the past few years the Foundation has

helped Gita develop a small business. She has made a great success of this venture and is seen as a role model to many women in a similar predicament.

Gita is now a community ambassador for the Foundation, helping other vulnerable women turn their lives around. Gita lives with her son and daughter in her own house. She has furnished it with basic amenities and is now saving up for the future marriage of her children. From being out on the streets alone, working odd jobs to having her own home and a strong income, Gita has come a long way. She has risen from the worst clutches of poverty by sheer determination, reinforced by an unshakeable sense of hope.



Poverty is a mindset

I have seen poverty in all its guises. I have been to slums and stared despair in the face. I have encountered inescapable dependency but this is not it, in Gita's case there is something different, something redemptive. Poverty, as I have experienced, is more than your economic situation or a lack of resources. It's a mindset. That feeling of utter helplessness, of being stuck in a situation from which you cannot escape — that's what it means to be poor.

There are people in this world who lack basic necessities and need legitimate help but that in itself is not poverty. For me, poverty is an attitude that crushes your spirit. Through the work of the Foundation, we are realigning our definitions of wealth and poverty... increasingly we find that poverty isn't defeated with wealth; it's overcome by hope.

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The power of possibility

The idea that an infusion of hope can make a big difference to the lives of the poorest, sounds like something dreamt up by well-meaning activists or tub-thumping politicians.

Although there is deep pain, suffering that cannot be cured by platitudes, behind Gita's anxiety is a deeper story:

there's still more healing to come. Moreover, it would be easy to look at Gita's original situation and see despair. However she managed to turn her situation around and is now in control of her own destiny.

There is also a strong sense of possibility. ...that looks like hope. Gita was isolated and

extremely vulnerable until her mother in law confirmed her situation was critical. This gave her the impetus and legitimacy to leave behind a dangerous existence, even allowing for the uncertainty of what lied ahead.

Futility

I find that one of the worst aspects about poverty is the slow acceptance that there is no way out of this predicament, that there is nothing that can be done to change or break from the hopelessness, the lack of opportunities from being poor. Those in need get the message, every which way they turn, that they don't have the skills or the value to be anything different.

I believe that the first step out of the cycle of poverty is showing that the individual is strong enough, that they are smart enough and that they are worth

it. The small spark of happiness and warmth spreads both within the spirit of the most vulnerable and within their peer group; I have seen it happen many times.

This is further reinforced by the fact that when you help someone break out of the cycle of poverty, you tackle one of the worst things about poverty, the hopelessness that spreads throughout the community of people living in need. By helping to build up individuals we are helping to build; families, communities, villages and strengthen wider civil society.



Telling them, “you're worth it!”

When these communities get the message that someone “outside” thinks they are “worth it,” they can carry with them the fortitude and the motivation to succeed, because they know they can; they know someone believes in them and is willing to ‘lift them up’. Surprisingly, many understand the responsibility of this. They gain pride in themselves and get excited about proving what they can do and how far they can go. Compare this to the sense of hopelessness many in poverty feel and the messages they may be getting from wider society on a daily basis.

Culture of poverty

The culture of poverty can come into being in a variety of historical contexts. The way of life which develops among some of the poorest in Indian society under these conditions is the culture of poverty. It can best be studied in urban or rural slums and described in terms of interrelated social, economic and psychological traits. However, the number of traits and the relationships between them may vary from community to community and from family to family.

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poorest to their marginal position in a caste based capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realisation of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of wider society. People with a culture of poverty tend to be parochial, locally oriented and have limited sense of history or belonging.

Asset maps

It is often the case that families may not be aware of the assets they have, so intervention efforts that tap into these assets may mean the incremental benefits of the programs will be sustained over longer periods of time. For us, helping communities develop 'asset maps' that list the sources of their strengths is an important step in fostering hope.

These maps may include circles of friends. Children who have friends at school, in the villages where they reside and also in adjacent neighbourhoods may find these assets essential for staying on course and avoiding negative peer influences. The maps may also help identify "hidden" skills that might be transferable to other contexts. For example, parents who are community leaders or involved in various community activities have skills in leadership, problem-solving, positive social interaction, help seeking

behaviours and advocacy. These assets are among the active ingredients of hope and can be important touchstones for the most vulnerable to observe and to translate into their own strategies for achieving success in relationships with peers and wider society.

Ongoing resources and support for education, mental health

counselling, job readiness, and financial literacy are needed to keep families from slipping back into difficult patterns of behaviour as they experience the inevitable setbacks in life. It is also important to help families learn not to attribute a setback to fate or a perceived lack of skill or ability. Instead, help them to identify other

useful pathways, assets and sources of support that will keep them on track.



Reflection

Reflecting on the ways in which many of our beneficiaries have overcome adversity and trying to understand the stories of these individuals, it was evident that a common theme among them was hope. I began to see the various ways in which hope was a highly influential and motivating force in their lives. This kind of

hope was not passive—it was not merely wishing for a better life but was active. It involved thinking, planning, and acting on those thoughts and plans to achieve desired outcomes. It was the driving force that kept them moving, despite the adversity allowing them to adapt and cope in the midst of their

circumstances.

I'm not alone in this awareness. Many of us have encountered individuals who have defied the statistics and the conventional wisdom that says if you live here, go to school there or have these parents, that the likelihood of success for you is extremely slim.

The good news is that there is mounting evidence that cycles of poverty and disadvantage can be broken. Studies now shed light on some of the processes involved in resilience and adaptation to adversity. Through my work, I have explored the role of hope as an important driving force for many communities. In

addition, research has revealed important links between hopeful attitudes and well-being: a belief that one can achieve, a sense of belonging and knowing who you are, the ability to problem solve, set goals and work toward those goals and perhaps most importantly, a sense of purpose and meaning in life.



‘HOPE’ REALLY DOES BRING ‘CHANGE’

“An absence of hope had helped keep these people in penury; through our work...we continue to inject a dose of optimism.”

I would argue that the effects of some of our anti-poverty programs go beyond the direct impact of the resources they provide. These programs also make it possible for the very poor to hope for more than mere survival.

Our micro enterprise program in south India is a case in point where we worked with women who lived in extreme penury. These women were unable to handle the demands of repaying a loan. Instead, we gave each of them a small productive asset - a cow, a couple of goats or some chickens. We also provided a small stipend to reduce the temptation to eat or sell the asset immediately, as well as weekly training sessions to teach them how to tend to animals and manage their households. Our thinking was that there would be a small increase in income from selling the products of the farm animals provided and in time the women would become more adept at managing their own finances.

The results were far more dramatic. Well after the financial help and hand-holding had stopped, the families of the beneficiaries were eating approximately 15% more and earning 20% more each month and skipping fewer meals than people in a comparison predicament. The women were also saving far more. The effects were so large and persistent that they could not be attributed to the direct effects of the grants: people could not have sold enough milk, eggs or meat to explain the income gains. Nor were they simply selling the assets (although some did).

So what could explain these outcomes? One clue came from the fact that recipients worked more hours, mostly on activities not directly related to the assets they were given. We also found that the beneficiaries' mental health improved dramatically: the program had cut the rate of depression sharply. It provided these extremely poor people with the mental space to think about more than just scraping by. As well as finding more work in existing activities, like agricultural labour, they also started exploring new lines of work. I firmly believe that an absence of hope had helped keep these people in penury; through the work of the Foundation, we continue to inject a dose of optimism.



The fuel of self-belief

Surprising things can often act as a spur to hope. A law in India set aside for women the elected post of head of the village Council (Panchayats) in a third of villages. Following up several years later, found a clear effect on the education of girls. Previously parents and children had far more modest education and career goals for girls than for boys.

Girls were expected to receive much less schooling, stay at home and do the bidding of their in-laws. But a few years of exposure to a female village head, had led to a striking degree of convergence between goals for sons and daughters.

Their very existence seems to have expanded the girls' sense of the possible, beyond a life of domestic drudgery. An unexpected consequence perhaps, but a profoundly hopeful one.

Development Economists have long surmised that some of the

poorest may remain trapped in poverty because even the largest investments they are able to make, whether eating a few more calories or working a bit harder on their minuscule businesses, are too small to make a big difference. So getting out of poverty seems to require a quantum leap--vastly more food, a modern machine, or an employee to mind the shop. As a result, they often forgo even the small incremental investments of which they are capable: a bit more fertilizer, some more schooling or a small amount of saving. This hopelessness manifests itself in many ways. One is a sort of pathological conservatism, where people forgo even feasible things with potentially large benefits for fear of losing the little they already possess.

Many of the communities we work with think they are in a poverty trap, when they are not. Poor parents often believe that a few years of schooling has almost no

benefit; education is valuable only if you finish secondary school. So if they cannot ensure that their children can complete school, they tend to keep them out of the classroom altogether.

If they can pay for only one child to complete school, they often do so by avoiding any education for the children they think are less able. Yet Economists have found that each year of schooling adds a roughly similar amount to a person's earning power: the more education, the better.

Moreover, parents are very likely to misjudge their children's skills. By putting all their investment in the child who they believe to be the brightest, they ensure that their other children never find out what they are good at. Assumed to have little potential, these children live down to their parents' expectations.

The gift of hope

In Gita, I saw how hope comes in little, unexpected bundles of action. Her life and that of her children is transformed — not in a great way that we sometimes expect, but quietly and slowly as most real change occurs. Gita is an example of pure perseverance and someone prepared to challenge the norm, demonstrating a 'never say die' attitude.

Hope isn't a cure-all and in none of what I have written so far, can we be certain that it actually explains the gains in people's income or education...instilling hope without skills or financial resources is unlikely to be enough to lift people out of poverty.

For the millions of people living in extreme poverty today, to say that they do not have sufficient

hope, aspiration and tenacity to fight for their rights is a fallacy. The structural odds against them inhibit their ability to leave the vicious cycle of poverty. Without additional resources and much more concerted action on the underlying causes, no amount of positive thinking will enable the great mass of individuals to climb out of poverty. We cannot afford to rely on methods that suggest that the poorest are simply failing to make the 'right choices.'

This doesn't mean that we should disregard ways of empowering communities, but it does mean that we should build on an understanding of poverty alleviation which is concerned with attacking the malaise of unequal distribution as opposed to remediating its symptoms. That

means confronting structures and stakeholders that have not only failed to address poverty but may also have reinforced the nature of uneven development across India.

Asking relevant questions is the first step towards understanding problems. Moreover understanding why widespread hunger and poverty persist in an era of unprecedented wealth, rapid technological transformation and democratic governance is the most important problem of the day. Inequality is not born in a vacuum; it is a fundamental aspect of the distribution of income and wealth. **Unless we understand how extreme wealth accumulation is connected to extreme inequality, the question of poverty will go unanswered.**

Final thoughts

Clearly poverty is an enemy of a good society. Almost everyone agrees that government should intervene. What divides people is whether state help should extend beyond subsistence levels. The poorest feel a big disconnect between the society they have and the society they want. This breeds a sense of powerlessness and a frustration with politicians who consistently seem incapable of developing a narrative of a good society that meets their needs.

So, where is positive change going to come from? How can we think about the roles of civil society, business and government in addressing poverty creatively while being mindful of the background realities and finances that constrain what can be done? These are the key challenges of our time.

The marginalised communities we work with are the ambassadors of tomorrow. They demand that government and society should enable them to empower themselves, hope and positive change are not only possible, but inevitable. When people have power over their own lives and support to use their resources however they please, progress will come.

Individuals and communities can make a huge difference by working together, changing lives and overcoming the embarrassing statistic of millions trapped in poverty. Whether it is a single contribution to the cause or a much wider appeal, it's important to get the message that they are part of a larger village where they can grow and make a difference of their own.

I strongly believe that the promise of hope for ending the cycle of poverty resides in the well-being of the communities we work with. They need support to overcome challenges of the forceful waters of life. When they come to us, visit our partner organisations or engage with one of our programs of work, we may not know all the complexities of their lives but we do know that they look to us with hopeful expectation, that we will help them navigate successfully through the unpredictable high and low waters of poverty and all that it entails.

For us, it's about displaying and retaining a powerful and instinctive sensibility, in favour of the common good and social justice. We believe in cross-sector collaboration, strengthening engagement with civic partnerships and playing a key role in helping create lasting change. In doing so, helping to destroy misconceptions and prejudice.

Raising hopes and aspirations may prove to be the missing link in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. The challenges that confront us and solutions that unite us should have no barriers, neither do we. We want bridges not walls!"

Making our collective contribution, we can all play a part in ensuring that hope has no barriers.

Bhupendra Mistry

Founding Director
KAMLA FOUNDATION

2020

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Kamla Foundation is based in the UK helping vulnerable communities in India, develop their capacity to meet basic needs and create solutions to poverty and injustice.

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