CHAPTER SIX

Dinanagar: Marginals' Pursuit to Prosperity

The suffix of 'nagar' with this small hamlet of about 500 population of Balkheda gram sabha in the block Sitarganj under Udham Singh Nagar intrigued me no end till I realized the implicit irony in the name as I reached this small village inhabited by only the Sikh community. I learnt about Dinanagar during one of my visits to Bari while traveling in a bus from Pantnagar University where I was staying. My co-passenger in the bus that day happened to be an old Sikh person, perhaps amused by my camera and my constant engagement with the book containing maps and literature on Uttarakhand asked me about my destination. I realized later how this casual interaction proved to be the most valuable one of my field work experience. The gentleman not only suggested to me to go to Dinanagar where a few marginal farmers were growing gladula but also gave me some valuable insights into the problem and prospects of agriculture based on his years of association with agriculture in this area. In fact the 'Dinanagar' chapter of my work can be directly attributed to that anonymous co-passenger as it turned out to be an interesting village with a homogeneous social composition and more importantly where families of a few marginal farmers were pursuing floriculture. This village is crucial also because it adds to the debate on the impact of cash oriented agriculture on the marginal sections of the rural community.

Contrary to the thesis which believes that such orientation has pauperizing
impact on the marginal farmers, experiences of Dinanagar suggests quite the opposite. Gladula cultivation even on a few acres of land for some families with barely 3 to 4 acres of land proved to be a boon as conventional agriculture of rice and wheat had only helped in maintaining the status-quo of a marginal sub-standard life for these families.

Not very sure of the exact location of Dinanagar I got down at Nanakmatta bus terminus one morning. I soon realized that the suffix of ‘nagar’ in Dinanagar was nothing but a crude joke on the village. Dinanagar as it turned out was about 6 to 7 kms from Nanakmatta and only connected by a mud road and the only mode of conveyance available for people like me and to the general villager who could not afford two wheelers was horse driven ‘tonga’ that also once in the morning from the village to Nanakmatta and then late in the evening back to the village. As it was past 9 am, possibility of getting a Tonga was bleak and as I rested in at a road side tea stall contemplating returning to Pantnagar the Shopkeeper gave me the name of a Dinanagar resident who ran a photo studio who was the proud owner of a scooter. This person turned out to be a man with a big and generous heart. He not just got
me dropped to his village but also promised to pick me up in the evening. Once in the village mention of phool ki kheti immediately got me to Resham Singh's house. Resham Singh, a farmer of barely 3 acres land, lives with his wife and three grown up sons in a modest house of brick and clay with mud ceiling. Till 1996 Resham Singh was part of the regular conventional agriculture in the village. Sugarcane was the only 'cash crop' but given his smaller land holding and sugarcane being an annual crop he had to wait a whole year for uncertain sugar mills that were far away from his village. Resham Singh's land produced enough rice and wheat to take care of his family's needs but he needed cash for his son's education. It was then he came in contact with one Subba Singh of Uttamnagar in Ruddarpur who was growing gladula then. Subba Singh gave him 'chharri' (bulbs of gladioli). That was in 1997 when bulb cost him Rs. 300 per kg. But as these bulbs were of poor quality and hence first attempt proved to be a failure. Resham blames it on faulty seeds rather than his lack of knowledge about new crop or his own lapses. As he says:

Ye log chahate nahin hain ki local market me unki tarah koi ho. Isiliye thik seed nahin dete hain. Par suru me hame itna pata tha nahin aur dusre ham seedhe saadhe log biswas par hi kheti karte rahe the. Isiliye itna dhyan diye nahi. Nahi to pahle hi saal fayada hota

(These people who are already in such agriculture do not want others to be successful in their field and
hence give wrong seeds and mostly misguides you. Since we did not think of all that as so far we had done our agriculture on mutual trust. Had we been a bit careful we would have had some success in our first attempt itself)

Here it is important to take note of Resham’s reference to conventional agriculture as ‘biswas ki kheti’ (agriculture based on trust) thereby meaning that the element of mutual trust and dependence was paramount in it unlike say in activities such as floriculture which operates in a more professional environment. It is evident that this shift from traditional to cash crops ushers in elements which tend to restructure the rules of the world of conventionality in rural India. Gradually farmers learn to ‘question’ the taken for granted world which existed around him. Hard calculations and reasoned responses underline the culture of new agriculture in India.

Resham Singh’s eldest son helping in his father’s dream ambition. Here he can be seen cleaning and sorting the bulbs of gladula.

Left with no option but to try again Resham Singh’s next attempt was encouraging. In the year 1997 he grew gladula on only 1 acre, in 2004 he was growing it on about 5 acres, half of which he had taken on subcontracting from other farmers. Resham Singh grows two crops of gladula in a year as compared to sugarcane’s monocrop on an annual return of Rs. 3000 per acre.
Gladula in contrast gives an annual return of Rs. 20000 from one acre of land which is roughly 4-5 times the return on sugarcane. Thanks to his new crop his eldest son is doing civil engineering at a polytechnic college, second son is in 1st year of intermediate and the youngest is preparing for his board exam. Resham Singh can not thank more to this miracle that happened in their lives through floriculture:

Bachchon ko padhane likhane ka to pahle soch nahin sakte the. Gladula ki kheti me thoda mehnat jyada ai, bazaar- bazaar bhatakna padta hai par dam turat ilta hai. Mehnat to ganne me bhi hai par waha bhatakne ke bad bhi dam nischit nahin tha
(Earlier we could never even think of sending our children beyond high school. Thanks to gladula cultivation it has been possible. Indeed it requires a lot of hard work; we have to wander from this market to that market but atleast we get immediate money which was not there with the sugarcane while hassles were same)

It is not a coincidence that Resham Singh’s house acquired a telephone, a television set and now a one room pakka (concrete) house. In another context as I asked Resham about his plans for his children, especially since he has been spending so much on their education and there is scarcely any job around his response surprised me:

Kam se kam mere se achchi terah kheti to kar lenge, bazaar ko behtat samajhenge
(If not any thing at least they will be better agriculturists and they will understand market better)

This speaks volume about the confidence level of this modest farmer who till recently was struggling with his handicap of being a farmer with marginal landholding. In fact for the last two seasons Resham Singh is not growing wheat; instead he is buying it from local market and grows gladula in this Rabi period. The period between September and March has become the most significant period in their agronomic calendar. This is for two reasons: one, winter season of the terai happens to be the best and the most suitable time for floriculture as the flowers do not need much of care and the flowers keep fresh for a longer period allowing easier marketability. Secondly the wedding season falls in this period when demand for flower soars high. And not to forget the most important day in the life of these farmers, namely the Valentine Day on 14th February when prices of gladula reaches its peak.

Resham’s family though does not know much about this day and its significance except that it is the day when college students express love for each other by gifting flowers. Resham Singh when asked about this day answers only through his innocent smile as he feels shy talking about it in front of his young sons who though seemed to be aware of it, thanks to the ubiquitous television. Resham only adds:

Is din kafi Kama leta hoon, dilli aur local mandi me bhi achcha bhao milta hai

(On that day I make very good money, both in local and the Delhi market)
This is how occasions like Valentine day, Christmas and New Year celebrations through the market come to occupy a distinct place in the lives of these marginal farmers. New agricultural calendar is evolving thanks to these celebrations. Not just in metropolitan places like Delhi, local market of Bareilly and Haldwani also responds positively to these floriculturists during these occasions. Thanks to the TV and mass media boom culture of expressing love and greetings through flowers have increased over the years and farmers like Resham Singh is certainly not complaining of any 'cultural invasion'.

This success has however affected Resham Singh's social life. Engagement with floriculture has left him and his family with no time for their social obligations like attending marriages and visiting relatives etc. Relatives have been complaining and accusing them of becoming 'money minded'. Last pilgrimage of Resham to Rithasaheb, Amritsar was in the year 1996, (he started his gladula cultivation in the year 1997). Explains Resham:
Is kheti me 100 km se dur nahin ja sakte, kab jarurat pad jaye
(You can not travel beyond 100km in this type of agriculture, for you never know when any emergency arises)

Singhara’s new pakka house But gladula is forever. His children can be seen here playing with sticks of gladula.

But he is not complaining much. Economic returns of the crop more than make up for these ‘small sacrifices’. Resham’s wife would like to get her elder son married so that the daughter-in-law can take charge of the household allowing her time to visit her father’s house which she has not done for a long time.

In the last five years Resham Singh; however, has not been able to convince many to follow his example. Scenario can be summarised as follows: most people find this kind of agriculture too demanding and risky and hence there is eternal ‘wait and watch’ syndrome that grips the attitude of the farmers. There is however still a few like Singhara Singh, friend of Resham, has followed Resham’s lead. Singhara Singh, 32, with his barely 2 acres of land was
growing wheat and paddy only till a couple of seasons back. The fear of 'going grainless' held him back from following Resham's example. But when he saw Resham buying wheat from the money he earned by selling the flowers he decided to take the plunge.

Today he grows gladula on about an acre of his land. Resham Singh is happy for having company. This actually helps him also. Says Resham:

Saath me kaam karne me achha lagta hai.
Jimmewari bhi apas me baat lete hain. Nahi to pahle akele bhagna dudna padta tha. Ab hai ki agar kisi karan main mandi nahi ja saka to Singhara chala jata hai.

(When there are other people also in the same enterprise it makes the job a lot more fun. Many responsibilities are shared now. Initially I had to run around alone. Today if I can not visit the mandi for some pressing reasons Singhara goes and vice versa)

Singhara Singh is only 8th pass and has 5 daughters and a son to be brought up. Gladula has changed his life. Today in only two seasons he has made enough money to buy a fan, a television, and plaster slabs for ceilings to replace the thatched roof he had for years. Most happy are his wife and children. In fact his eldest daughter Satwinder Kaur(9) along with her mother have developed a special liking for this new crop. Satwinder along with her mother and other sisters devotes substantial time in taking care of the gladula, in its cutting and sorting and packing.
Singhara Singh now regrets that he did not pay heed to Resham Singh’s pleas to switch over to floriculture earlier. Now he wants to grow ‘desi gulab’ (local variety of roses). He described his initial reluctance to the following factors: log bahut darate the ,kahte the fasal doob gaya to khane ke lale pad jayenge (people used to frighten us with all sorts of reasoning like if crop fails then you will starve etc.). Secondly, while returns are uncertain, hard work and round the clock involvement is certain. It is a major bottleneck for the beginners. Traditional farmers, especially marginal ones find these stories about the susceptibility of the crop and its being prone to failure and risk too discouraging and too high to surmount. As Singhara Singh says:

Das-bis kisan bhi mil jayen to kam karne me maja aaye. Akele me dar laga hi rahta hai

(If only 10-20 farmers come together to grow flowers there will be less of fear and more of fun).

What is therefore quite evident and noteworthy is the urge for ‘collectivism’ among these marginal farmers. No one wants to walk alone in this venture for fear of both monetary loss and loss of face in front of the community. While the farmers involved in agribusiness activity like this is constantly observed, monitored, disapproved, ridiculed and gossiped, in contrast the aura of ‘normalcy’ that surrounds the conventional crop seems the most formidable reasoning behind its ‘status-quoism’. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that the step of growing flower in place of conventional crops in villages, especially by the marginal farmers, can almost be equated with attempt of breaking the caste norms of matrimony in rural India, inviting disapproval and a creating the situation of allowing an individual or family to fend for itself.
Both Resham and Singhara Singh endorse such cash crops as the only panacea for the marginal farmers like them to get out of the cash-starved life that conventional agriculture provides to the small land holding farmers. Most of Resham Singh’s neighbors are large land holders who continue to grow conventional crops of rice, wheat and sugarcane. This suits them as land yield enough food security with substantial surplus to generate enough cash to take care of other exigencies. High acreage of landholding therefore, it seems, does not quite dispose a farmer favorably for adoption of such cash-crops setting in complacency. Also important here is the way these attempts by the marginal farmers are seen as an attempt to challenge and alter the social class hierarchy. Good thing about Dinanagar, however and lucky for people like Singhara and Resham sigh, is that this is a small and homogeneous community village where there is not much hostility to experimentation. Santa Singh for instance Singhara's immediate neighbor with about 20 acre land, however, does not approve of this kind of agriculture in villages as he says:

Jamin par anna ke badle paisa ugane ka kaam paap hai

(To grow money on land instead of grain is a sin)

Santa Singh explains and attributes his prosperity and comfortable life based on conventional crops to god's will and pointing towards Singhara Singh and others says:

‘kisi ko jab jamin se beej bhi nahin milta to hamari jamin hame 10-20 bora anaaj de deti hai, sab upar bale ki kripa hai
(when others starve for even seeds for the next season our fields yield 10-20 bag full of solid grain, all this has to do with one’s karma and god’s will)

Later I got to know that Santa Singh mints money through his Radhaswami satsang activities by partaking in community kirtans etc.

Similarly under Resham Singh’s constant persistence Kashmir Singh, another large land owning farmer started growing gladula but tuned to the easy going rhythm of conventional crops because his attempt failed as gladioli requires intensive agriculture. Kashmir agrees:

Maine socha tha ek bar laga do phir jaisa baki kheti me hota hai waise khet apne aap taiyar ho jayega (It is not like other crops that you grow and plant it once and be free. It requires constant attention throughout)

He does not want to try again citing reasons which again establishes the inverse correlation between large land holding and level of motivation towards agribusiness.

During my last visit to Dinanagar, almost after the gap of a year and a half in the month of January of 2006 I was pleasantly surprised to know that a pakka tarred road was being constructed to connect the village to Nanakmatta. Both Resham and Singhara Singh now had mobile phone connections. I was told most of the villagers now have a mobile set. Both these developments were welcome signs. Resham had informed me about his mobile connection prior to my visit and as I reached Nanakmatta very early in the morning and waited at a tea stall I could constantly keep in touch with them. In fact Singhara had
bought a new twomotorcycle, riding on which both of them arrived at Nanakmatta to take me to their village.

Soon I was on their motorbike, sandwitched between Resham and Singhara; I could see the construction work of new pakka road in progress. Resham explained to me how all this could be possible because of the formation of the new state of Uttarakhand. The smaller electoral constituencies are easy to manage and problems can be better addressed, he reasoned. The bumpy ride discourse on decentralization and devolution of power ended as we reached Dinanagar. We first reached Resham’s house where I kept my bag and met his wife and sons. After another cup of tea we started for a round of the village. Resham and Singhara accompanied me.

Resham Singh appeared happy for the fact that his more than a half a decade long association with floriculture and his efforts to bring in some more farmers of the village into its fold has started showing signs of acceptance. First to join him were the families of his own brother. Others are making inquiries, would come and chat with him and show interest. It seems his villagers have been convinced by two factors: one, he persisted with floriculture despite all odds and it sent positive signals, it meant that the flowers were making profits for him and secondly, the way Resham could help his sons to pursue their education did have an impact on other farmers. As one would say:

Suru me laga ki Resham aise hi kuchch akhbar bagairah padhkar naya karne ki sanak than liye hain.
Par jab lagatar do teen saal se jyada din ho gaye to laga ki nahi bakai kuchch baat hai is kheti me. Dusre isi kheti se WO apne teeno bachchhon KO aage
padhai ke liye sahar bhej pa rahe hain. Ab biswas nahi karne ki koi bajah nahi hai

(Initially we thought Resham is just being crazy under the impact of newspaper reports he is trying to do something new. But after he continued beyond two to three years we had to take him and his floriculture seriously. Naturally he was making profit or else he would have given up. Secondly, the way he is spending money on his son's education it was not possible had he continued with his conventional agriculture)

Resham acknowledges the contribution of flowers in his life and how much it is helping him in his son's education. This was unthinkable for a 2-3 acres owning farmer like him. The new found acceptance in the village has further strengthened his resolve so much so that one of the most severe critics of Resham's floriculture in the village, a person called 'Comrade' is showing interest in flowers.

This man aged 45; I wanted to meet for the obvious reason of the strangeness of his name. Singhara Singh helped me in arranging this meeting. Resham politely refused to accompany, as he is not on talking terms with comrade's family. As we later learned that this particular farmer had initially opposed Resham's floriculture as he thought it to be 'anti-farmer'. Apparently some years ago he had participated in a few dharnas in Delhi against WTO (the World Trade Organization) in the company of a few of his friends who happened to be members of some labour organizations. That he
was referring to GATT (the general agreement of trade and tariff) agreement as Mr. GATT was clear indication of his indoctrination into the left ideology. Market was inherently malevolent for him and a cash crop like floriculture was ‘amerika ka conspiracy’ (conspiracy hatched by the Americans). Based on these rhetorics he tried to sabotage Resham’s efforts in this direction but gradually he also seemed to backtrack.

His wife in contrast appeared to be more reasoned and practical. In fact too practical, as she simply refused to believe the fact that I am doing a research and there is nothing ‘profit-making’ about it. She actually thought me to be some government agent who was there to dole out some money or similar such incentive to make people grow flowers. She was also suspecting both Resham and Singhara to be hobnobbing with me for some vested interests. She also was not convinced that anybody would come to such a far off village just for research as she kept saying ‘jaroor government ne paise diye honge is kaam ke liye (govt. must have given money to undertake this work)’. On Singhara’s request she took us to her field nearby her house to
show us the place where she had grown some gladioli bulbs. In fact she had purchased these bulbs from Singhara. The manner in which they were being secretive about their interest in floriculture was indicative of their sense of loss of face in the village on this issue. 'Comrade' was though still stubborn about his rhetorics but seemed to have given up under the influence of her domineering wife. As we sat for a chat with comrade and his wife it was amply clear that here too the lady of the house was being instrumental in this volteface.

Tharus who are at the margins of the tarai society mostly work as laborers on others field. In day time their beautiful houses wear a deserted look.

Another interesting fact that I realized in Dinanagar was that the failure in such experiments especially of the rich farmers is a rather strong deterrent for an average farmer. So even though Resham Singh continued to grow gladioli all these years, the failure of floriculture of Kashmir Singh, a rich farmer, had the average farmer saying:

‘Jab inse ye kheti nahi Hui jab ki inke paas itni suvidha hai to ham chhote kisano se kya haoga
(If Kashmir Singh with so much money and resources failed in this, then where do we stand)

The reason why Kashmir Singh failed which we discussed earlier was of no consequence here. Also one may wonder as to why unlike in other villages
floriculture seems to be on the upswing mode here in this tiny village. The reason being beside Resham's successful innings with gladioli for a rather longer period of time, the homogeneity of the village in terms of its community composition( that it has only one community living in the village) and also the fact that unlike other places here the pioneer farmer Resham instead of being secretive about it talked about its virtues and how atleast for the marginal land owning farmers it could be a boon if practiced with dedication and hard work, worked favourably towards this upswing.

As for Resham life it has become a bit easier with this broad basing with his own extended family joining him in what was a lonely walk till this far. Now others also help in when it comes to going to Delhi mandi or similar such work. As he puts it about his nephews who have just joined him:

'bachche hai abhi ye sab inhe abhi mandi ka hao bhao pata nahi hai itna. Mera jyada jaan pahchan hai isliye maal jaldi uth jata hai aur daambhi theek milta hai. Par main inhe dheere dheere mandi ke chal chalan se wakif karwana chahta hun taki jaroorat padne par ye kaam kar sake, mere bharose nahi rahe (they are kids in this business. I still prefer to go to Delhi mandi myself as I understand the dynamics of mandi very well. My experience helps me in selling my flowers quickly and with good price. Still I stress on others accompanying me so that they do not depend me in any emergency situations).

This also means that Resham has now more time for himself and his family responsibility like visiting his relatives etc. An interesting feature that emerged out of my interactions with the women of the families who have recently joined
floriculture that the women of the house were always positively inclined to such cash crops and as it came to light during discussion that they were constantly prodding, encouraging and motivating their men to try ‘Reshamji’s Kheti’ throughout. As it turned out while the menfolk’s economic decision making appeared to be greatly influenced by common sense wisdom prevalent in the traditional agronomic discourse, the women particularly those coming from marginal land owning families seemed to be quite comfortable with the idea of trying out newer things, newer crops to get out of the cash starved vicious cycle of subsistence agriculture.

Even in the case of the flower growing families the role of women and children of the household has been found to be very crucial and active. Women would frequently refer to the traditional agriculture or ‘purani kheti’ as synonymous with mere survival (bas dal roti mil jata tha, we used to get two square meals somehow, the women would say). This image of women as risk taking and pro-innovation debunks the much prevalent stereotypes about them as conformist and status quoits. The men however would rubbish if you even suggest that ‘men are less entrepreneurial than the women as the latter donot hesitate in taking risk for the betterment of their lives. As one middle aged man retorted:

Are in auraton ko kya lagta hai badi badi baaten kare me, ghar to hame chalana padta hai. Kol KO nayi kheti doob jaye to izzat kiski jayegi. Log ham pe hasenge ki apne parivar ki roti ka intezam nahi hota isse.

(What it takes for the women to talk big things? If
these new crops fail then whose honor will go?

People would laugh at me that I am unable to even manage food for my family.

It is clear here that since the social responsibility of ensuring food and other basic necessities to the family members rest with the men this has an impact on their attitude to any risk taking proposal such as floriculture. The fear of loss of honor in the community possesses great demotivating influence for these men especially from the marginal or smaller land holding families. In contrast the women talked with lot of confidence and the enthusiasm for floriculture was well reasoned given the fact that in any case they have been contributing substantially to the household economy even in traditional agriculture, just that their work was not being considered productive enough to merit a voice in economic decision making such as which crop to grow in the field. As one woman whose persistence finally worked as her husband decided to grow gladioli in same part of the land put it:

Mai bar bar kahti thi ki ek baar kosish karne me kya harj hai. Anaaj to itna ho hi jata hai hai ki ek-aadh saal me mar nahi jayenge. Waise bhi us kheti me sirf aadmi ji bhar sakta hai

(I kept nagging him to at least try floriculture for one or two seasons. We have enough grain in stock which will see us through. In any case the conventional agriculture was only helping us survive)
What was striking in this was that similar sentiments were expressed by other women from the small landholding families in the village who it seemed were eager to try this new agriculture much more than the men. This 'risk taking approach' as displayed by the women of the marginal farming families does indeed question many stereotypes prevalent in the patriarchal village set up.

Singhara Singh the lone co-passenger in Resham's floriculture journey is as always rock solid in his belief in 'phoolon ki kheti'. He had to change his place of residence to avoid the hostility with his immediate neighbor which was brewing for some time. His new house is at some distance from the village but he says he is happy there with his family. Good thing is his new house is close to his substantial portion of his total land share. When I visited his house he took me to the area that he had marked especially for gladioli. In fact he had already started working on the land for this purpose. Singhara sounded convinced for a longer and bigger stint with gladioli this time around. With Resham's nephews also joining him and other villagers also showing interest they are planning to start a self-help-group of floriculturists in the village.

As I left Dinanagar I saw hope and optimism writ large on the face of Resham and Singhara and others like them who seemed all set to pursue their new dream of floriculture.