8.1 INTRODUCTION

Personal struggles, experiences and stories shared by each sahyogini is important and valuable to this study. It has not been easy for them to speak about the hardships they faced or express their feelings. There was a need to build rapport and empathy before the sahyoginis were prepared to share their life stories. In this chapter I present three oral histories that I recorded during the course of my field work. It is an attempt to indicate the courage, resilience and vulnerability of these women who are often overlooked within the programme as mere clogs in the wheel. In narrating their stories, their dreams and aspirations, these women emerge as women of courage and commitment. It is, after all, their commitment and integrity on which the success of the programme depends. They live ordinary lives under conditions of economic deprivation. Yet they stand out as extraordinary women, who have chosen to change the prevailing unfair socio-economic conditions into which they were born. They are women who touch the lives of other women in extraordinary ways. Their work makes a difference to so many other women, who are helped to move out of poverty and find strength within. The narratives indicate the personal and professional struggles of these women, who are the catalyst for change. In lending a helping hand to others, the sahyoginis find fulfilment. The narratives given below capture the essence of empowerment and indicate that the personal and professional struggles of these women are inextricably entwined in more ways than one. The first two stories belong to the sahyogini’s from Nandurbar district while the third pertains to the sahyogini from Yavatmal district. Nandurbar and Yavatmal both are recipients of the BRGF\(^1\). Nandurbar has significant tribal population and people speak various dialects.

8.2 STORY OF SHEETAL VALVI

As I waited in Valyaphala CMRC of Dhadgaon taluka in Nandurbar district to meet Sheetal tai, the CMRC manager, I noticed that the CMRC was a beehive of activities. There

\(^1\) Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) launched by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to address regional imbalance. 12 districts are identified by government of Maharashtra as backward district which includes Nandurbar and Yavatmal.
were many sahayoginis from other CMRCs visiting this centre for the scheduled interviews. It was a very hot summer afternoon and I could feel the heat radiating from the concrete walls of the room. I moved my chair closer to the table fan to get some relief from the overwhelming heat and then thirstily drank the cool water offered to me. As I listened to the conversation around me, I realized that they were speaking a dialect that I was unfamiliar with. I later found that they were talking in the Bhil dialect common in the area.

Sheetaltai swiftly entered the CMRC office and immediately introduced herself to me. She was very different from what I expected her to look. Dressed in a beautiful cream coloured, heavily embroidered saree with matching earrings, chain and bangles, she looked very elegant. Her face was well made up and her kohl-laced eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. I wondered why she was dressed as if she was going to a party or a wedding. I soon realized that she had taken special trouble to dress well for her interview with me. To her, it was a matter of prestige of the CMRC and her colleagues that she present a good image of herself as the CMRC manager.

8.2.1 Childhood

Sheetaltai was born in the Mohjra village of Dhadgaon Taluka of Nandurbar in the Bhil tribe-- a Scheduled Tribe. Her father had completed his B.Sc. degree and knew the importance of education. Sheetaltai studied in an ashram school established for children from scheduled tribal communities in Nandurbar. Education was free in the school, since it received grant-in-aid from the state government through the Tribal Development Department. Sheetaltai was the eldest of five siblings, comprising two boys and three girls. Her mother passed away when she was in class VII. She says, her mother’s death was a big setback for the family, as her father lost all interest in life and his children too. Her father let her study in the boarding school till she passed her Std. X examination. Her paternal aunt then funded her education till Std. XII. After passing her higher secondary exam, she returned to Mohjra, her village, in Dhadgaon.

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2 There were interviews also planned for the day of other sahyoginis. They had all come to the Valyaphala CMRC for ease of taking the interviews at one centralised place.

3 The other dialects spoken were Ahirani, Bhilori, Pavri, Pardhi

4 Sheetaltai belonged to Bhil tribe who are generally spread over the border districts of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. Her mother tongue was the Bhil dialect. In addition to the Bhil dialect she was fluent in many of the local dialects such as Pavra and Vasave
On her return she took charge of the house, the farm and her siblings, as her father had become indifferent to the home and family. Earlier, when her mother was alive things were different, she said, her family was economically better off. She recalled that “the first tractor of the taluka was bought by her father for the farm.” She also remembers working on the farm as a child, during the fruit-picking season of amsol. It was only after the death of her mother, that the family fell into dire straits because of her father’s lack of interest.

8.2.2 Entering the World of Work

After passing her higher secondary examination in 2002, she joined MAVIM as a sahayogini on a basic salary of Rs 1500/- . In addition she received a tribal allowance of Rs 200/- as she was working in a tribal area and Rs. 800/- as travel allowance. Sheetaltai says, the income from the farm was just sufficient to meet the basic needs of the family. Her salary was required to meet the expenses of a growing family. She was able to educate her brothers and sisters with her income. When she entered MAVIM, she had no notion of the nature of work it offered. It was only a job opportunity, since there were not enough job openings in Nandurbar. She says, “There are limited job opportunities in the district, since Nandurbar does not have any private companies; the work options in Nandurbar is either farm work or government jobs. Both these are difficult options, for it is difficult to be recruited into government service, and working as an agricultural labourer is to be hired on daily wages. Given the difficulty of finding suitable income sources in Nandurbar, one should stick to a job that one gets.” According to Sheetaltai the reason why MAVIM does not face staff turnover in Nandurbar, is because of the lack of employment opportunities. The sahyoginjis in Nandurbar do not think of a job switch.

8.2.3 Field-Work Experiences

Work as a sahyogini, she says, is not easy. When she was a sahyogini, she would have to walk at least 10 kms per day as there were no transport facilities in Dhadgaon. It was only two years ago that auto-rickshaw service became available in the area. She often had to walk to the nearby villages when she began her work. She had to face many problems in the course of her work. The village Sarpanch and the Police Patil who were corrupt would tell her to connive with them and misappropriate subsidies meant for the women by forming dummy groups. “The village women are ignorant,” they said, “therefore pass the benefit to us.” Being a tribal area, there are many government subsidy schemes and programmes available in Nandurbar, which the local power elite wished to misuse. Sheetaltai says that she flatly
refused to cooperate in the unscrupulous activities of the Sarpanch or Police Patil. “There were occasions,” she said, “when I was threatened with dire consequences by the Police Patil because I sought to empower women and encourage them to stand up to their rights.” Sheetaltaï said that she told the Police Patil “I am not afraid. I am from Mohjra village, and you be prepared for the consequences.” She revealed that this was an adequate protection for it is well-known in the Taluka that the people of Mohjra are vengeful. They would definitely avenge any injury to her. She added, “I know I should not be proud of it, but my family--my ancestors--have even committed murders to avenge insults. People are afraid of my family and my village. The moment you say one is from Mohjra people think before saying or doing anything”. She says, that as a sahyogini, she would often stay overnight in the village, because of the lack of transport facilities. On those occasions she would announce, “I am from Mohjra, I am not bothered what happens to me, even if I get raped or murdered, I will be gone, but imagine what will be the consequences to this village when my people come to know about me. Do you think anyone will be left alive?”

8.2.4 Family Relationships

Sheetaltai is a strong and confident woman, with a warm heart. She is very attached to her siblings. Although she got married in 2005, she lives away from her marital home. She lives in Dhadgaon in a room close to the CMRC with one of her brothers and one of her sisters because she feels she is responsible for them. Her husband, a medical officer in Navapur Taluka, has accepted her decision and he lives with his parents in Navapur Taluka. Her husband visits her frequently and she goes over to his home whenever she gets time off from work. Her basic salary currently is Rs. 7500/-. In addition, she gets a travel allowance of Rs. 1400/-, tribal allowance of Rs. 400/ and mobile recharging allowance of Rs.200. Her salary goes towards the expenses of her brother and sister.

8.2.5 Motherhood

Sheetaltai has a 9 year old son whom she has admitted to Smita Patil Public school5 in Dhule district. When asked if she feels bad about this separation from her son, she replies, “Well, I went to a boarding school when I was young. What I am doing is for the good of the child. Since there are no good schools in Nandurbar, parents have to either send their children to an ashramshala or send the child to schools in Nashik or Pune. My son has been admitted

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5 The school is founded by the Smita Patil Charitable Trust to provide co-education to the boarder students of the rural areas of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat as the school is situated at the boarder of the above three states. The medium of instruction is English. (http://www.smitapatilpublicschool.com)
to a boarding school from standard I. He is now in class IV. He is very understanding and tells me “don’t cry, I am fine here.” When asked about the quality of education in Dhadgaon taluka, Sheetaltai replied that the people who teach English are from the region itself so the quality of teachers and quality of education is poor. In case one has ambition for their children, they will definitely send their children to boarding schools outside the district. She pays Rs 55000/ per year as school and boarding fees. Additionally, she has to spend approximately Rs 45,000\(^6\) per annum to meet his health care and other expenditures. She is able to visit her son, thrice a year and the child is allowed to come home during Diwali and summer vacations. She would like to send him to Pune or Mumbai for further education. What was evident was that a family of three, comprising husband, wife and son are separated due to various reasons. Therefore, can we call her family, a nuclear family? Or does her family include her siblings with whom she lives in a rented room. Currently another CMRC manager of another centre, is staying with her. These alternative living arrangements, make one wonder about what constitutes a family? And what remains ones, support systems?

8.2.6 Career Aspirations

Sheetaltai has more than 13 years of work experience with MAVIM. She says, that MAVIM has given her a lot, but at the same time she is open to the idea of moving to some other organisation in case an opportunity comes her way. She also says that since she is an Scheduled Tribe (ST), the upper age limit for applying to government jobs is extended up to 38 years. She still has six more years to apply for permanent government job. She completed her BA through a distance learning programme after she became CMRC manager. She was motivated to graduate, since she felt the CMRC managers in other parts of Nandurbar had completed their graduation. She did not want to lag behind them. She enrolled for her BA at the Yashwantrao Chavan Open University, after her son was born. She has now set her sight on passing the MPSC exams that would enable her to get a job in a government office.

8.2.7 Ties with Colleagues

Sheetaltai stands by the sahyoginis working under her. She narrated an incident that reveals the support that she gives her subordinates. She said, the nature of a sahayogini’s work involves visiting villages assigned to her and conducting meetings. She also has to help the SHG groups in maintaining proper records. In a village, a close relative of one of the

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\(^6\) In a year she can visit him thrice on the days scheduled by the school. She hires a private car to go and visit him as the timings of the public transport buses does not suit the visiting hours. She also carries many gifts and clothes too. Thus all these expenses put together run into approximately Rs 45,000/
SHG members, would regularly taunt the sahyogini saying, she must be making lot of money through her work. He would be rude to the sahyogini whenever she visited the village. On one occasion when the man was very rude to her, the sahyogini came to Sheetaltai in tears and narrated her ordeal. Sheetaltai immediately called together a group of sahyoginis attached to the Centre and along with a few of the SHG members, accosted the man and spoke to him about his rude behaviour. She told him, a nurse and a teacher earn their living through their work. They have professional pride in what they are doing. Similarly, a sahyogini has professional pride in the work she does. If her family does not object about the nature of her work, why should anyone else do so? From that day onwards the man changed his behaviour and would greet the sahyoginis of MAVIM with respect.

Sheetaltai addresses her sahyoginis as “Mazya Pori” (My girls). She has advised each of them that however low the salary is, not to take favours from anyone. She has given them strict instructions that they should not let the SHG woman even buy tea for them, or not take a cold drink offered by anyone--be it a SHG member or their male relatives. As Sheetaltai says, “I have told them you can have tea made by the SHG member, when you visit her home, but do not let her buy you a cup of tea, even if she spends only Rs 5/ for the cup of tea.”

8.2.8 Work Challenges

Given the level of poverty of SHG members in Nandurbar, Sheetaltai thinks it would be a good idea if the service charges that the women have to pay for the services of the CMRCs are waived. Women in Nandurbar have very few opportunities to upscale their earning capacities and therefore find the service charges heavy. People in Nandurbar do get abusive and can use foul language to the sahyoginis. It so happened that once when she was away from the CMRC for a few days, things got out of hand, and a quarrel broke out between the SHG members and the person-in-charge. These members do not even hesitate from abusing the District Officer. Therefore she tried to resolve conflicts within the CMRC before things get out of hand. She says, “People from our region can really use lot of abusive words when it comes to quarrels and arguments and mostly our district officers belong to other part of the state, so it is better that I and my people only resolve things at our level, rather than take it to the district level. But the fact remains that the people find it extremely difficult to pay the service charges and can get aggressive.” Although Sheetaltai did not explicitly say that the salary that she receives in poor, she expressed her feeling indirectly. She repeatedly
said that “man dhan” is less, but there are other things to look forward to in her work as manager of the CMRC. She does feel the pinch of her poor salary, for she spoke of the rising cost of education and the difficulty of maintaining a good standard of life. Being able to meet these needs remained an important aspiration in her life.

According to Sheetaltaï, there is not much discrimination, between sons and daughters in the tribal area. Education through the ashramshalas were free and was available to both. Tribal communities also do not discriminate against daughters. Among them, the boys have to pay bride price to the bride’s family. As a matter of fact, her brothers had to pay bride price to the parents of their wives to get married. What irks her however are the customs that govern menstruations. She is often called to conduct gender sensitization programmes for young men and women in the Taluka and adolescent children in ashramshalas. She says that she is even called to upon to instruct adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene. She tells them to use napkins, but since these are expensive, she tell the girls as well as SHG members to use clean and soft cloth pieces, which should be washed well with hot water and dried in the sun. She laments that women are shy, hence they wash the cloth and put them to dry in unclean places and cover it further with some cloth as a result women are prone to urinary tracts infection. She also advises them to wax their pubic hair or use hair removing cream. She says adolescent girls are more open to change. She also encourages women to challenge menstrual pollution and argue that if conception of a baby is only possible because of menses, then why should menses be considered as polluting? Sheetaltaï says, until a few years ago, women would not cook or touch any of the household utensils, they needed to sit outside during their periods. Now through regular training sessions, such views are changing.

8.2.9 Family Ties that Bind

Her husband is her greatest support system. She has acquired a plot in her name with the money given by her husband. Even the scooter that she drives to visit field areas or nearby villages, is mainly paid by her husband. She has only paid the initial amount of Rs. 10,000. She takes pride that she has been able to purchase jewels in her name. Her husband does not question her about her spending or what she spends on her siblings. She has not only educated them, but also got them married and lavishes them with gifts. She is proud that she is respected by her natal family, her in-laws and extended family because of her work in MAVIM. She says that she ensures that she buys good sarees for her brothers’ wives as she is the head of the family after her father’s death. She sees her brothers’ wives as her daughters-
in- laws, although she herself is only 32 years of age. Sheetaltai would like to hear people say that her daughters-in-law have good clothes and jewels. As she explains, “For my brothers’ happiness, they must have good married lives. Whatever I do, I do with the intention of keeping them happy. My happiness lies in their happiness.”. Sheetaltai has also stood firm by the women in her family. When her brother wanted to desert his wife for bearing him six daughters it was Sheetaltai who intervened and supported her sister-in-law thereby saving the marriage and the family. Be it small or big decision in the family, Sheetaltai is always consulted for each and everything. At the end she said “Today I am known as Sheetal Madam otherwise I was known as Bhaskar’s (her father’s name) daughter. This means I have done something in my life.”

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8.3 STORY OF ANASUYA NAGRALE

I met Anasuyatai at the CMRC located in the city of Nandurbar. She was waiting with two other sahayoginis for the interview. It was Anasuyatai’s bright and intelligent eyes that caught my attention. She was sitting ramrod straight and appeared to be very confident, with her sari neatly pinned up. I noticed that the neatly pinned saree and hair neatly plaits was the trademark of all the sahyogini’s. She greeted me and after a brief introduction looked at ease. She carefully read the consent form and asked me few questions; and only after she was satisfied with the answers I provided did she sign it.

8.3.1 Childhood

Anasuyatai was born in an extremely poor, mahar caste, family in the village of Vavadh, near Dhule Nandurbar highway. Both her parents were illiterate. They worked as daily labourers, as they did not own any farm land. Anasuyatai had a very difficult childhood. She was the second child of her parents. She had an elder brother and younger sister and a brother. She studied in the village school. She recollects that she was not good in studies. She would attend school only four days a week and on Friday and Saturday she would go with her parents to work as a daily wage agricultural worker. Even when she attended school, her attention would be diverted thinking that had she missed school she could have helped her parents earn some money. Anasuyatai’s concern and sensitivity can be seen right from her childhood.
8.3.2 Marital home

Anasuyatai was married at the age of 16. She appeared for her school leaving examinations after her marriage, however she could not clear the same. She dropped out of her studies and focused on household duties in her marital home. The troubles never ended for her. Anasuyatai soon became pregnant. Her in-laws wanted and prayed for a boy, but Anasuyatai delivered a girl. They soon started ill treating her. Within a year and half she delivered a second girl. Her in-laws and husband pressurised her to get pregnant and threatened her that the third better be a boy. The third time too Anasuyatai delivered a girl. The extent of torture and ill-treatment increased many folds. The little girls were kept hungry. When she became pregnant again the in-laws took her to the doctor and when it was found that it was a girl, they forced her to have an abortion. Anasuyatai was a broken woman; she had lost all her confidence and was living only for the sake of her children. One day, her elder daughter, who was 6 years old, fell ill. Her eldest daughter was a delicate child who fell ill frequently. Her in-laws refused to give her proper medical treatment. They would get her some medicines from the anganwadi. This was the last straw. She walked out of her husband’s home with her three daughters and went to her mother’s house. Her husband never came to take her back.

8.3.3 A new beginning

When Anasuyatai came back to her parent’s home at Vavadh, she came in contact with Chaudhary ‘Madam’ who was a senior sahyogini at MAVIM. Chaudhary Madam is now a CMRC Manager posted at Nashik district and she has been a guiding force in Anasuyatai’s life. She encouraged Anasuyatai to apply for the post of a sahyogini in MAVIM. She received the appointment letter and on 14th January 2008 she joined MAVIM. Anasuyatai recalls that the cluster given to her was very far away from her village at Vavadh. She had to come to Nandurbar town and then change buses to go to the cluster assigned to her. The honarium paid was Rs. 1500 and travelling allowance was Rs 400. Prior to joining MAVIM, she had not stepped out of her village alone. Initially she found the work very difficult because she had to travel in buses and then walk long distances to different villages to speak to the women. Anasuyatai says that she was very shy and hence found it difficult to talk with strangers. Those days, she recalls, the sahyognis had to undergo rigorous training, many of which were residential programs of four or five days. Participation in these programmes was possible because her mother, brother and sister-in-law took care of her young daughters. It was because of their support, she says, that she was able to even work as a sahyogini when
her children were young. Working as a sahyogini meant long hours of work. Her sister-in-law took care of her daughters as her own. She would feed them, bathe them and send them to school.

8.3.4 Decision to live independently

She lived with her parents for nearly three years. All were good with her, but gradually tensions grew between herself and her sister-in-law. She says, her sister-in-law’s mother who would sometimes visit them instigated her sister-in-law against her. Her sister-in-law would then behave rudely to her. This tension continued between them until finally her sister-in-law went to her mother’s place and refused to return home even after three months. This made Anasuyatai to take the decision to live separately with her daughters. Anasuyatai called her younger sister who was by then married and asked her to find a rented accommodation in the neighbourhood of her mother’s home. The reason why she had called her sister, was because she was aware that the house was vacant, as the owners had moved from her village to the village, where her sister lived. This turned out to be a convenient arrangement since she could stay separately and yet remain close to her parents who helped out with childcare. Her sister-in-law then returned to her home and the two have a good relationship now. The rented accommodation that Anasuyatai moved into was very expensive, as she had to pay a rent of Rs 1000/, for a single room without water or electricity. She was able to manage because her brother kindly allowed her to take water and electricity connection from his house. It was very difficult for her to manage as she had very little money to meet the living expenses. She often found herself without money for the bus ticket and would have to take an advance from the MAVIM office with special permission from the District Coordinating Officer. She walked long distances to save on the travel money to meet family expenses. It was with great deal of stinting and saving that Anasuyatai brought up her daughters.

8.3.5 A Proud Mother

Anasuyatai is today a proud mother of her three daughters. Her elder daughter is in Std. X. The other two are studying in Std. VIII and Std. VI respectively. She wishes to make her daughters independent and is resisting pressure from all her relatives who advise her to get her 16-year-old, eldest, daughter married. Anasuyatai has clearly told her daughter that “you can study as much as you want, I will not get you married without your permission and until you are ready for marriage.” This is a remarkably bold step in a village community
where girls are married by the time they are sixteen. There is always a fear within an endogamous community that any delay in getting the girl married at the right age, would prevent her from finding a suitable partner. She proudly says, that all her daughters are studious and are being educated in Dr Kane’s Girl’s High School\(^7\) at Nandurbar town. The girls travel daily from Vavadh village to town. This is possible because they are able to make use of the free bus passes provided under the government education programme. The school timings are 11:30 a.m. and they take the 11:00 a.m. bus from Vavad. Her daughters manage things on their own and are independent. They help her in filling up water, washing clothes and preparing food too. Although Anasuyatai cooks food before leaving home at 8:30 a.m. in case something need to be done her daughters mange the house in her absence. Her elder daughter has also got scholarship and is a bright student. Her daughters are her biggest support system. During school holidays and long vacations, her daughters work as farm labourers to earn money and contribute towards the family expenditure. She says it is only with their support that she was able to pass her Std. X exam in 2013.

### 8.3.6 Hardships and fears

Household work is extremely heavy since she does not have a gas cylinder. This means that in addition to carrying water from her brother’s house Anasuyatai and her daughters have to traverse long distances to collect firewood from the forest for cooking. No doubt there are times when she is able to buy firewood from other women. Anasuyatai is used to hard labour, because as she says, “the cooking in her mother’s house was also done on the ‘Chul’ (earthen hearth with forest wood used as a fuel)”. The house does not have sanitation facilities. She and her daughters have to defecate in the open fields. She says, “This is not a problem since everyone defecates in the open.” When I put it across to her that there are subsidies provided by the government to construct toilets, she replied that “these subsidies are available only to those with BPL cards.” She also added, “the people are so poor, that they would rather spend the subsidy amount on food, than construct a toilet.”

Anasuyatai has worked for more than 8 years with MAVIM as a sahyogini and she has been member of SHG group at her village. She admits that even her daughter is a

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\(^7\)The school is private aided school with classes from 6 to 10. Under the RTE act all children under 14 years of age have the right for compulsory school education. All private schools have to admit 25% children from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups from their neighbourhoods for free education. Private aided schools shall have to admit children from similar backgrounds in the proportion of aid they receive from the government, in the induction class each year, and will not receive any extra reimbursement for these children. ([http://righttoeducation.in](http://righttoeducation.in))
member\textsuperscript{8} of SHG group, although her daughter is not yet 18 years old. The savings through her SHG group is the only savings that Anasuyatai can manage. She saves about Rs 200 per month through SHG. She is however wary of taking any loans through the group. She says, that once you take a loan then you have to ensure that you repay it every month, whatever be the circumstances. ICICI bank with whom they have bank linkage facility can charge upto Rs 300/ as penalty for non payment. She rather prefers small amounts of loan like Rs 2000/ which can be availed through internal lending of the SHG group. On probing further as to any other reason for not taking loan, Anasuyatai replies that this job of sahyogini is a contractual job and that too in 2015 Tejaswini project comes to an end although they have heard that the project may get extended by additional two more years. In case no project comes, then what is the alternative for them? They also have been informed that contracts henceforth will be renewed only for 6 months which increases the uncertainty of work and hence the fear of taking loan of higher value.

8.3.7 Work and the change it brought

Anasuyatai already mentioned that travelling was something that she learnt only after joining MAVIM. There are many other things that she has learnt because of her role as a Sahyogini. When she was a young and newly married, she was so shy that she would run inside her home when any stranger came asking for directions. Her husband’s home was on the Dhule Nandurbar highway and hence there were strangers stopping by for directions or for a glass of water. Speaking or interacting with unknown men was unheard of. After joining MAVIM she says “ I can speak with hundred of women, can convince them. If someone asks me questions I can answer them well and clear their problems”. She says, that she has gained so much confidence that she can resolve any issue. In one such incident she recalls that the MAVIM entered into an agreement with BAIF for selling seeds at subsidised rates to the SHG women. The CMRCs along with the Sahyoginis and BAIF resources decided to carry out the activity in the respective villages assigned to them. The packet of seeds which otherwise costs Rs 300 in the open market was arranged to be sold at Rs 100 to the SHG women. The Rs 100 which was to be marked for the SHG women was given to CMRC only for Rs 50 by BAIF. Thus the additional Rs 50 was added by the CMRC as way of making a small profit for the center. On the scheduled day the BAIF officials and the Sahyogini’s went to the village to sell the seeds. One of the villagers accused the sahyoginis of pocketing Rs 50

\textsuperscript{8} MAVIM generally accepts members who have completed 18 years of age in the SHGs. To make her daughter an SHG member, she has had to lie about her daughter’s age.
and threatened to call the police. Anasuyatai stepped in and said that she herself was going to call the police for getting the man arrested for false accusations. She reasoned that a proper receipt is being given through the CMRC and by spreading such false rumours the man was hindering the smooth process of giving the seeds to the SHG women.

On enquiring whether her view get heard at the management level or at district office. She smiles and replies “Our views also reach and we also ensure that we reach at the district office”. Her answer was spontaneous and summarised her strength and confidence too. Anasuyatai thanks her work for the change she is experiencing within herself. Even her mother told her that it is only due to the work that for every festival she is able to buy clothes for her daughters and able to give good education to them.

8.3.8 Relationship with the SHG women

Although Anasuyatai is a dedicated sahyogini committed to the work of developing and working for her SHG women, she also has to deal with their low understanding and illiteracy levels. She jokingly says “Either women should be full mad or complete sane but this half madness is dangerous.” She elaborated by saying that it is not easy to deal with women who refuse to understand why service charges are levied. Despite giving proper explanation, reasoning and giving proper calculations then too SHG women sometimes refuse to pay the service charges. So what are the ways Anasuyatai employs? She admits that when loan gets passed by the bank, even sahyogini along with the President and Vice President of the SHG group have to visit the bank sign the form and only then money is disbursed. Anasuyatai stubbornly tells her SHG women, pay the service charges to the CMRC and take the loan amount from the bank. She says unless such arm twisting methods are used we cannot meet the target of taking the service charges from our SHG members.

Anasuyatai ensures that the SHG women do get loans from the banks. She recalls an incident concerning one SHG groups which was under the TSP (Tribal Sub Plan) scheme. All the SHG women were tribals in these groups and none could read or write. Even the President and Vice President could not read or write. The hurdle of getting the loan passed was that ICICI had a condition that unless women are able to sign, the loan will not be passed. Anasuyatai then took the responsibility of making the women learn to sign their names. It was a task but it was achieved.
Anasuyatai narrated some of the hardships that her SHG women face. Recalling one of the incidents she spoke of the ICDS schemes. The contract of providing fresh food to the young children is provided to the SHG groups. However it takes more than 6 to 8 months at times to clear the bills. Unlike big contractors who have strong holding power and who can manage even if there is delay in payment of bills for few months, SHGs consist of poor women and non payment or delayed payment wipes out their meagre savings. Anasuyatai says some bills dating back to year 2009 have not been paid and despite follow up from the district office has not yielded the desired results.

This does not mean SHG women are always hapless victims of a defunct administrative set up. There are times when SHG women also indulge in malpractices. She says that the licence of rationing shops is also given to SHGs. However there are some SHGs who just take the license and then sub-lease it to other group for a price. To put a check on such practices, separate files are prepared for each of the SHGs along with the application forms. On the day of the allotment, the concerned official from rationing office along with the District Coordinating Officer comes to the village. Sahyoginis are also present, the DCO then takes a feedback on the capabilities of the respect of SHGs. Anasuyatai says that “I give my honest opinion as to which SHG can really handle the responsibilities of the ration shop and be committed in running the same. Normally if all the files are in order then our opinion helps to take the final decision.”

Anasuyatai is proud of her role and thinks that she has equally benefited and learned things from her SHG women. She says “My women may be illiterate, they may be uneducated but they have a different type of knowledge, which I may not have. I speak with them we exchange ideas and through that I learn many things from them.” She is proud of her women too.

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8.4 STORY OF LATA NEWARE

Wearing a light pink saree with big bindi adorning her forehead and clear and distinct voice with the peculiar dialect of speaking Marathi it is hard to miss Latatai. Latatai belonging to the Vadgaon village of Yavatmal district has put in 8 long years with MAVIM. She is 42 years of age and prior to MAVIM she worked as Balwadi teacher.
8.4.1 Association with MAVIM

Latatai was a SHG member prior to becoming a sahyogini. In 2008 when she was a still a member of the group MAVIM had organized cultural events and programs. Every member had to present their story and share experience. She too shared her experience with the rest of the members. The DCO of Yavatmal was present there for the meeting. He told her to apply for sahyogini post. Her financial position was weak and she applied for the post and she was selected. The taluka given to her was Malegaon and later on Kalamb. It included lot of travel on a daily basis. This was an opportunity she did not want to let go for any reason.

8.4.2 Support System

Latatai is very proud of her husband. She says that her husband encouraged her to take up the post. He was a vegetable vendor and took the task of taking care of her eldest son who was 9 years old then. The younger two sons were sent to her mother’s house not far from Vadgaon. Thus Latatai started her career as a sahyogini. Latatai says her husband has supported her in each and every decision. When people in the village started asking him, how can he tolerate his wife coming home so late and going off for training for so many days. He would sternly tell them “She is my wife and if I don’t have a problem, why should others have? She works for the cause of women and that too for an organisation like MAVIM.” This attitude discouraged the village men from talking about her.

Speaking of her husband’s support, she says, he has encouraged even the Vadar community women to come to her house for SHG meetings. Latatai sees this as an example of her husband’s progressive ideas because the dialect spoken by the community is very rough and it appears that they are fighting. SHG women also visit her home for getting their paper work or resolving any domestic issues or SHG related issues.

She says that since by the time she comes home from work it is 7 or 8 p.m. so her husband and her younger son does the cooking. She does not have to worry on anything on the home front. She feels indebted to her parents too for taking care of the children and their schooling when they were young. “Before joining MAVIM my financial position was so weak that I did not have food to eat at times. I have gone hungry too. My parents even offered to take me along with them to their house. But I refused and said I will stay with my husband in any circumstances.”
8.4.3 Carefree Childhood

Latatai was born in the Mehdek village in Yavatmal. She was the eldest daughter of her family. Her parents doted on her and her siblings when they were young. She has two brothers and a sister. All of them went to the school in the village. Her father was a gram sevak and they owned some land. Her mother had completed education till class IV. Both her parents knew the importance of education. The basic things were fulfilled and she remembers having a carefree life. Being the eldest daughter of the family as soon as she completed her Std. X papers she was married as relatives and extended family members pressurised her parents.

8.4.4 Handling SHG issues

Apart from SHG related Latatai says that she handles many other issues. Formation of SHG, giving the training to SHG women on concept of saving and monitoring the meetings and linking the SHGs with the banks and ensuring women get loans is normal course of work. As a sahyogini she is also entrusted with the task of making women aware of their rights. The demands or the problems can be effectively solved collectively with the support of the gram sabha. It is therefore necessary that women participate in gram sabhas in large number to put forth their issues. Initially women did not know the working of gram Panchayat. The first task is to make women’s voices be heard at the gram sabha. Now women have realised that four gram sabhas have to be held especially for women where they can put forth their questions. Likewise Latatai says in one of the villages the BPL cards and cheques for the families of the farmers who had committed suicide due to debts had come to the gram Panchayat. However they were not being disbursed, Latatai went to the meeting along with the other SHG women and questioned it at the gram sabha. They immediately received the BPL cards as well as the cheques that were ready. Latatai says that her women are now at least aware of the schemes such as Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana. In this scheme the widow gets a monthly pension of Rs 600 if she does not have any livelihood income. Latatai says that her SHG women can avail of various schemes as they have adequate knowledge of the forms to be filled, the relevant office to apply and the necessary paper work required. Before joining SHG women were unaware and not educated, thus officers at the tehsil office would take advantage and demand bribe for getting paper work done. Now with training women don’t have to be dependent on anyone. This is the level of awareness that has been created by sahyoginis through their regular SHG meetings.
8.4.5 Changing mindsets

Changing mindsets is one of the challenges that every sahyogini faces and Latatai too had to face it. Latatai states that during meetings the women do sometimes collectively purchase some light snacks to eat. In one of the meetings they were having samosa, one of the husbands of the SHG woman (under the influence of alcohol) remarked are the meetings only about eating and merry-making. The next time when he was sober, Latatai patiently explained to him that the meetings are more than merry-making and listed down the things that they do in the meetings. From that day onwards he speaks with respect whenever he meets her.

In another incident, a SHG woman would keep giving excuses about husband not allowing to attend meetings, this was after the loan was approved. Latatai then questioned her how come while taking the loan, she did not have to take permission from him and he did not have any objection and now for attending the meeting he has objection. The woman started attending the meetings regularly. Thus by using tactfulness one can change the mindset of people.

8.4.6 Dreams and Aspirations

Latatai is very fond of girls and laments that she has three sons but not a girl. She feels that girls are different. They are sensitive; they are concerned about their parents and are responsible. She says none of her sons pay attention to their studies, but had there been a daughter she would have taken care of the household responsibilities as well as been sincere in studies. She wants her younger son to be an engineer, currently he is in class IX. The second son drives an auto and Latatai insists that he complete class XII. The eldest son wants to prepare for a career in armed forces.

Latatai too feels that she should have completed class XII atleast. However she says that she knows that she is good at work and works tirelessly for her SHG women and for the CMRC. She currently has 43 SHGs all under the Tejaswini scheme. However she has a target of setting up SHG under a new scheme which is Integrated Watershed Management Scheme. She is enthusiastic about the rolling out this scheme. She now wants to serve MAVIM as CMRC manager, she has even applied for the post and is awaiting the results.
8.4.7 Contribution as sahyogini

Latatai is proud of her work for many reasons but mainly because she feels that initially the life of her SHG women was limited to cooking and taking care of children but now they can do banking transactions, they understand how it works. They can walk in the bank branch and get their passbook filled. Prior to joining SHG women did not have the confidence to go and speak at the Gram Panchayat although it was their own village but now they are able to speak at the gram sabha. Women have learned to go to Tehsil office to get work done. They know and understand the paperwork required. They do not have to depend upon their husbands or brothers to accompany them to step outside home. Women have learnt to travel too. People are uneducated so they had blind faith and would fast and visit temples to get cured however with training from MAVIM have helped them to go to the doctor and realise the importance of medical help. The training of HIV AIDS which was an eight day training programme at Mumbai also helped her understand in detail about the disease and the knowledge gained from the programme could be imparted to the SHG women too.

8.4.8 Expectations

Latatai does not have any major expectations from MAVIM, except that she wants to see her CMRC in number one position in Yavatmal. Currently their CMRC is self sustainable. She wants the CMRC to become profitable, so that they can earn a better honarium. She wants to serve MAVIM all her life as she feels that she owes everything to MAVIM. It is only after coming and working for MAVIM that she was able to improve her economic conditions be it buying a of plot of land, auto for her son, jewellery for herself or helping her husband to expand his business. According to her even the intangible benefits such as increase of awareness and confidence is due to MAVIM. Now she does have an offer as anganwadi sevika, but she is planning to stick with MAVIM. She is expecting to be promoted to CMRC Manager.

Her expectations from her family are very clear, good education for the younger son. She has got her share in her father’s property. Infact she has ensured that even her mother got her share in her maternal-grandparents property. Latatai has also added her name in the property held by her husband. She advises her SHG women the same and expects them to follow her.

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SUMMARY

The three oral narratives bring in the extraordinary side of seemingly ordinary women. They have overcome their personal struggles and tried to hold their ground through their work and dedication. Their stories bring in the immense potential which is waiting to be unearthed. It brings in hope and glimmer. These women have shown exemplary courage in their personal and professional lives to create a niche for themselves within the SHG movements. Each of them are special. The narratives also indicate the permeable boundaries between the personal and professional in the lives of development workers.