

"Yeh tumhare baap ki kheti nahi, mere baap ki hai! "

Sattarsingh, a tribal farmer of Malda village (Nunburder district, Maharashtra, India) kept Rs. 15,000 (320 \$) in the hands of the local money-lender and said "yeh tumhare baap ki kheti nahin, mere baap ki hai"(this farm is my ancestral property, not yours). First time in his life he could look into the eyes of the money-lender that had usurped his land 45 years ago. It seems hope and confidence had intoxicated him.

Almost every farmer in the Khandesh region of India is a hostage of illegal money-lending. Sattarsingh too had taken a loan of Rs. 15,000 against his land at a whopping 36% interest. Since last 45 years he has been longing to till his land, hoping for the day when he would not have to go to Gujarat to work as a daily wage earner, leaving his family behind.

Every farmer in Malda village goes to Gujarat, mostly to cut sugarcane in the fields. The more fortunate ones get to grow vegetables in their fields once a year. Families have lost lands, farmers have been asked to sell their women and many have committed suicide to escape the cycle of debt. This year alone more than 1500 Indian farmers have committed suicide after being pushed into debt through crop failures. The loans are a few hundred dollars but a source of shame when they cannot be repaid and often the interest rates are as high as 5% per month. The BBC news reports that more than 200,000 farmers have committed suicide in India since 1997.

One one hand, banks shy away from lending to the poor given the high risk and transaction cost, and the lack of information and collateral; and on the other hand, farmers turn to moneylenders as there is less formality and the loans are doled are quickly.

When i met these tribal farmers i realised none of them had got the farm transferred from their ancestors in their name simply because they did not have money to pay for the registration of the land. They need to borrow every crop season to invest in agriculture and the loan is paid off after harvest, leaving them with little savings. This pushes them into the vicious cycle of debt.

A new initiative was launched in the Khandesh region through partnership between BNGVN, AFC and LetzDream Foundation called Caring Capital. Through this project, 96 farmers in the Khandesh region have been given loan of up to Rs. 1,00,000 (2145\$) at interest rate of 14%.

Sattarsingh is one of the beneficiaries of the project. When he got Rs 15,000 through Caring Capital , he went straight to the money-lender and said "take your money and give me my land back". Obviously, the money-lender could not believe it and refused to return the land as he has assumed the land would forever remain as his property. Being an indebted poor farmer, Sattarsingh never had the courage to look into the eyes of the money-lender. But today, he was empowered to demand his land back and said "yeh tumhare baap ki kheti nahin, mere baap ki hai" Today he got his land back and he is

already dreaming of growing vegetables in his farm so that he never has to go migrate again to make a living!