



Where There's a Will

There was a small puddle on the mud floor where the roof had leaked in the night. Kusumben sighed as she wiped the wet patch. The rain was a blessing for farmers, but it was a sort of curse for her. The roof had begun to leak last year. Her husband had patched it up then, but the repair had been of a temporary nature. What they really needed was a new roof. This one was very old and needed repairs all the time. But she knew that a new roof was a distant dream. There was absolutely no money. In spite of the good rainfall, the yield from the farm was meagre. All they had was Sandeepbhai's salary as a security guard in Vyara, a two-hour drive away, on which to manage their expenses. And that was hardly adequate to feed a family of five. Perhaps she could get a loan for repairing the roof. It seemed unlikely.

The next day she mentioned this to her friend, Sumitraben. 'We need a new roof. I don't know how to get it. We have absolutely no money. Even the self-help

group can't help. I've already taken a loan last year for the farm.'

Sumitraben said, 'I know. And that farm of yours!'

Kusumben sighed. 'The farm is just a wasteland. Always has been. What's the point of tilling it? So much hard work, all for nothing. I can't even take a loan to buy the seed for sowing. That's what happened last year.'

'Is that why you didn't sow anything?'

Kusumben nodded. 'Yes. I couldn't afford to. Sandeepbhai was annoyed with me for letting the land lie fallow. But I showed him the calculation. We just couldn't afford to till our land. This year also, I'm tilling just one beegha, just enough to give us jowar for ourselves. After paying for the seed, fertilizer and everything else, there's practically nothing left over. Sandeepbhai's job is what keeps us going.'

'You must miss him,' Sumitraben sympathized.

'Of course, but we don't have a choice. I don't mind. I can manage the children.'

'That farm of ours, what should we do about it? It's back breaking work with no return. Why do we even have it?'

'I know you can. I've seen how well you look after them, even help them with their homework. All the women in the village admire you, Kusumben.'

Kusumben smiled wistfully. Admiration wouldn't get her a new roof.

She said the same thing to her husband when he visited them a few weeks later. 'That farm of ours, what should we do about it? It's back breaking work with no return. Why do we even have it?'

Sandeepbhai sipped his tea, made for him just the way he liked it, extra strong and with ginger in it, and said, 'Well, what are we supposed to do with it?'

'We could sell it,' said Kusumben. 'We've had it for so long with nothing to show except a couple of loans that became such a terrible burden all those years ago. Let's not hold on to it any longer.'

Sandeepbhai shook his head. 'You've gone crazy. Nobody sells their land. This is the only asset we have. How can you even think of selling it? And in any case, who would buy it? It's wasteland, as you keep reminding me.' He stood up and called out to their three children. 'Come on, let's go to the fields. Let's check the jowar.'

Kusumben watched the retreating backs of her family with bitterness. Her husband was

right, of course, but how she wished things were different. They had tried many different things to make the land fertile, but so far nothing had worked. Even when the weather was perfect and the rainfall was good, the yield was poor. What kind of asset was it that didn't give anything in return? Even the moneylender valued the land poorly.

That night, Kusumben sat up in bed after the children had gone to sleep and said, 'I have another idea for the land. If we can't sell it, let's give it on lease to another farmer. We can take a part of the produce as rent. I don't mind that. I can do so many other things with my time. I want to be on the school management committee. And give more time to the SHG. I have some good ideas for expanding it.'

Sandeepbhai turned around to look at his wife. Her unhappy face moved him and he took her hand. 'All right, I'll look for another farmer if you insist. But you know it's as good as giving away the land for nothing. We'll never get it back once we give it away. And what if the tenant stops paying us the rent? How will you recover it? It'll become a headache for us eventually.'

'Then what should we do?' Kusumben bit her lower lip, a habit when she worried about something. 'Look at this house. It has become so run down. How long can you go on patching the roof? We need a new one and you know it. Look at our neighbours. They've managed to build a pucca house. We should make a start on that. But that'll never happen, not the way things are going.'



Sandeepbhai gave her a slight shake. 'Don't worry so much. We'll find a way out. And I'll fix the roof.' He squeezed her hand hard and then released it. 'Life will become better, my dear.'

But Kusumben wasn't so optimistic. It was up to her to find a way out of their problems, beginning with the farm.

It was at this time that the Reliance Foundation formed a 'mandal', as Kusumben and all the villagers call the Village Farmers' Association, in Ishanpur. Kusumben grabbed this rope of hope immediately, and soon became a member of the executive committee. There were so many things the mandal did that the villagers hadn't known about till then. Kusumben was

land in the manner explained by them. There was nothing she didn't do. In the first year the yield was not so different from earlier years, and she almost lost heart. But the team members explained to her that when it came to nature, change took time. She should wait for another year to see the result of all the changes she had made in her farming practices.

Sandeepbhai called her up a couple of days before the soyabean harvest the following year. 'Father tells me that you've hired four labourers for the harvest. Is that wise? Can we afford it? Where's the money coming from?'

'Don't worry,' said Kusumben. 'I've taken an advance from the SHG to pay for the labour.'



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overjoyed when the Reliance Foundation team started helping her with her farm. She faithfully implemented all their suggestions. She believed that she must not miss out on this golden opportunity to turn her cultivable wasteland into a fertile farm. She segregated the land into smaller sections when they told her to, followed their suggestions on crop patterns, tilled the

'Advance? But how will you repay them?'

'You'll see for yourself when you come here.' Kusumben decided to be a little mysterious. The last time that her husband had visited, the soyabean plants had still been small, though promising. He had no idea what a good yield she had finally obtained. Now she wanted to surprise him.

As soon as her husband came home a couple of weeks later, she showed him her savings passbook and pointed to the large deposit she had made recently.

'What's this?' asked Sandeepbhai. 'Have your parents given you a gift?'

Kusumben laughed. 'It's the money from the soyabean crop. Look at how fertile our farm has become! And we still have to harvest two other crops. This year, for the first time I'm going to plant sugarcane. I can hardly believe it myself! Now we can finally get the new roof.'

In the afternoon, Kusumben took her husband to the farm to show him all the progress she had made. The next day he said over lunch, 'A farmer from the next village has approached me. He wants to lease the farm from us. He'll pay us a fixed amount every month. He's very impressed with the quality of the land. How about it, my dear? Now you can do all the other things with your time that you always wanted.'

The twinkle in her husband's eye told Kusumben that he was just teasing her, but none the less, a chill ran down her spine. She loved this farm now, loved the feeling of power it gave her. How hard she had worked to turn it into this bountiful land! She couldn't have it taken away from her, not now when things were finally

working out for them. This farm was her own venture. Sandeepbhai had almost nothing to do with it. He was hardly ever around to take of things. She had decided everything, what to sow, when to sow, how much to sow, how many workers to hire and when. She and the Reliance Foundation team between them had created a miracle. But all said and done, the final decision about the land would always rest with her husband. He was the legal heir of his father, the actual owner of the land. She might do everything for the farm, but she had no say over it. And that was never going to change.

Had the Reliance Foundation team divined Kusumben's inner turmoil? Was that why they had arranged for the Netrang development officer's talk on women and inheritance rights? Of course, it was just a coincidence, but the timing of the talk couldn't have been better from Kusumben's point of view. The development officer's explanation that the government wanted women's property rights to be strengthened triggered something vital in Kusumben, and now she worked like one possessed to have her name put in the inheritance deed along with her husband's, confidence that the law was on her side strengthening her actions. To convince her husband, and then her father-in-law, to put her name on the title deed hadn't been easy, but her persistence won them over.





She was like a tigress fighting for its cub. Almost single-handedly, she completed all the documentation. Her friend, Sumitraben, who's also the village sarpanch, helped her with the government work when she saw Kusumben's determination.

'Kusumben,' she said, 'If you get your name on the inheritance deed, what an inspiration it'll be to all the other women in the village. None of us have been able to manage this so far. We're all with you in this effort. We hope you succeed.'

Not only Sumitraben, but all the other government officials, impressed by this diminutive woman's sense of purpose, also helped Kusumben achieve her goal.

Finally, the tehsildar of Netrang handed over the inheritance deed to Kusumben and Sandeepbhai. Tears sprang to her eyes when she read her name alongside her husband's. This was the most precious possession she had now. She was going to guard it with her life.

'Hurry up,' she told Sandeepbhai after signing the register in the tehsildar's office. 'We have to go.'

'Go, where?'

'To buy the diesel engine for the farm pond! That's my next project on the farm.'

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Reliance Foundation's Bharat India Jodo programme is directly impacting lives of over 48,000 small and marginal farming families like Kusumben's in 500 villages across 12 states in India.