

18

Legends of Choar Mumtaz: Saleiha Chachi smiles

by JOHN SAMUEL

The author of the final article in this section carries out regular visits to communities in different parts of the world of his own accord. These visits are low-key, self-organised, and self-motivated. There is no facilitator, and sometimes no local organisation paving the way. These visits have become opportunities within one person's busy working life to take stock, to learn, and to be challenged. More than that, however, they challenge us as readers to reflect on the gulf that separates the 'experts' in development from those affected by the decisions they take. In this particular instance, although accompanied by the programme manager of a local partner of ActionAid, the journey was a personal one rather than being related to any specific project, and the author requested that his ActionAid identity be kept private.

I regularly make solitary visits to villages in different parts of the world, including my own village in Kerala, India. For me, these are more than immersions. They are intensely personal moments during which I can reflect, learn, unlearn, and imagine. They make me restless but hopeful. They disturb me deeply, but at the same time recharge me. More than anything they challenge me.

Before I leave, I read the history of the area and discuss its development dynamics with friends. Once there I meet, listen, and talk with people. I usually take early morning walks to observe what's going on. In some cases I go as a volunteer, without revealing my ActionAid identity or introducing the power dimensions that go with that title. When I go as a volunteer I contribute the salary of those days to a cause in that particular village.

For me, these visits are a pilgrimage of learning, solidarity, and meditative days away from the development circus. I wrote the following after one of these visits, to a remote island called Choar Mumtaz in Bangladesh, where I stayed for 5 days in January 2004.

Legends of Choar Mumtaz: Saleiha Chachi smiles

Saleiha Chachi keeps smiling. Her tobacco-stained teeth give some hints about her age: she must be in her mid-sixties or early-seventies. She lives on Choar Mumtaz, a remote island near Golachipa in the Meghna river of Bangladesh. It takes almost 18 hours to reach it by boat.

Saleiha Chachi remembers the horror of the flood in the 1970s. It washed away most of the people of Choar Mumtaz, but Saleiha Chachi lived to tell the story. She lived to change Choar Mumtaz. She lost everything, including her

first husband and children. She still remembers the stench of death. She was a young and beautiful woman at that time. Almost 4 days after the flood she found herself stuck in the branch of a tree, realising that the place where her house used to be did not exist any more.

But her will to live prevailed. She slowly picked up the pieces of her life and rebuilt them, all by herself. In those days there were no NGOs or any other support. She married again, and now has three children. She never had the chance to go to school, but she has picked up the Bangla alphabet. Today she runs a school – a ray of hope in Choar Mumtaz. She is one of the few women not to wear the veil in the whole island, and she encourages her daughters-in-law and daughter to do the same. Her smile, bright eyes, and perspective, and her boldness to change the situation within and around her, make her a rare woman leader in Choar Mumtaz.

She inspired me. She symbolises the thousands of unsung, unheard, and invisible leaders, both women and men, who make change happen. Most of them are real volunteers, driven by a sense of purpose and the courage of their convictions. They speak in their local language. They do not have the luxury of travel outside their communities. I was happy to discover Saleiha Chachi, and happy when Action-Aid Bangladesh decided to honour her during its twentieth anniversary celebrations. That must have been one of the very few times she travelled outside the island.

Choar Mumtaz is in a time warp: it is like visiting a village in the 1970s. There is no electricity, no telephone, no hospital, few roads, and no cars. The élite travel by bicycles. But it looked beautiful in the afternoon – like a green patch in the midst of the shining Meghna River. It boasts a weekly market, where goods from mainland Bangladesh arrive by boats. The market is also a sort of public sphere. People across the island come here to sell, buy, exchange, and entertain themselves. It provides a bit of celebration in this rather quiet island. There is also a cattle market, where around 100 cows, goats, and bullocks wait impatiently for buyers. The most astonishing thing was that I could find few women in the market; the few who came covered their faces with black veils.

In the main barbershop, at the entrance to the village, I saw a rather impressive poster of Saddam Hussein – the only visible symbol of globalisation. There is one pharmacy and a young ‘doctor’ who runs it. He is one of the enlightened souls of the village, who said that he finished school and learned ‘pharmacy’ in Calcutta. He has the answer to all the usual ailments, ready with a quick diagnosis and medicines. His small room is the one and only primary health care system.

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During an evening walk in the main street I met the only globalised man. He showed off his little English, to the wonder of around ten people who were curious to hear our conversation. He said that he had worked in the Gulf and knew about the world a bit. He is the only engineer in the town, maintaining the few generators owned by the élites. He also supports the electric generators and projector in the sole entertainment centre – a thatched cinema hall, to which the young people of Choar Mumtaz sneak out in the evening to catch a glimpse of Bollywood.

On the way back from the market in the evening I saw a rather well-made house, by the standards of the village. My friend told me that it was the house of Haji Sattar Chacha. He is relatively well-off from farming, and the only man in the village who has been able to go to Mecca for Hajj. A short, dark man, with a white beard and tobacco-stained teeth, he became a father at the age of 72. His third wife is in her twenties and his son is four years old. He told me the legends of Choar Mumtaz: the flood, the farm, the people, the market, his trip to Mecca, and development. He gave *zakat* and started the first high school – Haji Sattar High School – the only high school in the whole village.⁶ With a young wife, a small son, a white beard, and a school to his credit, Sattar Chacha looked a happy man, who lives a happy life in the lush green of Choar Mumtaz.

Choar Mumtaz looked beautiful, but it also looked sad. A sad beauty standing alone in the midst of an unpredictable river, with danger concealed deep beneath its silver-green waves. There was a soothing wind; no pollution; little noise: just the sound of the flowing river, and the sight of naked children running around. The earth smelled fertile; the people on the street smiled. No police, no state, no globalisation.

I went to the local *Kali* Temple with some young Muslim

⁶ *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is the obligation on Muslims to give a proportion of their wealth for charitable objectives.

friends. There was no discussion about secularism and pluralism, but a few Hindu families happily coexist with the majority Muslim population. Choar Mumtaz seemed to be blissfully unaware of the tensions in the wider world beyond.

Choar Mumtaz looked like an imaginary island. The big world, beyond the vastness of the river, starts at Golachipa and ends at Dhaka. The lone NGO is the sign of 'development' on the island. I stayed at their place as a guest, a mix of shelter, home, and office, and one of the few concrete constructions among the scattered huts surrounded by plantain, bamboo, and coconut trees.

There are hundreds of thousands of unsung and unheard leaders in villages like Choar Mumtaz right across South Asia and the rest of the world. They may not have the development jargon or a strategic master plan to 'deliver development', but they act out of conviction. They bring people together. They help mobilise resources. They plan with people and make things happen: getting water, building schools, challenging unjust practices, and reforming their societies and cultures. Saleiha Chachi made me humble. She taught me a couple of lessons about survival, development, and change.

The tragedy is that the key proponents, experts, and missionaries of modern development discourse spend more time in seminar rooms and boardrooms. Those who take decisions regarding women's rights, human rights, and governance are far away from the lives of the poor. They often derive their power from sleek, ready-made PowerPoint presentations rather than from the power of experience or the power of people. These encounters with the

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real lives of real people living in poverty make me restless about my own validity and role in relation to the hundreds of thousands of people like Saleiha Chachi in the world.

For me, my trip to Choar Mumtaz was like a pilgrimage: a cleansing act, a spiritual exercise, an offering of myself to feel my own roots. It was an act of nostalgia. It reminded me of my own beginning in the villages, as an invisible but inspired teenager who passionately wanted to make change happen, with no knowledge of development or NGOs. It brought back the memories of my life for 2 years in the remote tribal villages of Mizoram in India. It reminded me of my work with slum dwellers in Pune.

The legends of Choar Mumtaz stirred me. They grow within me, making me feel and imagine, making me restless. On my way back, sitting on the deck of the boat and looking at the gentle waves of the Meghna River, I realised:

I feel therefore I am; I think therefore I do!

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