



SADBHAVANA
TRUST

SADBHAVANA'S COVID-19 COMMUNITY WARRIORS AND I

A volunteer experience assisting Sadbhavana Trust's
COVID-19 community warriors

Field report by SMRITI SINGH
Design & illustrations by AAKANKSHA J



It's difficult to stay energised during this pandemic, but working with the community leaders of Sadbhavana Trust was one of the very few things that restored not just my batteries, but also my hope and faith- hope that humanity might make it through this gruesome time, and faith that we are worth it.

I had accompanied six community leaders to carry out a ration drive in the Garhi Kanaura area of Lucknow. The girls had been associated with Sadbhavana for different lengths of time, but they were all of course well-versed with how to approach the task at hand, keeping in mind the priorities and principles followed by Sadbhavana.

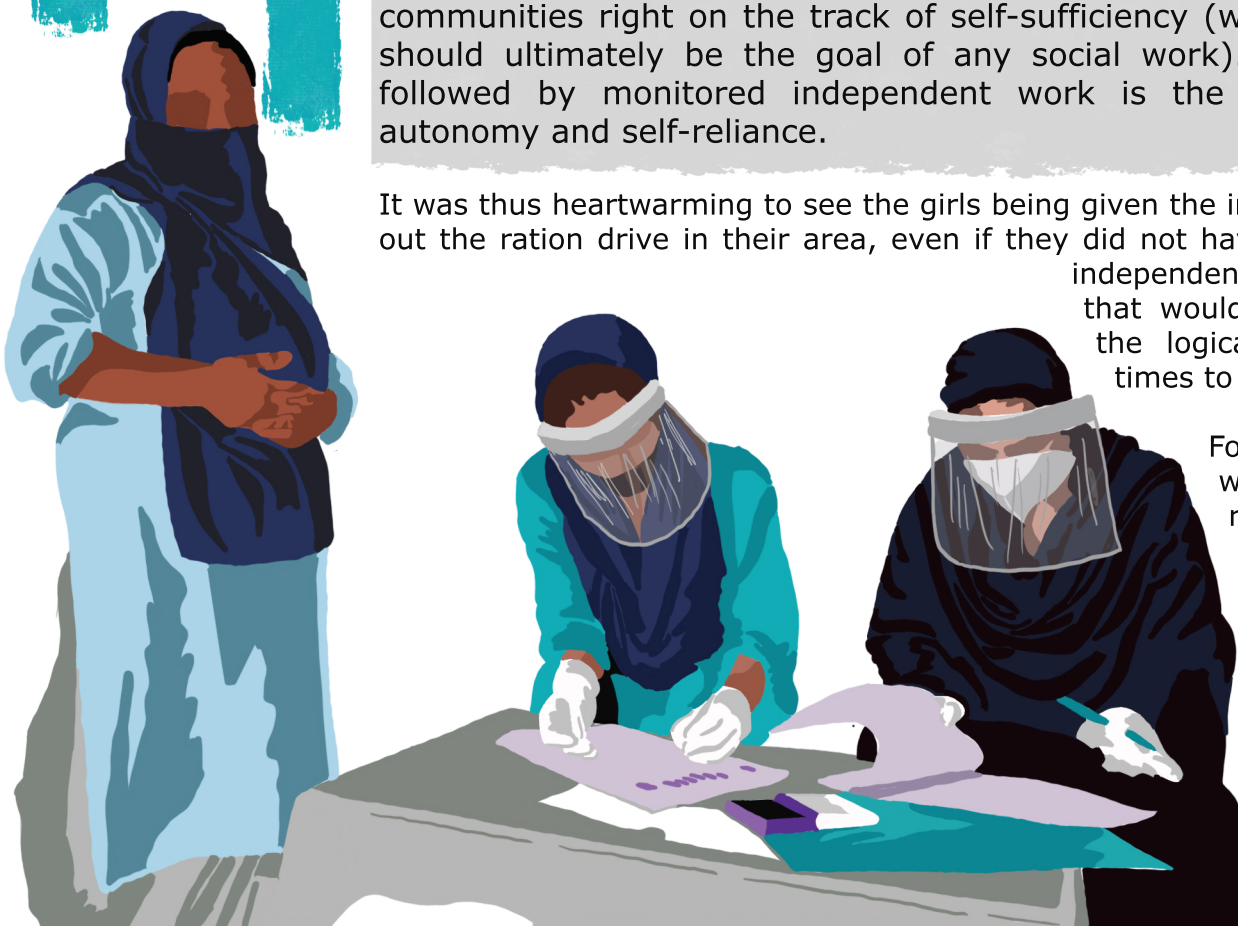
After the ration was transferred (brought in) to the point of distribution, the duty division was as follows-some were to call up the beneficiaries to ask them to come to collect their ration, someone was to register the beneficiaries, someone else was to cross-check the names of the registered people from the official list that contained the names of the beneficiaries, another one to pick up the ration from the storage area and bring it to the delivery kiosk, yet another to hand it over to the beneficiary, some others were to click pictures and videos for the social media handles of Sadbhavana, and finally some were assigned to crowd control duty. While there were overlaps and interchanges in these duties, leading to momentary confusions as well, the girls stuck to a good enough division of labour. The point, however, to be noted here is that it was a division that they themselves had come up with, which showcased their skill and vigour for the job.

Not just this, but their overall work ethic, actually, was a delight to observe. The girls had an enthusiasm to get things done, and to get them done right. It didn't seem for a moment that work was being done just for the sake of it. The leaders earnestly wanted to make sure that they do justice to the task- they understood its importance, they understood the weight of their responsibilities. Yes, quite a bit of this drive came from being accountable to the office staff of Sadbhavana, as was evident in their frequent worries about how the staff would review their work, but it would be grossly unfair to reduce their zeal to just this one source. I could see that they were cognisant of how the ration drive was a means towards social justice, and not just a means to satisfy the staff with their performance.

In my reflection, the Sadbhavana model that emerges is one that puts communities right on the track of self-sufficiency (which in my opinion should ultimately be the goal of any social work). Capacity building followed by monitored independent work is the path towards full autonomy and self-reliance.

It was thus heartwarming to see the girls being given the independence to carry out the ration drive in their area, even if they did not have the power to take independent decisions as of now- that would, I assume, just be the logical next step in the times to come.

For instance, there were confusions regarding whether or not to give the ration, if the spelling of the name on the Aadhaar card differed from that on the official printed list of beneficiaries.



This list was given by Sadbhavana to the community leaders and since the girls had been strictly instructed by the staff to not do anything that might result in an error in names, they were extremely reluctant to just give away the ration kits in the case of a name mismatch without consulting with the staff first. The good thing was that the staff was always available during these times, with the field mobiliser being just a call away. Thus even though the girls did not seem to have the authority to take matters in their own hands, this leg of the ration drive was structured to be a good learning experience for them, with the staff not conducting the drive themselves, but still hand holding the girls through it.

This is even more evident by the fact that the girls were actively thinking about the solutions to the issues which would crop up- they had their own opinions, even if they knew that the final word would rest with the staff. Thus the monitoring was not so hierarchised so as to stifle even independent thought. For example, the girls felt that insisting on giving the ration only to the one whose name was mentioned on the list disadvantaged those for whom coming all the way to the ration-distribution area would be difficult, such as pregnant people or people with special needs. Yet, at the same time they realised that the idea behind such insistence was to ensure that the ration reached the hands of those who did not have much bargaining power in their family, and who ran the risk of not getting the ration intended for them at all if someone other than them received it on their behalf. The girls came to the conclusion that this issue could be tackled on a case-to-case basis, instead of having a blanket rule, and they told me that they would pass on this idea to the staff.

Amidst objections from other community people that the shortlisting of beneficiaries by Sadbhavana was biased (objections whose decibel levels ranged from discontent murmurs to loud slogans of "the needy being discriminated against"), as well as the stubborn determination of the beneficiaries to time and again lapse into non-compliance of physical distancing protocols, the girls managed to hold their ground. They no doubt have the capacity to go places.

Apart from the way they worked, what was really heartwarming about these girls was their spirit of camaraderie. Of course, a competitive spirit also still existed (as displayed in their constant affirmations that their own individual work did not contain mistakes, or at least not as many mistakes as someone else's work did). However, the underlying current was not one of undercutting each other, it was to do the work together as best as possible, at least to my perception. The general atmosphere was that of positive team-work and friendship, and I'd like to trust that Sadbhavana, in its work with these girls, would only teach them to hold each other up. Anyway, for me, just seeing girls get together is an event of power and hope. I know the potential it can untap, I know what active agents it can turn them into, I know how much that could mean to our society, and therefore I always, always soak in the energy of girls joining hands to better both their own lives and the lives of their community's, irrespective of how "big" or "small" the project in question is, and no matter how far they have come in the collectivisation process, or how far they are yet to go.

It's vibes like these that ultimately make me look forward to getting out of this colossal mess of a pandemic that we are in- they tell me that there is so much, so much that is worth preserving, no matter how problematic we are as a race. Salute to every single one who is making whatever difference possible right now- and so salute to these potent young community leaders.

