

A POSITIVE DEVIANCE INQUIRY ON EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES OF RURAL INDIAN WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

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Abstract

Why do some rural women entrepreneurs in India succeed despite low levels of literacy, staggering household responsibility, unsupportive social structures, and oppressive cultural practices? The present article employed the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to identify the effective communication practices of rural women entrepreneurs in Uttar Pradesh, India, who succeed against overwhelming odds. Starting with an initial pool of 21,024 rural Indian women who received microloans for income-generation, and through several sieving rounds of focus group conversations with over 1,100 women, 24 PD women entrepreneurs were identified. A variety of participatory processes and liberating structures—Discovery and Action Dialogues (DADs), improv theater and prototyping, personal storytelling, and card-sorting games—were employed to identify the highly uncommon practices of PD entrepreneurs. These uncommon practices included micro interpersonal behaviours to connect deeply with customers, personalised branding of their businesses, daily diary jottings to monitor sales and profits, reframing value propositions to persuade customers, and others.

Keywords: *positive deviance, female entrepreneurs, Indian villages, successful practices*

Introduction

No longer the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen....as active agents of change.... Any practical attempt at enhancing the well-being of women cannot but draw on the agency of women themselves in bringing about such a change.

Nobel Prize-Winning Development Economist Amartya Sen (1999, 189–90)

While mythology portrays Indian women as embodiments of *Saraswati* (wisdom), *Laxmi* (prosperity), and *Shakti* (power), in most social, cultural, and public facets of daily life, they are treated as *Abla*—a powerless being (Das & Desai, 2003). Men represent the breadwinners and rule the economic roost (John et al., 2008, 86) while women as “second gender” perform familial, household, and domestic responsibilities (Das & Desai, 2003). Not surprisingly, India ranked in the bottom 10 percentile of all surveyed countries (in 70th position out of 77) in terms of female entrepreneurship; and of the 58.5 million Indian entrepreneurs less than 14% (8.05 million) were women (Female Entrepreneurship Index, 2015; Sixth Economic Census 2016).

Simply stated, the entrepreneurship sector in India is dominated by men, and this problem is further exacerbated in rural India. With deeply seated patriarchal norms, few rural women venture into businesses, and even fewer are likely to take loans to start a new venture. With few role models in sight, ordinary rural women in India have little efficacy, agency, and resolve to begin and sustain an entrepreneurial venture (Bandura, 1977; 2012; Birley, 1988; Seán, 2016; Weersma-Haworth, El-Namaki & Gerritsen, 1987).

The present article investigated if there were any rural women in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) who were highly successful entrepreneurs in the face of overwhelming odds. Further, if such women existed, then what were their uncommon behaviours and communicative practices that enabled success? Toward this purpose, we employed the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to identify these successful women entrepreneurs, including their highly uncommon actionable practices.

Odds against Women Entrepreneurship in India

While a woman entrepreneur has been variously defined as “who” she is (Carland et al., 1988) and “what” she does (Gartner, 1988), we subscribe to Manjunatha’s (2013) definition—a woman who accepts the challenge of initiating a venture to become economically self-sufficient. While the focus on “who” represents facets of her personality (Brandstätter, 2011), our interest lies more in the “what” she does—i.e., her behavioral acts and practices that make her successful (Gartner et al., 2010).

Women in rural India face multiple barriers to entrepreneurship. They suffer from low literacy and operate in domestic spaces where information about government schemes and programmes (such as, adult literacy classes, skills-based trainings, and vocational programmes) are hard to reach. Even if they do enroll for these programmes, dropout rates are high. Their daily lives—burdened with cooking, cleaning, washing, and caregiving—prioritise needs of family members over theirs. Moreover, they do not have access to loans or family savings to venture into business enterprises, and few rural men support their wives’ entrepreneurial aspirations. Further, institutional and legal practices may take insidious forms—for instance, husbands are often required to approve and co-sign for their wives’ loans. Entrepreneurship is also stymied by women’s lack of mobility, market and technological expertise, and unsupportive social structures (Manjunatha, 2013). However, despite all the barriers, some rural Indian women venture into entrepreneurship, and some among them succeed against overwhelming odds. They represent the positive deviants—“deviants” because they are not the norm, and “positive” because they are successful entrepreneurs.

The Positive Deviance Approach: The Six ‘D’ Steps

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach is premised on the belief that in every community there exist individuals or groups—the positive deviants (the PDs)—whose uncommon behaviours and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers without access to any extra resources and while facing the same challenges (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Singhal & Dura, 2009; Singhal & Svenkerud, 2018).

As a concept, PD was first broached by nutrition scholars who became interested in investigating why some children in poor households were better nourished than others (Zeitlin et al., 1990). What were they doing that others were not? PD’s first field implementation occurred in Vietnam in the early 1990s when Jerry and Monique Sternin, working on behalf of Save the Children, confronted an enormous public health challenge. The challenge was *defined* as: Some 65% of Vietnamese children under the age of five were malnourished.

Working in four village communities, the Sternins engaged with the community members to *determine* the presence of positive deviants by asking the following question: Are there any well-

nourished children who come from very, very poor families (Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009)? A weighing and mapping exercise with 2,000 children showed that a handful of children from very poor families were well nourished. That is, they had managed to avoid malnutrition without access to any special resources. The wisdom to solve the malnutrition problem was present with the families of these positively deviant children.

So, what were the PD families doing that others were not? Community members *discovered* several uncommon practices (Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009): They collected tiny shrimps and crabs from rice fields—foods rich in protein—and added them to their children’s meals. Some added sweet potato greens—rich in vitamins and micronutrients—to the *pho*, the traditional Vietnamese soup. While these foods were accessible to everyone, most community members believed they were inappropriate for young children. Further, PD families were feeding their children smaller meals three to four times a day, rather than the customary two big meals twice a day. They were also actively feeding their children, rather than the normative practice of placing food in front of them. Active feeding meant no food was wasted.

Working with community partners, a two-week nutrition program was *designed* in each of the four intervention villages where caregivers of malnourished children were invited to attend cooking and feeding sessions. The focus was not on telling people what to do, but rather to enable them to act. In the nutrition sessions, attendees were asked to forage for and bring tiny shrimps, crabs, and sweet potato greens, and then collectively cook their *pho* with these additional nutritious ingredients. Before actively feeding their children, mothers weighed them. In two weeks, caregivers could *discern* for themselves the rising nutritional status of their children.

When the project expanded to another 10 adjacent communities, community members were encouraged to self-discover the PD behaviours, as opposed to importing them from neighbouring communities. By designing nutrition programmes around wisdom that was locally discovered, malnutrition decreased by 85 percent in the first 14 PD communities. Over the next several years, the PD programme was *disseminated* nationally by building “living universities” around the PD communities. Teams from other communities with high rates of malnutrition spent up to two weeks directly “acting their way” into the PD process, and when they returned home, they implemented PD nutrition programme in at least two local communities. Through this lateral expansion, the PD programme in Vietnam helped over 2.2 million people improve their nutritional status, including over 500,000 children (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010). A later study, conducted four years after the programme ended, showed that older children and their younger siblings in PD communities continued to be better nourished, demonstrating the acceptability, affordability, and sustainability of the PD intervention (Mackintosh, Marsh, & Schroeder, 2002).

The Vietnam case illustrates the six ‘D’ step processes that are fundamental to any PD intervention.

Table 1: The Six-Step Positive Deviance Process: “The 6 Ds”

The Six “D” Steps of PD	Illustrations from Vietnam Case
<i>Define</i> the problem	Some 65% of children under the age of 5 were malnourished.
<i>Determine</i> the presence of positive deviants (i.e., the statistical outliers)	After weighing 2,000 children under the age of 5 in the four communities, it was determined that a handful of children from very poor families were well nourished.
<i>Discover</i> the uncommon and replicable practices that help alleviate the problem	Community members discovered that the PD families were adding tiny shrimps, crabs, and sweet potato greens to the <i>pho</i> , and actively feeding their children smaller but more frequent meals.
<i>Design</i> the intervention so participants “act their way into a new way of thinking.”	A two-week nutrition programme was designed where caregivers of malnourished children foraged for shrimps, crabs, and sweet potato greens, cooked a nutritious meal, and actively fed their children. The programme was designed not to tell people what to do, but to create repetitive patterns to act: i.e., to forage, cook, and feed.

Discern progress in solving the problem.	Feeding and monitoring continued for two weeks with mothers weighing their children daily and plotting it to discern the progress they were making.
Disseminate and scaling through “living university”.	The programme was disseminated by creating “living universities” around the PD communities. Teams from other communities with high rates of malnutrition spent time at these sites, “acting their way” into learning the PD process, and upon returning home they implemented a PD nutrition programme in at least two local communities.

The systematisation of the PD steps by Jerry and Monique Sternin in the rice fields of Vietnam, and later in other projects, greatly aided the dissemination of the PD approach to over 50 countries. To date, the PD approach has been widely utilised to address a large number of intractable social problems—reducing malnutrition, combating child marriage, decreasing neo-natal and maternal mortality, reducing hospital-acquired infections, boosting organ transplantation rates and cancer screenings, increasing mental well-being and psychological resilience, and preventing and controlling malaria (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Singhal, 2013; Singhal & Dura, 2017; Singhal & Svenkerud, 2018). However, to our knowledge, the present study represents the first systematic investigation of entrepreneurship using the PD approach, and that too among rural women facing overwhelming odds in India.

Methodology and Data Collection

Our data collection tools and methods in the Indian state of UP were geared toward answering the following determining PD question:

Are there women entrepreneurs in rural UP who

- (1) come from a low socio-economic status background,
- (2) have low levels of educational attainment,
- (3) were married early,
- (4) raised two or more children,
- (5) did not receive any formal training in business,
- (6) were not supported by husbands or family members,
- (7) who took loans over several cycles from a microfinance institution,
- (8) have maintained a 100% loan repayment history, and are turning a profit?

Table 2 lists the inclusion/exclusion criteria for determining if any PDs existed—i.e. rural women entrepreneurs who successfully overcame heavy odds and insurmountable barriers.

Table 2: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria for Determining the Presence of Positive Deviants

Odd/Barrier	Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
Low socio-economic background	Below Poverty Line (BPL) at the time of taking the first loan
Low levels of educational attainment	Finished middle school or less at the time of taking the first loan
Married at a young age	Below 20 years of age
Maternal caregiving responsibility	Mother of 2 children or more
No entrepreneurship training	No formal training in conducting business affairs
Not supported by their husband and/or family; or separated or widowed	Complete ownership, management, and control of business by woman entrepreneur
Took loans in the past (or presently take loans) from microfinance institution with progressively higher loan amounts	Completed at least 10 micro loan cycles with CASHPOR, the microfinance institution, and continued growth of business
Maintained a 100% loan repayment history	No default in re-payment of loans taken

We purposely chose to undertake our research in UP—the most populated state in India with over 200 million people, crushing poverty, large literacy gaps, and some of the poorest health indicators. Not surprisingly, India’s leading and the oldest micro-finance institution, CASHPOR, operate out of the holy city of Varanasi in UP State. Inspired by the global micro lending movement initiated by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh (Auwal & Singhal, 1992; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006), CASHPOR has played a pivotal role in providing microloans to millions of poor Indian women to incubate businesses, generate income, and to fight poverty. Within the state of UP, we chose to focus on CASHPOR’s operations in (1)

Meja Road in Prayagraj District, and (2) Chaubeypur in Varanasi District. These two locations have the highest Portfolios at Risk (PAR) rating—that is, areas where participants are at the highest risk of defaulting on their loans.

We began with a slate of 21,024 women micro-loan recipients in Meja Road and Chaubeypur, and systematically and iteratively applied the inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Table 2), narrowing down our potential pool of positive deviants to 63 women: 48 women in CASHPOR’s Chaubeypur Branch (in Chandauli Region) and 15 women in the Meja Road Branch (in Mirzapur Region). However, in trying to reach these 63 women, and during our numerous community conversations on the side, we discovered that the inclusion/exclusion criteria we employed was perhaps too rigid—that it would exclude several women entrepreneurs who had succeeded against heavy odds. Therefore, in the two catchment areas, we decided to cast a wider net for PD entrepreneurs. Over the next few weeks, accompanied by CASHPOR field staff who meet with clients on a weekly basis for securing loan repayments, we organised community conversations with some 1,100 women loan recipients in the two areas. Some 45 meetings were held with women entrepreneurs (in groups of about 25) of different ages, carrying out different types of business, with varying degrees of scale and success. Through these community conversations, and cross-validation by local key informants and our own assessments, 24 PD women entrepreneurs were identified (See Figure 1).

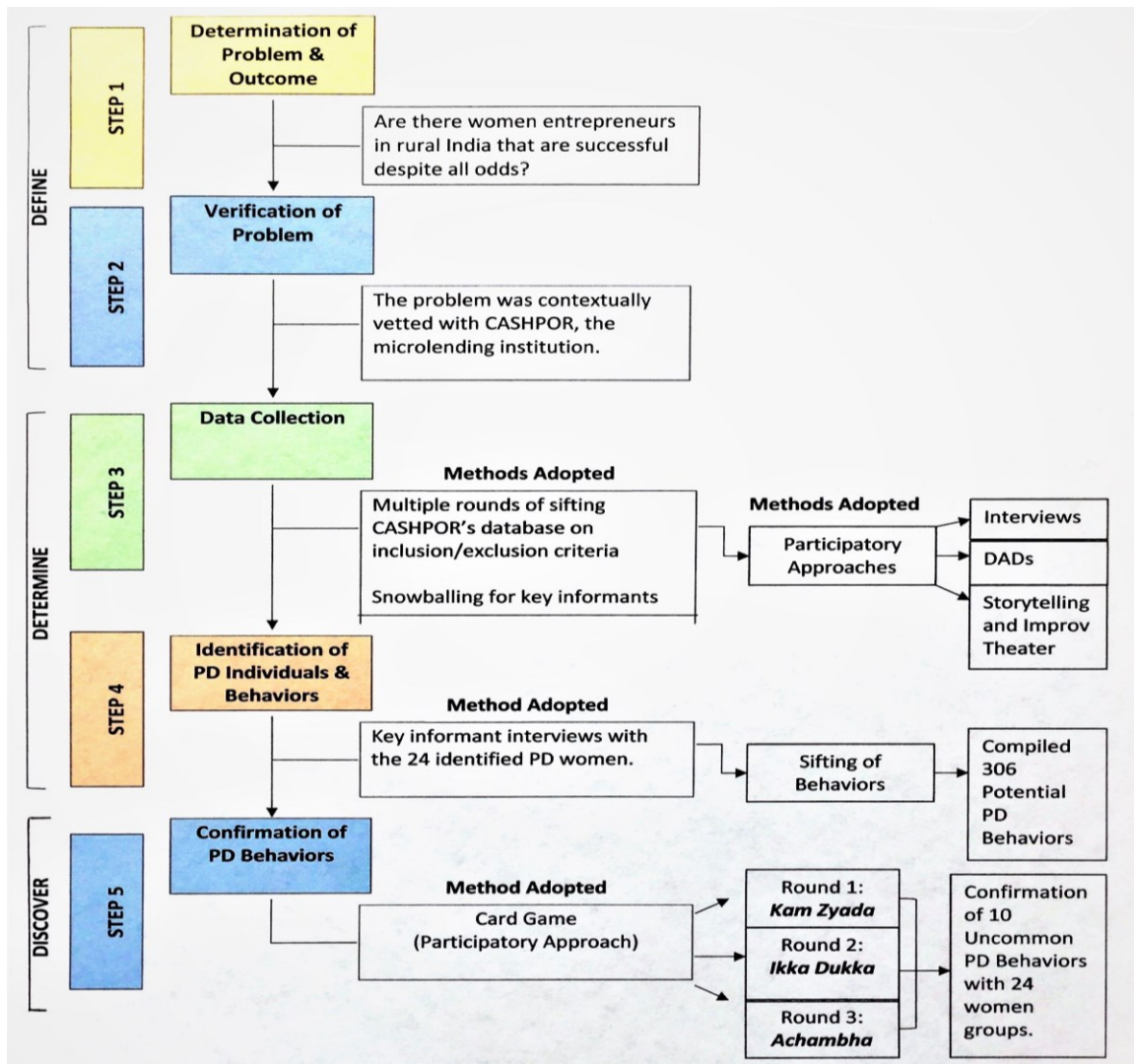


Figure 1: The Sequence of PD Steps and Methods to Unearth the PD Behaviours

How did the community conversations lead us to the 24 PD women? We employed a wide variety of participatory processes and liberating structures—Discovery and Action Dialogues (DADs), improvisational theater and prototyping, and personal storytelling—to identify positively deviant entrepreneurs. *Liberating Structures* (LS) are simple protocols to organize community conversations by distributing participation in small group configurations so all participants are included and engaged at the same time (Lipmanowicz, Singhal, McCandless, & Wang, 2015; Singhal, 2016; Singhal, Perez, Stevik, Mønness, & Svenkerud, 2018). DADs use a series of seven progressive questions to enable groups to self-discover practices and behaviours that enable some individuals to find better solutions and results than their peers (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013). In improv theater and prototyping, a diverse group of participants are invited to dramatise a daunting problem to identify and act out possible solutions in progressive chunks (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013). Personal storytelling included soliciting rich, detailed narratives from women about what represented entrepreneurial ‘success’ in the local context.

Once identified, the 24 PD women were interviewed in-depth. Further, we shadowed and observed them, spoke to their family members and clients—all to gain a deeper understanding of their entrepreneurship behaviours and practices. Each in-depth interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. PD women entrepreneurs talked about their lives—from childhood, to marriage, and to the present, their daily routines, household responsibilities, and entrepreneurial activities. All conversations were audio-recorded with their permission and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed to create a master list of entrepreneurial behaviours and practices. Additions to the master list were made from our observation notes (taken during shadowing of entrepreneurs), and conversations with their friends, families, and clients. The 24 PD women yielded a master list of 306 entrepreneurial behaviours. Each behaviour was captured in a simple statement: “PD entrepreneur greets a client with affection and asks about her family;” “PD entrepreneur offers water and tea to her clients;” or “PD entrepreneur counts the cash at the end of the day and jots it down in a diary.”

The next step was to identify which of these 306 behaviours represented highly uncommon practices—ones that contribute to the success of these PD entrepreneurs. An improvised card-sorting game *patte* (literally “cards”) was employed with non-PD entrepreneurs to distill these highly uncommon PD practices.



Photo 1: Through *Patte*, a Card-Sorting Game, the Uncommon Behaviours of PD Entrepreneurs were Discovered.
Source: Author files.

Each of the 306 behaviours was noted on a single card, and in 27 groups—ranging in size from four to eight women, the entire stack of cards underwent three iterative rounds of progressive sieving. The first round, *Kam Zyada* (“Less or More”), asked women to sift the cards in two piles based on whether, in their experience, the behaviour was observed Less or More. If the behaviour was relatively uncommon, it went in the Less pile, if it was relatively common, it went into the More pile. For instance, a behaviour such as “PD entrepreneur takes inventory of her stock every day” went into the More pile, indicating that most women entrepreneurs practiced the behaviour. The second round, *Ikka Dukka* (“Once or Twice”), applied a finer sieve. It asked women to take the cards they had sorted in the Less pile, and further put them in two piles—a pile of very rare and hardly observed behaviour—i.e. once or twice (*Ikka Dukka*) in a hundred, or a second pile of less uncommon behaviour. In the third and final round, *Achambha* (“Surprise”), applied an even finer sieve. It asked women to take cards from their rare *Ikka Dukka* pile and separate it further into two piles—the *Achamba* pile of very rare behaviours—i.e. 1 in a thousand, or a second less rare pile. Beginning with an initial slate of 306 observed behaviours from the 24 PD women, 27 groups of non-PD entrepreneurs sorted each behaviour through finer and finer sieves, cross-validating a set of 10 entrepreneurial behaviours as being very rare and, yet, actionable and accessible to all i.e., could be replicated by others.

Findings: Positively Deviant Entrepreneurial Behaviours

Table 3 lists the 10 highly uncommon positively deviant behaviours of the women entrepreneurs who succeed against overwhelming odds.

Table 3: Positively Deviant Practices of Rural Indian Women Entrepreneurs

Highly Uncommon Positively Deviant Entrepreneurial Behaviours	
1.	I matter—My name is on my board. PD entrepreneur has a board/sign that advertises the business in her name. PD entrepreneur does not miss an opportunity to promote her name, signature, and business brand for increased visibility.
2.	Jottings in my personal ledger. PD entrepreneur maintains an everyday ledger—a small notebook in which she daily records figures on inventory, sales, profits, and cash.
3.	I invite my customers in. PD entrepreneur does not wait for customers to show up. She makes a conscious and personal effort to invite her customers into her shop.
4.	My business brims over a hot cup of gossip. PD entrepreneur engages and entertains her clients with gossip, a cup of tea, or playing music at the shop to keep the customer in good spirits, to keep them their longer, and to have them make a purchase.
5.	My in-laws are supportive. PD entrepreneur is supported by her in-laws, which creates a socially-sanctioned and supportive environment for her to be bold, mobile, and confident in her business dealings.
6.	My friends make me radiate strength and optimism. PD entrepreneur maintains a network of peer support and has some very close friends who they fully trust for advice. They take out time at least once a week to socialize with their friend/s or have a heart to heart conversation.
7.	My uncle, a mentor like no other. PD entrepreneur is supported by an elder respected male in the family (e.g. an uncle, a teacher, a retired army officer) to undertake a business venture and receives continued guidance from them for her growth.
8.	My daily memoirs of journey to success. PD entrepreneur regularly shares her achievements and struggles in some form or the other—in a personal diary or journal, confiding in her husband, or with others whom she trusts.
9.	I sell products and plus plus. PD entrepreneur does not just sell products. She creatively enhances the value proposition of her offerings.
10.	Challenging the challenges. PD entrepreneur is undeterred by “nay sayers” or by struggles. Rather, in a quiet and dignified way, she takes up challenges, asks for advice, and gains confidence one-step at a time.

PD Behaviour 1: I matter—My name is on my board

“Meri dukaan ke bahar mere naam ka board laga hai.” My shop has a sign outside with my name on it.

PD entrepreneurs display their business with a sign that bears their name. Photo 2 shows Sanno standing proudly in front of her shop with a colorful board that says ‘Sanno Tailors’. The observability of

the sign, with her name and occupation branded on it, provides her a strong sense of professional identity, ownership, and self-confidence. After all, she is the one who manages the enterprise and is accountable to her clients, family, and friends. Therefore, Sanno's shop becomes a point of reference for village-level conversations, e.g. "Let us meet at Sanno's shop."



Photo 2: Sanno in Front of Her Shop that Says "Sanno Tailors."

Source: Author files.

PD Behaviour 2: Jottings in my personal ledger

"Main har roz ka hisaab likh ke karti hun." I make a written note of my daily income and expenses.

A PD entrepreneur maintains an everyday ledger in which she records—in her own handwriting—her daily income and expenses, including cash at hand. She makes jottings on what inventory she has, and what she needs to procure. This daily habit helps in monitoring and tracking the growth of her business, including sharpening her insights on customer buying behaviours, what product sells well in what season, and which products allow for higher margins.

PD Behaviour 3: I invite my customers in.

"Main khud grahak ke paas jaa ke unhe bulati hun aur apne paas se samaan khareedne ke liye kehti hun." I go to my customers personally and invite them to buy products from my shop.

A PD entrepreneur purposely reaches out to her customers, inviting them to sample her wares. For instance, one PD woman stands outside her shop and whispers to women who pass by: "I have a fresh batch of embroidered saris that will really look good on you, come inside and take a look." Normatively,

customers may be welcomed when they show up on their own, but to invite the customer pro-actively is an uncommon PD behaviour. Similarly, Ramauti, a PD entrepreneur in Chaubeypur, walked around the village and knocked on doors inviting customers to buy her fresh, plucked-from-the-garden vegetables. Another entrepreneur encouraged neighborhood children to urge their parents to buy her “delicious” snacks.

PD Behaviour 4: My business brims over a hot cup of gossip

“Main apne grahakon ko samaan ke sath baatein muft mei deti hun.” I give my customers not just the goods but also give them free gossip.

PD women practiced innovative ways of hosting and entertaining their customers so that they keep returning for repeat purchases. Entertainment, as a value addition to their product or service, may manifest as local gossip, having the radio or television turned on to a popular show, and/or offering tea and biscuits to customers. Customers felt engaged, valued, and “pampered.” During the card-sorting exercise, the non-PD women were deeply impressed to self-discover such PD behaviours, noting they can be adapted and replicated widely.

PD Behaviour 5: My in-laws are supportive

“Meri saas ne mujhe bahot badhaava diya apna vyavsay chalane ke liye.” My mother-in-law encouraged me a lot to run my own business.

“Jab mere pati ne mera saath nahi diya, toh mere sasur ne mujhe kaam karne ka protsahan diya aur mujhe nayi kala seekhne mei madad ki.” When my husband refused to support me, my father-in-law supported me tremendously and encouraged me to learn new skills.

PD women entrepreneurs tended to have supportive in-laws. In instances where the husbands were generally unsupportive, another significant elder male of the family (usually a father-in-law) demonstrated support. This support took many forms—from expressing pride in their daughter-in-laws’ ventures with neighbors, to openly praising them in front of other community members. PD women entrepreneurs emphasized how support from significant elders provided them a culturally and socially sanctioned “umbrella” to realize their full potentiality. They also emphasized how it helped them build their self-esteem, agency, and self-efficacy.

PD Behaviour 6: My friends make me radiate strength and optimism

“Meri ek pakki dost hai jiske sath main market jaaney ka, tehelne ka aur baat karne ka haftey mei ek baar zaroor samay nikal leti hun.” I have a best friend with whom I go to the market, take a stroll and have a heart to heart conversation at least once a week.

PD women pointed to the value of peer conversations and peer support in their entrepreneurial success. Many of them talked about having at least one close friend whom they fully trusted for business advice as well as moral and emotional support. They tended to meet regularly with these friends socially, for counsel, or simply to walk together to the market or to offer flowers in the neighborhood temple. They emphasized how in the routine humdrum of household and business chores, they looked forward to meeting their friend and confidante. It provided a way for them to receive social and emotional support, bolster their social-efficacy, and sometimes to receive valuable business advice.



Photo 3: PD Entrepreneurs Seek out Peer Social Support for Personal and Business Purposes.
Source: Author files.

PD Behaviour 7: My uncle, a mentor like no other

“Mere mama ne bachpan se hi mujhe badey pyaar se vyavsay karna sikhaya.” Right from childhood, my uncle taught me the tricks and trade of the business with care and love.

PD women entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of learning business skills early on in life with a significant elder male in the family, usually someone other than their father or a brother. Normatively, fathers pass their business acumen to the boys in the family. PD women talked about how in the informal, dotting care of their uncles, they picked up skills in customer dealings, simple accounting, and restocking the inventory. In a social context where patriarchal practices relegate women to household tasks, encouragement and inclusion from significant elder male members presented in-house business role models for emulation. In addition, a small pat on the back, a thumbs-up sign, or a simple word of encouragement, for instance, “girl, you can do it” were significant drivers to boost self-confidence among young women to undertake business ventures.

PD Behaviour 8: My daily memoirs of journey to success

“Main roz apne din bhar ki baatein ek jagah likh deti hun. Aisa karne se mere mann ko shanti milti hai aur mujhe apni musibaton se jhujhne ka saahas milta hai aur akelapan bhi nahi lagta.” Each day I write down the happenings of my day. By writing down my feelings, I do not feel lonely. I feel heard and gain the power to carry on despite all hardships.

Some PD women entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of micro-journaling—that is, penning down their daily experiences in a diary on a regular basis. In a life filled with obstacles, the act of journaling allowed them to vent their stress, embrace their struggles, and take stock of their accomplishments. Like a trusted friend, the diary listened and recorded with no judgement, proving a

source of comfort and support at the end of each day. Women entrepreneurs looked upon the journal, including the act of journaling, as their personal, ongoing support system. It reminded them of the journey they were on, the distance covered, and the obstacles overcome.

PD Behaviour 9: I sell products and plus plus

“Main grahako ko samaan is tarah se bechti hun jisse ki woh samaan unhe istemaal karna asaan ho. Aisa samaan main sadharan daam se mehanga bechti hun.” I sell the products to my customers in a way that makes it easier for them to use. I charge a higher price for the value addition.

PD women entrepreneurs explained how they added value to ordinary products through simple processing and/or packaging. For instance, all vendors sell green peas in their natural shelled state. The PD vendors sold fresh green peas in neatly packaged bags without their shells, commanding a price 1.5 times higher. Some roasted and spiced the green peas and could command a price up to three times higher than the original product. By expanding their range of value-added offerings, PD entrepreneurs earned a higher income while simultaneously saving their customers effort and labor. In the card sorting exercise, this PD behaviour was found to be imminently replicable to add value to a range of food products—for instance, turning raw mango into mango pickle, deshelling peanuts and roasting them with spices, and so on.



Photo 4: Vegetable Vendor Ramauti Offers Various Value-Added Products on Her Cart. She also Knocked on Doors to Invite Customers to Buy from Her. Source: Author files.

PD Behaviour 10: Challenging the challenges

“Jab mujhse koi kehta hai ki main ye kaam nahi kar sakti toh main usey chutki baja kar kehti hun ki aisa koi kaam nahi joh main nahi kar sakti.” When somebody tells me that I can't do something, I snap my fingers, I tell them there is nothing that I can't do.

PD women entrepreneurs displayed a can-do attitude and a certain interpersonal boldness that was palpable. The long shadow of patriarchy and the social pressure to conform to gendered norms often puts women in positions where they feel muted. PD women entrepreneurs seemed to project self-confidence that they could take on challenges and find a way around obstacles. They almost felt it was their duty to do so to preserve their honor, pride, and self-worth. PD women would snap their fingers (“*chutki*”) to take on challenges. This symbolic action aroused emotions and represented their expression of agency and self-efficacy to succeed against odds.

Conclusions

In the Indian entrepreneurship sector, overwhelmingly dominated by men, few rural women venture into businesses. Further, the entrepreneurship literature focuses predominantly on the identification of best practices and/or barriers. The present research questioned and subverted these conventions by employing the PD approach, seeking to identify the communication practices of women entrepreneurs who succeeded against all odds. Our study, utilizing a wide variety of community facilitation processes—Discovery and Action Dialogues (DADs), improv theater, storytelling, and a card-sorting game—and found that PD women entrepreneurs employed ten uncommon practices that were actionable and accessible to all (summarized in Table 3).

The identified PD behaviours included micro-interpersonal practices to connect deeply with customers, personalized branding of their businesses, daily diary jottings to monitor business growth, and adding value to existing products. Further, the enactment of these PD practices led to higher levels of agency, self-efficacy, and motivation among the women entrepreneurs.

Our PD inquiry—centering around a systematic investigation of the first three D steps of the PD approach—*defining* the problem, *determining* the presence of PDs, and *discovering* their uncommon and replicable practices—demonstrate that it is possible for rural women entrepreneurs to succeed and for such to happen with no extra resources. Needed are entrepreneurship development programmes in rural India that engage local women entrepreneurs to self-discover through a PD inquiry (such as the one reported in this article) what makes it possible for someone just like them to succeed i.e. the social proof. This self-discovery can lead to the implementation of the next three D steps in the PD process—*designing* entrepreneurship development programmes where the discovered PD practices can be made actionable, *discerning* how these practices contribute to entrepreneurial success, and *disseminating* these processes and practices in ever-widening circles.

Fundamentally, our research shows that small PD behaviours can make a big difference to a rural women entrepreneur. Purposely inviting customers into their shop, creating a personal bond by engaging in local gossip, and adding value by roasting peas and packing them in small bags represent the small things that make the big difference.

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