

Empathy: The invisible engine of the Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana (SAY)¹ programme

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The part of the programme you cannot see on a spreadsheet

Empathy is not a soft add-on in the government-led, inclusive livelihoods programme in India. It is the mechanism that makes every technical component of the programme work as intended. The Graduation approach, first developed by BRAC in Bangladesh, is built on a carefully sequenced package. In SAY, the program runs through a clear government pipeline: targeting, household profiling, aspiration mapping, livelihood preference assessment, screening, microplanning, cluster-level federation (CLF)²'s review, verification by the Livelihood Committee³, approval, and delivery of support. Through this process, there was a recurring question: why do two households with near-identical profiles, the same asset, and the same support end up on completely different paths? We have learned time and time again that the quality of the human relationship between the front-line workers (coaches) and the households makes a significant impact.

This narrative paper sets out what empathy means in the Graduation context, why the program cannot

succeed without it, and how it is already built into the design of the approach.

What empathy is, and what it is not

Empathy, in our world, is the disciplined effort to understand a household's lived reality so that the household can make and own its choices. This meaning is narrower than the everyday meaning of the word - which is the ability to understand and share another person's feelings or perspective and more demanding. In SAY, empathy has not been understood or practiced as sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for a poor household. It keeps the household at a distance, as someone to be pitied and helped. The concept that fits Graduation is developmental empathy. It means understanding a household's motivations, fears, strengths, relationships, and aspirations, then using that understanding to help the household pursue its own goals. It recognises participants' strengths and potential, and supports them to draw on their own capabilities to identify, develop, and own solutions to the challenges they face.

¹ The Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana (SAY) is a special sub-scheme under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) designed to lift the most vulnerable and extreme-poverty rural households out of poverty

² A Cluster Level Federation (CLF) is a block-level umbrella organization that unites multiple Village Organizations (VOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to drive collective economic and social development

³ The Livelihood Committee is a CLF-level sub-committee intended to provide an institutional mechanism for supporting and strengthening livelihood-related activities within the federation

How empathy is embedded in SAY

The SAY programme builds on empathy because extreme poverty is multidimensional. A household profile can record income, assets, household composition, and access to services, but it cannot fully capture the social, institutional, geographic, and psychological constraints that shape whether a household can actually use programme support and sustain its gains. Empathy therefore is not an additional, soft component of SAY; it is a practical capability that allows coaches to understand the barriers behind the data and respond to them appropriately.

An extremely vulnerable household rarely experiences poverty as a single economic problem. Multiple constraints often operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. A household may have irregular income, no productive assets, multiple loans, and almost no savings; at the same time, it may lack basic documentation or struggle to access government schemes. Geographic isolation can add another layer, with long distances to schools and markets, poor mobile connectivity, or settlements becoming difficult to reach during the monsoon. These economic and geographic constraints may be compounded by social exclusion, discrimination, widowhood, restricted mobility for women, or local power dynamics. Behind all of these may sit less visible psychological barriers, low confidence, fear of taking risks, or memories of earlier programmes that failed to deliver. The challenge for a coach is therefore not simply to identify what a household lacks, but to understand how these constraints interact and shape its choices.

The experience of particularly vulnerable tribal group households illustrates this well. As reflected in Lakshmi's work (a coach from Tamil Nadu), disadvantage was not limited to income or assets. Some households continued to live in unsafe conditions even after being allotted houses; women faced lower wages for tailoring because of discrimination; and physical isolation limited access to markets and services. A coach looking only at the economic profile could identify the household as poor and prescribe an asset or livelihood intervention. But without understanding these wider constraints, the intervention may not be viable. Empathy allows the coach to see the difference between a household that is unwilling to act and a household that faces barriers that make action difficult.

This is also where the limits of a household profile become important. The profile may tell us that a family has low income and few assets, but it cannot tell us why the household is reluctant to pursue a particular livelihood, why a woman is unable to act on an aspiration she clearly expresses, why a family continues with a familiar but low-return activity, or why confidence has declined after a previous failure. These are not gaps or errors in the data. They are part of the context in which households make decisions. They emerge through conversation, observation, repeated engagement, and the trust that allows households to speak honestly about their circumstances.

The field insights across states also challenge the assumption that empathy is created through more resources. Participants did not equate empathy with larger grants, additional funding, or staff recognition. A household can receive an asset and still feel unsupported if the relationship with the programme remains distant or transactional. Conversely, households reported feeling encouraged when someone continued to visit, listen, and ask about their progress. A participant from the state of Maharashtra shared, "People are searching for me to meet. I feel happy." This points to an important principle for SAY: being seen, heard, and understood can influence how households engage with programme support. Empathy does not replace assets, cash, skills, or entitlements; it helps ensure that these inputs are grounded in the realities of the households SAY intends to support.

Ultimately, empathy in SAY is about closing the gap between what the programme knows about a household and what the household is actually experiencing. It enables the coach to move beyond a profile, understand the reasons behind behaviour, adapt support to context, and help the household make decisions that it can realistically sustain. In that sense, empathy is not separate from the Graduation model - it is one of the mechanisms through which the model can translate resources and opportunities into agency and lasting change.

Empathy is a methodological requirement

Families stay polite but guarded at first. Coaches reported that real conversations start after four to five visits over the course of a month. If livelihood decisions are made after one or two visits, the microplan rests on incomplete, sometimes misleading, information. Empathy is critical to how the programme gets reliable information and avoids investing in the wrong asset. The SAY programme wants households that can make decisions, manage risk, absorb shocks and shape

their own future after support ends. A household told what to do may comply while the coach is present. Sustained change needs ownership, and ownership grows only when people feel understood and respected.

Empathy as part of every programme concept

Empathy is already designed into the Graduation approach. Each technical component has a human job that only empathy can do.

Programme component	What it gives the programme	What empathy adds
Household Profiling	Who the household is: members, income, assets	What daily life actually looks like for that family
Aspiration Tool and Booklet	What the household says it wants	Why that goal matters, whether it is genuine, and what blocks it
Livelihood Preference and Micro plan	What the household intends to do	Whether the plan fits real skills, labour, markets and risk appetite
Screening, Verification, Approval	Checks that the right households get the right support	Spotting gaps between records and reality, and explaining delays honestly
Asset Transfer	A resource for change	Help to use, adapt and protect that resource after it arrives
Links to Entitlements	Access to schemes and documents	Persistence to navigate offices, Panchayats and paperwork with the family
Monitoring	Whether progress is happening	Why progress is, or is not, happening
Coaching visits	Regular contact over the programme cycle	The trust in which honest conversation and ownership become possible

Aspiration comes first, by design

One of the most distinctive design choices in SAY is to begin with aspiration rather than with a predefined livelihood menu. Early field insights suggest that aspiration-focused exercises are relatively uncommon in government livelihood programmes. Frontline engagement often begins with delivering a specific service, facilitating access to an entitlement, promoting a livelihood, or completing a defined programme activity. In such models, the interaction is naturally organised around the question: “How do I deliver this intervention to the household?” Graduation coaching starts from a different question: “What future does this household want to build, and what is preventing it from moving towards that

future?” This shifts the household from being a recipient of a predetermined intervention to an active participant in defining its own pathway. The coach’s role is not simply to recommend a livelihood, but to understand the household’s aspirations, capabilities, constraints, and choices, and then help translate those aspirations into realistic pathways for action.

However, an [aspiration tool](#) by itself cannot create genuine aspiration or guarantee an honest response. A household may simply provide the answer it believes the programme expects to hear. Without empathy, aspiration mapping can become another form to complete; with empathy, it becomes a conversation. Trust, listening,

and repeated engagement create the space for households to articulate what they genuinely want, including aspirations that may initially appear unrealistic or difficult to achieve.

An aspiration tool can serve as a living record of the household's journey - something the coach and household return to over time to reflect on progress, understand setbacks, revisit priorities,

and reset goals as circumstances change. The value of starting with aspiration, therefore, lies not simply in asking households what they want, but in creating a coaching relationship through which aspiration can become a pathway to action, ownership, and agency. The model deliberately places a coach with each household over a sustained period of time.

Conventional Frontline Worker	Graduation Coach
Delivers services	Facilitates change
Focuses on programme outputs	Focuses on household goals
Gives information and advice	Uses questions, listening and reflection
Measures compliance	Builds capability and confidence
Solves immediate problems	Supports long-term transformation
Transactional interaction	Continuous, trust-based relationship
Empathy supports service delivery	Empathy enables behaviour change and agency

Empathy runs through every stage with a Graduation coach. Understanding builds trust; trust lets real aspirations surface; reflection leads to owned choices; action and learning build

confidence; and confidence grows into agency. When a setback arises, the loop returns to reflection rather than to blame.

Empathy embedded into coaching

Empathy shows up in six concrete coaching practices, each of which directly improves implementation. Lakshmi, a coach in Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, illustrates all of them.

1. Building trust through repeated visits

Lakshmi found families polite but superficial at first. After four or five visits, they invited her in and spoke about personal struggles. Neighbours who were not selected accused her of influencing selection. She kept engaging respectfully until attitudes changed.

Implementation gain:

Honest information for targeting and planning, and less community friction around selection.

2. Listening before advising

Many ultra-poor families have spent years being surveyed and instructed by institutions that never really understood them. A coach who opens with advice

repeats that pattern. Patient listening surfaces what questionnaires miss: past livelihood failures, debts, gender dynamics, seasonal stress, mobility limits and personal ambitions.

Implementation gain:

Hidden barriers are found before money is invested, not after an asset fails.

3. Observing what is not said

The condition of the house, the state of assets, how family members speak to each other, children's behaviour and relations with neighbours all reveal resilience or strain. Lakshmi checked records against what she saw and found discrepancies worth following up. As per Lakshmi, coaches must be careful observers, not just enumerators filling digital forms.

Implementation gain:

more accurate profiles and early warning of risk.

4. Asking questions before recommending

The early data shows that most households still choose goat rearing. An empathetic coach does not read this as a lack of ambition. The family may already have the skills, know the market, fear the risk of something new, or lack the labour for alternatives. The coach asks: What have you done before, and what worked or did not? Who in the family will manage this livelihood? What would make you comfortable trying something new?

Implementation gain:

Micro plans that reflect real capacity and choice, not standard packages, and fewer failed assets.

5. Staying with the household after asset transfer

Asset transfer is not the finish line. Illness, migration, a climate shock, or a dead animal can derail a plan. An empathetic coach treats a setback as something to understand, not as.

on-compliance, and helps the family reassess. When a family migrates, Lakshmi keeps in touch by phone or visits the worksite.

Implementation gain:

Assets are used and protected; plans adapt instead of collapsing.

6. Turning understanding into action

Empathy is not simply being nice. Lakshmi pursued scholarships for orphaned children, disability benefits for a hearing-impaired person, and a birth certificate for a child born in another state. She took issues to Panchayat representatives when needed. Not everything worked, but she followed through.

Implementation gain:

Households reach entitlements that raise their floor of security, and trust in the programme grows

Empathy turns a transaction into a pathway to agency

Graduation is not a delivery chain. It is a coaching journey that builds a household's own capacity to choose, act and adapt.

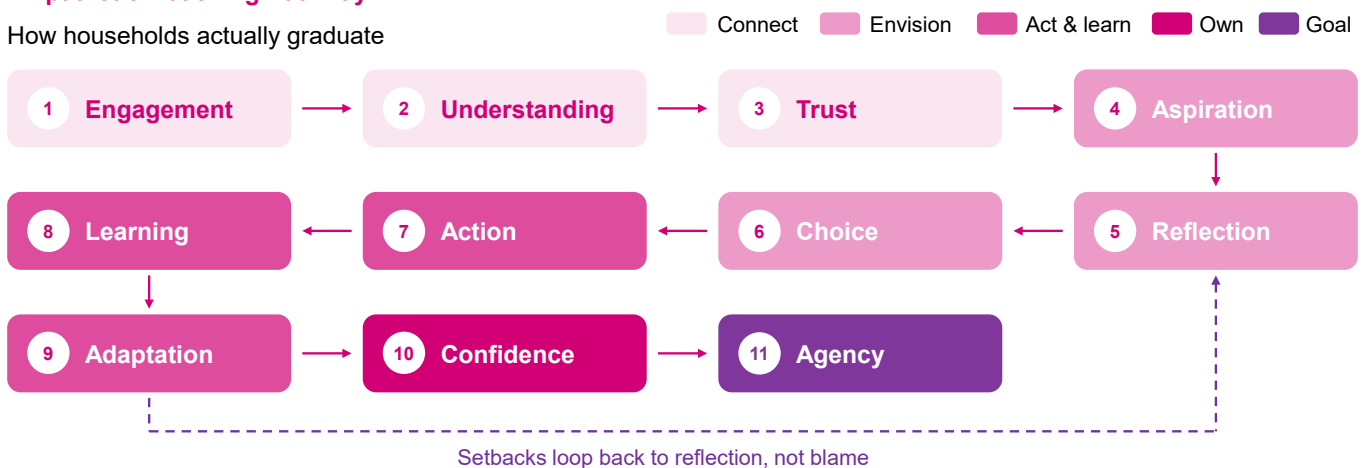
Transactional View

What a delivery mindset expects



Empathetic Coaching Pathway

How households actually graduate



The built-in pathway

With empathy, the design implies a pathway very different from the simple chain of visit, advice, asset and income. Empathy runs through every stage. Understanding builds trust; trust lets real aspirations surface; reflection leads to owned choices; action and learning build confidence; and confidence grows into agency. When a setback arises, the loop shifts to reflection rather than to blame.

Travelling with the family

Lakshmi described how her view of the role changed. She began by thinking of it as helping families, which is a transaction. She now sees it as travelling with the family, which is transformation. Travelling together keeps the household as the main actor, with the coach alongside. Her practice is also well documented through household profiles, daily diaries, weekly plans and narrative notes on every family, detailed enough for a colleague to pick up the relationship and carry it forward.

Developmental empathy supports household agency

A common worry is that a warm, close relationship will make households lean on the coach. Developmental empathy is designed to do the opposite. A traditional frontline worker diagnoses and prescribes. A Graduation coach helps the household think through options, weigh risks, and decide. If the coach picks the livelihood, the supplier, and the market, the family may comply while the coach is watching. That is not an agency. When households choose their own goals and pathways, they invest more effort, persist through setbacks, and keep going after support ends. The coach therefore moves from saying, “You should buy two goats,” to asking, “What have you raised before, and how did it go?” Instead of saying, “Sell your milk at the society,” the coach asks, “Where do people here sell, and what prices do they get?” When a plan is not followed, instead of asking, “Why didn’t you follow the plan?” the coach asks, “What happened, and what should we change?” The objective is not to make the coach less involved; it is to make the household more capable. Empathy creates the trust needed

for honest conversations, while facilitation ensures that this trust ultimately translates into greater confidence, decision-making, problem-solving, and agency within the household. For families who have lived through years of exclusion, being treated as a person with ideas and choices is itself a change. Empathetic coaching restores dignity by showing people that their experiences count and that they are not invisible to the system. Empathy also means being honest when support is slow. Many households expected help soon after enrolment and grew frustrated with delays. Lakshmi explained that Graduation is a longer journey, not an instant cash transfer. That honesty is empathetic.

Conclusion

Empathy does not graduate a household on its own, and other components of the Graduation approach remain important. But empathy creates the relationship through which those inputs turn into lasting change and connects programme inputs to the lived realities of the household. Throughout the Graduation journey, empathy adds a layer of understanding that tools and systems cannot provide on their own. Profiling tells us who the household is, but empathy helps us understand what life actually looks like for them. An aspiration tool can capture what they want, while empathy helps the coach understand why those aspirations matter and what may be preventing them from pursuing them. The microplan sets out what the household intends to do, but empathy helps ensure that the plan is realistic and grounded in their circumstances and priorities. Asset transfer provides the resources, while empathetic coaching helps the household use, adapt, and sustain those resources. Similarly, monitoring can tell us whether progress is happening, but empathy helps us understand why progress is or is not happening. This is why the coach’s role is not simply to provide answers or follow a checklist. The coach needs to walk alongside the household long enough, and listen carefully enough, to understand its realities and create the space for the household to identify and pursue its own solutions. That is how aspiration becomes action, action becomes confidence, and confidence becomes agency to find a sustainable pathway out of extreme poverty.

