Motin Bai’s story begins in Chichbod, a sleepy village of 1,200 people. There is one government primary school that goes up to fifth grade, and the upper primary school is over three kilometers away. The land holdings are small and, like the majority of people in this tribal belt in Chhattisgarh, Motin’s parents work as daily wage earners on bigger farms.

Motin dropped out of school before eighth grade. She was married at the age of seventeen, but after seven difficult years, she returned to her parents. Mindful of not being an extra burden on them, she worked in the fields to contribute financially to the family. It was a hard life.

In 2013, when Motin was 27, she heard about Pratham’s Second Chance program through Pratham tutors and faculty and the Panchayat (head) of her village. She could hardly believe that someone like her would have a chance to study again after a gap of twelve years.

With much apprehension, she enrolled herself and convinced two other girls to enroll with her. The class was three kilometers away, so going together would put their families at ease. Motin also promised her parents to continue working as much as she could in the fields.

When it came time for the secondary school exams, Motin studied hard — and she topped the Chhattisgarh Open School Board results. Her friends passed too, and this led to a Pratham Centre opening in her village. In the past two years, 30 girls from Chichbod have also completed their secondary education.

After a year, Motin returned to her studies once more, this time on her own. She had the confidence and competence to take the twelfth-grade board exams. Again, her determination and hard work paid off. She passed with excellent grades. Motin now lives in Raipur and is a hostel warden at the Pratham Arora Centre for Education (PACE) health care unit for training bedside assistants.

“...I want to continue my studies, go to college...I want to see myself sitting in the teacher’s chair.”

HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD AND BACK MOTIN AND ME

Excerpted from a blog post by Renu Seth, Program Head — Second Chance Program
“IT WOULD BE HARD TO OVERSTATE THE MAGNITUDE OF THIS JOURNEY... EVERYTHING WAS A FIRST FOR HER, IN EVERY WAY “PRATHAM.”

It was this story of courage, hope and hard work that led Pratham to choose Motin to travel to the United States to visit different cities and talk to current and potential supporters about her life.

It would be hard to overstate the magnitude of this journey. Everything was a first for her, in every way “Pratham.” Even before departing for the US, the process of applying for a visa meant Motin had to step out of Chhattisgarh for the first time in her life, as she and a PACE colleague traveled to Mumbai to complete the paperwork.

Pratham staff helped her shop for a whole new wardrobe, shoes and travel kit. She and I met, for the first time in a year, at a guesthouse at Kurla, where we gave each other a high five — yes, the trip was finally becoming real. We checked out a map of the US and marked the cities we would be visiting. Motin wrote down the cities’ names and kept repeating them, to be able to say them correctly.

It was her first time on a plane, and she enjoyed the flight to Washington DC, our first stop in the US. She wrote a couple of sentences in English in her notebook, practicing while we were airborne. As we disembarked, she said “thank you” to the crew.

Motin was at ease throughout the trip, taking every experience as it came: the weather, the people, the homes, the language, the new environment. From city to city, she shared her experiences and stories of other students. She talked about younger girls, married women, women who were encouraged, and girls who implored alumnae to come to their homes and convince their parents to allow them a “second chance” as well.

She spoke about financial independence, about education bringing respect, changing family attitudes and acceptance, and about how her community’s view of girls and education had changed as a result of her example. She asked friends at Pratham to continue to give female dropouts a chance to study again. She talked about how her life had changed because of education and how she can now contribute, not only to her family, but to the entire village.

Motin’s story illustrates how one person’s learning became a community’s learning. The District Collector has appointed her youth ambassador for Education for Girls, and with other alumnae, Motin plans to advocate for an upper primary school in her village. She wishes to pursue her studies through distance education while continuing her work at PACE, and to become a great vocational training team member.

In our month together, right in front of my eyes, Motin grew in so many ways. The rich sights and experiences — New York skyscrapers, kaddu (pumpkins) on doorsteps for Halloween, strange new foods (like cheese, which according to Motin, “tastes like “candle wax”), bright fall foliage, modern art, and inspiring people, to name a few — will remain with her for a lifetime. She is so much more aware, confident and articulate in what she has to say than when she began this journey. As we boarded the plane back to Mumbai, it was clear that her next journey had just begun.

Read Renu’s full account of Motin and her trip to the US on the Pratham India blog at http://prathamindia.blogspot.in/2016/11/half-way-around-world-and-back-motin.html.