

A woman with a serious expression is seated against a vertical wooden plank wall. She is wearing a red and white patterned sari with a floral border. Her hands are resting on her lap, and she is wearing multiple bangles on her right wrist. The background is a warm, orange-toned gradient.

# AGENTS OF CHANGE

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A Photographic Tribute by Shreya Bahl

“THE IDEA OF  
PERFECT WOMANHOOD  
IS PERFECT  
INDEPENDENCE.”

*Swami Vivekananda*

## **NGO - A CAREER OPTION**

The development sector is an employment opportunity, not a social service



# As

we speed down the dusty and bumpy lane, my eyes are drawn to the lush greenery on both sides. The wild and verdant vegetation is ample evidence of the onset of the monsoon season. Today, the rain gods have decided to let the sun have its way. It is a warm, glorious morning.

I am accompanied by Sudarshan, a Pradan stalwart, who gamely guides me through his organization's initiatives in the district and opens my eyes to a whole new world of empowered individuals who are powerful catalysts for change and hugely impact the lives they touch.

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The driver points out a wild flower that is used to make alcohol. He reveals, to my utter amazement, that the tribal people brew their own rice beer – a local favourite.

I notice children in school uniform making their way towards the village school, a new and welcome development, I am informed.











We are heading towards Chur Chur and then to Karma, tribal dominated pockets in the district of Hazaribagh in Jharkand and two of the five blocks in which Pradan is actively involved in raising the standard of life of the inhabitants. The major thrust is on women empowerment through better agricultural practices.

Watershed programs, conservation of water and soil and use of technology for greater productivity rank high on the list of priorities. I am eager to see for myself.

Not sure what to expect, I am instantly taken in by the enthusiasm of the locals to show me around, the shyness of the women and the sparse but spotlessly clean living quarters.

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With great patience, the tribals explain how the construction of dams and ponds has significantly impacted their lives by bringing under use the water that previously went to waste. With the active guidance of Pradan, the hamlet has been successful in recharging the water supply through simple yet effective means.











I realize how water is so precious in their lives and any imbalance can have severe implications.

I am shown around a nursery, a fish farming project and a vermi compost tank. I am informed that there is cross-training and exposure amongst the blocks under the care of Pradan so that the tribals can learn from each other's experiences.

After an informative and picturesque tour, I am lead to a huge shady tree under which about forty tribal women, a couple of land owners and a Pradan team leader are squatted on colourful mats for a meeting on land distribution and co-operative farming.

Brightly coloured saris flutter in the gentle breeze. One of the women is busy taking notes and recording the minutes. Children engage themselves in simple games. Many women have their babies clung snugly to their waist. A few discretely nurse their infants.

I peer closer and see weathered skin, strong bodies that move with eloquent grace and to my surprise, a glint of grit and determination in their eyes.









I learn that the women are organized into “mandals” or self help groups. Participation is voluntary and organization is democratic. The emphasis is on women entrepreneurship and finding solutions through open dialogue. The group discusses the effectiveness of pooling in resources for crop cultivation.

The husbands of these women are mostly engaged in migratory labour and are thus difficult to engage through the year. Pradan’s aim is to promote a measure of economic independence previously a concept that the tribal women could only

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dream about. This extra income has the power to bring about sweeping changes in their lives. The women would now be able to afford a more nutritious diet, basic education for their children, access to better health facilities, and a higher level of hygiene and sanitation.









As the meeting progresses, I am amazed to see these women with absolutely no formal education, speak with confidence, negotiate terms with the landlord and reject proposals that do not meet their expectations. This is a far cry from the initial shyness I had encountered. It is clear that the improvement in the financial status has bought about a sea change not only in their physical but also in their psychological and emotional well-being. I can sense the solidarity within the group.

I am told that economic improvement has gone a long way in easing some ugly gender discrimination issues like child marriage, dowry, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

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For the first time in their lives, the women have modest yet exclusive savings and bank accounts in their names, a previously unimaginable privilege. These savings open new and exciting avenues for credit.











Discussion with some of the women proves to be an eye-opener. Many of my pre-conceived notions of tribal women dissolve as I listen to them talk excitedly about the changes in their lives that Pradan has helped them bring about. They are now cultivating cash crops for economic consumption rather than food crops for sustenance.

They confide how they were initially suspicious about the project and offered resistance to Pradan's initiatives. The men folk had ridiculed their efforts. But with patience, continued motivation and inspiration, Pradan has succeeded in breaking down challenging social barriers and winning the trust and confidence of the population

and achieved the seemingly impossible — converting labourers into farmers and transforming women from mere helping hands into budding entrepreneurs empowered with scientific knowledge about all aspects of the agricultural activity in which they are engaged. Any opportunity to promote livelihood is actively encouraged, including tussar spinning, poultry farming and fish farming.

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The stay in Jharkhand has left a deep impact on my mind. I have witnessed how the hard work, persistence and patience of motivated individuals like Sudarshan have made a difference in the lives of the tribal women. I am impressed with the genuine sincerity with which the Pradan team involves itself in the betterment of a community largely neglected by the government and society. It struck me how Pradanites love to talk about their work and marveled at their enthusiasm, camaraderie and energy.

What drives them? I am curious to know.

In his gentle and engaging manner, Sudarshan unfolds his story. Selected through the campus recruitment process, he experienced a gradual yet intense connect with the community. What sets this job apart is the freedom it gives him to evolve and execute strategies and the satisfaction to personally experience the difference his measures make in the lives of the tribals. Recognition for his work is his greatest reward.

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“YOU MUST BE  
THE CHANGE YOU  
WISH TO SEE  
IN THE WORLD”

*Mahatma Gandhi*

“It is crucial to trigger the oppressed (the tribal women, in this case), for it is they who can bring about the change. The oppressor will never bring about the change.” opines Sudarshan.

Sudarshan proudly informs me that Pradan ranks 47 in “Great Places to Work In” in India, the only NGO to make it to the coveted list.

He shares Pradan’s refreshing “No Boss” policy. Employees are selected, not hired, and seniority is earned through experience, not position. Pradan encourages teamwork in its true avatar and firmly believes that in order to inculcate freedom and democracy in others, it is important to lead by example.

“The reward for good work in Pradan is more work”, jokes Sudarshan. The pride he takes in his work and the satisfaction he derives shine through.

Why not devote a few years working for the community? The money is decent, to begin with, but the level of financial compensation is rarely the driving force. An inner thirst to make a difference in the lives of others is the chief requirement.









The need for professionalism in the Development and Social Service sector is as crucial as it is in the corporate world. Sadly, many bright ideas and intelligent projects fail due to lack of professionalism.

Sudarshan feels that it is a good idea to start one's career with an NGO. The values you imbibe

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working with the community stay with you forever and are an asset no matter where you choose to work eventually.

It is important to recognize the Development Sector as an employment opportunity, not as a social service.

**“Be an agent of the happiness of others”** encourages Sudarshan. He finds the role of a “social entrepreneur” highly satisfying and finds his community a major source of energy.

One of his most rewarding moments was when one woman enthused “We are tired of selling. There is so much demand!”



# THANK YOU

PRADAN

*for the opportunity*

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*friend and critic*

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*for simply being*





