THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY

MAY 2010
Volume 10 Number 5

NewsReach

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Livelihoods through Tasar Sericulture: Issues before Small Producers

MADHABANANDA RAY

Recognizing the potential of tasar as an income generating and sustainable occupation for the tribals who live in and around forested areas, Pradan's focus includes promoting scientific practices in ensuring disease free layings and providing backward and forward linkages for the activity

BACKGROUND

India is the second largest producer of tasar silk in the world after China. Tasar, a wild silk, however, accounts for less than 5% of the total silk production in India. Although China produces only temperate tasar, India produces both tropical (mainly) and temperate (in sub-Himalayan regions) tasar. Tropical tasar, grown only in India, is also known as Indian tasar; its silkworm is reared on host trees such as asan (Terminalia tomentosa), arjuna (Terminalia arjuna) and sal (Sorea sp.), available abundantly in the estimated 14.5 million hectares of tropical forests in the central Indian plateau.

In the past three decades, the demand for silk in the domestic market has increased at the rate of 5% per year on real terms. However, the production of tasar silk during the same period has gone down from 600 tonnes in 1970 to 302 tonnes in 2004–05. The overall demand for tasar yarn far exceeds its supply. Hence, India has to import nearly 900 to 1,200 tonnes (more than 75% of total demand) of tasar silk (all temperate tasar) from China and Korea to meet its demand. The total value of tasar fabric trade in India is estimated to be nearly Rs 450 crores (source: Central Silk Board—CSB). The domestic market accounts for nearly 60% of the total trade and the rest is export market.

States that produce tropical tasar in India are Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, parts of Bihar, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, and the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Over one lakh tribals and many more disadvantaged communities in these regions are engaged in rearing tasar cocoons. This region is characterized by high tribal concentrations and it has wide forest cover with abundant availability of tasar host plants such as asan and arjuna trees.

Over the years, on account of various reasons, including the depletion of the forests, the livelihood base of these forest dwellers has shrunk. The rich forest soil has been exposed and has got eroded, reducing the areas to fallow undulating uplands. Agriculture never developed and remains at a subsistence level in this region. Most of the rural population migrated to cities in search of jobs, and the younger generation is confused about the future.

PRESENT SCENARIO

Pradan has been working in the area over the past 20 years or so to promote livelihoods for the poor communities that were once dependent on tasar rearing. The activity had almost disappeared from the area but for a few farmers, who continued rearing tasar because it is a traditional activity rather than for any real benefit. Pradan got support from the CSB and also got affiliated with a few state-led programme beneficiaries, who received tasar eggs. Pradan's interventions covered all the components in the tasar value chain. It has developed and adapted technologies suited to local conditions and worked out appropriate organization and management strategies for

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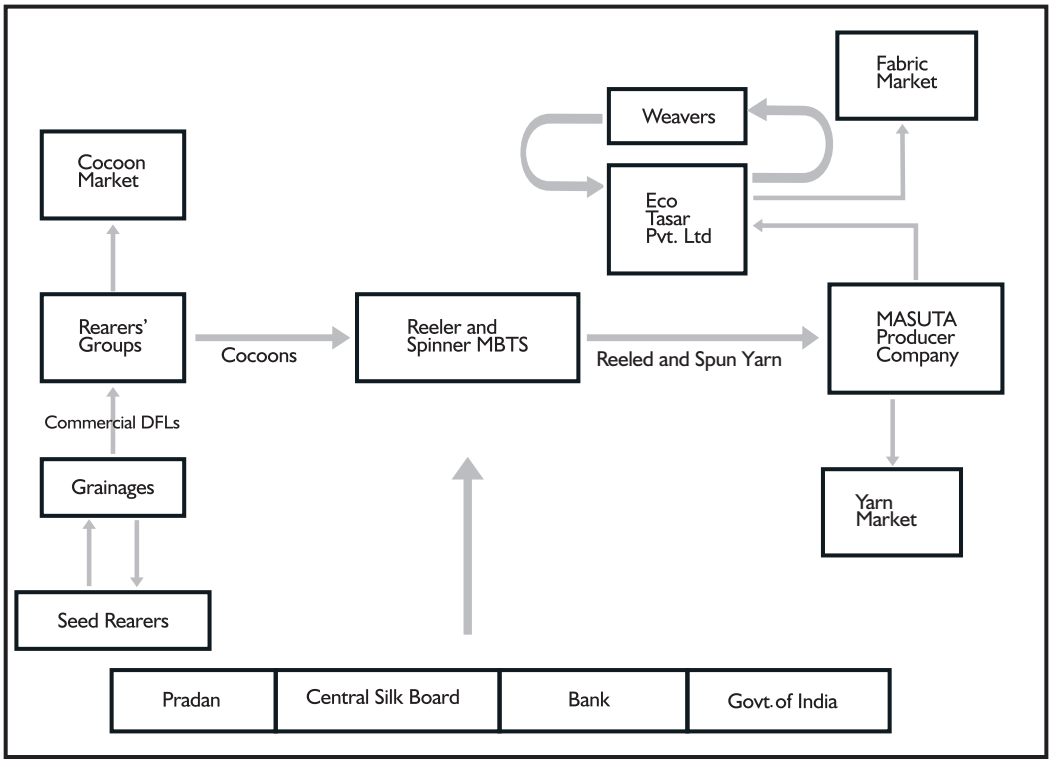
Box 1: The Value Chain—From Plantation to Tasar Fabric Marketing



different components such as the planting of tasar host trees, community-based disease-free egg production, including nuclear seeds, scientific tasar rearing, silk yarn production, fabric production and marketing.

Grainages have been established in the villages to prepare and distribute disease free layings (DFLs). A private grainage is a new concept in tasar sericulture. Pradan plays an important role in selecting and training grainage owners. In addition, Pradan provides them with an entrepreneurial orientation and organizes finance for infrastructure and equipment. To improve the quality of DFLs and the smooth running of grainage operations, Pradan provides intensive support and creates linkages for basic seeds with the CSB. Likewise, systematic seed crop rearing is a new concept and is practised by the rearers associated with grainages. The activity ensures multiplication of basic seeds to build seed stock for commercial grainages. Grainages offer a ready market for the seed rearers to sell their cocoons.

Pradan trains commercial rearers to adopt improved rearing practices such as *chawkie* rearing (in which the worms are reared on small size trees on small plots under nylon nets that protect the worms from the elements of nature and predators) and the maintenance of host flora. In addition, it links them with grainages for DFL supply, provides intensive follow-up support and helps organize finance. Pradan also creates diverse avenues for cocoon trade.

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Pradan has established three kinds of institutions at different levels of the tasar value chain.

Tasar Vikas Samiti: A Tasar Vikas Samiti (TVS) has 19 members with 1 graineur, 2 seed rearers and 16 commercial rearers. One TVS ensures sufficient DFLs for all the local commercial rearers. It also takes advantage of bulk buying of inputs and aggregate selling of the product (cocoons).

Masuta Producers' Company: Masuta buys cocoons from the TVSs and undertakes reeling and spinning of these cocoons through women's groups organized as Mutual Benefit Trust. The reeling takes place at common facility centres and women spin the yarn in their homes.

Eco-Tasar: Eco-Tasar is a private limited company, with Masuta being the major shareholder. The company has been formed to deal exclusively with the fabric market. The company provides the market for the yarn produced at Masuta.

In many areas, traditional practices are still in vogue. Tasar silkworm rearing in the forests is an age-old practice, in which tasar cocoons are collected from the forest. The rearers prepare their own eggs (called tasar seeds) for rearing. There is no way of identifying diseases in any stage of rearing; thus there are no prophylactic or therapeutic measures to protect silkworms from pests and predators. The success in rearing is not in the hands of the rearers. Many believe that successful rearing depends on God.

Currently, however, there is a gradual transition from uncertain traditional practices to more stable scientific practices. The development of plantations of tasar host plants in degraded forest areas or in the uplands, the scientific rearing practices of tasar silkworms, the elimination of diseased eggs in grainages (to make DFLs), etc., are the first steps to scientific intervention in tasar sericulture.

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TASAR YARN PRODUCTION

Traditional tasar yarn production activity has no independent identity. It is a subsidiary activity carried out by women, mainly wives of weavers, in their free time within the house. Traditional, inefficient production processes and technology, and exploitation by the traders and moneylenders have crippled the activity.

The use of the palms, thighs and primitive tools in the production of tasar yarn has proven to be unhealthy and ineffective in enhancing productivity, in ensuring a reasonable income or in maintaining high quality standards of the produce. There has been very low investment in the innovation and the upgradation of yarn production technologies and the marketing of Indian tasar yarn to establish it as an independent product in the tasar sector.

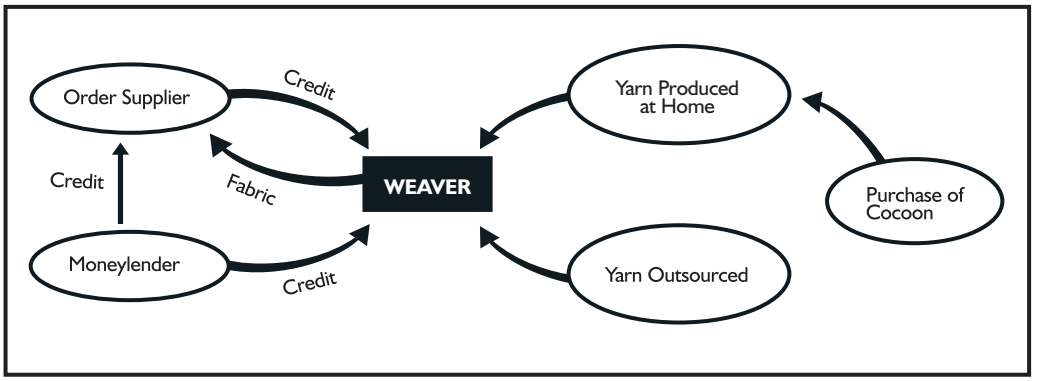
The tasar value chain in traditional weaving clusters is mainly of two types. First, the well-off yarn traders invest their money to purchase and stock cocoons for the whole year. After getting an order of yarn from the weavers or fabric manufacturers, they issue certain number of cocoons against the assurance of a fixed quantity of yarn to traditional women reelers, who reside in the same or in neighbouring villages. They then supply the yarn to the weavers or the fabric manufacturers.

The reelers use their palms and thighs to convert the cocoons into yarns (about 10–20 gm of yarn a day); they as such do not get any money from the traders for the conversion; the wastes (by-products) generated are their wages and they earn between Rs 10–12 a day from the tasar wastes. Many of the women have no income other than this.

Second, the weavers take credit from local moneylenders at a very high rate of interest and buy cocoons for the whole year. The fabric traders generate orders from the market for fabric and pass it on to such weavers for its manufacturing. The women of the weavers' families then convert the cocoons into yarn, using the same methods. The yarn is woven into fabric and sold to the fabric traders. In most of the cases, the fabric traders are the moneylenders; thus, after the repayment of the principle and the interest on the loans, the weavers are left with very meagre amounts.

In the traditional tasar yarn production business, therefore, neither are the yarn-producers and the weavers organized nor is there an open market for such yarn. Therefore, all such unorganized producers (yarn producers and weavers) are financially exploited in a closed system operated by moneylenders, traders and order suppliers.

Box 2: The Traditional Tasar Yarn Production System



ISSUES INVOLVED

As mentioned earlier, the present technology is the first step towards scientific intervention in tasar sericulture but there are many issues that need to be addressed.

a. Fluctuating production: Even with the application of available technology, the production of tasar silk fluctuates greatly in qualitative as well as quantitative terms.

b. Technological backwardness: The available technologies have become outdated as compared to the innovations in the other fields of technological developments.

c. Unorganized production system: In the tropical tasar value chain, all the actors are unorganized and are, thus, dominated by the middlemen and traders.

d. Lack of entrepreneurship: In the traditional value chain, the traders and the moneylenders are the entrepreneurs whereas the producers are all wage earners. Barring the efforts of Pradan and MASUTA, none of the institutions in the present value chain promote entrepreneurship among the tasar producers.

e. Finally, sericulture is a state subject; public sericulture establishments, in spite of recent development of value chain on tasar from producers to end users, have failed to capitalize on the advantages of recent breakthroughs and have been inadequate in providing a stewardship role. The patronage approach of the public institutions rather than partnership has not contributed to building a wide stakeholder base in the tasar sector. Consequently, the producers are promoted as beneficiaries and continue to remain at the receiving end (where their entrepreneurial ability is muted).

Moreover, there are limited stakeholders in the sector, yet another limitation. Apart from CSB (partly), the state department, NGOs such as Pradan and people's institutions such as MASUTA, no other formal public or private institutions are involved in the development of the sub-sector. Pradan's contribution lies in having evolved a suitable institutional framework for the promotion of tasar.

SCOPE FOR TASAR SERICULTURE–BASED LIVELIHOODS

Pradan's experience reveals that there are a host of other factors that helps India position itself for large-scale promotion of tropical tasar sericulture-based livelihoods such as:

- ✓ Favourable agro-climate for tasar silkworm rearing
- ✓ Availability of traditional skills of tasar rearing with tribal people
- ✓ Availability of large tracts of wastelands owned by poor people that could be put to use for raising host tree plantations and, subsequently, for silkworm rearing
- ✓ Availability of asan and arjuna trees in natural forests
- ✓ Low opportunity costs of labour, subsistence, mono-cropped, kharif paddy based agriculture
- ✓ Proximity to the largest tasar silk weaving and trade centres in Bhagalpur, Raigarh-Champa, Sambalpur, Bhandara, Nawada, Kolkata, etc
- ✓ Development of each of the segments— plantation, rearing, yarn making and weaving—as separate enterprises, and demonstration of entrepreneurship among the producers

WAY FORWARD

Tasar-based enterprises could be one of the best livelihood options for the poor residing in forest fringe areas. Tasar rearing pockets in all the states are mainly in inaccessible areas; many of these areas are affected by the activities of extremists and are out of the reach of the government machinery. There is also a dearth of credible NGOs to work at the grass roots to promote tasar-based livelihoods.

The need of the hour is to create grounds for multiple stakeholders to play a concerted role in setting sub-sectoral goals and design strategies based on complementarities to unlock the potential of the tasar sub-sector.

The need of the hour is to create grounds for multiple stakeholders to play a concerted role in setting sub-sectoral goals and design strategies based on complementarities to unlock the potential of the tasar sub-sector and create robust livelihoods for a large number of poor families in all parts of the potential tropical tasar belt. An approach that edifies the agencies of the producers in the overall context of sector development goals could form the basis of partnership among stakeh olders.

The strategies that comprise successful intervention are:

i. Promote tropical tasar sericulture-based livelihoods in central India, aggressively involving all who matter—public and private players, research institutions, NGOs, etc.

ii. Work in close coordination with the partners to promote 'entrepreneurship' among producers rather than create 'employment' for producers.

iii. Organize small producers around their institutions for long-term sustainability, building ownership and linking them with market with higher burgeoning ability.

iv. Innovate and develop new and need-based technologies for tasar seed production, plantation, rearing and post-harvest cocoon processing.

Besides these factors, there needs to be constant fine-tuning and improvement of tasar-based livelihood enterprises for higher productivity that match global quality standards. There is also the need to create leadership spaces for producers in their institutions and involve such producer leaders in government policy formulations.

Looking Back at Our Work with Damodar

AVIJIT MALLIK

Despite its primary aim of promoting sustainable livelihoods among the rural poor, Pradan extended support to the locals in Hazaribag and Koderma in their rights-based struggle and in creating greater awareness in areas such as gender, reproductive and sexual health, and legal literacy

Koderma and Hazaribag districts are situated in the northern part of Jharkhand state. Pradan works in three blocks of Hazaribag, namely Barhi, Chouparan and Padma, and three blocks of Koderma, namely, Chandwara, Jainagar and Koderma. The six blocks are contiguous in nature. We started our intervention in these blocks in 1992 by organizing village women through Self Help Groups (SHGs). At the time, there was an informal youth collective of young men from a few villages (in the then Barhi and Chouparan blocks) that had been evacuated for the construction of Tilaiya reservoir by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). This collective was primarily agitating to get the DVC to provide them the benefits that were promised to them when the dam was constructed, way back in 1952. It was agitating to make sure that the DVC provided the ousted with proper legal documents of the land to which they were being rehabilitated; and that the DVC constructed proper roads and school buildings, installed hand pumps for drinking water, created irrigation infrastructure, provided agriculture inputs as well as jobs to one member each of the displaced families. The delivery on these demands, however, had not been satisfactory. This had agitated the villagers who protested by holding *dharnas*.

Pradan helped form a federation of SHGs called Damodar, supported by these young men. The villagers, who formed the SHGs, belonged to the dam-displaced villages and had a history of occasional struggles against the DVC. These struggles were confined to a few young men from villages just around the DVC office at Tilaiya Dam, and it had very little mass penetration. When Pradan formed SHGs in all the villages around the dam, it brought together many other men and women from all the villages; they had been, in their own way and severally, protesting against the DVC; their presence gave momentum to the SHGs. Pradan helped them plan their struggle, even though it never came to the forefront in any of the agitations. Pradan worked with the SHGs, clusters and federation, without imposing any ideas on them and encouraging them to choose their own path. The locals intensified their struggle against the DVC. In a major showdown with the DVC in 1995, they even *gheraoed* the powerhouse for three consecutive days, leading to senior management officials from Kolkata arriving in Tilaiya to negotiate with them.

This fervour, which the federation internalized through its various engagements against the DVC, carried on and spread to other aspects of their life. The SHGs, clusters and federation actively started mediating in social issues in and around their villages. Damodar was not, therefore, focused on livelihoods per se.

Once the initial phase of mobilization was over and we started to concentrate more on livelihood programmes, we ran into problems. Today, after a good twenty years of promoting livelihoods and SHGs in the valley, I am tempted to relook at the suitability of our programmatic intervention. Although there are many positive achievements to boast of, sometimes it seems as though we may have mistaken the woods for the trees by imposing the 'Pradan kind of livelihoods' on a set of people who were essentially looking for support in their rights-based struggles.

During the initial days of our intervention, the villagers—men and women—did not believe us because of their earlier experiences. Many non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) had begun their operations in this poor area; however, after some time, they would vanish from the scene, 'eloping' with the savings of the poor. The villagers also took us for one more NBFC. We started our meeting with the villagers regularly and tried to convince them about the SHGs. Finally, a few individuals were convinced in some villages such as Jamukhandi and Titirchanch and started saving. They put all their savings into an earthen pot (*gullak*) at the meetings and pooled their savings. They would usually save a humble amount of Rs 2 per week.

For the women, being a part of this savings and credit group was not issue of money but one of dignity and power. Now they did not need to beg for a loan from the moneylender; now they had the power to be independent. The women articulated that clearly.

When they gradually experienced what it was to save some of their earnings, they felt happy. One day, in one of the groups in Jamukhandi, a member expressed her desire to stop the savings because she urgently required some money for the treatment of her son. Unfortunately, the amount she had saved was not sufficient for this. She had already decided to take a loan from the local moneylender, a common practice in the area. We intervened at that point and convinced the group about the strengths of a thrift-based collective and how it can lend itself to mutual help. After this instance, the concept began to spread; through the SHG programme, women in different villages found a way of keeping away from the clutches of unscrupulous moneylenders. For the women, being a part of this savings and credit group was not an issue of money but one of dignity and power. Now they did not need to beg for a loan from the moneylender; now they had the power to be independent. The women articulated that clearly.

Next, we began to think about how to organize the SHGs into clusters so that the women could come out from their own villages and participate in the developmental processes on a larger scale. This would also increase the positive influence of the women SHGs on the villages of neighbouring *panchayats*. A cluster would comprise about 10 to 12 groups from a handful of neighbouring villages within a *panchayat*; three women representatives would be selected by the groups. The representatives would sit together once a month to share and discuss progress along the parameters of

credit rotation, purpose of loan, problems faced by the women, etc. With such developments, the women began to draw help from one another in a more comprehensive way.

We then motivated the women to form a federation at Barhi. This federation became a means for the women to express their unity, solidarity and strength. Two representatives from each cluster participated in the federation's monthly meetings. At the time, there were about 100 SHGs organized into 8 to 10 clusters. The representatives would share the progress of their respective clusters and the problems faced, and would seek a way out of the problems. They would also seek or offer help to the representatives of other groups on the basis of requests. The concept of mutual help, thus, evolved from among the individuals of a group to among the groups themselves. In March of every year, since 1994, all the members of the SHGs assembled for their annual meeting and shared the year's progress, achievements, problems faced and overcome, and plans for the following year. As part of the preparations for the event, all clusters carry out similar exercises at the village/cluster level. The annual meeting is a gala event, and the women wait the whole year for the auspicious day. Initially, Pradan helped raise the money to organize the event; nowadays, however, members make contributions for the event.

The SHG members have a strong affinity for their federation, Damodar. It has become a visible part of their lives, so much so that the staff of Pradan is considered to be the staff of Damodar in the local area. By around 1994–95, there were 300 groups in the area; the SHG movement had gained reasonable strength over a period of 3 to 4 years. Owing to the fact that the SHG structure rested on a strong people-based rights movement meant that planting a new livelihood focus among the communities would not be easy.

By 1997–98, the groups were harnessing their collective strength to discuss and arbitrate on different issues for village development at the cluster and federation levels. To monitor these issues, members formed different sub-committees such as the education committee to ensure the attendance of the local school teachers and cleanliness committees to ensure the overall cleanliness in the village. There was a fair degree of competition among the clusters regarding these issues. Clearly, the focus remained on issues and concerns of larger social nature rather than livelihoods. Even where agriculture was concerned, the members of Damodar had a greater proclivity to addressing issues such as those relating to *mandi* merchants and middlemen rather than agricultural practices in themselves.

People from the Yadav (OBCs), Paswan, Ravidas and Bhuinya (SCs) communities formed a majority of the federation and village-level SHGs. Agriculture was the main occupation, and a potential sector for livelihood intention. It did not take long for Pradan to identify that owing to the fragmentation of land and the poor climatic condition, agriculture was not up to the mark. Very few opportunities in the local market and poor agriculture production forced the local youth to go outside to get a better livelihood. This reduced the area into a 'remittance-based economy'. A suitable livelihood model woven around agriculture was missing. The women members of SHGs used to take loans from their respective SHGs and from the banks, under the sponsored bank linkage programmes. The loans would

be most commonly used to start petty businesses such as a *kirana* shop, *pan gumti* or carpenter shop, or for purchasing a second-hand four wheeler for plying as public transport. The nature of the borrowings—scattered and individualistic—made it difficult to initiate any sectoral intervention, be it in agriculture, animal husbandry or any given trade or enterprise.

The cluster-level and federation meetings would come alive once issues such as family discord, domestic violence, alcoholism and women's role in decision-making at the household level came to the fore.

Even though the focus of Pradan is livelihoods promotion, it was difficult for us to move the local SHGs beyond their historical orientation of being organized as a rights-based movement. In order to usher a shift in thinking, Pradan organized a visioning exercise in 1998, with the existing members of the Damodar. At the end of the exercise, not many pointers, which would lead to concrete intervention in the realm of livelihoods, emerged. The women of Damodar had prioritized issues such as the health status of women and domestic violence over any livelihood intervention. It was a big dilemma for the Pradan team; on the one hand, we wanted to do something in livelihoods, but Damodar thought otherwise.

The cluster-level and federation meetings would come alive once issues such as family discord, domestic violence, alcoholism and women's role in decision-making at the household level came to the fore. The willingness of women to participate in other forums such as *gram sabhas* and *panchayat* proceedings at the village level was also remarkably high. Yet, on the other hand, the villagers accepted and nurtured the SHG platforms, particularly the OBCs, but only because it made for a safe means to a hassle-free loan from the banks. So the mobilization of funds from the bank increased every year. In 2003–04, the amount was a staggering Rs 99 lakhs from different nationalized banks, but the purpose of loans, as mentioned earlier, was still varied and household-centric. The efforts of channelling the credit into sectoral interventions had not acquired any specific shape.

By 2002–03, we had promoted four federations in four blocks of Padma, Barhi, Chauparan and Chandwara. This had been done because the members of the federation were finding it difficult to relate with each other and jointly. Problems began to surface in 2005–06. For the first time, we faced difficulties regarding bank repayments. The arrears shot up to around 30%. We discussed the whole issue in the federation meetings. At the end of the discussion regarding loan repayments, it was decided that the women SHG members, who have successfully repaid their loan amounts, would go to the defaulter groups in nearby villages along with members of the respective federation and pressurize them to repay. The concerned professionals and bank officials would accompany the SHG and federation members in persuading the defaulters.

Thus began the process of ensuring that the defaulters repaid the loans they took from the banks and their groups. Members from Damodar recalled the purpose behind the formation of the SHGs and asked the women to settle all sorts of loan amicably. They talked to the defaulting SHG members of the long way they had traversed as a large group for 15 years or so and the various struggles they

had waged. This had a salutary effect on the defaulters and they agreed to pay up. Sometimes, after assessing the financial and material reality of the member household, the group waived the interest that had to be paid. Such forms of community pressure helped salvage the situation. These attempts by a few SHG members to recover loans helped reinforce solidarity.

The women participated enthusiastically in each and every one of the trainings that were organized. The trained women carried their learning back to the villages and, of their own accord, organized meetings to share their new-found knowledge.

In 2006, Pradan conceived of an idea to help the women of Chandawara block by arranging a workshop for them on gender-related issues, in collaboration with an NGO called Jagori in 2006. As part of the follow-up exercises to the workshop, selected SHG leaders were sent for a series of training programmes on the subject. They were trained on issues such as understanding women's rights and patriarchy, women's health and quick remedies, and legal literacy. Women shared about different domestic atrocities and violence they had to suffer. These ranged from beating by husbands to the chastisement of widows. Dowry deaths, desertions resulting from second marriages and child marriage were some of the other issues the women faced. The women spoke of their medical problems, mainly gynaecological. They were forthright about their discomfort in discussing their ailments, particularly those in the nature of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), with male doctors. As for legal literacy, their main desire was to become aware of different government-sponsored programmes such as the PDS, *anganwadi*, etc. They were equally keen to learn about the different laws and enactments that could provide them protection in the face of domestic violence and abuse.

It was in addressing all these issues that, for the first time, we noticed an unusual energy amongst the members of the concerned groups. The women participated enthusiastically in each and every one of the trainings that were organized. The trained women carried their learning back to the villages and, of their own accord, organized meetings to share their new-found knowledge. The impact was immense for the little that we had done, particularly when one compares it with the long years one had spent on promoting livelihoods. There was increased awareness. Many widows came to acquire a respectable status in select villages. In a number of households, girl children are being sent to schools with the consent of the men of the household.

Under the health programme, the trained women tried to handle gynaecological problems, with herbs such as *tulsi* and *neem* leaves. They were quick to approach the Public Health Centre (PHC), knowing that such centres were after all established for the well-being of the local masses. Under pressure from a newly awakened mass of women, the PHCs were forced to deliver. Today, PHCs in the area interact intimately with pregnant women and tell them about the importance of a balanced diet and how it can be sourced locally. Distribution of free iron tablets and proper check-ups by the doctors are not uncommon any more.

Health issues and psychological problems associated with adolescence girls have been handled effectively by the women through the awareness trainings at the school level. In

case of legal literacy, initially awareness camps were the only way to move forward. The women trained in the project organized a meeting with local police officer and he told them about the different laws relating to domestic violence and dowry deaths. Looking at the enthusiasm of the women, he promised to help the women at any given stage.

In retrospect, it appears that the livelihoods promotion carried out by Pradan was not as appreciated by the local communities as the work on gender and rights and entitlements.

Possibly, the package of services being offered by Pradan as part its livelihoods promotion was not as relevant in this context, and a different selection of services in place of micro-credit and agriculture could have found greater acceptability in the region. A different selection of services might have mattered all the more over here because the region is significantly different in both its historicity and its class and caste composition from many other locations, where livelihood-based interventions by Pradan have yielded more promising results. In retrospect, it appears that the livelihoods promotion carried out by Pradan was not as appreciated by the local communities as the work on gender and rights and entitlements. The women associated far greater value when concerns such as health and decision-making were being addressed. This in no way goes to say that livelihoods find no place in the scheme of things; just that the community accorded a different priority to its needs. The greatest accomplishment of Pradan in the area has been in accepting the same, and also finding ways—even if to a limited extent—by which the women of the region can exert their rights more fully. It is also expected that the work that has gone into rights and entitlements in Koderma and Hazaribag will definitely result in better execution of state-run programmes, particularly the NREGS.

MGNREGA and Livelihoods—the Story of an Orchard

VARUN SHARMA AND RAJESH MIT

Developing a mango orchard in a hitherto barren tract of land with the landless households of Jharia Kocha in Gopalpura proves to be not only a revenue generating model but also a rights-based initiative.

With monetary coverage available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and institutional and technical support from Pradan, more than 144 landless households of Jharia Kocha in Gopalpura *panchayat* have established a sprawling mango orchard over 20 hectares of erstwhile barren land. In early 2008, the landless SC/ST households, which were accustomed to migrating every summer in search of labour succeeded in securing tenure over a single contiguous plot of barren land. This was achieved by affecting a lease arrangement with the 66 landowner families of the same village.

The plot had received little attention from the landowners because they held substantial stretches of fertile and more productive lands elsewhere. The landless SC/ST households, on their part, were either engaged as agricultural labourers or domestic help in the homes of these landowners. On occasions, they would be hired, for measly amounts, in house building or shed construction activities, or to harvest the fish produce from the village water body (*pukur*). The landowners exercised exclusive rights even over the water of the *pukur*. The landless households, being resource-poor and having limited avenues for earning money save the alternative to migrate, were known to regularly approach the landowners for loans to celebrate occasions, fulfill social obligations or even to meet their subsistence needs for food and clothing.

The landless SC/STs candidly admit that at first they considered Pradan's suggestion of establishing a mango orchard on barren lands as impractical, rather, impossible. The soil depth here was minimal and vegetative cover completely absent. The only saving grace was the nearby presence of a village water body (*pukur*). Pradan organized an exposure trip for the SC/ST households to another project location in Bandhudi in Purulia district, where a similar effort had yielded magnificent results. The farmers, then, began to take Pradan's suggestion a little more seriously.

The 12 SHGs formed in the village as part of the Swarna Jayanti Grameen Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) became the entry point for Pradan to facilitate discussions

on the prospect of establishing the orchard, with the support of NREGS. The SHG members quickly identified the owners to whom the contiguous plot of barren land belonged. They then approached the landowners and discussed the possibilities of acquiring the land by way of a lease agreement, and further developing it into an orchard, the produce of which could be shared in an agreed ratio. The prospect seemed inviting to the landowners, who had not been able to benefit from the barren land so far. Perceiving no threat, they readily agreed to the plan.

They then approached the landowners and discussed the possibilities of acquiring the land by way of a lease agreement, and further developing it into an orchard, the produce of which could be shared in an agreed ratio.

The matter was brought up before the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS), constituted as under rule 73 of the West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules 2004. The GUS, which acts an executive body of the *gram samsad*, includes the *panchayat* sarpanch, as an ex-officio member, and the individual who secured the second highest votes in the *panchayat* elections. The GUS also includes a retired school teacher, a retired government official and a member each from other village-level bodies such as the forest protection committee, water users' committee and the anganwadi centre. Besides these nominated members, ten other members or 1% of the total members of the *gram samsad*, whichever is higher, are elected from the remaining members of the *samsad*. The GUS makes for a highly empowered body, which acts as a sanctioning authority for the finalization/implementation of NREGS plans.

When SHG members and representatives from Pradan took their proposal of establishing the mango orchard to the GUS of Gopalpura *panchayat*, it won the body's ready approval. Without any delay, the proposal was forwarded by the GUS to the *gram panchayat* for the purpose of planning and making the estimate. At this stage, Pradan played the vital role of facilitating the process of decision-making and approval. Pradan assisted the *nirman sahayak*, or works engineer appointed under NREGS, to prepare a thorough estimate for the mango orchard. Simultaneously, a binding lease agreement was finalized between the 144 landless households of Jharia Kocha, the landowners and the panchayat. The lease, sans any fee, was finalized for a period of 25 years; it was decided that the returns from the orchard would be shared between the landowners, the landless households (organized as the 12 SHGs) and the panchayat in a fixed ratio of 2:1:1.

Pradan also stepped up its efforts to make the SHG members more aware of the provisions of NREGS. The landless households were familiarized with the procedures for opening bank accounts and availing of job cards. Likewise, specialized training programmes on technical aspects were carried out for supervisors, paymasters and other resource persons, who were selected through a village-level meeting convened by the GUS. All these efforts at the grass roots led to the plans being sanctioned first by the *panchayat* and then by the Block Development Officer (BDO), in an ideal bottom-up manner. Consequently, work was grounded with the work orders being handed to the 12 SHGs of Jharia Kocha.

By February 2010, Rs 39 lakhs had been dispensed under NREGS for the purpose of procuring the saplings, pitting and planting. A total of 48,148 employment days were generated in the process. Today, works such as fencing and cattle trenching are in progress around the orchard. All payments are made by cheque after an inspection visit by the *panchayat sarpanch* and the *nirman sahayak*.

With assistance from NREGS, community members have additionally adopted the 30 x 40 (thirty by forty) model of water conservation, as evolved by Pradan. A contiguous plot was squared with field bunds that measure 30 ft (along the slope) and 40 ft (against the slope). Pits measuring about 7 ft in width, 5 ft in length and 3 ft in depth were dug in the lowermost corner of these plots. All the rainwater that falls in the 30 x 40 plots collects in these pits, which helps in enhancing the local availability of water for watering the saplings, thus reducing the labour involved in carrying the water all the way from the nearby *pukur*. The pits also enhance the soil and moisture regime over a sustained period of time. The farmers acknowledge that the 30 x 40 model has greatly reduced the mortality of mango saplings. It is also responsible for the lush grass cover that spans the length and breadth of the plot. Today, the mango saplings stand a good five to six feet tall and the farmers collect the excess fodder grass to stall feed their animals.

With the confidence of having successfully tapped the resources of NREGS, the SHGs approached the National Horticulture Mission (NHM) in 2009 for assistance. The SHGs had a deep bore well constructed in the orchard. In order to optimize the utilization of ground water, a drip irrigation network was simultaneously established. Earlier, the orchard owners had to lift water from the nearby *pukur*. A diesel pump set had to be hired for this purpose. The villagers say that they were rather fortunate during the initial months because the fish produce had already been harvested and the landowners had no need for the surplus water, which was then conveniently diverted to the orchard. But this was not a reliable arrangement, as the right of the landowners over the water of the *pukur* for fisheries was final, and would never be compromised to keep the saplings of the leasers alive if ever faced by a shortage for their own purposes. With access to ground water now and the drip irrigation facility in place, there is no dilemma as far as water is concerned, or even the possibility of a conflict over the water from the *pukur*.

TABLE 1: FUNDS LEVERAGED ACTIVITY-WISE

No.	Name of Programme	Nature of Activity	Funds Leveraged (Rs)
1.	NREGS	Procuring plants, pitting and planting Inter-culture and watering Fencing and cattle trenching	39 lakhs
2	NHM	Submersible pump Drip irrigation network	14 lakhs
	Total		**53 lakhs**

There are around 9,686 saplings of Amrapali mangoes in the orchard. Amrapali—a cross between Dashehri and Neelam—is a dwarf variety that promises to yield 10 to 15 tonnes per hectare per year. It is a late-bearing variety, owing to which the produce reaches the market when the reducing supply of other varieties results in a price hike.

Tenurial agreements and the resultant sense of ownership has created an appropriate 'investment climate' for the one-time deprived; in other words, it has incentivized the adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies and innovations.

Even while the SHGs eagerly await their first crop, the many ways in which the entire effort has yielded social and political benefits alongside economic prospects is evident. Undoubtedly, security over tenure established in this way—that is, through a binding lease arrangement—is a decisive step in reversing the processes of land alienation that are commonly known to characterize the poorer *dalit*- and tribal-dominated parts of India. The security over tenure created for the 144 landless households has increased social cohesion greatly. The 12 SHGs that have collaborated to establish the mango orchard successfully interact ever so often, that the possibility of forming a federating body no longer seems distant. Tenurial agreements and the resultant sense of ownership has created an appropriate 'investment climate' for the one-time deprived; in other words, it has incentivized the adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies and innovations. This is manifest in the eager adoption of the 30 x 40 model, the deep bore well and the drip irrigation network through the provisions of the NREGS and NHM.

The landowner farmers admit that they had consented to the lease agreement believing that all efforts on the part of the landless poor households would eventually come to naught. Some *dalits* still feel that it was nothing more than a tacit move to ensnare the *dalits* further in debt. The landowners had hardly expected to see their plot of barren land transformed to a verdant oasis in less than two years. There was sufficient annoyance when alternatives created on the mango orchard began to thwart the availability of labour for their own agriculture in the lowlands. To make things worse, the dalit households, soon after, began to demand wages commensurate with the rates being offered under NREGS, with equal wages for both men and women for the same kind of work. When the landowners turned a deaf ear to the just demands of the *dalit* labourers, the Krishak Sabha intervened. The Krishak Sabha, organized by the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI–M) to represent the interests of the small and marginal farmers at the village level, plays an important role in such matters. It not only mobilizes small and marginal farmers to strike work in such circumstances but also cushions their interests by identifying alternative employment for them. In the event of a strike, the Sabha interacts vigorously with the SHGs, the NGOs active in the area, and most of all the *panchayat* to generate the required alternatives for its members. Alternative employment, created in this way, enhances the bargaining power of the small and marginal farmers. The labourers in Jharia Kocha now command at least 30% higher wages, at about Rs 60 per day's work, than what they received prior to the commencement of NREGS works. Also, the wages are far more equal than before. In this way, the unlimited resources of NREGS and

the enhanced possibility of accessing such resources have acted as an impetus for rights-based struggles at other levels as well.

Of late, the GUS has played a role in trying to pacify landowner farmers by reminding them of the many ways they stand to benefit from the orchard in the future. However, there has been a fresh furore over the fact that some of the landless households had undertaken cultivation of vegetables on small patches within the orchard without sharing the vegetable produce in the same ratio set for mangoes. The *dalit* households had either retained the produce for household consumption, or sold small quantities in the market. They felt free to do so because the present lease agreement does not lay down any sharing ratio for vegetables, grown in this manner. The landowner farmers have not taken too well to this practice; the matter is likely to be sorted out in the upcoming meetings.

Regardless of the agreements and disagreements, however, the present effort stands as a remarkable revenue generating model as much as a rights-based initiative. It has provided the basis to enhance the bargaining power of the landless wage earners through the efforts of the Krishak Sabha and has also energized the GUS by transforming it into a platform where plans are finalized, issues are resolved and the status quo is challenged by the SHGs. Nowadays, SHG members are willing to approach the *panchayat sarpanch* directly for clarifications, and this can very clearly be traced to the confidence that stems from secure tenure and the resultant sense of ownership.

These achievements at Jharia Kocha reinforce the fact that when an appropriate tenurial arrangement is combined with proper technical and institutional support, it becomes a sure means of enhancing participation of marginalized sections, in programmes such as NREGS. In addition, it ensures an idealistic bottom-up implementation of the NREGS, and saves resources from being cornered by the landed gentry alone.

Family Based Livelihoods Planning to Address Grass Roots Concerns

DIGVIJAY SINGH AND SAMEER KUMAR

Moving from participatory approaches to family based livelihoods planning is an attempt to make development interventions more meaningful and significant by taking into account the aspirations and problems of each individual and increasing ownership.

The development sector, mainly comprising the NGOs working at the grass roots, has evolved in the past decades in its working style, both in terms of implementation and planning. From charity based organizations to organizations following bottom-up approaches, the journey has been enriching. Organizations have explored the varied dimensions and aspects of the lives the poor lead. Over the years, the participatory approach has been widely accepted and has given satisfying results. The participatory approach, it is believed, makes up for the 'reductionism of formal surveys', and the 'biases of typical field visits'.

However, the participatory approach, which focuses on the community of a concerned village as a whole for planning and implementation (as in watershed, land development, etc.), somewhere diminishes the very essence of 'participation' in certain respects. This is because participation is never uniform; even within a group or community there are different levels of interest. The community we are referring to here—also the ones with which Pradan works—is divided on the grounds of poverty, concerns and issues. Even though there may be a commonness or homogeneity among households, the problems faced by each household are unique. Participatory methods, at times, overlook this element of uniqueness in a hurried attempt to arrive at a 'holistic' picture. Development agencies, therefore, may be failing to take into account the dissimilarities in aspirations and the problems faced by each and every household. This article looks more specifically at such dilemmas faced by professionals in the field.

Pradan's journey in Mandla (earlier a part of the Dindori team) started in Mohgaon block. SHGs and then livelihoods—it was all moving swiftly and smoothly. In the second year, Mandla became an independent team and Mohgaon came under it. As part of the new team, we were supposed to build a perspective plan, which included the objectives and the activities of our operations for the coming years. Our initial meeting was facilitated by our Team Leader of Dindori. His first question to us was, "How satisfied are you with the work you have been engaged in till

now?" We answered in percentages: 60%, 70%, 80% and so on and so forth. To which he responded, "I don't know…I can't gauge this because I don't have a 'denominator' to do it."

His statement struck me. We were actually working without a denominator. The denominator, ideally speaking, is the vision the people have, the sights they have set, the changes they want to see in their lives, and the problems that they are facing and want to get rid of at the earliest. The question made it imperative that we assess the satisfaction we derive from our work vis-à-vis the aspirations of the households with which we work. Perhaps the only way to arrive at an authentic percentage of our work satisfaction was by treating our effort (analogically, the numerator) as a ratio of the expectations and aspirations of the people (the denominator). This basic understanding gave birth to Family Based Livelihoods Planning (FBLP) in Mandla, and the need to measure our success and job satisfaction on the basis of a household's assessment of its own well being. Today, in the kharif season, assisting people in their own plans (673 people in Mohgaon block) to capture their aspirations gives me the utmost satisfaction and the team a significant thrust to its efforts.

This thought, of course, had to be followed through with some validation in the field by identifying the various issues prevalent in the community and whether they actually vary from family to family. This proved to be true; for instance, when talking with Lodhi *bhaiya* (a farmer) in Andiyadhar village of Mohgaon, we realized that his problems are not typically what we could consider to be problems of the entire village or group. His main problems were, "First, my son's job; he is doing MA and he is still not sure of any job nor where he will find one. Second, I want to grow sugarcane this time because I think it will fetch me good money but I don't have the right knowledge for it." Also when asked about who buys and who takes the decision to buy things at his house, he replied, "It is always me or my son even if it is small thing such as a soap." Then, with a hint of pride, he added, "It's a man's job to get his clothes dirty and to buy soap, and woman's job to wash them clean."

We realized that the three issues we needed to work on here were commercial farming, youth employment and gender sensitization. The first two were needs felt by the respondents, and the third was a need that we perceived.

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Similarly, some families faced food insufficiency (that is, from their own fields). For instance, Bhag Singh from Sakri, Mohgaon, owned 1.5 acres of land; however this yielded food for six months only, resulting in him having to work as labour elsewhere. The intervention, in his case, would be to identify the right practices to obtain the maximum yield from his land such that there is food sufficiency and he need not work as labour elsewhere. In some other families that were mainly dependent on labour, there was little or almost negligible knowledge of NREGA and their rights under the Act. There was a need, therefore, to work on rights and entitlements with such sub-groups or individual households and create greater awareness among them.

The issues, varied and multifarious, emerged only because we were willing to accord specific attention to each household rather than dismiss any one of them as being no different from the rest of the group or the community to which it belonged. Had we zeroed into a single problem such as youth employment, even if it were widespread, the fact of the matter is that it would have be irrelevant for a significant other. This aspect gathers added importance owing to the fact that Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) are somewhat public events in character and, on many an occasion, select groups/individuals do not have the skill and authority to present their interests in a mass gathering. Besides, PRAs are criticized on the grounds that the suggestions expressed publicly are more likely to be manufactured ones.

We found that even with two households that were keen on growing tomatoes, the kind of support required varied significantly. In other words, the technical input an agency delivers cannot digress from the unique and individual situation of a given household. Even within a single issue such as food sufficiency, the reasons that go into making the problem are different for different families—whereas it was the sheer lack of labour in an aging household in one case, it was a mental block to adopt new practices in another.

Though participatory approaches have their own value, we realized that excessive reliance on them diminished the participation of individual households. A family or a household very often thought that its individual reality had not been addressed adequately. In participatory exercises, a few would dominate despite the best efforts by the facilitating agency, and thus determine the final course of action. There was also the need to refine our own tools and techniques to be able to understand the microcosm of a family better. This was a welcome change because many of us within the team had begun to feel dejected with the role we had been performing. We had begun to function like an agricultural extension agency, and even where participatory methods were concerned, we would choose the topics and summarize lessons according to project criteria. Despite the emphasis on participatory methods, the 'needs' seemed to be significantly shaped by perceptions of what we could/would deliver. This confused most of us: were the issues we were working on, the issues the villagers faced?

Though participatory approaches have their own value, we realized that excessive reliance on them diminished the participation of individual households.

Our activities, for example, the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) had led to an increase in the yield of many a farmer. The average yield nearly doubled last year for almost 300 farmers across 32 villages; however, we cannot say whether this was all or the only thing they desired. Moreover, we were never really sure if the farmers adopted the technique because they really wanted to or had they adopted it merely for the lack of options, especially since Pradan as an external agency had nothing else to offer. Our bundle of options, rather, our bag of services, comprised SRI alone; so where was the opportunity for a farmer to exercise a 'choice'. Such a scenario had forced to us to exclude many landless households for which SRI was not an option.

When we revisited the households that had had taken up SRI, we found three trends: (a) there were farmers for whom SRI was just the right match, mostly those with substantial land but low yields (b) farmers who have achieved the desired level of food sufficiency by bringing only part of their lands under SRI; they enhanced their cash earning by bringing the rest of their lands under vegetable cultivation, and (c) marginal farmers, whose small land holdings could not really justify the adoption of SRI and when adopted, the net yield increased only marginally, and the landless. For the last category, SRI was of little relevance.

Thus there was an urgent need to redefine the unit from community to family for better participation, knowledge transfer and enhanced realization of the problems faced by a family.

Thus there was an urgent need to redefine the unit from community to family for better participation, knowledge transfer and enhanced realization of the problems faced by a family. This approach could lead to better customized solutions for the poor and would also ultimately result in a better and faster adaptability of new techniques and activities because we would be lending ourselves to a family's plans rather than seeking their 'participation' in the fulfillment of our plans. The core of the concept lies in the fact that every family has its own plan and, as development agents, we need to work on those plans.

To summarize: (a) the intention is not to dismiss the importance of PRA exercises; only that with the required focus on FBLP, PRA exercises can be made more meaningful in the long run (b) an NGO agency is seldom able to address each and every livelihood need of a household, and FBLP does not insist on something as incredulous. What it emphasizes is the need for a facilitating agency to create/evolve a suitable bag of services on the basis of each household's responses while making sure that the broadened options fall within the overall mandate of an intervening organization (in this case, Pradan), (c) FBLP is not about having as many different approaches and processes as the number of household needs that emerge from the exercise. FBLP entails a certain degree of aggregation and consolidation; only the aggregation of people's needs and concerns comes from one-on-one interaction with households rather than the community or group itself (as commonly adhered to under PRA exercises). Thus, if it is found that women and livelihoods is a recurrent concern, a common process would be designed to address it, making sure that the process remains accommodative and sensitive to the uniqueness of each family, and finally (d) FBLP does not preclude social interaction; instead, it tries to understand the dilemma of a household vis-à-vis its interaction with other households, as part of a composite social group.

A GLIMPSE INTO FBLP PROCESSES IN 2009

This year, we planned to work on five programmes, which came up from the initial survey we conducted among different family types, on the basis of members, caste and landholdings. The five programmes are:

1. Ensuring food sufficiency
2. Enhancing cash income (for emergencies and savings)
3. Enhancing participation in NREGS
4. Identifying opportunities for youth

5. Ensuring equal participation of women in decision-making through gender sensitization, as much as addressing issues such as education of girl child, alcoholism and domestic violence.

Needless to say, the five areas of intervention were zeroed in after thorough interactions at the household level. The family based plans for each of the households were prepared in collaboration with the Community Resource Persons (CRPs) identified by Pradan earlier on. CRPs mostly include village youth, who are proactive and astute where developmental processes at the village level are concerned, and willing to partner with Pradan in enhancing the livelihoods of their respective communities. CRPs were first oriented to the basics of FBLP on primarily how to prepare plans, keeping a household's resources, skills, opportunities and aspirations in mind. Most important, CRPs were trained in how they should inspire hope among households and ensure that a household comes to own its plans rather than perceive the plans as something that is imposed upon it at the hands of external agency. Efforts were made to club CRPs from the SHGs of one cluster in one training event. Other Pradan staff members were also included in the training, with the intention of making them aware of the role of the CRPs. The first training was facilitated by an external resource person; subsequently, all others were conducted by team members. By the end of 2009, about 144 CRPs were trained in the Mohgaon block of Mandla alone.

The CRPs were then made to interact with members of the SHGs formed by Pradan. All interactions were guided with questionnaires that sought to capture the information, aspirations and expectations of the households of each of the SHG members. In order to ease the process of data collection, the CRPs were paired with one or two SHG members from each group during interactions, to increase their acceptance by the other group members. The CRPs were paired with members, who have been active in the past, are respected by other members of the group and are somewhat aware of livelihood opportunities.

Much depends on the personal motivation of the CRPs. Some CRPs try to convey the importance of family based planning to the respondent households; this makes it easier to collect data and encourages the families to share their aspirations a little more openly. They help the respondents to envision an 'ideal situation' and also give them the required faith and hope to make the journey. Others adhere to the formats provided, which are very open-ended, to try and capture the desired state of the family and on how they are going to reach it. The significant part was that even when the interaction was format-oriented, the households had a central role to play and thus took it seriously. In due course, the CRPs and the SHG members brought the newly prepared plans back to the office. Their enthusiasm was obvious.

The plans were then consolidated at the team level and shared with Pradan's Village Level Committees, which gave direction to the SHGs in a given village over the next two months (before June kharif 2009). The major focus was to make people realize that they had to work on their plans to reach the desired state.

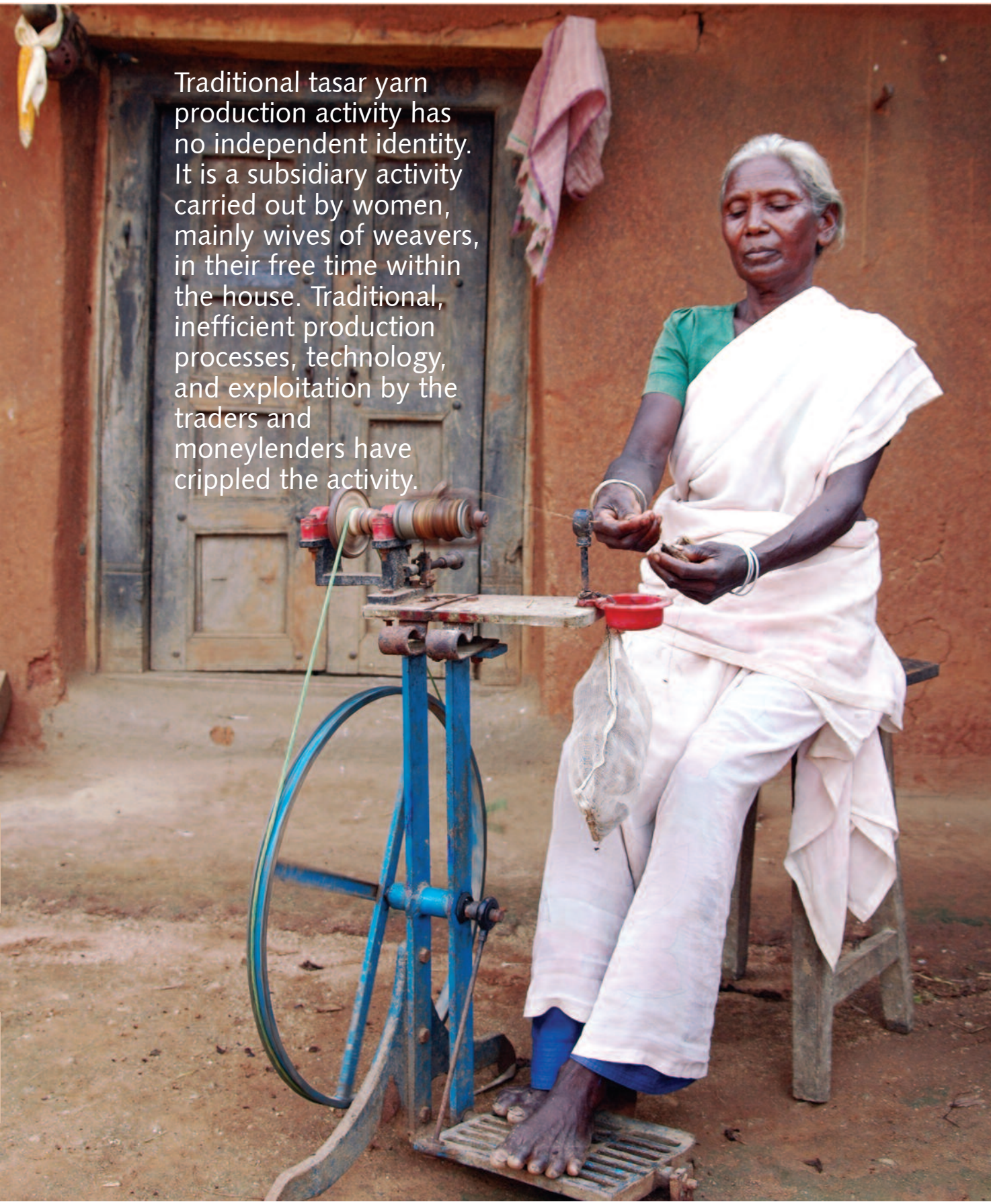
For example, in the Man Ambe SHG of village Nidhani, Sudama Bai and Rajkumar's plans were to grow paddy, brinjal and tomato, and her desired state was to earn around Rs 10,000 and get a yield of 15 bags of grain.

If this happened she and her family would consider the season a success. Our endeavour was to make this family see if there are any gaps between the desired state and the processes they were going to adopt to reach to it. Did they see a viable chance of reaching the desired state with the techniques they had so far been practising? When SRI fitted into their plans, it had an acceptance far higher than there was in the past. Our sole plan that kharif season was to see that the 673 plans of the people reach their desired state.

The need of development agencies is to seek the real needs of a poor family and work out possible services to their livelihood plan; this may differ from family to family and does not assume the possibility of similar situations or aspiration levels in every and each poor family.

This approach is analogous to the customized (services) processes of the corporate sector, which has been setting new and successful operational lines to provide the right services for the differing needs of the customers. The need of development agencies is to seek the real needs of a poor family and work out possible services to their livelihood plan; this may differ from family to family and does not assume the possibility of similar situations or aspiration levels in each poor family. Thus, it remains the plan, desired state and aspirations of individual families; we help them to adopt the most appropriate technology and path to achieve their plans.

In a way, the concept is akin to what Paulo Freire's 'conscientization', that is, taking development to the individual (although, we talk about family, eventually it will focus on the individual). Ironic, though it may sound, even though participatory approaches emerged from the shortcomings of the 'reductionism of formal surveys', FBLP can enhance participation if applied properly and in conjunction with PRA exercises.


Traditional tasar yarn production activity has no independent identity. It is a subsidiary activity carried out by women, mainly wives of weavers, in their free time within the house. Traditional, inefficient production processes, technology, and exploitation by the traders and moneylenders have crippled the activity.

Pradan is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Pradan works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of Pradan'swork is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor,enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks,markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using theirknowledge and skills to help remove poverty. News*R*each, Pradan's monthly journal, is a forum forsharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas inthe field. News*R*each helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

News*R*each is published by the National Resource Centre for Rural Livelihoods, housed in the Pradan Research and Resource Centre.

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AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

Supported by the Aga Khan Foundation through the European Union co- financed SCALE Programme