

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

January–February 2015
Volume 15 Number 1

NewsReach





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Letters to the Editor

Thank you for including me in the mailing list of your periodic publication *NewsReach*. Incidentally may I suggest that the contact details like email ID of the authors may also be indicated against their name. If there is a soft copy, I shall be interested in it as well.

The theme in the issue (*NewsReach* November–December 2014) is very lively and apt as it appears that MNREGA is at the crossroads now, not knowing which way to go. The authors have come out with very informative insights into the scheme and its functioning and I wish the GOI thinks it to fit to organize a 'National Seminar on MNREGA - Looking Back and the Way Forward' and gets feedback from all quarters to enable the GOI to take an intelligent decision in the matter.

M.V. Ashok
Chief General Manager, NABARD

This is with reference to the article, "MGNREGA: The Need to go Beyond Ideologies" by D. Narendranath (*NewsReach* November–December 2014). I was impressed by the argument for keeping the scheme and fine-tuning it further to make it more effective. I want to just add another story from Assam to support your argument further.

The Tea industry in Assam has been one of the most exploitative industries in the state. It is also one of the oldest industries and (perhaps because of that) also one of the most primitive. Its practices, particularly related to labour relations, are rooted in the nineteenth century. So, despite the Plantation Act after independence, it still has pegged labour rates abysmally low. They give an excuse that it is low because of in-kind benefits they provide like food rations, medicines and education, which are of questionable value to the workers. The normal wage per day is around Rs 89 whereas the minimum wages for Assam is Rs 158.54. MGNREGS which provides a much higher wage per day, is therefore attractive to the workers. So we have an ironical situation where by a social security scheme competes with the industry for labour. The Tea industry is complaining that MGNREGS should be stopped because it is adversely impacting industry. But, thanks to it, the tea labour workers, for the first time have a choice and also a benchmark to peg their labour rates. Earlier, the minimum wages was just a figure; there was no one who was providing cash for that amount, all year round. MGNREGS provided them with the choice. This has given them a bargaining power and in this round of negotiations with the management, they are asking for a fairly large raise. This would not have been possible without MGNREGS. What 67 years of independence could not achieve, hopefully MGNREGS will be able to and provide the tea industry labour their much-desired labour rates, which is long overdue. These are some of the indirect but definitely more significant impacts of MGNREGS.

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The Transformation of Jolhakarma

AVIJIT MALLIK

Having been able to assure food security among the villagers and realizing that economic self-sufficiency alone was not going to alleviate the basic problems faced by women, the focus in Jolhakarma is on ensuring pipe water supply and sanitation units within homes to assure them a life of dignity, free from the ordeal of open defecation and the drudgery of getting water for daily use from remote sources

Jolhakarma is a revenue village in the Chandwara block of Koderma district and is located about 12 km from the district headquarters. The village has approximately 56 households, of which about half belong to the Muslim community and the remaining are from the Other Backward Communities (OBCs). Whereas agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the villagers, the absence of irrigation facilities, coupled with small landholdings, makes farming a fragile practice in the area. Food insecurity and the absence of gainful income opportunities locally have pushed the men of the region to migrate to towns, at least for half the year.

Total households	56
Total population	296
Men	155
Women	141
SC population	22
Total literate	192
Literate men	108
Literate women	84

PRADAN started its work in Jolhakarma in 2006–07. The initial focus was on organizing the women into Self Help Groups (SHGs). There was resistance from the men of the Muslim households to the idea of women joining SHGs. Through PRADAN's consistent efforts, women from the OBCs were persuaded to form two SHGs that was involved initially in savings and credit.

As the SHGs stabilized over a period of a year, the women members were steered towards coming up with livelihood plans. Farming emerged as the common thrust area for all the member families. They approached the banks with their livelihood plans, and were offered credit support. PRADAN

extended technical support to help the groups adopt improved agricultural practices. SHG members showed great interest in vegetable cultivation on small parcels of their lands. Over the next two to three years, all the members registered significant gains in income from farming. In some cases, the men stopped migrating altogether. Their success inspired other families, including women from Muslim families, to join SHGs. By 2009, the village had four SHGs, which included women from all the households!

In 2011, during a livelihood-planning exercise in the village, women members brought up the matter of water. The problem, they said, was not only the scarcity of water for farming but also of drinking water. There were around seven dug-wells and two-hand-pumps in their homesteads. However, during the summer months, the entire village depended on just one hand-pump, which yielded turbid water. The women spent a long time in queues, waiting to collect a couple of buckets of water for domestic use. SHG members also shared that there were frequent outbreaks of water-borne diseases and skin ailments, especially among women and children because they suffered the most due to the scarcity and the poor quality of water.

On further probing, the women also shared the pathetic condition of hygiene in the area. The village had no individual sanitation units

In 2011, during a livelihood-planning exercise in the village, the women members brought up the matter of water. The problem, they said, was not only the scarcity of water for farming but also of drinking water

and, therefore, open defecation was the only option for them. Women and teenage girls suffered the most because of the lack of sanitation units. Most of them had to defecate before dawn or then wait until dusk. Water-borne diseases were quite common (atleast one child from each household suffered from a

water-borne disease last year, during the rainy season). That economic development alone was not going to be the solution for the basic problems faced by women became evident. Specific focus on water and sanitation was necessary, to improve the living conditions in the villages.

In 2012–13, the villagers of Jolhakarta formed a Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC), as per the mandate of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). The main function of VWSC is to address the issues of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in the village. Each revenue village would have a VWSC constituting 12 members, with 50 per cent representation of women. The *mukhiya* of the *panchayat* is the Chairperson of the VWSC. A person designated as the *jal sahayak* acts as the Secretary of the Committee, to link the body with the PRI and the agencies of Drinking Water and Sanitation Department (DWSD). This is a statutory body formed to improve the WATSAN (Water and Sanitation) scenario of the village.

Except for the *mukhiya* (Jolhakarta comes under the Kanko *panchayat* in Koderma block), all the members of VWSC belong to the village. The SHGs in the village nominated some of their most active and articulate members to join VWSC. All the women representatives in VWSC are members of SHGs.

VWSC members and other villagers (mainly women SHG members) were taken for an exposure visit to a nearby village called Belkhara, where PRADAN had earlier installed a pipe water supply system, with financial support from the CSR division of Damodar Valley Corporation. The women of Belkhara explained to the visitors the project and the roles of the user groups in the operation and maintenance, including the system for tariff collection, regular repair and the monitoring of the water quality. They were eloquent in their sharing of the impact of the water supply system, in terms of minimizing the drudgery of women, the drastic reduction in gastro-intestinal disorders and the enhancement of a sense of well-being among the villagers.

Upon their return, the SHGs of Jolharkarma quickly convened a meeting of all the villagers to share their experiences of the exposure visit and resolved to set up a pipe water supply system in their village. The *mukhiya* presided over the meeting. In the same meeting, PRADAN informed the villagers about the provisions of the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP), a flagship programme of the Government of India, to make safe drinking water accessible in rural areas. The DWSD of the Government of Jharkhand and UNICEF were consulted to prepare a detailed project report (DPR) for the installation of a pipe water supply system.

VWSC and PRADAN spent three days exploring various options to create a sustainable water supply system for Jolharkarma. The exercise started with an assessment of the total water requirement of the village, taking into consideration the current population and the prospective population of the next two decades, and estimating the water needs of the animals. These were important design

VWSC and PRADAN spent three days exploring various options to create a sustainable water supply system for Jolharkarma

considerations for the water supply system when ensuring sustainable water security for the village. The development of conjunctive water sources were planned to reinforce this effort.

In each and every step, the women participated fully and were involved in the major decisions.

The plan was finalized after two rounds of iteration of the DPR with the *gram sabha*. The scheme included digging a sanitary well (30 ft deep and 25 ft in diameter) in the lowland to tap the sub-surface water flow, setting up a solar powered pumping device, constructing a pump house, an overhead tank (for 27,000 litres of water) and PVC conduit systems for distributing water to every household.

The DPR was finally vetted by the *gram sabha*. The *mukhiya*, as Chairperson of the VWSC, then submitted the DPR to the District Water and Sanitation Mission (DWSM), with copies to the Principal Secretary, DWSD, and to UNICEF.

The Executive Engineer went to the village to formally launch the scheme. Meanwhile, the SHG women took the initiative to identify lands belonging to their members, to set up installations such as the sanitary well, the pump house and the overhead tank. The lands were formally donated by the members to VWSC. This otherwise complicated exercise literally took no time due to the involvement of SHGs in building consensus in the village. The SHGs also convinced all the families to contribute Rs 1,000 per household as subscription, to build a corpus fund to meet any exigencies in the maintenance of the water supply system.

The DPR received technical sanction from the office of the Superintendent Engineer

and administrative approval of the DWSD, the Government of Jharkhand. UNICEF played a key role in strengthening coordination among all stakeholders. A total of Rs 23 lakhs was budgeted for the scheme. The entire fund was transferred to the bank account of VWSC in three instalments. VWSC implemented the scheme with the help of the villagers. This system offered an effective alternative to the contractor-driven implementation process. The SHGs were responsible for regular monitoring of the implementation.

In the village, a fortnightly meeting was organized, wherein SHG members and VWSC members monitored and reviewed the progress of the drinking water unit. The villagers also extended their support in the implementation by working as daily wage labour.

The project received regular technical support and overseeing from UNICEF and PRADAN. The execution of the project was completed within the stipulated period.

VWSC undertook responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the works. Two village youths were trained to operate the solar pump, and to clean and maintain the water tank and the distribution system.

VWSC purchased a chlorine dosing system, to ensure the supply of bacteria-free water. VWSC meets once every fortnight, to collect the water tariff of Rs 60 per household, per month. It also keeps an eye on the overall management of the system, optimum water use, including checking wastage and monitoring water quality. The per capita supply of water has been decided at 75 litres per day. Thus, a family with a size of six members

The project received regular technical support and overseeing from UNICEF and PRADAN. The execution of the project was completed within the stipulated period

receives 450 litres of water per day. The water is supplied for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening.

This apart, the overhead tank remains full, to ensure water availability any time of the day as per the need. At the peak of last summer, Jolhakarma did not face any water scarcity even for a single day.

After completing and operating the pipe water supply system, SHG members again took the initiative and discussed the problem of open defecation and how it affected their sense of dignity and overall cleanliness of their village. SHG members shared their discomfort about having to defecate in the open and discussed its harmful consequences such as the occurrence of water-borne diseases, skin diseases, etc., as well as the problems faced at a social level. With the provision of running water in homes, the next step was to have individual sanitation units at the household level.

VWSC resolved to support each of the households in constructing toilets. In the first phase, 30 households received financial support under Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA). They received Rs 4,600 per household to construct toilets. This amount was supplemented by most of the families, which contributed Rs 6,000 to Rs 12,000 each to complete the construction. The use of the sanitary unit, fitted with a twin soak pit, was demonstrated by officials from UNICEF in the villages of Koderma; it was found to be a suitable model for the area.

Many households created space for bathrooms by increasing their financial contribution. In most of the cases, the women invested some money of their own, to cover a portion by the side of the sanitation unit for a bathroom

because they knew that this would improve the quality of their life. The women were able to finance the additional costs for construction through interest-free loans from their SHGs. In many villages, SHG members demanded that the district authority include the cost of constructing bathrooms. When there was no response from the district authority, the Federation members in one of the meetings decided that the SHGs could take a decision about whether they would like to give interest-free loans to their members for meeting the extra cost.

The message, thus, to the SHG meetings (with which the members fully concurred) was that besides toilets, they also needed bathrooms so that they would never have to bathe in the open again.

Seeing the success of this intervention, the District Administration and DWSM released the financial allotment for the next lot of 26 toilets. By this time, the government had ensured the convergence of MGNREGS with NBA.

Estimate of a Sanitation Unit of 4' x 3'

No.	Material	Quantity	Unit	Rate	Cost
1	Brick	1,000	Pcs	2.70	2,700
2	Sand	30	Cft	10	200
3	Cement	4	Bag	400	1,600
4	Chips	2	Cft	30	60
5	Rod	2.5	Kg	50	125
6	Rural Pan-syphon	1	Pcs	250	250
7	Door	1	Pc	1,100	1,100
8	Mason	3	MD	300	900
9	Labour	5	MD	150	750
10	Roofing material (Asbestos)	1	PC	450	450
11	PVC Pipe and Y-Tee	5	Ft	LS	330
TOTAL COST (Rs)					8,465

There was a huge issue at the district level about the convergence of MGNREGA and NBA. After a discussion at the block level, a format was developed to record the availability of job cards and the sanitation position in the village. A resolution was passed that all the villagers, who have job cards, would first get the sanitation units and then the rest of the villagers would have to have their job cards prepared for the construction of sanitation units. The resolution, along with a list of villagers, was submitted to the block office by the concerned *mukhiya*; after approval by the block office, it went to the district level. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) sanctioned the amount and gave instructions to the Executive Engineer to release the support amount into the account of the concerned VWSC and asked the Deputy Development Commissioner (DDC) to allot the funds to the concerned *panchayat* for sanitation work.

STILL A LONG WAY TO GO

A visit to Jolhakarma these days reveals dirt-free pathways inside the village, neatly constructed

toilets beside every house, and the discernible presence of a water tower. These are some of the signs of change. However, the real transformation can be sensed when talking to the women of Jolhakarma. They are not worried about having to get up in the dark, before sunrise to go outdoors for their daily ablutions. Neither do they worry about standing in long queues to collect water from hand pumps.

Now, the women in Jolhakarma bathe in closed spaces. This is a dream come true for them. Every gesture and word expressed by the women conveys a deep sense of self-worth and confidence in having freed themselves from the daily indignity, ordeal and drudgery by creating common asset for everyone and making their village a place worth living.

The men of the households with toilets, however, still hesitate to use these and attempts are being made to discuss the issue with them. Therefore, the village is not yet 'open-defecation free'

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So far, 37 households have built sanitation units at their homes. Meanwhile, due to a change at the policy level, the Government of India has discontinued dovetailing MGNREGA funds for the construction of sanitation units and has asked to release the entire amount of Rs 12,000 per household, to the account of

the concerned VWSC. Unfortunately, due to the lack of clarity at the district level, the funds have not been released as yet.

Lately, in the village meetings, SHG members have been discussing solid and liquid waste management in the village. An SHG member plans to construct a soak pit to collect waste water; many others are also thinking along the same lines. They plan to keep dustbins in their homes so that their surroundings remain clean. They have asked the *mukhiya* to release the funds under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) for the rest of the households, to build the sanitary units.

Women in the Political Arena

AZIZA HUMAYUN HALIM

Holding their ground firmly, despite political pressure to withdraw from the political arena, the women of Samnapur block, Dindori district, set an example by fielding, supporting and canvassing for their representative in the local elections because they know that having a position in the government will help them realize their dreams for a better tomorrow

With the *panchayat* elections of 2015 in view, villages are alive with speeches and promises of a 'better tomorrow' and 'a happily ever after' ending. From earlier experience, the villagers know that the sincerity of these promises vanishes just like the trail of dust that rises and settles after the candidates have sped past their narrow village lanes.

Dropti, a member of the Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh (RDTMS) says, "The gap between how policies are made and the manner in which information regarding these is disseminated to the common person is appalling."

Playing an important and active role in the Federation these past few years has given her the opportunity to engage with government officials on various occasions; in interactions with them, her experience has been varied. She realizes that there is so much information available in the block as well as the district that is meant for the ordinary villager but is not being passed on to them. New schemes are issued regularly by the government; however, they rarely reach the people they are meant for.

Dropti understands that these schemes do not reach the people because there are no proper channels for dissemination of this information and that there are no 'linkages' that allow access to these channels. This problem exists at all levels—from the district to the block, the block to the *panchayat*, the *panchayat* to the *gram sabha*, and from the *gram sabha* to the citizens.

The Federation is a group of informed and aware villagers, with a mission to change society; a group that has struggled long and hard and has finally been able to have access to the right places. Although the Federation has done much work in enabling women to access public information, it is ultimately only a parallel structure to the government. A vast majority of villagers, neither connected to the mainstream nor to any such Federation, are left out every time.

It is imperative, therefore, to have people who are trustworthy and dedicated, to be part of the system and in some position of authority, who will support and guide the villagers in availing of their entitlements. With widespread patriarchy and corruption prevalent in society, it is extremely essential that more women and gender-sensitive people occupy influential positions in the government

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in order to have just and fair policy-making, implementation, and information disclosure at all levels of the bureaucracy.

The women learned this lesson the hard way. They heard from the *zila panchayat* that a decentralized planning process was in progress in all the blocks.

It was to be carried out at the village level by the Technical Support Group (TSG), in the presence of the *gram sabha* members. Not seeing any action in this direction and keeping in view their priority of participating in the planning process, the women decided to intervene in the integrated village-level action plans. Their aims were simple: to increase transparency and demand individual assets in the name of women. The village leaders, the Federation staff and the promoting agency employees worked to create a movement towards this end in all the villages and completed it within a record time of one month.

RANI DURGAWATI TEJASWINI MAHILA SANGH

Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh (RDTMS) is a women's collective located in Samnapur block of Dindori district. About 25 km from the district headquarters, Samnapur is a block populated mainly by the Gond, Ahir, Panika and Kol tribes. There are also a few villages belonging to the Baigachak region—Baiga being a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG). The Federation spreads across 60 of Samnapur's 116 villages. It is with great enthusiasm that the leaders of all the villages got together to start a Federation to support them in realizing their dreams.

The Federation has a three-tier system, with the starting unit being an SHG member and the forum for connection being the SHG meeting. The next tier is formed by the thematic leaders, or *sakhis* whose forum for sharing and gathering information is the monthly village-level meeting of the Village Level Committee (VLC). These leaders represent their village for a particular theme, and meet every month in the block to share their progress, take inputs and contribute to decision-making by sharing their village's perspective. Another monthly forum, in which decisions related to the Federation's way forward and critical issues such as resources, finance and operations are discussed, is the Governing Board, to which one woman per Cluster of three or four villages is elected as a representative. From these, the Chairperson, the Secretary and the Treasurer of the Federation are elected.

As many as 1,270 plans were designed and consolidated in 48 villages, and prepared for presentation at all the levels of administration, including the *panchayat* office, the block office, the *zila panchayat* office, and the District Collector's office. When the Federation leaders took the plans to the respective officials, the response they received ranged from the warm and appreciative response of the District Collector, who lauded their initiative and hard work, to the rude and insensitive response of the Additional CEO of the *zila panchayat*, who devalued their efforts, saying that there was no need for it.

The contrast was sharp. This event opened their eyes to reality, and further strengthened Dropti's belief that in the district and other places, there exists huge discrimination, especially against women, and even more so for women who belong to the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Women had no voice and their opinions were never considered seriously, no matter how pertinent these might be.

The women were convinced they needed to enter the political sphere if the system were to be made pro-women. Discussions were held in the *Adhikar Sakhi* meetings after the Federation had submitted the micro-plans for each of their 48 villages to the district official. While analyzing their learning, they realized how hard it would be for them to break through to the system. And, yet, this was necessary. It was important to enter the arena of politics, however murky it may be, and to change the system from within by making it more responsive to the needs of the people because this system was responsible for planning and implementing most of

Determined to make their mark in the elections this year, they fielded candidates for various posts, and women from RDTMS, Samnapur, filed their nominations for all the posts including for 24 sarpanchs, 27 ward members, 5 janpad sadasyas, 1 zila panchayat sadasya, the block representative and the district representative

the development policies and schemes in the country.

The discussions in the Federation meetings resulted in a decision that women from the Federation be placed at various levels in the government, including the village, the *panchayat* and the block, so that like-minded women, with a mission to transform their lives, would drive the forces of positive change within the system as well as outside.

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It was also decided to contest elections at the district level. A consensus was arrived at and everybody collectively decided to put up Dropti's name as a candidate for the district representative of 83 villages of Samnapur region. She now had a larger canvas on which to paint her dreams.

Dropti hails from a poor family and has no living parents or siblings. Her husband and three children are her only surviving family. She has lived through times of abject poverty and is grateful for what she has today. She and her husband Vishwanath have both worked very hard to have come to this stage of life, where now they can live a life of dignity. She can now live with her head held high and has no one to fear. She expressed, "When I saw my name published in the list outside the Collectorate and when the District Collector

herself announced my name in front of so many people as a contender for elections, I was speechless. I had never imagined I would ever do such a thing and feel so proud. I think, having come thus far, I have achieved enough for my lifetime." There are 11 men contesting the elections this year and Dropti is the sole woman.

With Dropti standing for elections, history is being created by RDTMS, Samnapur. This is the first time any woman candidate is contesting an election in the district. It is a place that seems far away and, hence, is also considered out of reach for ordinary women, especially from the tribal and rural communities. For them, this nomination heralds their bold entry into the political sphere of their society, and, if elected, will certainly enable their opinion to be genuinely represented in the larger governmental forums.

One of Dropti's signature remarks to people who ask her why they should vote for her when she does not give them anything (material) in return, is, "You voted for those who gave you money and travelled by cars, but did they ever return to your village? I don't have anything material to offer to you. But I can promise that when selected you will definitely be seeing me again."

The women are hopeful and confident that Dropti will be their true representative. As a regular Federation member, she has taken many initiatives to strengthen the institution such as extending herself to help those women who sought counselling from the Federation, visiting their villages, getting to the root of their problems while being sensitive to their position in the family and village.

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We asked a few SHG members why they would choose Dropti and what was in it for them if she were to win.

One of them replied, "We have always put forward the men in any work it may be. Now for the

first time, we have the opportunity, so let's put our women in front and see what happens?"

Another woman chipped in, "This is our way to prove that we are equal to men, that we can also contest elections."

In a Federation meeting in late November 2014, in which village leaders from around 30 villages participated, the agenda of the upcoming *panchayat* elections was raised. The villagers discussed what kind of a leader they would like to have and what they wanted to be included in their election manifesto.

A list of the following points came up:

- ◆ Access to regular and proper information regarding the *gram sabhas*
- ◆ Equal treatment of men and women in the *gram sabhas* (evident through actions such as seating arrangements, a space for women to articulate their opinions and needs)
- ◆ Information regarding the various schemes applicable to their *panchayat* and the people/positions responsible for expending those funds.

It was evident that the main concerns of the women were related to knowledge provisioning and accessing information meant for them at the right time and in the correct public forums. The lack of these, they concluded, was causing the others to bribe government functionaries

at all levels. They held that if the decisions regarding who would obtain which public benefit were made with consensus or, at least, if everyone knew that their needs were also part of the plan, they would not feel so insecure and the system would not have to be compromised.

With this in view, Dropti's election manifesto centres on the following points:

- ♦ Transparency in information dissemination at the *panchayat*
- ♦ Regularization of the *gram sabha*,
- ♦ Institution of a special *gram sabha* on agriculture
- ♦ Participation of women in regional development and women's rights
- ♦ Increase in the effectiveness of health services
- ♦ Provision of clean and safe drinking water and toilets

All the women of the Federation are on this journey together. One day, a contestant and a few of his supporters visited Chhindgaon village for canvassing votes. No sooner had they reached the village lane than a group of SHG members assembled near his car and told him, "*Prachaar ho gaya hai, vote fix hai Dropti bai ke liye.* (There is no need for any propaganda; our vote is fixed for Dropti bai)."

A similar incident took place in Kuraili village. The solidarity that the villagers have displayed during this time has been heart-warming. Leaders from Ghata village invited Dropti to come and share her views with the people, to

A local shop owner, in response to the campaign strategy, remarked, "Since the awareness levels of the villagers have increased, and owing to the efforts made by organizations such as PRADAN, the masses have started questioning candidates about why they should vote for them. This trend was not prevalent earlier and people would cast their votes for whoever was in power or for other reasons."

mobilize public opinion and align with the people's expectations. Elections have become a costly affair and sensing the situation, the leaders have gone out of their way to support Dropti financially. In one of the Federation meetings, the issue of election propaganda came up. Dropti shared that she had no money for the propaganda and sat down quietly.

At first, everyone was puzzled because there would definitely be some small expenses such as hiring vehicles on some occasions and other publicity costs. Considering all this, and wanting their initiative to

succeed, they all decided to contribute Rs 5 per person. Almost Rs 5,000–6,000 was raised. In that instant, the election belonged to more than 1,000 women, not just one. And Dropti's style paved the path for women to claim their spaces consciously and willingly. In a way, by doing this, Dropti became a co-traveller and gave everyone an equal opportunity for taking responsibility. This one act demonstrated a singular unity in their village, which has had a huge impact on the social perceptions that people carry about the Federation and its leaders.

A local shop owner, in response to the campaign strategy, remarked, "Since the awareness levels of the villagers have increased, and owing to the efforts made by organizations such as PRADAN, the masses have started questioning candidates about why they should vote for them. This trend was not prevalent earlier and people would cast their votes for whoever was in power or for other reasons."

Contesting the elections has cleared many of the misconceptions the village women had regarding elections. For instance, the slogan, "Aadhey mein haqdaari, poorey mein ummeedvaari," has started to be quoted frequently by anyone who is told that this seat is reserved for men and the women cannot contest in this area. If women's participation in *panchayati* elections is the agenda, the means to it are to pose questions and provide information in order to create the right environment for members to make an informed decision and make their choice.

Many women, including those who have not stood for elections this year, are now aware of the electoral procedures, rules, etc.

In the course of filing applications and mobilizing public opinion in favour of not only Dropti but also all the other Federation members who stood for elections, many internal dynamics have become known. The village, being a closer-knit unit than a district, also experiences much more political disturbance. It is harder to unite people for a single cause in a village already divided by caste, class, gender, relations, money and many other reasons.

The Federation members standing for positions such as ward member and *sarpanch* have a somewhat harder time in drawing support because there are multiple contenders for the same posts. Traditionally, in the context of Dindori, discrimination against women in terms of mobility, decision-making and voicing their opinions is extensive, and women's political participation in the 2015 elections

It hasn't been easy to face such threats. "But I will not quit," Dropti says adamantly. "It is the unwavering faith of my fellow sisters that has got me so far. I have seen them make the effort when they have invited me to their village to meet the Federation members, and after all the trust they have placed in me, I cannot withdraw my name. No matter what happens, even if death comes my way I will face it."

has raised many eyebrows. At the beginning of the process of filing applications, there were 18 candidates, including Dropti. However, by January 2015, the number stands at 11.

The unique feature that distinguishes Dropti from all other candidates standing in this election is that she has entered the elections only because she has been nominated as a representative by the public. She was chosen from amongst almost 2,000 women of the Federation, of which she is a member. They have proposed her name and, hence, she believes that they will support her too.

There is one particular instance Dropti narrated that really proves that her participation has made people question themselves and their stand in this election. One day a big car came and stopped by her house and some popular influential figures emerged. They had come to find out who Dropti was. She was offered a handsome amount of money in return for stepping down and withdrawing her nomination. They said that it is a '*purush* seat' and she should, therefore, withdraw.

Well aware that it was not a reserved seat, she confidently replied, "I will not withdraw because it is an open seat and I am as entitled to contest the election for the seat as you are."

All possible means of negotiation were attempted. They even tried to play on Vishwanath's ego by taunting him, "We would never place our guns on our wife's shoulders. We would never allow our women to do such things."

To which Dropti promptly retorted, "This decision is mine and my husband is supporting me."

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Despite the brave front she puts up for the world, a certain anxiety always prevails. Dropti says, "*Mujhe to neend nahi aa paati aaj kal. Raat bhar jagi rehti hu ki kya hoga nateeja.* (I am unable to sleep through the night thinking about the results)."

Ansuiya Bai of Mohti Village consoles her saying, "*Nateeja chaahe jo bhi ho par chunaav me itne bade pad ke liye ladna hi apne aap mein ek badi baat hai, didi.* (Whatever be the result, just fighting in the election for such a post is in itself commendable)."

However, Dropti's aspirations for herself and for the Federation are higher. She dreams of a larger victory, a more equal system of governance, a bigger impact. The election this time was postponed by at least a fortnight. The date announced earlier was 7th and then was postponed to 22nd February 2015. Owing to this decision, the tension among the Federation members, as well as the candidates, increased and so also has the risk of the majority opinion shifting.

The women believe that the earlier the elections get over, the better it would be because with

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every passing day and week, public opinion is wavering. Women are employing smart strategies to campaign for Dropti—wherever they go they say, "*Is baar to Dropti ke taraf hi ja raha hai vote. Dropti hi jeetne wali hai. Usi ko vote dena.* (This time the votes are going in favour of Dropti. She will definitely win. Give her your vote)."

By tapping people's tendencies of 'going with the crowd' and 'casting their vote in favour of who wins', it seems like the crowd is quite convinced that Dropti is the 'rising sun'—just like her election symbol—for them. In many places, the people who are leading Dropti's publicity campaign are also faced with many challenges. For example, when the leaders, who are extending themselves voluntarily for this cause, go to village-level meetings, they will be faced with much ridicule.

This event has brought out the spirit of oneness and leadership among many of the leaders of the RDTMS such as Laxmi Bai of Chhindgaon, Geeta Bai of Ramhepur, Kasturi Bai of Madhopur, Godavari, Devki and Siya Bai of Barga, Maina Bai of Kikarjhar, Shyama, Sukko and Sarla Bai of Devalpur, Ansuiya Bai of Chapwar, Janki Bai of Mohgaon, Mamta, Sunita, Laxmi Bai of Samnapur, Kuwariya and Shyama Bai of Ghata, Shyama and Deepa Bai of Harsinghari, Ansuiya and Chaiti Bai of Mohti, Sukarti and Gomti Bai of Bamhani, Ketki and Ramkali Bai of Tikariya, Anita Bai of Kuraili.

The confidence and energy of these women has emerged as a beacon of undying support during the elections. Phula Bai of Sunderpur, a particularly vocal leader of the Federation, faced a reaction from her own village-folk who said, "*Tum log ko to paisa milta hoga yeh sab kehne ke liye; par humko kya doge?* (You

all must be getting money for this.)" And, "Ab tak kahan thi jo aaj yeh sab prachar me lagi ho? (Where were you until now?)"

She was particularly hurt by these comments and retorted, "Aaj tak tum log ne mujhe mauka kahan diya hai, agar bolte to tumhara bhi saath de sakti thi. (You haven't given the space till now, if you would have said earlier, I could have supported you)." Keeping up the Federation's 'no-frills-for-vote' principle has been a tough challenge in an environment where everything has a price.

Threats from other financially powerful and socially influential people to take back her form have started to come her way but she has put up a strong front. The response from the village is mixed. Also, where the Federation has its stronghold in terms of leaders or SHG members, there is greater acceptance among the villagers and campaigning is supported heavily due to their efforts at mobilizing the masses. But in the villages where people don't yet know of her, the leaders wonder how effective their door-to-door, low-cost methods will be.

Dropti has a support system in the tireless volunteers who are committed to the cause of seeing their candidate win the election in the face of corruption and bureaucracy. In a time when money can buy most things, especially public opinion, this victory would mark the ascent of an honest, replicable and value-driven process; one which can be followed by any ordinary person.

With the support of the Federation staff, the leaders have decided to hold exclusive *mahila gram sabhas* to campaign for Dropti. She has a support system in the tireless volunteers who are committed to the cause of seeing their candidate wins the election in the face of corruption and bureaucracy. In a time when money can buy most things, especially public opinion, this victory would mark the ascent of an honest, replicable and value-driven process; one which can be followed by any ordinary person.

Finally, the participation of women in the elections has opened another door to freedom. Women's entry into the political sphere is sure to create an inroad into the dense, inescapable jungle of bureaucracy, which envelops us. With a hope of greater awareness, articulation and access to the very system that governs their existence in many ways, this step hopes to bring about a positive difference in the governance structure of Dindori today.

The Community Score Card – A Tool to Improve Service Delivery

BHAWANA MISHRA

Using a way of assessment and scoring that is inclusive, open and transparent, and jointly working out a possible solution with the community and the Service Provider, to make the running of government schemes more effective and accountable, and improving service delivery is what the correct use of the Community Score Card promises

Shakuntala Mahali of Jabor village, Jhalda 2 Block, Purulia, could not control her emotions as she jubilantly showed her receipt for the 2 kg of rice received for the first time from the Fair Price Shop (FPS).

“Earlier getting the full ration from the FPS was impossible; now our *didis* have made it possible. We used to fight with the dealer, who would give us 1.5 kg of rice or even less. There would always be shortage of kerosene and sugar, and the rations given to one card holder would be different from those given to another. Until now!”

Often, during Cluster meetings, SHG members would speak about the problems they faced due to the inefficient running of the government schemes and institutions. Some Clusters had also brought these issues to the delivery agencies, and requested for improvement, but had failed to make any impact on a long-term basis. The women were not really aware of the actual provisions under the various government schemes. They would fight with the Service Providers (SPs), put pressure on them to mend their ways, but to no avail.

In one case, 35 women from Simani village went to the teacher of the primary school complaining about the quality of the mid-day meal provided to the children. The women members were very angry and threatened the teacher, “You are not providing good meals to our children. There are no green vegetables, no egg and there is only soya bean *khichari*. You have to improve the quality otherwise you will face dire consequences.”

The women left in a rage and the school teacher seemed quite petrified by the threats of the women. The quality of the food improved for a few days but soon it was back to square one. No significant change took place in the delivery system of the government schemes. The approach by the women largely remained in the fault-finding mode and, consequently, they felt frustrated and hopeless that the situation would never change and their life would remain the same.

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In October 2013, under the Fight Hunger First Initiative (FHFI) programme, a training programme was organized by the Welt Hunger Hilfe (WHH) introducing the Community Score Card (CSC). The training was attended by Community Resource Persons (CRPs) and PRADAN professionals. It educated the participants on how to use CSC to improve the delivery of government services.

CSC, as the name suggests, is a tool with which the community and the service provider can assess various schemes, score these on different indicators, and then jointly work out the possible solution to make the scheme more effective. The basic assumption on which CSC works is that the community becomes aware of the various schemes and programmes, and works with the SP to improve service delivery.

The PRADAN team, along with CRPs, decided that the CSC exercise could be piloted in one *panchayat* of Jhalda 2 block. Manjhidi *panchayat* was selected because most of the CRPs who attended the training programme were from there. A discussion was initiated in the Simani Cluster of the *panchayat*, in which SHG members decided to use the tool in three services—that is, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the

primary school and the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Three trainers are required to conduct a CSC exercise, that is, a Moderator, who facilitates the CSC; a Scribe, who documents the proceedings; and a Coordinator. Trainers are chosen from the CRPs, who have been trained to perform the required roles and are selected at the Cluster level. Before conducting a CSC, a meeting with the community representatives is held, to explain the purpose and the benefits of the CSC exercise. Trainers collect the basic data (population, services being provided, poverty profile, social profile, service usage statistics, etc.) from the community and decide upon the inputs to be tracked.

Before having the CSC filled, trainers and members need to visit the centre and make a detailed list of the available services by asking the community members and the service provider.

This step is called the Input Tracking Scorecard. This process is very crucial. In Bagda village, trainers themselves were not aware about the progress of ICDS. And because the members had very little awareness about the scheme, many indicators were left out. So the final scores for ICDS in the village were good even when the condition of the *aanganwadi* was bad because the scores were given by *aanganwadi* workers as well as the community.

The next step is scoring by the community, in which the community gives scores to various indicators. Initially, it can be complicated to find indicators, especially with inexperienced beneficiary groups. This is often triggered by a lack of information about their rights and entitlements. So the role of the moderator is

also to make the beneficiaries aware of what they could actually demand from SPs. For each indicator, the group agrees on one number and determines the reason for that as well as the solution. At the end of the scoring process, they have to have a consensus on the scores. This enables the women to state their opinions in the interface meeting as well.

Similarly, a scoring is done separately with SPs, where they score themselves, based on the indicators that they have listed.

The process is followed by an interface between the two parties, that is, the beneficiary and the SP, by which the parties come to a common scoring of the indicators and prioritize the indicators with low scores (less than 3 on a scale of 1–5). The process mostly triggers much discussion because the SP usually

Several implementation issues such as delays in wage payment, the complexity of the payment process and the lack of accountability of frontline functionaries have come to the fore, over the last nine years of the programme's existence

overestimates the quality of the service. Big differences appear even between two beneficiary groups because their perceptions of the indicators may vary. Often the SPs are shocked or become angry. In such a case, it is the moderator's task to reassure them.

Finally, each score below four requires an Action Plan, made jointly by the community and the SP.

There is then a follow-up in the Cluster. The representatives from the Cluster regularly meet with the SP and appraise her/him of the service delivery system for its effectiveness. The follow-up encompasses several actions and it is crucial to check whether the planned actions are being implemented or not and if not, to determine what the obstacles are in its implementation.

Table 1: Indicators Identified by the Community

Public Delivery System (PDS)	ICDS	Primary School
Days of opening of FPS	Infrastructure facilities at and cleanliness of the centre	Number of teachers appointed
Per capita allocation of food grains (quantity)	Quality of food for pregnant women and children	Attendance of teachers
Quality of food grains	Quantity of food for pregnant women and children	Attendance of students
Board display (rate and quantity) at the FPS	Quality of education	Distribution of school dress
Issue of receipts	Provision of drinking water	Provision of drinking water
The FPS owner's way of dealing with the card holders	Play-game options for kids	Sanitation facility for the students
Allocation of ration cards (exclusion-inclusion factor)	Time duration of the Centre	Quality of education
Role of the Vigilance Committee	Aanganwadi Worker's (AWW) way of caring for children	Provision of games for students

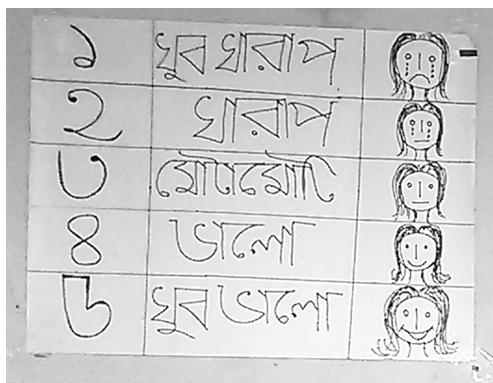
CONDUCTING CSC FOR ICDS IN SIMANI VILLAGE

Another CSC was conducted in Simani village. This time, the trainers were well prepared and the community was aware of the scheme. The participants were all beneficiaries; the SPs were not present in the exercise. The meeting began with the introduction of the objective of the meeting—how the scheme could be better implemented with the involvement of the SP. The beneficiaries were divided into sub-groups of 8–10, which discussed aspects of the programme.

The moderator began by asking about the purpose of ICDS. The beneficiaries believed that it was for giving children *khichari*. When asked what purpose the *khichari* served, the participants answered, "For giving *pushti* (nutrition) to the children." On being asked whether *pushti* alone is sufficient for children's good health, the women said that good food, physical activity, vaccination and hygiene were all required to have healthy children.

The discussion helped beneficiaries list the indicators on which to assess the service. Good infrastructure, water facility, providing nutritious food (including eggs), physical activity, opening of an *aanganwadi* centre, behaviour of the ICDS worker, maintenance of hygiene, a monthly weighing facility, medical provisions for pregnant women, etc., were all important indicators. Based on the discussions, the moderator listed all the issues mentioned and assisted the group in organizing these into measurable performance indicators. All these points were noted on a chart paper and each indicator prioritized with the help of the beneficiaries.

The moderator then helped the group to give a relative score for each indicator on a scale of 1–5, where five is 'very good' and one



କ୍ଷେତ୍ର ନାମ	କାରକ	ସେବା	ସମାପନ	ଅନ୍ୟାନ୍ୟ
ଓପେନିଂ ଟାଇମ୍	2	ଶ୍ରାବଣ ବସ୍ତାବୁ ହାତ ନେଇ କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ
ଶ୍ରାବଣ ବସ୍ତାବୁ	3	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ
କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ	2	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ
କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ	2	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ
କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ	1	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ
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କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ	1	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ	କାର୍ଯ୍ୟକ୍ରମ ହେଉଛି କି ନାହିଁ

Score Card by the Community

means 'very bad'. A discussion was also held on how these scores could be improved. After the whole process was over, the group fixed a date for the interface meeting.

The team of trainers did a similar scoring with the SPs (in the case of ICDS, it was the *aanganwadi* worker and the cook). The SP was asked about the provisions under ICDS and what the responsibilities of the ICDS workers were. The SP also made some points such as good infrastructure, water facility, home visits, weighing the children, good food, etc. The indicators were prioritized, as was done with the beneficiaries, and the SP scored each category on a scale of 1–5. It was seen that there were some indicators which the community did not include and some others that the SP didn't consider.

କ୍ର. ନଂ	ସେବା ପ୍ରଦାନକାରୀ	ପିଲାମାନଙ୍କ	ସମୟ
1	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି	5
2	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
3	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
4	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
5	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
6	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
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8	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
9	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
10	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
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12	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
13	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
14	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
15	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
16	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
17	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
18	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
19	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5
20	ସମସ୍ତ ପିଲାଙ୍କୁ ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	ନିୟମିତ ଭାବେ ଖୁରାକି ନାହିଁ	5

Scorecard by the Service Provider

Initially, the SP was unwilling to co-operate and we, therefore, approached the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) for a written order to the SP to participate in the Community Scoring Process.

The interface meeting was held at an ICDS centre, in which the beneficiaries, the SP, the cook in the ICDS centre and the trainers participated. The two scorecards prepared with the help of the beneficiaries and the SPs were displayed on the wall. A separate space was provided where, after consensus, a final score would be given for the various indicators. There was some confrontation between the two parties but eventually a CSC was made, and after that an Action Plan was prepared for indicators scored at 3 or below.

INTERFACE OF THE COMMUNITY AND THE SP AT MANJHIDI PANCHAYAT

The Manjhidi *panchayat* has 10 ICDS centres. After the scoring of each centre, it was evident that there was no uniformity in the services provided at these centres. In some Action

Plans, it was decided that three eggs would be given to the children in one week whereas in some centres the decision was to give four or five eggs. Similarly, there were many other indicators such as the timings of the ICDS centre, the home visits by ICDS workers, the pre-schooling timings, etc., in which there was no uniformity.

Clearly, there are many variations even within one *panchayat*. A *panchayat*-level interface was conducted wherein all the ICDS SPs, the beneficiaries, the Asha worker, the Cluster representative, the CDPO and the village *pradhan* participated.

The CDPO spoke about the various provisions under the ICDS programme. There were many confrontations between the beneficiaries and the ICDS workers as well as between the ICDS workers and the CDPO. Again, the members pointed out the differences in the number of eggs given to the children in the different ICDS centres. Discussions revealed that this was so because of the price of eggs. Only Rs 3.25 was allotted for the purchase of eggs whereas the actual cost of an egg was Rs 5.

The process also allowed ICDS workers to share their problems with the community and the CDPO. Finally, they came up with a common plan for weighing children, the provision of eggs, the timings of the centres, the home visits and pre-schooling.

The preparation of the Action Plan after the interface meeting is quite crucial for translating plans into actions and, thereby, into results. The delegation of responsibilities for Cluster leaders, the beneficiaries and SPs is also important for improving the efficiency of the service delivery mechanism. In Simani, Marlong and Karumama, the Cluster was assigned the task of improvement of infrastructure; the beneficiaries were asked to

send their children on time; and the AWW was asked to improve the quality of food.

Although the quality of food and the timings of the *aanganwadi* centre improved tangibly, little initiative was observed in improving the building infrastructure and education of children between 3 and 5 years.

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for the same indicators. Also, the community discussed other issues of pre-school hygiene, home visits, meeting of mothers, unlike earlier where the main issue was food and the provision of eggs. The Community was now more aware about ICDS and the villages were taking an active part in streamlining the systems along with the ICDS workers.

Changes after the CSC interface:

- ♦ Regularity in taking the weight of children
- ♦ Rice was cooked well and served. This tool not only helped in revealing the actual quality of the service delivery to the community but the SP also got a fair glimpse of the community's expectations from the scheme. During the Cluster exercise in Marlong, the leaders vehemently opposed the under-cooked meals being served to children at the *aanganwadi* centre.
- ♦ Inclusion of eggs (almost all the ICDS centres)
- ♦ Mothers also became aware that the ICDS had a learning programme as part of its agenda for children and that the ICDS workers needed to teach the children using games. The mothers also discussed these agendas in the Cluster meetings, as well as with ICDS workers.
- ♦ The community also felt the need to have a well-maintained ICDS centre (renovation work started in six ICDS centres).

The first interface was held in February 2014 and the second in January 2015. In the second interface, the whole process was initiated and conducted by the community. In the second round, the community gave higher scores

Like Manjhidi *panchayat*, SHGs from Begunkodar *panchayat* have also worked with the 19 ICDS centres in their *panchayat* to bring about positive change.

CONDUCTING THE CSC FOR THE PDS

In January 2014, PRADAN organized two orientation trainings on Targeted Public Delivery System (TPDS) for 82 SHG representatives, covering 16 villages of Manjhidi *panchayat*. The main focus of this programme was to develop awareness on the rights of households under PDS. Following the training, these representatives ranked the quality of this service delivery at their village level (0–5 scale). The Cluster leaders visited the local leaders and FPS dealers to understand their perspective on PDS, and recorded their responses.

Following this, an interface meeting of the community leaders and local FPS dealers was organized by the Cluster leaders for finalizing constructive measures towards the improvement of this service delivery. The interface was planned directly at the *panchayat* level because one dealer caters to around 5,000 cards (households). A meeting was called at the *panchayat* level, wherein one member of each SHG in the *panchayat*, the four dealers, the *gram sabha pradhan*, the Block Food Inspector (BFI) and the District Food

Controller (DFC) were invited. Male members were also called to participate because, usually, they fetch the ration from the PDS shop.

On 16 February, almost 250–300 people assembled near the *panchayat* bhawan. The Cluster representatives arranged a *pandal*, a microphone and mats for the people. However, none of the dealers turned up for the meeting. The women, then, with the help of the *gram pradhan*, went to each dealer and again requested them to attend the meeting. After much cajoling, the dealers agreed to participate.

The SHG members shared the objective of the meeting and assured the dealers that the meeting was not to find fault with their work but to share with each other what the issues were and how these issues could be resolved to make the programme more effective. After the introduction, the moderator displayed the chart papers scored by the dealers as well as the SHGs.

Whereas the SHGs had given a scoring of one or two for most of the indicators, the dealers had given a scoring of four or five. As the discussion proceeded, the dealers began to leave the venue saying that they were not answerable to the community and that they would not sit in the meeting until the officials from the block or district were present. The situation became chaotic because the officers who were meant to attend the meeting were in another meeting. However, after an hour or so, both the BFI as well as the DFC arrived at the venue. The dealers then quietened down.

There were eight indicators on which the FPS had been scored and these were—the fixed day and time of opening of the FPS, the per capita allocation of rations (quantity), the quality of the food grains, the board display of the rate and the quantity of rations at the FPS,

receipt slips, the FPS owner's behaviour with the beneficiaries, the allocation of ration cards (the exclusion-inclusion factor) and the role of the Vigilance Committee.

The SHG members complained that they did not get the allocated 2 kg of rice or the allocated rations, to which the dealers responded that they get 1.6–1.8 kg of rice per card. The DFC admitted that he also received less rations from the government. An Action Plan was then made that at least a receipt be given to the ration card holders for the amount of ration being given to them so that they have proof of the same. Discussions were held on other issues too, and likewise Action Plans for those indicators were also made during the meeting.

After the meeting, SHG members were very happy when they, for the first time, got pink colour receipts from the dealer. They also shared that the amount of rations had increased from 1.2 to 1.6 kg.

PUBLIC HEARING FOR THE PDS

As the days passed by, some of the dealers again began creating problems and did not abide by the Action Plans they had earlier agreed to. The matter came up at the Cluster meeting and the members discussed the issue. The dealers had apparently said that if anyone wanted a receipt, half a kilogramme of rice would be deducted from their rations. The SHG members had tried to resolve the issue with the dealers but the situation only worsened.

At the same time, in the FFHI project, PRADAN was to conduct a public hearing. We decided to bring up the issue of PDS at that hearing. On the one hand, this would showcase the changes that had taken place with the CSC in some of the FPSs and, on the other hand, it

would highlight the issues being faced by the people in the other FPS.

With the support of WHH, a village-level hearing was organized in April 2014 in five villages of Manjhidi and Begunkodar *gram panchayat*, which was quite effective; the community participated in the programme and shared their concerns. After that, a district-level workshop was to be organized to share the findings of the public hearing with the media and the concerned government officials. Unfortunately, permission could not be granted because of the election process.

Instead a block-level public hearing was planned, which was to be attended by the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Civil Society Organization (CSO) and the community. Also, there was a plan to have an interface with the SPs during the hearing. However, this was a big task. From April to December, we, along with the community, went from block to district to get a date from the BDO and the other officials but our request fell on deaf ears. Their excuse was, "We are busy. Come after 15–20 days." It was quite obvious that they did not want to be in the public hearing where the people from the media and the community could question them.

Finally, after several months, the BDO gave us a date and the public hearing was scheduled for January 2015. The event was planned and the invitations sent to all the concerned people—the media, NGOs, Federation board members from the Barabazaar and Jhalda1 Block, PDS dealers, SHG members, etc. Resource persons were also called in from Kolkata to conduct the public hearing.

The effect of CSC and the public hearing are so visible that the women from other panchayats are also showing interest in learning and conducting CSC in their areas

As planned, the public hearing started in the presence of the BDO. Many issues were discussed during the meeting, in which both parties, that is, PDS dealers and members from the community were present. The meeting was well appreciated by all and resolutions were made to

better the PDS in the block, and to check the loopholes. The hearing had a great impact, not only on the functioning of the PDS but also on ICDS and primary schools, where CSC has been conducted.

The effect of CSC and the public hearing are so visible that the women from other panchayats are also showing interest in learning and conducting CSC in their areas.

Changes observed in PDS after CSC:

- ◆ SHG members became aware and informed about their entitlements, (covering quality, quantity and the transparency component)
- ◆ Greater accountability was enforced on dealers, both by the community and the Regional Food Control Officer.
- ◆ Three dealers started putting up information boards (after the interface meeting).
- ◆ Beneficiaries began to receive purchase/receiving slip from FPS owners.
- ◆ The per capita allocation of rice and wheat flour increased.
- ◆ FPS started opening on four days a week.

IMPACT OF CSC

- ◆ Has encouraged women's participation in demanding their entitlements and

improving service quality. This exercise has helped immensely to enhance the awareness of the community, especially women, about various social security schemes.

- ♦ Has been possible to have a holistic assessment of schemes because it prompts the community to select a number of indicators for evaluation of the service.
- ♦ Has provided a space for interface between the SP and the beneficiaries on several indicators. Although, this exercise causes confrontation between the SP and the beneficiaries, both get ample space to share or justify their positions. The role of the moderator becomes immensely important here to move forward with togetherness.
- ♦ Has helped in building awareness about people's rights and entitlements about various schemes

In conclusion, the CSC is an effective tool, wherein the community and the SPs interact directly with each other and jointly make an Action Plan for smooth functioning of the service. The scorecard helps them look out for various aspects of the scheme and helps

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them think of all the indicators of the scheme. The tool helps in generating larger awareness about the programme and also helps the community to understand its responsibility in improving the system. For example, for the smooth functioning of ICDS, it was imperative that the parents send their children regularly and also that the parents bring their children to the centres for timely vaccines.

During the CSC process, the community has also realized that their demands have always been on tangible things such as whether eggs are being provided or whether children are provided meals; they did not pay attention to the qualitative aspects such as having regular parent-teacher interaction or ensuring home visits by the ICDS worker.

Of course, conducting a CSC is not without challenges. Before conducting the CSC, trainers as well as community representatives need to be aware about various indicators of the service and also aware of the needs of the community so that the Action Plan is made after considering all the indicators of the programme, rather than only the visible indicators.

Community Resource Persons: Extending Boundaries

NARESH KUMAR NAIN

Undergoing an intense and in-depth training programme, which provides the required exposure and awareness while enhancing confidence, CRPs emerge with the wherewithal to deal with various situations, having developed their articulation and facilitating skills.

Seema is a high-caste Thakur woman, and this is what she regrets the most. As far as she is concerned, being born to a Thakur family is a curse. It has restricted her freedom to such an extent that she is unable to visit her land or go to fetch water to the nearby well or hand pump. Societal norms are so rigid that she, being from the Thakur community, has had to always remain confined within the four walls of her home and to depend on her husband completely. She has three children and it has been difficult for her and her husband to make a living with the produce from the small piece of land that he has inherited from his parents.

Life has been restrictive for her husband as well. Being from a high caste, he could not work as labour to meet his family's needs. Seema's plight was no different from any other poverty-stricken woman of any other community; unlike them, however, she could not contribute to her family by working. When she joined the SHG and dared to step out of her house, she was prepared to bear her husband's wrath.

She would often come to the PRADAN office along with the other SHG members on some pretext or the other. She would extend herself to other SHG members and actively participate in Cluster meetings. She was selected as a Community Resource Person (CRP) by her Cluster members for her active role as a Cluster leader and for extending herself for the cause of the SHG and the Cluster. She would visit other villages; thanks to her veil, her identity was protected. Her fellow SHG members supported her and were with her when she decided to tell her husband about her first earnings as CRP.

Today, Seema, all of 34 years old, has visited many places without her husband and has gone beyond the boundaries of her home, village and even the district, and has stayed in some far-off places, while her husband takes care of their home and children because she is the main bread-earner of the family. This has been an amazing transformation for Seema. She has moved from being confined to the four walls of her

Seema, all of 34 years old, has visited many places without her husband and has gone beyond the boundaries of her home, village and even the district, and has stayed in some far-off places, while her husband takes care of their home and children because she is the main bread-earner of the family

home to working selflessly to motivate and create awareness among the women of her village and Cluster. With her strong will and determination, she has broken and challenged societal mould and norms.

BACKGROUND

Dholpur, in Rajasthan, is located between two big cities, that is, Agra and Gwalior. Barely 250 km from Delhi, Dholpur district is struggling to free itself from the shackles of the feudal society in which it is trapped. The district, once infamous for Chambal dacoits, is located in one corner of Rajasthan and is surrounded by two other states, making it an easy escape for anti-social elements, who continue their notorious activities in the area. There is a huge caste divide in Dholpur, and the women struggle to find and establish their identity.

When PRADAN started its operations in Dholpur 15 years ago and the team started going to villages to form SHGs, the professionals would often face the brunt of the community, which sometimes even dared them to enter their villages. Gradually though, the team has been able to mobilize the community. Initially, however, more often than not, SHGs would become defunct and the main reason would be the interference of men.

The team realized that the community in Dholpur had no trust in PRADAN and it would be difficult to do any work over a sustained period. As a strategy, it was decided to involve SHG members from Alwar district, where PRADAN had been involved in institution building. These members were invited to Dholpur, where they shared the experiences that had helped them as a community. This opened up a space, in which a sense of trust started building between the community at Dholpur and the PRADAN team.

During 2002–06, PRADAN implemented the District Poverty Initiatives Programme (DPIP), extending itself to other blocks and interior areas, promoting women's SHGs and Clusters, and grooming the Federation. Many SHGs and Clusters were formed during that time. Many bright women benefitted by being members of SHGs and its associated tiers, and by joining the Livelihoods programme. These women were assertive, socially motivated, and happy to extend themselves and share their positive experiences with others. The team realized that some of these women could be encouraged to become resource persons, to reach out to a larger number of families in the area.

The women were then chosen, trained and groomed to act as CRPs for scaling up the SHG and the Livelihoods programme, in the areas where the team was working. At present, more than 80 per cent of the SHGs promoted in Dholpur are formed, nurtured and groomed by these women CRPs.

Initially, CRPs were selected by the team; however, in order to bring in greater transparency, they are now selected through a screening process, which includes:

- ◆ Identifying potential CRPs at the SHG and Cluster members
- ◆ Forwarding their names to the Federation
- ◆ Holding a screening workshop at the Federation level
- ◆ Identifying some key skills—expressiveness, communication, participatory approaches, attitude, behaviour and belief
- ◆ Conducting a socio-metric process by the peer group
- ◆ Holding a detailed discussion and seeking the consent of the CRP

GROOMING CRPS

CRPs are the key persons for scaling up SHGs and the Livelihoods programme. PRADAN, therefore, has a stringent training programme for them. The training programmes provide the required exposure, awareness and also

enhance the confidence of the CRPs in various situations. Many women, who would shy away earlier, have developed the ability now to articulate their views well and have good facilitating skills. The training programmes also provide CRPs an opportunity for cross-learning. Their exposure to various stakeholders and the nature of the programmes contribute to their technical and soft skill development. Regular trainings are conducted for CRPs on group dynamics, facilitation and communication skills, and gender sensitization. Training programmes are also held to make CRPs aware of various issues and government schemes.

This wider understanding of various issues helps CRPs spread awareness of these issues among women. CRPs encourage SHG and Cluster members to talk about their lives and livelihoods, and the social and political environment around them.

CRP TRAINING PROGRAMME

- ◆ Concept, overview, basic premises (identification) and role of CRPs
- ◆ Orientation on participatory identification of the poor or the target poor for a project, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques and social mapping, wealth ranking (well-being ranking)
- ◆ Group processes and SHG overview
- ◆ Orientation and workshops on processes—systems, governance and management of SHGs
- ◆ Workshop on group development processes and facilitation processes
- ◆ Training and orientation on gender
- ◆ Training and orientation on Achievement Motivation
- ◆ Training of CRPs on Cluster development—concept, promotion and the role of the Cluster
- ◆ Leadership training—leadership concept, qualities of social leaders and the role of social leaders
- ◆ Training on Vision building for SHGs

State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM) and CRPs

Dholpur is part of the Rajasthan Rural Livelihoods Programme (RRLP). Under RRLP, the Rajasthan Grameen Aajeevika Vikas Parishad (RGAVP) approached the Federation Saheli (Sangh for Empowerment and Livelihood) for deploying CRPs in the state, for social mobilization and institution building. World Bank and RRLP officials visited Dholpur and met the Federation members, visited SHGs in the field area, and interacted with the CRPs. After the visit, RRLP and the World Bank gave the PRADAN team in Dholpur a proposal to evaluate whether the existing resources could be deployed in expanding the RRLP programme in Dholpur as well as in the other districts.

This was a new opportunity for the Federation as well for the CRPs, who would earn a significant amount during their engagement with RRLP. Yet, interestingly, the team was apprehensive because the engagement with RRLP would mean that CRPs would have to leave their home for 15 days at a stretch, travel to various areas and stay in unknown villages to promote SHGs. However, all apprehensions faded when Federation members unanimously expressed that they would be happy to engage in this. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Federation and the Government of Rajasthan, in which it was agreed that the Federation would deploy CRPs for eight trips of 15-day duration each in a calendar year. The CRPs deployed would, in turn, contribute Rs 100 per day to the Federation towards their engagement as CRPs in RRLP.

The CRP team would have to go a village in a Cluster and take up intensive social mobilization and institution building activities. They would be required to stay in the village and be responsible for taking up activities such as identifying the marginalized poor and organizing them into SHGs, provide basic training on meeting processes and management norms

Discussions were held in the Federation on the suitability of the CRPs because the agreement required the members to stay away from their families for more than 15 days at a stretch. Such members who were able to do this and were experienced in training and grooming SHGs were considered for CRP selection by the Executive Committee of the Federation. Initially, the Federation selected 50 CRPs. Of these, 20 CRPs were selected for Dausa district and 30 for Dholpur district.

A four-day refresher training, including PRA and Participatory Learning Approach (PLA) techniques, was conducted with all CRPs so that they could work effectively with the new developmental agenda. The CRPs were eager to learn new skills and sought each other's feedback in honing their skills when developing an understanding of the programme.

RRLP officials were also present in the training, wherein they shared the objectives, strategies and the target for the projects. RRLP district officials and the facilitation team members provided a list of villages and shared the logistical arrangements with the CRPs. A five-member team of CRPs was chosen for documentation. They were to be helped by a *munshi* (accountant).

The CRP team would have to go a village in a Cluster and take up intensive social mobilization and institution building activities. They would be required to stay in the village and be responsible for taking up activities such as identifying the marginalized poor and organizing them into SHGs, provide basic training on meeting processes and

management norms, and provide training to the existing SHGs on best practices, identify book-keepers through SHGs and provide training on book-keeping, and also identify two or three active women volunteers and provide basic orientation during their 15-day stay in the village.

In the resource village, the women would talk with the villagers informally, and do transect walks in order to understand the village. After establishing a good rapport with the villagers, they would arrange for a meeting in the village

take the responsibility of the women's safety.

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SHG Promotion in RRLP

With this mission in mind, the CRPs set out for unknown destinations, leaving their families behind for two weeks, with the dream of organizing those women, who are left out, poor and unaware. One CRP recalled her experience, "We ate together, we slept together and we shared our concerns, sorrows and problems and we laughed together. We have become best friends now." Another CRP spoke of how they shared their responsibilities and tasks when preparing their meals and managing other logistics in the village.

Initially, the CRPs were assisted by the RRLP team, which would ensure that the logistics were arranged and the safety of the women was ensured. The CRPs stayed at the Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra (RGSK) in the villages to begin with. However, the women felt unsafe staying there because these RGSKs were far from all habitation. In one incident, in a village in Dholpur some miscreants went to the RGSK and started passing lewd remarks at the CRPs. The Federation and the RRLP teams and the village leaders were immediately informed and the villagers took prompt action. But the incident was cause to reconsider the safety of the women. The issue was discussed in the Federation; it was decided that women CRPs would not stay at the RGSK and that arrangements needed to be made for their stay in the house of a villager, who would

During the process, they would also ensure the participation of *aanganwadi* workers, school teachers, *sarpanches*, *sachivs*, etc., to get a better understanding of issues and build understanding with the existing institutions, which would then be able to support them to work in a more effective manner in the village.

Each team did PRA exercises, including social mapping, resource mapping and wealth ranking in the villages, and documented the whole process. This was handed over to the block unit. The CRPs educated the new SHG members about the norms of SHGs, the importance of regular and timely meetings, and regular savings and credit, book-keeping, etc.

The CRPs also focused on the larger development agenda of SHGs as a solidarity building and sharing platform for women. They shared with the members of the newly formed SHGs their own experiences and how their SHGs had played a role in building their confidence. They explained that being a part of the SHGs has not only helped them when they needed the finance but also has given them the space where they can freely interact with each other. The women spoke on various issues such as the *aanganwadi*, mid-day meals in the school, PDS and health, which would then evoke further discussions among the members on the issues that affect women. The CRPs shared that SHGs and Clusters

are platforms where a women could come together and extend support to each other and also work together to achieve larger goals.

In yet another incident, the CRPs showed their courage and strength when one of them was teased by high-caste hooligans in a village. The fellow CRPs immediately called a meeting in the village and created social pressure on the villagers, who reprimanded the hooligans. The CRPs made it clear that in no way would they tolerate such type of incidents and also sensitized the women in the village not to succumb to any such atrocities and to fight for their dignity.

Although the CRPs were not literate, they did have experience on their side. They were always surrounded by the women of the village, who would listen to their stories and feel motivated to form their own SHGs. All this had such a good effect that though each team had a target of forming eight SHGs, they would often form SHGs in the range 10–20 per village.

The experience of social mobilization and institution building with RRLP turned out to be worthwhile because CRPs were able to put forth their experience and were able to contextualize the socio-political environment in the village. Being from the same or nearby districts also helped CRPs in building a relationship with the women because they spoke a common language and had the same culture. The partnership with RRLP is continuing and, at present, 125 CRPs are engaged with RRLP in Bharatpur, Ganganagar, Dausa, Pratapgarh, Bikaner and Dholpur districts of Rajasthan.

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CRPs Journey to Western Rajasthan

The Federation was then approached by Mitigating Poverty in Western Rajasthan (MPOWER), an International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD)-supported programme of the Government of Rajasthan, for capacity

building of SHGs, promoted under the programme and also to provide support in the capacity building of the community facilitators.

In July 2013, the Federation organized a three-day training programme in Dholpur for the Community Facilitators (CF) recruited by several NGOs working under the MPOWER project. The training was successful; their exposure to the SHGs, Cluster and Federation helped them visualize a state in which the women are independently running and managing their institutions as well enhancing their livelihoods through promoting various livelihood options.

The Federation was approached next by the Centre for Microfinance (CMF), a resource agency in the MPOWER project. It proposed that the Federation deploy CRPs and help in training CFs as well as provide capacity building training to SHGs promoted by the various NGOs under the MPOWER programme.

This time, however, the districts were in western Rajasthan whereas Dholpur is in the east of Rajasthan. So a team comprising the Federation leaders and CRPs visited the area to understand the context, issues, challenges and opportunities in the area. The SHGs were grappling with the same issues that they grapple with in different stages of group functioning. The visit provided insights

and also an assurance that CRPs could contribute in strengthening the SHG programme with MPOWER, and thus the Federation accepted the proposal.

In August 2013, the terms of reference (TOR) were signed between the Federation and the CMF, to strengthen the SHGs under the MPOWER projects. In the first phase, 18 CRPs were deployed in a three-member team along with a *munshi* for documentation, with the objective of strengthening SHG group processes and building the vision of SHG members through training programmes.

This time, during the visit to villages in Jodhpur, the CRPs were quite confident and were ready with their training kits comprising pictures and material for conducting games, chart paper, etc. During the refresher training, one CRP asserted, "Training to ganne se shuru hoti hai, khel khilane se or skit karwane se bahenjiyo ko sahi samajh me aata hai; apni samiti ki ILS bhi bahut upyogi hai. Group ki mahilayein swayam neeyam banati hai. Bhashan se kuchh nahi team hota. (Training starts with the song,

The process of training adopted by the CRPs was unique, both in terms of quality and content. The training programmes were held at the village level; each day, a CRP team would train two SHGs.

games and skits, which help the women relate better; our ILS—a pictorial handbook on SHGs—is very helpful. SHG members themselves make their norms. Speeches do not help.)" The CRPs also said that since they themselves were members of SHGs and have faced similar situations, the women found it easy to relate with them.

The process of training adopted by the CRPs was unique, both in terms of quality and content. The training programmes were held at the village level; each day, a CRP team would train two SHGs. Initially, the language was a little challenging for the CRPs; with time, they picked up local words and focused on connecting with participants. The CRPs would say, "Hum bhi aap jaisi bahene hain... hum bhi pahale kuchh nahi janti thi. Aaj SHG ke madhayam se hi hum yahan tak pahunche hai. (We are also like you...we too have faced similar situations and were unaware. Now, with the help of SHGs, we have reached this stage where we can extend and share our journey with you all)."

Institutions	No. of CRPs Deployed	Districts Covered	No. of SHGs Trained	No. of Families Covered
MPOWER (Rajasthan)	152	1. Barmer 2. Jodhpur, 3. Jaisalmer 4. Pali 5. Jalore	1,080	14,160
RRLP (Rajasthan)	125	1. Bikaner 2. Udaipur 3. Dungarpur 4. Jhalawar 5. Partapgarh	933	11,196
Total	277	10	2,013	25,356
Cluster Training under MPOWER	50	1. Sirohi 2. Jodhpur 3. Jalore	75	2,985

Many new games were designed by the CRPs during the training. Radha and Sashilata shared, "*Jab hamne 2-3 din tak lagaatar dekha ki wahan samooh khel se jyada seekh rahe hain team to hamne tapeli wala game wahan par naya suru kiya. Pehle hamne apas me raat ko charcha kari or pura abhyas kiya. Agle din woh game karvaya jise dekh mahilayein rone lagi aur phir samiti ne muddo par charcha shuru kari.* (When we observed that the women were learning more through games, we sat together in the evening and designed some games based on the issue and practised them. The next day we introduced the game and the women became so involved that they started crying. After the game, they discussed the issues in their SHG)."

The CRPs shared that it was more important to explain to villagers the meaning of an SHG. They described it as, 'being together, providing space to each member of the group and supporting each other in times of crises'. During the training programmes, they would ensure that SHG members could relate with each other and understand their responsibilities; once that was done, the women themselves would take on the onus of strengthening their SHGs.

After the training, one of the officials said, "We never expected CRPs to be of such high calibre. They exceeded our imagination and have done a remarkable job."

The work of the CRPs and the Federation has been widely appreciated by all partner-NGOs, officials from MPOWER and the resource agency, CME. The experience was unique and the staff said, "This is the first time that we are learning from the community; the way the CRPs have understood the issues and contextualized them is commendable."

Many shared that they have learned a new way of training and interacting with the community, "Here, the community itself comes up with the solution; the CRPs' role remains that of a facilitator or moderator."

THE WAY AHEAD

With the CRPs becoming exposed to different areas and places, they bring back new lessons from those places and work with these new ideas in their own village. For instance, when the CRPs went to the MPOWER project, they saw that in some villages, the villagers were doing works such as construction of sheds for goats and buffaloes, and land and water harvesting work, under MGNREGA. The CRPs shared this with the Cluster and Federation members, and have since approached the *panchayat* and the block administration in Sarmathura region for MGNREGA work.

At present, the Federation has 200 CRPs who, other than providing trainings and forming SHGs, are also the leaders; in the Village Committees and Clusters, more and more women are exposed to the work and are taking up leadership roles. They regularly groom other SHG members to take up leadership positions and are engaged in transformative roles.

With a pool of good CRPs, the team is thinking of working on issues of gender and governance. At present, the major focus of the team has been in promoting savings and credit, and livelihoods. Although there have been instances of women taking charge and working on the issues that affect their family and the village, the approach has mostly been incident driven. A systematic approach is being followed, wherein the Federation and the CRPs are being groomed to take on initiatives and work on bringing about a positive change in the self, fellow women and also in the larger socio-political scenario.

My Journey into Kishanganj

SUDARSHAN THAKUR

Realizing that there is no single approach to engaging with women in order to organize them into SHGs, the Kishanganj team found success when it was willing to let go of its biases and identified the pressing needs of the women in the Muslim-dominated hamlet, supporting them in the areas of health and nutrition before considering savings and credit

In mid-July 2013, one of my senior colleagues in Hazaribagh asked me whether I would like to work in Bihar. My instinctive reaction was a blunt reply, "No, I am not interested."

Later in the evening, back at my place, I began to brood over why he had asked me whether I wanted to move to Bihar. Was it because the organization had already decided to place me in Bihar? What if I was going to be asked to leave Hazaribagh where I had spent seven years of my life? What if I didn't like the new place and found it difficult to adjust to the new milieu? The 'what ifs' continued until I retired for the night.

The next morning, I felt quite agitated, now questioning why I was so troubled by the idea of leaving. I could not understand my apprehensions. There seemed to be a fear associated with moving away from my comfort zone. Not ready to face my fears, I told myself that it was because Jharkhand was the place where I wanted to spend the rest of my life, that there was no place as poor as Jharkhand and I could definitely make a difference here.

A month passed. While I was occupied with work, the thought of the possibility of having to leave Jharkhand continued to haunt me. One day, I came across a quote from Lao-Tzu which said, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be." Something shifted in me. I made up my mind to let go and not worry about something that had not yet happened. After another month, I finally got the call from our Head Office asking whether I would want to move to Bihar or Chhattisgarh.

I was surprised to find myself answering, “Yes, I am interested.”

I was asked to join the Kishanganj team in Bihar as soon as possible. I began to think of the area, its history, its geography, its culture, its society, its people as well as the issues of the area, the developmental challenges and the possibilities. The area seemed to be interesting and exciting. On 1 October 2013, I moved to Kishanganj to start my new stint in a completely different setting; I must admit I was very anxious and yet looking forward to it.

The first thing which caught my attention was the geographical location of the place. It is situated in the north-east corner of the state of Bihar, bordering West Bengal and Nepal. A narrow strip of West Bengal, about 20 km-wide separates it from Bangladesh. Small trading and the exchange of labour are the most crucial part of the economy for the people on both the sides of the border, especially with Nepal, which shares a porous border with India.

I had heard that there were cases of human trafficking and cross-border smuggling of narcotics, petroleum products, fertilizers, etc. Whereas there was no evidence of any of these on the surface, the continuous chaffing between the Shashastra Seema Bal (SSB) and the locals showed that everything was not quite well.

I would like to narrate the experience of my one year in Kishanganj and will attempt to draw a picture of it as I saw it.

First of all, I would like to share an interesting story about how the area had come to be known as ‘Kishanganj’. During the Mughal period, the area was a part of Nepal and was called Nepalgarh. On the instructions of the Mughal emperor, Mohammed Reza captured

the fort in Nepalgarh and the name was changed to Alamganj. During the period of the Khagada Nawab, Mohammed Fakiruddin, a Hindu saint arrived in the area. He was worn-out from his long travels and wanted to rest. But on hearing that the name of the place was Alamganj, that the river that flowed through it was called Ramzan and that the area was ruled by Fakiruddin, he refused to enter Alamganj and chose to stay on the outskirts. The Nawab, as a gesture of courtesy towards the holy man, announced that the portion of land from the Hindu saint’s place of rest to the river Ramzan would be known as Krishna-Kunj. Over the centuries, the area has come to be known as Kishanganj. This reflects the tradition of tolerance and respect for another culture and rituals that exists in the area.

The climate of Kishanganj is humid and the temperatures range from as high as 41°C in May to as low as 5°C in January. There are three seasons: winter, summer and monsoon. The average rainfall is 1800 mm, of which 80 per cent occurs during the monsoon. The main rivers of the district are the Mahananda and the Kankai that flow across the Kishanganj, Thakurganj, Kochadhamin, Bahadurganj, Dighalbank, Terhagachh and Kochadhamin blocks and the Mechi, the Ratwa, the Ram Chandra and the Kaul rivers flow across Thakurganj, Terhagachh and Kochadhamin.

The soil in the area is light, sandy loam to loam, and its physical range is 5.8 to 8.0 (mostly natural soil but some of it is slightly acidic and some slightly saline). The nutrients in the soil are low to medium, with a deficiency of zinc and phosphorus pent-oxide. The geographical area of the district is 1,93,855 ha, of which the total cultivable area is 1,73,574 ha and the total irrigated area is 27,018 ha. The irrigation facilities available in the district are mainly in the form of hand pumps, tube wells and wells. The land is divided into highlands (33,700

ha), medium-lands (50,700 ha) and lowlands (42,979 ha). The forest area of the district, which is merely six per cent, is mainly situated in the two blocks of Thakurganj and Terhagach.

As per the 2011 Census, the total population of Kishanganj is 1.69 million with approximately 90 per cent of the people residing in the rural areas. The population density of the district is 897 persons per sq km. The population growth in the last decade has been about 30 per cent. The sex ratio of the area stands at 950 female per thousand males. The child sex ratio stands at 971. The average literacy of the area is marginally over 55 per cent.

Situated in the north-eastern part of Bihar, the Surjapur region has adopted a distinct language over the years called Surjapuri, which is a combination of Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Oriya, Nepali, Rajbonshi and Maithili, and is recognized by the Government of Bihar as a special dialect. Although Surjapuri is the spoken language of the area, there is no information about the origin and history of Surjapuri. Some say that it has been spoken since the Mughal era whereas some say that the language came into existence during the British period. In fact, the term Surjapuri represents a community of people living in Surjapur area that sprawls over six districts, including four districts of Bihar, namely, Kishanganj, Katihar, Araria and Purnia, and districts of Uttar Dinajpur and Malda in West Bengal.

The district has diverse communities that dwell in the area. The Muslim population is 71 per cent of the total population. There are the Surjapuri Muslims and the Shershahbadi Muslims. Surjapuri Muslims are one of the

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initial settlers in the area whose origin can be traced to the western parts of the present state of Uttar Pradesh. They traditionally own land resources but there has been a gradual decline in their land-holding because people from other areas have brought their lands. They can trace their history back to the era of Nawabs; therefore, they have a sense of pride and are well-accepted among the Muslim and the Hindu

population of the area.

The Shershahbadi Muslims are considered to be progressive and diligent entrepreneurs. They are the last settlers in this area and are a part of the larger Sheikh community of Bihar and the Bedia community of Bengal. They still speak Bengali, but most can speak Hindi, which is the official language of Bihar. They are a community of settled agriculturists but as their population has grown and the lands have become fragmented, many have become landless, and now work as agricultural labour, daily wage labour, teachers and businessmen.

The Rajbongshi community claim to be the first settlers in the area and can be found in present lower Assam, Malda, Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal, Kishanganj in Bihar, Nepal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh. Their language is Rajbongshi and they also speak Surjapuri or Hindi. This community worships nature and is animist; in Kishanganj, however, they get subsumed as Hindus and can be seen worshipping Hindu deities although in their homes they still have animist symbols. Traditionally, they were landed, and agriculture was the main occupation. Due to a decline in land-holding, many families are landless and migrate to cities for skilled and unskilled work.

Mushars, also known as Rishidevs, are a Scheduled Caste community who have migrated from Darbhanga, Supoul and other areas of Bihar. Maithili is the primary language of this group. When the Mushar community immigrated to this area, they were given two or three decimals of land by the zamindars to build their homes. Neither the Mushars nor the zamindars have the power to sell the land. This type of land is known as the *baskit parcha*. The ownership of the land, however, remains with the zamindar. Mushars subsist mainly on wage labour and migration. The community is almost illiterate and struggles to survive. The landed families in the area prefer not to lease out their land to the Mushars for agriculture.

The Adivasis migrated from Jharkhand and parts of West Bengal around 70–80 years ago and live on the banks of rivers, towards the Nepal border. They settled on the land that belonged to the Bihar government or had arrangements of *baskit parcha* with the landlords. The striking feature of this Scheduled Tribe (ST) is that all groups—Santhal, Oraon and the others—are called Adivasis and are landless.

The tribal population in the area still speaks Santhali and Sadri. Their livelihood mainly depends on wage earnings and remittances from migration but many families have taken up agriculture by taking cultivable lands on lease. The main problem with this arrangement is that the lease is on a seasonal basis and the community is not assured whether it will get the land for the next season.

Education is a major problem although there has been a slight improvement in the literacy rate, owing to the presence of Christian

With such a wide diversity in the community profile, speaking many languages and dialects and having different historical backgrounds, the issues, challenges, aspirations and needs across the communities are diverse as well

missionaries in the area. Many tribal families have adopted Christianity and those who have not are quite sceptical of it, and their relations with the Christian families, is not amiable.

Apart from these major communities, there is a small population of other castes such as Basaks, Yadavs, Sadgops, Singhas, Brahmins, Gangais, Hanris, Chamars, Dusadhs, etc.,

who have come to settle here from other parts of Bihar and Bengal.

With such a wide diversity in the community profile, speaking many languages and dialects and having different historical backgrounds, the issues, challenges, aspirations and needs across the communities are diverse as well.

The PRADAN team, at the onset, tried to organize the community on the basis of issues prevailing in the area and left no stone unturned to mobilize the women into SHGs but met with little success. One of my colleagues was told by a 12-year-old boy, “In our community, women do not go outside of their household.” On numerous occasions during our interaction at the village level, women did not come out of their homes, preferring to peep at us from the safety of their homes while the men spoke to us. We faced arguments such as:

1. What can women do which we men can't do?
2. How can we trust you strangers and allow you to sit with our women?
3. Women in our area do not talk to strange men. How can you think of promoting groups with women?
4. Our women don't have any problems; we are the decision-makers, so talk to us.

With the area being largely Muslim, our own presumptions about the community became a hindrance in our work. We were prejudiced by the fundamentalist image created by the media and society.

We, therefore, started promoting SHGs with the Adivasis and the Mushars with whom we were comfortable. But we realized, over time, after we had promoted about 20 SHGs in 10 different villages, that the women of different communities did not interact with or relate to each other. With such a handicap, we wondered how we were going to build a community organization to take up multi-dimensional development challenges.

To have a larger impact, we realized we could not afford to overlook people from any caste, creed or religion. We, in fact, recognized that the population belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the STs was just 10 per cent of the total population, so just working with them would not bring about the cultural change that PRADAN, as an organization, was endeavouring for.

The men resisted the attempts to organize the women because they feared for the safety of their women. In Bandarjhula village in the Thakurganj block, two of my colleagues, Abhishek Kumar and Abhishek Kumar Gaurav, and I were sitting in a meeting to promote an SHG in the area. About 20 men from the Muslim community gathered around us and sat down.

As the discussion started, we tried to focus on the issues of the village—education, health, road connectivity, market infrastructure,

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basic livelihood needs for living a dignified life, social backwardness as well as political participation; the list was endless. It was important to focus on forming an SHG that would help address these issues. But it was difficult to hurry the villagers. After long-winded discussions with these men, we ultimately came to the conclusion that the hamlet needed to come together to deal with situations in the area.

We fixed a date for the meeting and asked the men to invite the women to the next meeting. As soon as we made this suggestion, there was a shift in their attitude. One of the women, who was a standing Ward Member of the Bandarjhula *panchayat*, tried to say something from a distance but was stopped by a man. We were categorically told, "It is not possible to have a meeting where men and women sit together. You are strangers; we cannot allow our women to sit with you on their own."

We were taken aback. Later, we realized that the situation of the women in other places was the same. Women are seen as possessions, whose honour has to be protected. We realized that such incidents were bound to happen anywhere, and this being a new place, the people would have reservations and suspicions. The apprehensions of the men included:

1. Why did we want to mobilize women?
2. How could multiple issues be dealt with by organizing women?
3. How could just common citizens bring about change?
4. How could change happen without

political will and the support of the administration?

These worries were further enhanced by our unease in approaching villages where people still doubted our objectives. We were clear that savings and credit alone would not lead to speedy mobilization because micro-finance institutions (MFIs) were already lending credit support to small groups formed by them. If we were to try to introduce the same principle for forming the SHG in an area like this, the idea would not be accepted.

We needed to recognize that there were multiple issues, and that savings and credit was just one of them. In fact, in most of the human development parameters, the district was far behind most of the regions of India. Only 10 per cent of the households had electricity and just a little more than five per cent of the people had closet latrines. Some of the villages had a Public Health Centre (PHC); however, institutional child delivery was less than nine per cent and only ten per cent of the children were vaccinated. Many of the villages were inaccessible during the rainy season and less than ten per cent of the villages were connected with all-weather roads. We needed, therefore, to introduce the women's collectives for large-scale mobilization, which would, in fact, build social capital to tackle the multi-faceted issues.

We were not sure of the processes to adopt that would lead to large-scale mobilization. We were also clueless about how to bring women out of their homes in the face of so much resistance from the men. We thought of organizing camps at the village level on the theme of the need for women to come together but were unable to figure out the

Over six months, we organized camps at the village level, conducted workshops with SHG members and organized transect walk events. These initiatives created excitement among the team members to move forward and build inroads into those areas and communities that we had not touched before

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Towards the end of August 2014, we discussed the need for community building with the existing members of the Laxmi Mahila Mandal of Bhendrani village of the Thakurganj block. We asked them whether they could arrange an event, to which more women could come and listen to their experience as SHG members. We believed that the onus of organizing camps or workshops should be in the hands of the existing SHG members so that they could feel ownership and could be made responsible for bringing the marginalized women of their village into the community fold. Frankly, we were concerned about whether these new SHG members could organize such an event without support; to our sheer amazement, the preparations and arrangements were beyond our expectations.

On the day of the event, it was raining heavily. We considered cancelling the event because we thought that people might not be able to come because of the intense downpour. Abhishek went to the village to talk about the possibility of another date. But this idea did not sit well with the SHG members and they took a firm decision to hold the event at any cost. For them, it seemed to have become an issue of their reputation because they had already informed the villagers about it and had made all the arrangements.



Fig. 1: Workshop on 'Women Getting Together' at Bhendrani village in Thakurganj block

To our amazement, they gathered more than 100 women from the adjoining hamlet and held a wonderful event. This was a great learning for the team, and we realized that at times we need to loosen our grip on the affairs of the community.

Three or four workshops were organized and we could see that the women were energized and the men had softened their stance. We were excited and hopeful. We then decided to organize exposure visits for SHG members to some of the projects of PRADAN so that they could see and understand the potential of a women-led community organization. Ten members were selected from different villages for an exposure visit in September 2014.

One of our colleagues, Illora Rabha (a PRADAN executive), took the women for a four-day visit to the Damodar Mahila Mandal Federation in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand district. The idea was to take these motivated women from our area to experience how a women-led-Federation was striving towards a just and equitable society.

We expected members to be so inspired as to initiate large-scale mobilization of women into the SHG fold.

On the third day of the trip, we received a belligerent call from a man called Prithvi, asking about the whereabouts of his wife, Sunita Ekka, an SHG member from Kharkharia hamlet of Lohagara village in Dighalbank block of Kishanganj. Abhishek tried to calm him down by assuring him that all was well and told him that he could speak to his wife and be reassured about her. But the man was not ready to listen. He threatened Abhishek with dire consequences.

On our return, Sunita was afraid to go back to her village alone. We agreed to accompany her and help her face the situation. Four of us went with her to the village. It was almost nine at night when we entered Kharkharia. As soon as our vehicle stopped, Prithvi came aggressively out to meet her. We realized that he was completely drunk.

Standing there tottering, he shouted, "Go back from where you have come and spend the night with the person you were with since the last few days." Abhishek tried to intervene. Holding the man's shoulders, he asked him why he was so angry. Prithvi became more enraged and brushed away Abhishek's hand from his shoulder and yelled, "Don't interfere in my personal affairs. I can thrash you if I want and no one will come to save you from me." We were at a loss about how to react.

Trying to reason with him, we assured him that other women from the nearby villages had also gone for the visit. He was not ready to discuss the matter and continued to repeat that he would not keep her with him because she never obeyed her *pati-parmeshwar* (husband-god) and she was trying to humiliate him before the villagers.

"There is a rumour in the village that my wife has gone for prostitution and I can't live with a prostitute," he shouted. All Sunita's pleas and requests fell on deaf ears. Suhagani Devi, another woman from the village, who had also gone with the group, tried to reason with him but to no avail.

After almost two hours, when he was almost passing out with exhaustion and intoxication, we asked Suhagani and the other SHG members of the village, who had gathered by that time, to take care of Sunita and promised a meeting the next morning in the village to sort out this issue. As we drove towards our office, exhausted and embarrassed after the scene in the village, we were all contemplative. The group for the exposure visit had three Muslim women, and we had expected rigidity

The group for the exposure visit had three Muslim women, and we had expected rigidity from their households. We did not expect such a problem from a tribal family. I thought of our biases towards a particular community and how we tend to stereotype people because of our pre-set notions and cynicism

from their households. We did not expect such a problem from a tribal family. I thought of our biases towards a particular community and how we tend to stereotype people because of our pre-set notions and cynicism.

The next day, we invited some of our SHG leaders, who were also a part of the exposure trip to be present in the meeting, to help sort out the issue. News from that village was disturbing. Suhagani had called to say that Prithvi had beaten up Sunita and

had tried to electrocute himself.

Abhishek and I went to the village with four SHG members from other villages. Sunita and the SHG members from her village and the adjoining areas had assembled there but Prithvi refused to come until men were also part of the congregation. The SHG members invited the men from the village to be present; Prithvi took another two hours to come and when he did, he was completely intoxicated.

He continued to repeat his arguments from the night before and was in no state to listen to anyone. Fortunately, the men of the village came out in support of the lady and dismissed any rumours about Sunita going into prostitution. We were able to ascertain that the main problem was Prithvi's complex, arising out of his wife getting acclaim in the village and the vicinity because of her role as an SHG member and making her own identity in the village.

For the last few months, she had taken the lead in many of the social affairs such as arranging workshops in her SHG and negotiating with the landlords to get access over land for agriculture. All the arguments put forward by

Prithvi showed that he was not able to accept the rise of his wife and was jealous that she was getting recognition.

He left the meeting; the incident unified the two SHGs in the hamlet and the members assured the gathering that Sunita would come to no harm. To our relief, the SHGs of Kharkharia took charge of this and was able to influence Prithvi to accept her and take care of her with due dignity.

This news spread far and wide, and to our amazement members of about ten SHGs in Lohagara village staged a meeting, to take a pledge to support women in their vicinity if any such incident were to occur in the future. We had never thought that the exposure trip would create such a conflict. It also gave us the insight that confrontation and its resolution can lead to new openings.

A week later, Sunita called Abhishek and said, "Don't worry, brother, this is part and parcel of our struggle. I hope we women can come together and move towards liberation." Seeing the way the women handled this issue strengthened our belief that we needed to forge connection among women, and if we could do so, no force could stop them from coming together.

Another challenge of the team was to build in-roads into the Muslim community. We conducted various meetings and workshops but were not able to form a single SHG exclusively for Muslim women. We knew that unless the Muslim women came forward, the dream of building a community based organization of women was unlikely to take shape. Initially, the team thought religious rigidity was the main reason the Muslim

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women resisted our attempts to form SHGs with them. However, we soon realized that our own biases left us blind to the real issues of the Muslim community. Without understanding and appreciating this, we could not move forward.

What happened in Rasuldangi hamlet of the Maltoli village of Dighalbank *panchayat* is a vivid example of this. Illora Rabha of PRADAN joined in May 2014 and worked hard to mobilize Muslim women. She tried a number of ways—holding meetings and organizing workshops on the need to come together. None of these inspired them. She used agriculture as a tool to generate enthusiasm amongst them as was our practice. People usually listen to you if you know or can demonstrate better practices or yield. This helped mobilize people yet restricted our reach to the men of the village who, in fact, are at the forefront of the farming practices.

That the Census of 2011 identifies only 17 per cent of women contributing in the total work force is striking; the fact is that the labour of women in most of cases goes unrecorded. Women, at best, are restricted to the unrecognized form of labour in the household, in the fields or in post-harvest processing activities. In Rasuldangi, we first tried to discuss the possibilities of forming SHGs of women wherein thrift savings and credit could be one of the activities, and the village outright rejected any such option.

Therefore, we continued with our agriculture intervention approach and initiated work with tomato and brinjal cultivation, with the hope that we would develop a bond with the men of the village, who would then let the women of the village come out of their houses.

This did leave an impact on the hamlet, which has 100 per cent Muslim population; however, the women of the village were nowhere visible in these activities. Illora, being a woman, had some access to their houses; this helped build some sort of a relationship with the wives of the farmers involved with us; nevertheless, this was limited to their courtesy of providing us with tea and snacks.

One day, while having a discussion on agriculture in a community meeting, Illora raised the issue of the lack of women participation with the men of the village. They immediately justified it by saying, "Women are mostly engaged in day-to-day household chores and they don't have much time or interest to get involved with outsiders. We are concerned about our children and women; that is why we are focusing on improved agriculture so that we can provide well for our families."

These arguments were coming from the perspective of a provider-receiver relationship, largely prevalent in our society. During the

Most of the children and women in the village were suffering from malnutrition and the food intake of the households was limited to the consumption of rice and potatoes with an occasional helping of green vegetables and meat

meeting, Farzan Khatun, a woman who had come to serve tea to the persons sitting in the meeting signalled to Illora to come with her. Illora followed her to the place where almost ten women were listening to the discussion from inside their houses. One of the women, while offering a seat to Illora, smilingly said, "I always see that you come to our village and talk

with our men. We also have issues that we can't share with anyone."

Illora was surprised. "But you have never shown any interest in meeting me. And all my efforts to meet you were rejected by the men."

"That's true, *didi*," Farzan responded. "Our main issue is health because most of the women in the village suffer from huge blood loss during menstruation. Some of us have irregular periods and we go through enormous pain every month."

Illora observed that most of the women seemed anaemic and were probably underweight. She realized that most of the children and women



Fig.2: Farzan Khatun and her daughter in Rasuldangi hamlet, Maltoli village, Dighalbank block

in the village were suffering from malnutrition and that the food intake of the households was limited to the consumption of rice and potatoes, with an occasional helping of green vegetables and meat.

Illora shared her experience with the team. We realized that the central theme around which the women could be brought together was health and nutrition. Most of the agriculture done at the household level met the consumption and cash needs of the families but did not completely address the nutritional needs, especially those of women and children.

On her next visit to the village, Illora discussed the issue of nutrition at length with the men. Some of them did understand the severity of the problem and did not have any idea how to tackle the issue. They then relented and allowed us to work with the women to form groups to deal with this concern.

During the first organized meeting with the women of Rasuldangi, the main discussion was around the food habits of the household, especially of the women and children. They began by discussing how much water they should drink every day. It was important for them to understand the connection between drinking clean water and their health. Interestingly, the issue of safe drinking water and the amount required for a healthy body was instrumental in the formation of the first SHG in the area, the Bismillah Mahila Mandal.

In the next meeting, some of the women raised the issue of stiffness in their body. The SHG decided to have a regular exercise session during the meeting to promote better health. We, in the team, were quite amused to hear

We realized that the central theme around which the women could be brought together was health and nutrition. Most of the agriculture done at the household level met the consumption and cash needs of the families but did not completely address the nutritional needs, especially those of women and children

that an SHG could be formed by prescribing drinking water and exercise. But the women of the village were excited. The news soon spread in the hamlet and, within a span of one month, three SHGs were formed.

Gradually, we introduced the concept of a small kitchen garden. Each of the women in the SHGs was to grow 12 different types of leafy vegetables for their nutritional needs. This elicited a huge response from the women and

almost 15 women in the hamlet have already started this activity.

After the third meeting, these SHGs decided to participate in a savings and credit activity and sought our support, which we readily extended. We had first entered the village with the intention of forming SHGs, in which savings and credit could be one of the activities. The villagers had rejected the idea then; yet now, we were doing exactly that. How had that happened? The learning for us was that perhaps one prototype could not possibly be used to mobilize the women at all places. It was evident that people could not be organized into groups or organizations unless their needs were identified.

In the last year, there have been many occasions during which my spirit has been low; yet, there have been many occasions that were fulfilling and meaningful. Each interaction with the community, my team members or in other situations has contributed to my learning, re-learning and de-learning of ideas, perceptions and wisdom. I hope the coming years will be as fruitful and that we continue, as a team, to seek new ways to connect with people and to strive towards crossing the uncrossed.

Migration among the Madia of Bastar: Assessing its Worth

SHASHANK DEORA

Describing the risks in migration and the burden it places on those left behind as well as the changes it has brought about in the people and their lives, this article explores options for generating a similar income within the village itself while acknowledging the lure of migration

Illo Mandavi from Dondarguda was working in a stone quarry near Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh with her husband, Sahibo, when she fell ill and was hospitalized for a few days. She succumbed to her illness, which was not diagnosed. Her mother-in-law, Sukti, now regrets having quarrelled with Illo last month, making her flee to Andhra Pradesh, just a month before her death.

Sukti lives in a small house at one end of the hamlet. Her husband died ten years ago when her two sons were still very young. Their entire land-holding was snatched by relatives, and with nothing left, even for shelter, Sukti was forced to ask for help. Her sons had to stop going to school and, instead, spent their childhood helping her herd the cattle of the hamlet in exchange for food. Sukti raised her two sons and her orphaned nephew, who stayed with the family.

When they grew up, Sukti's sons, Sahibo and Maso started working as seasonal migrant labourers in Andhra Pradesh, to supplement the family income from cattle herding and the local wage labour. Just two years ago, they managed to save enough through their seasonal migration work to acquire an agriculture plot on lease and buy a pair of bulls to plough that plot.

It was then that Sahibo met and fell in love with Illo, who worked in the same stone quarry as he did and lived in a hamlet near his own in Bastar. Sahibo brought Illo home with him to Dondarguda to meet his mother. Illo's relatives and other people of her hamlet had several rounds of discussions and negotiations with the people of Dondarguda, and they came to an agreement about a bride price of Rs 25,000.

Paying of bride price is a norm in this tribal community; it is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. Earlier it used to be paid in terms of rice grain and cattle, now it is paid in cash—and is distributed among the hamlet priest, relatively older people chosen as the panchs for negotiation, and the rest is kept by the family of bride.

After the marriage, Illo continued to migrate for work to various stone quarries near Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh with Sahibo and Maso, providing financial support to Sukti back home. In the meanwhile, the *panchayat sarpanch* sanctioned a house for Sukti, to be completed under the Indira Awas Yojana. The family's financial status began to improve. All was not well, however, at home with frequent quarrels erupting between Sukti and Illo, mainly because Illo was not able to help in the agricultural field due to her migration in the agricultural season.

Illo would frequently go to her parents' home after a quarrel. This last time, however, she joined her husband to go to another stone quarry. She had left with her husband, but soon the villagers heard of her death and he brought back her body.

This incident was similar to that of Subari's husband from the same hamlet. He had left

In the last couple of years, six young women from nearby hamlets have died, either while staying in the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh or soon after coming back

the previous year for a stone mining site in Andhra Pradesh and the villagers had heard of the news of his mysterious death, possibly murder, a few weeks later. Nobody knows what had caused his death.

In the last couple of years, six young women from nearby hamlets have died, either while staying in the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh or soon after coming back. Of those having died away from home, not much is known, except that they suffered from fever. But among those coming back, malaria and filariasis have been seen in many cases by the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) working in the area. Most of the cases are attributed, by the locals, to black magic.

Illo, Subari and all the others named here, belong to the Primitive Tribal Group Madia Gond (they also call themselves Koitor), like everyone else in Dondarguda, a hamlet of Kurenga village. Dondarguda comes under the Kurenga *panchayat* of Tokapal block in Bastar district. This hamlet is about 10 km away from Tokapal and around 30 km from Jagdalpur, the headquarters of Bastar district. The new road connectivity to Dondarguda has facilitated easy movement of the villagers for daily wage labour works. In recent years, people have also started migrating seasonally to Andhra Pradesh for labour works. Of a total population of around 250 in Dondarguda (from some 75 households), almost half the youth migrate to Andhra Pradesh every year during the agricultural season, after the sowing of paddy in April-May. They stay away from home for a period ranging from three months to one year.

There are as many more Illos, as there are places like Dondarguda within the entire Bastar region, where migrating for work is part of life now. The places and the people

may be different but their issues are essentially the same. And to understand these issues, it is important to have a basic understanding of the Madia tribe of Bastar. It is also important to have an idea about the livelihoods available to them across the region before talking about their migration.

MADIA TRIBES OF BASTAR

In Chhattisgarh, the Gond tribals constitute the highest segment of the population at about 55 per cent among the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the state. Their highest population is in Bastar Division as per the 2001 Census of India—the Bastar Administrative Division comprises seven districts of southern Chhattisgarh, namely, Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur and Sukma, carved out from the erstwhile Bastar district.

Among the Gond tribes, the Madia Gonds of Bastar have been studied in detail by W.V. Grigson, who highlighted the two divisions of the tribe existing in Bastar, namely, the Hill Madia (Abhuj Madia) and the Bison-horn Madia (Dandami Madia). The Abhuj Madia reside on the Abhujmad mountain, mostly in Abhujmad (Orchha) block of Narayanpur

district whereas the Bison-horn Madia, with a much larger population, occupies the districts of Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kondagaon and Sukma.

The Bison-horn Madia derives its name from the famous head-dress of bison horns, cowrie shells and a plume of feathers worn by the drummers at the dancing festivals. The Madia, like the other Gond tribes, are a Proto-Australoid people, speaking several Dravidian dialects.

The Abhuj Madia are known for the *ghotul* system in every village—a youth dormitory for training of youth from both sexes (though this is rarely seen now), extensively studied by Verrier Elwin. *Ghotul* is a type of dormitory, comprising a large hut or group of huts enclosed in a compound, where unmarried boys and girls interact with each other. It has an elder facilitator, with young, unmarried boys and girls as its members. Girl members of the *ghotul* are called *motiaris* whereas boy members are called *cheliks*; their leaders are called the *belosa* and *siredar*, respectively. The members are taught lessons of cleanliness, discipline, and hard work. They are taught to take pride in their appearance and to respect



Fig 1: Bison-horn Madia dancing in Bastar Didi Mandai (SHG Maha-adhiveshan)

themselves and their elders. They are also taught the idea of public service.

Another distinctive feature of the Madia tribes in Bastar is that the women also plough the agricultural fields, a practice forbidden for women in most of the societies in India. This may also be attributed to a lower impact of Hinduism on these societies of Bastar.

LIVELIHOODS AVAILABLE

The Madia people, along with contributing to one of the highest populations in Bastar, are considered among the most backward tribes of the region, receiving very few benefits from government schemes. Like the other tribes of the region, they are dependent on forest-based resources, agriculture and wage labour for livelihood generation. For forest-based livelihood sources such as non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection, a good forest cover is a pre-condition, and Bastar has traditionally been home to dense forests of sal, teak, and bamboo, among others. With the current forest cover of around 57 per cent over the Bastar plateau (comprising all seven districts) fast depleting—having depleted by 38 sq km in a span of just two years between 2011 and 2013, owing to reasons such as developmental activities, mining and encroachment on forest land (mentioned in the Indian State of Forests Report 2013)—forest-based livelihoods have been impacted adversely. The reducing groundwater level is making rain-fed agriculture the only viable agriculture-based livelihood option today. As per a Human Development Report prepared by the UNDP and the Planning Commission for the Government of Chhattisgarh, in 2005, it has been indicated that the Bailadila mines

With a poor agricultural scenario and the lowering forest cover reducing forest-based livelihoods, people are forced to search for other livelihood options to provide for the basic necessities of their households

in Dantewada district have affected almost a third of the forest area in the district; 40 per cent of the livelihoods in the district was forest-based—the biggest livelihood source. The report also highlights that more than 80 per cent of the people from Bastar district have been unable to find employment in their area round the year.

In Bastar district, agriculture in most of the villages is confined to a single crop of paddy. The poor condition of agriculture can be gauged from its Agriculture Contingency Plan for 2009, which shows that, of the total land under paddy cultivation, only a fourth is cultivable and not even four per cent of the land is irrigated.

In Dondarguda also, people plant only a single crop of paddy per year in their agricultural plots and supplement it with subsistent farming of maize and a few other crops in their home gardens, locally called the *badi*. The agricultural produce is hardly sufficient to provide food through the year to the local community; they are able to survive only due to the 35 kg of rice distribution through the public distribution system (PDS) to below the poverty line (BPL) families. In the past, before the implementation of this scheme, there were several cases of rice theft from the fields, quarrels over rice, even leading to a death in one case.

With a poor agricultural scenario and the lowering forest cover reducing forest-based livelihoods, people are forced to search for other livelihood options to provide for the basic necessities of their households. Another source of livelihood earning is the daily wage labour in and around the village, either under a government project or on private land. In

Dondarguda, the schemes of PDS and the Indira Awas Yojana are working well; however, other government schemes meant to benefit the community have been few and far between.

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), in the last five years, people from the hamlet can only remember working on the two ponds that have been dug in the hamlet. Some of the labourers are yet to receive payment for the work they did on these. Therefore, not many people are interested in working for MGNREGA now. The people from the village get some work from the Forest department—such as digging of cattle proof trenches, weeding and plantation of saplings in the forest area near the hamlet. But these works are sporadic and cannot be relied upon for steady income generation. Therefore, people resort to private wage labour works, which are mostly on agricultural lands owned by big landlords, who harvest two or three crops a year, paying wages at a rate ranging from Rs 60 to Rs 150, varying as per the market demand. These works too are not available round the year.

While looking for alternative livelihoods, the people of Dondarguda and a few other villages around have found an enterprise in the quarrying of stones from the land in and around these villages. Dondarguda also has several small stone quarries, some of which are on the private lands and some on the village land, whereas the rest of the stone is excavated illegally from the forest lands. Quarries on the community land have been distributed among the groups of households by the hamlet priest and the hamlet headman, who is also the Ward *panch*. These quarries help people earn an income ranging from to Rs

With so many different sources of livelihood available, one may be tempted to portray a rosy picture of the area; on closer analysis, however, it turns out that the situation is not as good as it seems to be

2,000 to 10,000 per household in a season, which is the time between a year's harvesting to the next year's sowing.

Yet another alternative livelihood practised by the youth from Dondarguda and many other villages in Bastar is the staging of drama. These dramas are whole night performances and

with around 20–30 performances per season, starting just after harvesting and lasting until before the next sowing. The net income per person comes to be around Rs 3000 to 4,000, not making it a lucrative livelihood option.

MIGRATION FROM BASTAR

With so many different sources of livelihood available, one may be tempted to portray a rosy picture of the area; on closer analysis, however, it turns out that the situation is not as good as it seems to be. On doing a cash flow analysis of Sukti's house, if the income from migration is excluded, there was a shortfall of around Rs 6,000 in the total cash inflow, as compared to the total cash outflows. It is this shortfall in the disposable income which pushes people to migrate, initially to nearby towns and, later, to places outside Bastar. The Bastar Plateau borders the states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha, and migration is higher to the cities in Andhra Pradesh. The Bison-horn Madia community in Bastar has a lingual advantage when it comes to migrating as wage labourers to Andhra Pradesh. Their mother tongue, called Koya Mata, is a Dravidian dialect and resembles the Telugu language, spoken in Andhra Pradesh, which makes it easier for them to be understood.

When it comes to understanding migration out of the Bastar Plateau, studies on the subject are few. One thing that becomes easily

evident, however, on interacting with the Madia community of Dondarguda, is that a significant proportion of their population is migrating every year. There was a PRADAN-supported study on migration conducted in Darbha block of Bastar district in 2011. The study was conducted in three villages, and it was found that, of the 121 households surveyed, around 80 per cent were affected by migration. And the situation does not seem to have changed much since then.

The study found that, among the migrating households, men were migrating from two-thirds of the households whereas the women were migrating from the remaining one-third. Twice as many unmarried youth were migrating than married people. The places of migration outside Bastar were found to be around the cities of Hyderabad, Tirupati and Bangalore, along with a small number migrating to places in Odisha. Around one-fifth of the households were seen migrating within the Bastar region. Migration to places in Andhra Pradesh, at just less than 50 per cent of the total migration, was the highest. The types of jobs that the migrating population was engaged in were either in factories, companies, stone quarries or brick-making works. Of these, half worked in stone quarries, followed by those in factories and brick-making works.

Issues Involved

This out-migration of the Madia from the Bastar region has many facets, a few of which have been mentioned earlier. Death and illness are not the only things to be worried about for the people migrating from Dondarguda and the other villages around. Four young men of

People live and work in highly unhygienic conditions when they migrate. Being an unorganized sector, there are no facilities for medical treatment, or insurance against accidents or illnesses happening at the site of migration

Dondarguda returned from yet another stone quarry in Andhra Pradesh, after having worked there for a year or so, but having earned only between Rs 3,000 and 4,000. When joining work, they were promised a daily wage of Rs 200–250 a day but were given only the bare minimum to cover their daily expenses and were assured that they would be given their wages in full after six months. Once the six months

had passed, they were told that they would get their full wages after another six months. When they got the same answer after having worked for one full year, they realized that they were being exploited. They had no option but to leave. This is no less than slavery.

What if the promised wages were paid on time? Would migration then be a good livelihood option? A group of 10–12 young men from Dondarguda returned after having worked for a month in a stone quarry near Tirupati and discussed their work and their working conditions. Apparently, they worked on a wage rate of Rs 200 per trip—a trip includes breaking or crushing of stones and loading those onto a trolley. They would start working after midnight, by about 2 or 3 a.m., and make two or three trips by 10 or 11 a.m., when the heat would become unbearable. When it rained, they would, at times, work in chest-high water. Tired and exhausted after the night's work, they would huddle together in their cramped living spaces for a nap—some 25 people stayed in one hall with not even a mat to sleep on. People live and work in highly unhygienic conditions when they migrate. Being an unorganized sector, there are no facilities for medical treatment, or insurance against accidents or illnesses happening at the site of migration.

Migration and Women

For the women, the situation is no different. What is different is the wage rate which is Rs 20 to Rs 40 less than that for men. Women migrate both before and after marriage, though the migration is less after marriage. Most of them load the trolleys with stones excavated from the stone quarries. Working in similar living conditions as that of the men, they are no less prone to diseases. In fact, there are greater incidences of diseases among the migrating women. According to the local Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, a major reason for this is the absence of early diagnosis, which was available to them in the *aanganwadis* in Bastar. There are many incidences of young women and men eloping for marriage from the migration sites and, although unstated, one cannot rule out the possibility of instances of molestation and harassment.

Hidme, a mother of a ten-year-old daughter, is married to a migrant worker in Dondarguda. Her husband spends most of his migration remittance on alcohol whereas Hidme, in addition to the household chores, tries to earn wages to meet the needs of the household. She and her daughter work as daily wage labourers in the agricultural fields of big landowners, about 8–10 km away, near Jagdalpur. With no one else to help, she has to find the time to work in the family field, visit the PDS shop some 6 km away, and walk to the weekly *haats* with her meagre savings so that she can purchase something to sustain the family for the week. Her husband's migration has only increased her burden and work, rather than being of assistance to her.

Another woman, Maso, in Dondarguda, used to migrate before her marriage. After she was married, she continued migrating with her

There are greater incidences of diseases among the migrating women. According to the local Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, a major reason for this is the absence of early diagnosis, which was available to them in the aanganwadis in Bastar

husband until she had a baby. She has stayed home since then. Her husband continues to work at a stone quarry in Andhra Pradesh and she takes care of everything at home. While her husband is home, he helps Maso in most of the work. But while he is away, Maso is stressed with the agricultural work, daily wage labour, fuel wood collection and arranging for the

rations, among others things, for which she has to leave her child in the custody of others. At times, she is unable to visit the *aanganwadi* centre on Tuesdays (the stipulated day for vaccination and the distribution of Take Home Ration packets), and is at risk of missing the vaccination schedule for her baby.

There are many such cases in the village, wherein the husbands have gone to Andhra Pradesh, leaving their wives back at home, either pregnant or with an infant. With no one else at home to bear the responsibility, women are working in their agricultural fields and also tending to daily household chores. Financially, migration is proving to be a more promising option than doing labour works nearer home; however, the earnings are not always available when and where needed. There are times when urgent money is required at home, and with one or more of the earning members having no means to send the money immediately, it becomes difficult for the remaining members of the household to make up for their absence, no matter how hard they work.

The Pull Factor for Migration

These narratives are not the end. There are many more. Despite all the drawbacks, large numbers of Madia youths are migrating from Bastar every year. One reason seems to be the bulk sum of money they get as

remittance when it is time to come back—amounts to the tune of Rs 10,000 to 15,000. Yet, perhaps, that is not the only reason. Migration wage work gives girls and young women the opportunity to explore areas beyond their village. They are able to earn and spend relatively large amounts of money, which they would not be able to all their lives when staying in the village. The youth now follow fashion in the cities, and are buying articles of luxury for their homes in the village.

With the assurance of consistent cash inflow from migration, some people have planned what they want to do with that cash next—purchase motorbikes, build a brick and mortar room in their homes for their daughter's or son's marriage. Migration is changing people's lives in small but significant ways. Some of the migrating households have started eating vegetables and pulses they were not eating earlier; their food is now richer in nutrients than it used to be. In some of the households where the men migrate, women are getting a major say in household affairs when the men are away, and their self image vis-à-vis men is slowly being enhanced.

Weighing Migration

The pro and cons of these aspects of migration need to be weighed to assess its value. Several questions arise. Is migration worth it? Migration brings with it a reasonably good remittance, sufficient to support many of the needs of the families; it helps them realize their wants to a certain extent. However, there is constant risk of physical injury and illness due

Migration is changing people's lives in small but significant ways. Some of the migrating households have started eating vegetables and pulses they were not eating earlier; their food is now richer in nutrients than it used to be. In some of the households where the men migrate, women are getting a major say in household affairs when the men are away, and their self image vis-à-vis men is slowly being enhanced

to the poor living conditions. If not migration, what could be the alternative sources of livelihood for Sukti and other landless people, so that they can acquire comparable wealth? Are government policies, programmes and schemes capable of meeting these needs? Can these programmes provide an income level that is enough for a landless labourer to purchase or lease land or cattle? Would these programmes allow people to afford the lifestyle that migration remittance can support, discounting the risks involved with migration? And given such an option, would

people prefer to stay back rather than migrate? There is a possibility that they will. If people were to get a sustainable and consistent income, they might want to stay for MGNREGA work, especially if they are guaranteed timely payments or they might want to stay if their agricultural produce could give them more than just enough for warding off their hunger. They would be more likely to stay if they had access to money in times of need, for example, at the time of marriages, deaths, illnesses, and also for major agricultural operations. Are they asking for too much?

There are many such questions that need to be answered. And it is time the answers were found. There is a need for a more comprehensive study on Madia Gond migration from Bastar. Understanding of the issues involved may prove instrumental in devising important development strategies related to agriculture, natural resource management, health and nutrition among others because the reasons, as well as the impact, of migration are cutting across different sectors.

PRADAN's Role

It has been five years now since PRADAN started working with the SHGs in the region for livelihoods promotion. Migration has been on the team's radar for some time now and it has been viewed as a repercussion—a situation caused as a consequence of the prevailing issues of poverty and unemployment—rather than an issue itself. The PRADAN team is of the view that SHGs and its livelihoods promotion activities can address these issues, with the SHGs facilitating credit availability in times of need and livelihood activities help in income generation for the households. Currently, the team has an outreach of around 4,000 households and it is striving towards an objective of community mobilization, to facilitate better implementation of various government programmes and schemes.

PRADAN has direct engagement with more than 1,000 households through different livelihood interventions, and the various projects taken up by the team have led to some changes in the overall scenario related to migration. Works on the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and other interventions in the farming sector have helped ensure year-round food sufficiency and have been a source of income generation in agriculture while keeping the land productivity intact. During a project with the Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata Trust (JRDTT), implemented over a two-year time period, modelled around that time's MGNREGA norms and having community based wage disbursement mechanism, the

percentage of migrating population was seen to have reduced drastically in Mangalpur hamlet of Teerathgarh village in Darbha block. Of a total of 99 households, only two had members migrating whereas it used to be around half the total households prior to implementation of the project.

The team has now been selected as part of the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) for MGNREGA implementation through the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) in Darbha block, to facilitate better planning and execution of the scheme. As part of the engagement of the team for 2015–16, the team had planned to double the number of human days of work with the help of the community in some *gram panchayats*. If wages are paid on time, the percentage of the migrating population may reduce significantly.

However, for now, hundreds of Madia people are migrating undeterred from the Bastar region—aware of the issues involved and the problems they might face. Sahibo, Illo's husband, has completed all the required ceremonies to pacify the gods, purportedly responsible for Illo's death. And to make up for the expenditure for her funeral and other ceremonies, he has started working in a stone quarry near Jagdalpur. Although he is not sure when, he has plans to go again to Andhra Pradesh maybe to a different stone quarry this time. Migration still beckons him and others from his hamlet.



Most of the agriculture done at the household level met the consumption and cash needs of the families but did not completely address the nutritional needs, especially those of women and children. We introduced the concept of a small kitchen garden. Each of the women in the SHGs was to grow 12 different types of leafy vegetables for their nutritional needs. Seen in the picture above are the SHG member during vegetables nursery training at Vrindavan village of Lohagar panchayat in Dighalbank block of Kishanganj district, Bihar.

PRADAN



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's work 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 their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. *NewsReach*, PRADAN's bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

NewsReach is published by the National Resource Centre for Rural Livelihoods, housed in the PRADAN Research and Resource Centre.

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