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Participatory Processes under MGNREGA: Strengthening Grass-roots Democracy

SIBIN VARGHESE

Moving from the policies of a welfare state to the participatory processes of MGNREGA and other poverty alleviation programmes has inspired greater ownership and a more vibrant involvement of the poor and the marginalized in the development of their own villages

India is known as the largest democracy in the world. When we consider its demographic and socio-economic composition, we find that the rural population still accounts for more than 70 per cent of the total population. And, so far, the effective means of governance has been to serve the poor and the marginalized with policies of a welfare state. However, there is a visible change in approach in the past decade or so. Emphasis has been placed on 'inclusion' of larger sets of people in the decision-making, monitoring and reviewing processes, and making them responsible and accountable.

This article focusses on the democratic participatory approach adopted in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the visible changes brought about by it in the tribal district of Betul in Madhya Pradesh, where PRADAN is active.

MGNREGA came into existence when it was notified as an Act of Parliament on 7 September 2005. The objective of MGNREGA is, "to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of statutory guarantee of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto."

It also aims at providing employment near their place of habitat. It is for the first time that wage employment has been guaranteed and an attempt is being made to safeguard the interests of the rural poor.

This paper focusses on the movement in this regard in the past two years, in two blocks of Betul district. It also analyses the shift in the qualitative and the quantitative measures, assesses the present situation and the past trends with a futuristic viewpoint.

MGNREGA, in its later stages (that is, from FY 2013–14), has become a programme focussed on livelihoods and continuous efforts have been made to bring about utmost transparency in the systems and processes. Participatory processes¹ and public disclosures are now essential when identifying potential beneficiaries, planning for activities under the Scheme, reviewing of progress in the *gram sabha*, monitoring through the

Participatory processes and public disclosures are now essential when identifying potential beneficiaries, planning for activities under the Scheme, reviewing of progress in the gram sabha, monitoring through the MIS (management information system) that is available in the public domain) and, most important, having a post-completion scrutiny through a social audit.

Management Information System (MIS) that is available in the public domain and, most important, having a post-completion scrutiny through a social audit.

Indeed, it took long before action was taken on the anomalies noticed. The trend, however, suggests that the people's verdict is being considered and there is among them 'a sense of being counted'. Participatory approaches will contribute greatly in the performance appraisal of MGNREGA and will eventually lead to the

establishment of an ever-strengthening grass-roots democracy² in rural India.

Around 2010, PRADAN motivated the women in Betul to participate in the *gram sabha* and, at the same time, prepared an integrated micro project (IMP) for 26 villages of Ghora Dongri and Shahpur blocks of the district. During the planning process (which eventually did not get implemented due to certain hurdles that

Envisaged goals

- ◆ Providing a strong social safety net for vulnerable groups through a fall-back employment source.
- ◆ Providing a growth engine for the sustainable development of an agricultural economy.
- ◆ Providing employment with works that address causes of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation and soil erosion.
- ◆ Empowering the rural poor through the process of a rights-based law.
- ◆ Encouraging new ways of doing business as a model of governance reform anchored on the principles of transparency and grass-roots democracy.

¹Specific methods employed to achieve active participation by all members of a group in a decision-making process. The primary goal is to create productive discussions to develop positive solutions.

²A tendency towards designing political processes in which as much decision-making authority as is practical is shifted to the organization's lowest geographic or social level of organization.

Movement over the Years

Movement	Introducing Year
Act came into existence	September 2005
Phase 1: Introduced in 200 most-backward districts	February 2006
Phase 2: In 130 districts	April 2007
Phase 3: In the remaining 274 districts	April 2008
Provision of irrigation facility, horticulture plantation and land development facilities on land owned by Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Below Poverty Line (BPL), Beneficiaries of land reforms & Beneficiaries under the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) households	March 2007
Notification to maintain labour-material ratio as 60:40	June 2008
Amendment to include small farmers or marginal farmers for work on individual land	July 2009
Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD's) instructions to take up works on the lands of SC/ST households (HHs) on a priority basis	September 2009
MoRD's decision to prepare the labour budget under MGNREGS through the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) I	2014
MoRD's decision to further prepare the convergence plan for five schemes together through IPPE-II	2015

Source: NREGA guidelines issued by MoRD

The above-mentioned data suggest that the provisions to include and prioritize work on individual lands (especially of SC/ST HHs) came to light after three years of the initiation of this Scheme and it took another two years, that is, by 2009, to focus upon the target group of SC/ST.

came up after the completion of the planning process), we, at PRADAN, had the following observations:

- ♦ The women as well as the *panchayat* representatives had significantly little knowledge about MGNREGS and its rights-based approach.
- ♦ The *panchayat* representatives doubted the intention of the women's collectives as well as of PRADAN and showed reluctance in engaging with both.
- ♦ The village community had lost trust and did not wish to work under MGNREGS due to delayed payments and transparency concerns.

- ♦ Developing a village plan through a participatory process was not in the comfort zone of the *panchayat* representatives.

The situation became even worse when the plan didn't actually get implemented. People's expectations were high and there was a lot of excitement in developing a village as per their liking, which eventually did not get actualized. Although some of the *panchayats* included the plans in their Shelf of Projects (SoP) later and gradually took up implementation of these projects, the execution of the plans was not as per the priority or the preference of the villagers, as discussed during the planning process.

However, that the district administration, the block and the *panchayat* functionaries had accepted the fact that the process had helped in organizing the larger village community around the village infrastructure creation, and governance was a ray of hope. The role of the women's collectives especially was the topic of discussion. We took it as a first step towards the desire to strengthen local governance and to capacitate women's collectives to take a lead role in exploring the prospects of improving villages.

These attempts continued from 2012 to 2014 before we found IPPE as an opportunity to cash in and create a positive tide towards a community-led planning process under MGNREGS.

IPPE-1 was aimed at preparing the labour budget under MGNREGS for FY 2015–16 through the participatory approach using PRA tools. Madhya Pradesh took a conscious and opportune approach not to have a test trial of this process in the selected areas but to introduce this process of planning state-wide in all of its 182 backward areas, comprising 12,382 *gram panchayats*. PRADAN, being a Civil Society Organization (CSO), familiar with using this process of planning in the

watershed programme, was identified as the CSO partner in the district to build capacity of the planning teams at the district and the block levels, as well as to provide the necessary on-field support to Block Planning Teams (BPTs) in conducting community-led planning process in the villages.

In the initial stages itself, it was observed that the challenge would be on two fronts. On the one hand, it was essential to engage with the district and block functionaries, and BPTs to help them realize and experience the process of participatory planning, methodologies and the process of facilitating community-led planning. On the other hand, it was important to fill the trust deficit between the village community and the *panchayat* functionaries.

The situation was so grim that in one village people explicitly stated that they would engage in the planning process with PRADAN but would not sit together with their *panchayat* Secretary or the Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS). The villagers complained that whenever they approached the *panchayat* office for any help, the officials ran away. It was essential that this attempt be led in a focussed manner so that a confident resource pool (rural youth who have been identified and deployed as BPTs)

Planning Process under IPPE-1 during FY 2014–15		
No.	Particulars	District/Block/ <i>Panchayats</i> /Villages
1	Capacity building of DRTs	Betul
2	Training of BRTs	Ghora Dongri
3	Training of BPTs	Ghora Dongri
4	Demonstrating the planning process in the villages	3 villages of Ghora Dongri block
5	Hand-holding support to BPTs in the field	9 villages of Ghora Dongri block
6	Capacity building of village women to make them familiar with the planning process using PRA tools	7 villages of Ghora Dongri block

could be created and that the people begin to have a sense of ownership of the development of their village and their immediate surroundings. This was the aim for the next few years.

Therefore, in a strategic manner after the training of the District Resource Team (DRT) and the Block Resource Team (BRT), it was decided to work together with the BPTs of the *gram panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block, where PRADAN had its intervention and social mobilization base. The planning phase of IPPE-1 was conducted during September 2014–January 2015. The DRTs were trained by trainers, who had themselves undergone a Training of Trainers (ToT) at the state level earlier. The DRTs, then, trained the BRTs and BPTs at the block level. In all these trainings, PRADAN participated in building the capacity of the trainers and of the members involved in the planning.

Orientation was also conducted for the women's collectives and they were motivated to work together with the BPTs so that a proper planning process could take place. Professionals were engaged in facilitating the process of planning with the BPTs and the village women, and as the process moved forward, most of the BPTs got into their roles and found it easier to relate with the process and understand the significance of the community-led planning process.

Even though the process of planning was time-consuming, the village women and SHG members and many of the motivated village youth invested their time, energy and experience to develop a concrete village plan. The planning process found active involvement of more than 50 per cent of the women in 10 villages. This was, indeed, a promising trend.

The PRA tool has helped in organizing the village community and has helped the villagers to realize that their voices, ideas and experiences are worthy

The earlier trend where the *panchayat* representatives and a few influential people in the village planned the interventions under the programme was now on the decline. From 2014–15 onwards, the planning process was carried out, using the

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tool. PRA is an extensive process of planning in which the entire resources and social composition of a village is mapped by the residents of the village.

The idea behind performing a PRA exercise was so that the villagers would have a better understanding and knowledge regarding their village and its developmental prospects, and that they are a part of the planning process. The PRA tool has helped in organizing the village community and has helped the villagers to realize that their voices, ideas and experiences are worthy. Jagota Bai from Kuhi village happily states, "Earlier, I used *rangoli* for my house decoration, whereas now I am using *rangoli* for decorating my village."

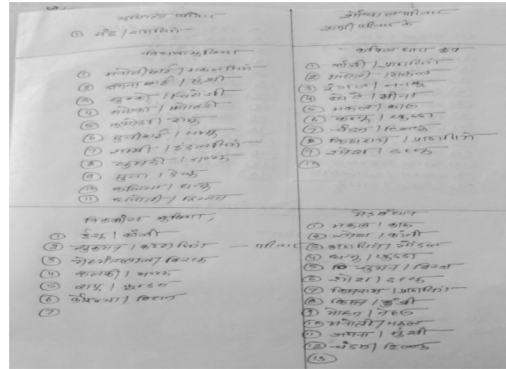
The focus was also on planning for those activities under MGNREGS that would contribute to livelihoods augmentation as well as provide employment for the vulnerable sections, viz., widows, separated women, the disabled, etc. The process was facilitated in a way that after the resource and social mapping, a brief overview of the livelihoods prospect was placed before the villagers and they were encouraged to plan for assets that would last for a long duration and eventually lead to livelihoods augmentation. The villagers, therefore, planned more land development activities this time as compared to structures that require huge investments and contribute comparatively less in livelihoods development.

Over the last few years, the *gram sabha* has been strengthened. A large number of women have started attending the *gram sabha* and have been placing their demands before the assembly. The agenda and the discussions have become more about reviewing of plans for the creation of assets in the village.

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rain water storage but we never expected that our views would be useful or that the government would ask us for ideas and seek our suggestions in this regard."

An insight that the planning team had was that the community had some preferences about the timing of their employment and,



IPPE has taken it further and, for the first time, the residents of the village (especially women) have observed that their opinions for the next financial year have been solicited, and their choices considered and incorporated in the planning for activities under MGNREGS.

Sanno Bai from Dulhara explains this change in her own words, "I have been residing in the village for many years. The other SHG women and I used to discuss about how to improve our agriculture practices and how to work on

up until then, there was a mis-match in the demand for wage employment and the period when this was provided by the *panchayats*. In almost all the villages, the people have stated that plenty of work is on offer during the beginning of the year and that overlaps with the crop intensive or festival season. Therefore, they found it difficult to prioritize. The GRS of Mahendrawadi *panchayat* says, "Earlier there was unnecessary pressure on us to deploy labour at the worksites, but now I feel confident that if the plan is implemented in the

Ratanpur, a village in the Ghora Dongri block, is situated about 25 km from Betul district. During the IPPE planning, the women of the SHGs wanted to include their men in the discussions. They became further motivated after watching a movie on MGNREGA; they asked the men to join them. At first, the men were a little aloof and kept their distance as they watched the women begin to draw the resource map. Although they were invited to join the women, the men did not participate; the women then decided to draw the map and asked their GRS to guide them in marking the points. Later on, some of the men got interested and joined the exercise. They spent three days in helping the women. When the planning exercise was over, the panchayati raj institution (PRI) members applauded the village women for their determination.

manner that my villagers have decided, there will be more cohesiveness and accountability among them.”

Here was the drawback in IPPE-1. The planning process was successfully completed in 22 of the 56 *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block in 2014, including the six villages that PRADAN was engaged in. But because of the lack of clarity about the flow of funds among the district and block officials, the block officials were unable to consolidate the plan and eventually have not been able to freeze it in the MIS of MGNREGA. The block had utilized their contingency reserves in completing the planning process in an effective manner, but due to the communication gap in the state-to-district and district-to-block officials and the lack of formal intimation, it was not consolidated properly, for which the block Programme Officer (PO) is still regretful. He said, “It was one of the most fascinating processes of planning I have seen happening under MGNREGS in my tenure, and I was pleased to see the efforts put in by the planning teams and the women SHGs in this process. But I feel incapable that I haven’t been able to convince my block and district functionaries.”

Even though the IPPE plans made in 2014 have not been entered in the MIS entirely, there is a positive aspect to the situation. A majority of the individual assets creation plans has been incorporated in the SoP of the respective *panchayats*. In FY 2015–16, the focus of the state government was on taking up the incomplete works on a priority basis before taking on new works. Therefore, most of the plans are still there in the SoP of the *panchayats*. In many *panchayats*, work has been initiated but only 15–20 per cent of it has been completed because the focus has been on closure of the already initiated works.

Gradually, the pendulum has swung towards the favourable in 2015. MoRD has moved a step closer and introduced IPPE-II, incorporating a convergence approach in the planning process. Now, IPPE is no longer a labour budget preparation exercise but has turned into a process to plan for each of the village HHs, especially the vulnerable ones, identified through the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data, 2011.

Based upon the SECC data, a livelihoods plan has been chalked out for each of the vulnerable HHs in a village. In this process, a conscious attempt has been made to bring together all the five schemes {that is, MGNREGS, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), IAY and Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)} so that livelihoods of families can be strengthened. The attempt was to conduct the entire planning process and have it entered in the MIS. The critical factor was the fact that the district, this time around, planned things on time and also did not face any financial challenges at any stage.

Considering the challenges of the past, PRADAN was selected to facilitate the planning process in 16 villages of Ghora Dongri and Betul blocks and to also keep an eye on the process in the other regions.

As PRADAN was the district-level CSO engaged as a resource organization, I (Executive–Projects) interacted with the block personnel as well. Also, because I was the master trainer for the region of Betul and Chhindwara districts, I reached out to a larger area and was kept constantly updated with the progress in these regions. I guided and assisted BPT members. I attended the State Resource Team (SRT) training in Raipur in September 2015, where the pre-planning preparatory process kicked off.

I was engaged in the capacity building of the BRTs in Betul, Hoshangabad, Chhindwara and Raisen districts. The participants had already gained insights from their year-long

- ♦ MR Mandloi, Sub Engineer of Ghora Dongri block, says, "I like this process of planning because it helps me understand the challenges in the lives of the villagers. Initially, I felt uneasy and wondered whether I would be able to carry out such an exercise but the village women helped me in gaining confidence. I wish, from now on, all plans are prepared in this manner only."
- ♦ Mr. Saxena, APO Technical, Betul district says, "This process has taken me back to my early days in this Rural Development sector when I used to interact for long hours with the rural people. I must say the village people have much to contribute in educating us. All they need is some affection and a sensitive atmosphere; people will come together and then the feeling of moving together is just joyful."
- ♦ Mr. Dongre, PO, Betul district, shares his experience. "What I found and learned is that we should respect the people living in the villages. Our sensitivity should be high. The villagers have a lot of self-pride and only if one is aware of one's own behaviour towards them, can a person facilitate this process of planning, which is so exciting."
- ♦ Mr. Agrawal, PO, Betul district, shares his point of view, "The villagers, especially the SHG women, have the competence to plan for their village but we need to keep on creating a space for them and also to acknowledge and

praise their efforts. We need to come out of our 'knowledge-expert' mind-sets and start thinking from their point of view. Only then can we relate to their thought processes."

engagement in the IPPE-1 and, therefore, understood the approach much better.

In Ghora Dongri, almost 60 per cent of the participants were those who had engaged in the planning process the previous year. For the first time, there was the involvement of

Dulhara village in Ghora Dongri block is situated around 35 km from Betul district. The village community had carried out the planning process in 2011 and had placed their demand in the *gram sabha* but the *panchayat* had not incorporated their plans. During IPPE-1, however, the villagers again got together and conducted the same process of planning and put forward their demands. The plan was approved by the *gram sabha* and included in its SoP. However, work did not begin because pending works needed to be completed first, on a priority basis.

Had the village community expressed its reluctance to engage, it would not have been surprising. The heartening part, however, was when the women and the men in the village said that the feeling of being counted was good in itself. They were appreciative of the fact that their *panchayat* representatives were including them in the process. One of the residents of the village stated, "We have the perseverance even though we have problems in motivating ourselves time and again. We are waiting for the day when our plans will be implemented. It will surely add value to our lives."

women SHG members in BPTs because it was essential to have women members facilitate the plans around schemes such as NSAP and NRLM that have direct impact on women.

These BPTs involved themselves regularly in the planning phase; the State Council organized timely trainings of BPTs and BRTs and had the State Nodal Officer provide supervision for them. The BPTs also tracked the movement of the process online and continuously reviewed the progress at almost all levels so that the process was facilitated in a time-bound manner.

A livelihoods plan for vulnerable HHs has been made in all the *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block. PRADAN was engaged in eight villages from four *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri, and five villages of five *panchayats* of Betul block, with the specific objective of facilitating an ideal process and also developing some model villages, where PRADAN has a strong social mobilization base. The demarcations under this process have been clear and, therefore, very visible. The village community and the

BPT members have been able to measure the challenges, the opportunities and, most critically, the vulnerabilities. The demarcations were as follows:

- ◆ Housing
- ◆ Caste-wise settlement
- ◆ BPL/APL/*Antyodaya* HHs
- ◆ Landless/Landholding HHs
- ◆ Women-headed/Physically challenged/Elderly/Destitute HHs
- ◆ HHs with literate/semi-literate members
- ◆ HHs with electricity connection, toilets, cattle sheds
- ◆ HHs in which women are a part of SHGs
 - Type of land and soil—the present state
 - Undulation
 - Land and water treatment that took place in the past and the possibilities
 - Water resources and its condition
 - Present usage of resources

The steps of the process are as follows

Planning Process under IPPE-II during FY 2015–16			
No.	Process	Desired outcomes	Conducted in
1	Movie show on planning through the PRA process	People will get familiar with the process of planning	November 2015
2	Executing the planning process	A three-day process for PRA, and option generation and prioritization of work.	November 2015
3	Approval from the <i>gram sabha</i>	Getting the Administrative Sanction (AS) for the plan	December 2015
4	Livelihoods planning for vulnerable HHs	To get the livelihoods plan prepared for each of the vulnerable HHs in the village.	December–January 2016
5	Entry of plan in MIS	To get the plan mapped in the MIS for further course of action	January–February 2016

The planning process eventually led to a proper conclusion; in almost all the *panchayats*, the plans are on the verge of getting fed into the MIS. Trends suggest that the planning process under IPPE-II has been effective and impactful. Some observations are:

- ◆ People's involvement in the planning process was higher when deliberations were taking place, based upon the maps drawn. The community was able to explicitly state the best possible means for livelihoods augmentation and self-sustained assets creation for themselves. The village group was more in agreement and helpful to each other when prioritizing work.
- ◆ The identification of vulnerable HHs through PRA and SECC data helped in reaching the targeted set of beneficiaries, which, in earlier times, used to become complex due to the many parameters of identification.
- ◆ Women's SHGs in each of the villages were actively engaged in mapping and planning.
- ◆ The demands of different sets of people, namely, youth, elderly, women, farmers, etc., were being voiced explicitly.
- ◆ It was relatively easier for women to express their vulnerabilities in this process and to be confident to seek the support of the village community in dealing with the situation.
- ◆ There were SHGs that wished to converge with NRLM and other schemes to collectively undertake livelihood plans and implement them. In almost all the villages, people stated that, in earlier times, MGNREGS work used to take place during the intensive farming periods and, therefore, they were unable to take

up work. The villagers have voiced their preference to engage as labour during the lean periods in the year.

Dharakhoh is a beautiful forest village, gifted with natural resources. It is situated in Betul block of Betul district. During the planning process, the villagers explicitly stated that it is for the first time that they are seeing their PRI members, the GRS and the Sub-engineer sitting together for such long hours and helping them think, plan and articulate their desires.

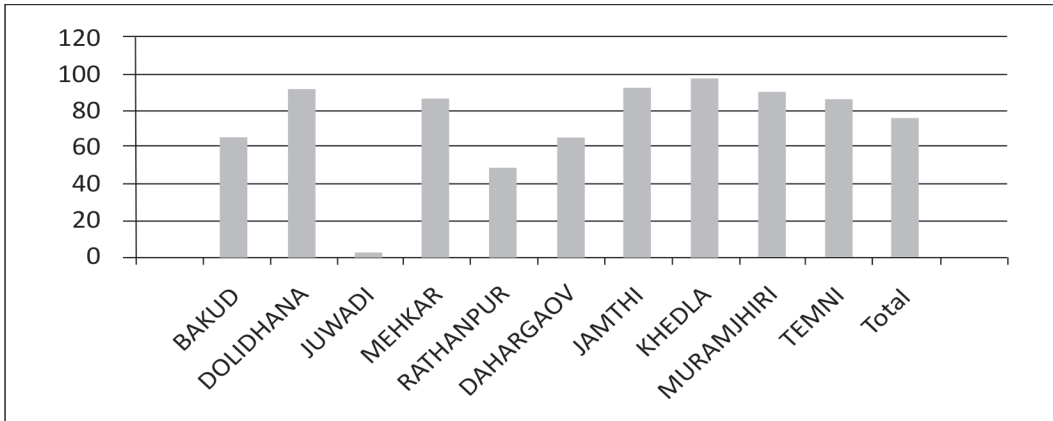
As the planning process evolved further, the GRS, the Sub-engineers and other BPT members sat, chatted and took action together.

During the finalization phase, many villagers were noticed standing a little away from the *gram sabha*. When questioned why, they said, "We wonder if the PRI and BRT members are here because of some pressure. If this practice were to continue, we can together develop our village in four to five years and there will be no one who is poor amongst us." Having said this, they again expressed their apprehensions about whether the trend would continue in the long run.

Case studies of Dharakhoh, Ratanpur and Dulhara villages suggest that the villagers are very involved in this programme and are filled with a sense of satisfaction. They are hopeful that this kind of approach will help them develop their villages as per their choice, and also help in identifying and allocating work to the vulnerable sections.

As far as tangible outcomes are concerned, a significant number of demands of the vulnerable HHs have been incorporated in the total demands made by the *panchayats* that PRADAN engaged with.

Figure 1: Percentage of Estimated Demand by Vulnerable Jobcard Holders to Total Demand (Person Days)



Source: nrega.nic.in

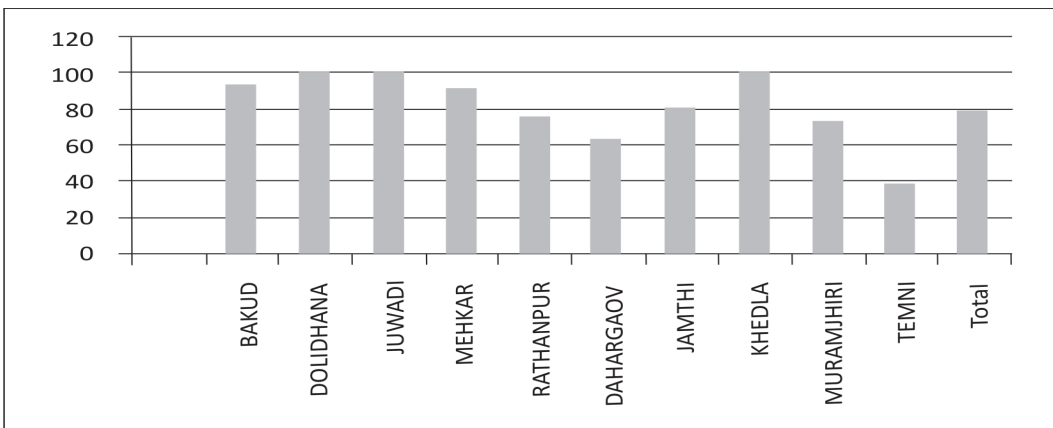
This shows that concerted efforts have been made to attend to the needs of vulnerable HHs. There has been a significant increase in the demands by vulnerable sections during the planning process and, if these get actualized, it will enhance their livelihoods prospects and gradually bring them into the mainstream.

Also, interestingly, the proportion of planned agriculture-related work is witnessing a significant rise, implying that the livelihoods propelling plan has reached a break-even stage.

Data is still in the process of being evaluated; further analysis will only strengthen these observations.

These trends suggest a movement of MGNREGS from a wage-employment generating scheme to a focussed and process-driven programme wherein there is scope to build upon the effectiveness of established participatory processes at the planning, execution, monitoring, review and evaluation stages. As the democratic processes start settling into a motion, trends suggest that

Figure 2: Percentage of Estimated Person Days from Agriculture related Work Out of Total



Source: nrega.nic.in

the ownership and outreach of this scheme will enrich the rural economy and take it to the next level. To move in that direction, the following need to be attended to:

- ♦ Villagers need to be educated on the rights-perspective of this programme and their entitlements under this.
- ♦ A large number of rural youth and women need to be informed of the various provisions of the Act and be encouraged to actively engage in the role of Village Social Auditors (VSAs), Mates and GRSs so that the inclusion is led in a self-sustained manner.
- ♦ These processes need to be envisioned for a long term, and efforts need to be made to make these free from time and fund-flow constraints.
- ♦ Information needs to be passed on to rural HHs in a simplistic and timely manner.
- ♦ In Betul district, because land distribution did not take place, many villagers were unable to take up work on their individual land under the scheme. The selection criteria can be reviewed further to put in place a community-led, potential-beneficiary identification process.
- ♦ Efforts need to be made for PRA for all the rural development schemes. This will bring in unanimity in operations and establish a culture.

- ♦ Focussed attempts are needed to create more opportunities to establish communication between the village community and PRI functionaries. This will contribute to reducing the trust deficit to a great extent.
- ♦ Women's SHGs and CBOs need to work towards ensuring greater participation and creating social mobilization in the villages.

To create convergence of all the schemes has been a struggle all through the planning process. This was especially so in planning for convergence under NRLM because Ghora Dongri block is a non-intensive block under NRLM. There were openings that will keep increasing for convergence in the other schemes. The changed perception of BPT members, block officials, district officials and the village community suggests that, in the years to come, continuing with these participatory processes will contribute greatly to integrated village development. The increased confidence of the villagers will inspire the involvement of a larger number of people which, in turn, will lead to mass awareness. It will allow an increasingly strong grass-roots democracy to flourish. This will bring all the people together for a common cause, create a healthy governance system and contribute to eradicating poverty.

Leaves of Prosperity

G. XAVIER AND M. SUBRAMANIAN

Reaching out to the poor, landless and marginalized betel vine cultivators and supporting them to better their cultivation practices and to bypass sale of their produce to middlemen is steadily improving the lives of these farmers and holding up hope for them of a way out of abject poverty

The picturesque Anaimalai block of Coimbatore district offers ideal agro-climatic conditions for betel vine cultivation. Numerous landless Pandiya Vellalar communities have, for many generations, leased land from the owners of coconut plantations to cultivate betel vine, or *paan*.

The process of cultivation for this ancient crop (it has been in use globally for 2000 years) is highly labour intensive and, therefore, the communities involved invest most of their time and labour tending to it. Betel vine cultivation and its trade and commerce offer employment to about two million families in India and the livelihood of these people is solely dependent on the performance of this bread earning crop. The farmers have become members of the Thenchitur Vetrilai Urpathiyalargal Poocharam, or Common Livelihood Group (CLG), an intervention at the community based organization (CBO) level, to bring under one umbrella all those individuals involved in this business at the habitation level.

During cultivation, betel vine is very susceptible to diseases such as leaf-spot, leaf rot and a powdery mildew. This results in great losses. Against this background, it is important to mention the integrated support provided by the Pudhu Vaazhvu (New Life) Project (PVP). PVP began its operations in Tamil Nadu in 2005, covering 26 districts, 120 blocks, spread across 4,174 village *panchayats*. It had a project outlay of Rs 1,667 crores, funded by World Bank. The objective of PVP is to empower the poorest of the poor, the marginalized and the differently-abled, and to promote sustainable livelihoods for them. PVP follows the community driven development approach, and has absorbed the poor and the under-privileged into the mainstream development process. CLG members of Thenchitur derive enormous benefits from PVP, which has largely reflected the overall mandate of the Project—of poverty reduction and shared growth. These benefits have been taken to the ground through sustainable natural resource management, effective disease control, arrangement of micro-finance and business development.

Coimbatore is one of the most industrialized districts of Tamil Nadu. According to the 2011 Census, Coimbatore district has a population of 34,58,045 with a sex ratio of 1,000 women for 1000 men. Schedule Castes and the Scheduled Tribes account for 10.5 per cent and 0.82 per cent of the population, respectively. In 2011, the district had a total of 9,58,035 households (HHs). Coimbatore district is home to the Anaimalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park, both of which are under consideration by UNESCO as part of the Western Ghats World Heritage Site. There are over 2,000 species of plants, of which about 400 species are of prime medicinal value. Coimbatore district houses more than 25,000 small, medium and large industries, with the primary industries being engineering and textiles. Coimbatore District Society, or PVP, was formed in 2005.

PVP is being implemented in three blocks of Coimbatore district. Thenchitur village *panchayat*, where a betel vine CLG has been organized, is situated in Anaimalai block. Thenchitur *panchayat* has a target of 108 HHs, comprising 45 very poor, 66 poor, 40 differently-abled, and 21 vulnerable HHs. A *panchayat*-level Federation (PLF) has been functioning since November 2010 and has received Rs 10 lakhs as livelihood corpus fund, or Amutha Surabhi Fund (ASF). There are 25 SHGs, with 266 members, affiliated to the PLF. The betel vine CLG of this *panchayat* has 21 members engaged in cultivating approximately six acres of betel vine. A one-time development fund of Rs 77,800 was provided to the CLG for the purchase of essential infrastructure items useful in cultivation and for training to enhance the administrative and marketing skills of members. Besides, various loans through nationalized banks amounting to Rs 1.6 lakhs have been extended to members to facilitate timely farming operations.

Betel vine is a delicate and extremely fragile plant, which must be tended to carefully. Not only is it painstaking work but also the plants have to be kept disease-free. The fluctuations in prices, which are dependent on market conditions, have a great impact on the income of the farmers. Betel vine farming is labour intensive; the availability of labour for its cultivation during peak season is also a serious problem, preventing the timely execution of cultural practices. Currently, around 250 families of landless agricultural labourers of Anaimalai block are traditionally employed in betel vine farming. Each family usually takes on lease up to eight cents of fertile land that has coconut trees, which offer the much-needed shade to the betel vine. The owners of the leased land ensure continuous availability of water through lift irrigation. The land is usually leased for three years. Most often, organic farming practices are adopted, which involves growing the *sesbania grandiflora* (*agathi*) as a support crop, and bananas and chillies as inter-crops. The first picking of leaves usually commences after a gap of eight to nine months from the time of planting a robust seed crop.

The local name of the variety grown is *Sakari Kodi*. It has mild pungency and is light green in colour. In Anaimalai block, coconut trees are widely grown and because these provide additional shade, the vines are trailed on grown-up *sesbania* trees, the leaves of which are used both as manure and as a green vegetable, fetching additional income to the growers. The mature betel leaves are plucked by hand along with a portion of the petiole. The harvested betel leaves are washed, cleaned and made ready for marketing. An annual yield of a good betel leaf crop is about 65–75 leaves per plant, translating into a yield of 18 to 20 lakh leaves per acre.

The type of leaves produced by this CLG has found good market acceptance in the

neighbouring state of Kerala. Because the quantity available with individual growers is small (1 or 2 kg per picking), they usually hand over the daily collection of leaves to the brokers or middle-men, who then arrange to make a down payment at the rate of Rs 80 to 90 per kg of leaves. The village middle-men, however, invariably exploit the growers and offer much lower prices than the prevailing market prices. These marketing bottlenecks have been successfully addressed by resorting to collective pooling of the produce and arranging to sell it directly to wholesalers at a higher price, thus bypassing middle-men.

As mentioned earlier, the betel vine CLG at Thenchitur was launched in 2011 as part of the PVP strategy for inclusive growth and development of poor, landless growers. The CLG primarily focussed on finding ways to stabilize production by making available critical infrastructure essential for crop management, coupled with the marketing of the produce collectively at a higher price to wholesalers, with an aim to enhance the individual members' profitability. On 7 March 2011, this CLG was formed with 20 members. Each member contributed Rs 100 as membership fee and the group elected a President, a Secretary and a Treasurer, to run the day-to-day operations of the CLG. Training was imparted on various aspects—administration, finance and crop management. Subsequent to the training, the group prepared a business plan, which was fine-tuned, with inputs from the PFT and District Project Management Unit (DPMU), Coimbatore.

On acceptance of the plan, the CLG received Rs 77,800 as development and infrastructure fund, which was utilized to purchase ladders,

Marketing bottlenecks have been successfully addressed by resorting to collective pooling of the produce and arranging to sell it directly to wholesalers at a higher price, thus bypassing middle-men

sprayers, vessels for lift irrigation, weighing balances and iron nails for plucking the leaves. Keeping in mind the constraints faced by the members due to shortage of funds for routine farming operations, CLG members were extended credit facilities through the Amutha Surabhi Fund and also through bank

linkages, to the tune of Rs 1.6 lakhs. These crop loans were both internal and external. The internal loan was provided through the Amutha Surabhi Fund initiated by the Project, aimed at giving timely business credit to CLG members. Besides crop loans, arrangements were also facilitated through nationalized banks to take care of the micro-financial needs of the members.

Apart from these initiatives, a major programme that was successfully implemented was collective direct marketing. The groups successfully bypassed the middle-men who had, so far, been buying the leaves at the rate of Rs 85-95 per kg, and had managed to sell their pooled produce directly to the wholesalers operating in the nearby town of Pollachi at the rate of Rs 120 to Rs 130 per kg, resulting in an additional profit of Rs 30 to Rs 40 per kg of leaves.

The success of this CLG has encouraged PVP, Coimbatore, to scale up the activities by organizing other betel vine growers of the *panchayat* into a new CLG. Plans are also underway to form a betel vine growers' Federation, with the following key objectives:

- A. The betel leaf is eaten raw; if the produce were to be cultivated through organic farming techniques, the product would acquire a unique selling point (USP), commanding a higher premium price in the market place. Therefore, it is planned that cultivators be brought under the

Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) Organic Certification Process. Most of the CLG members have undergone training in organic cultivation, and exposure visits have been arranged to familiarize them with the preparation of organic inputs and pesticides. Once the growers become eligible for an organic certificate, a suitable brand name may be assigned to the produce, capitalizing on the popularity of their geographical location. This will help them acquire premium pricing in a wider area and in diverse territories.

- B. The market price and yield make all the difference in improving agricultural profitability for small landless cultivators. Currently, all the growers face a 40–60 per cent loss in yield because of pest infestation and diseases. Despite repeated preventive measures using fungicides and pesticides, some of the sucking pests have not been eliminated; the diseases and the pests seem to have become resistant. It has, therefore, been decided to introduce improved cultivar varieties developed by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) that have a high level of pest and disease tolerance. These will be tested for adaptability to the local agro-climatic conditions as well as market acceptance. Systematic testing and the gradual introduction and expansion of this new improved variety, coupled with the adoption of the Integrated Pest Management technologies, using bio-control methods such as *Trichoderma Viride* and *Pseudomonas* is expected to gradually eliminate pest and disease problems, thereby, resulting in a boost in the yield by up to 30 per cent.

These programmes of the PVP, Coimbatore, planned for the benefit of the CLG, aim at bringing in sustainable changes and

development in the lives of the under-privileged, landless betel vine growers of Anaimalai block of Coimbatore district.

NAGALAKSHMI'S STORY

Nagalakshmi of Thenchitur is no stranger to farming. As a child, she helped her parents with planting, weeding and plucking betel vine in the Thenchitur village of Anaimalai block, which lies in the picturesque foothills of the Western Ghats. This marginalized but bold and enthusiastic landless labourer has managed to sustain a family of four, raising her children and sending them to an engineering college to make their future secure.

The agricultural techniques adopted by her over the years were primitive but ensured that the eight cents of leased-in land where she and her husband cultivated betel vine was able to cater to the basic needs of the family. Productivity was below average. In addition, the prevalent nexus of local traders and middle-men led to a situation where she had absolutely no bargaining power and was constrained to sell her produce at the rate of Rs 80 to Rs 90 per kg of leaves, incurring huge losses.

In 2011, Nagalakshmi joined the 'Thenchitur Vetrialai Urpathiyalargal Poocharam (CLG), which was set up by the PVP society, Coimbatore, a poverty alleviation Project jointly financed by World Bank and the Tamil Nadu government. Like Nagalakshmi, a group of 20 marginalized landless labourers of Thenchitur, who had been, for generations, cultivating betel vine on leased land, were a part of this CLG. The members participated in all the meetings and attended training sessions held by PFT and DPMU.

Judiciously utilizing the infrastructure fund extended to them, Nagalakshmi purchased

implements such as sprayers, ladders and iron nails for her farm operations. Prior to the formation of the CLG, she would rent these implements at a considerable cost. Nagalakshmi also received a soft loan of Rs 35,000 through the Amutha Surabhi Fund (a corpus fund anchored by PVP) through the officers of the PLF of Thenchitur *panchayat*.

An entomologist and pathologist from the Department of Aromatic and Medicinal plants, TNAU also visited Nagalakshmi's pest-and disease-affected fields and recommended safe and effective pest control measures. Complying strictly with the procedures and diligently following the tips shared by PFT and DPMU, Nagalakshmi secured a bumper yield

of 750 kg of betel leaf per year from her eight cents of leased land.

She is able to sell her produce directly to the wholesalers at Pollachi, fetching an additional profit of Rs 25 per kg of leaves. Thus, with the incremental yield of 90 kg ($90 \text{ kg} \times \text{Rs } 120 = \text{Rs } 10,800$) and the additional price realization of Rs 14,400 ($750 \text{ kg} \times \text{Rs } 20$), Nagalakshmi earned an extra income of Rs 25,200, solely because of her valuable membership in the CLG.

Seeing the increased yield and the other financial and infrastructure benefits that Nagalakshmi received, other farmers are now motivated to become members of the existing CLG in Thenchitur.

Participatory Planning in Jharkhand: A Step towards Democratic Development

SHACHI SETH

Transferring the power to plan and implement development work in villages to the villagers themselves is a step toward decentralization, which forms a vital aspect of good governance and has the potential to change the face of rural policies and planning

The idea of democratic participation is incomplete without the needs of the people translating into policy and its subsequent implementation. The voices of the people often remain unheard in the chambers of politicians and bureaucrats, the decision-makers in the areas of policy allocation and ground-level distribution. Numerous surveys, studies and assessments are conducted each year, elected representatives take the problems to the Vidhan Sabha and the Lok Sabha, and many rural policies are approved each year, and, yet, little seems to change for people in villages.

Because of middle-men, vote bank politics, and a large web of bureaucratic corruption and indifference, people do not receive entitlements that are due to them. The distance of the policymaker from the actual scene of implementation is often a hindrance to seeing the needs and requirements of the rural population. The government has tried to change this by incorporating new, participatory ways of decision-making, notably the Integrated Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE), implemented in certain blocks across the country.

IPPE works on the principles of policy convergence and public participation; nonetheless, in its first phase, it has had little impact in Jharkhand, where the rural population continues to suffer from exclusion, poverty, and a high outward migration rate. During the second round, IPPE-2, new ideas and experiments, focussed on deepening the practices of democracy, have emerged.

At the cusp of the practices of decentralization and policy convergence lies the IPPE being held in Jharkhand—the Yojana Banao Abhiyan (YBA). The programme, a brainchild of civil society actors and a close derivative of the People's Planning movement in Kerala in 1996, has seen large-scale participation and publicity in the past month. Implemented across all blocks in the state, YBA is a programme designed to benefit rural populations as per their needs, with their priorities being strictly kept in mind. It also aims at strengthening the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) in the area. In its initial phase, the programme seems to have created a stir and has instilled hope in a significant section of the rural poor in Jharkhand.

ABOUT YBA

YBA is a decentralized planning programme that aims at increasing the participation of the rural public in the development of their area. It creates a platform for villagers to step in and determine the development works that will be most beneficial for the community. The programme was launched by Chief Minister Raghubar Das in December 2015 and has seen a tremendous show of political will and publicity.

Apart from the wide press coverage, the programme has been advertised through many hoardings across the capital city of Ranchi as well as in rural, peri-urban and urban areas of Jharkhand. Various events have been organized across the state to create a resource pool for the programme, and several planning exercises have been conducted. For example, training workshops for Community Resource Persons (CRPs), mega rallies in villages, and awareness and mobilization drives have been

YBA is a programme designed to benefit rural populations as per their needs, with their priorities being strictly kept in mind. It also aims at strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the area

organized. Many aspects of the state apparatus have been put to use, with the strong support of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Ministers, MLAs and MPs have been made in-charge of specific areas, and professors from universities, members of SHGs, workers from various non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) are part of the resource base that the campaign has created.

The state's expectation from the movement is that the villagers will manage allocations in a way that is suitable for their community's geographical, social and environmental needs. With the introduction of YBA, the rural public along with their local governments, that is, *gram panchayats*, will make rural development plans, based on their resources, livelihoods and requirements. These plans are to be made at the hamlet-level meetings and then passed by the *gram sabha* of the revenue village. Once these plans are made and priorities have been decided by the *gram sabha*, a *panchayat* working committee meeting will finalize the plans and record these in the formats provided. The plans will be implemented as per the guidelines of MGNREGA and the 14th Finance Commission, and through funds that are allocated for such schemes.

Villagers can now choose and prioritize, through YBA, how they wish to use the funds that are allocated under MGNREGA. Whereas MGNREGA is in itself an employment and livelihoods-generation scheme, YBA allows for the public to determine its priorities in terms of developmental works that get sanctioned under MGNREGA. The 14th Finance Commission, which provides funds for basic amenities in the village, will provide the funds for these projects. A Panchayat Planning Team (PPT) will be formed in each village, to guide

villagers about the scheme, and help in mapping and planning projects for the village.

PPT comprises at least five members including the *panchayat sewak*, the *rozgar sewak*, two Ward Members, and two social planners (representatives from Self-Help Groups—SHGs, Cluster Facilitation Teams—CFTs, etc.) from the village. PPTs are being trained and supported by the State Resource Team (SRT) members of each district, comprising civil society members, CFT members, Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) officers, government officials and functionaries, Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows (PMRDF), PRI trainers and Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) officials. Bureaucrats and local politicians, including MPs, MLAs and ministers, have been actively involved over the first phase of this scheme, by visiting the villages allotted to them and ensuring the smooth functioning of these meetings.

Bureaucrats such as the block and district Project Officers and Block Development Officers (BDOs) monitor the planning process. In order to prepare them for the programme and to sensitize them to the issues at hand, these bureaucrats underwent a special residential training in Ranchi. The District Programme Officers attended a five-day residential workshop, which included three days of planning and two days of field visits, along with other key actors such as members of the State Resource Teams (SRTs).

YBA has attracted a remarkable amount of enthusiasm, with innumerable aspects of the state and the civil society being called on board so as to make the programme work. Evident also is the enthusiasm of the people, who

YBA has attracted a remarkable amount of enthusiasm, with innumerable aspects of the state and the civil society being called on board so as to make the programme work

have shed a lot of inhibitions and are participating in it in unprecedented numbers.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The planning exercise for YBA is conducted over a period of three days. Guidelines are laid down to help the villagers assess

the needs of the village, vis-à-vis the resources available in the area. Every day, a specific set of activities that need to be conducted is allotted. An important aspect of YBA is to uplift *vanchit parivars* (deprived families) in a village and to ensure at least 100 days of employment to members of such families. Whereas the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) recognizes certain families that meet the criteria of *vanchit parivar*, YBA allows the *gram sabha* to recognize many more categories such as widows, senior citizens living alone, landless families, poor families with a large number of children, etc. Additionally, the *gram sabha* can suggest the removal of the *vanchit parivar* status from families that are well-off.

Day one of YBA is preceded by an awareness rally across the village and detailed information is put up on the notice board so as to inform and collect as many people from the village for the meeting. The schedule for the first day includes a discussion with the villagers, explaining to them the nuances of the scheme, and assisting them in the process of planning. A social map of the village is drafted with families marked as below poverty line (BPL), schedule caste (SC), schedule tribe (ST), other backward caste (OBC) and *vanchit parivar*. The purpose is to have a visual representation of the population distribution so that resources may be allocated in a fair manner, accessible to all. A month-wise plan of the livelihoods and MGNREGA employment scheme is set, after considering the needs of individuals and the

community. Issues concerning *vanchit parivars* are discussed and listed as a priority.

Day two of YBA focusses on resource planning. A resource map is drawn, wherein wells, rivers, check dams, arable land, land for grazing, etc., are marked. Both the social map and the resource map are initially drawn on the ground, using colours provided in the YBA kit given to all PPT members. Different colours are used to mark different social groups and resources in the respective maps. After there is agreement on the maps and the village has been inspected for their accuracy, these maps are drawn on chart papers. The areas marked for developmental works are inspected and a tour of the village is made so as to verify the records created in the previous two days.

On day three, the verification continues and the households marked as *vanchit* are visited to check if the family is actually deprived. Sometimes, a family that has been marked as deprived is well-off in reality. Such families are removed from the list and other families are marked as deprived, if that is so. The aim is to eliminate errors such as inaccurate inclusion of prosperous families and omission of needy families from the records. A primary understanding of the policies marked out by the village is undertaken and the plan is revised and rectified before it is sent to the *panchayat*. The third day is largely dedicated to documentation—the details are written down and forms are filled, chiefly by PPT.

OBSERVATIONS OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

The involvement of such a large resource pool did have an impact on the mobilization across the state. Participation in most areas was noticeably high, and the involvement of SHG women positively affected their participation in YBA. Most people in these areas had their

reservations about MGNREGA due to late payments, improper maintenance of records, etc.

The mobilization conducted by SRTs and CFTs was crucial to breaking inhibitions in people and played a great role in reviving the trust of the people in the state. Whereas certain issues were common to all, the composition of the society and the level of intervention in the areas affected the outcomes and the process of organization. Some areas were easily motivated in large numbers to take up the schemes prescribed by the government whereas some stuck to the structures they trusted. In some areas, the meetings functioned fairly smoothly whereas meetings in other areas experienced arguments and conflicts when making decisions.

In a village of Koderma block, where there was sufficient attendance in the *gram sabha*, the community split into two—men and women. The men became drunk, as is a usual occurrence in the area, and created a huge ruckus. This segregation was initiated by the women after the men started fighting amongst themselves. Even in the women's group, in which most of them were from SHGs and were aware of the evils of caste, a few conflicts arose around the construction of walls around their cremation grounds. Because the village was divided on basis of caste, the upper castes had two cremation grounds and the lower castes had one. There were prolonged arguments about which of the grounds was to be enlisted for development work; both sides presented heated arguments. SHG members mediated in the matter and helped the group reach a conclusion eventually about which one of the cremation ground walls for higher castes was to be repaired first. The nature of the demands was more individualistic in some areas and the issues of caste often arose in the decision-making. Nonetheless, in most cases, members

did arrive at a consensus. What was interesting was the kind of discussion and debate that suddenly became a part of the public lives of these villagers. A culture of participation, planning and presenting arguments for their own welfare could emanate from such a programme, leading to a healthier democracy.

NATURE OF DEMANDS

One of the biggest problems across the state is availability of water, both for drinking and irrigation. The focus of the government training was, therefore, chiefly on water conservation schemes so as to increase the level of the water table in these areas. The plateau region is characterized by rocky, uneven terrain and it is often tough to retain rain water. There is inadequate storage of surface water and the water table in the area is fast declining. Most farms are uncultivated during January and February because the agriculture is rain-fed and there not many other alternatives to irrigation. Villages were being encouraged to use YBA to construct structures that contribute to increasing the water table levels and harvest rain water for long-term use. The construction of new structures such as *dhoba* and *medhbandi* are being encouraged whereas old structures such as check dams and wells are the other available alternatives.

The distribution of the available water sources is itself not equitable and often some of the farms are at a disadvantage. Women from farther regions have to walk for several kilometres to access clean drinking water. The seasonal nature of agriculture also drives up migration rates in the area. Most men travel to urban areas in search for work, owing to the higher wage rates and the lack of alternatives

What was interesting was the kind of discussion and debate that suddenly became a part of the public lives of these villagers. A culture of participation, planning and presenting arguments for their own welfare could emanate from such a programme, leading to a healthier democracy

in the villages. Hence, the concerns regarding availability of water sources seems to be uniform across areas and most villagers recognize the desperate need for irrigation facilities.

Whereas the authorities suggest structures for rain water harvesting, most of the villagers seem to prefer wells and lift irrigation. This is partially because most villagers are not familiar with the structures

that the state suggests as a means of water conservation whereas wells are a reliable, familiar source for them.

Another common request is for the construction of sheds for domestic animals such as goats and cows. A series of queries about the allocation of houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana also came up. The state and the civil society actors have been encouraging water-related demands at the community level; however, it is common for the demands to be of a more individualistic nature.

A FEW CHALLENGES

Communication with bureaucracy: Development and planning in Jharkhand has chiefly been driven by the bureaucracy, which seems to hold power. The rural poor, who have been distanced from the bureaucratic set-up due to the very nature of interaction that exists between the bureaucracy and the citizens, have largely been unaware of their entitlements and rights. Even in places or groups that do seem to be aware, the public's control on their development has been minimal or negligible. Most procedures of the bureaucracy are driven by a strong focus on paperwork and formats. Not only does this serve as an impediment in connecting the needs of the people with the

bureaucracy, it also distances the state from its people.

Until now, funds from various government schemes would be transferred to local bureaucrats, who determined what development works would be fit for the area. The public was expected to apply for benefits and schemes by approaching either the local representatives or the block office. Whereas the noticeable presence of SHGs has helped bridge this gap through social organization and awareness, bureaucratic procedures continue to be a hindrance in people's involvement in their welfare. The people's experience of their interaction with bureaucracy has often been uncertain, tedious, and requiring a large amount of paperwork, characteristic of bureaucratic systems.

Illiteracy is often blamed as the underlying cause for poverty; however, bureaucratic literacy in India continues to be a distinct phenomenon, inaccessible even to the functionally literate. This plays a large role in distancing bureaucrats from local information, thus adversely affecting their choice of developmental works. The pressure on bureaucrats to fulfill certain criteria and reflect the result in numbers is immense. This year's (2016) YBA exercise chiefly focusses on water conservation schemes and a long-term focus on sustainable income-generation schemes. Bureaucrats often face a challenge in emphasizing the need for such schemes to villagers, especially given their limited interaction.

For example, during a YBA meeting in Digri village. Torpa block, Khunti district, a number of bureaucrats attended the meeting for about half an hour. The bureaucrats, including the District Collector, the BDO, and the Circle Officer, suggested that the villagers take

The people's experience of their interaction with bureaucracy has often been uncertain, tedious, and requiring a large amount of paperwork, characteristic of bureaucratic systems.

up livelihood activities such as bee-keeping, plantation of timber wood, fisheries, etc. The villagers, who were more interested in discussing their missing pension and the money that they were to receive from the government for filling Aadhaar cards, literally laughed

at these ideas. To them, activities such as bee-keeping were far from their requirements of irrigation facilities and basic health facilities.

In Porna Tham in Koderma block, the requests of the villagers were met with a condition of the District Collector, who insisted that all households get toilets constructed before they receive the schemes from YBA. Some villagers agreed that this was a fair demand but others were exasperated by the request. Whereas the bureaucrats focussed on the involvement of the villagers in activities that generate income or tried to use YBA to negotiate for other government targets (such as the construction of toilets under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan), the focus of the public was on personal and more intrinsic needs. The BDO of Khunti district said, "The people want schemes that will bring noticeable and sudden changes to their life. The villagers usually want to construct wells and goat-sheds, the former as a trusted system of getting water despite the fact that water levels are alarmingly low in the area and the latter as an addition to their land-based assets."

Thekedaars and political pressure: In areas that are characterized by public corruption, the decentralization process has challenged the lobbies of *thekedaars* and political groups who have vested interests. Often, allocations will be made to the middle-men or *thekedaars*, who cut costs and pocket a large chunk of the development funds while the public struggled with incomplete, unnecessary and

shoddy works. The *thekedaars* use capital intensive machinery, thus driving up costs and also reducing chances of employment for the local poor. In fact, in areas such as Kisko district, a number of *thekedaars* were offended by the YBA and tried to create pressure on the villagers and local bureaucrats to plan schemes that would benefit the *thekedaars*. Organized by SRT members, the villagers stood up against their dominant presence and continued the planning with even more participation.

Retaining the momentum: A major challenge is to retain the momentum the scheme generated among the rural population. In order to ensure implementation and maintain better accountability, the community needs to be pro-active and aware. If the schemes are not implemented as per the allocations, the *gram sabha* should check with the authorities and take necessary action. The villagers need to keep close track of their respective development works, follow through with them and, when needed, generate public support and raise their voice against any missing funds, misallocation or exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Decentralization is a cornerstone for good governance and better networking between the state and the public. Policy convergence is another practice that allows for comprehensive

YBA is a positive step in the direction of creating a government of the people, a government that ensures pro-people development, unmarred by the selfish desires of the local elite

growth because schemes overlap to provide the citizens what they need—after they have recognized this for themselves. If implemented correctly, these practices reduce state costs and increase systems of information between the state and the people. The transfer of power to

the public for the use of their resources is a seminal step and has the potential to change the face of rural policies and planning.

Schemes such as MGNREGA, one of the biggest livelihood generation schemes in the world, look to be strengthened via similar mechanisms. A major challenge lies in the continued motivation and mobilization of the general public. If proper implementation is to be ensured, it requires pro-active change in the distant processes of the bureaucracy, the continued awareness and vigilance of the people, and the support of the local representatives to the *panchayat*. Different areas and their experiences should be considered under different spectrums rather than using a single, one-size-fits-all approach. YBA is a positive step in the direction of creating a government of the people, a government that ensures pro-people development, unmarred by the selfish desires of the local elite. If the different actors and the public involved in the project continue with the momentum generated in the past few months, Jharkhand will be looking at a new story of development.

Right to Food: Women Fight Back

FAHAD KHAN

Showing remarkable persistence and spirit, the women of Jhikra panchayat, in a never-say-die attitude, continued a ten-month-long struggle to find a solution to the corrupt practices of local PDS dealers and a hand-in-glove administration, to finally be rewarded with access to food that is legally and rightfully theirs...

INTRODUCTION

It was an unusual day on the Dumka Pakur highway on a hot, sunny afternoon. One hundred SHG members of Jhikra *panchayat* of Kathikund were sitting silently on the road next to the police station, blocking the highway. The police were there too, threatening to shoot them. The women, undeterred by the threats, remained firm, refusing to step back.

An hour later, the scene changed. The media arrived and a crowd gathered, wanting to know why the women were sitting on the road in the scorching heat. The policemen, who had been pointing the guns at the women, backed off; officers from the police station came to the women and offered to talk on the women's terms and conditions.

For months, the women had been seeking action against the corrupt Public Distribution System (PDS) dealers but all their attempts had failed; as a last resort, they had come to protest at the police station. It was a test of their belief in group strength. And they proved the magic of it. They had heard of the story of how an individual stick could be broken, but a bundle of sticks would be difficult to break. All their lives, these women had been discriminated against in their homes, in their families and in their communities. That day, however, they recognized their strength and shone together.

BACKGROUND

In Kathikund block of Dumka district, malpractices existed in all the 55 PDS shops. There were constant complaints that the distributors cut down the measure of rations allotted for a family, charged high prices for subsidized rice and kerosene oil, and took signatures for the allotted quantity illegally but gave the cardholders less than what was recorded. There was no proper or transparent measuring system. Ration was distributed using tin containers, the capacity of which was not clear. Dealers hoarded large amounts of rice and kerosene oil, which they distributed at high prices to non-cardholders. There were many murmurs about the widespread irregularities in all the PDS shops in Kathikund. But the corrupt PDS dealers were little affected by these rumblings.

Those who protested did not have enough power to effect change in these malpractices because the general public was largely ignorant about their entitlements. There was great need to collectivize these voices and generate discussions on this issue on a regular basis and to confront the PDS dealers, who were hand in glove with each other and were making huge profits. The beneficiaries of these corrupt practices also included people from the administration. There were claims that PRI members, *panchayat mukhiya*, *panchayat sachiv*, officials from the block, Marketing Officer (MO) and the Ladies Extension Officer (LEO) encouraged such practices because all of them received a share of the profits. The dealers were not accountable or answerable to anyone and there were few people who dared to confront them. This gave the dealers more confidence and they bullied the people.

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Agriculture in the area is rain-fed; the land is undulating and, thus, very little land is available for agriculture. In such conditions, farmers can only cultivate crops and grains that hardly last 6 to 8 months, creating food insecurity for the rest of the year. This has led to increased dependency on the PDS, which is in a pathetic state. The poor and almost negligible transport system in this hilly, remote and inaccessible forest fringe area has only added to the miseries of the people.

The people, therefore, have had to satisfy themselves with what is being provided to them by PDS dealers and distributors.

There are 10 SHGs in Jhikra village and six SHGs in the adjacent village of Lakrapahari. Although SHGs have existed in the village for a while, their role has only been limited to savings and credit. Awareness about village issues is minimal. Although an SHG with 10 to 20 members is large enough to identify the problems of the community and raise its voice on issues, it needs support to address its concerns, generate action and arrive at solutions.

The SHGs of these villages are organized into a bigger forum called the Lilanti Gram Sangathan (Village Organization, VO), which is the second tier of women's institutions at the village level. Lilanti Gram Sangathan in Jhikra was formed in 2014, comprising 155 members from 10 SHGs. Four members from each SHG participated in the VO meeting and discussed issues of their respective SHGs. The larger issues of the village were also discussed in this forum. However, the VO had, so far, not taken any concrete steps to solve the issues raised in the meetings.

Members of Lilanti Gram Sangathan in Jhikra attended a rights-based workshop called the 'Jan Ghoshna Patra' organized by Khushali Mahila Sangh in Saraiyahat block of Dumka district. The basic objective of this workshop was to set up a forum to advocate for economic, social and cultural rights of people across the state and to try to get these points included in the political agenda of the state. The event was attended by activist John Dreze and Mr Balram.

The exposure visit acted as an eye-opener for the members of Lilanti Gram Sangathan. They became aware of what their entitlements were in terms of food security, distribution of mid-day meals in schools, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), PDS, social security pension, Right to Food, and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA). Members could relate to the information easily because the issues were the same as in their own villages. They were gifted a book called *Apna Adhikar Jano*. This gave them valuable information and, more importantly, a roadmap to plan their engagements around their rights.

Silvanti Besra, a member of the Sirmai Epil Mahila Mandal and a member of the Adhikar Sub-committee of Lilanti VO shares, "We attended the Jan Ghoshna Patra event, where we discussed issues of the *aanganwadis*, mid-day meals, PDS, MGNREGA, and pension. We learned that we, the tribals of Santhal Pargana, had certain basic rights and entitlements."

After the event, a discussion about the proceedings was held at the Lilanti VO meeting in December 2014. The inspired members chalked out an action plan in January

The dealer did not respond to their questions. When questioned repeatedly, he mocked them saying, "Badi laat saahab ban kar aayi ho tum log, jao jakar MO se jankari lo, lena hai to (You have come here like officers: go ask the Marketing Officer for the information, if you want to)."

2015. The plan was to visit public service institutions such as schools to talk with the teachers regarding the functioning of the school, the attendance and the mid-day meals; the *aanganwadi* to become familiar with the services provided and its regularity; the PDS shops to check whether these were functioning properly or not and to ask about the entitlements of the people. The women decided to visit all such government

institutions in the periphery of their village and hold a dialogue with the persons responsible for the issues they faced. The purpose of the visits was to understand their entitlements, to check the functioning of these institutions and to extend help to sort out any problem that existed.

The members of Adhikar Samiti in Lilanti VO, which included Silvanti didi, Premshila Hembram, Komishila Marandi, visited the PDS shop and asked some basic questions such as, "How many cardholders are there under this PDS shop? How many cardholders get regular benefit? On what day is the PDS shop open? Does it follow government norms? What is the subsidized price of rations that cardholders are paying? How is the ration measured? What is the exact measure allotted to different people belonging to the various social categories such as Below Poverty Line (BPL), Antyodaya, primitive tribes, etc.?" They also questioned why, at times, the correct amount of ration was not being distributed and whether the women could collectively help the dealer sort out the issue.

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have come here like officers: go ask the Marketing Officer for the information, if you want to)."

But this did not discourage the women from persisting. In fact, they increased the number of visits to his shop. This irritated the dealer.

Premshila *didid* shares, "When we asked him to give us the details of the cardholders and asked how much ration they were getting, the dealer became very irritated and told us to ask the individual families or go to the block for the answers to these questions."

The members of the SHG had heard that this dealer was not supplying rice in the correct quantity and that he was distributing fewer rations at higher prices. He was distributing 25 kg of rice at Rs 30 to BPL families and 30 kg at Rs 35 to Antyodaya whereas the correct ration for rice was 31.5 kg at Re 1 per kg for BPL families and 35 kg of rice at Re 1 for Antyodaya families. Thus, he was cutting down 5 kg each from every beneficiary. The women demanded that he provide the correct quantity of rations at the correct weight and price to all cardholders. They told him that they had not come for a fight and just needed his co-operation. But he was not willing to co-operate and said that they could take their complaint to anyone but he would not give any information.

Premshila adds, "He was very confident and said in a sarcastic way that we could go to any place; he had money circulated everywhere so he need not worry about the consequences." This incident fuelled the movement. The women, then, visited the next village.

This incident shook the women's belief in PDS and the local authority. They were abused and challenged when they raised their voices against this corruption. At the same time, this incident strengthened their will to fight injustice and inspired them to take a pledge to do whatever they could. This was an opportunity to put to test whatever they had learned till now about self-help and collective strength

Along with the other women, they visited Kairasol village, where they found that there too rice was being measured in a container, the quantity of which was not known. The dealer habitually gave approximately 5 kg less rice to everyone. They went to the villagers and asked many cardholders not to accept the rice if it were not measured correctly. They went to the PDS shop on the day of the distribution. The dealer told them, "You have come to enquire about the measure. You can check it but if you do not find any discrepancy in the weight, I will take the equivalent amount of rice from each household."

Seeing that the villagers could not afford food other than from the dealer, the women decided to find a way to counter this malpractice. The dealers, however, were enraged about being questioned and started fighting with one of the group members (finding her alone). All the members rushed to help her. They heard the dealer using very bad language and demanding that all the villagers sign the register in which he had written the inflated amounts of rice. When one of the SHG members refused to sign, he scolded and insulted her. The other women came to her support and refused to sign the register. Seeing so many women, he left threatening to take revenge.

The women took the issue up with their *upmukhiya* Emanuel Murmu, who did not take any action. He just gave date after date, to hear the issue. This incident shook the women's belief in PDS and the local authority. They were abused and challenged when they raised their voices against this corruption. At the same time, this incident strengthened their

will to fight injustice and inspired them to take a pledge to do whatever they could. This was an opportunity to put to test whatever they had learned till now about self-help and collective strength.

Komisila *didi*, an SHG member, said, "We decided that we would go to the block headquarters, which is 37 km away from our village. There is no transport facility to get there. But nothing could stop us from reaching there, even if we had to walk. Also, the dealer had challenged us to go to the block, and we wanted to take him up on his challenge."

MASS-LEVEL ACTION

The members of various SHGs in Jhikra told us that the struggle that started in January continued for the whole month. They said, "We collected money from all the SHG members of our village, booked a vehicle and went to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO). There were 70 SHG members who went to the block. We pushed ourselves inside the chamber of the BDO; the officer asked us who we were and what we had come for in such huge numbers. We told him we are having problems with PDS in our village, about how the dealer had misbehaved with us and how he had rebuked us. We, then, asked the BDO to tell us how much ration we were entitled to get because the dealer was not willing to share the details with us. The BDO seemed afraid and wanted to know who we were and who had sent us. We explained that we had come to complain and that no one had sent us. He then asked us to give him the complaint in writing, signed by all the cardholders. We asked for an appointment with the BDO so as to submit our complaint and were asked us to meet him on the 10th of February. Until then, no action was taken."

"Once again, 90 to 100 SHG members booked a vehicle and went early in the morning to the block office (BO). The BDO was not in the office in the morning and we sat in the veranda in front of his cabin. The staff of the block came and questioned us about our purpose. They asked us to give our problem in writing and not to make a scene there. But we did not move. We had also called the reporters of *Dainik Jagran* and *Hindustan*, who advised us to wait till the BDO came and not to leave without meeting him. After some time, the Ladies Extension officer (LEO) came and listened to our problem. We told her that the block office was not looking into our problems, and that although the dealers were allotted by the BO, it did not supervise their work. The LEO assured us that she would look into the matter. But we refused; we were determined to meet the BDO. When the BDO came in the afternoon, we gave him the application and took the receipt. We asked the BDO what action would be taken. He told us that he would send the enquiry within one month. We went back with an assurance from the BDO. In the meantime, the news reached the *pramukh* and the *mukhiya*, who were also told by the administration to look into the matter, but nothing happened."

Two months passed but no action was taken. The women again went to the BDO in March. He told them that he would definitely take action this time. Again, nothing happened. The members, however, did not give up. They went to meet the BDO again and were determined to get some concrete answers from him. They asked him why he had been assuring them and yet had done nothing in the matter. In the village, the dealer and the others had started mocking the SHG members and the people were beginning to think that nothing could change. The dealer was now

becoming more corrupt and told the women, "Go to the BDO. He will give you ration." The BDO called up the MO, asked him about the matter and told him to take action.

Silvanti *didì* said, "It was now mid-March. Three months had passed; we had made several visits to the BO. It seemed to us that somehow the BDO was unable to resolve the issue or was incapable of doing so. The next place to expect some action was the police station. But a mere two or three people going to the police station would not have made a difference. Around 100 of us villagers, including men and women, again booked a small bus and headed to the police station. Since everyone was not allowed to enter, a few of us went inside. The dealers of two villages Jhikra and Kairasol were also present there. We narrated all our complaints once again. The policemen questioned the dealers about the quantity of rice being distributed. The dealers lied denying all allegations. The villagers began shouting when they heard this. The dealer, then, talked to the Officer-in-charge of the police station and several rounds of negotiations started. Some local leaders joined the negotiations, to cash in on the situation. No one seemed to be talking on our behalf. The dealers took the In-charge of the police station aside and explained to him that it was not possible to disburse the correct measure; that the material was being wasted in transportation; and that they do not get any benefit. The police officer told us to negotiate with the dealer and sort out the matter with him. But this was not at all acceptable to us. We could not lose the battle so easily. We demanded the correct measure, provisioned by the government, be distributed but the Officer In-charge did not listen and told us to accept the deal because we had no other option. Seeing that no acceptable solution was

All our attempts to move the administration and the law had failed. We were mocked at and cheated, as if there was no law in the land and that everything was fake and false

being offered, we walked out of police station."

"All our attempts to move the administration and the law had failed. We were mocked at and cheated, as if there was no law in the land and that everything was fake and false. The fervour

and zeal to move the police station with our collective strength had been so high that we had not taken a drop of water since the morning. When we failed, all the strength seemed to drain out of us and we felt very miserable. We left the police station and as we were crossing the highway, we realized that even the heavy vehicles and trucks had to stop so that our crowd could cross the road. Seeing the trucks, standing and waiting, reminded us that even when we feel low and discouraged, our numbers always have the strength to cause an impact. It was time to test our strength. We all stopped crossing the road and sat down in the scorching heat, on the burning ground.

Everything around us came to a standstill and all eyes were on us. The traffic was blocked. There were many military vehicles waiting to enter the city, but we had blocked their way also. The para-military in uniform came with guns to force us away and to clear the path. But we did not move. It was a testing time; they pushed us with their rifles and even threatened to shoot us. The next moment we were surrounded by a crowd and the media. Everyone wanted to know what the matter was. We stood firm. In an hour or so, all the police station staff came out, trying to bully us. But soon, they understood that the situation was not so easy to control. They asked us why we were blocking the road. We replied that it was because they were unwilling to look for a solution to our problem and, therefore, we were left with no choice but to protest. They immediately began giving us assurances that

they would make the dealers use the correct measure. It was matter of shame for them that the road in front of the police station was blocked and they could not clear the way. They requested us to come to the police station. We demanded that the dealers give it to us in writing that they would distribute rations honestly. The dealers admitted in writing that they had been giving wrong quantities earlier but, henceforth, they would give the correct measure, that is, 35 kg to Antyodaya families and 32 kg to BPL families. The written and signed document was given to us with the assurance that if this failed, strict action would be taken against the dealers. We came back rejoicing in victory, satisfied that finally our demands would be met and that our fight would be over."

NO END TO PROBLEMS

However, our struggle did not end there. Premshila *didi* shares, "The dealer in Kairasol village distributed the correct measure of ration for the next two months after the incident at the police station. Soon, however, the dealers of Jhikra and the other places contacted him and asked him why he was distributing the correct measure, and that if he continued this practice all the other dealers in the block would also be forced to do so and they would not be able to make large profits out of PDS. In the face of such consistent pressure, the Kairasol dealer resumed his corrupt practices. The problem was not so simple that it could be handled at the block level and, therefore, we went to the district headquarters to meet the District Collector (DC). We were told to come on the day when the DC met the general public, which we did. We submitted our complaint letter, enclosing photocopies of our application to the BDO, the CO and the

The members of the SHGs knocked at every possible door, to resolve their problem but there was no change in the situation.

Police Station, as well as the paper cuttings of all the events. The Collector talked to us and said that he would enquire into the situation. He also added that from July 2015, the new distribution system of 5 kg of

rice per member of the family would come into force; thus, we should not drag this issue. His answers were not satisfactory but we had no option but to go back."

TRYING A DIFFERENT ROUTE

The members of the SHGs knocked at every possible door, to resolve their problem but there was no change in the situation. Silvanti *didi* says, "Although we were being continuously put down wherever we went, we were ready to go to any place and reach all levels of the administration with our applications and complaints. Our belief, our strength and our hopes were still alive. We had heard about the Right to Food Campaign in Ranchi from PRADAN *dada* (professional working in PRADAN). He provided us with the numbers of activists such as Balram (Advisor to the Supreme Court in the Right to Food Case) and other people active in this campaign. We talked to them, and they asked us to send all the copies of our applications and paper cuttings to Ranchi. This was the first time that we heard of the word 'Internet' and learned that there was a way in which documents can also be sent to far-off places without being posted! With the help of PRADAN *dada*, all the documents were sent by Internet to Mr Balram. He then told us that he would visit Kathikund. He said that he would give us a date on which all the SHG members should assemble for a *Jan Sunwai* (Public Hearing) in the village. Mr. Balram said that he would convince the state food minister or the DC/ SDO of the district to attend the *Jan Sunwai*."

REGULAR FOLLOW-UP

"Days passed," Salvanti *didisaid*, "and it was the beginning of August. Nothing had happened and the dealer again mocked us saying he had distributed money even in Ranchi. We called up the people in the Right to Food campaign in Ranchi regularly. Mr. Balram informed us that he

was reminding the DC in Dumka regularly of the issue. Twice we were given dates when he would be coming to meet the villagers; twice he did not come because the government officials were unwilling or unavailable to visit the village. As time passed, we were not sure whether we would get any support from Ranchi through the Right to Food campaign.

"It was early September, when one of the representatives from Right to Food, Dhiraj, visited us and talked to us. We explained all our problems and narrated our story. He asked for some time so that he could check the status of the complaint at the district and block levels. He then met with the BDO at the BO. The BDO claimed that he had done his investigations and his enquiry team had found no discrepancy in the distribution. According to him, some cunning women of the village were conspiring against the dealer, to take his place. Mr Dhiraj, then, went to the District Supply Officer (DSO), who heads several blocks in the district and was responsible for distribution of rations through PDS and *aanganwadis*. The officer was very co-operative and was astonished to hear of such corruption under his nose. He promised to take action as soon as a written complaint was provided to him. The SHG members then approached the DSO, giving him the complaint in writing and attaching all the earlier applications. They also marked a copy to the Advisor, Supreme Court, Right to Food Case, Ranchi."

For the first time, the villagers realized that it was important to mark a copy to the relevant stakeholders when writing an application, so that the follow-up of the application could be done.

For the first time, the villagers realized that it was important to mark a copy to the relevant stakeholders when writing an application, so that the follow-up of the application could be done. They got a receipt for the application from the DSO and gave it to the representative of the Right to Food campaign. The

SHG members recalled, "This time, it seemed that something concrete had been done. But, we did not have any great expectations after so many failures. We just waited."

Yamni Devi, one of the members from Jhikra VO, says, "It was in October 2015 that we noticed that the ration was not being distributed by the earlier dealers and that the PDS shop was not being run by them. The same happened the next month too. We had some signals but no direct confirmation of any action. Slowly, the news spread all over the block that the two miscreant dealers had been taken off their duties, and their PDS shop registration had been cancelled."

LEARNINGS

The struggle lasted for 10 long months. The women agreed that the culprit was given the right judgement but there was little excitement over their victory. Their expressions showed they were not at all astonished by their victory because they had a firm belief that they would one day win the battle, and their collective and continuous efforts would definitely bear fruit. It was not the victory but the fight they fought together that gave them happiness and satisfaction, and a sense that they had achieved something. They say that they are now hearing from all over the Federation and from various places that they have done a wonderful job. The SHG members say that they just stood up for their Right to Food and raised

their voice against the insult and disrespect to womanhood. They were asked, in one of the exposure meetings, where they had got the strength to fight. They replied that the abusive tone that the dealer had adopted with them had ignited a fire within them and they had become determined to show him what women could do. The knowledge they gathered in the process helped them, and they are now sure of how to handle similar situations. This movement had turned out to be a great learning for other village-level organizations, which discussed their issues on a monthly basis. It provided them a role model. They had a clear and successful model of a public service grievance redressal mechanism. The actions of the women can now be categorized into a step-wise process, which includes:

- A. Dialoguing with the people connected with the problem, without fighting.
- B. Submitting signed applications at each level, starting from the village, *panchayat*, block, district and state.
- C. Attaching copies of all efforts made, all applications submitted at the lower levels, and paper cuttings of all the action at all levels.
- D. Submitting applications in a smarter way by copying it to the higher authorities and writing the word 'COPY TO:' in the end.
- E. Increasing the knowledge base by keeping the media into the loop. This is the best way to make the problem known to everyone and to create pressure.
- F. Taking a receipt of all applications at every level.

The women in Jhikra may have reached a milestone in their journey in the SHG and the VO but many challenges remain.

- G. Following-up regularly by calling over the phone and meeting officials.
- H. Having more than one single leader for the movement so that people are not cornered.

- I. Approaching the correct and relevant levels of the departments for the concerned issue.

SUCCESS REPLICATED

The structured protest set an example for the locals and guided one such VO in Kathikund. The VO in Budhidangall village named Naya Jiwan Mahila Gram Sangathan, comprising 12 SHG groups of the Bichhiyapahari *panchayat* started monitoring an *aanganwadi*, which was not functional. When the issue was not resolved by talking to the *sevika* of the *aanganwadi*, the whole village signed an application and complained about its poor condition and sent it to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) by following the proper process. The CDPO was not immediately available; they submitted the application signed by 155 members from three villages. The BDO responded by advising the villagers to elect a new *sevika*. The villagers completed their responsibility of electing the new *sevika* by holding a meeting of the *gram sabha*, and informed the CDPO. The new *sevika* is now serving as an *aanganwadi* worker and running the institution as per her job requirements. The members of the VO, who belong to Adhikar Samiti, are responsible for monitoring the working of these institutions and helping solve village-level issues.

CONCLUSION

The women in Jhikra may have reached a milestone in their journey in the SHG and the VO but many challenges remain. The new ration card has now been introduced all over Jharkhand by the government and a new distribution system is also functional. There are many families at many places, however, that have not yet received their new ration cards. Many SHG members have not got their ration cards and their names are missing in the survey list. The missing names are not a mere co-incidence. This may have come about as retaliation to the mass action of SHG members of Jhikra against PDS dealers. People in the BO and the field (such as PRI members and block officials), who had been benefitting by getting

They have the confidence now to enter the mainstream without any hesitation. They do not waste time now with the agents and brokers; instead they talk directly to the officers such as the BDO and the CO

a share from the old corrupt system, may be responsible for the omission of the names. Nonetheless, the picture is changing rapidly; members of the SHG are now fighting neck-to-neck with competitors in the *panchayat* election and are registering their presence in the public administration too as *mukhiyas* and Ward Members. They have the confidence now to enter the mainstream without any hesitation. They do not waste time now with the agents and brokers; instead they talk directly to the officers such as the BDO and the CO. Today, the story of the women from Jhikra is being shared in various trainings of VOs across Kathikund and at Federations too, thereby helping women to recognize their own potential.

Poll Boycott: Taking an Extreme Step

DHRUBITA DAS

Pushed to the wall and struggling for some basic necessities such as a road and electricity—the first steps to development—to their village, the people of Pokharia collectively decide to boycott elections in a bid to draw the attention of the administration and the government to their plight

The people of Bihar, working in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Assam and other parts of the country as skilled/unskilled labourers or in some office, came back to Bihar in October and November 2015. They had one common motive—to participate in the much-hyped and talked-about election, which would decide the fate of the third most-populated state of India. The results of the elections would be of great significance, especially for the party at the centre, which invested large sums of money for campaigning.

The contesting parties came up with different agendas to win voters' confidence. There were promises of supply of electricity, water/sanitation, building of roads, and more. The event remained the most sensational news in the national and the international media. It has been the most-watched election in recent times. The state witnessed a huge influx of Biharis, who came to exercise their democratic right.

On election dates, the booths were crowded, and there were long queues of eager voters. The voters believed that their voices would be heard and their eyes were alight with hope that their lives would improve. The nation's eyes were on Bihar; which political party would come to power in Bihar? The political parties had their own interests. The enthusiasm of the people of the state and of the observers nationwide helped the state register an overall polling figure of 56.80 per cent—the highest in an assembly election in the state's history.

Amidst this hype and hullabaloo, there was one polling booth in a remote, unknown part of Southern Bihar, where not a soul went to vote. Except for an occasional sound from the stray dogs roaming around, complete silence prevailed. There were more than 1,000 voters in Pokharia, who had collectively taken a decision to boycott the Assembly elections. Some journalists came to take photos of the deserted poll booth, which then appeared in some regional daily newspapers. The villagers of Pokharia were not influenced by the massive media hype, the large-scale campaigning or the big promises of the contestants.

Why were these people not exercising their franchise? Why was the polling booth deserted?

The people just wanted that their demand for basic amenities be fulfilled. It did not matter to them much whether the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) won or whether the Janata Dal United (JDU)–Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) alliance was victorious; what mattered was that their aspirations should be met and the development of their village should begin.

Pokharia, a name which even the District Magistrate (DM) had not heard, is in Banka block of Banka district, about 3 km into the interiors, off the Katoria-Banka state highway. The villagers are largely of the *kumhar* (those who make earthen pots) community, and their primary livelihood is agriculture. In the name of government interventions, the village has a middle school, a half-completed community house (which the Chairman of the *Panchayat Samiti* is using as his personal residence), one well (the water of which the owner of that land does not allow others to take), and three hand pumps in the school premises.

The road to the village is kuccha and bumpy, making it inaccessible during the monsoon months. There are four hamlets in the village and all the roads are in a similar condition.

The road to the village is *kuccha* and bumpy, making it inaccessible during the monsoon months. There are four hamlets in the village and all the roads are in a similar condition. If you were to enter the village during monsoon, you will see only a mud road. If you step on it, your

feet will sink up to the ankles and, at some places, even up to the knees. These deplorable conditions prevail for many days after a rainfall, making life miserable for the villagers.

Raghunandan Pandit, a 43-year old villager laments, "*Motorcycle, cycle to kya, paidal chalne me bhi dikkat hota hai.* (Let aside motorcycle or cycle, it becomes difficult even to walk)."

The most affected are school students and women, who have to venture out of their houses several times a day. Shakuntala Kumari, a 12th standard science student, who takes private tuitions outside the village, says, "*Barish me hum tuition nahi ja pate hain.* (When it rains, I cannot go out for tuition.)" Also severely affected are the patients, who need emergency medical treatment. Women who are ready to give birth and old people have to be carried 3 km on a *khatia* (bed made of wood and ropes) during the monsoon because the entire road is *kuccha* and muddy and no vehicle can ply in such conditions.

There is no electricity in the village. Again, the most affected are the school students, who have to study at night, and women, who have to cook. Shakuntala says, "*Azadi ke itne saal baad bhi hamein andhere me rahna parta he.* (Even after so many years of independence, we have to live in darkness)."

The *gram sabha*, the villagers know, is a platform where they can demand that a road be made. Some men got the road sanctioned in the *gram sabha*, many years back, during the tenure of *mukhiya* Jogender Das. The soil-filling work had started but due to some reason the work ceased. Jogender Das lost the subsequent election. Subsequently, he again won the elections. The villagers persuaded him to resume the unfinished work. To their astonishment, they learned that the project sanctioned for them had been diverted to another village due to the intervention of a powerful and influential local person. The infuriated villagers approached the *mukhiya*, to enquire about the road. He asked them to have patience because the funds had not yet come.

He procrastinated like this through his five-year tenure and the villagers were not able to take any collective action to make the *mukhiya* accountable to the public. Most of the villagers were angry because their *panchayat* representatives could not provide them with basic amenities. The villagers said that these representatives, who came to their village frequently, asking for votes and making great promises before the elections, vanished after winning the elections. After that, they were not in the least bothered about serving the villagers, who had helped them win the elections nor were they willing to address the issues for which they had been elected. The villagers' role seemed to be to give their votes and sit back for the rest of the tenure, waiting for the government to do something for their upliftment.

The repeated crushing of their hopes tested their patience. In 2014, during the Lok Sabha

It was time to bring their dissatisfaction and anger to the notice of the administration and the government. The much-awaited election, the Bihar Legislative Assembly election of 2015, was drawing closer. They thought that this was a good opportunity

elections, they heard that people from a nearby village, Sonhola, were planning to boycott the election if their demands for a road and electricity were not met. Some men of Pokharia also decided to express their strong protest by boycotting the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. They asked the villagers not to vote. They did not have much time to spread this message or

get a consensus on the decision to boycott. They, therefore, stationed themselves on as many approach lanes of the polling booth as possible on polling day, and asked the people not to vote. Some people turned back whereas some did not; some were afraid to boycott the elections and, therefore, cast their vote. Some people voted because they were unaware about the protest. Moreover, people from a nearby village also had their polling centre in Pokharia. The boycott failed because it was not well-planned. The people had not had enough time to involve everyone.

A few months later, some youth of the village, during a casual discussion about the poor condition of the roads and the lack of electricity, thought that merely talking about the issues of their village among themselves would not change the situation. It was time to bring their dissatisfaction and anger to the notice of the administration and the government. The much-awaited election, the Bihar Legislative Assembly election of 2015, was drawing closer. They thought that this was a good opportunity.

They talked about it with other young people of the village, who agreed with them. They discussed the loopholes and shortcomings of the previous effort that their fathers and uncles had made during the General Elections. Twenty-two-year-old Kundan Kumar, who was

a student and an electricity line worker, said, "*Is bar hum kisiko vote dene nahi denge.* (This time we will not allow anybody to vote)." They decided to make it a people's movement by including everyone. They held many meetings to win consensus.

During the month of August 2015, some 18–20 youth walked around the village, drawing people's attention by beating empty mustard oil tins. They called for a meeting, to talk about village issues. It took them 3–4 days to inform the whole village. On the appointed day, most of the men and some women met in the school premises. They discussed their problems and the *panchayat* representative's repeated negligence. They decided to bring this issue to the notice of the district administration, and if the administration did not take any action, the entire village would boycott the Assembly elections.

Raghuandan Singh, a 45-year old villager, firmly stated, "*Sadak, bijli nahi dega to is bar hum vote bahishkar karenge.* (We will boycott the elections, if they do not provide us roads and electricity)." Their clear objective was to tell the administration that they would not tolerate any more delay. They thought of boycotting the Assembly elections and not the *panchayat* elections scheduled to be held in 2016, because the former would have a greater impact. All the villagers present agreed.

The villagers met 3–4 times to convince everyone and discuss the strategy. The news spread to some SHG members, who discussed this emerging development in their SHG meeting. Coincidentally, in the Federation meeting of July 2015, the issue of anomalies in PDS in the different *panchayats* of Katoria and

The villagers then held a peaceful protest in front of the DM's Office, demanding a road and electricity. They shouted slogans such as "Road nahi to vote nahi (No road, no vote)," warning the authorities that they would boycott the election.

Banka blocks was discussed, and the members decided to give written complaints to the District Magistrate. This was then discussed in the *panchayat*-level Federation meeting, in which representatives from every SHG participated. Through this, SHG members of Pokharia became aware of the public grievance redressal system and decided to utilize it. With time, 100 women

from nine SHGs of the village joined the villagers, thus strengthening the movement. These SHGs were formed in the latter half of 2014 and some in the early part of 2015. This was how the tiny mass grew into a bigger collective. After that, there was no looking back.

To make this boycott a success, they required money. They started collecting a donation from each household. Banners on vote boycott were prepared and hung at different corners of the village so that they would be visible to anyone entering the village from any side. This was meant to communicate their message to the government and was also meant to remind everyone to stick to the vote boycott.

In the meeting, it was decided that a written complaint would be given to the DM. Accordingly, some 40 men, women and youth went to the DM at Banka and gave their written complaint. Neelam Devi, an SHG member said, "*Humlog ko teen baar DM office jana para apna shikayat dene ke liye.* (We had to go three times to the DM's office to register our complaint)."

The villagers then held a peaceful protest in front of the DM's Office, demanding a road and electricity. They shouted slogans such as "*Road nahi to vote nahi* (No road, no vote)," warning the authorities that they would boycott the election.

The local daily reported this news. The DM said, "Humlog ka haath bandha hua he, thora ruk jaiye. (Our hands are tied, please wait for some time)." The protestors were adamant because they had reached the end of their tether. The DM called them after a few days and assured them that, within five days, electricity poles would be grounded in the village. This proved to be a futile assurance. Sensing the delicacy of the situation, the *mukhiya*, fearing that he would be taken to task by the DM, filled some of the big potholes in the road with some soil, thereby making it a bit more comfortable for commuters. The mockery of their demands strengthened the villagers' determination. At that time, campaigning for the election was on in full swing. Campaigners were prevented from entering the village by the men and women. If some campaigners did enter the village and paste posters on the walls, the children tore these off.



Hearing about the boycott, the Block Development Officer, the Sub-Divisional Officer and personnel from the Bihar Military Police visited the village three times, to convince the villagers to lift the boycott. But the angry villagers remained adamant. People were happy that, because of their boycott, at least these high-profile officers had entered their village.

Some people in the village such as the Chairman of the *Panchayat Samiti* and some followers of the *mukhiya* were against this boycott. The villagers held several meetings, sometimes for four consecutive days at a time, to discuss the situation. And the strength of the collective showed its magic. The *panchayat* officials had to support the boycott because of the collective's pressure.

Some days before the election, the SHG representatives gathered at the Jamua Panchayat Bhawan for their monthly *panchayat* Federation meeting. A candidate, campaigning in Jamua, saw this gathering of women. The contestant, in a white *kurta pajama*, approached them to make an appeal. Seeing him, Neelam Devi said, "Yahan humara Federation meeting ho raha he aur aapko yahan prachar karne ka jarurat nahi hai. (We are having our Federation meeting here and you need not campaign here)." Perplexed, he wanted to know the reason. Bebi Devi, a member, said with pride in her voice, "Humlog Pokharia se hain. (We are from Pokharia)." The contestant replied, "Humko vote dijiye, hum road banwa denge. (Give us your vote and we will make the road)". Sensing that the women were not paying any heed to him, he left.

Finally, on 12 October, the day of the first phase of the much-awaited Bihar Assembly elections arrived. People lined up to vote since the early morning, carrying their *parchi* (coupon that they had to show to enter the booth). Those who had forgotten to bring the coupon had to return to their homes and bring it to be eligible to cast their vote. Many had to return disappointed because they had not collected their coupon from their *panchayat* representatives.

But there was a completely different scene at the Pokharia poll booth. The youth of the village roamed around near the booth to

ensure that no one came to vote. They had sticks with them, prepared to threaten anybody who arrived to vote. But nothing happened. The booth was deserted throughout the day. The only people there were the guards who were deputed at the booth. The people were delighted that after months of preparation, they had succeeded in making the boycott successful.

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Post election, some good and some bad news came the way of the people of Pokharia. The good news was that the deputy *mukhiya* said that he would resume construction of the road. It may have been a political gimmick because the Panchayati Raj elections were due in April 2016. Whatever the reason, a *pucca* road is more important for Pokharia than wondering about who gains what. People are waiting to see whether he keeps his word or not. Otherwise, they are planning to resume their fight. Another piece of good news was that two electricity transformers were sanctioned for the village and work was to start soon. It was an occasion to celebrate in Pokharia because they had succeeded in making the administration fulfill their demands.

Amidst all the celebrations, some bad news came their way. Someone from the village used the opportunity to square out a personal rivalry. To the DM, he named some of the villagers, accusing them of starting the boycott movement. A few days after the election, the DM sent a notice to the villagers against six men and two boys, alleging that they had

led the boycott and that there would be an enquiry into the matter. An atmosphere of gloom spread in the village.

According to the villagers the persons named were not in the lead role. It was a conspiracy. Some old men said, "*Kal uthae diya*. (By doing this boycott, you people have called danger)." The people then heard that the

government would stop distributing kerosene and ration to this village. They held a meeting to discuss the matter. Once again, they showed unity, and it was resolved that it was a collective movement and they would face whatever came their way collectively.

The people of Pokharia learned the importance of solidarity and the power of unity. The movement also tapped into the power of the youth and women. In a democracy, voting is a tool to show our duty to the nation. Maybe a vote boycott is not the correct way to voice disappointments, but what are the people to do if the public grievances are not addressed? Where should they go to make themselves heard? How should the public make the government and the administration accountable for the gaps in the system? These people just wanted to make their voice heard at what they called the 'upper level'. They held a peaceful protest. They just wanted to make their village worth living in. The action taken portrays the hard reality of the lives of the poor people and the struggle that they go through. There are innumerable such unheard and untold stories in many villages.

Nasima Khatoon: A Leader is Born

NAMRATA SHARMA

Setting out with a fierce determination to fight injustice and oppression, Bibi Nasima Khatoon, a milquetoast, is a shining example to poor village women that they need to raise their voice against all harassment and that, together, they become a mighty power, which will be acknowledged by the village and state administration

The three-day-old decomposed bodies of a young pregnant woman and her six-year-old son were found hidden amidst heaps of paddy straw in Targachha village, in South Bihar. The police handed the bodies to the family and dismissed the case on grounds of lack of evidence or witnesses. The bodies were cremated immediately without any further investigation.

Soon after, a tiny woman was seen shouting in a shrill voice outside the police station. She was leading a 300-strong group of protesters, who had mustered the courage to walk 12 miles in the scorching October sun. They were demanding to meet the Inspector, who did not come out of his room. This was not the first time that this woman had led a group of people or had come to the police station. Media persons had, however, never ever seen the women of this area, in such large numbers, protesting so fiercely. The policemen mocked them and told them to go back, "*Yahan koi sunwai nahi hoti, janani sab ke mard kuch nahi lagam lagwalke...* (Nobody would bother to listen to you all; it seems none of your husbands seem to have kept you in control)."

This tiny woman was there to seek justice for a helpless mother. She met the mother, who was crying inconsolably, in a Cluster meeting. The mother told her that her daughter had been tortured, poisoned and murdered, and her body had been found two days ago. The husband and the in-laws, however, had got away easily. The distressed mother was a widow and had nothing to offer to anybody. Nobody was, therefore, willing to do anything to help her find the culprits behind her daughter's mysterious death.

She vowed to raise her voice to help those seeking justice and to those who were being mistreated. After the marching, shouting and protesting for someone to whom she was not even remotely related, she usually came home to the abusive beating of her own husband. This repeated violence and abuse stirred her heart and mind so fiercely, it made her even more determined to help anyone in need

Having realized a few years ago that such problems were seldom addressed in Cluster meetings, and that there were many fellow women, who were similarly unjustly oppressed, Bibi Nasima Khatoon, a milquetoast, had decided to do whatever it takes to help these women. She vowed to raise her voice to help those seeking justice and to those who were being mistreated. After the marching, shouting and protesting for someone to whom she was not even remotely related, she usually came home to the abusive beating of her own husband. This repeated violence and abuse stirred her heart and mind so fiercely, it made her even more determined to help anyone in need.

The eldest in the family of four, Nasima Khatoon was born and raised in the Purnea district of Bihar. She is 46 years old now. Her maternal family consists of six members; her parents, two brothers, one sister and herself. All of her siblings are now married. Her parents were not well off. At the age of 16, she was married to Saffruddin Ansari. A

year later, having no income to sustain them, her husband and she had decided to migrate to Katoria, where he found work as an intern to a master tailor in the market.

They rented a house and, soon after, with all the savings of a year or so they brought a little piece of land and built a home there. Nasima, like any other woman, had not had many aspirations. It had always been the welfare of her husband and the rapidly growing family of eight that she was concerned about. She travelled to places like Delhi and Kolkata to earn for her family and raise her children.

Leaving her kids with her husband, she did menial jobs in factories. With the expenses so high in the cities and earning just enough to sustain her, however, there was little incentive to stay away from her family. She had decided to move back again.

The family continued to grow. The eldest daughter was married early and has four children, all of who stay with Nasima. If you ask her how she keeps her sanity with so many mischievous kids around, she laughingly says, "*Ziada hai tabhi toh hassi khushi hai; kaha say sunsan ghar mein itna buddhi ayega, didi?* (The more, the merrier; so where from will insanity peep in?)"

There was nothing unusual about Nasima except that she didn't know how to cook! She would rather go to the jungle very early, even before dawn, to gather firewood, go to work in others' fields or, at times, go to help her husband in his little tailoring shop and earn some money than sit at home and do the

chores. Nasima was sure that her children could take care of the household chores, so she was not bothered about her home not being looked after.

The whole family would gather in the evenings and eat together. Their meals usually comprised *dal* (lentils) and *marbhaat* (rice) with salt and chilly; at times, perhaps once a month, they would feast on chicken and mutton. Vegetables were a rarity and Nasima explains that the family could do without them because they are not only costly but also, if cooked, not everyone in the family would get their fair share because vegetables shrank after cooking!

As night sets in, the three younger children wrap themselves over her and fall deeply asleep and wake up to another day of survival.

The beating was not new to her but now it was about submission. Her husband beat her because the neighbours, other men-folk, elders of the community as well as everyone else on the road told him that his wife goes out for protests without any *pardah* or *haya* (shame). Her husband never used to get provoked by people's talk earlier, but now there were too many people talking. None of this mattered earlier when they were poor and going out of their houses for their livelihoods. Nobody thought of religion or customs earlier; now, however, they brought it up against her. In her words, "*Ghar main rehna aur pardah karna ameeron ke liye bana hua dharam hai didi, hum gareeb logo ka kya dharam. Pet bharne ko milega kaise, isi chinta mein rehte hai* (Staying in the house and in *pardah* is for the rich; we poor are always worried about how we are going to fill our tummy)."

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The large number of people that she gathers in support and her many acts of selflessness held no significance for any of these people, who taunted her and complained to her husband. All of a sudden, she had started feeling alienated from what she chose to do, which for so long had been everything to her.

It was beyond her comprehension why she was being beaten so badly instead of being praised. While picking up firewood, a few days later, she recalled the beatings and realized the significance of what she had learned during one of the SHG trainings in the game of introducing a stranger as your friend—*Sakhi-Sathi-Saheli*.

She realized that these men and the rich would never understand the problems and misery of any woman and the struggle she goes through. She realized that all these women had always been there to listen to her. She grew popular among them because of her wit and her speeches, she was liked too. She believes she has an even bigger family outside her home and that is of the *Mahila Mandal* (SHGs).

The SHG to which Nasima Khatoon belonged was formed by the wife of Munshi Saffruddin Ansari— the accountant, who used to meet PRADAN professionals regularly. Tasreen Begum, his wife, became involved in the SHG when her husband had insisted that she help him form groups in his own village so that they could become beneficiaries in the Goat Rearing project, funded by Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and piloted by PRADAN in Katoria in 2009–10.

Nasima's relationship with her fellow women grew stronger, based on a common feeling of victimhood, all suppressed by society and influential people, simply because they were poor and they were women. She spoke for them and for herself, and that was something that the women looked up to her for. She raised her voice for many of these voiceless victims. She enjoyed the popularity and openly acknowledged it. The others didn't mind either.

It was a hot summer day in mid-April in 2015 when Nasima learned of a meeting that was going to take place the next day. The *munshi* of the SHG and his wife had not told her about it. The meeting was about distributing the subsidy money to those, who would be rearing goats. She had overheard this from some women in the local market. The beneficiaries were to gather the next day in a village named Bahadiya, 7 km away.

Nasima prepared herself and reached the venue at 7 a.m., the next morning. There was nothing there, not a single being around, except for the huge Mahua tree. She sat under it and waited for the others. Soon, she fell asleep. She was woken up by the noise of babies crying, people talking and motorcycles revving. She realized that it was already eleven. People had started gathering. The accountant and his wife recognized her among the crowd and tried to chase her away with rude words, but she remained unaffected.

Nasima stayed on. A little later, she saw a young man arrive. He asked everyone to sit in a huge circle and started addressing the crowd. She liked the way this man spoke. He was unlike politicians or block officials. She was not used to being in such a meeting. She became excited and asked many questions about the objective of being in the SHGs, being beneficiaries, the criteria, etc. All her queries were answered very politely. Later on, in that same tone, she

complained about the misdeeds of the *munshi* and recounted his questionable practices of misleading SHG members. The gentleman was impressed and took her details and suggested that she come again for the next meeting, along with her group members. She learned that the gentleman was 'PRADAN *ke bhaiya*'. This was the beginning of her journey. It was her first encounter with PRADAN and the Federation. From that day onwards, she has never missed a single meeting or training, unless she was seriously ill.

In the next meeting, she helped the most vulnerable and the poorest of the SHG members get goat sheds. The *munshi* was better off and did not deserve the sheds, but he had already misled the authorities and got them sanctioned and constructed. This she revealed to the villagers much later. His threats to dissolve the groups, to defame her in the village and to ensure that she gets nothing ever all fizzled out, once she began to raise her voice. At present, he is never seen near any of the SHGs. She has the support of all the SHG members of her village, except the *munshi's* wife and her immediate relatives.

Each of the SHGs now have a woman accountant, who is a group member and who attends meeting regularly; this again is something that has been made possible by her. There are now nine groups in her village.

KIDNAPPED!

One morning in January 2015, Nasima's phone rang when there were a hundred guests in her house. A relative's *mannat* (wishes) had been fulfilled and there was a feast at her home. The woman on the other side of the line was weeping and Nasima could hardly understand what she was saying. She spoke to her until the woman was calm enough to tell her story. The woman's daughter had been wrongly

charged by her husband and his family. The girl had returned to her maternal home and was refusing to go back. The husband's family didn't want her back either. The woman said that there were no quarrels or arguments among the two families, but her daughter's life was now at stake. The unknown woman requested Nasima to come to a particular venue with some other SHG members and intervene in the matter.

Nasima hesitated, looked at the guests in her house, but then agreed. She picked up her wallet, informed her eldest daughter that she was going out and went out discreetly. She was joined by other women, who would accompany her, and proceeded to Simultala, around 25 km west of Katoria. On the way, she asked the driver of their vehicle to stop at the police station, where she met the Officer In-charge. She told him the reason of their visit in the area and also took the phone numbers of the *mukhiya* and the *sarpanch* of that area.

When the women reached the venue, a school building, they found it deserted. Suddenly, a few men appeared and pushed them inside a room and locked them up from outside. All 12 women were trapped. They were in a panic but Nasima didn't showing any sign of fear, mainly because if she were to become afraid, the others would lose all hope and that would make things worse.

She waited till she could no longer hear anything from the outside. She, then, called the *mukhiya* and the *sarpanch* at the numbers she had taken from the police station.

The few men then re-appeared and asked them, "Who made the calls?"

One of them claimed that he was a high-up official in the Railways, while the others said they were dangerous people so the women should fear them.

Nasima got up daringly and said, "*Hum kiye call, kyu nahi karengay call?* (I made the call. Why wouldn't I!)"

One of them said, "*Pehechanti ho kaun hai hum?* (Do you know who we are?)"

She replied, "*Hum yahan jaan pehechan banane nahi aye! Jis kaam ke liye bulaya hai, hum logon ko udhar le ke jao. Mukhiya ji aur police dono ko bata diye hai ki hum school mein band hai!* (We have not come here to socialize with you. We were called for a certain purpose. Take us there. I have told the *mukhiya ji* and the police that we have been locked up in this school.)"

The men were taken aback. Never had they heard a woman (let alone such a tiny one) speaking to them in such a manner, disregarding who they were, as if it did not matter to her.

They took them to the venue, which wasn't far. There they saw a huge gathering of around 200-300 men. It seemed like a full-fledged *aam sabha*. The *panchs* were sitting under a big Mahua tree surrounded by the villagers. The *mukhiya* was furious at seeing them in that meeting. Nasima saw the woman who had called her; the woman had brought several men to support her. But they had the look of defeated soldiers...sad and tired.

Nasima realized that the *mukhiya* was in favour of the boy's party and had already threatened the girl's side to not take this matter any further. Nasima intervened and very calmly explained that this union between the boy and the girl had been a very costly affair for the girl's family and the case should not be dismissed without trying to resolve it. She also explained that, according to the boy, the girl was not ready for any intimacy with him and hadn't given him any reasons. He

gets frustrated and angry at her behaviour and he is not being able to settle down properly with her and hence there are no grounds to continue with the marriage. His case was strong.

Nasima said she wanted to ask the boy some questions. She talked to him so calmly and with such wit that it turned out to be a different case altogether.

The girl, being the only daughter at her home, had been so pampered that she wasn't willing to stay alone in the house without her husband. Her husband worked out of town and returned home once in several months. Hence, she refused him and his moves. Nasima then sat with both the girl and the boy separately for almost two hours, heard them thoroughly and finally convinced them to stay together. The *panch* and the others were not happy.

Nasima said that they were unhappy because they lost the money they would have got upon giving the case in favour of the boy's side, and because women from a different block had come to their help and to mediate, something which had never been heard of before.

She smilingly says, "*Hum dus aadmi ka ghar basa rahe hai, jo thana ya samaj nahi karta woh hum kar rahe hain, isiliye accha lagta hai yeh himmat jo humko mili hai.* (We are reconciling conflict in families, which neither the police nor the *panch* is able to do. We are happy to have found the courage and confidence to do so."

LAND GRAB

Guddu Yadav is a thug that many fear in Katoria. He had been a *mukhiya* earlier and now was the right hand man of a well-known corrupt politician. He has always been associated with

The goons were taken aback and scared by the arrival of the army coming to the rescue of the women. Nasima didi, then, reached the spot and thanked the army men. As they were leaving, the jawans warned the goons not to trouble the woman again

wrong- doings. Once, he helped a tribal man illegally claim the land of an SHG *didi*. The tribal man was just a façade, a front person, who claimed he had the papers of Sumitra *didi's* roadside plot, where she had built a little concrete house of two rooms. On the day when Nasima went to Simultala, to ensure the safe return of the girl whose case she had handled earlier, SHG

members of Sumitra *didi's* village had called for a road blockage. The women had asked the local police to be present but they refused, stating that their jeep had been taken by another officer on another case. Nasima *didi* was unable to return on time because she was 25 km from Katoria and the protest was 15 km from Katoria in the opposite direction.

She maintained contact with the women on the phone. The SHG members were being threatened again and again but she kept them motivated. She reached Katoria at noon but Guddu Yadav's goons were already there with bulldozers, unloading cement, bricks and sand on to Sumitra *didi's* plot. They planned to break her small house and keep their own material there. The goons were holding bricks in their hands and aiming them towards the SHG women, threatening to hit them.

Nasima *didi* was desperately trying to get a vehicle to reach the spot but without money, she couldn't hire one. While waiting for in a bus, she saw an army caravan carrying some *jawans* coming that way. She got down from the bus and stood in front of the vehicle. The army driver asked her why she was stopping the vehicle. She pleaded with them to help her, to go to the village 15 km away. She told them they would see a few women blocking the road. The women were trying to save their land from being taken over by goons. She said

that she would follow them in the bus. They agreed. The army caravan reached the spot and took charge of the situation in 5–10 minutes. The goons were taken aback and scared by the arrival of the army coming to the rescue of the women. Nasima *didi*, then, reached the spot and thanked the army men. As they were leaving, the jawans warned the goons not to trouble the woman again. Sumitra *didi* then brought her photocopied papers and threw them at the goons and told them that, legally or illegally, they could never get that plot of land.

It has been two years now; nothing has been heard of Guddu Yadav's tyranny in and around that village again. The men of the village and adjoining areas are still in awe as to how the army had arrived. Only Nasima *didi* knew how and she again smiles, followed by a laugh this time.

A LEADER

Because of the many incidents and issues that she has dealt with, the other SHG members have begun to see her as an uncompromising leader. She was unanimously elected President of the Jagriti Mahila Sangh (the SHG Federation at the Katoria block). The trust and confidence placed in her by the women in this area is clearly visible. She is seen as someone, who is fierce and articulate although petite and not a very good orator. She learns things quickly, especially things that interest her. Without any written script, she can sing all the songs and narrate dialogues from any training that she has been to. She often boasts about it in private.

When asked about her motivation, she says "*Hum pati-patni ke larai, ghar thodne wale*

Because of the many incidents and issues that she has dealt with, the other SHG members have begun to see her as an uncompromising leader

faisle, mahila logo ko bolne ka samman aur police ko ghoos dene say bachate hai logon ko, is se logon ko karj bhi nahi lena parta hai, na hi unko police se harassment hota hai... wohi cheez acha lagta hai didi.

Ek na ek din log yaad toh zaroor karta hai... Dada bhi, aas pass ke log bhi bolte hai ki log maar dega, bomb phak dega—public ke liye hi na marengay, naam hi na hoga didi...koi toh jaanega ki aisa bhi kaam ho sakta hai... (We solve marital issues, help families settle issues rather than break up families, let women have their say and teach people to respect their views, help people not to get into debt for bribing the police and save them from police harassment. My husband and our neighbours keep telling me that I will be killed. Someday, someone will throw a bomb at me. I say it will be a good thing. I will die serving the people, I will be known for it. At least people will know that such things are happening and are possible...)"

The milquetoast, who had never even spoken outside her home until five years ago, now calls up the police station, "*Hello, hum Nasima Khatoon bolchi, Ghormara panchayat ke leader didi, ek case...*" (This is Nasima Khatoon speaking, leader *didi* of Ghormara panchayat, about a case...) Without any backing from her husband, she deals with both the struggles at home and outside. She relies on her own intelligence and gut, which she says she listens to and takes decisions. She and many others like her would have silently vanished into nothingness of their existence, had it not been for SHGs and various platforms, which have given them the space to speak up and to learn. She truly acknowledges this and derives her strength from the unity of her Federation members. The other SHG and Federation members look up to her as their spokesperson.

She is proud of her ability and uses it to influence people positively to speak up for their rights, irrespective of whether it is the right place and forum or not. She thinks that all members need to speak up and only then will things come to the surface and resolved. Many, however, feel the disapproval of society and keep quiet. She insists that once power gets into their heads, people tend to forget their duties. She cites the example of how all the SHGs of her village had elected a Ward Member from their group. After coming to power, the woman quit the SHG, and her husband started dominating the group and misusing her powers. He dictates to

the villagers now. She doesn't regret that they did not select the right person. But she says that everyone will get corrupt unless women speak up about what they feel and want. The women outnumber the men in any village at any given time; so they will always have a majority. The men usually go out of the village to earn money.

It will take many more years for her to reach her full potential; there is no doubt, however, that given a chance, there will be more Nasima Khatoons.



Panchayat planning team members in Yojana Banao Abhiyan campaign in Gumla district, Jharkhand

Implemented across all blocks in the state, the Yojana Banao Abhiyan is a programme designed to benefit rural populations as per their needs, with their priorities being strictly kept in mind. The state's expectation from the movement is that the villagers will manage allocations in a way that is suitable for their community's geographical, social and environmental needs.

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.

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