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Girls but not Brides

RAJANEESH R

Leading to a lifetime of disadvantage and deprivation, child marriage is at the root of many gender-related problems and is a clear violation of child rights. When this happens in poor, underprivileged families, the results are all the more distressing

After completing three months with PRADAN and my field engagements with the rural communities of Jaisinghnagar block, Shadol district, Madhya Pradesh (MP), last November, I came back to Kerala for my home visit. A news report about girl child marriages caught my attention. Almost all the TV news channels in Kerala reported the news that four girls from two districts of Kerala had got married in the last three months. The source of this news was an investigation report submitted by the local police to the Women's Commission, Kerala.

I found the reaction extraordinary because in Jaisinghnagar, over the last few months, I had seen many rural families where the girls had got married at as young as 12 years. The marriages took place with the knowledge of village representatives, local leaders, government agencies, and the local and national NGOs working in the area. I wondered why the authorities in MP had not responded to the information whereas in Kerala there was a strong reaction. The law enforcement system and the constitutional rights are the same for everyone in this country. Why then are only some States alert to such transgressions?

Clearly, these problems are partially because of a weak law enforcement system or the lack of proper media attention and partially because of the social vulnerabilities of some groups of people. This remains a great challenge for professionals working in this area.

Child marriages are a clear violation of child rights. They impact the gender structure, engender inequalities and, in the long run, are the cause for most of the gender-related problems that rural women face. One important fact is that these practices are happening mostly in poor and under-privileged families.

According to UNICEF, "Child marriage, defined as a 'formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18', is a reality for both boys and girls, although girls are disproportionately more affected. Child marriage is widespread and can lead to a lifetime of disadvantage and deprivation." India has the highest number of child brides in the world. Approximately, 47 per cent of the girls are getting married below the age of 18; of these, 18 per cent, get married before the age of 15.

MP is amongst the worst-affected states in India, the others being Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. MP has a higher rate of girl child marriage than the country's average rate. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) 2007 has set the minimum age of marriage at 21 for men and 18 for women, and the violation of this is a punishable offence. This remains a big concern for development professionals and this is where the law enforcement system begins to weaken. Another important fact to be considered is the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). According to UNICEF, the IMR is 76 per cent among women aged less than 20 years with 50 per cent for women aged between 20 to 25 years. One in every six girls in India begins child bearing between the ages of 15 and 19. These early pregnancies increase the risk of complications during delivery and of maternal and child mortality.

PRADAN'S APPROACH

Working as a development agency, PRADAN in Jaisinghnagar has its own agenda and vision on gender, caste and class-related issues. Services in the form of training programmes, focussed

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group discussions, displaying of posters, etc., have been extended to the communities. When I was in Kusmi, a small village in Jaisinghnagar block, I first observed that these practices were an integral part of the lifestyle of the people.

I was approached by Durga, a young girl of 14, who requested me to talk to her elder brother to allow her to study further. Just like every girl in that village she was under pressure to get married at an early age. When I

talked to her brother, he gave me arguments, which I could not counter. He believed that there was no benefit for a girl child to be educated and that it was better for them to get married and start a family life as early as possible. Although this was a small incident, it showed me the approach and thinking of the adults on these issues. The real picture is that none of them thinks that early marriages have an impact on the future generations and on the health of the society as a whole.

IMPACT ON SOCIETAL LIFE

The social vulnerabilities that, according to me, are the reasons of this 'social injustice' are related to the economic standing and the educational levels of these families. The girl child bears the brunt of the social impact of child marriages or early marriages. One of the issues that it impacts is education. Due to early marriages, girls are unable to complete their secondary school education. School registers and discussions with school teachers clearly reveal that the reason for more than 75 per cent of drop-outs among girls is because of marriage. This eventually leads to a higher level of unemployment for village women and to a system where the social standing of women remains backward.

The other grave problem is that the health of young girls and newborn babies is compromised. Often, there are complications in the early stages of pregnancy. The IMR of babies born to mothers of 16 years and below is much higher. Most adolescents in rural areas do not have any sex education and that leads to complications during the time of pregnancy. Usha Singh, an *anganwadi* teacher in Kusmi village, and Rani *bai*, an ASHA worker in Tendutol *panchayat*,

say they handle many complicated health problems of women during their pregnancy and most times the child-bearers are girls below the age of 17. They have also found that child-bearers of this age group show a reluctance to come to the clinic for regular check-ups which, then, leads to a delay in identifying any problems at an early stage.

Early marriage has an impact on the mental and physical maturity levels of boys and girls. It creates a pressure on them to take on family responsibilities at an early age. The changes that take place for boys and for girls because of early marriage are different. Boys get more respect and acceptance in their families and society after they get married whereas girls face more restrictions, have limited interaction with the community, increased work pressure and low access to society. This hampers their social, psychological and political lives from an early age and leads to a situation in which they have very little say in decision-making, lack of opportunities and fewer choices of lifestyle.

IMPACT ON THE GENDER STRUCTURE

In Indian rural communities wherein a higher level of patriarchal norms exist and male dominance is prevalent in each and every

The changes that take place for boys and for girls because of early marriage are different. Boys get more respect and acceptance in their families and society after they get married whereas girls face more restrictions, have limited interaction with the community, increased work pressure and low access to society

aspect, girl child marriages contribute to shape such a gender structure, which results in unpleasant effects on women. Clearly, girls get married only because they are girls and they have no say in the matter. This demonstrates the lack of a girl's rights and ownership on her life, and the lack of freedom to take her own decisions.

The problems are rooted deeply in the social norms and practices of the community where in men

in the family always want to see their women rely on them. The conviction is that the men have the right over a woman's life, and the power of taking decisions about her life should always rest in a man's hands. This shows us how men perceive their women and their role in the family. Most of the gender structures in the rural areas have been defined in terms of roles and responsibilities of men and women in the family as well as in society. The established family set-up and practices require women to perform unpaid household work. The most underrated and unrecognized work on farms, the homestead and in households is carried out by women. Women are entrusted with the role of enlarging the family workforce and they are exploited by imposing the idea of role descriptions and the ideology of motherhood. Men always want to have a command over the women's lives. When a girl marries early, a clear message is given to the women that the decision-making power about their lives always rests in the hands of the men in the family.

Early marriage limits the employment prospects of girls. It hampers their accessibility to schools, restricts their social life and the quality of mental growth. It ultimately results in fewer employment prospects for women

and also prevents them from achieving self-sustainable and dignified lives. The lack of skill development and knowledge in girls restricts them from contributing to the finances of the family.

It also affects their psychological empowerment and thought process and eventually leads girls to rely on the male members of the family; it results in the girls accepting a role of dependency and support seeking. Unless there is a sea change in this social practice, poverty cannot be reduced and women will continue to remain the most vulnerable section in society. Until we bring about a change in these processes and practices, the vicious circle of patriarchy, dependency and poverty will continue and have an even greater negative impact on coming generations.

Another major finding is the connection between gender inequality and patriarchal practices in society. The distinctions, discrimination and inequalities between the genders set the stage for their future roles in the family and the basic economic outcomes from them. The sad fact is that it is inbuilt in patriarchal societies in the villages of Jaisinghnagar and Gohparu that there is very little expectation from a girl child in terms of economic, social and physical contribution to the family.

Saroj bai of Patori village, Gohparu, says that she could never enjoy her school life as the boys did. She liked school and spending time with her friends. At the age of 14, however, her parents got her married and she moved to her husband's home. That stopped her from achieving what she wanted to in her life. She explains that her parents did not see

Families are proud to raise girls, who are obedient, modest and respectful to parents and elders. This pressure makes girls more inhibited and restricted.

The girls, often, see marriage as an escape and an opportunity to break free from the barriers imposed on them

any advantage or benefit to the family by sending her to school.

The two main obstacles to encouraging the education of the girl child are the high opportunity costs and the lack of economic benefit from educating a girl. A girl is considered part of her husband's family and, therefore, any money spent on her education is only going to benefit her marital home and not the home of her birth. This results in parents preparing their

daughter to become a capable, domestic, unpaid labour.

Families are proud to raise girls, who are obedient, modest and respectful to parents and elders. This pressure makes girls more inhibited and restricted. The girls, often, see marriage as an escape and an opportunity to break free from the barriers imposed on them. Sukhmanti Singh from Amjhar village, Gohparu, said that marriage at an early age was her own choice because it helped her to move away from the obstacles she faced in her own home. Her parents never treated her as equal to their two sons, whether it was in terms of school education, clothes, food or decision-making in the family. She thought that if she were married, she would have a new place to live, where she might have dignity and equal choices. Now, she is the eldest daughter-in-law in her marital home and the other family members treat her with respect. Like Sukhmanti Singh, there are many women in Jaisinghnagar and Gohparu blocks, whose lives are positively affected by early marriages.

In a patriarchal system, the father or the eldest male member has the responsibility and the authority to protect the family's honour and reputation by protecting the sexuality of the

girl child in the family. Early marriage is a way of handing the responsibility over to the marital family and the girls have 'no say' in the matter. Once a girl is married, it becomes her responsibility to prove her fertility to the new family, and she is under compulsion to bear a child as soon as possible without regard for her health. According to the ANM, ASHA workers and *anganwadi* teachers in some villages, there is a strong connection between infant mortality and the age of the mother. Pointing to three instances of infant deaths from Naktitola and Tutatola in Tendudol *panchayat*, ASHA worker Sangeeta Singh says that early pregnancies weaken the physical strength of women and lead to health complications.

There is also a connection between girl child marriages and the gender structure. Early marriages make women dependent and helpless, and vulnerable to control by male members of their family and that, in turn, results in them becoming the most vulnerable and disadvantaged section of society. Sometimes, it is difficult to say whether the hierarchal and patriarchal norms are the root cause of this practice or whether girl-child marriages actually strengthen those social norms. However, one thing is certain that the men always enjoy a greater command over the women through these early marriages.

REASONS

In many of our gender training sessions, we have tried to investigate the reasons for early marriages and whether the causes are poverty, social standing, traditional values, literacy rate, patriarchal social norms, and infrastructure availability. The main reason, according to our observation, was that it was because their ancestors had followed the same practices and these are now socially accepted norms that they cannot change. These same norms give

rise to the fear of losing the family honour if a girl or a boy were to marry someone from another caste. However, even in this situation it affects the girl's family more. About 70 per cent of the participants in our gender training said that if a girl eloped with a boy of another caste, it would bring more dishonour to her family than if a boy were to run away and marry a girl of another caste. The parents of girls are anxious at all times that something unpleasant may happen to their daughter.

Another reason most families favour early marriages is because a girl child is considered a liability for the family. Early marriages are a solution to get rid of this liability. Due to extreme poverty in the family and lack of sufficient basic resources for all family members, these child marriages are a solution to reduce family size.

Families in villages such as Amjhar, Patori and Pathar in Gohparu block revealed yet another reason for early marriages. Parents feel compelled to fulfill the grandparents' wish to see their grandchild's marriage before they expire. This, we found, was a fairly common practice. People do not always take the age of the child into consideration when under emotional pressure from the elders in the family.

In Durga's case—the 14-year-old girl who had approached me to advocate her case with her brother—the availability of infrastructure such as roads, a secondary school and electricity also influenced the decision of her brother. One of his reservations about sending her to school was about her travelling the distance to the school. I understood from his comments to me that he would have considered her request if the village had an easy access to a secondary school and a good road for her to travel to and from school.

The practice of *kanyadaan* (giving away the girl at puberty) is a very popular custom. Giving away one's daughter as a gift when she attains puberty is believed to bring wealth and prosperity to the family. In the focussed group discussion with eight women (those who were married before the age of 16) in Naktitola during a Village Level Committee (VLC) meeting, three of the women said that they were victims of this practice. They said the practice was quite common when they were growing up. They recalled that even their mothers had no say in the decision-making of their marriage of their daughters.

The women believed that because only women could understand the difficulties and struggles of getting married at early age, the 'no say' directive for women during decision-making makes the situation much worse for young girls. Impressive it is that drawing from their own experiences and struggles, these eight women have taken the decision to put an end to the barriers that restrict them and are involved in the decision-making process of their daughters' marriages. They have clearly communicated that they will not allow their daughters to get married before the age of 18. They want to give their daughters a life of dignity and self esteem.

It will be injustice if we only talk about the issues faced by the girls in the family. To a lesser degree, the practice of early marriage also affects the lives of many boys as well. Boys at 18 or below are not mature enough, both physically and mentally, to get married and take on the responsibility of a family.

THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH AND STANCE

The Women and Child Welfare Department is undertaking the working of Akikrit Bal Vikas Pariyojana (ABVP) at the block level in every

district. (ABVP was first introduced on 2nd October 1975. In 1985, it launched its first project in Jaisinghnagar block. ABVP directly undertakes the working of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) under the supervision of the block Child Development Project Officer (CDPO). From the year 2014, it established its separate wing for women welfare under the supervision of the block Mahila Sasaktikaran Adhikari).

The project officer in every block manages the work of supervisors. For example, Sarvari Begum, one of the supervisor at Gohparu block, coordinates the works in four *gram panchayats*. She explained to us the difficulties and struggles she faces while working with the communities to stop child marriages. The maximum number of cases of child marriage is reported from tribal societies. Practices such as *kanyadaan*, *pundaan*, etc., are very popular among the largely tribal population of Gond, Bhaiga, Kol and Paav. Changing these customary practices and traditions is difficult without an intensive effort by the government or Non-government Organizations (NGOs). A fundamental change in perceptions of the villagers needs to also take place. During her 15 years of experience with the rural community and working in various sectors such as education, the adolescent issues of girls, child nutrition, and women's health and sanitation, she admitted that preventing child marriages is one of the issues with which she encountered the most difficulty.

The Women and Child Welfare Department has its own network of resource persons, *anganwadi* and ASHA workers, which disseminates information about the ill-effects of child marriages at the village level. Their interventions have helped create awareness among the villagers of Gohparu block and also include direct action to stop 10–15 child marriages every year.

The Police department has its own limitations about intervening in the issue. Manish Bansol, Assistant Sub Inspector in Sidhi Police Station, reveals the struggles and difficulties that the police face when dealing with cases on child marriage.

A matter of concern is that only a few cases of child marriage have been reported by the community so far and these have mainly been initiated by the *anganwadi*, ASHA, ANM and sometimes by rival families. Unfortunately, even after the police intervene to stop the wedding proceedings, the community still goes ahead with it once the police go away. Some of these girls do not have a birth certificate or any other document that shows their real age. Most of the children in remote areas are born at home and the parents neglect to register their child's birth in the *panchayats*. This failure of registration of birth creates difficulties for the police department because they are unable to bring the case before the court.

Another problem is that most of these marriages are never registered. Every tribal community has its own traditional wedding customs and practices. These are not in compliance with the marriage registration requirements and cannot be registered under either of the two Marriage Acts: the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 or the Special Marriage Act 1954. Therefore, the parties neither have a proper marriage certificate nor registered documents as proof. Whereas people are not bothered about reporting these marriages to the police, they are very particular about filing a report with the police when their children elope.

Manish Bansol told us three different stories from three villages of people eloping. In two cases, the boys were more than 21 years old and were sentenced to imprisonment under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 whereas the girls were sent back to their

parents. Police officers say that the practice is more prevalent in remote villages than in those to which they have easy access. The inaccessibility of the villages proves to be a hurdle for the police and other responsible bodies to reach the location and take action in time.

The Mahila Bal Vikas Pariyojana in both the blocks, under guidance from the district office, has organized many training programmes, awareness creation camps and workshops for adolescent girls with support, at the ground level, from *anganwadi*, ASHA workers and ANM in all its villages. The problems of accessibility, poverty, lack of family planning, illiteracy, established social norms, customary practices, high level of patriarchy and lack of women's institutions are the main hindering factors to achieving the set objectives of these programmes.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES FROM PRADAN'S APPROACH

The last four years of work on gender, class and caste issues with under-privileged tribal women in two blocks of Shahdol have given sufficient feedback to the PRADAN team to reflect on how the three aspects are interconnected. Because of the actions taken by PRADAN through its training programmes on gender, caste and class, group discussions and awareness creation in SHG and VLC meetings and grooming of women leaders to act upon these issues, the team is expecting that the women's collectives will be able to start discussions, identify problems and also seek feasible solutions to these problems. It hopes to reach out to the most deprived and silent women and to bring them to the group discussions in their respective collectives and to prepare a pool of women leaders, who will help the community take action on issues related to gender, caste and class. Engagement with

the community during meetings and training sessions revealed some positive signs of change, based on the understanding and reactions of the women participants.

Probing questions regarding early girl child marriage and the consequences of it are very common during these meetings. As facilitators and trainers on gender issues, we have tried to raise the issue among these women rather than prepare them to take physical action against it. It is more important to prepare the women to identify the social causes and problems connected with this issue rather than to advise them to take action against it. Creating awareness and involving the women in these discussions gradually creates a better level of understanding for them to conceptualize their problems and also leads to community driven action against the issues.

Although we have seen an appreciable increase in participation from the community in these trainings, an area we are lagging behind in is the absence of requisite follow-up measures in both, the pre- and post-monitoring actions after these trainings and discussions. When engaging in other topics such as livelihoods, governance and citizenship, rights and entitlements, education and much more, the team is unable to give their continuous attention and follow-ups to this matter.

As much as the post monitoring and evaluation processes are important in this matter, pre-monitoring processes are also required. Almost all these central trainings are conducted at the block level and the participants are not familiar with each other. More time is required for

In spite of the fact that child marriages are common among tribal communities, there has been a substantial change in the attitude of the people to the practice and there has been some decrease in the numbers compared to the previous decades

women to adjust and open up during the discussions. For this reason, the community demands that there needs to be primary level visioning, planning and problem identification training in villages. These sessions will help them understand the problems, the objectives of the trainings and also the expected outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Undeniably, there is no more effective tool for development than the empowerment of women. An understanding of how the gender structure and child marriages are inter-connected and how the latter restricts women from enjoying their individual rights to education, enjoyment, protection from exploitation, employment and free social life is also important. Child marriages have a severe impact on a girl child's cultural, social, economic and psychological life. The reasons for the practice to continue could be many such as gender inequalities, poverty, cultural norms, protecting sexuality, lack of enough outreach of law and inadequate policies.

The practice of institutional patriarchy creates discrimination in all aspects of society. The slow outreach of law, policies and Acts in the rural areas of our country also restricts the development workers. In spite of the fact that child marriages are common among tribal communities, there has been a substantial change in the attitude of the people to the practice and there has been some decrease in the numbers compared to the previous decades. One reason for this could be the outreach and awareness about the law and the government policies.

Also, there has been an impact of the interventions of government agencies, NGOs and other community based organizations. Women do not want their daughters to suffer like they did. They know that girls are undervalued and have unfulfilled dreams because of the deeply rooted norms and practices of rural patriarchal societies; and they want to work towards change. Development workers are challenged by these social norms

and traditional practices. This experience has given me a basic insight:

“Change in behaviour can only be possible through change in perception.”

The first step towards change in perception is to help women imagine how they envision their life, prepare them to set their goals and make sure that these goals are achievable.

Born Into Penury: Failing to Make the Cut

RAJESHWAR DHAVALA

Representing the struggle of thousands of people living below the poverty line, Dugi Mai Bodra's life-story is one of steadfast perseverance and dogged determination that finally culminates in her finding her own power through the SHG to which she belonged

In the past six decades, India has seen huge leaps in development...both economically and socially. The percentage of people below the poverty line (BPL) was 50.1 per cent in the rural areas in 1993–94. It dropped to 25.7 per cent in 2011–12. In absolute terms, nearly 404 million people were poor in 1993–94 and the figure stood at 269 million in 2011–12 (Tendulkar Estimates). Thus, some 135 million people have moved out of their 'destitution' as per government reports and estimates. In terms of health, the life expectancy of people has gone up to 65 years in 2012 from 32 years at the time of Independence. Literacy levels have gone up from 16 per cent in 1951 when the first Census was conducted, to around 74 per cent in 2011.

However, the following is a story of one amongst those 269 million people who failed to make the cut.

This 58-year-old woman, an old gentle lady left me in awe of her boldness and spirit when she walked all the way in the scorching heat of May (covering her head with some leaves) to the Federation meeting. Along with her hamlet women, she walked 10 km to submit an application regarding the non-issuance of PDS ration in the village for over six months.

"My name is Dugi Mai Bodra. My name in my Aadhaar card has been incorrectly recorded as Durga Bodra. It didn't matter much until now when the bank-*babus* asked me to submit my Aadhaar number so that it could be linked to my account. I've since then paid four visits to the centre to rectify the error, paying an additional Rs 100 for the process. I fear my pension will be scrapped if I don't submit it soon. When I go to the bank with my current Aadhaar card, the bank *babus* reprimand me and ask me whose Aadhaar card I have submitted.

I was born to Bacho Chaki and Gurubari Hansda in 1958, third in line to five siblings, in a tiny village named Pukurimunda, in Sundargarh district of Odisha. My mother didn't live through our childhood. My father struggled hard to feed us. We had land but no hands that could cultivate them; thus my father worked on others' lands and grazed their cattle. We had our own cattle too, 12 of them. It

was our responsibility to graze them in father's absence. As children, we grew up eating *kheer* in the morning from milking these cattle. Our lunch and dinner was usually rice-water, occasionally flavoured with vegetables or pulses that the landlords sometimes provided my father.

School was a distant dream—we neither had the resources nor the time to entertain the idea of education. Those who had the luxury had to take the trouble to cross a stream that separated our village from the school while we grazed our cattle and did household chores.

I often wished to be attired like many other kids, to have braids like they did, to go to *melas* to buy toys. I ended up going to a railway track construction site (1968–70). I was paid six annas (1 anna = 6 paisa; 1 rupee would roughly translate to 16 annas) per day for 15 days of work every month. My sister had got married and it was me and my brother along with my father who were now the bread-winners of the family. I was around 12–13 then. I remember how the contractor used to hide us somewhere whenever some *bada babu* was going to visit us. We knew he'd be rebuked if we were caught working at this age. And he knew why we needed to work at this age.

School was a distant dream—we neither had the resources nor the time to entertain the idea of education. Those who had the luxury had to take the trouble to cross a stream that separated our village from the school while we grazed our cattle and did household chores

I was happy when I earned my first wage, joyous to contribute to my family, elated to support my father. Rice, then, was priced at 8 annas/kg. My wage helped us get some more of it. We also started utilizing our fallow lands for growing paddy, now that there were three of us.

A few years later (1972–73), I moved to Karampada. I heard they paid better wages there. It

was there that I was once accosted by a man while on my way to work. As fate turned out, I married him a few months later (in 1974, aged around 16 years). It was painful to leave my father behind, but I was also excited to leave Odisha and go to Bihar (now Jharkhand, Bhalupani *gram panchayat*, GP, in Bandgaon block, West Singhbhum district). Within a span of 5–6 years, I gave birth to three children (two girls and a boy). Soon the children kept falling ill; we were advised by my father-in-law to migrate to some other place (guided by the belief that evil spirits were the cause of the illnesses). Migrating would also ensure us our family needs. Our move affected my children's education (thereafter they were never able to continue schooling) but feeding them was more important. We migrated every season to Talicher for two years and then to Sankarnagar in West Bengal (around 1983–84), returning to the village during the monsoons and then heading back. I worked as wage labourer for Rs 20 for every 1,000 bricks I carried. My husband worked as a mason, earning Rs 40–50/day. My eldest daughter (aged 10–12) took care of her siblings occasionally; and as she grew older, she helped me to carry bricks.

We were provided 15 kg of rice per week by the manager for 60 annas, and devoured fish curry and other delicacies nearly every single

day, during our stay in West Bengal. We also built our own shelter from unbaked bricks from the kilns.

We moved back to our village (probably around 1993–94) after my husband fell ill and subsequently died of his sickness. Unlike these days, there used to be no doctors then. We had to mortgage part of our lands for Rs 1600 for seven years to bear the cost of his treatment.

After the death of my husband, life moved on as usual. My daughters got married. My son migrated to Kolkata and I worked as wage labour at Rs 5 a day during the paddy season. Post the season, I started going to the forest and I learned to collect and sell various forest produce such as *sal* leaves, *mahua*, char and timber to sustain myself. Rice was priced somewhere around Rs 3–5/kg, they sold it in *batis*, with one *bati* of paddy for Rs 1. To make ends meet, I also made liquor from *mahua* and sold it.

Around 2001–02, Anil *dada* from PRADAN came to our village and explained to us the idea of SHGs—and how these would help us in savings and loans. We liked what he said and formed our own group: Sude Sagen Mahila Mandal. I remember the wages around that time were Rs 15 and rice was priced around Rs 12/kg. We started with Rs 5/week as the saving amount. My son was also married by that time. We had two cattle, but couldn't make use of them because my son was not around much. One of those was sold when a need arose and the other died.

We were provided various trainings and we played many different games through our years in the SHG. We also went on 'exposure'

Around 2001–02, Anil dada from PRADAN came to our village and explained to us the idea of SHGs—and how these would help us in savings and loans. We liked what he said and formed our own group: Sude Sagen Mahila Mandal.

visits to see horticulture plantations as well as wells and ponds constructed in the fields for irrigation. I liked it very much; after a meeting at the village level, many of us planted (around 2006–07) mango, cashew and *amla* trees in our up-lands. My children and I worked hard to plant and protect these trees. My son also

stopped migrating to the city and stayed back to take care of the plantations. Our SHG also got Rs 25,000 loan from the bank, out of which I borrowed Rs 3000 to purchase a goat.

Things seemed to improve until my daughter-in-law was diagnosed with TB and eventually succumbed to it (around the year 2009). We had to mortgage another chunk of our lands in return for Rs 1500 for the treatment. She left behind five kids to be taken care of, four of whom didn't live beyond 7-8 years. My son remarried and now has three more kids. He lives in the adjacent village, sustaining himself and his family by selling timber and chopping wood. We still haven't been able to free up the land. The mango orchards have started bearing fruits too. But they are an asset of my son and his family now.

And I live in my own solitude, owning, in terms of my asset, a goat and a house that has its roof blown off by the storm that hit a few months ago. I still work whenever I get the opportunity, at wage rate that has now gone up to Rs 60. During other times, my daughters feed me well and sometimes my son provides me with the savings to contribute to my SHG. Rice is now fetched at Rs 20–25.

I worry about my house. That is a thought I sleep with every passing day. Repairing it will require another Rs 5,000–6,000. I also worry

for my grandchildren. And I still have an outstanding loan of Rs 1,600 that I need to repay to my SHG; Rs 600 taken this season for paying to the quack when I had malaria.

The happiest moments I can recall from my life have been with the SHG, especially when I could travel to places (probably for the first time without the purpose of earning) and learn different things. I also loved the *mahadiveshans* in which we used to participate and light the *diyas*. I feel happy when I see my daughter taking care of me. And I feel happy when somebody comes and talks to me because usually people prefer to stay away. Who wants to talk to an old lady who has nothing?"

Fifty-eight years down the line and nothing has changed for this woman... and as a matter-of-fact, for many others like her. When she narrated her story, I realized the meaning of the 'vicious cycle of poverty'. Her children went through the same phase that she had been through, and her grandchildren are not very different circumstances either. Did education (or rather the lack of it) or health or resources or economy or gender inequalities (in terms of control over assets) play any role in running the cycle? I wonder.

More than 60 schemes are being run by the state government as poverty-alleviation programmes, in addition to the flagship schemes of the central government. A look at the budgetary spending of these governments for the implementation of these schemes reveals shocking details. For example, up

Fifty-eight years down the line and nothing has changed for this woman...and as a matter-of-fact, for many others like her. When she narrated her story, I realized the meaning of the 'vicious cycle of poverty'. Her children went through the same phase that she had been through, and her grandchildren are not very different circumstances either. Did education (or rather the lack of it) or health or resources or economy or gender inequalities (in terms of control over assets) play any role in running the cycle? I wonder.

to November 2005, Rs 8,067 crores have been allocated for the SGSY scheme (and not a single penny of that was received by Dugi Mai Bodra). Considering the medical and public health expenditure, there has been a 71 per cent increase in expenditure for the 1996–99 period, from around Rs 56 billion in 1995/96 to around Rs 96 billion in 1999/2000 (yet the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) doesn't reach the village in times of need, and Dugi Mai has to shell out Rs 600 for the treatment of her malaria). MGNREGA was launched in 2005, promising 100 days of employment. That would add to 11,000 person-days generated per household—yet not a single day of employment was received by the woman.

Ironically, computing the total budgetary expenditure of the government on poverty alleviation programmes in the 1999/2000 period (850 billion) divided by the poor population (approximately 350 million) would provide the woman with Rs 2,431 in her pocket, more than she had ever got. Considering the budget allocation for 2016–17, Rs 87,765 crores to be precise, and averaging it with the rural poor population of say 269 million people, would make way for Rs 32,259 in her kitty, nearly close to repairing her house eight times over, and more than what she can earn for and has ever had in whole life. Just a thought!

Of course, the thought follows its own argument that would suggest depriving many others by denying the infrastructure

development that has taken place over the years, and economic development (if direct cash transfer over budget allocations to various schemes is considered) may not necessarily imply overall human development. And that is not what I intend to conclude either.

However, I wish to counter the belief that intervening in and impacting only one of the elements of the poverty cycle breaks the cycle as a whole. That would have meant that livelihood intervention in the life of the woman, to enhance her income, should have changed the picture of her life...which it didn't. That was because the ownership rested with her son, who has had final control over it. Similarly, an agricultural intervention taking place in a village may get a woman's entire family involved. And her children may still be robbed of education. Thus, the intervention may mark a temporary 'push-up', which may or may not persist with her children in the future (degrading resources, divided properties, etc., could well play the 'pull-down' factors).

If education were to be considered as the only critical factor, the children may still not attend school because they are often used as extended hands in a family, grazing the cattle or working in the fields, as can be witnessed in low attendance figures in schools, in spite of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* reaching the remotest corners to build a school building. And if educated, they may still not find work, given the unemployment ratio of the country. One of the mothers says, "This (formal) education has left our children with neither jobs nor with agriculture."

Similarly, health interventions may have their fallout if the food on the plate is still the traditional 'high-carb', that is, if agricultural practices and local resources are not taken

into account. For example, awareness can be created around different health schemes and nutrition, but they may fail to sustain if agricultural practices continue the way they have been (like monocropping with singular focus on paddy) and natural resources (forests, lands, etc.) are not concurrently considered in the given context.

Do we need to consider that it is necessary to impact all the dimensions of a poverty cycle? Should the people working at the grass roots be aware of this perspective? Should a whole family be considered as the unit of development? Should the focus be shifted beyond the SHGs? Should men, children and the youth of the community also be included in the process of development? That might include education intervention for children and women, livelihoods intervention with the men and women, and health interventions with the entire family, all simultaneously. Government programmes today have evolved to cater to all these ages but it is the implementation that has always been in question. And that is also the challenge that lies before those amongst us who work at the grass roots.

That's my conclusion from the story of Dugi Mai Bodra. She has shown courage, perseverance and hope, despite all these years of struggle, by taking the lead after the cluster meeting that focussed around Food Security, PDS in particular, and concluded with the members resolving to write letters as a means of Grievance Redressal. On being asked why did she take all this pain of going to the meetings and with the letters, she replies, "This is my necessity". Beyond those words, I can only assume that times have strengthened her resolve and the collectives have given her faith to never lose hope.

Swachh Gaon Kalwari: Community Engagement for a Clean Village

DEBIKA GOSWAMI AND VIKAS JHA

“Improving sanitation facilities and making them sustainable means changing behaviour. Helping people to understand the importance of toilets can inspire them to invest their time and resources in upgrading these facilities and taking care of them. The benefits of a toilet are not only health-related—the pride, dignity and convenience that they bring are usually more important in convincing people to use them.”

According to the 2011 Census report, less than half of the Indian homes have toilets. The 2012 National Sample Survey Office records reinforce this abysmal state of sanitation in India, reporting that only 32 per cent of rural households in India have toilets. There are glaring exceptions as well; for example, in Kalwari village of the Tauru block in Nuh (erstwhile Mewat) district of Haryana, the villagers have worked hard to create sustainable sanitation practices. Almost 90 per cent of the Kalwari households have constructed toilets, and the village has almost no open defecation. The village has proper drainage and garbage disposal systems for waste management. The residents of Kalwari have taken great strides toward their goal of leading healthy and dignified lives by achieving these sanitation successes. This village, just like thousands of other villages in India, once struggled with the sanitation issue but now serves as an example of how to create *swachh gaons* (clean villages).

KALWARI GAON

The village of Kalwari, as per the 2011 Census, has 519 resident families with a population of 2,751 (1,462 men and 1,289 women). The village is located on the border of Nuh and Gurugram (erstwhile Gurgaon) districts, 24 km north of the district headquarters in Nuh block and 8 km from the Tauru block headquarters. Kalwari has four *anganwadi* centres and two government schools. The overall literacy rate of the village is 78.38 per cent, 89.31 per cent (men) and 65.99 per cent (women). Agriculture is the primary occupation in the village. The majority of young people are keen to work with the government.

A study of Kalwari was undertaken in January 2016 by the Sehgal Foundation. The non-profit organization's work in Nuh district since 1999 has focussed on water management, agricultural development and promoting good rural governance. Through its 'Good Rural Governance'

programme, the Sehgal Foundation has used a community-led, interactive approach to create conditions for a more active civic engagement among poor rural citizens and to strengthen the capacities of the local government to be more accountable and effective. With this approach in mind, the methodology followed in this study of change in Kalwari, where the Sehgal Foundation has been working for approximately five years, included (i) discussions with several social groups and village-level institutions (ii) interviews with key community leaders, the *sarpanch*, and other *panchayat* members, and teachers, and (iii) a 'transect walk' of the village with the community leaders.

THE STATUS OF SANITATION IN KALWARI

Sustainability through community engagement has become a mantra for *Swachh Gaon* in recent years, after the earlier top-led and construction-oriented attempts to improve sanitation failed to motivate the people. Factors critical for sustained sanitation-behaviour changes include the involvement of communities and public institutions and increased public awareness about the benefits of changing sanitation-behaviour. This study focusses on the construction of sanitation facilities, and on their maintenance and usage by the community. Checks on sanitation

Sustainability through community engagement has become a mantra for Swachh Gaon in recent years, after the earlier top-led and construction-oriented attempts to improve sanitation failed to motivate the people.

facilities examined personal hygiene, use of functional toilets, availability of water and proper waste management. The research team conducted the checks at the following locations in Kalwari: (1) individual households, (2) *anganwadi* centres and (3) schools.

INDIVIDUAL HOUSEHOLD SANITATION

Good personal and food hygiene, the consumption of safe drinking water, and the proper disposal of human excreta are the major factors that can improve the quality of individual household-level sanitation.

The drive for the construction of individual household latrines in Kalwari began with the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) that was launched in 1999. Although many toilets were constructed under TSC, their use remained limited due to lack of public awareness about the ill-effects of open defecation. Community meetings and training programmes by village-level institutions such as the *gram panchayat* (village council) and the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committee, and awareness-generation programmes on radio and television inspired the villagers to bring about change. As a result, toilet construction in the village increased significantly. Ninety per cent of households built new toilets under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign) in 2012–13, and the villagers gradually incorporated hygienic practices into their daily lives. They now regularly wash their hands before cooking, eating and after using the toilet. Cooked food is usually kept covered, and kitchen sheds are regularly cleaned after meal preparation. Most of the single-pit toilets, as was evident in the transect walk, are cleaned regularly and the water

supply is supplemented with the use of submersible water pumps. Scavenging work, such as the removal of human waste from pit latrines, is systematically carried out with the help of a machine.

The teachers interact periodically with the students and discuss the importance of hygiene and the connection between hygienic practices and physical fitness

poster display on 'good hygiene practices'. Children in another centre said that, in addition to general pre-school education, the *anganwadi* worker, sometimes, gives them lessons on hygienic practices.

SCHOOL SANITATION

The two government schools of Kalwari have separate toilets for boys, girls, people with disabilities and the staff. The toilets are regularly used by the students as well as the teachers. The sweeper appointed by the school authorities maintains the toilets and the overall school campus. The cooks maintain the kitchen where they prepare the mid-day meals. The schools have clean water tanks, hand pumps and submersible water pumps. During the school visit, students were seen washing their hands and plates before collecting their mid-day meals. Wall paintings and posters on hygienic practices were not found in the schools, but the students said that the Physical Training teacher checks their nails, dress and general cleanliness every day before school. The teachers interact periodically with the students and discuss the importance of hygiene and the connection between hygienic practices and physical fitness.

ANGANWADI SANITATION

Two of the four *anganwadi* centres in Kalwari are located on school campuses. An *anganwadi* 'worker' is in charge of the centre's activities and an *anganwadi* 'helper' is responsible for the overall cleanliness of the centre. The helper cleans the rooms, the kitchen area and the toilets. Two centres share the school toilets and water supply. The centres outside the school campus have access to water from hand-pumps that the *gram panchayat* has installed nearby. One of the *anganwadi* centres had a

AVAILABILITY OF WATER

Regular availability of water for drinking and other daily use is a key indicator of sustainable sanitation. In the village of Kalwari, the *gram panchayat* had 25 hand-pumps installed for the supply of safe drinking water. In addition, seven government water supply connections were installed by the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) to maintain an adequate supply of water in the village. During the transect walk, researchers noted that approximately 40 per cent of the households had submersible water pumps to ensure a reliable water supply.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

A suitable waste management system is essential for good health and dignified living. In Kalwari, solid waste, including animal waste, at the household and community levels, is disposed of in individual pits located outside the village. This waste is converted into compost and used later in their agricultural fields. Households that do not use the waste compost can sell it. Liquid waste from households and the rest of the village flows through concrete drains to a common water body. The village submitted a proposal to build a water treatment plant to process the liquid waste, which PHED is considering. In 2014, the *gram panchayat* selected a space about 500 m away from the village as a waste disposal complex for solid waste. The villagers expect it to be functional in 2016. Due to the solid and liquid waste management systems

in place, the village roads, seen during the walk, were dry and free of debris. Two sweepers recruited by the *gram panchayat* maintain the overall cleanliness of the village roads and drains.

MAKING OF THE SWACHH GAON KALWARI

The Bellagio Principles for Sustainable Sanitation, endorsed by the members of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council during its 5th Global Forum in November 2000, have identified the main cornerstones of sustainable sanitation as human dignity, quality of life, and environmental security at the household level; participation of all stakeholders, especially the consumers and providers of services in decision-making; and consideration of waste as a resource and its holistic management. Using this framework for the review of Kalwari proved to be exemplary. Over an approximate five-year period, the villagers came to a profound understanding of the ill-effects of poor sanitation practices and how to bring about change. Kalwari became a *Swachh Gaon* due to peer influence on behaviour change as well as the pro-active role adopted by government functionaries at the village, block, and district levels.

The following sections examine each of these factors and their roles in influencing the sanitation of Kalwari.

VILLAGE-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS LED FROM THE FRONT

Kalwari's village-level institutions played a pivotal role in improving the status of hygiene and sanitation. The *gram panchayat*, the School Management Committee, and the

Kalwari became a Swachh Gaon due to peer influence on behaviour change as well as the pro-active role adopted by government functionaries at the village, block, and district levels

Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC) members worked together to achieve a clean village.

The *gram panchayat* mobilized government funds. The *sarpanch* and other Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) members, during their 2010–2015 tenure, utilized all the available

funds allocated under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, and by PHED and other government departments to improve sanitation in Kalwari. The *gram panchayat* not only encouraged the construction of toilets at the household level but also took an active part in the disbursement of Rs 18 lakhs to the beneficiaries (Rs 4,600 for each individual household). The *panchayat* formed a monitoring committee comprising PRI members, community leaders and ex-army men, who supervised the construction of toilets before disbursing the funds. The *gram panchayat* arranged for the installation of water storage tanks in schools, two new government water supply connections, and approximately 20 hand-pumps in the village.

The *sarpanch* and other *panchayat* members played an active role in keeping the village clean. The *gram panchayat* recruited two sweepers and provided them with the basic equipment to maintain the general cleanliness of the village on a daily basis. The *gram panchayat* also took the initiative to construct roads and drains, ensuring that they were cleaned at regular intervals, and to install solar lights in the streets of the village to improve travel safety after dark. The *gram panchayat* spread awareness about the benefits of improved sanitation and hygiene practices through wall paintings and community meetings.

The *gram sabha* also made meaningful contributions by providing an open platform to the *gram panchayat* members and communities to discuss issues of sanitation and necessary follow-up. Based on the outcome of those discussions, the *gram panchayat* appealed for funds from the relevant government departments and undertook action, utilizing the available funds.

The School Management Committee members perform the important role of monitoring the cleanliness of school campuses. They regularly oversee the cleanliness of the toilets and kitchens in particular, and they check the quality of the mid-day meals from time to time. In case students fail to come to school in clean uniforms, the committee members play a vital role in discussing these issues with the respective teachers and the parents. Sunita Devi, a member in Kalwari, shared that the meetings with the teachers serve as a useful platform to discuss issues of sanitation and creating a healthy environment.

Members of the VHSNC have also played a critical role in improving sanitation practices in the village. They conduct awareness-generation meetings with small groups of villagers, including marginalized people such as women, young girls and children. Committee members discuss hygiene practices, both at the personal and the household levels, children's health and vaccinations, pregnant women's health, and cleanliness of toilets and kitchens. In collaboration with the *gram panchayat*, the committee used Rs 10,000 as an annual grant to each VHSNC by the Health Department. for constructing drains, and spraying the area, from time to time, to keep the village free of flies and mosquitoes.

Regular monitoring by government functionaries works both as a check on the performance of the Village-level Institutions and a motivation to execute responsibilities effectively

POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT FOLLOWING GOVERNMENT SUPPORT AND MONITORING

Regular monitoring by government functionaries works both as a check on the performance of Village-level Institutions and a motivation

to execute responsibilities effectively. Representatives from the office of the Additional Deputy Commissioner periodically visit Kalwari to supervise the sanitation status. During group discussions, villagers shared that on one recent occasion, the Additional Deputy Commissioner paid a surprise visit at 5:00 a.m. to Kalwari to check whether anyone was found defecating in the open. Representatives of PHED check the quality of water once or twice a year. Representatives from the Health Department conduct health check-ups of school children once a quarter, approximately. The *gram prerak* (village motivator), in charge of the Swachh Bharat Mission at the block level, often visits the village to check the overall cleanliness, waste management, and the conditions of roads, school and *anganwadi* sanitation, as well as household latrines. Such regular monitoring by officers from different government departments ensures compliance by villagers and also deters unscrupulous elements from littering and draining household water into the streets.

COMMUNITIES SHOW WILLINGNESS TO ADOPT CHANGES

Changes in the collective behaviour of the community in Kalwari have created a better and healthier environment. Villagers have acted on the awareness they gained about the benefits of proper hygiene and sanitation.

Construction of toilets is sometimes easier than changing habits and getting villagers

to use the toilets for what it is meant. Toilets are often used as store rooms or cow sheds. However, the villagers of Kalwari have willingly conformed to the desired behaviour in toilet use and improved personal hygiene, maintenance and cleanliness of households, schools, *anganwadi* centres and the village, thereby making their village a *Swachh Gaon*.

This behavioural change in Kalwari can be attributed to increased levels of awareness and education among the villagers. Knowledge and information about the ill-effects of living in a filthy environment and how it leads to diseases and untimely deaths had a strong psychological impact on the villagers. Peer influence also worked as a binding force in this respect. Sehgal Foundation's '*Good Governance Now!*' initiative in Village Leadership School sessions provided selected community leaders (named as *Sushasan* Champions) with information about the ill-effects of poor sanitation practices and made them aware of the benefits of good hygiene habits. These champions understood the provisions under the *Swachh Bharat Mission*. Thus, greater citizen participation and public awareness have led to effective implementation of the sanitation programmes of the government.

CRITICAL ROLE OF WOMEN'S INFLUENCE

Women and girls are traditionally responsible for domestic water supply, sanitation and maintaining a hygienic environment in village homes. As managers at the household level, women also have a higher stake in the improvement of the community water and sanitation services and in sustaining facilities.

The collective action in Kalwari toward sustainable sanitation can be replicated in other villages. The partnerships between communities, village-level institutions, government departments and non-profit organizations led to the creation of a Swachh Gaon in Kalwari, over a period of five years.

Rajbala's (VHSNC member in Kalwari) observation in this regard is apt. She said that the increase in awareness levels with greater dissemination of knowledge about good hygiene practices among women in Kalwari has changed the face of sanitation and created a healthy environment across households. Meetings of the VHSNC as well as the Village Leadership School sessions of the 'Good Governance

Now!' initiative have mobilized women by stressing on the importance of good hygiene habits, which has gradually influenced their thinking. Slowly, the villagers have stopped the age-old poor sanitation habits and have started accepting the changes. They have ceased open defecation, have begun regular cleaning of toilets and kitchens, wash their hands, use soaps, and dispose off garbage properly. Although stereotypical gender roles continue in the village, some of the *Sushasan* Champions mentioned in the group discussion that even male members of their families now take an active part in maintaining cleanliness.

CONCLUSION

The collective action in Kalwari toward sustainable sanitation can be replicated in other villages. Partnerships among communities, village-level institutions, government departments and non-profit organizations led to the creation of a *Swachh Gaon* in Kalwari, over a period of five years. The election of an informed, public-spirited *sarpanch* and good Ward Members created an environment in which the elected representatives were aware of their roles and responsibilities and were better able to plan for the development and to use the development funds in their village.

Awareness-generation by the *gram panchayat* and the Sehgal Foundation, and a campaign by school children spread the message of sanitation to every family in the village. Moreover, the School Management Committee members, teachers, *anganwadi* workers and women members of the VHSNC carried out intensive awareness-generation drives among women and children, which led to behavioural changes in sanitation practices. The district administration played a significant role by monitoring sanitation projects and releasing funds on time.

Voluntary efforts to bring change in villages in India go waste unless they are accompanied by strict monitoring and fear of imposition of penalties by village institutions. In Kalwari,

the coordinated, pro-active role of the *gram panchayat*, community monitoring mechanisms and government officers' regular visits ensured village compliance with sanitation norms. Kalwari's proximity to Gurugram, the financial and industrial hub of Haryana, the residents' high literacy rate (79 per cent) and the community leadership groups created as part of the Sehgal Foundation training programmes promoted social capital, leading to fast acceptance and sustainability of sanitary practices. However, even without the favourable conditions of Kalwari, other villages may strive for replication of *Swachh Gaon* across India, if the communities and the village institutions act on a joint pledge to improve sanitation practices.

The references in the article are available at newsreach@pradan.net

Women Lead the Change in Murgabani Step by Step

KANAD GHOSH

Perseverance, determination, some guidance, and knowledge about rights and entitlements saw a few SHG members through a challenging situation, in which they crossed swords the powerful head of the village

March 2013. Mangali was very happy. She was returning home after attending the Mahadhivesan. She had no clue what lay ahead. When she reached home in the morning, her husband was drunk and was annoyed that she had stayed out at night. He was so angry that he beat her up brutally. Mangali fainted. Although she was a Federation Board Member (FBM), she could not stop her drunkard husband, who seemed to have totally lost his senses.

Beating women was a regular occurrence among the tribal population Murgabani village. Because domestic violence was so much a part of life, and quarrels between husbands and wives a natural phenomenon, other women did not become involved in the matter. And that morning, many SHG members were resting after their overnight *Mahadhivesan*; it was, therefore, some time before they noticed Mangali's plight.

Alaka Baskey (SHG member) first saw her lying unconscious on the ground and her husband sleeping on the cot. Alaka called the other members, who were shocked to at the sight of Mangali lying unconscious. They did not know what to do immediately. Coincidentally, Sadmani Saren another Federation leader, and some other women from Tilabani (a neighbouring village) came to Murgabani for some work. When she came to know of the incident, Sadmani immediately said, "*Taratari haspatal na legle u morei jabo; kotha bolte parchilo nai sudhu tuku tuku jol khacchilo* (If we do not take her to the hospital, she might die; she cannot talk, and she's only sipping a little bit of water)."

She asked the SHG members to call an ambulance and take Mangali to the Barabazar block hospital, saying, "*Amader jiban ta to ektai, amra na darale habek nai* (Our life is one, it will not work if we don't stand with each other)."

Parbati (SHG member), with the help of other SHG members, found the phone number and called the ambulance. The women asked Mangali's husband to go with her to the hospital but he refused and continued to sleep. Some of the SHG members insisted, "*Bou k mere r ghore ghumale habe. Okeo jete habe* (Having tortured your wife, you plan to stay sleeping in your home. Get up! You have to go)."

The SHG members forced him to get out of bed and go with Mangali to the hospital. Some of the SHG members accompanied them. The next day, Sadmani and some members went to the hospital; they talked to Mangali and after getting her consent, they decided to lodge a complaint against the husband.

Mangali's mother-in-law started crying but Mangali refused to back off or change her mind. She said, "*Era jadi na thakta tahole amake merei dita, or to kono hunsh e chilo nai* (If the neighbours had not saved me in time, I would have died and he would have been responsible for it. He was so drunk that he was out of his senses)."

The women lodged a complaint against her husband. The police threatened him and he had to make a promise that he would treat her well. The women kept a close watch on him and he did not dare to beat Mangali after that, for fear of the police and the SHG members.

This incident made the women more confident and they set larger goals for themselves.

TOWARDS LIQUOR-FREE MURGABANI

There are three SHGs in the area, which cover 39 families. When the women met after this incident, they discussed the problem of

When the women met after this incident, they discussed the problem of physical violence that most of them faced and realized that the root cause in every situation was alcohol

physical violence that most of them faced and realized that the root cause in every situation was alcohol. One of the women in the SHG meeting said, "*Dada ra ghore kono kaj korbe nai r chaal taka ja pabe seigula diye mod khabe r ghare ese sudhu jogra korb* (Our husbands do not do

any work and they take away any money, rice and whatever else they can find in the house and spend it on drinking and after they come home, they fight and beat us up)." And truly, the situation is such. The women take on all the burden of the family whereas the men, in addition to not contributing to the earning for the family, also steal whatever the women earn.

The issue was taken up by their Federation: Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh (SSNSS). The SHG members of Murgabani spoke about the problems of alcoholism among their men-folk and its impact on their lives frankly and openly. They came to the conclusion that the evil stemmed from the local liquor shop. It was decided that FBM Sadmani from Tilabani village would work with FBM Mangali of Margabani village on the issue to find a solution to the problem. Both the FBMs drew up an action plan to mobilize the women of Murgabani village. FBM Mangali and Sadmani discussed the issue with the women and asked them whether they were ready to cooperate. The SHG members pledged that they would give full support to Mangali in curbing this problem.

Nilmani (an SHG member of Sisu Seba Swanirvar Mahila Samiti) said, "*Kichu kore holeo bandho korte habe nahole bartei thakbe* (It will have to stop immediately otherwise the problem will increase)." They decided that they would take up the case with the Block Development Officer (BDO) and set a

date for the visit. They wrote out an application to the BDO complaining against the liquor shop owner and requesting that action be taken against him. Mangali, along with the FBM Sadmani and a PRADAN professional, went to meet the BDO and the *Sabhapati* and presented him the application. They provided the names and addresses of all the liquor shop owners of the area whose shops they wanted closed.

This was Mangali's first visit to the block office and her first interaction with the BDO and the *Sabhapati*. The women were not very confident that they could speak with the BDO. Mangali said, "*Prathame tuku voy korchilo tarpor jakhon sunchilo nai takhon dame rag hoyechilo r pura bole dili* (Initially, I felt frightened. But I told the BDO and the *Sabhapati* the problem. They did not seem to understand our problem and because of that I felt angry and expressed myself loudly)."

Some *panchayat* members were also present in the meeting and one of them tried to trivialize the issue. Mangali became very angry. She came back and shared the experience with the other women in the village. However, the BDO and the *Sabhapati* realized the seriousness of the situation and decided to take action that very day.

The block administration assured the SHG members that they would take action. They also told the women that they would need help at the time of the raid and arrest.

On the same evening, the police arrested four people, in the presence of the block officials, on charges of unauthorized production and sale of country-made liquor. The BDO made out a case against them. SHG members came out in full strength and helped the police

The SHG members realized that if all the members were to come together, they could do achieve everything they wanted.

destroy the liquor making pots. They helped the police identify and search for the men, who made liquor in their houses and sold it to the villagers.

The women achieved what they wanted. Mangali reflected, "*Voy pele habe ni, bolte habe* (Don't be afraid; you have to express yourself bravely)."

The SHG members realized that if all the members were to come together, they could achieve everything they wanted. A majority of the members wanted the making and sale of liquor to be stopped, and their success helped the SHG members become stronger and more united, raise their confidence and encourage them to work together on many other issues. At present, the supply of liquor from outside the village has stopped. But three families within the village have started to make and sell liquor behind closed doors.

RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS

At about this time, PRADAN started working on creating awareness of rights and entitlements and took up the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) for the purpose. In 2013, PRADAN started a mass awareness campaign on MGNREGA, through hamlet meetings, during which it discussed the rules, norms and process to get 100 days of work and other work-related information such as wage rates, payments schedules and processes, the facilities at the work site, how this work would help the households, etc.

After the awareness campaign, SHG members in Murgabani conducted a meeting, which was attended by PRADAN professionals. Many SHG members said that barring 8–10 days of earth work, they had not been getting 100 days' work. Even for the 8–10 days that

they worked, they got paid after 5–6 months. They did not know who to contact and where they could avail of the 100 days of work. PRADAN professionals explained to them that if a person had a job card and a bank account, they could get 100 days of work by applying at the *gram panchayat* or at the block.

The PRADAN team realized that, except for two or three women, none of the members had ever visited the gram panchayat office. The women expressed their uneasiness because visiting the gram panchayat was a new experience for them.

In another SHG meeting, members decided to ask for 100 days' work and set a date for filling the work-demand form. With the help of the Adult Functional Literacy (AFL) teacher and the SHG accountant, they filled the required form. PRADAN professionals then told SHG members where they could deposit the form and the process they needed to follow. Ten SHG members, who would deposit the forms at the *gram panchayat* (Bansbera), were selected in that meeting. They were reminded to insist on a receipt from the *panchayat* because otherwise the *panchayat* official could, at a later date, deny that he had received their forms.

The PRADAN team realized that, except for two or three women, none of the members had ever visited the *gram panchayat* office. The women expressed their uneasiness because visiting the *gram panchayat* was a new experience for them. Encouraged by the other members of the SHG, however, they went to the office. They could not deposit the work-demand forms because the concerned official (MGNREGA-related official) was not present that day. The women went again the next day and deposited the forms but were not given any receipt even after repeated requests. One of the members said, *"Amader katha ta niloy na. Kaaj ta na dile to amaderi khoti. Receipt ta nitei habek* (They don't hear our request. It would be our loss if we don't get work. We

have to take the receipt)."

The women went to the *gram panchayat* office again for the receipt. They had a heated conversation with the *panchayat* officials, who were not ready to give them the receipt. Finally, their efforts and insistence paid off and the women were successful. In accordance with MGNREGA rules, they got

their work within 15 days of depositing their work-demand application. In the financial year of 2013–14, they got a total of 35 days of work and they each got a payment of Rs 6,090, of which they deposited Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 in their own bank account. The SHG members realized the power of the collective, *"Sabai mile panchayat jeye bolte habe...ekla gele habei nai kichu* (Together we will have to go to the *panchayat* and speak...nothing will happen if only one of us goes)."

In 2014–15 and 2015–16, they demanded work and got it. However, in 2015–16, they faced the problem of late payment. The women knew whom to approach and they promptly communicated the issue to the block administration and received their payments.

FIGHT FOR DIGNITY

In Murgabani village, the Sarul festival is celebrated sometime from mid-February to mid-March. Each and every Santhal tribal village celebrates this festival. After spotting the moon in mid-February up to mid-March, the village head (Majhi Haram) and other villagers fix the date for the festival. At a holy place (Jahira) in the village, the God Marang Buru Jaher Ayo is worshipped by the Laya (worshipper of the village) so that all the villagers can live in peace and without any kind of disease. During the festival, all

the villagers enjoy being together for two to three days. Laya, along with a few other powerful villagers, are the main controllers of the festival. The Festival Committee arranges a drama competition in which 8–10 groups from other nearby villages come to compete. People from the neighbouring villages also come and enjoy the competition.

Some days before the start of the Sarul festival, the SHG members had undergone a residential training in Balarampur block, 21 km from Murgabani. They spent the night there. The drama group of Murgabani used this as the theme of their play—that women spend a night outside the home and are, therefore, characterless and are denounced for bringing disgrace to their family and the village.

Another theme that drama group highlighted was how SHG members talk openly with outsiders, especially PRADAN professionals. They showed how women are expected not to talk with outsiders

The drama group was trying to demean the SHG institution by showing them in a bad light. The SHG members came to know about the plan of the drama group and decided that they should do something about it and the drama group should change their theme. They decided to talk to Laya and Majhi Haram, to change the theme of the play.

Parbati Murmu, along with the FBM and the SHG members went to meet with Majhi Haram and very politely asked him to tell the drama group to change the theme because it showed the women and the SHG in bad light.

Majhi Haram called a Sholoyana meeting (planning meetings of men, usually conducted before the Sarul and Bandhna festivals, in which other issues are also discussed), in which he brought up the women's request, except that he falsely stated that the women

had demanded that he change the theme and had threatened him with dire consequences if he did not. This was received very negatively in the Sholoyana meeting; the members called the families of the SHG women and threatened them and said that in that case:

1. All the responsibilities of the festival would have to be taken up by the SHG members whereas traditionally women did not take on any responsibility in the Sarul Puja.
2. At the time of festival, if there was anything missing or stolen, the women would have to compensate the loss to the family concerned.
3. The families of the women, who do not obey the Sholoyana's decision, would be considered outcastes and would be physically reprimanded.

These conditions were relayed to the SHG members by their families, who pressurised them to not make an issue of the situation. Husbands of SHG members asked them not to attend SHG meetings and that there should be no further discussion on the issue.

This time the SHG members were frightened. The members agreed not to take the issue further. Many SHG members were silent succumbing to their family pressure; only some spoke about what could be done further. Quite a few SHG members did not turn up for the meeting.

Parbati's mother-in-law told Parbati's husband, "*Bou to tor kono kathai chale nai, nijer icchai ja khusi korche, group e jete nai habe* (Your wife does not listen to you. She does whatever she likes. She should not go to the SHG any more)."

Nilmani also faced pressure and comments from her family. "*Group kore khub berechis, baireo jabi na r group eo jete habe na* (You have learned enough from the SHGs. You

don't need to go out and go to the group anymore)."

Parbati said, "*Sabar valor jonne bolte geli r ekhon amakei katha sunte hacche. Dame kharap lagchilo* (I went to speak for the betterment of all, but now I am being considered the culprit. I am feeling very bad)."

Many SHG members clearly articulated that they would not go with Parbati and others for any further protests against the theme of the play. Parbati herself told me that she was afraid and, at the same time, very sad.

I discussed the situation with Parbati and explored what she wanted to do. She expressed her helplessness because the other SHG members and her mother-in-law were insisting that the issue be dropped and she was afraid of societal punishment. What would happen if she were to withdraw from the protest? And what is the learning for other villagers from the drama? Parbati replied, "*Chere dile ta dada eta ro barbek r pura bolte thakbe* (If I don't oppose the injustice against us, this injustice will continue to increase and the opposite party will take advantage of our weakness)."

I asked her what her hurdles were; she thought about it and realized that her husband had not really asked her to stop. I left her alone to think. Parbati Murmu and three other SHG members discussed the issue with some well-wishers— young boys (the SHG accountant, a young teacher and some others) of Murgabani. This group also wanted to change the theme of the drama because they understood the value of the SHG and they wanted to motivate the women. The boys assured the women verbally and they promised that if the women were to call a meeting with all the villagers they would be present to support them. But it was visible that all the women were not together.

"Amra jeta boli ni seta niye loke jakhon dosh dicche takhon to amader kei samadhan korte habe (We have to resolve this because we are being blamed for saying something that we have not)."

Four SHG members (Parbati, Mangali, Alaka and Nilmani) went to Majhi Haram just before the Sarul festival and told him that the women wanted a Sholoyana meeting where the women would be allowed to be present. In that meeting, they would discuss about their demand and ask the Sholoyana members what was wrong with their demand of asking for a change in the theme. The women were very firm this time, but Majhi Haram did not want to call for any village-level meeting.

The women insisted that either a meeting be held or their demand be fulfilled. The women decided that they would do their own Sholoyana meeting and began to inform the villagers of it. At this, Majhi Haram requested them to stop. He did not want any trouble in the village, especially at a time when outsiders were expected at the time of the festival. He listened to the women's concern again and said that he would ensure that the drama groups change their themes. He also agreed to see to it that no one talks ill of the SHG members or tease them in any way. Finally, the theme was changed by the drama groups. This satisfied the women.

Parbati, Alaka, Mangali and Nilmani told us, "People will say many things. We don't need to pay attention to everyone."

The women will continue with their struggle. During this movement, they became aware, however, of some gaps in their SHG. They plan to introspect on why SHG members did not support them throughout. They said it would be difficult to move forward without the SHG members' support.

CSO Partnership in South Odisha: Renewed Stance

MONISHA MUKHARJEE

Learning to step back from a 'leadership' role, learning to partner without an agenda, learning to encourage the partner organization explore its potential and share its skills and knowledge is seeming to be a journey that PRADAN in Odisha is attempting.

PROLOGUE

Partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs) is a much deliberated agenda at PRADAN. We have had different kinds of CSO partnership experiences in different places, over the years. In Koraput, we have had our share of learning, de-learning and re-learning. This article describes some of our experiences in our partnership in Koraput in the recent years. The objective of sharing this is, first, to have more people on board about the current endeavour and, thus, to draw inputs to further sharpen our steps towards partnership building with CSOs; and, second, the experience itself may motivate other teams to take up initiatives on similar lines.

RETROSPECTION

We started working with other CSOs in Koraput, in 2012, with the emergence of the Orissa Tribal Employment and Livelihood Programme (OTELP) Plus project. During that period, the OTELP project was at its peak under the leadership of Mr. Sushanta Nanda, the former Programme Director (PD) of the project; PRADAN too was in the limelight after its good performance in Balliguda. Therefore, the idea of doing an OTELP Plus programme in consortium mode, wherein organizations such as PRADAN will guide four or five other organizations in implementation, came about.

This opportunity was discussed at the South Odisha Development Initiative (SODI), a network established for the development of South Odisha. Interested NGOs such as Harsha Trust, Chetana Organic Farmers' Association, PRAGATI, Livolink Foundation and PRADAN came together to form a consortium to take up the project in Koraput. The NGOs asked PRADAN to be the lead NGO and hold the secretariat for the consortium, to which PRADAN agreed. Through this partnership, PRADAN hoped to build associations with other CSOs and, through them, reach a larger number of families in Koraput district, who would then, be directly or indirectly benefitted.

Therefore, to strengthen the spirit of partnership, in the beginning itself, it was discussed that all partners would hold equal importance, have an equal say in consortium affairs, and contribute to the growth of the consortium. All of them will remain accountable to each other. Nonetheless, it was easier said than done. The implementation of the time-bound project took centre-stage and precedence over the grooming of partnerships. Partner organizations treated it as just another project and engaged contractual staff for implementation. Time and again, the aspects of partnership were discussed; yet, maybe because of the genesis of the association, implementation of the OTELP Plus project overshadowed the whole process. The organizations were more interested in the short-term goals of the project at hand than in nurturing the partnership with each other.

In hindsight, PRADAN was also not an exception. We were also bogged down often by the pressure of meeting targets and overlooked instances when we could have helped strengthen the partnership. For example, there were times when our partner organizations invited us to events beyond the OTELP Plus project boundary and we turned down the invitation not understanding the importance of attending such events to strengthen each other's inclusion. Similarly, our expectation for quality, transparency and integrity in handling the project was too exacting for the NGOs to handle, and further alienated us from them. In addition, at times the feeling of being superior crept in. For example, we believed that PRADAN's way of community mobilization was the best and that the others should follow it. The constant pursuance of that line of thought may have irked some people, and augmented the alienation factor. Therefore, the partnership did not blossom the

The organizations were more interested in the short-term goals of the project at hand than in nurturing the partnership with each other

way we would have liked it to. In short, the difference between the lead NGO and member NGOs remained. And because PRADAN wore two hats, one of a co-traveller and one of a monitor, the NGOs received confusing signals; this further hindered the partnership grooming process.

By the time we identified the above factors and acted upon them, the PD of the OTELP Plus programme was transferred and a new PD took over. The new person did not seem to find much value in such a consortium arrangement and, to our dismay, he started dismantling it. The arrangement came to an end by mid-2015.

The consortium partners then met to chalk out the future of the group. Two major things came up as a common agenda for the association—the promotion of vibrant community institutions and staff development. As an action step, Harsha Trust took charge of designing a study, which would generate a baseline regarding the status of various forms of institutions promoted by three of the participating organizations. However, due to some sudden crisis situation at Harsha Trust, things didn't move at all for almost for three or four months.

A NEW BEGINNING

With all these rich experiences in the bag, the concept of bringing all the prominent NGOs of Koraput to a common platform to speed up the process of establishing a just and equitable society, without any project bindings, emerged. The basic idea was to facilitate a group of NGOs to come together without any project mandates, and deliberate on the needs of Koraput, the existing opportunities, and how organizations could help and strengthen

each other to bring discernible positive change in the Koraput region.

To start with, a meeting of the NGOs in Lamtaput block was convened in January 2016. PRADAN, Society for Promoting Rural Education and Development (SPREAD), and Asha Kiran Society participated and tried to map the various CSOs

of the district, who could act complementarily for the holistic development of the area. CSOs (as enlisted by the participants of the first meeting) were then consulted with, regarding the relevance of such a forum for the district, and the response was a positive one.

Subsequently, a district-level meeting was convened in May 2016, in which organization heads or district heads of many prominent NGOs in Koraput such as Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Dhan Foundation, SPREAD, Foundation for Ecological Society (FES), Koraput Farmers Association, Harsha Trust, Chetna Organic Farmers Association (COFA), Asha Kiran Society and PRADAN participated. The need for such a forum was discussed at length. Because all NGOs have some expertise, experience, knowledge of the area and have been working on different themes related to development, there was ample scope of sharing these with each other and of playing a complementary and supporting role with each other for the larger well-being of Koraput district. This would be promoted as a learning forum, to which everyone is welcome to join and learn. There will be no compulsion on a person who has participated in an event, to deliver something in return. Some NGOs may want to take up particular issues whereas others may not choose to do so; there will be complete freedom.

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THE JOURNEY SO FAR

The issue first discussed in the forum was the rampant malnutrition in Koraput district and the use of millets in reviving the situation. Dhan Foundation was identified as the agency with end-to-end expertise on millet cultivation. It had extensive experience in seed selection, preservation, improved millet

cultivation, storage, processing, value addition and marketing. Therefore, it was entrusted with the responsibility of taking the lead in training all other CSOs on millet cultivation. Subsequently, the first-phase training was organized by Dhan Foundation, which encompassed both class room and field training. The field staff of all the organizations participated. Of the eight participating agencies, four could do scale demonstration in their respective field areas whereas other CSOs shared their inability to do much in this regard. Unlike, during the earlier association, there was no discomfort or discontent, and all the organizations were comfortable with working together.

In the second meeting, the discussion was on how the WADI programme could be implemented in some of the villages of Lamtaput or Nandapur under the Focused Area Development Programme (FADP) programme by CYSD. Based on that discussion, the programme was implemented in two villages of Lamtaput block and CYSD's staff took the prime role to actualize it with the help of PRADAN. It was encouraging to see that the CYSD staff commuted from Koraput to PRADAN's field area in Lamtaput to ensure timely interventions at-least five to six times, even when it was raining heavily.

The third meeting of the learning group was held on 9th of August 2016 at SPREAD's office, Koraput. Asha Kiran Society's agro-forestry model, the opportunities in Orissa Agro Industries Corporation (OAIC), Orissa Lift Irrigation Corporation (OLIC) schemes for irrigation and the insurance schemes implemented by Dhan Foundation were discussed at length. The district officials of OAIC were also invited to this meeting. Based on the deliberations, a few action plans were worked out.

As per the action plan, a training programme was organized by Asha Kiran Society, where the model was elaborately discussed and shown to the participants through field visits. The model appealed to all and the responsibility for preparing a note, creating a model estimation, and influencing the district administration to take up the model under MGNREGA has been entrusted to SPREAD, Harsha Trust, CYSD and PRADAN.

Exposure Visit to The Integrated Farming Model, Promoted by Asha Kiran

SPREAD also held a meeting on the National Food Security Act, which all the CSOs attended enthusiastically.

The agenda for the next meeting is how the CSOs of Koraput can help villagers get what is rightfully theirs under MGNREGA. In addition, as per the plan of the third learning group meeting, one exposure-cum-training event will be conducted at Bangurpoda village, Lamtaput, in which the OAIC river lift scheme will be installed, mainly through a community driven approach. This event will be facilitated by the JE OAIC.

The best part of such an arrangement is that it does not require any outside funding and, therefore, there is no pressure of delivering something through a top-down approach

NO FUNDING WORRIES

The best part of such an arrangement is that it does not require any outside funding and, therefore, there is no pressure of delivering something through a top-down approach. Meetings are held in the office of each NGO by turn; on an average,

each NGO has to convene one meeting a year. The convening organization bears the boarding cost for that meeting. In case of training, the respective organizations bear the boarding cost whereas the convening organization arranges for the venue and, if required, the night stay.

To sum up, unlike the earlier association, the following things are happening differently:

1. Learning from each other and, thus, contributing to the local area development in a better way, seems to be the central agenda.
2. Each of the organizations is inviting the others for their internal events. This culture was almost missing in our earlier consortium arrangement.
3. The group had started without any pre-set agenda; the member organizations are coming forward to share their ideas with more spontaneity.
4. Organizations are taking the responsibility to train others unlike the earlier arrangement, wherein it was mainly PRADAN's headache.

EPILOGUE

Although this journey is in its nascent stage, it seems quite promising. During this journey, a sharing from one of our partner NGOs summarizes the essence of this new initiative:

Dear Fellow Sojourners,

Thank you for visiting Asha Kiran Society and being part of the learning journey. While all of you were here, a thought came to my mind which I reflected upon for a little longer and thought of following it up with a mail.

You are aware that we are running a hospital for nearly 25 years now and are able to offer secondary-level health care for people of this region. We would like you to consider this hospital as a place where you also have a stake. We would like to serve your contacts/beneficiaries that are in need of medical care which we can provide. If they are poor and need subsidized treatment, it will be our

privilege to offer the same to them. As we are empanelled under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana -Below Poverty Line (RSBY BPL), the patients can avail in-patient treatment, free of cost. We have specialty clinics for ante-natal check-ups, sickle cell disease and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. In case you want to enquire more about this, do drop in a mail. In case you want to refer a patient, please send them with a text message to either me or Frederick. We would like to be of service to you and to the people whom you serve.

Hoping to hear from you in this regard,

Mathew

Farmer Producer Organization: Enhancing the Identity of Women as Farmers

HARIKANT GUPTA

Bringing about change in the mindsets of women is best achieved by first organizing them in collectives, so that they see themselves as farmers and as major contributors to agriculture. The focus is on enhancing the agency of women and having a clear understanding of FPO systems, operations and resource utilization with a sense of ownership.

Agriculture, once the backbone of the Indian economy, contributes just about 14 per cent to the overall GDP even though about 70 per cent of the population is, directly or indirectly, dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Today, agriculture in India is plagued by many problems such as small land holdings, non-availability of timely inputs, vulnerability in the market and lack of awareness about the potential improvisation in agriculture, thereby, affecting the yield and productivity of the crops, which, in turn, affects the income and interests of farmers.

Women's participation in agriculture is an important aspect because almost 79 per cent participate in agricultural activity, which is higher than the 63 per cent participation of male members (Source: ILO workforce data). This participation is not only limited to the field but also extends to post-harvest operations. Despite this, however, women are not free to take basic and crucial decisions such as crop selection, which is the sole authority of male members in the family in most cases. This lack of participation of women in decision-making is evident from the fact that they have little access to the market and other institutions, limiting them from getting credit support. All these subjugations lead to the lack of recognition of women as farmers and under-rate their contribution in the family as income earners.

The PRADAN team in Bhoura is envisioning the empowerment of the community in social, political and economic arenas against such a backdrop. For economic empowerment and enhancing the agency of women, PRADAN has promoted the Farmer Producer Organization (FPO). The first step in the process was to identify the issues that women farmers face. The team found that women contribute to the major activities of agriculture but have no say in the choice of crops sown. Women were also not able to identify themselves as economic contributors in the family. They say, "In the farming activity, we women do not do anything. The men in our family are the main and major contributors in farming and our contribution is very little."

The PRADAN team is working to mitigate these gaps in farming and elevate the status of women. Over time, the women with whom the team was engaged in various activities realized the need for the collectivization of women to empower themselves. In one of the most remote areas of its operations, the PRADAN team set about establishing an FPO to build a support system for small women farmers, create enabling conditions and a system for them, making them economically stronger, so that they recognize their own contribution.

The PRADAN Bhoura team is working in an area called Dodramau, which has almost 45 villages in its periphery. All these villages are very far from the block and district centres. These areas are not only remote but have very poor connectivity. Almost 90 per cent of the people are engaged in agriculture. PRADAN began this intervention in 2006 by collectivizing the women into a Self-Help Group (SHG). The next step was to strengthen the agriculture practices of the farmers. The team engaged in improving the agriculture practices through interactions, planning, training and crop demonstrations for enhancing the income. However, although there were significant changes in the agriculture practices and in their enhancement of income, women's status did not improve. They still had no say in the farming or any control over the income. They also had no recognition of their own contribution and did not consider themselves farmers. "*Bhaiya hi kisan hai kyun ki woh hal jotta hai* (The men are the farmers because they plough the fields)," is the response of most of the women. Further, despite performing most farming activities—from pre-sowing to post-harvesting—women did not have any say in the process. An SHG member's husband had migrated to the city for work; yet, when the agriculture season started, she called him

The PRADAN team is working to mitigate these gaps in farming and elevate the status of women

to ask what crop he wanted to cultivate.

When the crop is harvested, women cannot sell the crops. Not only do they have to take permission of the men of the family before selling the product they also seek permission on how to use the money earned from the sale of crops.

Women are engaged in most of the agri-operations. However, they consider themselves as mere supporters in the process because they do not bring in the input material nor do they plough the fields. Some women say, "I am not ploughing the field and without it we cannot do anything, so that's why I am not contributing to agriculture."

Regarding control, access and ownership of the resources, the women say, "*Khet to bhaiya ka hi hai na, wo hi sochega aur batayega ki kya lagana hai* (The men of the family are the owners of the land and, therefore, they will think and plan what kind of crop they want to cultivate)." Just as universally, women have less access than men do to productive resources and opportunities; here also women are less likely than men to own land, adopt new technologies, use credit or other financial services, or receive extension advice. In some cases, women do not even have control over their time.

About accessibility and mobility, the women say, "*Bhoura aur Chicholi kaun jaye, aane jane me badi dikkat hai, gaon me hi jo mil jaye wahi le lete hai* (Who will go to Bhoura and Chicholi? The travel to and fro itself is so difficult. We take whatever we get in the village)." Because of poor connectivity, it is difficult for women to access agriculture-related institutions such as the markets and the Agriculture Department. These limitations restrict their mobility and

their exposure to the practices in the world outside. Moreover, it limits them from using modern technology.

Having restricted mobility, women have no means of gathering information about improved agricultural practices. This results in poor practices because they continue to be involved in traditional agriculture and applying traditional and outdated inputs.

Women perform most of the agriculture activities, and because they have limited access and mobility, limited knowledge about the improved agricultural practices and technology, it results in lower production of crops, thereby decreasing the value of their engagement

Women perform most of the agriculture activities, and because they have limited access and mobility, limited knowledge about the improved agricultural practices and technology, it results in lower production of crops, thereby decreasing the value of their engagement.

In addition, at the individual level, women have less bargaining power because small farmers have less land and less production. Some intermediaries take advantage of this and purchase the produce at rates much lower than the market prices because women are ignorant about market strategy. Even if women farmers are aware about the market prices, they are unable to bargain because the volume of their individual produce is very low.

This discourages women farmers. Many of them say, “*Kheti se koi labh nahin hai. Is se achha to bahar kaam karne chale jao* (It's better to migrate to other places for work instead of doing agriculture because there is no profit in agriculture).”

Mitigating these gaps in farming patterns and overcoming other problems can take place when the women are collectivized. The need for collectivizing women has led to the formation of the Farmers' Interest Groups

(FIGs), and other such collectives from 2011 onwards. Later, these transformed into an organization of farmers called the Farmers Producer Organization (FPO). The FPO was registered under the Producer Company Act 1956 on 19 February 2014 and named 'Sampurna Women Crop Producer Company Ltd.' The women of the FPO discussed and finalized the structure and operations of the organization.

STRUCTURE OF THE FPO

- ◆ **Farmers' Interest Group:** This is the forum of primary producers (only women) at the village level. All village-level activities and decisions such as planning of crops, concept seeding of the group, mutual sharing of the produce, and the setting up of any kind of linkages are taken at the FIG. This forum selects one representative for the Governing Board, who leads the agenda of the FIG at the organization level and takes decisions for the FIG.
- ◆ **Representative of Governing Board (RGB):** RGB is a forum to which every village sends one representative. A monthly meeting is held at the office of the FPO and village-level issues related to the operations of the FPO are discussed.
- ◆ **Board of Directors (BOD):** This is the apex body of the FPO, in which governance and operation-level decisions take place. This forum has the power to take decisions for the growth of the FPO and realize its objectives: “To capacitate women farmers, and generate livelihood opportunities for small and marginal farmers so that they become economically stronger and create enabling conditions so that women can

take decisions in farm activities, recognize their contribution to the family economy and provide a dignified life to the women farmers."

- ♦ **Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** Handles the managerial work of the organization, is accountable for every employee of the company and works as per the directions of the BOD. A full-time appointment.
- ♦ **Production Manager:** Strengthens the operations of the company at the field level and is responsible for providing services in the village as per the direction of the BOD. There are eight production managers.

Initially, when the idea of a farmer-based organization was mooted, it was envisaged that it would be a member-owned organization in which, at every level, the members would be the decision-makers. However, to ground this in practical terms, it was important that all the members have a clear understanding about the FPO, its members, how it works, its benefits and importance.

Many events were organized at the village level to create awareness and understanding of these aspects of the FPO and to introduce the concept of collectivization to the farmers. Discussions were held on the status of the members at the individual level and the effect that collectivization would have. Farmers were told how an FIG would benefit them if it were formed in every village and if they work with a common purpose.

To start the operation, some capital was needed; this was raised from the members, enhancing their ownership in the FPO. Members held discussions with the members of the FIG—about shares, its concept, meaning, shareholders, their importance and the difference between a shareholder and a non-shareholder.

Initially, the farmers were not interested in holding any shares and it was quite a challenge to convince them. However, after some time, the BOD of the FPO and the employees were able to raise Rs 4,80,000 share capital from 480 members of the company.

Along with the concept seeding about the importance of the FPO and shareholding, the PRADAN team adopted some strategies in the system and operation of the FPO so that the objectives of the FPO could be achieved:

- ♦ **Planning the utilization of land and resources:** This is a very important aspect of agriculture. If a farmer is unable to make a plan for better utilization of the land, and is not able to map the material to be applied in the crops, it results in poor resource management. In addition, mapping of monetary resources such as how much credit is required and how it will be arranged are also necessary. The FPO covered these through training events such as planning of crops, concept seeding and resource planning, which contributed to greater awareness about these aspects.

Suganta bai from Kajli village has two acres of land. She did not have any idea about the crop potential or about the selection of crops suitable and profitable for her land. She also did not have any idea about the good practices for crops and that was why she was just following her family's instructions regarding the work in the field.

She says that earlier she used to work on the field as labour because she did not have any idea about crops and was not able to identify whether a crop would be good for her land or not. Now, after attending the meetings and trainings, she has the confidence because she now knows about crop patterns and planning. *"Jaisa majdoori mein kaam karte hain, waise*

hi majdoori samajh kar hum kaam karte rahte the; lekin ab hum ye jante hain ki kya fasal lagane se kya fayadaa hoga aur fasal kaise lagani hai (Earlier, I used to work in my fields just like I would work as labour in others's fields; now, I know what crop to grow and how to do it)."

- ♦ *Training and exposure:* Training programmes and exposure visits to improve agriculture were conducted so that members could get an idea about the practical aspects of growing the crop.
- ♦ *Field-level support:* Field-level support from the beginning to the harvesting of crop was provided to members of the FPO.
- ♦ *Post-harvesting support:* Once the crop is ready, there is need to link the produce to the market to get the maximum price. It was important to continue the engagement after the production in order to establish the linkage of the produce and make

farmers aware about the market strategies, so that they take informed decisions about the selling of the produce.

SYSTEM AND OPERATION OF THE FPO:

- ♦ All the activities mentioned above are included in the operations of the FPO; the members of the FPO strengthen the system so that these operations may be performed with ease.
- ♦ The beginning of any season starts with concept seeding activity and the planning of resources. Members then put in their request for all the inputs they may need for their crops to the Field Supervisor of the FPO through their FIGs. The Field Supervisor submits the demands from all the villages to the office of FPO; the CEO collates the requests and presents it to the Board. The Board Members, then, take the decision about the quantity of inputs

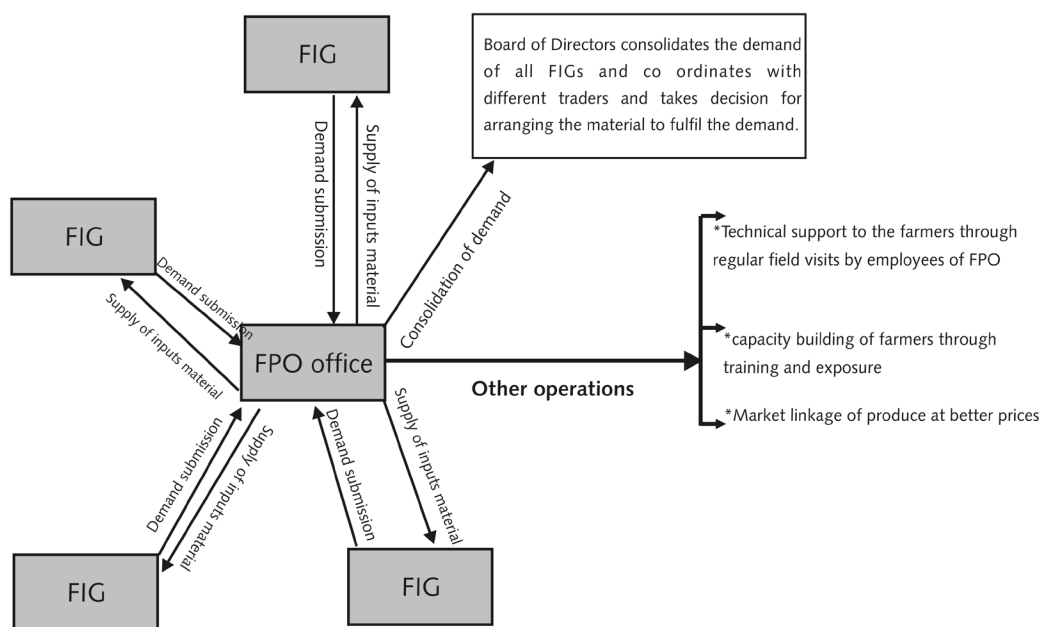


Figure 1: Operational System of an FPO

(seed, fertilizer, etc.) that the farmers will be given. The CEO and the Board Members contact traders and arrange for input material of good quality at reasonable costs. When all the material has been arranged, the Board Members hold a meeting to decide the selling price of the input material, keeping in the mind the condition of the farmers and the financial status of the FPO. Following this, the farmers, from each village, take their input material as per their demand from the FPO.

- ◆ Providing technical support to the farmers about the method of cultivation, sowing and input application takes place alongside the supply of the inputs. Once the sowing is complete, the Supervisor visits the farmers' fields. The next step is capacity-building of farmers by the staff. These training programmes are held at regular intervals to provide support to the farmers to manage the crops. At the end of a crop cycle when the produce is ready, the FPO arranges the market linkage of the produce so that the farmers get better prices.

In each strategy and at every step, the PRADAN team has tried to engage only with the women beginning with planning the resources and building their capacity so that they become aware of the various aspects of agriculture. The focus is on enhancing the agency of women and having a clear understanding of FPO systems, operations and resource utilization with a sense of ownership.

There has been improvement in the income figures of families. Some families, which did not have food sufficiency round the year, are now not only producing more but are also selling their produce at higher prices.

CHALLENGES

Initially, we thought that women do not have any idea about crops, the required material and market strategies, and this limits their mobility. To begin with, therefore, we adopted a strategy to enhance awareness. However, due to adverse conditions such as no proper roads connecting villages, long distances and

heavy rainfall, they did not find it easy to travel to places or markets. Such factors limit their participation even if they have the knowledge and the awareness about the resources.

Our primary focus of engaging only with women to mitigate their constraints somehow also resulted in increasing their drudgery. Earlier, they used to work intensively inside the home and participate in agriculture. However, the strategy that we adopted to capacitate women and raise their awareness and knowledge intensified their work outside the home also. The challenge for us was to reduce their workload even when engaging them in farming.

There has been improvement in the income figures of families. Some families, which did not have food sufficiency round the year, are now not only producing more but are also selling their produce at higher prices. On the one hand, the income of families has increased and, on other hand, the workforce of women has also increased. They, however, do not have control over the income and are not yet able to exercise their choice about the investment of the income. For example, if women want to purchase jewellery/or some other things for themselves and the man wants to purchase

something else, the man's choice gets preference. In addition, such dominance is not limited only to purchasing or selling but even while prioritizing the health of women over that of the men.

There are so many taboos in society related to women's role in agriculture such as ploughing and *gahani* (threshing technique) which limit their identity as farmers and equal contributors, not only in others' minds but in their own minds as well.

CASE STUDY

Saraswati Bai

"Initially, when we formed the SHG in 2006, the production was not sufficient to provide food security round the year. PRADAN helped us learn about good agriculture practices by which production would increase. After two or three years, when the production increased, and became more than we required for consumption, we were able to sell the produce to the local traders or in the market at a price the traders decided. We knew that, the price was much less than the market prices but we could not take our produce to the market, or *mandi*, because the scale of produce was very little.

We came to know of better agriculture practices, thanks to PRADAN; to follow these practices, however, we needed good quality inputs on time. We purchased the material

from the market. However, the quality of input varies a lot and many times the material was not available on time. We live in very remote villages and it takes us a whole day to get these inputs; sometimes, we need to make more than one trip if some items are not available. We understood the need for collectivizing to improve our situation. From my village, 25 women have joined the SHG and all the women are a part of the FIG. Today, we procure whatever we produce and, with the help of the FPO, link it to the market. Therefore, we are getting better prices for our produce. We are also getting better input material and on time, thanks to the support of the FPO. My income from agriculture has increased to Rs 30,000 and now I am able to send my children outside the village for better education. Because of our collective approach, so many people from the village seek our support in agriculture practices. We have a different identity in the village and that makes us proud farmers!"

Women like Saraswati Bai, who manage the FPO, have made a difference in their own lives and are a motivation to the team to move forward despite challenges. The social, economic and political arenas are not conducive to encouraging women to be decision-makers in agriculture. Yet, women are now heading the FPO and are nurturing and strengthening the right environment for others to bring a change in societal norms as well as in creating economic empowerment.

Getting Rations: A Continuing Struggle

VIJAY KUMAR

Grit, perseverance and determination in a single woman become the catalyst for change in a tiny village in Bihar. The training conducted by PRADAN helps raise awareness of the villagers' rights and entitlements. Women take the lead in seeking and demanding justice for themselves

"Hum log bahut door jangal taraf se aate hain aur aanae-jaane ka koi sadhan nahi hai. Aapko hum logon ka baat aaj hi sunna padega (We come from far off, from near the forest and there is no transportation. You have to listen to us today)," said Chhotaki Hembrom.

In January 2015, Chhotaki, along with other Santhal tribal women from Naudiha *panchayat*, went to complain about the irregularities in the Public Delivery System (PDS) to the Marketing Inspector (people call him MO). The women wait till the MO finishes his work. He listens to their plea and checks the records of their dealer. He tells the astonished women that the records showed that they were receiving food grains and kerosene regularly. Chhotaki tells him that they do not receive the rations regularly and the other women nod in agreement. They tell the MO, *"Hum logon ka faisla aapko hi karna padega. Kripa karke aap hum logon ke gaon aayiye* (You have to solve our problem. Please come to our village)." The MO promised them that he would visit their village.

A month passed; the MO didn't visit them and the dealer continued with his exploits. The women met the MO again; this time gave him a written application, and insisted he visit their village. The next day, the MO came to the PDS shop. More than 100 women from the *gram panchayat*-level Federation (GPLF) gathered at the shop. Chhotaki led the crowd. Soon, a heated argument began between the women and the dealer.

The women said, *"Tum hum log ka ration chori karke bech dete ho. Hum log padhe-likhe nahin hain to jahan-tahan angutha lagwa lete ho. Hum logon ko marke tum sukhi nahi rahoge* (You steal our ration and sell it to others. Because we are illiterate, you take our thumb impression wherever you want. You cannot live happily by killing us)."

The dealer became very agitated and started abusing the women. Chhotaki controlled the situation. Hearing this, the MO said, “*Hum khud khada ho kar anaj aur tel aap logon ko batwaenge* (I will stand here myself to distribute the food grains and kerosene).”

This is the story of Chhotaki Hembrom. She is a short, slightly plump, lady. Whenever she speaks, a little smile appears on her face and wrinkles form on her forehead. Chhotaki is a 47 year-old Santhali tribal woman, who lives in the village of Naiyadih, Naudih *panchayat*, in the Chakai block of Bihar. Her husband, Lakhiram Murmu, died four years ago when he fell off a tree. Her elder son was 17 years old then. He gave up his studies and started working as a labourer. She has two more sons—Mukesh Murmu (now 17 years) and Rajendra Murmu (15 years and studying in Class V)—and a daughter, Savita Murmu, who is 12 years old and studies in Class III. Chhotaki spent her childhood at her parents’ home in Lahariyatanr village, Giridih district, Jharkhand, which is 3 km from her marital village of Naiyadih.

Her father, Fagu Hembrom, had married again after her mother’s death. Chhotaki had two sisters, who died soon after their marriages. Her father and stepmother do not have any children, so Chhotaki gets support from her parents in crucial situations.

After the death of her husband, Chhotaki did not get any support from her elder brother-in-law (*bhaisur*). He accused her of being too free and of ‘wandering’ around the village after her husband’s death. She did not care about what he had to say and continued to work and look after her children. She hopes that her younger daughter and son are able to complete their

She says that, after the Membership Training in 2013, she learned the bigger purpose of being in a group. She learned the importance of mutual help and solidarity, of acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills, especially to enhance livelihoods

studies without facing any financial constraints. In 2011, she joined the Dare Nari Mahila Mandal, mobilized by PRADAN as a joint project of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the Central Silk Board (CSB).

Initially, she joined the SHG for savings and credit so that she would not have to borrow money at a high rate of interest from a moneylender. She did not speak much at the meetings in the beginning; after several meetings and trainings, however, she understood the purpose and the importance of being in a collective and started participating in the discussions.

She says that, after the Membership Training in 2013, she learned the bigger purpose of being in a group. She learned the importance of mutual help and solidarity, of acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills, especially to enhance livelihoods. Through various awareness building training programmes on ‘Right to Food’ and ‘MGNREGA’, she began speaking up for her rights and entitlements; she understood that to get those rights, she had to raise her voice and for that it was important to work collectively.

In 2014, when PRADAN mobilized all the SHGs to form a collective at the *gram panchayat*-level in Naudih *panchayat*, Chhotaki *didi* was selected as the representative from her village to the GPLF, which was named ‘Nouadih Gram Panchayat Federation’. The new Federation was mandated to work upon *panchayat*-level problems and issues of the community. At the GPLF level, depending upon the issue, there were a few committees that were formed—the Mahila Sangathan Sudhar Samity, the Ajeevika Samity and the Adhikar Samity.

Provision for Food Security

1. Every person belonging to a priority household shall be entitled to receive 5 kg of food grains per person, per month at subsidized prices from the state government, under the targeted PDS.

Provided the households covered under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana shall, to such extent as may be specified by the central government for each State in the said scheme, be entitled to 35 kg of food grains per household per month.

2. Eligible households shall be entitled to food grains under Section 3 at the subsidized price, not exceeding Rs 3 per kg for rice, Rs 2 per kg for wheat and Rs 1 per kg for coarse grains for a period of three years, from the date of commencement of this Act; and thereafter, at such price, as may be fixed by the central government, from time to time, not exceeding:
 - i. the minimum support price for wheat and coarse grains; and
 - ii. the derived minimum support price for rice, as the case may be.

The Adhikar Samity works on the rights and entitlements of the community. Chhotaki *didi* believed that her aspirations and motivations were in alignment with the social movement and she became a member. The members of the Adhikar Samity received training from PRADAN on various social security schemes. Depending on the needs of a particular area, PRADAN arranges for training on the 'Right to Food' and the 'Rozagar Guarantee Act'.

Chhotaki used the training in her day-to-day life. One day, in a conversation she said, "*Dekhiye, dada, din main 2.5 kilo chawal lagta hai. Us hisab se to saal ka 900 kilo chawal lag jayega na? Lekin hum log to 600 kilo hi uga paate hain. Tab baki kaa kahan se laayein* (Dada, we use 2.5 kg of rice per day. Based on this, we consume 900 kg of rice in a year, but we grow only 600 kg of rice. Where should we get the rest of the rice from)?"

She described 'how PDS is significant in her life'. In the *khairif* agriculture season, Chhotaki produces 600 kg of rice. The family consumption of rice is 75 kg in a month. So

they need 900 kg of rice for round-the-year food sufficiency. The rice produced in their fields lasts for only eight months; for the remaining four months, she either buys rice from the market or depends upon the PDS. For a six-member family, they should ideally get 30 kg of grain (rice and wheat) per month which lasts for only 10 days a month. She can receive 360 kg of rice from the PDS, which will meet her family's food needs for another four months.

After her training in the Adhikar Samity, she realized that her family was not getting the benefits from PDS as per the provisions. She approached the PDS dealer, Arjun Soren. He, however, rebuked her and refused to give her the grain or the kerosene.

She brought up this problem in the weekly meeting of her SHG. She said, "*Maine hisab lagaya ki mujhe kitna ration milna chahiye par jab main dealer se mili to usne mujhe bhaga diya. Kya karna chahiye* (I have calculated the amount of grains that I should get from the PDS. When I asked the dealer, he didn't listen

to me and shooed me away. What should be done now)?"

She asked the others to calculate their rations and whether they were getting rations as per their entitlements. Every one calculated and found that no one was getting rations, as per the stipulated entitlement. The women realized that everyone had the same problem. The dealer was exploiting them. They decided that all the members of the group would meet the dealer and demand the right quantity of grains and kerosene.

The next day, the group approached the dealer but he said, "*Hum nahi denge. Tum logon ko jo karna hai kar lo* (I will not give. You do whatever you want to do)."

The group decided that this incident needed to be shared with everyone and the topic should be on the agenda for the monthly meeting of the GPLF. Around 30 members were present in the next GPLF meeting. Chhotaki narrated the whole incident in the forum. She recounted how the dealer scolded them and how he challenged them. The *didis* representing the Ektara, Rangmatia, Govindpur and Jobardaha villages agreed with her and admitted that the dealer was treating them badly as well.

Chhotaki then said, "*Agar yeh sabhi logon ka dikkat hai, tab hum logon ko kuch karna chahiye* (If it's a problem of everyone, then we should act)."

Everyone realized that it was a common problem. From Naudih village, Mahadev Soren (a volunteer in the block-level Federation) suggested that if the dealer was saying that nobody could do anything in this matter, they would have to visit the block office and report

The dealer was told by the MO to be regular and that there should not be any further complaints regarding the distribution of ration. The MO came again the next month and had the ration distributed in his presence. After that, the families started getting their regular food grains and kerosene

this issue to the MO (PDS), because he was the key person, who could solve their problem.

Chhotaki offered, "*Main jaungi. Kaun mere saath chalega* (I will go. Who will come with me)?" Fifteen other members volunteered to meet the MO in the Block.

In the second week of December 2014, Chhotaki, along with the other women, went to the block

and persuaded the MO to visit their village. But the MO didn't come. Again (in January 2015, as mentioned earlier), they visited him with a written application and the MO came to their village. The dealer distributed the ration in front of MO. The dealer was told by the MO to be regular and that there should not be any further complaints regarding the distribution of ration. The MO came again the next month and had the ration distributed in his presence. After that, the families started getting their regular food grains and kerosene.

This success story spread in PRADAN and reached the working *panchayat* of Chakai via the block-level Federation. Due to Chhotaki's participation and contribution in GPLF, she was chosen as the 'Koshadhyksh' of the Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation). On 2nd April 2015, Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh decided to conduct an awareness campaign on PDS and ICDS.

In support of this, the Naudih GPLF organized an awareness camp on the rights-based schemes of ICDS and PDS on 18 May 2015. On the occasion, the MO applauded such a programme and initiative; he was pleased that such campaigning was happening in Chakai block. He talked about the PDS scheme and gave the villagers information about how the

families who had been left out could still enlist their names in the BPL list by contacting the Vikas Mitra.

The SHG women from the Naudih *panchayat* participated in the camp and some of them also shared their views on the current the condition of the *anganwadis* and PDS in their villages.

In August 2015, the MO was transferred and a new MO was posted. Once again, the dealer, Arjun Soren, reverted to his old practices. He would not distribute the food grains and kerosene as stipulated. Chhotaki again went to the dealer and argued with him and he again scolded her and refused to provide the food grains.

She responded in anger, *"Tumhare ghar se nahi maang rahen hain. Hum apna adhikar maang rahen hain* (We are not asking you to give grains from your house. We are asking for our rights)."

Once again, she reported the matter in the GPLF and added that the issue was not only about inadequate supply of food grains and kerosene but also that the dealer drank too much and misbehaved with the women when supplying food grains. On 29 November 2015, led by Chhotaki, some SHG members from Naiyadhi and Ektara villages submitted a written complaint to the MO. But the new MO

For two years, Chhotaki and her fellow GPLF members have been fighting with the dealer for regular and correct supply of rations. The dealer, from time to time, goes back to his malpractices

did not take any action against the dealer.

Chhotaki then spoke about it in the GPLF again. Some members said that if the dealer was continuing to behave like this, there was no point in pursuing the matter. Chhotaki *didid* said, however, that they should not leave the case and that they

should fight till the end. She, along with Sunita Soren of the same village, went to the block office and talked to the MO. He listened to them and told them that he would visit the dealer and look into the matter. After the MO's visit, the dealer once again started giving the correct amount of rations.

Chhotaki now says, *"Thoda khit-pit to abhi bhi karta hai, par ration de deta hai* (The dealer still troubles us, but he gives us regular rations)." For two years, Chhotaki and her fellow GPLF members have been fighting with the dealer for regular and correct supply of rations. The dealer, from time to time, goes back to his malpractices.

Chhotaki says, *"Hum chup nahin rahenge. Yeh ration ki ladai to chalti rahegi* (We will not keep quiet. This fight for rations will go on)".

Chhotaki's efforts have not been limited to the regularization of PDS; she has raised awareness in the community on other government schemes such as MGNREGA and ICDS, which directly affect their lives.



When the idea of a farmer-based organization was mooted, it was envisaged that it would be a member-owned organization in which, at every level, members would be the decision-makers. To ground this in practical terms, it was important that all the members have a clear understanding about the Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO), its members, how it works, its benefits and importance.

Seen in the picture are the FPO farmers in an annual event in Bhoura, Madhya Pradesh

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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