

# MY JOURNEY WITH TASAR SERICULTURE



Recounting his initial engagement with *tasar* as a livelihoods option for the tribals of Chaibasa district, the author describes how over the last two decades this has become a meaningful though challenging involvement, requiring perseverance and optimism

**S** OON AFTER I COMPLETED MY B.Sc. (Forestry) from Birsa Agriculture University, Ranchi, in January 1996, I joined PRADAN as a Development Apprentice. I was in search of a job in the NGO sector that would allow me to continue to live in Ranchi to pursue my Masters. I considered it a transitory arrangement as my plan, in the long run, was to get a government job. I shared this plan with Achintya and Bismaya, who interviewed me in PRADAN's Ranchi office. They insisted that I visit a PRADAN project in Bihar before taking a decision to join the organization.

I visited PRADAN's Chaibasa project. The field visits, along with interactions with the members of PRADAN's Chaibasa team, completely changed my perception about NGOs. I was particularly impressed by the seriousness with which PRADAN members engaged with the community and worked to promote improved farming, supported by small irrigation schemes. Later on, Achintya asked me to join the Godda project because it was my home district and *tasar* was related to the subject I had studied in college.

Satya was the Team Leader of the Godda project. On the day I joined office, he briefed me about

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PRADAN and the *tasar* project and arranged to drop me at Sunderpahadi, where I was to stay and work. I remained there for the next six years. Sunderpahadi was the block headquarters. Besides the block office, there were only four or five other *pucca* buildings in the area in those days. The place was very peaceful and full of greenery. Our office was located at one end of a village playground, with the forest cover starting from the other end of it. Sunderpahadi was sparsely populated with no electricity or telephone connection. Excepting for the members of the team, no one remained awake beyond 8:00 in the evening.

As a Development Apprentice, I chose to explore the *tasar* theme. In those days, PRADAN teams were thematically organized. My daily routine was to visit the villages along with Anish. We would spend the entire day talking with men and women in the villages, understanding their livelihood options, keeping a special focus on *tasar*. Those were my initial opportunities to interact with the tribal people and understand the socio-economic and cultural aspects of their lives. There was not much by way of entertainment in Sunderpahadi; therefore, the team members'

discussions continued late into the evenings. I slowly started loving the place and my work.

During the initial months of Apprenticeship, there was no particular work assigned to me. I would interact freely with the villagers, observe and learn about the various aspects of village life and write reports and share them with my colleagues. Being a forestry man, I enjoyed exploring the forest. I realized the tremendous opportunity I had been given to learn, not only from my colleagues, but also from the villagers. I was so engrossed in my daily chores that my plans to do my Masters and get a government job faded away from my mind.

Spending six months with Anish gave me ample opportunity to learn about the community and sericulture. I also received training on seed production technology and processes from Central Silk Board (CSB). We were able to promote four grainages (seed production units of *tasar*) in Sunderpahadi, owned and operated by four tribal youths. Four additional grainages were coming up in the area. Anish was already involved in these initiatives. I joined him after my training. I got a photocopy of an outdated version of a *tasar*

sericulture manual, compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organization. That was the only available printed material of some use for the practitioners of the sector!

In those days, the traditional silkworm rearers had two sources to procure *tasar* seeds. Either they gathered the seed cocoons from the forests, preserved these at home for some days, and allowed the male and female moths to emerge from the cocoons and copulate. The inseminated female moth would lay eggs that were, then, mounted on the host trees. Eggs would hatch to spawn a new generation and, hence, a new crop cycle.

The other source was the government sericulture establishments (such as CSB and State Sericulture Department), which supplied Disease Free Layings (DFLs) or the seeds of the *tasar* moth to the silkworm rearers.

The availability/collection of seed cocoons from the forests was, however, dwindling rapidly in the 1990s due to tree felling and disease contamination in the insects. Rearers were unable to prepare adequate quantities of *tasar*-layings at home. Thus, they

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were opting for the DFL supply from government-run grainages. Here also, there were serious supply constraints. Hardly 20 per cent of the demand was being met through the government grainages. Also, the DFLs were of questionable quality and resulted in regular outbreaks of disease in the silkworms and, consequently, crop failure. The situation was quite worrisome for the traditional rearers, who were gradually giving up the practice of silk rearing. In this backdrop, PRADAN promoted the concept of DFLs prepared locally by village-based entrepreneurs in small-scale grainages.

*Tasar* has two or three crop cycles in a year. The last cycle, from October to December, is considered a commercial cycle and the earlier cycles are seed cycles (seed crops); these, through successive cycles, build up the seed stock used in the commercial grainage cycle. Village-based grainages, promoted by PRADAN, produce DFLs for the commercial crops that are then sold to silkworm rearers in the neighbourhood. In the past several years, since we have been involved in grainage promotion and DFL supply, we saw repeated failure of seed crops, leading to near complete erosion

of seed stock for commercial grainages.

Every year, seed crops were lost due to some reason or the other. We were unable to identify the exact reason for the setbacks. Neither could Central Silk Board (CSB) provide any plausible answers. Left with small seed stocks, PRADAN, along with the grainage owners, worked hard to produce DFLs that performed better than average. And that was how there was a gradual increase in the demand for DFLs from the grainages. However, we could not increase the number of grainages in our project areas due to an acute shortage of seed cocoons. The existing grainages produced about 20,000 DFLs annually to cater to about 180 silkworm rearers. We stagnated at this number for nearly three years.

Satya told us that we should find ways to break the stalemate. We decided that we would procure seed cocoons from outside the project area, and at the same time continue with our efforts to stabilize the seed crop cycles within our project area. In that way, we could have the additional seed stock to promote more grainages and augment the DFL supply to cater to a greater number of silkworm rearers. I

took a few traditional rearers to the forest areas of Giridih in search of seed cocoons. I remember how tough it was to procure seed cocoons as an outsider. We had no clue as to where to stay in the night in the forest. Fortunately, we were able to locate a small campus set up by an NGO, deep inside the jungle. They were kind enough to offer us some food and a place to stay at night. Over the next two days, we spent from morning to dusk, visiting villages and rearing fields. We observed widespread crop losses across the jungle. Our hopes of getting seed cocoons in the Giridih jungles fast faded away.

On the third day morning, as we were preparing for our outing on the final day, Satya arrived. He had been to the forests of Purulia (in West Bengal) in search of seed cocoons and on his way back had come to Giridih to tell us that there were plenty of seed cocoons available in Purulia and that he had spoken with the Sericulture Department, which had agreed to help us with the procurement. We felt as if we had hit the jackpot! We hurriedly returned to Godda, arranged the money, and Satya and Anish and a few grainage owners left for Purulia the next day. I stayed

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My experience in working with *Tasar* had, so far, been quite frustrating. One day, in 1998, sitting in the Sunderpahadi office, I started reflecting and questioning myself, and wondering what I was up to. I asked myself what kind of a job I was doing.

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back at Sunderpahadi to help the grainage owners ready their grainages to receive the seed cocoons.

The team to Purulia took the help of the local Sericulture Office of the government to establish contact with the rearers and bought 2.40 lakh pieces of seed cocoons in three days! They spent two days tying bunches of seed cocoons to threads for making garlands. They, then, raised bamboo frameworks, hung the cocoon garlands on them and mounted them on trucks for transportation. All this was done to minimize cocoon damage during the long-distance drive back. Transporting live material (seed cocoons) across the state border required elaborate paperwork by the state department. After all the papers were in order, the team finally left Purulia on the sixth day and reached Sunderpahadi late in the night.

That same night, I took the trucks to distribute the cocoons to all the grainages. A total of 18 grainages were thus operating in the entire Godda project to produce 63,000 DFLs to serve 480 silkworm rearers. The commercial crop was very successful. A total of over 20 lakh pieces of cocoons were produced by the rearers,

who were then supported to market the cocoons.

Over the next three years, we followed the same procedure and procured seed cocoons from Purulia. However, soon we hit a limit. There was no increase in the cocoon availability in Purulia. Moreover, disease infection was on the rise every year and, by 1999, several grainages failed and we were back to square one!

We, then, decided that instead of procuring seed cocoons from outside, we would work towards improving the local production. We developed training modules for grainage entrepreneurs and detailed out the processes of establishing grainage enterprise in the village. We were quite sure of the robustness of our grainage model and saw major challenges in arranging seed cocoons for the grainages.

In 1998, we approached CSB and sought support for our grainages. However, CSB was not convinced about our grainage model and said that our private grainages may be breeding diseases rather than eliminating them.

My experience in working with *tasar* had, so far, been quite frustrating. One day, in 1998, sitting in the Sunderpahadi

office, I started reflecting and questioning myself, and wondering what I was up to. I asked myself what kind of a job I was doing. I knew that my parents did not really appreciate my job because they were keen to see me in a government job. I liked the idea of the work that I had committed to but was totally dissatisfied with the final outcome. I wondered how many years we would need to work to see the impact among the tribal rearers. What was the growth potential of our work? I also told myself that I should think differently or leave the activities.

I recalled Anish's words as he was leaving Godda in 1997, "Shamshad, leave DFL production and silkworm rearing to their traditional wisdom and focus on yarn processing." I had not replied but was not convinced either. After Anish left Godda, I remained holding fort alone in Sunderpahadi, with support from Satya.

#### **TURNING POINT IN *TASAR* SERICULTURE: UNDP PROJECT**

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their numbers had drastically reduced with many rearers dropping out of the activity altogether. There was rampant felling of host trees in the traditional forest areas. Neither DFL rearing, nor indigenously prepared layings, were yielding good results. The production of seed cocoons in Giridih also significantly declined, thus, curtailing seed cocoon supply in traditional rearing. None of the states (through the Department of Sericulture—DoS) took any serious steps to arrest the steady decline in the *tasar* sector.

In this backdrop of gloom, the Ministry of Textiles (and its subsidiary—CSB), the Government of India and UNDP jointly organized a meeting in 1999, to revitalize the *tasar* sericulture sector. PRADAN was invited to a meeting in Kolkata; our colleagues, Arijit Mukherjee and Ujjal Ganguly, presented our case, which was well received for the freshness of its ideas. It was decided that UNDP would finance a comprehensive pilot initiative, to be anchored by CSB, and it would collaborate with suitable partners, government departments or NGOs, to implement the project across major *tasar* producing states. CSB formed a committee to select

suitable field implementing agencies.

At first, CSB shared the project concept with DoS, Government of Bihar. DoS-Bihar decided to opt out of the project, claiming lack of staff and other resources to implement such a ‘time-bound and result-focussed’ project. The department, instead, reluctantly proposed PRADAN’s name for project implementation.

The committee then visited our project areas and had extensive interactions with the producers and PRADAN staff. Two days of hectic field visits ended in a meeting, in one of our field offices, with some of the grainage owners. CSB scientists wanted to assess the technical knowledge of the grainage owners. It was a chill December evening and there was no electricity. The interaction lasted for two hours in the light of a dim hurricane lamp; the grainage owners were able to respond to all the queries posed by the senior CSB scientists. They also supported their answers with data recorded meticulously in their grainage registers. The committee was thrilled by its findings and expressed the desire to introduce the model across all the states through the UNDP project. Subsequently, Satya and

I engaged with the committee to develop a comprehensive plan, covering all the major aspects of the value chain with specific focus on expansion of the grainage model.

Collaboration with CSB under the UNDP project was, in many ways, a turning point for the *tasar* project. For the first time, we forged an institutional collaboration with CSB and received the support of mainstream finance. We decided to plan the activities in such a manner as to minimize the chances of any failure. Satya asked me to anchor the project. By this time, some of our plantations (about 500 acres altogether) had matured and we decided that we would use these plantations as well as some forest patches in Sunderpahadi exclusively for seed-crop rearing.

Meanwhile, I attended a three-week in-house training designed by CSB for implementing the UNDP project. I had an opportunity to share my experiences with the scientists of CSB. It was a mutual learning and reflection process. The training gave me the confidence to work with CSB in addressing the major challenges of the sector. I was to apply all the insights I had

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gathered so far, to improve the performance of seed-crop rearing and the grainages.

Three key factors played a significant role in the success of the endeavour: (i) the quality of DFLs supplied by CSB (prepared with special care from select grainages), (ii) the rearing of early stage worms under the cover of nylon nets and (iii) the rigorous training of grainage owners and seed-crop rearers.

Seed-stock multiplication became a grand success in the three years of the project. The entire lot of seed cocoons was processed in the grainages. The availability of seed cocoons created grounds for rapid scaling up of grainages. From 21 private grainages, the number rose to 76, with an annual production of 2.75 lakh DFLs to cater to 1,100 rearers. We were most happy to see many (40 per cent of the total) rearers and grainage owners, earning in the range of Rs 15,000 and Rs 25,000—indeed, a huge earning in 2001! In the three years of the UNDP project, our field areas became a learning ground for state sericulture departments and CSB scientists. Every year, PRADAN received the award for the Best Field Implementation Agency. These successes paved the

way for our project's entry into West Singhbhum (the southernmost district of Jharkhand) in 2002, which had a vast potential for expansion. We entered there on an invitation from CSB.

#### **UP-SCALING THROUGH THE SPECIAL SGSY PROJECT**

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The UNDP project was a success for CSB; it brought renewed focus on *tasar*. PRADAN produced spectacular results consistently during the project period and established its credibility as a significant actor in the *tasar* sector. In the concluding review meeting of the UNDP project in 2002, Satya expressed our eagerness to upscale the initiative. Shri P. Joy Oommen, Member Secretary of CSB, took note of it and decided to visit our project areas to see the impact on the ground and explore future possibilities with the PRADAN team.

The Member Secretary visited the project areas in August 2002 and spent three days with us, going to project villages, interacting with producers and meeting PRADAN team members. He was fully convinced of our work and was excited to interact with a young group of PRADAN professionals,

who were dreaming of making it big. The next month, the Member Secretary sent a team of officials from the CSB's head office to work with Satya to formulate 'scaling-up' projects for Bihar and Jharkhand. They spent about a week to prepare the project proposal. Mr. Joy Oommen committed that CSB would bear a substantial part of the project cost and assured full technical support of CSB. The remaining part of the project had to come from some other sources.

Deep Joshi shared the project proposal with the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, and requested for financial assistance. MoRD agreed to meet 75 per cent of the cost, the remaining came from CSB. For the first time in the history of *tasar* sericulture, the sector received such large-scale financial support (to the tune of Rs 28 crores). Two separate projects, one each for Bihar and Jharkhand, were considered for funding under the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY) Special Projects.

We were to reach out to 8,000 households in Bihar and Jharkhand. The major objective here was to enable households earn sustainable livelihoods in

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*tasar* sericulture and to be able to permanently move out of the poverty bracket. By all standards, it was a big project. CSB set up its nodal office in Ranchi, to support the projects. Two Basic Seed Multiplication Centres were set up by CSB to cater exclusively to the projects. Also, its Regional Research Stations were revamped to play an important role in training and extension. In 2003, I left Godda to join our Deoghar office. The partnership with CSB had reached great heights by then. For us, the project offered great opportunities to upscale all the interventions tried out so far in our project, the major ones being the plantations, grainage and rearing.

Over the next three years, beginning 2003, we promoted 2,000 ha of plantations in private lands, owned by around 2,800 families. Using all our insights on farmer selection, nursery raising and plantation maintenance, we established plantations in large patches successfully; these helped in generating robust livelihoods for rearer households subsequently. PRADAN set up 260 private grainages (over a three and a half-fold increase from the UNDP project), to prepare 7.80 lakh DFLs annually and cater to 5,000 rearers,

producing 30 million cocoons annually.

Here, I would like to mention that everything did not always run smoothly in the SGSY Special Projects. As we embarked on a rapid expansion of grainages, our requirement for Foundation Seed DFLs also increased commensurately. The entire lot of DFLs was to come from CSB, which was the arrangement in the UNDP project. However, from the second year onwards, CSB's seed supply systems started to falter. Supply (in terms of quantity) commitments could not be met, the DFL supply did not follow the time schedule and, above all, the quality was poor. There were problems of germination everywhere and a large percentage of young worms perished quickly. Seed rearing in 2004 failed again! Only a third of the grainages could be operated. There was a serious shortage of DFLs in the commercial crops and many rearers did not get DFLs, leading to widespread livelihood losses.

At the apex level, in a project review meeting of CSB, we submitted all the data and evidence gathered from the field about the reasons for the crop failure; we also explained how the inability of CSB to

supply Foundation Seeds could potentially jeopardize any expansion plans in the *tasar* sector.

Subsequently, Deep wrote a letter to the Member Secretary, CSB, to express concerns about the widespread crop failure and livelihood losses of tribal households. CSB convened a meeting at its head office, inviting PRADAN to discuss the matter. Besides the Member Secretary, the Secretary, Ministry of Textiles, and the Head of *Tasar* Seed Supply Organization of CSB attended the meeting. Deep and Satya proposed that PRADAN could join hands with CSB to augment the Foundation Seed supply in the sector.

First, the CSB's grainages lacked person power to carry out critical operations. We proposed that the expanded pool of grainage owners in our project villages could assist CSB to perform all the operations in their grainages, to maintain the quality of DFLs. Against this, CSB would need to assure Foundation Seed supply to grainage owners. This arrangement was adopted in CSB grainages and helped in the improvement of Foundation Seed supply and, thereby, the attainment of growth as planned for the projects.

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Second, PRADAN proposed to undertake the Foundation Seed preparation and requested CSB to hand over one of its Foundation Seed units. The proposal was, in some ways, a bit radical because CSB never thought that any other agency could take up this role. CSB hesitated about handing over this role to PRADAN. However, in the subsequent meetings with CSB over the next two months, we remained firm on our point. Here, I would specially mention the names of Shri J.V. Krishna Rao and Dr. K. Satyanarayana, senior scientists, who were integrating SGSY Projects on behalf of CSB. Shri Rao and Dr. Satyanarayana actively supported our entry into Foundation Seed production. I see this as a turning point in our journey.

### **EXPERIMENTING WITH BASIC SEED PRODUCTION**

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We planned to initiate the Foundation Seed grainage in 2005. CSB offered us one of their Foundation Seed production units in Deoghar, Jharkhand. We refused to take it because the building was not customized to be used for seed preparation and was quite dilapidated. Instead, we decided to use one of the buildings set up for the rearers'

collectives in a village. At that time, we were not really familiar with the nitty-gritty of the Foundation Seed grainage, which required six to seven months of engagement. The cocoons preserved in the grainage were the harvest from the previous crops. The presence of diseases in the cocoons (of the previous crops) could lead to the high eruption of disease in Foundation Seed grainages and cause a complete failure.

I took charge of the entire initiative. We took utmost care in the rearing of the previous crop cycle and the selection of seed cocoons for the Foundation Seed grainage. Whereas we were successful in ensuring ambience and cleanliness in our grainage, yet, soon after the start of the grainage cycle, the disease levels in emerging moths were found to be very high. This led to a complete failure of Foundation Seed grainages for the next two years.

We were totally frustrated by the repeated failures. Our requirement for Foundation Seeds was increasing every year. Depending fully on CSB for seed supply was not reassuring. Also, placing grainage workers in CSB grainages (for helping in grainage

operations) across six states was very cumbersome.

I reflected hard on the series of events leading to the failure in the past two years. The previous seed crop cycle (leading to grainage) was the most crucial, for which I selected a completely new patch of plantation raised under the SGSY projects. Next, I went to one of CSB's seed supply stations, along with experienced grainage owners. We personally examined the moths, prepared 3,000 units of DFLs and conducted the rearing in the selected plantations. Needless to mention, I could not, at that time, attend to many other activities within our project. For the first time, we harvested 75 cocoons per DFL and, more importantly, these were absolutely free of infection!

Next month, in January 2007, we consigned the cocoon lot for preservation in three buildings closer to Deoghar (where our office was situated) for better monitoring and follow-up. We were excited at the prospect of cracking the problem this time and yet we were nervous about the possibility of something going wrong at the last moment. The subsequent six months of the cocoon preservation period were

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In 2012, PRADAN embarked on a discussion to revisit its approach and strategy that necessitated an organization-wide restructuring. Sectoral initiatives such as the *tasar* project would not go into PRADAN's new approach was one of the conclusions.

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literally nerve-racking for us. Our Foundation Seed grainage finally started in late July 2007. Incidents of infection were very negligible. It was such a relief! The grainage operation was a grand success! This was much beyond our expectations and it reinforced the point that Foundation Seeds could now be prepared in the villages by our grainage entrepreneurs; a new possibility to unleash growth in the sector.

In the next three consecutive years, we succeeded in Foundation Seed production, simultaneously expanding the activity in three more locations. In this journey, we kept the CSB in the loop by the joint monitoring of grainage functions. CSB was fully convinced about the progress and felt the need for supporting the work with better infrastructure. In 2010, funds were arranged from the SGSY Special Projects to set up a new building for the Foundation Seed grainage. In the next two years, we set up three such units additionally, taking support from CSB and NABARD. Our dependence on CSB for Foundation Seed supply came down to just about 10 per cent by 2012. Further, all our Foundation Seed grainages received ISO 9001:

2008 certificate, a pioneering feat in the *tasar* sector. The certification helped in developing the protocol of quality seed production right from silkworm rearing to the Foundation Seed production. It also improved the data recording system.

#### **STRENGTHENING THE *TASAR* THEME**

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Satya and I worked together for so many years with *tasar*. In 2007, Satya shifted to Ranchi to integrate PRADAN's operations in Jharkhand. His availability for the *tasar* project became less. The success of the Foundation Seed production raised our aspirations; we wanted to expand the *tasar* project to several states. Between 2010 and 2012, we had already made forays into Odisha. With my time increasingly getting drawn to building seed verticals, the remaining activities could not be fully attended to. By 2011-12, there were signs of deterioration observed on several fronts. It became too much for me to manage every aspect of the project.

In 2012, PRADAN embarked on a discussion to revisit its approach and strategy that necessitated an organization-wide restructuring.

Sectoral initiatives such as the *tasar* project would not go into PRADAN's new approach was one of the conclusions. PRADAN would like to set up separate organizations to pursue these initiatives. I was disheartened, and not sure of getting PRADAN's support in the long run. Anish and Satya kept encouraging me to think big and lead the initiative. I was not confident about whether I would be able to set up a new organization. Also, getting excluded from the main body of PRADAN was a painful prospect.

In any case, in 2012, we decided to strengthen the *tasar* theme team. Rajendra Khandai, who was already a part of the *tasar* programme, being part of the PRADAN Dumka team, had joined the *tasar* project. He took responsibility for strengthening the seed vertical. I continued to anchor the overall operations, especially looking after ongoing projects with CSB and NABARD.

In the same year, we partnered with CSB to prepare a multi-state *tasar* project for consideration under MoRD. Things started looking up for the *tasar* team when Ashish Chakraborty and Binod Raj Dahal, two of our experienced colleagues, joined us.

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There was no other organization in the state or in the private sector other than PRADAN (more specifically its *tasar* team), which had the commitment, expertise and ground presence to further the *tasar* sector development.

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**ESTABLISHMENT OF TASAR  
DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION:  
BEGINNING OF A NEW CHAPTER**

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Tasar Development Foundation (TDF) was incorporated on the 5 November 2013, at the National Capital Territory of Delhi, under Section-25 of the Companies Act. Four of us, Ashis, Rajendra, Binod and myself joined TDF. PRADAN intended to have influence over

the governance and management of TDF. Satya became the Chairperson of the Board of TDF. Two other members; Anish and Khitish, our long-standing associates, also joined the TDF Board. PRADAN had deputed four of us (Ashis, Rajendra, Binod and myself) to TDF to set up the core management team. The Board asked me to take on the role of Managing Director.

There was no other organization in the state or in the private sector other than PRADAN (more specifically its *tasar* team), which had the commitment, expertise and ground presence to further the *tasar* sector development. TDF, in its vision document, mentioned that it would unleash a three to five-fold increase in livelihood coverage under *tasar* sericulture in the next 10 years. It would do so by way of



*Women farmers from West Bengal undergo training on moth examination under the microscope for DFL*

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The MKSP projects are taking us to a new high. We have set up Foundation Seed grainages in each of the states, raised over 2,000 ha of *tasar* host-tree plantations and supported over 8,750 women and men to undertake seed production and silkworm rearing. In the past three years

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building and retaining competent human resources within the sector to instill new ideas, raise standards of performance and manage frontiers of growth. One critical frontier for TDF would be to manage the seed vertical to promote growth in the sector and establish the concept of quality and service in the sector. The rationale for setting up a sectoral organization also existed in creating mechanisms for effective integration of pre- and post-cocoon segments that operated in different geographies and building an on-going concern for maximizing the gains of the producers in the value chain.

Meanwhile, our project proposal for a multi-state expansion initiative languished with MoRD, which had initially shown great interest in this project. Finally, Anish revived it and put it on a fast track at MoRD. Subsequently, I was invited to a workshop conducted by MoRD at National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), Hyderabad, to identify/explore the possibilities of livelihoods generation under Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs). I made a presentation on our *tasar* project. Most of the participants, including the experts, considered *tasar* a fit activity for expansion.

MoRD finally decided to consider our project proposal under the Mahila Kisan Swashaktikaran Pariyojna (MKSP) to support *tasar* expansion in West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Five separate MKSP projects were sanctioned by MoRD in 2013. CSB chipped in as a co-financer and technical support agency. TDF became the Field Implementing Agency. The projects were to create sustainable livelihoods for an additional 12,000 poor households in three years.

The MKSP projects were very different from the earlier two state-sponsored projects because we were required to promote *tasar* among rural women. In *tasar*, so far, the participation of women in silkworm rearing was minimal because the activity was carried out in distant forests, often inaccessible to women. TDF took on the challenge and systematically involved women in all the major activities such as plantation, grainage and silkworm rearing. The period between 2013 and 2016 was full of action for TDF. Offices were set up in four locations, staff was to be recruited, trained and deployed for field operations. In many locations, TDF had to move

alone beyond PRADAN's project areas, to reach out to silkworm rearers. In addition to these, the tasks around seed verticals gained primacy.

The MKSP projects are taking us to a new high. We have set up Foundation Seed grainages in each of the states, raised over 2,000 ha of *tasar* host-tree plantations and supported over 8,750 women and men to undertake seed production and silkworm rearing. In the past three years, TDF has supported seven Foundation Seed units, to consistently produce 2.75 lakh Foundation Seed DFLs per annum. As many as 300-private grainages were made operational to prepare over 15 lakh DFLs every year in the commercial crop cycles, to cater to over 8,500 silkworm rearers, who produced around 6.50 crore pieces of *tasar* cocoons annually. There are signs of revival of *tasar* sericulture in our project areas. This has been made possible through the efforts of a competent team of 24 staff members of TDF.

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Shamshad Alam is based in Ranchi, Jharkhand