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Are We Missing the Woods for the Trees?

SANJEEV PHANSALKAR

Do we really know what is happening with the folk with whom our partner CBOs and we work? Do we understand how the economy and society are behaving right now? Do we insist on solutions derived more from our ideology and orthodoxy rather than the aspirations of the people and even the current market conditions?

This note is for development professionals in implementing, intermediary and donor organisations. It aims at, hopefully, raising compelling questions as to whether we are collectively failing to read the signs in the wind as it were and continuing to work on problems of the past—which at any rate are going to be transient—while missing on opportunities to make ourselves far more relevant.

The ground situation in the country is changing at a far more rapid pace than we appreciate or even notice. As a specific case, till 2006–07, a lot of people, me included, were painting a black future scenario about the return of the era of food insecurity. Trends indicated that food production was stagnant whereas the demand was rising, forcing the country to start relying on massive grain import just to meet the demand for food. I had, in fact, started working to figure out what would be the quantum required each year, how much would be its value and what impact it would have on the economy! And then this year, the Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, announced a surplus of food by well over 20 million tonnes. It may well have been a flash in the pan, or perhaps my fellow colleagues and I just did not understand the way the economy and the people were responding, thus making the prognosis of doom both irrelevant and misleading.

Major changes are occurring in the rural situation. The senilisation of agriculture as many young people withdraw and many more young people desire to withdraw from agriculture; the feminisation of agriculture as the withdrawal first occurs when male family members migrate out of the area and the massive and unplanned urban growth, exporting the problem of disguised unemployment from rural to urban areas and so on are yet to find an echo in the action of development actors. I had also earlier hinted at the possible desirable shift in goals from growth with equity to 'growth with modern aspirations'. Similar changes are possibly occurring in other spheres of national life and may be going unnoticed.

My submission is that the people of 'our' (that is, those who are on the wiser side of 50!) generation, trained in economic disciplines during the era when the Soviet Republic was a real power and socialism had an unquestioned sway, have become so grossly irrelevant as to be useless if not actually counterproductive. We were taught the economics of central planning and a public policy that was coloured by the trauma of the Bengal famine. Free trade was considered the ultimate anathema and the market was the enemy of all human development. Despite its corruption and absence of accountability, government interventions were considered optimal.

The reality has changed. The economy touched double digit growth and is still among the fastest growing economies despite a world that is reeling under the aftershocks of the American meltdown. New forms of economic activities and new forms of economic enterprises have come on to centre stage, creating immense and real opportunities for the people, rural or urban. Yet we, the development-wallahs, linger on, savouring the remains of this ethos, hanging on to the clichés of the bygone era, which hopefully shall never return. At times, it appears as though we behave like the proverbial fool who is searching for his coin under a street lamp because he can see the floor there and not because he dropped it there! I am not sure if all the people of 'our' generation will accept the possibility that we have become irrelevant as readily as I am willing to. But that does not deter me from stating it as a real possibility. The ironical possibility is that people of my generation, many in leading positions, may have no specific knowledge about the present issues of social development but have just the so called 'generalised wisdom' to justify our upkeep!

Despite our and the state's efforts, not much is happening in the fields of nutrition, literacy and women's empowerment and yet perhaps these problems will become irrelevant faster than they will be solved by our efforts! Then why do we hate the markets so much and why do we hark back to the bad old days of centralised planning and controlled economy?

The rest of the note addresses a few important issues. The first is of hidden, unstated and never-to-be-acknowledged upfront values. The second is about isolating the core issues hitherto just hinted at. The third is about looking at possible ways of becoming genuinely 'forward looking'. The final is about arriving at the right blend between 'succors to the needy' and 'forward looking'.

THE HIDDEN VALUES

There is no question in my mind that most of us development-wallahs not only croak under the 'brown man's (or woman's!) burden' but claim martyrdom for it. Have I not given up a lucrative career in selling pink soap and vanishing cream because my heart melted and bled for the rural poor? Oh what a white soul I am!! And now that I have done that, do I not automatically earn the right to advise the poor rural brother not to drink and to undergo vasectomy after his first child? Of course I do. I am the repository of all wisdom and I have to carry the burden of 'developing' these lost souls who do everything that is wrong and must be changed—from what they eat to how their daughters clean their hair. They must eat 'rich and variegated diets,

comprising diverse cereals, legumes and vegetables that grow naturally on their farms and common lands' whereas I enjoy a basmati pulao. And, of course, their daughters must clean their hair boiling the leaves and fruit of the thorny bush that grows on the side of the river and which they can get only by walking through thigh-deep slush (statements copied verbatim from the obiter of an NGO leader in Assam)! For, if they ate the branded and packed food that I do and use the Clinic pouch which my daughter uses, they are not only ignoring their real needs (ask me what these are!) but also becoming the victims of an exploitative market dominated by the multinationals, who are out to loot the country, like the East India Company. And now, shall we order our burger from the McD?

BUT A MORE SERIOUS QUESTION IS THE FOLLOWING

Are we being the new fascists? Let us look at my field—that is one of livelihoods. Having personally escaped forced livelihoods in agriculture (or mining and quarrying or fishing or anything that is real hard work) and its drudgery, and having been fortunate enough to enable our children to escape it and to enable them to take advantage of the new opportunity set, are we becoming instruments of perpetuating the old order by saying that Munnibai's son must do good farming or train to become a mason or at best a handy boy with the courier firm? Do we at all see the possibility of the poor reaching out to reap the benefit of the same opportunity, set at least in those regions where logistics so permit? Are we willing to shape our efforts to this end? Or are we requiring them to remain frozen in time by insisting that they must live in 'self contained' and 'harmonious' villages, lopping the same forest trees for fuel without

ruining the forest, chasing the same herds of sheep and goat graze without 'damaging the vegetative cover', tilling the land in such a manner that 'top soil' does not get washed away, 'sustainably using natural resources' producing 'more crop per drop', learning such vocations as to make their 'local economy' more self reliant and so on? Are we trying to perpetuate the existing order that is so eminently unfair and lopsided simply because we believe that doing that is 'right' besides, of course, being in our favour?

And are we doing the same in other fields such as education and health? Why do we feel that Vaidyanathan's son can cram for exams, get into the IIT, cram some more and then go to US for that dream IT career but the village boy must be given '*nayi taleem*' so that he becomes a more fulfilled individual well adjusted with his community and able to contribute to holistic human development in a secular and harmonious society? Why do we feel that at the first instance of a cough, I can get Mox 500 and fix the malady but the village woman must depend on the community health worker who will probably tell her to boil *tulsi* and drink the liquor?

In other words, are we, in our assiduous examination of the options, deliberately choosing those for our agenda, which would keep the poor in the same positions as their forefathers; justifying that these things are really good for them? Are we justifying a status quo and by ascribing it the virtue of righteousness, allowing our stand to smack of fascist behavior?

The third and somewhat unrelated set of values is about the fetish with the debunked socialist beliefs held so dearly by a slightly

retarded undergraduate. (Remember the adage, 'You are not sensitive if you are not a Marxist when you are 16, nor sensible if you still are at 30'?)

The facts are that the public sector and the governments have lost all their credibility as drivers of the economy. Private entrepreneurship of the crafty Indian (quite our opposite, we are the class of the Argumentative Indians!) and the unshackling of economy are clearly yielding results that show that the pie is growing at a fast rate. Yet, we find sympathy with every possible 'cause' that will retard such growth. For instance, we oppose the entry of Reliance into retail because it will make millions of vendors lose their jobs and several millions lose their control on their production activities. But we oppose this without ascertaining whether this is really going to be so!! Some of us hate the 'cut-throat' SHG movement because with its highly effective interest rates it is becoming as exploitative as the money lender, forgetting that the latter is so ingrained in the rural ethos that no one except the development-wallahs and the film fellows see him as a villain.

I can, of course, understand the anger of the NGO leaders with the market, considering that many of them are so incompetent to deal with it, but why do we as intellectuals, hate it so much? Critics of the trickle-down notwithstanding, it is undoubtedly true that personal disposable incomes in Gujarat are far higher than in, say, Uttar Pradesh. True, Gujarat rural households have become so commercialised that they do not retain for themselves good produce that they ought to be consuming whereas their Uttar Pradesh or Assam counterparts consume the same produce simply because they have no way of

marketing it. Yet, Gujarat becomes a magnet for drawing huge and unending masses of migrant labour from within the country. So, between our idealistic expectations of how rural individuals ought to behave and how they actually behave there is a gap. There is an even worse gap between the credit we attribute to the salutary impact of market developments on the lives of people and what people themselves think about the same.

Robert, an NGO leader in Chirang, told me three years back that the Bodo people wanted to have huge industrial investments in the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) region because they would have the advantage of new employment opportunities. When I told him that in a region that is 'back of beyond', industrial investment would essentially make them coolies in factories and their wives housemaids in the homes of industrial employees, he was unconvinced. He said that surely some of them would find these kinds of jobs, but a lot of them would also be employed in more decent walks made possible by the services sector that must follow the investment.

Rural folk seem to want change, investment and industries whereas we want them to remain blissful in their remote hinterlands, embracing simplicity, dust and cow dung. Do we reckon that the trickle-down will surely work though not as fast as we would like? Have we not seen the near end of the more oppressive aspects of untouchables in urban areas? Have we not seen women becoming reasonably free of the shackles of tradition in even provincial towns 'even of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar' so as to use two wheelers, give up the '*la'*' tradition of hiding their faces when men visited them and remaining mute

DECLINING SEX RATIO IN NORTH INDIAN STATES

The 2001 Census had revealed shockingly low levels of sex ratio for North Indian states, reaching a low of 783 for Punjab. Other states suffering from these problems were Haryana, New Delhi, Rajasthan and Gujarat, with possibly Western Uttar Pradesh and Northern Madhya Pradesh sharing the same trend. Cumulatively, this region has a population of, say, about 19 crores (exact numbers will be available in the Census—I am only illustrating). For the purpose of argument here, if I assume the average sex ratio for this region to be, say 870, this means that the population of women is about 46.52 per cent. It also means that 130 males would go without wives eventually, assuming we exclude marriage with outside women for the moment. That takes the number of males without legitimate wives to a massive 13 million. And since successful, well connected and well-off males are more likely to get wives, most of these would be at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. Before I draw the implications of this, let me try to see if the trend of declining sex ratios is reversing or strengthening. The next Census figures will be available only in 2012/13. But I do not have to twiddle my thumbs. Children born in 2001 to 2003 should have been in schools by now. So if I assume a reasonably complete spread of school systems at least in cities, all I need to do is dig up school enrollment data of say New Delhi, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Alwar, Meerut, Ahmedabad, Gwalior and so on. Should this reveal that the enrolled number of girls per thousand boys is lower than 870, I can reasonably infer that the trend is worsening. Suppose it is. Now it is time for me to worry about implications. Just three facets would do:

- ♦ There appears to be a secular rise in sexual assaults on women in New Delhi and North India in general over the last decade or so. Maybe I can validate that statement with press reports based on police records that appear once in a while.

- ♦ I can, with the help of NACO or agencies such as Durbar, try to figure out if there has been a marked increase in the volume of sex trade in these regions.
- ♦ I may follow through repeated if sporadic reports of Kerala women being imported for being 'wives' of Punjabi men who cannot find partners in their communities.

The implications of the first two need not be spelt out. The implication of the third could, on an alarming front mean an increase in seduction-and-trafficking and on a social front mean problems of adjustment of Malayali girls in a virtually alien culture of North India.

The question is this: Does this emerging problem of the future trouble me at all? Do I see millions of burly Jats, Gujjars and Punjabi youth, mostly school dropouts, hard-up and without a hope of legitimate normal sexual relationships, as being a menace to the society and to ordinary decent womanhood? Do I see the emerging massive scale of 'national movement of wives' from Kerala and tribal regions (all of which have very favourable sex ratios) to the North Indian regions as an emerging social problem, whether of trafficking or of social adjustment? Do I feel perturbed about the huge potential rise in commercial sex leading then on to things like HIV/AIDS? Do I look at this as a problem at all?

If I do, what can I do about it? How should I go about tackling it as an item for my programming? Whose problem is it anyway and who should tackle it?

Hope I make my point about how to go about thinking of emerging problems.

spectators in social events? We had not much to do with these things; it is just the passage of time and the spread of capitalist modernity. Despite our and the state's efforts, not much is happening in the fields of nutrition, literacy and women's empowerment and yet perhaps these problems will become irrelevant faster than they will be solved by our efforts! Then why do we hate the markets so much and why do we hark back to the bad old days of centralised planning and controlled economy? An interesting special case is the silly and uninformed (I know because I have taught and researched cooperatives!) fetish with cooperatives shared by virtually all the NGOs. Over a hundred years of history with cooperation has demonstrated conclusively that it works just as reliably as the throw of a pair of a hundred-faced dice. Yet, we insist on all collective activities to be done only through cooperatives—a classic case of insisting on keeping your head under inches of sand like the good old bird. And the amazing thing is hard-headed fellows like me insist on cooperatives despite their record of failure—perhaps because they still carry a degree of legitimacy. Many of us reject out of hand their somewhat tolerable versions of a producer company or a large partnership. Why? Is it because we can not get out of the romantic trance of socialism?

THE CORE ISSUE

The core issue is this. Do we really know what is happening with the folk with whom our partner CBOs and we work? Do we understand how the economy and society are behaving right now? Do we formulate problems in consonance with our dearly held worldview, derived largely from the left of the

centre media, rather than in consonance with reality and the perceptions of people? Do we insist on solutions derived more from our ideology and orthodoxy rather than the aspirations of the people and even the current market conditions? Are we working with problems of the past or the emerging problems of the future? Are we thrusting old and debunked solutions on the people rather than exploring new and possibly unconventional opportunities? Do we, directly or by implications, justify methods and approaches that restrict the choices available to the client communities rather than opening up their vistas while sharing with them responsibly our incomplete familiarity with the new world? Do we, almost compulsively, focus on the trees of comfortable and familiar formulations of problems while missing the complex reality of the woods that is changing and is beyond our comprehension?

BECOMING FORWARD LOOKING

Among the most common defense offered to these arguments by development-wallahs is this: The client communities miss out on the most basic services (subsistence needs, basic education, basic health services, etc.) and it is our task to support models that, once mainstreamed, would enable the poor to receive their rightful dues from the state agencies. Hence, we must focus on such basic services as primary education, preventive and curative health, pertaining to commonly occurring health syndromes; dignified livelihoods that help meet their survival costs and so on. This itself is proving to be a mammoth task. We can not fritter away resources and energy on fancy 'higher order' issues involving technology, market and complex institutions.

Surely, this is a certain recipe for a *stud quo* formulation of development action. Why? The reasons are these: a) Resources are small and we can but reach a miniscule of the total client communities. b) The ailments of the state systems range from inadequate resources to malafide delivery by corrupt officials. These are well known but generally regarded as intractable in the medium term. c) Even if we help the poor solve their current problems, they will remain far behind in the race and will continue to lag behind others so we will never be able to bring them up to a level at which they can compete with others in real world.

To me a forward looking approach would have the following components:

- a. I reaffirm my faith in the ingenuity of the client communities to survive and thrive despite their infirmities and constraints. There are numerous examples of very hard up and illiterate women working to ensure that their daughters are educated and transcend the low orbits in which they themselves are stuck. (George Bernard Shaw's play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* depicts how an early-twentieth century sex worker educates her daughter to become a Cambridge scholar.) Less dramatic but no less moving was my real experience in 1982. I ate in the famous Annapurna restaurant in Coimbatore at after gruelling work one evening. The topper of the first batch of IRMA, Shivkumar, then took us home. Imagine my surprise when the waiter who had served me dosa in the restaurant turned out to be his father! (Shivkumar is a Dean in the management school of a US university today.)

- b. I remain actively interested and engaged with news, views and analyses of problems pertaining to my area of action and constantly think about it. My concern would be: How does this seem to be shaping? What implications does that have? Is that a cause of action? What needs to be done? How? Sounds too general? See Box 1 for an illustration of this sort of continuous speculative intellectual engagement, which needs to precede any intervention.

Similar alarming problems perhaps exist on other fronts as well. To use a clichéd example: Is it not time we stopped behaving like the legendary fishermen of Orissa who busied themselves in mending their nets and boat, unmindful of the cyclone that loomed in the sea?

Let us return to the question of what forward looking work entails.

- c. I work in my field addressing the existential problems of the client communities but exploring solutions that are more rooted in current ethos and not in my ideology and currently established dogmas.
- d. While I work on the existential problems of the client communities, I engage with their aspirational side as well. For example, I do not scoff at Arjun Munda's passion to make pilots out of Jharkhand tribal youth. I encourage projects that exhort the clients to take to more current paths that may be rooted in modern technology and emerging markets.

THE RIGHT BLEND OF 'SUCCOR TO THE NEEDY' AND 'FORWARD LOOKING'

This is a matter of controversy. I postpone presenting my views on this for a while. We will need to clear the cobwebs first. We need to feel persuaded that we, in fact, do not understand the complex and changing reality about our nation. We need to understand that we really live in several centuries at the same time: the almost medieval world of the primitive tribals to the almost today's world of the Bangalore peri-urban poor. Hence, we need to agree that we cannot paint the whole reality with a single brush and that we

need a nuanced approach to our job. We need to confront the reality that by working on existential problems in a conventional manner alone can, at best, help people reach where their urban counterparts were last week. The correctness of the 'correct blend' of the two is as much a function of our conviction as of the reality on the ground. My suggestion is that while we work with the existential aspects of the client communities, we need to also start engaging with their aspirational side as well though the allocation of resources may be much larger for the existential aspects. But first, we need to deliberate more.

Sylvan Harvest

ANU SINGH

Pradan's intervention through lac cultivation provides a viable source of livelihood for thousands of rural poor families in Jharkhand

Life was not always easy for Sushila and her husband, Walter Tuti. Sushila and Walter live in Gutwa, a quiet village in Khunti district, Jharkhand. Devoid of any basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, roads, sanitation, school or hospital, their life is a constant struggle. Their house is located a little away from the village hamlet, amidst clusters of *palash* and *ber* trees. Walter Tuti fondly talks about his trees and the jungle—his home and source of livelihood for generations now.

Walter and Sushila have been rearing lac insects on their *palash*, *ber* and *kusum* trees for years with meagre returns. But this time around, they have a different tale to tell. In 2007, Walter and Sushila earned Rs 35,000 from lac cultivation. For the Tuti family, thanks to the income generated from lac, the dream of better days has come true. They have renovated their house and bought a pair of bullocks. Walter has also managed to pay off his mortgage and get his land back from the moneylender.

After a hard day's work, with the household chores done and livestock taken care of, Phoolmani Devi, another resident of Gutwa, sits with her neighbour in the evening to pack brood lac in net bags. Showing no sign of tiredness, she says with a bright smile, "Being financially independent seemed like a distant dream two years ago. We may have reared lac for generations, but I was not willing to invest time and energy into it after my husband passed away." Being a single mother, struggling to make ends meet for her and her children, Phoolmani Devi now earns around Rs 20,000 a year from lac cultivation and is a role model for many women in and around her village, who are also engaged in the activity.

Such happy tales are testimony to the fact that lac rearing enables poor families to earn their livelihoods from the forests that have been their home for generations and to convert their dream of a better life into reality.

THE SCENARIO

Poor families living in forests and forest fringe villages have historically suffered from challenges such as unfertile or barren land, low asset base, lack of irrigation facilities, small landholding, poor linkages with the market and low risk-bearing capacity, resulting in widespread migration among such families.

Lac cultivation, with the resources readily available within the periphery of their habitat, does provide some solutions to their predicament. Additionally, this is a vocation that has been practised traditionally by the tribals inhabiting the sub-hilly tracts, especially in Jharkhand. Therefore, the basic knowledge and skills necessary for lac cultivation exist. Also, lac is cultivated in such cycles that it provides cover to the families during the labour surplus months from November to May.

On an average, India produces annually about 21,000 metric tonnes of shellac, or lac as it is commonly known, and contributes around 55 per cent of the total world demand. The other key lac producing countries are Thailand and China. India exports around 80 per cent of its production to around 75 countries across the globe. Germany, US, Italy, Egypt and Indonesia are the key export destinations for Indian lac producers. India exports different grades of handmade and machine-made shellac.

Lac is eco-friendly, safe, non-toxic, versatile and biodegradable. It is used in surface coating, adhesives, food, leather, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. Fruits such as oranges, lemons and apples are coated with shellac, extending their shelf life and giving them a shine that other natural products do not give. Chewing gum and chocolates are treated with shellac for gloss and for protection against moisture. The pharmaceutical industry uses shellac as a coating for tablets. Printing inks also have shellac. Other uses of shellac are in the electrical and electronics industry, for coating spark plugs, as a bonding material for mica and fiberglass and as an adhesive for chips and solar cells. Manufacturers of specialty paints use this natural resin as a binder for interior wood finishing and wall sealers.

ABOUT KHUNTI

Khunti is located in the southern side of Ranchi, Jharkhand. The ST and SC population in the rural areas of Khunti district are about 72 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively. The Munda tribe constitutes the majority among the tribal population.



Most families in the areas have marginal or small landholdings, which have low agricultural productivity. The average landholding of the community in the area is about 1 hectare. Of it, about 0.4 ha is unproductive degraded upland, and another 0.4 ha medium uplands, totally dependent on the erratic rainfall of the region. Only about 0.2 ha is better quality land (homestead and lowland). The average food sufficiency from their own land is about 7 to 8 months.

The major livelihoods of the people are traditional agriculture, menial wage and migration. Migration to adjoining states, metros and some forest-based activities, livestock, etc., are the major sources of income to support the household gap in food sufficiency. The situation is further complicated with declining returns from traditional forest-based livelihood. Economic poverty, coupled with poor quality of basic services in health, sanitation, safe drinking water, etc., are the main constraints to development.

A study carried out in several lac growing villages of Jharkhand by the Indian Institute of Natural Resins and Gums (IINRG), formerly Indian Lac Research Institute, revealed that the income generated from lac cultivation was next only to paddy. In 2003, the income from lac cultivation in Jharkhand was about 28 per cent of the total agricultural income.

According to a market estimate, the world demands around 40,000 metric tonnes of lac annually. With India, China and Thailand's production totalling up to only about 32,000 metric tonnes, there is still a huge gap between demand and supply, clearly indicating the potential lac has. IINRG estimates that the industry requires at least 20 per cent more raw lac than the existing annual national production. Meeting the gap between demand and supply can result in generating livelihood options for as many as one lakh lac rearing farmers.

Despite its huge demand in India and the international market, lac production in India, especially in Jharkhand, has been on a constant decline. The major reasons attributed are the following:

- ♦ The techniques that were being used by the cultivators were based on traditional methods. The transfer of technology to the poor cultivators from the laboratories of research organisation such as IINRG had not happened and they were often nonplussed with issues such as unpredictable weather, damages by pests, etc., resulting in the high mortality of lac insects. Farmers were unwilling to risk their meagre resources in lac cultivation because of the uncertain nature of the returns. Many traditional lac cultivators moved away from the activity.

- ♦ The price that raw lac fetches keep fluctuating. Often when the production of domestic raw lac plummets, to cater to the demand for processed lac from various countries, India imports raw lac from Thailand. Now this import from Thailand is in excess to the actual demand that has been created due to less production. This supply shock, in turn, results in lower prices to the lac rearer despite production being lesser.
- ♦ Brood deficiency is another key problem. The seed (brood lac) for lac production cannot be stored and has a very short life. Therefore, whenever there is a dip in lac production due to adverse climatic conditions in an area, resilience in production is constrained by lack of brood lac supply. No brood means no crop in the next cycle. To make matters worse, there is not much institutional support that provides working capital or equipment to lac rearers, who want to take up this activity on a large scale.
- ♦ Lac cultivators mostly are at the mercy of the middlemen, or paikars. Although the sector has very distinct systems and there are people who are engaged in different activities such as buyers, processors and agents, it is very unfriendly to the poor lac cultivator for the following reasons:

The agents or the middlemen, who buy the lac from the lac cultivator, hoodwink the farmer when weighing the produce.

The middlemen keep a huge margin between the price they offer to the

farmer and the price they sell to the processor. This does not allow the farmer to get attractive returns for his effort.

The middlemen adulterate the raw lac (with sand that gets embedded in it), thereby lessening the resin content of the produce.

These factors had resulted in the traditional lac cultivators moving away from the activity to other vocations.

PRADAN'S INTERVENTIONS

The Pradan team in Khunti operates in six blocks of two districts, namely, Ranchi (Namkum block) and Khunti (Khunti, Erki, Torpa, Karra and Murhu blocks). The team engages in various livelihoods activities such as agriculture, lac cultivation, poultry, land and water infrastructure development, and horticulture, with more than 9,200 families across 193 villages.

The team identified several gaps in the practice of lac rearing in the project areas. They found that families were reluctant to pursue this potential livelihood activity, which was economically, environmentally and socially viable. Pradan's intervention in lac began with 25 families initially and now covers more than 2,600 families. (See Table 1)

Pradan started work on the various stages of lac rearing to reduce uncertainty, increase productivity and help the poor families of Khunti use their natural resources and skills to the optimum level. As in all Pradan interventions, the starting point of this intervention was the establishment of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). There are around 530 SHGs in Khunti with more than 8,860 women members. The SHGs members

Table 1

Total no. of families engaged in lac cultivation over the years

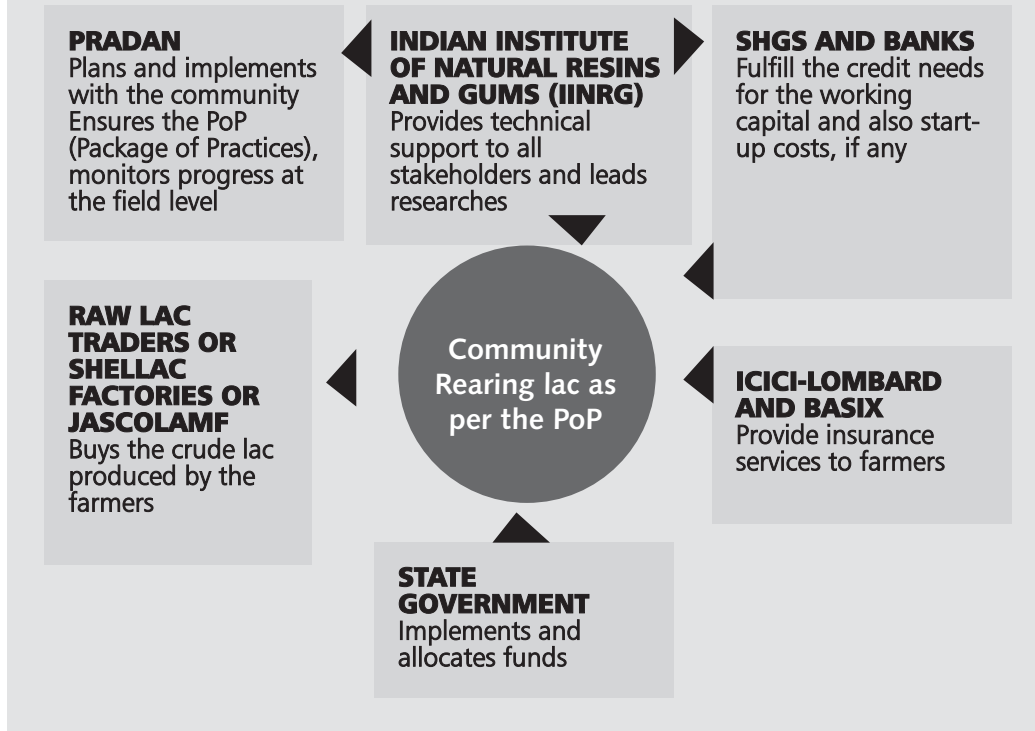
Year	No. of Families engaged
2001–2002	25
2002–2003	303
2003–2004	743
2004–2005	864
2005–2006	1212
2006–2007	1914
2007–2008	2659

also started to look for opportunities to enhance their livelihoods. Lac cultivation was an ideal activity for Khunti and its adjacent areas, where this was a traditional source of livelihood.

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGY INCLUDED:

- ♦ Collaborating with IINRG and practising the experiments conducted in laboratories in the field; succinctly put, bringing the knowledge from 'lab to land'.
- ♦ Promoting scientific rearing practices to reduce the mortality of lac insects
- ♦ Building linkages for material and financial inputs (credit and insurance)
- ♦ Training the farmers in scientific rearing practices
- ♦ Using diverse the host plants
- ♦ Making lac a round-the-year activity by experimenting with different strains on different host plants (For example, kusumi on ber)

Figure 1
COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE STAKEHOLDERS



- ♦ Preparing a cadre of trained youths as Local Resource Persons (LRPs) for lac cultivation activities
- ♦ Assuring a supply of quality brood lac from brood surplus areas to brood deficit areas
- ♦ Organising the lac cultivators into producers institutions / organisations, which will bypass middlemen and help farmers find good prices for their product. Such an organisation, with its trained cadre, will also provide sorting and grading services, thus leading to much more accurate and reasonable returns, based on the resin content of the product, for their labour, and ensuring good quality for the procurers.

When Pradan began working at promoting the scientific package of practices and the benefits among the traditional lac rearers, there were not many takers for the idea. Interacting closely with the rearing families, Pradan identified each and every step of concern, including the lack of quality brood lac and the fluctuating income generated, and looked for solutions.

Convincing lac rearers to adopt new ways of lac cultivation was a mammoth task. There were deep-rooted misconceptions regarding lightning, fog and pollution affecting the yield that were difficult to overcome. Pradan initiated other ways of generating awareness among the people through one-to-one communication, village level group meetings and by organising street plays, to help

UPSCALING THE LAC CULTIVATION BUSINESS

More often than not, farmers are limited or constrained by the number of host trees when thinking about upscaling their lac cultivation. Ber, palas and kusum are the three major host trees. But these traditional host trees are spread across the jungles, sometimes even away from the villages. Because of their size and distance from the villages, rearers feel skeptical about inoculating these trees. Sundar Pahan of Chitramu village has inherited more than 50 host trees of lac, but has not been able to inoculate more than 8 to 10 trees in a crop cycle. "How will I look after them all at a time?" he asks candidly. This was one reason that Sundar was convinced about investing in a semialata plantation.

Flemengia Semialata, a host plant, can be grown in the farmstead, and can be inoculated after one year of planting. The average height of the shrub is about 7 ft. A semialata plantation is easy to maintain and also permits intercropping. Pradan helped 20 progressive farmers such as Sundar Pahan in planting semialata in 2006–2007. Now, many more are willing to join the

wagon. Sundar says, "It has only been a year since I planted semialata on my land. Apart from keeping brood for my own host trees, I managed to earn Rs 10,000 from 7 kg of brood inoculated during the last cycle. And all this only from planting semialata on just one-tenth of an acre of land! I am convinced this plantation will turn out to be the turning point in the way we have reared lac."

Asrita Horo, another lac rearer from Deogaon village, echoes similar sentiments. She has planted semialata on a small patch of her homestead, and is now helping other farmers of her village do the same. These lac rearers have realised that semialata will help stabilise lac production and make lac rearing a rewarding livelihoods option. The successful harvesting of lac on semialata has been a significant breakthrough in the lac programme because it reduces rearing risk considerably, increases yield, shortens the gestation period, enhances productivity of the bare uplands and enhances the income of the lac rearer with a small landholding.

villagers understand the benefits of the scientific rearing of lac.

One such street play was attended by Sushila Tuti. Sushila says, "We were just not ready to accept the fact that anything beyond what we had already done for generations could be of any help. How could spraying pesticides decrease lac mortality? For generations, we had been told stories such as one should remain on an empty stomach till the inoculation; lightning blinded the lac insects and so on! Then we saw this play in our

hamlet, which opened our eyes to so many things. Now, I don't believe in superstitions. I follow the rearing methods taught to us by Pradan professionals and am extremely happy with the results. And when there is a doubt in my mind, at least I know where I can find answers."

Cecilia Tuti, a lac rearer from Gutwa village, says, "Although we have always reared lac, we could hardly save any money. We could barely feed our family for six months by cultivating paddy. Today, the income from lac

ECONOMICS OF KUSUMI LAC ON SEMIALATA

INPUTS (for 15 decimal land)

Items	Unit	Quantity	Rate	Total (Rs)
Brood lac 18 kg (30 g x 600 shrubs)	Brood	18	140	2520
Pesticides 4 sprays for 600 shrubs @ Rs 0.12/shrub	Sprays	4	72	288
Nylon net bags @ Rs.1.5/bag runs for minimum 3 cycles (Rs.0.50/bag of 50gm)	Net bags	600	0.5	300
Total inputs on vegetable cultivation in between the semialata rows (5 decimals of effective area of cropping, minimum 1 cycle)	Decimals	5	100	500
				3,608

OUTPUTS

Items	Unit	Quantity	Rate	Total
Phunki lac	Lac	6	120	720
Sold as brood lac in July	Brood lac	40	140	5,600
Sold as scrapped lac harvest (4 times of brood inoculated)	Lac	72	120	8,640
Total output from vegetable intercropping (5 decimals of land)	Decimals	5	1,000	5,000
				19,960

PROFITS

			16,352	
Rounded to			16,000	
Return to labour (Per day)			545.1	

enables me to live a life of dignity. I earned Rs 24,000 from lac last year, and now dream of building a new house for myself."

With the farmers coming forward to adopt the scientific practices in lac cultivation, Pradan arranged a series of trainings in collaboration with IINRG. This was then followed up by Pradan professionals through on-the-job training, in which lac rearers were helped at each and every step of a crop cycle.

Following the scientific package of practices asked for certain investments. This is where SHGs promoted by Pradan come to the rescue of the lac rearers. Sushma Runda of Barodih village cannot stop thanking her SHG, which has always been a source of support and strength for her family and her.

She says, "I would not have invested in lac if not for my SHG. Peer support and credit helped me put all my energies in lac, and look at the results! I took a loan of Rs 600 to buy 10 kg brood last year, which was inoculated on three ber trees. Nine months later, after clearing off my loan, I had a saving of Rs 2,000." Many such stories abound, with the support of SHGs, linked to banks and other financial institutions such as insurance companies and with facilitation by Pradan.

Pradan strongly believes that community development lies in the community's hands. To mobilise more and more villagers to take up lac rearing as a livelihoods activity, LRPs and Brood Inspectors are chosen from within the community. These LRPs and Brood Inspectors are rearers themselves, with a flair

KEY AREAS OF SCIENTIFIC INTERVENTION IN THE LAC SECTOR

- ♦ Identification of good host plants
- ♦ Improved pruning techniques for greater canopy
- ♦ Nylon net bag techniques to prevent brood-borne predators
- ♦ Superior practices for brood inoculation
- ♦ Rotation of net-bags
- ♦ Practice of removing brood lac
- ♦ Spraying of insecticides and fungicides in a regulated schedule
- ♦ Follow-up on male insect emergence, predator attacks, proper growth, etc.
- ♦ Proper time for harvest and related techniques

for leading and helping others. Young lac rearers, willing to take up the additional responsibility of guiding and training other fellow farmers, are selected and then screened through a written test and interview. Pradan arranges for these LRPs to attend a week-long training programme in scientific package of practices at the IINRG. Once they are trained, these youth provide services such as knowledge dissemination and on-job training to other lac rearers.

Come October and Josephine Linda of Huduwa village suddenly becomes busy like never before. Apart from taking care of her own crop, which is ready for harvesting, Josephine has to help other lac rearers prepare themselves for harvesting and inoculation for the next cycle. Josephine's responsibilities range from making sure that the host trees in her region are pruned well, the brood is made available to the rearers and they inoculate it properly after packing it in nylon net bags. While training other lac

rearers in various steps of scientific lac rearing, Josephine comes across as an extremely confident woman.

Josephine says, "I owe my confidence to my association with Pradan. I work towards only two objectives now—one, to earn good returns from lac and raise my family well, and two, to help many more lac rearers adopt scientific methods of rearing."

Five years ago, after graduating in Arts from Nirmala Women's College, Ranchi, she did not want to migrate to a city and take up a regular job like her other peers. Lac rearing has been her family's main source of income for generations. But unpredictable harvests worked as a deterrent. Many families in and around her village were giving up on lac altogether and were migrating to the cities in search of a more stable source of income. Josephine would have followed suit if not for an interaction that she had with one of the Pradan professionals. She was more than keen to adopt the remedial measures, and within a few months she witnessed the outcome. Josephine recalls, "Following Pradan's advice, I inoculated (inoculation is the process of introducing lac insects onto the host tree) a ber tree. The result was astounding. The very first experiment turned out to be a success and we got four times more lac than what was inoculated. That first income of Rs 2,500 gave me the confidence to take up lac rearing seriously, once again."

And this was just a beginning. Noticing her interest in training others, Pradan sent her for a week to IINRG and since then, Josephine has been deeply involved in helping rearers understand the minute details of scientific lac rearing. From providing training in pruning, brood cutting and packing to inoculating brood and harvesting through the right techniques, Josephine, like other fellow LRPs,

is always there for the villagers each time they need some help. She has now become an enthusiastic advocate of the scientific package of practices and travels frequently to other villages to train other lac rearers.

Some LRPs, who have received intensive training in brood selection process and brood estimation, also work as Brood Inspectors. They inspect the brood before the farmers inoculate their trees and contribute to the quality and quantity of production. There are 62 LRPs working in Khunti now; of these, 20 work as Brood Inspectors. The LRPs and Brood Inspectors receive their remuneration, based on the services provided and activities undertaken. One LRP is supposed to look after 50 beneficiary families in five hamlets and can earn around Rs 8,000 during one crop cycle.

LEARNING TO DREAM AGAIN

Lakshmi Devi of Nichitpur Raidih village of Khunti district is a confident woman today. She is a successful lac rearer with an annual income of around Rs 32,000, of which Rs 14,000 on an average comes from lac. "I have around 50 lac trees, but we never thought of them as an additional source of income. We reared lac more out of tradition and habit than anything else. We never gave any thought to the various steps that one needs to follow during rearing. And then, in

one of our SHG meetings with a Pradan professional, we had a discussion on scientific package of practices. I got interested, and after that there has been no looking back," Lakshmi says.

Krupa Tuti vouches for the scientific methods of lac cultivation because she has witnessed the change in her financial status in barely two years. Krupa says, "I owe my success to my SHG because this is where I first learnt about the package of practices of lac cultivation. At a time when we did not have any money to buy brood, our SHG came to our rescue. With other members of my SHG, I learnt about the nuances of lac rearing and at the time of crisis, it was there to support me." Today, Krupa earns Rs 20,000 from lac and has cleared off all her loans taken from the SHG. She now plans to plant some more host trees of lac.

The reduction of risks at various levels of rearing has made lac cultivation a robust livelihood option today for more than 2,600 tribal farmers, with the support and facilitation of Pradan. Pradan has thus been a partner in the journey of many such farmers of Khunti district, helping them break the shackles of poverty and live a life of dignity and self-sustenance through lac cultivation.

Making the NREGA Work

D. NARENDRANATH

From a fall-back wage perspective, the NREGA will have to take a livelihoods promotion perspective to ensure a truly resurgent and prosperous new India

NREGA: A PATH-BREAKING LEGISLATION

The recent estimates of the World Bank state that over 45 per cent of the population in India lives under the \$1.25-a-day (at purchasing power parity) poverty level, which translates in numbers to a staggering 450 million Indians—more than the population of the United States of America, the third largest nation in the world today. These are bizarre numbers by any standards and a shameful blot on the face of a country that plans on putting people on the moon! In our economy today, which is growing consistently, finding the resources required for the elimination of poverty is not a constraint. But questionable are the ways in which the resources are spent. The different departments, seized with removal of poverty and under development, function in their own vertical silos with no effort at co-ordinating with each other. Therefore, the resources spent by these agencies do not achieve the necessary impact. This is, of course, not counting the large amount of money that gets siphoned off and finds its way into the pockets of corrupt officials and middlemen.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which came into force in 2005, is designed as a novel and radical response to the challenge of removing the appalling poverty in rural areas, which is also a major cause of urban poverty. While in content it is similar to many of the earlier wage employment programmes, the major departure of this new avatar is in the process. The NREGA is described as an Act to provide legal guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a year to any rural household that is willing to do manual labour. The Act is also concerned with ensuring the payment of minimum wages and the proper impact of the funds by banning contractors and use of machines in the works. The Ministry of Rural Development, which is implementing the Act, also seeks to ensure transparency and accountability by putting all the works related information on its website and organising periodic social audits of the works done. The Act also insists that at least 50 per cent of the wage employment must go to women, and facilities such as crèches, drinking water and first aid must be made available at worksites. The right to employment has been further reinforced by a provision for the payment of unemployment compensation to the applicants, in case the local panchayat fails to offer employment.

SOME CONCERNS

Of course, it is a moot question as to how the NREGA will target groups that are already the most deprived of the lot to assert their rights on the local elite in the panchayat and

administrative machinery. This sad reality is reflected in the hordes of stories regarding the hideous levels of corruption and inefficiencies in the implementation of NREGA, in spite of important provisions in the Act for ensuring accountability and transparency. But these are early days for the most ambitious programme in the history of the state-led efforts at poverty alleviation. The three years that have passed are small by any count for a country of this size, and with time, as the village community becomes more aware, we can hope that it will start asserting its rights and make the panchayats and administration more accountable.

However, there are other issues that need to be addressed if we are to see the best results of this 'right' that the state has bestowed on the poor people. About 120 million families (of a total of about 200 million families) are directly employed in agriculture whereas about 40 million additional families benefit as labourers and other service providers. Given such an overwhelming engagement in farming, any comprehensive response to poverty reduction has to address the issue of agricultural development. The reason for the terrible poverty in the rural areas, which is now spreading to the urban areas as well, has a lot to do with the abysmal quality of agriculture. Some years back, a National Sample Survey reported that 60 per cent of the farmers interviewed wanted to leave farming as a livelihoods option. Eighty per cent of the farmers find farming non-viable; yet they persist with it as a matter of habit. About 70 per cent of the farming in India is rain-fed; that is, it is dependent on the vagaries of rainfall, making it a veritable gamble most times. Much of these rain-fed areas are qualified by their hilly, undulating terrain and degraded ecology. These regions are also inhabited by the poorest communities. However, it is also a fact that

much of these areas need not be so poor and miserable.

Most of the rain-fed areas receive much more rains than what is required for a plentiful crop. There are inspiring stories such as that of Hiware Bazar village in Maharashtra which receives about 400 mm of annual rainfall but has more than 50 farmer-millionaires as a result of some very innovative soil and moisture conservation measures and the intelligent crop management they undertook. The poorest states such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Jharkhand receive rainfall of anything above 1,200 mm. If systematic and large scale investments are made in these regions to optimise the land and water resources, productivity can be enhanced three to four times in the single crop they do currently and cropping intensity can be increased and diversified, increasing productivity manifold. This will make farming meaningful for the farmers and the labourers, and drastically reduce distress migration.

Stories of radical changes in the livelihoods of poor farmers are abundant from villages where such work has been taken up. Saramani Naik, a very poor tribal farmer from Baliaposi village of Keonjhar district in Orissa, dug a 15 m square and 3 m deep water harvesting tank on his barren farm under a wage employment programme last year. He utilised the harvested water to irrigate the tomato crop in a small parcel of 15 cents in the kharif season. In addition, he used the bund for cultivating flat beans, pigeon pea and bottle gourd, and reared fish in the tank. He sold 35 kg of flat beans, 40 kg of pigeon pea, 200 kg of bottle gourd, 100 kg of tomato and 8 kg of fish and earned a net profit of Rs 3,000—a bonanza from a plot of land from which he never earned anything. He now looks forward to using more land to cultivate vegetables in the coming years. A

small farm pond, a dug well, a water harvesting structure, a little levelling of the unproductive upland—all these can work miracles in the lives of hapless impoverished farmers in the hinterlands. It requires focused investment in such a way that these farmers are able access the funds without hassles.

The NREGA offers the unique opportunity of taking up such small activities in the villages. Necessary amendments, however, need to be made in the way NREGA is implemented. The right of the worker today is solely to demand wage employment but not the right to decide on what work needs to be taken up. It is impossible for the poor marginalised farmer to influence the panchayat to ensure that the necessary development work happens on his plot of land. If viewed purely as a security net for the very poor, the current approach holds. If, however, the perspective of NREGA is as a trigger to revitalise and kick-start the economy of the rain-fed regions, the approach will have to be more enabling. From a fall-back wage employment perspective, the NREGA will have to take a livelihoods promotion perspective. The farmers would rather be productively employed in their own farms than be dependent on wage employment elsewhere. A comprehensive livelihood plan for the rural small farmer will comprise a mix of interventions, leading to enhanced food security from one's land, and additional cash income from farm, livestock, forest resources and other enterprises, through appropriate market linkages.

REFLECTIONS

The realisation of such a plan requires at least two things to happen simultaneously. First, a truly bottom-up plan, taking into consideration the livelihood reality of the very poor has to be made. This will entail competence-building efforts at the level of the villagers and at the level of the Panchayat functionaries, to help in the preparation of such plans. Such a plan will have a number of components, only a portion of which may be met through wage employment with NREGA funds. There are other schemes in the villages, such as the SGSY, watershed programmes and horticulture development schemes, run by many ministries. The second condition, albeit difficult, is for the various schemes to converge at the level of the poor family and deliver the funds as required. This needs vision, will and the commitment to come out of one's own departmental silo and integrate with other departments. If such a vision and will could be orchestrated somehow, the problems of desperate poverty and misery in our rural areas can be summarily addressed in a planned manner in the coming years. Some efforts towards this have already been initiated by the Rural Development ministry under its new convergence agenda. Let us hope that the efforts bring forth the fruits desired, and we will be able to see a truly resurgent and prosperous rural India in our own lifetime!

WHAT'S RIGHT	WHAT'S WRONG
Right for 100 days of paid employment per family member per year	Increased corruption in NREGA implementation at the grassroots levels
Banning contractors and use of machines for better use of NREGA funds	Lack of involvement of worker in planning NREGA work and dominance of panchayats
Unemployment compensation paid to workers in case local panchayats fail to help implement	Inability of NREGA to offer a sustainable solution to alleviating rural poverty by asset creation

Known a Pradanite

ACHINTYA GHOSH

Keeping in close touch with his own core inner values, constantly aware of what work resonates within him and what does not, A Pradanite recalls his early days

MY FATHER, MY INSPIRATION

Father wanted me to serve my own villagers. He had an inclination towards the 'Left' ideology and was against all kinds of fundamentalism. He used to teach English to my uncle. When framing a sentence, instead of starting with 'Ram' or any other familiar names, he used names such as 'Jhoro', 'Kangla', etc. Jhoro and Kangla were the poor farmers of our village and my father always preferred to interact with them. His roots were with them. A clerk in the Indian Railways, my father was considered an unsuccessful man, not worth depending on by our family. However, his thoughts and actions, and his closeness to those belonging to the lowest strata of the society fascinated and inspired me. He has now become quite old and physically retarded, but even today people like Jhoro and Kangla continue to be his close friends.

He was indifferent to my going to IIT Kharagpur to study Agriculture Engineering. He said, "Studying there, you will become a bum."

MY DAYS AT THE IIT

Debu and Raja were my closest friends at the IIT. Three of us had had our own ideas about doing something meaningful in life. Debu dreamt of opening a school. Raja also had number of ideas on serving society. He later joined Pradan and worked for five to six years. However, I used to keep my ideas to myself. Somewhere I had heard, "Don't make promises if you can't keep them". Therefore, I preferred to keep quiet.

In 1979, Raja told me about a big development project undertaken by Oxfam in West Orissa. They offered both of us work as volunteers for drought relief there during our winter vacations. I took three other boys of my class with me. It was a very important event in my life. After I came back from Orissa, the key person of the project kept writing to me. He asked me what I wanted to do after I completed my course at the IIT. He might have noticed something in me which stirred his interest. I thought that I would explore the possibilities of doing something meaningful after I graduated.

MY FIRST JOB

My first job was with a six-year project in Orissa; I joined it midway in June 1980. They required an engineer to construct a water harvesting structure (WHS) to tackle the drought. I joined as an explorer, who wanted to know whether he fits into this kind of work. I could see the meaningful impact of my work. The job touched my heart and seemed very noble to me.

Life in Kalahandi could be very difficult and full of drudgery. However, compared to the sorry plight of the villagers, my life did not appear so. The love that the villagers gave me bound me to them forever and continues to be my source of inspiration. I was entangled in a *mayajaa*!

I can never forget one particular incident. While working, I had to cover a huge area on my motorcycle. I used to stay at night in our field office in Sinapalli block of Noapara district (Old Kalahandi). There was a very poor and old tribal man who used to wish me every morning when I crossed his house. Once he wanted to give me some *makai* when I passed by in the evening. However, I did not hear his call and did not stop at his place. He then walked 16 km from his house to my field office to give me the *makai*. He reached the office at night and when I asked him how he would go back, he said, "No problem, I will walk and reach home by dawn." I was overwhelmed. I was able to strike a chord with the people and resonate with them.

HOW I CAME TO PRADAN

I left the project in Orissa after a little more than two years. I started looking for some assignment related to rural development. In November 1982, I got such an assignment

with the Krishi Vigyan Kendra of Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

The organisation essentially provided training and I discovered that its activities had come to a standstill. There were no job opportunities for those who completed the training. So, the institution enrolled the old students but with new names every year. I was very disheartened and started looking for something meaningful in early 1983.

I had sent a bio-data to ASSEFA. Vijay Mahajan, who used to work in ASSEFA, invited me to visit the ASSEFA project in Bihar. Visiting the project, I felt ASSEFA was doing something constructive. They were directly helping the poorest Bhoodan farmers. I joined ASSEFA in August 1983. I continued to work in ASSEFA but enrolled myself in Pradan in January 1984.

REFLECTIONS

During my initial days of development work in Kalahandi district in the early eighties. I observed that there was more emphasis on providing goods and services to the villagers for their well being. The organisation I was involved with had to construct many WHSs for irrigation purposes, a very new and grand idea. We formed village committees and helped them to construct WHSs. Many development visitors came and praised the mode of work. However, the outcome of these WHSs was not up to our expectation. There were many flaws in our approach. A few 'not-so-poor' farmers guided us in selecting the site for the WHSs. We never looked at the command area of the WHS in detail and its ownership pattern. The structure was installed with the active support of a few individuals, who were the spokespersons of the village community,

which met very infrequently. At the meetings, we stressed on how to complete the installation of the WHS. In a sense, there was an incompleteness in our work approach. There was no thought about how the farmers would share the benefit among themselves from the created asset and would maintain it.

Later, I worked in a training institute whose entire focus was on training of farmers and rural youths in agriculture and allied subjects. The staff used to visit villages and help the farmers to raise crops in their fields. The enterprising farmers, who could procure various agriculture inputs by mobilising their own resources, were very much benefited. Nevertheless, the very poor farmers remained left out by the training institute.

The institute also used to conduct long duration training programmes in the campus on agriculture and allied subjects such as cattle rearing, horticulture, agronomy, etc. It was a free residential training programme, aimed at enhancing and up-grading skills of farmers so that they could become self-employed in the new vocation. Mostly school educated young men from the farming families used to attend the training programme, with the hope of getting some white-collar job somewhere!

There was a mismatch between aspirations of the trainees and the objectives of training institute. The training institute gave no thought about post-training follow-up and help for the trainees to set up activities for self employment.

I then worked with the Bhoodan farmers in Munger and Gaya regions of Bihar. Let me explain 'Bhoodan farmers'. Vinoba Bhave had collected more than 40 lakh acres of land

from the landed farmers under the Bhoodan movement in the late fifties and early sixties. The lands collected were mostly degraded and were distributed to poor landless families. By receiving the degraded land, these families no more remained landless. Yet, they could not cultivate the land in absence of resources to deploy in the land.

These families called themselves '*Bhoodan Kisan*'—a category between the landless and the farmer. ASSEFA chose to work with the poorest and needy, namely, the Bhoodan farmer. One ASSEFA worker used to be placed in a single hamlet of Bhoodan farmers and was in-charge of developing the land, providing irrigation system and ensuring crop production. All kinds support and inputs that were required to ensure the well-being of Bhoodan farmer were provided by ASSEFA. Bhoodan farmers were greatly benefited and their living condition changed drastically but they were dependent heavily on the resident ASSEFA worker for virtually everything. Later, the worker was taken out from the single village and made responsible for a cluster of villages. This single act of shifting the ASSEFA worker to, my mind, did a lot of good to the Bhoodan farmers. It helped them take charge of their affairs.

By the late eighties, I realized the need for exclusive focus on the poorer community, the rationale of working through users groups and the need to support the community with a complete and comprehensive package: infrastructure support for the activities and other relevant inputs, specific training and networking support to ensure outcomes. Another very important component is the support to individual members on how they can function as effective functional users groups, to derive benefit from combined

activity on a continuous basis. This, in development language, is known as 'group development' support.

Other ideas that emerged in the late eighties and of the early nineties were how to tap financial and other related resources from

various government department/bodies, banks, etc., and to collaborate with them in various ways.

*This article was first published
in January 1999.*



Pradan started work on the various stages of lac rearing to reduce uncertainty, increase productivity and help the poor families of Khunti use their natural resources and skills to the optimum level. As in all Pradan interventions, the starting point of this intervention was the establishment of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). There are around 530 SHGs in Khunti with more than 8,860 women members. The SHGs members also started to look for opportunities to enhance their livelihoods. Lac cultivation was an ideal activity for Khunti and its adjacent areas, where this was a traditional source of livelihood

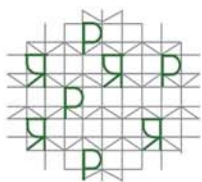
Extract from Sylvan Harvest. Page 9



Pradan is a voluntary organisation registered under the Societies' Registration Act in Delhi. We work in selected villages in 7 states through small teams based in the field. The focus of our work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organising them, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their incomes and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. Pradan comprises professionally trained people motivated to use their knowledge and skills to remove poverty by working directly with the poor. Engrossed in action, we often feel the need to reach out to each other in Pradan as well as those in the wider development fraternity. *NewsReach* is one of the ways we seek to address this need. It is a forum for sharing our thoughts and a platform to build solidarity and unity of purpose. *NewsReach* was supported in the past by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and Ford Foundation.

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