

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

March–April 2016  
Volume 16 Number 2

# NewsReach





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# Gender Training in Samnapur: Moving beyond Markets, Changing Mindsets

SHACHI SETH

*Realizing that economic upliftment does not necessarily bring about equality in society and that true equality could come about only when patriarchy and subordination of women are questioned and countered, PRADAN is working to create awareness through its Gender Approach, to bring about a change in the mindsets of the people regarding gender roles*

The construction of the female identity in the development sector has undergone a change over the course of time. It has been a major challenge for professionals, policy-makers as well as activists, to incorporate gender within the fold of development. In a strongly patriarchal society, where subordination of women is the norm, it is often tough to work for the upliftment of women or bring about a change in the mindsets of the people regarding gender roles.

The solutions offered for the upliftment of women are an extension of the capitalist mindset and in line with the modernization theory that financial productivity and independence liberates women. Whereas this can be partially true in the short term, the correlation is not sustainable in the long run. If the sole reason for a woman being treated equally in society is her income-generating ability, it would create a dependency. Such conditional change in women's status is return-based rather than ideological, and falls rather short on the inter-sectionality of its coverage.

At a time when economic productivity acts as a commonly accepted measure of development, the Gender Approach taken by PRADAN's team in Samnapur, sets an example of sustainable and equitable development for women. This sustainability is derived from the efforts being made to change the patriarchal, exploitative set-up by creating agency, ownership and a sense of entitlement among women.

Samnapur is located in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori district, mainly populated by indigenous tribals, with the Gonds as the major tribal group. Tribes such as Baiga, Kol, Agariya, Pradhans along with Hindus, Muslims, and Other Backward Classes make up the rest of the population. The terrain of the area is irregular with undulating topography, low water retention and a depleted water table, leading to rain-fed agriculture and erratic incomes.

Madhya Pradesh ranks low among Indian states, in terms of determinants of gender equality, as well as other development indicators. As per the Gender Development Index<sup>1</sup> (GDI), calculated in 2006, Madhya Pradesh ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> of 35 states and union territories in India. On the Gender Empowerment Measure, it ranks slightly better at 21, partly due to the high participation of women in the legislature. Almost 40 per cent of the women are illiterate. The Gender Literacy Gap for Madhya Pradesh was 31, only behind Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.<sup>2</sup>

In conversations with the local women of the area, domestic violence emerged as a common problem. The women are still wary of talking about it, even amongst themselves; their mobility is largely restricted, with most women not being allowed to step out of their homes.

Given such a setting, some voices that are emerging from within the community, after the gender training, are heartening. The Gender Approach that the Samnapur team is taking, when conducting interventions, has brought about an openness in the thinking of

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those involved. There continue to be hurdles with some women withdrawing into their shells due to familial and social coercion; however, all in all, the incorporation of this gender-based perspective in PRADAN's efforts has deepened its impact

and outreach.

## SHIFT TO THE GENDER APPROACH

Gender training first took place in Samnapur (in the Mahakaushal Cluster of Madhya Pradesh) in 2011 through the UN Women's Gender Equality Program. The training was conducted by PRADAN, with support from Jagori, to nine teams in and around the area (including the Samnapur team). Whereas PRADAN's core area of work had earlier included women and their empowerment, the programmes were more about reduction of poverty, providing livelihoods, and other income-generating and savings activities. Although the discussion on gender did take place among practitioners and was even forwarded through gender-sensitization training for the villagers, the trainings mainly focussed on inequality and were mostly in order to allow for easier mingling and acceptance of the Federation and its activities. Whereas the programmes did create some benefits for women, they remained tools to meet targets set out for the creation and running of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Earlier, the overall approach was to help increase the income of the households, and the SHGs were a tool to help women finance their needs. The focus has now shifted from increase in family income to whether the woman gets

<sup>1</sup>UNDP for Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI (2006)

<sup>2</sup>Gender Development Indicators: Issues, debates, and ranking of districts, Preet Rustagi, Center For Women's Development Studies

to have any spending power. In fact, once the women were included in the scope of income-generating activities, the men started using them merely as a resource to earn income and not as shareholders in the household income.

Since the training by PRADAN and Jagori, there is awareness among women of the socially constructed, systemic subordination of women. The local women and practitioners now understand the hierarchal power relations that create injustices for women; they have now begun challenging the norms. This awareness has created a shift in the approach that PRADAN takes when working with these women and has brought changes to how women approach their problems.

The process of bringing about this change in approach involved work on many aspects—trainings, broadening of ideologies (of both the practitioners and the *didis*), understanding the connection between social justice and gender justice, and the coming together of Federations. PRADAN, along with Delhi-based NGO Jagori, designed modules and tools to promote awareness of gender inequality and for training Community Resource Persons (CRPs). Chosen by the members of the Federation and the practitioners, CRPs were to be the contact point for the women and the practitioners, and were to be responsible for conducting trainings and planning in the community. CRPs were also trained in basic counselling and facilitation so that they could help women facing serious problems.

The gender trainings were regular and repetitive so as to have the maximum impact, and were conducted by the CRP, in the presence

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of practitioners from PRADAN. These sessions were open to all and specifically included the women involved with the SHGs and the Federation. The women were able to relate more to and identify with the training conducted by the CRP, rather than professionals. Whereas the women from the Federation are often receptive to training given by professionals, when people external from the community address them, the impact is relatively more distant

and lecture-like. CRPs, thus, also act as close confidantes and guides to women, who are often hesitant to speak, especially about matters as personal as gender.

The modules designed by Jagori laid a strong foundation for the training and created a base for women to grasp the nature of the issue. The trainings included a variety of games, ice-breakers and role-play exercises that showed the women, the visible and invisible ways that gender manages to create deprivation for the girl child and women. For example, in the game of Kamal-Kamli, the women track the progress and opportunities for two children born at the same time (one boy and the other girl) and talk about the various changes that occur at definite time intervals in the lives of these children. Two women, representing the boy and the girl, start off at the same spot and take steps forward depending on the opportunities, or the lack of them, faced by the children. The game acts as an experiential and observable histogram of the gender inequality in the area. Apart from the games that help open up women's minds and increase their willingness to share, the training also involves an introduction of various essential concepts such as patriarchy, land rights for women

and fair distribution of work. Additionally, forums for strategic discussions have been created within the Federation, aided by women—local champions, who can uphold and fight for these issues in the village.

Within the Federation, there are mandatory forums that are structural in nature. These strategic forums have been put in place to create thematic leaders and structures outside of PRADAN, with an objective of creating a self-sustaining system. Four such forums have been created, namely, Aajeevika Manch (Livelihoods Forum), Adhikar Manch (Rights and Entitlements Forum), Samaanta Manch (Gender Equality Forum), and Sangathan Manch (Savings and Credit Forum).

As the training by the CRPs continued at regular intervals, those Federation women, who are keenly receptive to the ideas and show a strong willingness to work, have been put in charge of each of these forums and are called *Sakhis* (companions). Two *Sakhis* have been assigned for each of these forums, to oversee activities related to each of these issues. On various occasions, this new structure has shown great promise and has helped women seek justice within and through their own community. For example: The *Adhikar Sakhi* checks on the proper delivery of the mid-day meal scheme, *anganwadi* services, PDS entitlements, etc.

In Chapwar village of Jadasurang *panchayat*, the PDS dealer regularly overcharged the villagers on the pretext of transportation costs, refused to return the balance of the money paid by the villagers, and did not give the correct amount of grain to certain families. Eventually, the women organized themselves under

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the guidance of the *Adhikar Sakhis* (Anusuya and Sukwariya *didis*), and the men and women united to protest against the dealer. The *didis* managed to get the contact number for the Collectorate, made complaints to the District Collector against this injustice, and ensured that the people received their dues.

Not only is this an example of the people rising up against the rampant low-scale corruption, it also places women at the helm of the protest, by organizing it and talking to bureaucrats. The

women, who were, until very recently, holed up inside their homes, afraid of interacting with outsiders, are now taking such drastic steps as to ensure just delivery of their rights. Being members of SHGs has over the years helped them break out of their shell; and the recent gender training seems to have created a renewed sense of ownership and motivation.

## EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

The women in Samnapur, especially the ones who have been a part of the gender trainings, now show a distinct boldness. They confess that, earlier, they wouldn't talk much even to each other, let alone to outsiders. Their involvement with the SHGs and the subsequent gender training has helped them recognize themselves as a community, encouraged them to share their problems, and inspired them to work together towards bettering their lives. Whereas the SHGs gave the women the confidence to step out and talk to other women, the gender training has broken their beliefs of being inferior or subordinate to men. As of today, the women of Samnapur have saved girls from being trafficked, helped widows get remarried, and even chased away

a rapist 'godman' from the area. The impact has been manifold; and change is visible in some areas.

**Violence:** Domestic violence was such a common occurrence in these areas that there were minimal discussions or complaints around it. It was considered a right of the husband to discipline or reprimand his woman, symbolic of male dominance, and the culture of treating wives as one's personal property rather than as individual entities. Women would be beaten up for talking to men, talking too much in the house, not doing their 'duties' properly, and sometimes simply because the husband was not in a good mood. Whereas domestic violence still continues in the area, the women themselves acknowledge that the number of cases of domestic violence has reduced significantly, especially with women connected to SHGs. Discussions around the issue have emerged, allowing people to recognize this violence as problematic, rather than accepting it as part of a woman's life.

Earlier, apart from accepting violence against themselves, the women also chose to not interfere when they knew that violence was taking place. After the gender training workshops, the women slowly started to speak up about the violence. CRPs became involved in supporting and helping such women. When the violence was extreme and the victim asked for support, the women of the Federation would collect, confront the man, and warn him about the consequences of his actions.

In instances of trafficking and sexual violence, the women have taken groundbreaking action. Geeta *didi* from the Federation shares her story. One day when she was walking to a nearby shop with her husband, one of the men from the village who she called *mama* (maternal uncle) called her aside and touched her inappropriately. She was walking ahead of

her husband. Women are taught to keep silent on such matters; with the new awareness, however, Geeta *didi* created a scene and filed a case against him.

The wife of the accused was the Sarpanch of the village and Geeta *didi* was under a lot of pressure and was the object of snide remarks for taking legal action against a man of the same village. Initially, the women were hesitant to support her; eventually, as many as 400 women gathered and showed support for Geeta *didi* and others, who had also had similar experiences with the man. Geeta *didi* is still fighting the case and is resolute about getting justice.

In a society where women are regularly discouraged from making a hue and cry about such harassment, especially from family members, Geeta *didi* took a stand for herself and the women around her. She says, "Ever since the gender training, I have realized how systematically men control every aspect of our lives. If I cannot even raise my voice against a man violating me physically, what is the point of the training?"

**Family:** Confined within their homes, the women did the bulk of the household chores of looking after the children, the elderly and the family cattle. They did some work in their small patches of land, in addition to fetching water. The women, although involved in farming, did not receive recognition as farmers nor did they get any portion of the money earned from it. The ownership of land was passed on to the men of the family and the women accepted the practice, considering it as a part of the socio-legal rights of men.

These problems continue in the area; however, conversations have begun to emerge around the subject and that is a positive step in the direction of gender equality. Women's social

identities are not as 'farmers' despite the fact that a majority of the work is done by them. Most agricultural policies target men farmers; there is rarely any mention of women as farmers. Nonetheless, to themselves and to the people around them, many women have started recognizing their identities as

farmers. The Mahila Adhikar Kisan Manch (MAKAM) has been set up to address the problems of women farmers and help them establish their identities.

Ever since the PRADAN gender training, the women have begun to question those practices within their homes that earlier seemed normal to them. Traditional gender roles are often tough to break out of, and whereas women continue to do most of the household work, some of them have managed to convince their husbands to contribute. Men have also begun to help in the tedious task of fetching water if their wife isn't home, although it may partially be due to the introduction of the 'water wheel'. Nevertheless, both through mechanization and awareness, there has been a reduction in drudgery for women.

Almost all the women in the Federation meeting shared that they have started eating as and when they felt hungry rather than waiting for their husbands. The usual and unspoken norm is that the women must be the last ones to eat, and only after their husbands have eaten. The underlying assumption to this tradition is that your husband is your God (*pati parmeshwar*) and women must not serve 'un-kosher', or *jootha*, food to them. Women have begun to laugh now at the suggestion of their husband's divinity and have started to consider them as equals.

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The women are also extending the ideas of gender equality to their daughters. As Urmila *did*i recalls, "One of my brothers-in-law went to the city and came back with two packets of chips for my sons, and nothing for my daughter. Even though a woman is supposed to not talk in front of her brother-in-law, I fought with him for treating my kids differently."

**Mobility:** The men in the village were hostile to the formation of groups, women's training programmes, etc. They often picked on and taunted women, who stepped outside their homes, calling them names, de-motivating and even threatening them. During the early days of SHG formation, *didis* would come to the meetings escorted by the men of their families, and would follow whatever decisions the men took for them. Women would rarely talk to each other, and had little or no say in decision-making in the household. In village matters too, women had almost no say. Women themselves believed that they were incapable of making any major decisions, and held back their opinions.

Joining an SHG was a major contributing factor in expanding the radius of women's participation and mobility. Not only did it help in creating savings, it also gave the women a sense of community, belonging and togetherness. Most women members faced mental and physical pressure when they began stepping out of their homes. The other villagers were suspicious of their activities until the SHG started lending money to those in need and they could see a tangible economic benefit.

The discussions and training sessions attended by members of the Federation, helped in



developing the ability to share their views, interact with new people, especially those from outside the village. As the women pointed out, they felt extremely self-conscious when speaking with educated outsiders, bureaucrats and even policemen. Whereas membership in the SHGs did

help instill confidence in the women, the transition remained incomplete because the day-to-day practices of gender subordination remained unquestioned.

**Citizenship:** Despite the numerous policies for women and children, women had little idea of what their rights were. Participation in the *gram sabha* was chiefly for the men. The women, for a large part, did not even know what the *gram sabha* did, or what it was meant for. They had some vague idea of the working of the institution, which they had picked up from training and orientation programmes they had attended over the years, from overhearing conversations of the men, and from government awareness programmes. However, none of these pieces fit to make women aware of their rights.

Their involvement in SHGs introduced to them certain ideas of entitlement and gave them the courage to claim proper delivery of schemes such as PDS, MDMS, *anganwadi* centres, etc. Gender training included aspects of health and nutrition, and helped women understand these through a gender-based perspective. The women also conducted a survey of *anganwadi* centres, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), etc., and came up with a Citizenship Report, highlighting the problems and needs of the area.

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zeal for claiming their rights. They have become more aware of their nutritional, social, political and legal rights. In case there are any discrepancies in the entitlements that the villagers receive, the women, along with the concerned *Sakhis*, get together and protest.

This is in stark contrast to the past when the women recall taking whatever came their way and accepting injustices rather than fighting against them.

Most of the people in the villages around Samnapur had given up on MGNREGA (due to the delays) and were convinced that they wouldn't receive the payments due to them. After the training renewed their sense of ownership, the women became actively involved in claiming their payments. They talked to the officers—quite an unthinkable act for them earlier—filled the necessary forms and kept making trips to the concerned offices until they received their dues. Not only did this help them financially, it also gave the women encouragement to work harder for their rights.

## THE PRACTITIONERS

The beauty of the approach is in the universality of it, and the way it bridges the distances between the practitioners and the beneficiaries. Since the gender training, the day-to-day activities of the practitioners are being scrutinized under their very own lens of inequalities. The PRADAN practitioner, Ambuj, is married and comes from a patriarchal family, like most of us. He shared that his mother cooks at home and it hasn't ever been questioned. Now, suddenly, he has begun to wonder why he and his father have never taken over that task. He adds, "Whenever possible, now I try to help my wife but I still struggle with breaking out of the normalized patterns.

Ever since we've taken up this approach, I question every act of mine, and when I see it not fitting the gender equality I am working for, it worries me."

While this introspection is often a tough process, it is indicative of a major change taking place in the thinking and is a step out of the comfort zone that one tends to get limited to. To bring about the kind of social change that is desired, this creation and recognition of the problematic is essential, unavoidable and heartening. The Gender Approach, taken by the team at Samnapur, has not only clearly benefitted the women and broadened their scope of thinking and imagination, it also distinctly reflects in the working of the team.

As one of the practitioners, Aziza Ansari, puts it, "We are still doing the work that we did earlier. Only the lens has changed. Now, we are doing the same work through a gender lens, and suddenly, it isn't just a job, it's an inseparable part of our entire life and their (the women's) entire life. We didn't even realize just how much we were missing out on."

## LIMITATIONS

**Outreach:** PRADAN's major involvement continues to be with the women that are connected to it through SHGs and the Federation. The women, who are a part of these SHGs, typically belong to a certain class. As per an approximation, the participants in the SHGs are largely women from middle-income families. Women from the low-income families usually do not have the capacity or propensity to save, neither are they able to regularly attend the meetings (SHGs have strict rules in terms of attendance) due to household duties. These women usually face severe inter-sectional exploitation and do not

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have the agency to step out and participate in such activities. Alternatively, women from the few higher class/income families do not feel the need for such participation, and often, choose to stay away from identifying with the relatively lower classes.

Whereas gender training in the villages was open to all, one cannot be sure as to what may be the direct impact on the non-SHG women of the area.

These approximations on participation are mere speculation and derived from the practitioners' experiences, and my personal observations. No specific survey or research has been done on this; maybe, undertaking such a step would help understand our reach and our target groups. It may also allow us to recognize our limitations as an organization and to chart out possible ways of interacting with groups that are not yet part of our interventions.

**Land rights:** The issue of land rights is a major hurdle. It is connected to economic wealth and capital ownership, which are often the determinants of power in a society. It is, therefore, unsurprising that there continues to be resistance to overturning male-dominant land ownership and succession patterns. The women themselves are also hesitant to claim such blatant ownership, first, due to the prolonged conditioning in a deeply patriarchal set-up and, second, due to the fear of social ostracism.

Approximately, 84 per cent of the land in the area is owned by men. Even when the land is in the name of women, they have little control over it. Some other women would like to transfer ownership of land to their daughters; however, not having land in their own name makes it tough for them. To extend land rights to their own daughters is a big challenge even

for men, and invariably leads to fights at home, taunts from relatives, and social pressure and threats from other villagers.

These violent reactions to women's rights pose another problem for gender equality. The degree of sustainability of the programme seems low, especially compared to the momentum it initially generated. Women, who formed the initial batches of PRADAN's gender training (CRPs), had a tough time being understood and accepted by those around, including other women. Their views sounded radical within the existing set-up and it led to extreme backlash of the community, resulting in a number of women dropping out soon after. PRADAN began to have group trainings for CRPs, to be able to address this situation, and arranged regular meetings where they could meet people with similar problems and give each other support. Nonetheless, social pressure continues to push women away from understanding their rights and fighting for them.

**Legal aid:** Not only are social pressures tremendous, the solution of legal action is often so tedious and long-drawn that most women choose to skip it. Legal aid is insufficient; courts are far away, police put pressure to drop cases, fighting a case is expensive; these are all impediments that are often tough to overcome. Hence, even when women may want legal justice, given the current judicial system and its drawbacks, it's an uphill task.

PRADAN team coordinator, Krishna, says, "We regularly face ethical and moral dilemmas in cases of violence. We are not sure of the level of intervention we can maintain, and whether we are even capable of entirely supporting

women, if they do take legal action. Our intervention stops at making these women aware of their rights and helping them raise their voices. Once it becomes a legal case, or even a social outcry, as outsiders we are still figuring out how to extend our support or carry it forward."

**Age old taboos and practices:** Taboos around menstruation are still strong and even though women are transgressing them in their personal spaces by cooking during their periods, etc., it is yet to become a public change. Dowry is another issue that seems to be deeply entrenched. Even the women who have received gender training are open to accepting dowry when their sons get married. Their argument is that since they brought dowry when they were married, they are entitled to receiving it as well. Thankfully, the trend of dowry isn't as extravagant and demanding in the tribal areas as in other populations, but the ideological problem still remains.

## CONCLUSION

Gender is an omnipresent structure of power, often invisible, yet tangible if one learns to recognize it. Women are often entrenched in patriarchy and gender to such an extent that they become active practitioners of patriarchal practices, even resistant to arguments of inequality. PRADAN's efforts at questioning these norms and helping women break out of them have been seminal, yet a systemic change in ideology takes time. Whereas a handful of women can lead by example, for the impact to be experienced by every woman in the village undergoing exploitation or discrimination due to gender, it will take time and continuous effort.

# The Community Takes Charge: Green Shoots Emerge

JYOTSANA JAISWAL

*In an attempt to strengthen the NMS, by bringing changes in the existing support system, by enhancing volunteerism to reduce dependency, by moulding challenges into opportunities for women leaders, by helping women extend from the self to others and by developing a pool of strong leaders in their collective, the Bhoura team has been successful in initiating the journey towards autonomy and self-sufficiency*

*"Awaz do hum ek hain!"*

*"Hum Bharat ki nari hain, phool nahi chingari hain!"*

*"Jan-jan ka nara hai, Narmda Sangh hamara hai!"*

These slogans reverberated in the villages during the Cluster *Adhiveshan* event. The women were preparing for the *Mahadhiveshan* of the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS), to take place on the 23 February, 2016. The women were excited because this was the first time that they had taken complete charge of conducting the event. They had been preparing and waiting for over a year for this event, in which 11,000 women would participate. The fact that they were exclusively responsible for organizing the event made it even more exhilarating for them. They had even invited the Honourable Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh for the event.

Other such initiatives were also being organized by the volunteers of NMS. This was not the picture some two years ago. NMS has, indeed, travelled a long way to becoming an autonomous body!

PRADAN has, over the years, played the role of facilitator and guide and provided hand-holding support and helped the women form NMS. And it continues to support NMS, to become a volunteer-based institution of women that strives to change society for greater good. To achieve this larger goal of NMS, it needs to be autonomous and self-sustained. PRADAN has been engaging with NMS, to build its capacity around operations and governance and to make it an independent institution, run and governed by its volunteer members.



In the last year, many positive signs of increased volunteerism and leadership have been witnessed. Organizing a *Mahadiveshan* of this size and standard is a perfect example of the women taking charge. New faces are taking on the leadership role and directing the village-level agenda in an inclusive way. Women are extending themselves beyond the SHG, with the feeling of 'we'. The journey from 'I' to 'we' (from the individual to collective identity, strength, support extension, thinking beyond the self, etc.), volunteerism, and leadership of women, however, was not an easy one. It needed systemic changes in the structure and operations of NMS.

The support structure for NMS is the Community Service Provider (CSP). CSPs are resource persons of NMS; they belong to the community and work with NMS. They support the women by training and disseminating knowledge at the SHG and the village levels. They also assist women, when needed, with legal cases.

However, their presence overshadowed the NMS members, and prevented the women from taking full charge of NMS. CSPs were resource persons of NMS but were accountable to PRADAN because they were paid and monitored by PRADAN. The successes that NMS enjoyed were mainly CSP-driven, while the women members stayed in the background. By bringing about some changes in the functioning of NMS, however, women are now being encouraged to lead and they are coming to the forefront and creating the organization into a strong autonomous collective.

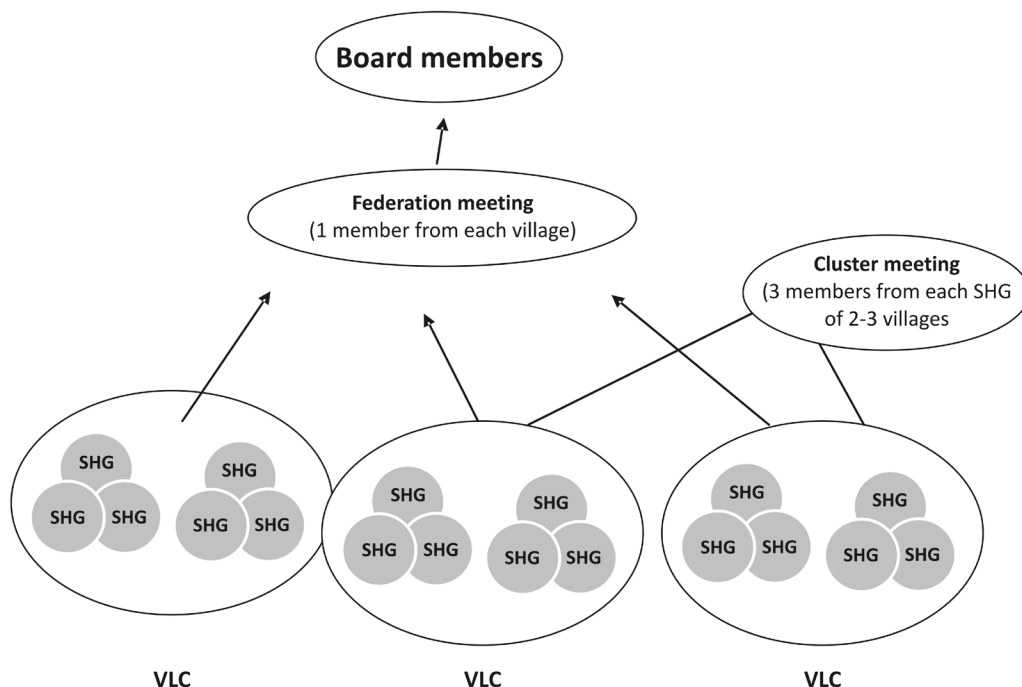
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This article mainly focusses on the Bhoura chapter of NMS, and describes the experiences and efforts of the Bhoura-PRADAN team in making NMS an autonomous body. The team strengthened this volunteer-based organization by bringing about some changes in the existing support system (CSPs), by enhancing volunteerism to reduce dependency, by moulding challenges into opportunities for women leaders, by helping the women extend from the self to others and by developing a pool of strong leaders in their collective.

**Narmada Mahila Sangh:** NMS, Bhoura, began its journey in 2002. It is a block-level Federation of women, a collective of more than 11,000 women, mainly belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories. NMS works for women's empowerment by creating an equal space for them in the social, political and economic arenas, and by influencing the patriarchal structure of society. NMS is a registered body under the Societies Act and is promoted by PRADAN.

**SHG, Village-level Committee (VLC)/ Cluster, Federation:** NMS has a three-tier system. An **SHG** is the primary unit of NMS, and it functions mainly around savings and credit; the women meet every week for this purpose. A **VLC** is a forum for reflection, articulation of thought, raising issues and taking action accordingly. The women meet every month with all the group members at the village level. A **Cluster** is also a forum for sharing and reflection of village-level issues and concerns. It acts as a space for learning and implementation. Three representatives from each SHG from 3–4 villages attend a cluster meeting. The collective strength increases at the higher levels.

## Structure of NMS



**The Management Committee (MC) member and Village Representatives (VRs):** A **VR** is a volunteer woman, who represents her village in every Federation meeting, supports the village development agenda and helps take forward the larger organizational goal. She works as a bridge between the village and the Federation.

The **MC** is a group of eight members, selected from among the VRs of all the villages. The MC is responsible for taking important decisions concerning the Federation—governance, operations and functions.

**CSPs:** A CSP is recommended by the village and is chosen by the Board Member through a selection process. CSPs are engaged in all the tiers of the Federation, namely, SHG, VLC, Cluster and Federation. PRADAN plays a major role in the capacity building of CSPs,

who then play a crucial role in conducting and regularizing meetings at the village level. The latter provides capacity building training to SHGs and VLC/Cluster members. With the financial assistance provided by PRADAN, NMS pays CSPs for their services.

## Issues with NMS

PRADAN conceived of the idea of a CSP to scale up the outreach. CSPs were drawn from the community with a belief that, in the long run, they would become the resource pool for the Federation...a strong pool of women, who have the knowledge and capacity to train villagers. CSPs are involved mainly in promoting and strengthening SHGs; they deal with legal cases and other village-level issues too. In places where SHGs are in a nascent stage, CSPs help conduct SHG meetings. Their regular engagement in the community

has capacitated the group to function and has enhanced their level of knowledge and understanding. CSPs also encourage women to participate in the *gram sabha*. They help women become aware, come out of their homes, go to block- and district-level offices, fill forms and applications and get things done for their community. Such an engagement by CSPs,

however, had some limitations as well. It was very common to hear the women of village say: “*Wo sangh sathi (CSP) gram sansad (VLC) me nahi aati to hum nahi baithe meeting ke liye, wo hamari batein likh kar le jati thi upar tak tabhi hamari sunwai hoti thi* (We don't conduct VLC meetings when the CSP doesn't come. She notes down our issues and forwards it to the higher-ups for solutions. Only then are our issues heard).”

On the suggestion of the Board, CSPs gradually reduced their presence in VLC and SHG meetings. Initially, the members in many VLC meetings found it difficult to conduct the meetings on their own. Clearly, CSPs had created a dependency by their way of engagement, which had a very negative implication on the collective growth and progress of the women and NMS, in becoming an autonomous and self-sustaining body, at every level.

Although VLC meetings were running well, these were not being run by the women themselves. All the proceedings, including the writing of minutes, were handled by CSPs. The women would wait for the CSPs to arrive, to begin their regular meetings. Women rarely started out from their homes in the absence of the CSPs and would wait for to be called. The women believed that because the CSPs were educated and were more articulate, they

*Clearly, CSPs had created a dependency by their way of engagement, which had a very negative implication on the collective growth and progress of the women and NMS, in becoming an autonomous and self-sustaining body, at every level*

would be taking the lead in solving their issues. The CSPs, in effect, became the drivers of the VLC. The VRs were also not clear of their roles and responsibilities and, although they attended Federation meetings, the drop-out rate and rotation of VRs was very high. The monthly plans for the Federation and the VLC were prepared by the CSP, with the help of PRADAN

professionals; therefore, the tasks of reviewing and monitoring were also PRADAN's task, and the VRs had little control of the whole process.

### Reducing Dependency on CSPs

Having realized that the community had become dependent on the CSPs, the PRADAN team discussed the matter with the people. The community members, especially the VRs and the Federation leaders also realized that they were dependent on the CSPs. Some changes were required in the organizational vision of NMS, to facilitate the process of creating an autonomous, volunteer-based model. The core idea of the 'community taking charge' needed to be followed. There was an immediate need for relooking at the process that NMS was engaged in.

A reflective exercise was conducted with NMS members. The objective was to revisit the structure of the Federation, keeping in mind the larger goals and objectives. This exercise happened in two phases, in December 2014 and in February 2015. Besides this, regular discussions continued with the Federation members and in VLC meetings.

Some major points of discussion were:

- ♦ Revisiting the objectives of NMS
- ♦ Highlighting the issues in operations, governance and finance of NMS

- ♦ Understanding the types of activities that NMS needed to undertake to reach its objectives
- ♦ Revisiting the structure, the responsibilities of each tier and the respective members
- ♦ Gaining an understanding of the resources and the funds required to run the organization

After agreeing to these changes and defining the new roles, the community was involved in intensive engagement to ground the changes and the thought behind it.

**Redefined role of VR and mobilizing support from the village:** In the revised role, the VRs had a new role and greater responsibility. A VR was expected to take forward the development agenda of the village through

discussions generated in the VLC meeting. The VR generates the demand for different types of capacity building training and support. Their demands are consolidated by Federation members and support provided accordingly.

**CSP as trainer:** Reviewing the engagement of CSPs in the community, it was decided that their services could be used for training SHG members on various issues, especially because CSPs have been supporting the VLC and the Federation, and have undergone extensive training on various issues, at different levels. CSPs will be more involved in knowledge and capacity building roles, trainers and paralegals. The Federation and other meetings will be organized and conducted by the women themselves and the CSP will not be present at the meetings.

By relooking at the objectives of the Federation and its path forward, members felt the need for some changes and to keep some things as they were (such as its activities). The main decisions taken at the end of each exercise were:

- ♦ The structure of the NMS will be: SHG – VLC – Federation – Management Committee (MC)
- ♦ The Federation and MCs will be the supreme bodies to decide what to do and how.
- ♦ The MC will be responsible for resource mobilization.
- ♦ The VRs will be the most important actors in the system because they are responsible for assessing the needs of the village. They will be responsible for keeping track of the happenings in the village, updating the Federation and articulating the need for intervention.
- ♦ The MC will consolidate the observations of the VRs, take concrete decisions and mobilize support of the trainers/CSPs/External Resource Persons for each of the villages or for a Cluster of villages or for the organization as a whole.
- ♦ CSPs will take instructions from the MC only for their engagement planning.
- ♦ There will be no separate planning meeting for CSPs. Planning will be done in MC meetings only.
- ♦ A CSP will not be present in Federation meetings.
- ♦ The engagement of CSPs will be on demand-basis (demand for support).
- ♦ The focus will be on strengthening VRs so that they can think comprehensively about their village and realize their roles.



***Transferred responsibility and resources:***

During the reflection meeting, it was decided that MC members would take the lead and that the MC would involve itself in the planning and review of CSPs, earlier done by PRADAN professionals. MC members will consolidate in the Federation meeting requested, for the training and support in the VLC, and will allocate tasks to CSPs. MC members will undergo capacity building training so that they can conduct meetings independently. This, most likely, will result in visible progress.

***Reflective exercise with VRs:*** At the MC level, the discussions were very thorough. In order to clearly articulate their role at the village and Federation levels, as a resource pool that connects two ends, it was necessary to enhance the roles and responsibilities of VRs. Training was organized, therefore, with a Board Member (MC), VRs and PRADAN, with the purpose of inculcating the vision of the NMS in the VRs, making them aware of its structure and its importance, and clarifying the roles of CSPs, VRs and PRADAN. The VRs were encouraged to see themselves as the trunk of the NMS tree, connecting its roots with its leaves.

***Visit of MC member to the RGVMP:*** In the meeting, the women decided that governance will be the responsibility of the Board Member. They realized that they lacked the required skills and confidence, and needed some training to build these. PRADAN organized a visit to the Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGVMP) in the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh, for capacity building. The purpose was for the women to get an understanding of the work methodology and governance of RGVMP. The major learnings of the visit were: every tier of the Federation worked independently; women supported the extension work of collectives to other women and villages (collection of grain and distributing

it among the poorest was a major insight), and that the expansion of collectives strengthened the Federation. The participants took back a documentary, which they showed the others in the Federation and the village. It was helpful in showcasing how the extension of collectives could be supported. They also promoted grain collection for the support of the poor.

***Green shoots:*** After making the above modifications, many positive changes were witnessed in the functioning of the NMS. Although it will take time for the full impact of the initiatives to be visible, some of the green shoots have become visible within a year:

In Malwar village, one *bai* (woman) said, "*Hum sab baiyan mil kar gaon ki nahar mein pani le aye, iske liye hum sab ne rally bhi nikali*, (All of us women worked to bring water in the canal for irrigation. We even took out a rally for it.)"

In a VLC meeting in Pawarejhandra village, one woman said elatedly, "*Hum chaar samiti milkar gaon mein paanch aur samiti banaye hai, hum chahte hai hamare gaon mein har bai samiti se judi ho* (Our four SHGs have together helped form five new SHGs; we want that every woman in our village should belong to an SHG)."

A VR, in her VLC meeting in Mudha village, said, "*Hamko bahut achha laga us gaon ki baiyan panchayat se pura hisab leke ayi. Humne bhi koshish ki thi par nahi hua, par ab fir se koshish karenge. Woh baiyan se hamko bahut himmat mila* (We felt very good when we saw that the women of that village asked for and got the audit of the *panchayat*. We had also tried, but failed. We will try again. We have got a lot of courage from these women)."

In Palashpani village, a woman proudly announced, "*Hum sab baiyan mil kar police*

*thane gaye apne gaon ki ek ladki ke rape ke case ka FIR karwane aur hamne pawati bhi li* (All of us women went to the police station together to register an FIR for the rape of a girl of our village. We took a receipt too)."

In Malwer village, a member confided, *"Humko bahut dar lag raha tha ki hum apna Cluster adhiveshan bina kisi ki madad se kaise karenge. Lekin karne ke baad himmat aa gaya. Ab hum apne se hi karenge aur aage se bina CSP ki madad se hi karenge* (We were afraid of how would we organize our Cluster meeting without the help of the CSP, but after organizing it, we are confident now. Next time on, we will do it on our own)."

These are samples of what was shared by the women from several villages in their formal and informal meetings. The issues raised were discussed by the women and sorted out by them. Many activities are now being led by the women without any support from the CSP or PRADAN professionals. These efforts have boosted the energy and the confidence of other village women.

These changes are redesigning the present scenario in a positive way.

### **Present scenario**

- ♦ Active and enhanced participation of VRs in Federation meetings. The clarity of their role has given them a new lens to recognize the issues of the village; they now feel responsible for leading the agenda by including all women. Some women are so passionate about their roles that they walk for 12 to 15 km just to attend the Federation meeting. Some pay for their travel and make sure they attend the meeting. Some women shared that they felt guilty if they were unable to attend a Federation meeting. This is the outcome of their enhanced sense of their responsibility.
- ♦ Women are now involved in strengthening the forum of the VLC and the Cluster by defining their objectives. They are recognizing the VLC as a forum where, together, all women can plan and act upon developmental issues. Now, most of the VLC meetings are being conducted by the women, without the support of the CSP or any PRADAN professional. Women are engaged in making it meaningful by deciding some norms for increased participation. To make it purely their meeting, they have selected a minutes-writer from the group so that they can keep a record of the issues and discussions, and also can monitor the participation of women. There is now a sense that this is their own meeting and they are responsible for its functioning.
- ♦ In a VLC meeting, the women and the VR, both feel responsible for each other. The VR brings to the VLC meeting the essence of the discussion held in the Federation. Women in the VLC also ascertain whether the VR has participated actively in the Federation meeting and has put forth the issues discussed in the VLC. Due to the above changes, the frequent drop-out rates of VRs has reduced.
- ♦ MC members are designing the plan of the CSPs, on the basis of the support required by the village. The support is usually in the form of knowledge building. Hand-holding support is now asked for only in some legal and violence cases. Monitoring is done by a Board Member by reviewing the plan and by engaging in the field with the CSP.
- ♦ The CSPs, as trainers, are now accountable to NMS and not to PRADAN. The planning and the review are carried out by MC

members. If required, a Board Member extends support in the planning at the village level. Trainers submit their bills in the Federation and have them verified by the computer *munshi*.

- ♦ Women are extending themselves to create more groups, with a vision to enhance the strength of the village and the Federation. Not only do they form groups but also monitor their functioning on a regular basis.
- ♦ Women make efforts to engage and coordinate with the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in their meetings.
- ♦ This year, the Cluster *Adhiveshan* (a Cluster-level event) has been organized. In around 80 per cent of the villages, the Cluster *Adhiveshan* was led by the VR and the leader, without the support of the CSPs; in the remaining 20 per cent, the women paid the CSPs for their help.
- ♦ Some of the VLCs and Clusters have started functioning without any external support and many more are in the process of beginning to work independently with the support of the VRs and the MC members.

The current scenario presents a picture of volunteerism. Women are taking on roles and are executing them without being paid. This is a big change for the organization. Not only does it enhance volunteerism but it also enhances a sense of agency and confidence among the collectives. By creating such rigorous engagement at the village and

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Federation levels, the Bhoura team has succeeded in inspiring women towards autonomy and self-sustenance.

### **Challenges in the Journey of being Autonomous**

- ♦ The biggest challenge before NMS was to find funds to meet its expenditure. NMS was completely dependent on PRADAN. And to become a self-reliant institution, NMS had to stand on its own. The challenge was how the Federation would reduce its expenditure and how it would increase the revenue, independent of PRADAN.
- ♦ This changed role was not easily accepted by CSPs.

Their engagement of 30 days a month became limited to 8–10 days or lesser. They struggled to relinquish the position of power they had wherein the women followed their instructions. One of the CSPs said, “*Ab to koi bai hamari sunti hi nahi* (Now, no woman listens to us).” Another CSP said, “*Hum 10 saal se kaam kar rahe hain aur ab bai log hamme baitayenge ki planning aur monitoring kaise karna hai* (We have been working for more than 10 years, and today are the women going to tell us how to do planning and monitoring)?” Their feeling of superiority still continues; however, for the time being, they have accepted the decision of the apex body.

- ♦ The MC has taken on the role of steering the Federation; therefore, it is important to build members’ capacity and knowledge

of various programmes and skills so that they are able to negotiate with various stakeholders.

- ♦ At the village level, after the withdrawal of the CSPs, the Cluster and the VLC hit a block, and many groups stopped having their meetings. As of now, no one is stepping forward to conduct their meetings and there is no one who is willing to lead the agenda of the meeting. However, with time, the groups have started to revamp. The responsibility of the VR has increased manifold. She is the key person in grounding the new thought and stance of the NMS in all the SHGs in every village. The VR is rigorously engaged in reviving all the SHGs. Due to this, she is struggling to lead village issues.

#### **Fears and Concerns**

- ♦ NMS is creating leaders who will lead villagers and Federations. A leader has power and is listened to by all the women and she plays an important role in influencing people. So, would a leader allow for rotation and share her power?

- ♦ Who will facilitate the processes for reflection, to revisit the process of operation and governance of MC members?
- ♦ Knowledge should not be limited to a few hands—how to extend it to others is a concern.
- ♦ The managing of funds in the NMS is, in the long run, also a concern.

#### **Conclusion**

Although the present approach is very different from the previous one, the members and the team are convinced that it is making a difference. The vision of a women's collective—of standing on its own and leading the developmental agenda—is what energizes this conviction. The evidence from the ground, after one year, is very encouraging because the green shoots can be seen emerging in bits and pieces. Although the challenges continue, the difference in the picture between earlier and the present is evident. Despite the challenges, this is as energizing for the women as for the team. Although not yet fully accomplished, a positive scenario is visible.



# Sustainable Development: The Role of Women's Collectives

SANTOSH KUMAR

*Recognizing the strength of collectives, PRADAN works with SHG members to encourage women to step out of their homes and work for a shared and common purpose of identifying and resolving village issues, thereby leading to development as also to an increase in individual confidence and standing in their villages*

One day, during a Cluster meeting, I heard a statement which grabbed my attention, as it did of the other members of the SHG. *"Hum samoooh khaali apan khatir ta nahi banaye hain, baki gaon ke manayi ke bachcha bhi ta hamare bachcha jaisan hau* (We have not formed this group just for ourselves. The other children of the village are like our children too)." This statement was made by Neeta Singh, an SHG member, who had come to seek help from the group.

During the meeting, the women discussed the status of the *anganwadi* of Phuljhar village. This small village is a part of the Bakhul *panchayat*, in Deosar block, Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh. There were allegations about the *anganwadi* worker that the food that the children were getting was not proper—in quantity as well as quality—and also that the *anganwadi* was open only once a week on Tuesdays instead of on all the prescribed days.

Another issue the SHG faced was that the member, who prepared the food, was from their own group. It was difficult for them to go against their own member. They, therefore, decided that before taking any action against her, they would try to make her understand the difficulties that her actions were causing. And if she didn't agree, they would then lodge a complaint with the higher authorities.

The members of the Vidya Mahila Mandal (of which the *anganwadi* worker was a member) and the Saraswati Mahila Mandal were entrusted with the task of talking to her. And it was decided that in the subsequent Cluster meeting (monthly meeting), they would take the decision about whether they needed to file a complaint against her.

In the next Cluster meeting, the members of the Vidya and Saraswati Mahila Mandals shared that the *anganwadi didi* had not agreed to open the *anganwadi* daily, to serve food to the children, and she was not afraid of any steps taken against her by the other members. The members of the SHG then decided that they should go to the *Jan Sunwayi* of the Collector. They withdrew the money for the fare for three women, who volunteered to go to the Collector's Office.

This was first time that these three women (Sonmati Singh, Neeta Singh and Janak Kumari Singh) had visited any government office. They gathered courage and entered the building and began walking without knowing where they had to go. None of them was literate enough to read the signboards outside the offices, which had the name of the official and their designation. However, they met with the Collector and gave him the complaint against the *anganwadi didi*.

They came back confident and proudly announced that they could now go to any office and talk about anything. Bubbling with enthusiasm, they shared with the group that the Collector (Shashank Mishra) had promised them that he would forward their application to the concerned department and that their complaint would be addressed within a few days.

However, by the next monthly meeting, there had been no progress. The members of the Vidya Mahila Mandal visited the *anganwadi* twice during the month and found it closed both times. In the Cluster meeting, the members decided to go to the Collector's office once again with their grievance. This time, two members (Neeta Singh and Munni Singh) volunteered to go.

They met the Collector and informed him that there had been no progress on their complaint. The Collector was furious at his officials and assured the women that he would look into the matter and that they would not have to come to his office again. And he kept his promise. The *anganwadi* worker was removed, even though, that was not what the group had asked for. They had just wanted change in the current status and smooth functioning of the *anganwadi*.

Although this problem in the *anganwadi* had been there since its inception, no one had looked into it. The women's initiative brought about the change.

In an incident, SHG members in Bakhul village identified a problem, discussed it and made the action plan for it. One day, Janak Kumari Singh, a member of the Sankarji Mahila Mandal was going for a Cluster meeting. Because she was early, she decided to go to see the (MDM) being served in the school nearby. She found that the rice had many stones in it. She angrily asked, "*Etek kankad churaibe bachcha sab ke khana me* (So many stones in the children's food)?"

The helper in-charge of cooking the food responded that she could not help it because this was the rice they procured from the PDS. The PDS shopkeeper was the son of the President of the MDM committee; therefore, they had to use rice from his shop for cooking the MDM. The helper also explained that she gets the rice in the morning and did not have enough time to pick all the stones because she needed to have lunch ready as per the timings of the school.

By that time, other members of the Cluster had gathered in the *panchayat* hall. The Cluster

meeting started with a prayer. Everybody was silent after that. Janak Kumari placed a poly bag full of stones and another poly bag containing rice to show the members the quality of rice being served to children in the school. The women started a discussion on what could be done to deal with the problem. A member suggested that they should talk to the helper. But the member who had raised the problem said that the helper could not be blamed for this because the rice was given to her in morning and she did not have enough time to clean it.

The members then decided to talk to the President of the MDM. They also realized that they would have to deal with the PDS shopkeeper because he was supplying the rice. They went to meet the President of the MDM committee but she said she was not responsible for the MDM. The women met the PDS shopkeeper and discussed the issue with him. At first he said he could not do anything about it. When the SHG members said they would raise the issue in the *Jan Sunwayi* and the *gram samwaad*, he agreed to supply rice on time so that it could be cleaned properly.

Earlier these very women, who found it difficult to talk to strangers, were now getting together, discussing and dealing with village-level issues.

In a Cluster meeting in Gajrabahra village, the women decided that they should have access to and information about government programmes. Many members realized they were not aware of their entitlements in programmes rolled out by the government periodically. They wanted to visit village-level institutions such as the *gram sabha*, PDS shop, *anganwadi*, Primary Health Centre (PHC) and school, to check their functioning. The decision came after the discussion among themselves that they could seek to improve

the conditions in their villages only through active participation in the village development activity and for that they had to ensure that the village institutions were functioning well.

According to Cluster members, representation in the *gram sabha* and the *gram samwaad* could lead to women's development. This was discussed in the Cluster meeting because of the problems that they faced on a daily basis. For example, because the PDS shop was not working properly, the people would not get their ration in the correct quantities; similarly, the *anganwadi*, which was meant to function daily, was not open every day.

They decided to visit these places regularly. Phulkunwar Singh, an SHG member, who volunteered to visit the Health Centre and the *anganwadi*, shared that the *anganwadi* worker and the ASHA workers said that the women of the village do not come to PHC nor do they send their children to the *anganwadi*, which is why the *anganwadi* remained closed on some days. Phulkunwar *didid* brought up the issue in the Cluster meeting. She added that the government provided them with many services but the villagers did not access them or seek them out and that is why those services were dwindling. She reminded them that it was their right to avail of those services.

A member from another SHG, Bitti Singh, who had visited the school, shared that the teachers were complaining about the absence of students. They were very happy that the women of the village were coming to the school and asking questions about the quality of education. Bitti *didid* suggested that everyone send their girls and boys to the school. One member, Bhagwaniya Sahu, of Lakshmi Mahila Mandal of Gajrabahra village said, "*Hum punche ta na padh paini par apan beta, beti ke padha sakat hai* (We did not get to study but we can make sure that our sons and daughters are educated)."

The women agreed that they needed to talk to other members of the community about sending their children to school; once the school was fully functional, they could ask the teachers about the quality of the education.

In another village, Jaththa Tola, the women of the collective decided that they should work to conserve the little forest area that was left. Due to deforestation, there was erosion of soil from the nearby mountain which adversely affected the farms in the lower catchment. Chhoti Yadav spoke about the need to protect forests; otherwise the coming generations would face problems. It would affect their livelihoods from agriculture and forests, and they would also have less rain. They would even not have any *datoon* (toothbrush). She was also worried about how they defecate if there were no forests.

The members deliberated on how to practice conservation. They realized that only the villagers could check deforestation. The members divided the responsibilities among the women of the collective. They kept vigil and if they found anyone cutting trees, they would persuade them to stop. They have succeeded to some extent. Their main focus, so far, has been to save the current forest and not on planting more trees.

Keeping in mind the health of the soil and of the people, they discussed about using organic methods for agriculture. The SHG members have started making organic fertilizers, insecticides and fungicides. These initiatives have spread to other villages also. Villagers, who could not afford chemical fertilizers and medicine, have access now to organic fertilizers and medicines. Even those who can afford costly chemicals are shifting to organic methods after understanding the adverse effects of the chemicals on health.

Village-level institutions are now beginning to function better because they are under the scrutiny of the women's collective. Members are now aware of the issues that affect life in their village and have information related to their rights. A sense of volunteerism has developed among members, following the discussions on platforms such as the Cluster and the SHG. They understand that their personal issues are not really personal but affect the whole village, and that they need to come forward, take ownership and work together to better their lives.

Members have also been given training with continuous follow-ups, and discussions are held in the meetings. They are becoming familiar with government programmes and are aware of their entitlements. They have realized that by uniting, they can bring about change in the village. Training programmes in different areas such as the *gram sabha*, health, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), MDM, PDS and Right to Food have contributed to their awareness. They work now not only for themselves but for other residents of the village also.

In 2016-17, PRADAN is planning more training programmes, considering the beneficial results of the earlier ones. The objective of the training modules is to create awareness about the rights of the people and their duties to bring about change at the grass-roots level.

Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (definition from "Our Common Future", also known as the Brundtland Report). Women's collectives are working towards this. They discuss the kind of development in which they can avail of current services; and if they are not getting these, demanding that

they do is their right. They are also thinking and talking about resources, forests, health of the people and education, which are all very crucial subjects for the future development of villages.

Evidently, these stories reveal that women's collectives are determined to participate in the sustainable development of the villages. They are talking about meeting their present needs, without compromising the needs of the future generations. This approach is clearly visible from their work in various fronts such as organic agriculture, education, forest conservation and health.

### Strengths of the Women's Collectives

The foremost thing that the women recognize in their meetings is that the collective has helped them develop the habit of thrift. Some see it as freedom from local moneylenders because they no longer have to be in debt or be obliged to any moneylender. They have a share in the return of interest as well. They now have easy and timely access to loans. Members also say that earlier they had to ask their husbands for money to buy every little thing they needed; now they have easy access to money. They meet according to the timings they set for themselves, depending on what suits all of them. The collective gives them the platform to get in touch with other community members, to discuss village problems and act upon them. Because they are the part of a collective, they think their voice is heard in the public sphere. And because members are many, they have access to information from different sources and ideas generated by them. They have access to varied perspectives, ideas and information to bring about change in their lives.

*Women's collectives are determined to participate in the sustainable development of the villages. They are talking about meeting their present needs, without compromising the needs of the future generations. This approach is clearly visible from their work in various fronts such as organic agriculture, education, forest conservation and health*

As a community, they follow improved livelihood practices and are more planned and prepared. Their risk-taking capacity has increased, resulting in active experimentation of new techniques and practices.

There is a noticeable change in the personality of the members because of their interactions with many stakeholders. They go to different forums, participate in training on different themes and meet concerned members of institutions.

There has also been a shift in the position of women in the family owing to the increase in their knowledge related to livelihoods and government programmes. Women get recognition for their contribution to village development work although sometimes it is discouraged by family members because of the fear of the risks involved. In some families, women play a part in village-level work even though they do not get the consent of their *maalik* (master, in this case the husband). Villagers have started noticing the development work done by the women although some encourage it and others do not.

### Challenges and Initiatives of PRADAN Professionals

Many challenges await women's collectives and PRADAN professionals working with them. Issues that arise are complex, not just black and white issues, and their solutions are never simple. The literacy rate among the women of Singrauli district is approximately 36 per cent. This almost equals the lowest 'female-literate' districts of the country. Most of the women have no education and are hesitant about participating in village-level meetings or



about going somewhere. Many of these women think that they have very little to contribute.

Some women are reluctant to be part of collectives because they think it requires some basic education. PRADAN professionals have a tough time convincing them that collectivization is the only way to understand and resolve their problems, be it economic, social, political or environmental. Continuous discussions, however, on these topics in different platforms such as SHGs, village-level Clusters and, most important, during training programmes, have brought about a change in the thought processes of the community. Many community members have evolved as leaders. Today, a pool of dedicated leaders can be seen and their dedication is contagious.

There are many challenges in forming collectives. In the villagers' prior experience, many have come and looted money from them. So, it is hard to win their trust. Another challenge is the lack of banks and, therefore, a lack of bank literacy among villagers. Villagers often quote their experiences of having debts with banks whenever they become linked with them. Some people also believe that if they were to take a loan from banks, and they are unable to pay it back on time, their lands will be seized.

There are stereotypes about government programmes as well: "If MGNREGA work is done on our land, the government may seize our land in the future." Through continuous training and discussion, however, things are becoming clear and the villagers are moving ahead.

*PRADAN professionals have a tough time convincing them that collectivization is the only way to understand and resolve their problems, be it economic, social, political or environmental. Continuous discussions, however, on these topics in different platforms such as SHGs, village-level Clusters and, most important, during training programmes, have brought about a change in the thought processes of the community*

The other challenge is the villagers' engagement with various government officials. The villagers do not recognize or accept that their rights are their entitlement. They see themselves merely and only as receivers. But with increasing awareness, the villagers, led by the women, have started extending themselves and are availing of and sometimes even demanding their rights. However, some members are still stuck and do not participate in the activities of the collective due to family pressure or because of the prior experiences with the officials.

In the existing social structure, women are not supposed to speak up in the family or in community matters. The decisions are mostly taken by men. So, when PRADAN professionals work with the women with the objective of bringing change in the family and the community, it is resisted and discouraged by the men.

The final decision of inclusion in the collective is mostly taken by the men of the family. It becomes important, therefore, to make men understand the importance of women participating in village affairs. This has been often shared by SHG members, who have gone to other villages voluntarily, to form new SHGs.

Most men care only about the monetary benefits coming from the formation of these collectives. It takes time and effort to engage them in any discussions on building a perspective of village development through the collectives. This appeals to only some of them. It, therefore, becomes hard to bring the

whole village into the SHG fold. It takes patience and dedication to hear their problems and facilitate them in the search for solutions.

PRADAN works with the objective that many community problems can be solved when the community comes together, identifies the problem, shares the common vision and works to find a solution. The important first step, therefore, is to bring the community together.

Some of the villagers don't want to be in collectives because they think meetings take up a lot of time. If they were to utilize this time in other livelihood activities, it would be more beneficial for them. Some of them think that to be a part of the collective would mean that they have to go out of the village for training; that is restricted by the elders of the family. It is forbidden in most homes to leave the village for anything except household chores and health problems.

Important, therefore, it is to seed the idea in the community that personal problems of livelihood are connected with social and political problems. That the dysfunction of village level institutions can be effectively addressed by the collective must be impressed upon them.

It is not that the collective always succeeds or gets positive responses. Sometimes, the members have to bear abuses and threats. In Kasaiya village, when they protested against the PDS shopkeeper because he was giving less grain than their entitlement, he didn't listen. He told the villagers to do whatever they wanted. The women protested in front of the *sarpanch* but nothing happened.

*Important, therefore, it is to seed the idea in the community that personal problems of livelihood are connected with social and political problems. That the dysfunction of village-level institutions can be effectively addressed by the collective must be impressed upon them*

Sometimes, people have to stand up to their neighbours, who may be involved in malpractices. This is a very tough decision to take because it creates a lot of tension and could result in the souring of relationships. Villagers may then just let the situation be.

## Conclusion

Women of the collectives play a very crucial role in village development activities by participating in village-level institutions and strengthening them by creating more collectives, by increasing their outreach and making others feel their presence. Women are benefitting because it gives them confidence and a different perspective about village development. They raise new issues that need to be discussed. They talk about the changes in people's lives and are also concerned about the sustainable use of resources and their conservation. After the formation of the collectives, the women are more informed about government programmes/policies and their own rights and entitlements. Their knowledge of livelihood activities has also improved as they participate in related trainings and workshops.

Groups existed earlier as well, but their focus was mostly on livelihoods, savings and credit. Now, the focus has shifted to rights and entitlements. The PRADAN team recognized that every village has problems and the villagers work on them individually. A need was, therefore, felt to build the vision in the community about what kind of works could be done through collectives. For this, many visioning exercises were conducted at the village level. The community also felt the need for a federated body to deal with the larger problems.

Being a part of the collective has also improved the status of women in their families. They now have a say in the decision-making processes in their families; however, it is still a long way for this to become widespread. Women, who are a part of collectives, recognize the changes in their behaviour and confidence levels. They say that they have developed certain skills of communication because they get more chances now to communicate with other people, especially outsiders. They get to know more about the conditions of their neighbours, the villagers and those in other villages. The scope for peer-learning has increased. A feeling of solidarity has developed within the village. They know that they are strong enough to challenge and seek information from institutions, which are not working properly.

This is, however, not the case in all the families in the village because there are many

challenges. It also cannot be said that all women, who are part of women's collectives are doing well and are part of the change in the village because there are still challenges in coming out of their homes and becoming a part of any training or visioning exercises for the community. Some of the women limit themselves to group meetings, and savings and credit activities.

In the coming years, the focus of the team will be on building the leadership of those SHG members, who participate less in the public forums. This will help increase the leadership pool; these leaders will then be equipped with information that may prove useful in finding a solution for a problem identified by the community. The increased leadership pool will also be beneficial in increasing the strength of the community by adding other members from areas where such change has not taken place.

# Volunteerism: A New Approach

SAMIR SETHY, ROSHAN RAJU, NILAYA NAYAK, DEBENDRA NEGI AND SRIHARI CHITY

*Introducing a new approach to community mobilization, the Nandapur team decided to use volunteers to bring a large part of the community that had been left out of the development process, knowing that if normative and cultural changes were to take place, large-scale mobilization is imperative*

**Background:** The Nandapur team is located in Koraput district in South Odisha region, where PRADAN initiated its work in November 2009. Koraput is part of the infamous KBK (Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi) region of Odisha that is known for its abject poverty, remoteness, under-development and a high level of Maoist activity. It is one of the least literate districts among all the districts in which PRADAN works. It ranks 631 among the 640 districts surveyed in India.

By March 31, 2015, the Koraput team was able to mobilize around 7,000 village women in 600 Self Help Groups (SHGs), and helped raise the income level of around 2,500 families through improved agriculture. In addition, in collaboration with two other Non Government Organizations (NGOs), the team was able to facilitate the promotion of another 400 SHGs and introduce 2,000 families to improved agriculture practices.

The team has also been associated with government flagship programmes such as the Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme Plus (OTELP Plus) and the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) with a fair bit of success. During the restructuring of PRADAN, the Koraput team was divided into two teams, that is, Lamtaput and Nandapur.

This write-up encapsulates some of the new approaches that have been taken up, as well as some of the old approaches that were tried differently by the Nandapur team.

### Bringing Women into the SHG fold through Community-to-Community Extension:

With the restructuring of the Nandapur team, a new approach to community mobilization was put in place. Earlier, the responsibility of promoting and nurturing SHGs rested with the Executives of PRADAN. When planning for the promotion of new SHGs, the team thought that the Executives were constrained for time.

With its new approach, the team began to bring into its fold a large part of the community that had been left out. Large-scale mobilization was necessary, if cultural and normative change had to be brought about in a short period of time.

After intense brainstorming, the team came up with the following strategies to bring women into the SHG fold on a large scale.

First, the team discussed what the journey for the old SHG members had been like in the last three to four years; they were asked what they had gained by being in the SHG and what changes had these SHGs had brought to their life. We also asked them about the village women, who were not yet part of the SHG in their own village and in the villages nearby, where PRADAN had not yet reached. The team impressed upon the women that families that were not part of the SHGs fold may require some support in joining SHGs. When asked if the women would be willing to help others, who were left out, some agreed. The team arranged the transport and the members went to visit the villages. They made groups of two or three and went to different hamlets and gathered the women and men for a meeting. They shared their experiences of being part of

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SHGs and motivated women to form SHGs of their own.

Second, in villages where Village Organizations (VOs) had been formed, the team discussed the issue of those of the same village or of nearby villages, who had not joined SHGs. The team told the women how important it was to bring everyone on

a similar platform so there could be holistic change in their villages. If they had benefited from SHGs, was it not their responsibility to involve those women, who were not part of it as well?

In some villages, the team got a lukewarm response. However, in many villages, the SHG women responded positively and understood the importance of bringing all families into the SHG fold. They realized that the addition of these families would make their institution stronger as well. The increased membership would lead to more negotiating capabilities with the stakeholders.



***Didis of Aanlaghati village explaining about SHG modalities to women in Mulda village***

Third, women from the new villages were brought to the nucleus villages to experience how SHGs functioned. They took back their learning and, in turn, influenced the women there, inspiring them to join the new SHGs being formed.



During the discussion on the issues of women who had not joined SHGs, some women said that they knew of villages of relatives where there are no such SHGs, and that they were interested in helping their relatives. Transport was arranged for these women, who went and persuade their relatives and their neighbours to join the SHG fold.

*During the discussion on the issues of women who had not joined SHGs, some women said that they knew of villages of relatives where there are no such SHGs, and that they were interested in helping their relatives*

SHGs were a part of each group. However, this did not have the desired impact at the village level. Only some members of the village attended such forums, and the percolation of knowledge at the village level was limited. In addition, attendance was an issue in such meetings through the year.

Through these approaches, in very little time, a large number of women became SHG members. This helped in the geometric progression of the number of SHGs in the area. These increased from 130 SHGs (2013–14) to 270 SHGs (2014–15) to 510 SHGs (2015–16). In 2016–17, the hope is that the same trend continues and around 8,500 women join around 750 SHGs.

**Evolution of VOs in Place of Area-level Clusters:** Earlier, on the secondary level of community institutions, Cluster-level groups were formed, in a 5-km radius, and 10–15

Development discourses at the team level looked at how to strengthen these forums so that these are more effective in bringing about societal change. A new idea emerged. The suggestion was that secondary level tiers be promoted at the village level. This may help increase participation and may also evolve as a forum of overall village development.

The question was: When was the best time to form secondary level institutions? The prevailing practice was that SHGs were formed first, and after they stabilized over six months, and if the need for a secondary level tier arose, Clusters were formed. However, in most



*VO meeting in S.Pujhariput village, Malibelgaon panchayat, Nandapur block, Koraput*

cases this was not an organic development. As facilitators, PRADAN triggered the process.

Another thought that emerged in the developmental discourses was to seed the concept of the village-level organizations from the very first day, with whatever primary groups were being formed. It was also suggested that the task of saturation of the village, that is, taking all the women into the SHG, be left to the VO.

The old way of doing things was to start with the savings and credit, and gradually move into the field of livelihoods and other activities. In the new approach, it was decided to leave the stage to the village women from the very first day; they were allowed to discuss anything that they thought was pertinent to their lives.

This approach worked miracles. It has broken all old conventions and textbook knowledge. It shows how, with a little encouragement, village women can start taking charge of their lives and the village, without the initial gestation period.

At Nandapur, in February 2015, formation of SHGs in the Mali Belgaon *panchayat* began. SHGs and VOs were formed simultaneously in three to four villages. The savings and credit activity was begun immediately at the SHG level; in addition, as mentioned earlier, the women were also asked to discuss whatever issues they thought were pertinent. They were asked to list the areas in which they would like to bring some change and how they thought that change could be brought about. The women were also given training on citizenship and governance, which included an understanding

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of the rights and responsibilities of a citizen, the various schemes available to them as citizens, the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders such as the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), and the different line departments of the government.

There were some initial hiccups as the participation in the VO meeting was not uniform across the villages. But some of the VOs started holding their meetings fortnightly. They identified the issues affecting their lives such

as lack of drinking water, electricity, roads, etc., and gradually began to approach *panchayat* officials by attending nodal meetings. *Panchayat* officials were taken aback by the presence of women in the meetings; initially, they ignored the women, hoping it was a one-time attendance. However, the SHG women continued to approach them in a series of nodal meetings and began to follow-up on their applications. The results are there for all to see. New open wells and tube wells have been sanctioned, and implemented. Impressed by the perseverance of the SHG women, the *panchayat* came forward and opened up some road construction work, to engage the women.

In the meantime, the power of solidarity was being discussed in VO meetings. They were made aware of the advantages of uniting and demanding for their rights. The village had been able to witness so much change just because the women had become aware and involved. They realized that there was tremendous potential if a large number of women got together under one umbrella. There were discussions about the value of extending the self to others, of supporting other struggling villagers to achieve what they had as a VO, and of including the women

of their own villages and the neighbouring villages, who were not yet a part of the collective.

Inspired by their success, VOs began extending themselves to the nearby villages and started promoting new SHGs and VOs. Within six months, nearly 52 SHGs were formed, covering around 600 women out of a total of 1200 women in the *panchayat*. Currently, 10 VOs are in place, holding regular village meetings. With the principle of increasing their strength and solidarity, the women have constituted a *Gram Panchayat* Level Federation (GPLF). This was unimaginable a year ago. In 2015–16, there were 40 VOs holding regular meetings. In 2016–17, the team has planned to bring 75 VOs to such levels.

**Creation of Voluntary Resource Persons (VRPs):** The role of Community Service Providers (CSPs) or Community Resource

*There were discussions about the value of extending the self to others, of supporting other struggling villagers to achieve what they had as a VO, and of including the women of their own villages and the neighbouring villages, who were not yet a part of the collective*

Persons (CRPs) has been important in helping expand the reach and manage operations. The CSPs/CRPs provided a service/training to the community and, in return, the community paid them; they are accountable to the community. However, largely, these cadres have been used as extended hands of PRADAN professionals, and have helped in implementing projects and have

imparted training on PRADAN's behalf and, in return, have been paid directly by PRADAN, or through Clusters, Village Development Associations (VDAs) and Federations and have, by and large, remained accountable to PRADAN.

In Nandapur, the situation was no different. Moreover, because the literacy rate is very low (almost nil among women), the CSPs/CRPs engaged were mostly men. Their main role was to follow up on our SHG and agriculture



*A volunteer imparting Group Process training in Dasaput village, Kumargandhana gram panchayat, Nandapur*

activities. In the beginning of 2015–16, however, two ideas started taking shape through different developmental discourses within the team.

Questions were raised about why illiterate women could not be considered as Resource Persons (trainers) and why the more articulate women could not extend themselves to educate other women?

To ground the first idea, it was necessary to design training modules that would require no reading and writing at all, and to create material that women Volunteer Resource Persons (trainers) could use at the village level to educate the other village women. Picture Led Discussion (PLD) tools that had been developed earlier, on themes such as the SHG, came in handy for the process. We started developing more PLD tools for other themes as well.

In VO meetings, we asked the SHG women to volunteer for learning so that they could, in turn, help others to learn. We also asked the VOs to nominate persons, whom it thought could help them learn about various aspects of life. There was some apprehension among the women. They wondered how they would impart training to others when they could not read and write. But after they were assured that no reading or writing would be required for learning and imparting training, some women (usually one from each VO) either volunteered or were nominated by the others. And, thus, began the journey of creating a pool of VRPs (trainers).

To ground the second idea, the value of volunteerism was used. Discussions were held at length about how some people are more fortunate than others and how it is important to help those who are less fortunate than us and how helping others would give

us satisfaction. The consequences of good karma were discussed at length. It made many women come forward to take up the role of VRPs.

Measures to keep the workload of the volunteers to a level, which they could do happily, without facing much resistance from their family members were discussed. Also, as they were volunteers, a decision was taken that they would not be monitored by PRADAN. It was left to the VOs to take care of the monitoring roles and they were told that if someone was not able to give the required time as a volunteer, the VOs had the liberty to change the person.

In 2015–16, forty such women underwent training at the PRADAN office in Nandapur. They attended the training every fortnight, and imparted the same in their villages. They have gone through two phases of training on group processes, and savings and credit, six phases of training on agriculture, four phases of training on governance and citizenship, one phase of training on gender, and they are currently imparting the same at the village level with the help of SHG leaders.

**Leaders are leading the way:** Educating some volunteers, however, and expecting that they learn and take the entire load of educating others was a little too much to expect. Therefore, the leadership group of the VO (one representative from each SHG) was entrusted with the responsibility of making sure that the trainings percolate down to all SHG members of the village. The decision was taken at the VO level about which day which SHG or group of SHGs would be given training. Whereas it was the responsibility of the VRP to impart the training, it was the responsibility of the leaders to organize trainings. In this way, much of the work of the volunteers was shared by the leaders.



In some villages, the leadership groups were not active, and therefore, the VRPs found it difficult to conduct trainings. It was, thus, decided to conduct leadership training with all the selected VO leaders so that they understood their roles well and acted accordingly. Three residential trainings were conducted for these leaders from all the VOs where VRPs were engaged.

Observing the current VRPs, other women are now evincing interest in attending trainings and imparting them. To share responsibility, it was discussed that VRPs and Leaders should work on a rotational basis. This year, accordingly, a new bunch of VRPs are being groomed, who will impart the training at the village level with a new set of leaders.

#### **Reflections of VRPs and PRADAN Executives:**

From time to time we conducted meetings to consolidate the learning of the VRPs. Here are some glimpses into their experiences over the past year:

#### **Lessons learned**

- ♦ Group processes: We have learned how to conduct meetings, about the norms of SHGs, how to address topics beyond savings and credit such as village problems.
- ♦ Agriculture: Earlier, in agriculture we were not able to identify crop diseases and their remedies. We have now learned about the different diseases and the medicines we need to apply.
- ♦ Citizenship: We have learned about our rights and responsibilities and the roles of different stakeholders such as PRIs.
- ♦ Gender discrimination: We have learned about the patriarchal system that is impeding the growth of women.

#### **Learning that strikes you the most**

- ♦ Earlier, when we were doing agriculture we were following instructions; now we are learning about agriculture and are guiding people.
- ♦ MGNREGA and its nuances.
- ♦ The patriarchal system and its effect on women.

#### **Experience that you liked most**

- ♦ When some of the men ask us questions to clarify their doubts to understand some aspects of agriculture.
- ♦ In some cases, after our training, the VO approached the *panchayat* and we were able to access drinking water and even roads for the village.

#### **Facilitating factors during the last one year**

- ♦ Banner and picture training helped us to facilitate with ease, and members learned about medicines for different diseases and pests.
- ♦ Getting a high yield, after applying nutrients and pesticides on our advice, is making the members happy. At the time of any disease or pest attack, the villagers come to us to ask about which medicine to apply.
- ♦ When village women understand our training and take action, we feel very happy.
- ♦ After acquiring knowledge, we apply that knowledge for our own good.

#### **Hindering factors during this period**

- ♦ Sometimes we had to neglect household chores because we had to go for training.



There are a large number of SHGs that we have to train..

- ♦ Some women commit to the VO that they will apply the learning but do not follow what they have learned.
- ♦ It becomes hectic when the leaders do not support us and when we have to call people to come for training.
- ♦ Sometimes, it became very difficult to make the *didis* understand the content of the training.
- ♦ In some cases, the *didis* sprayed pesticides and medicines but ultimately it was in vain because the plants died due to heavy rain
- ♦ We feel sad that in spite of taking so many effort, many women do not understand and they take no action in the area of governance citizenship or gender for their own development and dignity

#### Things we want to learn in the future

- ♦ Seed selection: We would like to know which is hybrid and which seeds are good for our soil.
- ♦ We produce a large number of agricultural products but we do not get proper rates when we sell them. We would like to know what we can do to get better prices.
- ♦ There are other developmental issues in the villages such as pension schemes, health issues and education; we would like to know what to do about them.

After these consolidations, the team held discussions periodically, through the year, and took a different course of action, when necessary, as described below:

1. As the service is given purely on a voluntary basis, the lower the load for women, the better. VRPs are able to give time for up to

three or four SHGs happily; beyond that, they begin to face difficulties. To address the situation, the team has decided to train one VRP for every three or four SHGs.

2. In smaller villages, the VO was formed by SHGs of two or three nearby villages. Here too, the VRP raised concerns about having to leave her own village and go to the other villages on a regular basis. This led to many of her household chores remaining unattended. After discussions, it was decided to have one VRP for each village.
3. In some cases, the VRPs had to organize meetings as well as impart training. The community soon decided that volunteers would not organize meetings. VO leaders would be responsible for organizing these meetings, and volunteers would only conduct trainings. The team conducted leadership training for all the leaders so that they could play their roles effectively. This decreased the workload on VRPs.

#### Strategies to Strengthen VRP system in 2016–17

##### (Hatia-based Volunteer Development System)

PRADAN's reach spread to almost 150 villages; going by last year's (2015) strategy, it would need to invest in developing at least 150 VRPs. In addition, we discussed the following:

1. Women of far-off *panchayats* find it difficult to come to the PRADAN office to receive training.
2. To reach the central trainings at PRADAN office, women leave their homes early in the morning and returned late in the evening. A decision was taken that travel costs and some food cost would be reimbursed, that is, on an average, Rs

100 per training would be given to each woman. Therefore, two trainings a month and almost 20 trainings in a year for 150 women would cost Rs 3,00,000. This was costly and may not be sustainable.

3. In some cases, PRADAN found that when only one woman learns and, in turn, imparts the training in the villages, the quality of the training becomes diluted. Therefore, instead of giving training to one volunteer per village, it was decided to train one volunteer per group. At the village level, the volunteer could choose to conduct training alone or take the help of volunteers of other SHGs.

Looking at all these aspects, the team has decided to decentralize the system. Because volunteers are not paid, the training would be held at a place the volunteers regularly frequent for their personal needs. The *hatia* (weekly market) was considered most suitable because the women went there regularly and, therefore, it would not be an additional burden on them to reach it.

For the two *panchayats*, there is at least one weekly *hatia* that the women access for groceries. The following table shows the list of the *hatias* and the number of SHGs that access them.

Through this strategy, PRADAN expected to train at least 500 women volunteers in various aspects of life on a fortnightly basis; in turn, they would be able to conduct training in the villages.

**Agriculture with a difference:** In Nandapur, agriculture is the major source of livelihood for the villagers, followed by wage labour and migration. Income from the forest is minimal. Therefore, we also have been focussing on helping the community to strengthen agriculture.

Up to now, even though this activity was being conducted by SHGs, both men and women participated in the training events; somehow, men took the centre stage and women the backseat.

This year, a lot of thought went into how this activity could be implemented fully by women and for women. It was also an experiment to see if women could extend themselves to participate in the activity.

With this in mind, this year, the VOs were left to take care of the intervention completely. Volunteers were trained in PLD tools, and they were given the same material to disseminate the knowledge at the village level. The VO

Days	Name of the Hatia	Name of the Panchayat It Caters	Number of SHGs It Caters to
Monday	Gunthaput	Gunthaput, Subai	40
	Raising	Raising, Kasandi	80
Tuesday	Paliba	Kumarpaliba	70
Wednesday	Nandapur	Khurji, Nandapur, Hikimput	150
Friday	Pujariput	Malibelgaon	70
Saturday	Thuba	Thuba, Bheja	50
Sunday	Tiakanta	Tikarpada	50
		Total	510



*Standing tomato crop of Moni Bhoi didi of Muliaput village, Khurji GP, Nandapur*

took the responsibility to arrange the training and to help the SHG women adopt various improved practices. In addition, the VO was responsible for monitoring whether proper measures were being taken or not.

The model worked well. The penetration of knowledge to the women was much higher than in the earlier years. Each VO had printed 3'x 2' IEC (pictures) to refer to, for the Package of Practice as well as for Pest Management. VRPs conducted the training with ease and SHG women found the pictures interesting and remained glued to the material during training.

Participation in agriculture, following this, increased to almost three times the previous year. Of a total reach of 3,000 families, around 2,200 families used the improved agriculture practices and increased their income substantially, that is, in the range of Rs 20,000 to Rs 60,000 for *kharif* (2015).

And to our immense satisfaction, all these achievements were taken care of by the women volunteers, SHG members and the leaders themselves.

This may be the way forward for the years to come. Through the method discussed earlier, substantial agriculture training is being planned with at least 5,500 families during 2016–17.

Change within leads change without: After numerous developmental discourses at the team level, a consensus was reached that extension out there cannot be achieved without achieving the same inside the team. To put theories of a renewed stance and approach into practice would require a lot of brainstorming, innovation and experimentation. All the people have to actively participate in the whole process to convert these theories into reality. This is a path less travelled by almost all of us; therefore, before we try to bring the normative change in the villages in which we

work, the extension to each other in the team itself is non-negotiable.

### **Lanjigarh Team Visit to Koraput (Nandapur and Lamtaput)**

Listening to our experiences in different forums, other teams of South Odisha Development Cluster visited us through the year. The following is an excerpt from the sharing of a visiting team:

“As a team, we have learned a lot. The overall experience was enriching and it has opened a window to innovative ideas for us. The Koraput team’s major focus on nurturing and strengthening SHGs under the lens of the spiritual and the concept of ‘relatedness well-being’, is stirring. It was well-demonstrated when the women of Koraput SHGs shared how satisfied they feel when they extended themselves to vulnerable sections.

“Also it has been interesting to see how villagers envision a better quality of life because of their association with, and being a part of, the collectives in large numbers and to see how they have formed new groups as a token of their contribution to the holistic well-being of their life, village *panchayat* and block. The model, which abolishes payments to the CSP or the CRP and adopts the concept of voluntary rotational leadership, is conducive to knowledge transfer at a bigger platform and holds within it the power of change within the community. Presumably, this approach will minimize inequality within the group, which tends to happen if only one woman is chosen to be trained. Taking stock of the status of the activities within an SHG is another strengthening pillar. The formation of a Village Level Women’s Organization (VLWO) and catalyzing the positive energy of the women into fruitful results, leads to the development of an independent sustainable institution.

“The overall learning around the SHG and its promotion is entrenched at the individual as well as the team levels.

“Regarding agriculture, as a team we realized how important it was to identify traditional agricultural practices and make technological advances within that domain, rather than introducing a non-practised crop. This was evident by the huge patches of potatoes and ginger sown in line as per the crop POP seen throughout the exposure visits, where potatoes and ginger are traditional crops of the area.

“Post the exposure visit, changes are clearly visible in the community also. The SHG members, who were part of the visit, took the responsibility of organizing a meeting of all SHG members in each *panchayat*. They worked out different strategies in the area of saturation and large-scale agriculture promotion. At the *gram panchayat*-level meeting, a demonstration was held of the different tiers of SHG promotion and nurturing, after re-organization (SHG, VO, GPLF and block-level Federation), and the role of the CRP in this process. A block-level meeting of five to ten members from each *panchayat* was also organized; and they plan to organize all the women of Lanjigarh block through large-scale SHG promotion.”

**Conclusion:** When the Lanjigarh team visited Nandapur, one of the visiting Executives shared that this is what she had been dreaming of for a long time. She exclaimed, “The Nandapur team is actually working on an exit strategy. We had never thought along these lines.” After her sharing, it struck us that it was actually possible to work on an exit strategy. And it is indeed possible to work on an exit plan by 2022, instead of working on a perspective plan up to 2022.

# PRI Elections in Jharkhand: Making Women Count

SHACHI SETH

*Taking their place as representatives in PRIs, women in villages take the first step to strengthening rural populations by fighting for their rights and working towards development, self-sufficiency and equality*

As the oldest system of local governance in the nation, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have held a traditional stronghold in the village life of India. Chiefly regarded as the space for conflict resolution and maintenance of order at the village level, these institutions were the receptacles of the Gandhian dream of Swaraj, or self-governance. As India embraced modernity in its institutions, PRIs were moulded to fit an agenda that went beyond mere arbitration and guidance.

PRIs have undergone changes in terms of the process of choosing members, their duties and roles. In the current socio-political context, the chief objective of democratic states is development. Institutions of local governance, therefore, become crucial for addressing issues of the rural population, especially as decentralization becomes a buzzword in search of good governance.

In Jharkhand, Panchayati Raj elections were held for the first time in 2011 although the state was formed in 2000. There was a surge in political participation by women and 56 per cent of the seats were won by women. The number of victorious women exceeded the 50 per cent that is reserved for them—a sign of encouragement for those working to better their lives.



The second elections, the results of which were declared recently (2015), became an impetus to empower women further. The PRADAN office in Ranchi conducted a series of workshops over two days (January 29–30) on 'Strengthening Local Governance: Reflections and Way Forward by SHG collectives'. This was a follow-up to PRADAN's recent interventions in strengthening the governance networks in rural areas. A series of such meetings and workshops were organized for those interested, chiefly, the women representatives of *mahila mandals* from Jharkhand. The workshops are aimed at increasing awareness and involvement in PRIs among rural women, especially those that are a part of collectives, Federations, and *mahila mandals*.

After the results of the elections for PRIs were declared, the workshop served to review and assess the progress that women had made, and to shed some light on the path ahead. The core objectives of the workshop were to record the women's experiences of the elections (post the training provided by PRADAN at the previous workshop) and to guide them for the upcoming challenges.

## LEARNINGS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The theme of the workshop was *Jan Banaam Dhan* (People vs. Money). It focussed on breaking the legacy of money and muscle power as the decisive factors in *panchayati raj* elections. The workshops conducted by PRADAN acted as seminal spaces for the women to understand their political rights. The aim was to motivate women to participate in large numbers, both as candidates and as

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citizens, and to make choices that benefit the community in the long run. The choice of these candidates was to be made by the people and the money was to be crowd-funded rather than distributed, to buy votes.

The acute scarcity of women representatives was problematic and contributed to the unequal opportunities presented to women. The experiences recounted underscored a certain set of patterns, with some

distinct examples of bribery, defamation, and blackmail, clearly outlining the odds stacked against the rather powerless, individual women. This despite the fact that the laws in India offer reservation to women in representative roles and the Jharkhand Panchayat Act 2005 has a provision for women's reservation of 50 per cent.

Jharkhand saw a relatively high participation by women, which included many success stories. Despite such affirmative action being taken at the policy level, when it comes down to implementation, the power in the hands of women is negligible or limited, at very best. The common practice in seats reserved for women was that candidates are often wives or close aides of the powerful male politicians. The records may show a female statistic going up; however, often when it comes to decision-making, the power lies with the male politician backing the candidate. The accepted practice for a woman *mukhiya* or ward member is to continue handling domestic chores and 'duties' while the husband attends functions, meetings, and village affairs. On the flipside, the women associated with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), or women's organizations, show a significant revulsion to such proxy *mukhiyas*.

Besides gender, a crucial factor in determining who opts to become a candidate is her/his financial status. People with little or no money are usually not expected to win, or even stand for elections. If one is to aim at better transparency and representation and better governance, the role of money needs to be minimized in determining capacity. One of the candidates from Champadih village of Padma block, Neelam Devi, who lost by a mere 43 votes, recounts a *Shakti Pradarshan* (power rally) by her opponent that included over 50 SUVs and 100 motorcycles. Such displays of power, often, sway the vote of the public, who are convinced that the opponent has enough support to clearly win, and therefore, they do not wish to waste their votes on a candidate who would lose. This poses a rather complicated hurdle for a candidate of modest means, who must garner enough faith and support to neutralize the effect of such displays. After Neelam Devi saw these rallies, she too got nervous; she decided to focus on organizing the women. Even after she lost, in a spirit of true sportsmanship, Neelam Devi participated in the celebratory procession for the woman candidate who won.

Some of the *didis* such as Neelam Devi, who stood for elections, were entirely crowd-funded; a few were pressurized into spending a substantial sum of money in order to help level the playing field for themselves. The problem with this expenditure is the pressure it creates to earn back the money. Neelam Devi observes, "Those who spend money want to earn their money back once they win. It is but natural. Therefore, it is best to elect a candidate, who does not have this conflict of interest between private needs and the needs of the community." The idea captures the core issue in a simple understanding of human behaviour, yet does not necessarily manage

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to seep into the general psyche enough, to drastically change the status quo.

Additionally, social taboos and the fear of public shame sometimes manage to sway women into withdrawing support from such candidates. Whereas the success of the intervention is not to be measured by the number of seats won but by the change in ideology and mobilization that took place, one wonders whether a week-long training for a handful of members of society is sufficient to break the conditioning of ages.

The training provided by PRADAN hoped to break the norms in a two-pronged manner, in which one who is a candidate does not give money and a voter does not accept money in exchange for votes. If this spreads among the people and takes deep root in their political choices, one can expect to see changes in the system. Second, it hoped to bring to the fore the issues of women's development and rights. Often, the mere creation of institutions and practices is not sufficient to bring change. The process needs to be made more sustainable by increasing the stake of the women such that they themselves are motivated to participate and stand for their rights.

## STORIES OF WOMEN

Draupadi Devi, Ward Member from Barhi block of Koderma district, narrates how she battled both these evils. She had a strong desire to stand for the post of the *mukhiya*; she faced tremendous pressure from men politicians, who asked her to stick to Ward Membership, which she had earlier won uncontested. When she tried to fight back, they publicly mocked her for being illiterate and questioned her abilities, given that she was uneducated. Draupadi Devi had been managing Self-Help

Groups (SHGs) for years but the fact that she was illiterate managed to sway a number of women. Whereas men were accepted in political positions, irrespective of their education, women found that they often needed to use being educated as a compensatory factor for their gender.

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The male politicians argued that even if a woman were chosen, it would be her husband who would do most of the work. Therefore, it would make more sense to choose a man in the first place. In a set-up where situations such as these are commonplace, it was not tough to convince the people that Draupadi Devi was not the correct choice. Draupadi Devi ended up spending above a lakh of rupees on elections and underwent verbal humiliation at the hands of the powerful men of the village. Her experience reflects the challenges that often come up when trying to change a system that has been working in a specific way since ancient times.

The formation of SHGs has gone a long way in empowering women in rural areas in India. However, as in most patriarchal societies, this sudden surge in awareness and empowerment of women is looked down upon and actively discouraged. Many women recounted incidents, which clearly revealed that one of the problems was the defamation they faced because women stepping out of the house to engage in public discussions ruffled the feathers of quite a few men. SHG women often found themselves at the receiving end of public taunts and were seriously reprimanded by family elders and their spouses. During elections, these multiplied because of the earlier unconditional acceptance of male domination in the political arena. In a space almost entirely occupied by a certain class of men, the

sudden prospect of poor women entering the political arena resulted in a lack of acceptance and understanding.

A second-time *mukhiya* from Porna Tham in Koderma block, Pushpa Devi, garnered 1,680 votes with a lead of over 1,000 votes from her nearest rival. She

was 22 when she stood for the *panchayat* elections for the first time in 2011, the first PRI elections that Jharkhand saw after a break of over three decades. The fact that she was educated was a big reason for her family and the villagers supporting her in this move, and fortunately the *mukhiya's* post in her constituency was declared as reserved for women. After winning the election the first time, she took the initiative of ensuring that the villagers were informed of various government schemes and that their problems were conveyed to the block office. Pushpa Devi was not a part of any Federation then.

Unlike the second election, where she had a strong support base of the local women, her first stint cost a large amount of money. Given that it is an anomaly to hope for a zero-cost election in a system where votes are commonly bought in exchange for favours, both in cash and kind, this is not surprising. Mobilizing crowds for canvassing often comes at a cost, coupled with the need for vehicles, posters, banners and loudspeakers.

The workshops on self-governance conducted periodically by PRADAN and the constant reminders to unite and participate in state institutions had a significant impact on the people in the area. The women of the village recognized Pushpa's willingness and ability to work and came together to support her in her journey. This was a turning point and Pushpa Devi managed to ride on the support freely

offered to her by the women, despite the political pressure. In fact, the women of the *mahila mandal* took a formal pledge to re-elect her as the *mukhiya*.

The ideological aim to create a dent in the system of money-determined politics bore fruit when Pushpa Devi managed to win her second nomination as *mukhiya* spending much less than the amount she had spent the first time. Her personal manifesto included better access to pension schemes and avenues for irrigation. The topography of the region does allow for water to be retained and the monsoons had been erratic for several years. Most of the agriculture in the area is rain-fed and migration of men to cities for work is a common practice. Women often migrate too but often have to return to the village after bearing a child because there is no one to look after them. Irrigation schemes, therefore, became essential in order to bring development to the area. Pushpa Devi's plans to make changes in these aspects, her involvement with the villagers, her reaching out to women, and her constant efforts in following innumerable bureaucratic procedures were noticed by the local women.

Nonetheless, in this fight against an established system, there are many hurdles. A woman from the Federation, who voted for Pushpa Devi, recounts that when the men heard the women discussing Pushpa Devi's nomination, they spoke of her failure to carry out her domestic duties. This was a common complaint about women—their involvement in public activities was often seen as their failure in their domestic roles. The men followed the women around at meetings, passing derogatory comments and taunts, in an attempt to coerce the women into reconsidering their choice. Involvement

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In rural areas, where the oral tradition has strong roots, informal conversations are often a major source of communication. Malicious gossip, a common political tool, creates the possibility of social ostracism and, therefore, acts as a strong deterrent to women stepping out, for fear of bringing discredit to their family's image and honour.

## THE ROLE OF SHGs

That the women participating in the workshop were from the districts around Ranchi, where PRADAN has made multiple interventions and the SHGs have had a fair amount of success, is noteworthy. A visit to Koderma district of the North Chhota Nagpur region, reveals that these problems are still evident. The women of the area have created avenues of financial capacity for themselves and are more aware. Most villages have multiple SHGs, formed by various NGOs and institutions. Women now have a strong base to fight unwelcome social practices, with support from other women of their Federation. In the early 90s, when PRADAN started working in districts such as Koderma, women had little say in their own lives.

PRADAN initiated programmes chiefly to grant women this control and choice over their own lives. SHGs run on a spirit of unity. He notes that a mere increase in income is not sufficient to better the lives of these women. When

domestic violence continues to be a major form of abuse that women face, merely having more avenues for livelihoods has minimal impact. As the income of the household increased, alcohol consumption also increased. Rather than spending on nutrition, education, and creation of assets, the additional income is being used as the man of the house chooses to.

In Khunti district, one of the Development Practitioners, Smruti, wondered whether the empowerment that women seemed to have gained over the years was solely due to the increase in income or due to an ideological shift in the attitudes of society. Perhaps, the atrocities towards women have reduced partly because of the contribution of women to the income of the family and partly because of the fear that the men feel of being surrounded by the women of the *mahila mandal*. Is the change sufficient and sustainable?

This is a common challenge in the attempt to establish gender equality, wherein processes are put in place so as to financially strengthen women without creating an atmosphere of equality irrespective of financial status. As Avijit says, "We need to first help women make their presence felt and stand up for what is right, rather than merely use SHGs to implement financial activities. SHGs can and should be used to change patterns of thinking, and not be just a monetary tool of development practice." Most development programmes aim for tangible results that create avenues for market entry and consider this as the panacea for most problems, especially poverty.

Programmes such as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) use SHGs in a specifically programmed way and micro-manage the activities undertaken. These do not necessarily

*Was the empowerment that women seemed to have gained over the years or solely due to the increase in income or due to an ideological shift in the attitudes of society?*

develop shared understanding, sense of community, or common good. The idea, often, is to merely bring about a statistical-economical change instead of altering the ideology and strengthening the rights of the population. The nature of

democratic politics seems to be that somehow most welfare schemes end with the creation of beneficiaries, instead of attempting to create capability and citizenship.

For example, SHGs are a seminal tool; if they are used to alter the approach of the local population to their own lives rather than to add it to a list of activities used for rural development, it would bring about cracks in patriarchal systems. In their very essence, SHGs are a platform for women to congregate, collect and create a collective identity of strength such that they can break out from the individual and social exploitations that they face. Often, so deeply are the women entrenched in the web of patriarchy that domestic abuse and demands for dowry are normalized. The women, often themselves, propagate these as acceptable ways to control their husbands and children.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE PRI MEMBERS

In a society where practices of gender-based discrimination, corruption, bribery, malpractice are normalized, the challenges to bringing about change are manifold. The Panchayati Raj elections, therefore, are a mere tool in the larger picture, which aims at holistic development, community participation, and the creation of a more sustainable and egalitarian society.

In the workshop conducted by PRADAN on January 28–29, 2016, the success stories recounted of women were followed by a



reminder that it was not the end of the challenge. The elected women were briefed about their duties and responsibilities, and the procedures they needed to follow in order to fulfill most of them. The women were informed of their rights as voters and members of the *gram sabha*, as well as their duties as aware citizens. The *panchayats* were encouraged to step out of their web of solving land issues and family conflicts, and participate more in creating avenues for uplifting community.

When women voters were asked to list their expectations of those who win elections, issues such as awareness about policies, removal of social evils, providing facilities for irrigation, better health facilities, elimination of middle-men and *thekedaars*, transparency, integration of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Public Distribution System (PDS) into the *gram sabha*, employment opportunities, etc. came up. To a *mukhiya* or a Ward Member working alone, this is a formidable list to achieve. The women were inspired to organize themselves so as to support their representative in her efforts to achieve these goals. Following procedures such as attending the *gram sabha*, giving complaints in writing, keeping an eye out for corruption and subsequently bringing it up in the *gram sabha* were underlined as the duties for members of village units. The women were encouraged to work as a unit and support each other in order to eliminate the *bichaulia raj* (the rule of the intermediaries) and to claim their rights.

The work of a member of these institutions is huge in scope and limited in resources. The women in these positions need to stay

highly motivated and stand up to the system at intervals, in order to ensure timely delivery of policies. They not only need to deal with the *babus* and the officials that the rural population often fears, but also interact continually with the community. The ability to perceive and understand the community's needs and to bridge the gap between the state and its citizens is a continuous process.

## CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj elections are a step towards better engagement with the state so that the rural people can fight for their rights and take their problems to the state through their representatives. What is necessary to make this process successful in its objective of strengthening rural populations is the involvement of all communities and strata of society. Essential it is to break out of a stagnant system of the rich and the powerful making choices for their own benefit in the name of development. Also essential it is that the poor, the women, and those that wish for the development of the community become active participants in the system.

The path to better governance is through setting up processes, enhancing awareness, and creating a system of checks and balances such that better transparency and participation is achieved. The community needs to come together and stand up against coercion, muscle power and bribery, and support their leader actively in making choices best suited to the sustainable development of a community and not just the vote bank. PRADAN's training programmes and workshops for the villagers are but small steps toward the achievement of a better and a just democracy.



*Exposure visit to Village Organisation meeting at village Badatankua, Mali Belgaon panchayat, Nandapur*

Women motivate a large part of the community that are left out. Everyone must be brought together on a similar platform so there can be holistic change in the villages. They thought, "If we have benefited from SHGs, is it not our responsibility to involve those women who were not part of it as well?"



# PRADAN



PRADAN is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. PRADAN works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of PRADAN's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. *NewsReach*, PRADAN's bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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

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