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# News Reach

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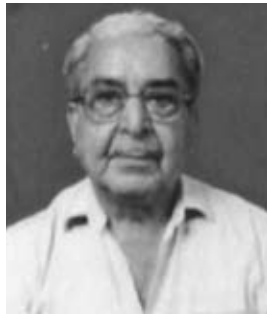
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1936 - 2012

## In memory of Colonel Brij Lal Verma

Col. B.L. Verma was born on 12 March 1936 in Hisar, in erstwhile Punjab. He completed his B.Sc. from Forman Christian College, Lahore, joined the Indian Army in 1949, and completed his Civil Engineering from the College of Military Engineering, Khadki, Pune. Col. Verma played a key role in the building of three forward air bases in Jamnagar, Bhatinda and Suratgarh as part of his many assignments in the Army. Col. Verma was also the Chef-De-Mission for the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany, where he led the Indian yachting team. He retired from the Army in 1976 and, in the same year, he joined Engineers India Ltd. and was in charge of the fertilizer plant project in Bhatinda. After two years, in 1978, he joined Action for Food Production (AFPRO), a socio-technical non-governmental organization based in Delhi and worked with the organization until 1988. He instituted many divisions in AFPRO and promoted water resource development with great enthusiasm in the days when it was a relatively new concept. He was a member of Rotary International and received the Paul P. Harris Award in recognition for his exceptional service. He was a founding member of the PRADAN Society and served as a member of the Pradan Governing Board from 1983 to 2001. Colonel B.L. Verma passed away on May 30, 2012. He is survived by his wife Mrs. Uma Verma and two sons.

### **Colonel Verma remembered by PRADAN colleagues:**

*"I am very sorry to hear this. AFPRO under the late JB Singh and Col Verma had a huge formative influence on me. In 1982, I first met Col Verma in Dev Pimpalgaon, and learnt for the first time what planned watershed development can do for dryland villages. In the years 1982 to 1986, must have dealt with at least four of AFPRO's then six Geo-hydrological Investigation Teams (GIT) doing bore-well siting in Gaya, Munger and Deoghar districts with the Ranchi GIT; in Wardha and Yavatmal with the Ahmednagar GIT; in Baran and Guna with the Udaipur GIT and in Tumkur with the Bangalore GIT. We must have drilled over one hundred bore-wells in sited locations, almost always successful, except in Wardha and Tumkur where we hit hard rock soon and didn't have the money to drill down to a water bearing 'Deccan Trap'. Col Verma was always kind in helping me to get the GITs over, even though in his own smiling, stern way, he would say, "No jumping the queue, my dear!" He took only a few minutes to say yes when I went to him in 1983 to ask if he would join PRADAN's founding Governing Board. In my youthful innocence, I explained the concept of "professional assistance for development action", to someone who embodied the concept. However, he was gracious. Col Verma was a stickler for participating in Board meetings.*

*His words that I quote most often was about PRADAN's good work in the villages: "Unseen, Unsung" (it was only three years old in 1986). He said in a Board meeting "Jangal mein mor nacha, kiske dekha? "Who has seen the peacock dancing in the jungle?" That is when I decided to write regularly to disseminate lessons from the field and we started PRADAN NewsReach. Col Verma remained active even after his second retirement, from AFPRO. Every time he came for the PRADAN Board meeting, he would bring some report or study that he was involved in and talk to us about it. He stepped off the Board after serving two terms, but always made it a point to come to the Annual General Meeting, joining the Board members just before lunch for a cheerful glass of beer and stories from recent field trips.*

*May his soul rest in peace!"*

**Vijay Mahajan**  
Co-founder  
PRADAN

*"I am saddened to learn about Col. Verma's passing away. I met him in 1980 when he came to Sukhomajri where I was then working. Colonel Sahab was full of life, free and frank in expressing his views and always so supportive of young people."*

**Deep Joshi**  
Co-founder  
PRADAN

*"I had known Col. Verma as my boss in AFPRO till June 1983 and as a fellow Member (Board/General Body) of PRADAN. I distinctly remember Col. Verma walking into PRADAN's General Body meeting two or three years ago with a bag-full of literature / books for PRADAN's library.*

*We all pray for Col. Verma's soul to rest in peace"*

**Vijay Sardana**  
Founding Member  
PRADAN

*"I salute you!! If the watershed program is where it is today - it owes much to the foundations you put in place. You continue to be our guiding light and inspiration."*

**Al Fernandez**  
Founding Chairman  
PRADAN

# Impact of Self-Help Groups on Local Issues

PAOLO CASINI AND LORE VANDEWALLE

*Assessing the influence of the collective action undertaken by the SHGs created by PRADAN, without the intervention of local governments, the study recognizes the role SHGs play in providing a platform that allows socially disadvantaged women to meet regularly and discuss their problems*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are the most common form of microfinance in India. The primary aim is to encourage the poor to pool their savings to create a common fund and give small loans to one another. This helps them to save regularly and lend money to members at nominal rates of interest. When these SHGs become well-established, they can open savings accounts in commercial banks and can apply for loans.

In several regions of rural India, women are relatively disadvantaged. They are restricted in their physical mobility, their public role is minimal and access to information is limited. In such a context, SHGs provide a platform that allows women to meet regularly and discuss the problems they face in their daily lives. We provide evidence that the SHG members have undertaken collective action to solve these problems. These actions include manual interventions, campaigns in the village or visits to a government officer to seek solutions. In this article, we evaluate the impact of these actions on the issues that the local authorities deal with.

To perform our analysis, we focused on the lowest official authority in rural India, the *gram panchayat*, which is divided into several wards. Each of these wards elects a representative, known as a ward member (WM), who then becomes the official spokesperson of his ward. His main responsibility is to communicate about the problems and needs of the ward to officers, who have the financial means and power to solve those issues. A WM is the only official, with the duties described above. There are unofficial bodies, however, which visit the functionaries on their own initiative, to lobby for interventions. We found there were three different types of such bodies: SHGs, individuals and other groups of villagers that meet regularly for non-financial reasons. We labelled this residual category as Other Groups.

The main focus of this article is to assess the influence of the collective action undertaken by SHGs. The SHGs that we analyzed were all created by Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), with no intervention of the local government. The SHG programme aims at providing financial intermediation and does not have an explicit socio-political agenda. (In contrast, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has a clear social development agenda. Members are required to obey *16 Decisions*, which have a clear social connotation. For example, Decision 7 states: "We shall educate our children and ensure that they can earn to pay for their education.") The SHGs are different from the Other Groups, 24.5 per cent of which were created with the direct intervention of the local government.

Our data shows that SHGs mainly focused on issues related to excessive alcohol consumption, and school and forest problems whereas WMs focused on the major responsibilities of the *gram panchayat*, namely, village infrastructure and welfare schemes. There is evidence that the problems the WMs took care of were influenced by the activities of the SHGs. When SHGs undertook collective action, the WMs were more likely to deal with the problems that were closer to the preferences of women. Indeed, we found that WMs dealt with, on an average, one extra type of issue after the SHGs began undertaking action. In particular, they were on an average 28 per cent more likely to deal with alcohol issues, 25 per cent more with forest issues and 23 per cent more with school problems.

The article is organized as follows. Section II describes our data-set, the village organization and the collective action undertaken.

*Our data shows that SHGs mainly focused on issues related to excessive alcohol consumption, and school and forest problems whereas WMs focused on the major responsibilities of the gram panchayat, namely, village infrastructure and welfare schemes*

Section III shows the empirical results. Section IV discusses the effectiveness of the action undertaken by SHGs, followed by the conclusions in Section V.

## II. BACKGROUND

### **Data-set**

PRADAN assisted in the data collection. In 2006, Baland, Somanathan and Vandewalle surveyed all the PRADAN SHGs created in the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts of Odisha (irrespective of whether the groups were still actively meeting or not). They collected information from 532 SHGs and 8,589 women who, at some point, belonged to these groups

In the autumn of 2010, we complemented this data-set in two ways. First, we revisited those SHGs to gather information on the collective action that they had undertaken. Second, we conducted an elaborate survey in the village to collect data on the activities of WMs. PRADAN began working in Odisha in 1998 but the information that we needed dated back to the period before the creation of the first SHG. We, therefore, interviewed WMs elected in 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007. (Elections take place every five years. WMs can be re-elected.) We also recorded the activities of Other Groups and individuals.

We gathered information about 425 SHGs, 462 WMs, 94 Other Groups, 132 individuals who had visited an officer to request intervention and 844 individuals who had never visited one. We covered 112 villages and 147 wards. (We were not able to survey 72 SHGs and the villages in which they were located again because of the social tensions over a private mining firm. Moreover, 35 groups that no longer meet were not willing to sit with the research team.)



### **Village structure**

In rural India, the lowest official authority is the *gram panchayat*. It is composed of five to 15 contiguous villages. The 73rd Amendment Act 1992 of the Constitution of India empowers the State Legislature "to endow the *panchayats* with the power and authority necessary to prepare the plans and implement the schemes for economic development and social justice." The main responsibilities of the *gram panchayat* are managing the local infrastructure and identifying villagers, who are entitled to welfare schemes

Each *gram panchayat* is divided into wards and is governed by a *sarpanch*, a *naib-sarpanch* and several WMs. One WM is elected from each ward. WMs have the right to access the records of the *gram panchayat*, to question any officer about the administration and to inspect the action undertaken by the *gram panchayat*. They inform the government officers in charge, who have the financial means and power, to deal with the problems and needs of wards. Besides the *sarpanch*, higher authorities at the block or district level can be approached. Because the *gram panchayat* is mainly responsible for managing the village infrastructure and welfare schemes, these issues are the main responsibility of the WMs too.

Although SHGs are created for financial intermediation, there is evidence that the members participated in the collective action to solve problems concerning their ward. They undertook action as a group: at the moment of the first action, of the average 15 members, 11 were actively involved. The WMs are usually

*The increasing population has put a strain on the forest resources. To prevent excessive deforestation, the villagers formed voluntary forest committees. Later, the forest department began supporting these committees and also created new ones. They provided training, and supplied and introduced new ways of sustainable exploitation of the forest.*

aware of these actions. (The first action usually concerns village infrastructure—33.6 per cent, forest issues—26.1 per cent and alcohol problems—21.9 per cent). This means that this is just an overview of the FIRST topic dealt with by all the SHGs that undertook an action: 33.6% of them dealt with village infrastructure.

Other Groups comprise villagers who meet on an average once a month, for a specific, non-financial reason. These are

mainly *forest committees* (69.2 per cent), some of which (35.4 per cent) are created by officers of the forest department. (As most villages are located close to the forest, households depend on the forests as a source of income, for example, an important source of income is making leaf plates. The increasing population has put a strain on the forest resources. To prevent excessive deforestation, the villagers formed voluntary forest committees. Later, the forest department began supporting these committees and also created new ones. They provided training, and supplied and introduced new ways of sustainable exploitation of the forest.

Other Groups were formed for village help (26.6 per cent), cultural activities (3.2 per cent) and farming issues (1.0 per cent). Ninety per cent of those that do not gather for forest issues are created by neighbours. The remaining 10 per cent were founded by an NGO. More than half the wards (55.8 per cent) have at least one Other Group.

We label as Individuals, the villagers who visited an officer on their own personal initiative. They did not join any group but

dealt with the issues that they were interested in, on their own. Although we might not have been able to identify all Individuals, we believe we interviewed an important subset of them. Our main motivation to survey Individuals was to be able to tell them apart from the villagers who joined either an SHG or an Other Group.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of WMs, SHG members, Other Group members and Individuals, who have dealt with ward problems at least once (columns 1 to 5). The members of Other Groups differ from the SHG members in several respects: they are mainly men, are more educated and own about one acre more of land than others. SHG members differ from the WMs and Individuals: the latter are better educated and own more land. In fact, 31 per cent of the WMs are women. This is close to what is expected, based on the reservation of seats imposed by law. (One-third of the seats must be reserved for women.) The

reservation of seats is allotted by rotation to different wards. Strangely, women rarely visit the officers by themselves (only 2.3 per cent).

Columns 6 to 9 show the characteristics of the bodies that have never dealt with ward problems. We also found that the SHG members were slightly less educated whereas the profile of Other Group members was not very different from each other. To gather information about Individuals, we interviewed a random selection of people, who belonged neither to an SHG nor to an Other Group and who did not deal with ward problems individually. Female Individuals were slightly more educated and owned more land than SHG members. We found that the opposite was true for male Individuals: they were less educated and owned less land than the Other Group members and Individuals, who dealt with ward problems.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of WMs, SHG members, Other Group members and Individuals

	Bodies that Dealt with Ward Problems					Bodies that Never Dealt with Ward Problems			
	WMs		SHGs	Other	Individuals	SHGs	Other	Individuals	
	Female	Male		Groups			Groups	Female	Male
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
# of groups	N.A.	N.A.	388	91	N.A.	37	3	N.A.	N.A.
# of members	143	319	6,299	734	132	567	23	79	765
Woman (%)			100.0	13.4	2.3	100.0	17.4		
Average education level (years)	5.8	7.3	2.6	7.6	9.0	1.4	7.2	3.3	4.8
Can read and write (%)	75.0	88.5	30.5	83.0	96.2	16.4	87.0	36.7	57.9
Land (acres)	2.2	2.5	1.7	2.6	3.3	1.7	2.6	2.6	1.8
No. of children	2.7	2.9	2.6	2.6	2.8	2.9	2.1	1.9	2.6
Age (years)	40.0	46.8	35.5	41.0	47.7	35.4	34.8	37.0	42.4
Caste category: ST (%)	65.7	75.3	62.9	67.3	64.4	82.5	56.5	77.2	66.7
Caste category: SC (%)	14.3	4.5	9.3	4.3	4.5	1.4	17.4	1.3	6.5
Caste category: OBC (%)	20.0	19.6	26.5	27.9	28.8	15.5	26.1	21.5	26.7
Caste category: FC (%)	0.0	0.6	1.3	0.5	2.3	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.1



### Collective action

We asked WMs, SHGs and Other Groups to list the kind of problems they faced. We also asked them whether they had discussed the problems within the groups and whether they had visited an officer to seek solutions or intervened directly in any way. Direct interventions can be attempts to solve the problem (for instance, repairing a well) or organizing campaigns in the village (for example, against alcohol production).

Table 2 shows the percentage of WMs, SHGs and Other Groups that tried to solve a problem

by visiting an officer at least once for each of the issues (Columns 1, 3 and 5, respectively). Columns 2, 4 and 6 give the percentage of the WMs, SHGs and Other Groups that tried to solve a problem by *either* visiting an officer *or* by intervening directly. The data shows that WMs and Other Groups did not intervene directly in the village, except for issues related to the forests. If they did become involved in solving a problem, they did so by visiting the officer in charge. The SHGs on the other hand, intervened directly for several issues. The most important ones were for alcohol and forest problems.

**Table 2:** Public-good Activities of the WMs, SHGs and Other Groups

	WMs		SHGs		Other Groups	
	% Visit	% Visit or	% Visit	% Visit or	% Visit	% Visit or
	Officer	Intervene	Officer	Intervene	Officer	Intervene
Village infrastructure	79.0	79.9	43.3	53.7	31.9	36.2
Welfare schemes	64.5	64.5	23.1	25.9	0.0	2.1
Alcohol problems	12.3	13.0	33.7	59.8	6.4	7.5
School problems	12.1	12.3	9.9	16.5	4.3	6.4
Dowry and child marriage	0.0	0.0	1.7	2.8	0.0	1.1
Forest issues	33.1	33.1	35.3	55.1	69.2	74.5
Other	4.8	4.8	3.5	3.5	7.5	9.6
Average number of different issues (conditional on at least one)	2.2	2.2	1.8	2.3	1.3	1.4
Number of observations	462	462	425	425	94	94

As expected, WMs were found to be the most important actors to deal with village infrastructure and welfare schemes—the main responsibilities of the *gram panchayat*. Other Groups were mainly interested in forest-related issues. They, typically, had a very specific focus because the average Other Groups rarely dealt with more than one issue. The majority of the SHGs also dealt with problems related to

village infrastructure and forests, and many of them spent time on welfare schemes. But they were less likely to deal with those issues than WMs and Other Groups.

SHGs were found to be the most important actors for alcohol issues and school problems. The focus on alcohol issues was in line with the findings of a sizeable amount of literature on

the topic. Literature shows three main facts. First, households realize that alcohol consumption reduces the budget available for primary expenses. Alcohol ranks among the first item that poor families would like to eliminate from their consumption bundle. Second, in India, men are 9.7 times more likely than women to regularly consume alcohol.

Regular use of alcohol and tobacco in India and its association with age, gender, and poverty. Finally, it was found that there is strong evidence that alcoholism triggers violence against women. The risk of wife abuse increased significantly with alcohol consumption.

Domestic violence was highly prevalent in Eastern India, including Odisha. Studies Showed that Alcohol consumption is an important risk factor in the physical, psychological and sexual violence against women. Some of the representatives of the SHGs visited officers to request the suspension of alcohol licenses. Others intervened directly by organizing anti-alcohol campaigns or by trying to dissuade households from producing alcohol. This is quite interesting because anecdotal evidence suggests that women consider alcohol consumption as a 'right' of men. Therefore, they rarely undertake legal action, even in cases of domestic violence or abuse. Indeed, we did not find any woman, who had undertaken an action alone.

School problems were mainly related to the non-provision of free mid-day meals, sanitation and the quality of the teachers. Women's interest in these issues was in line with the common finding that they generally spend more time and resources on children's welfare.

*Some of the representatives of the SHGs visited officers to request the suspension of alcohol licenses. Others intervened directly by organizing anti-alcohol campaigns or by trying to dissuade households from producing alcohol*

Furthermore, in our survey, we found that SHGs were responsible for providing mid-day meals at schools in 22.3 per cent of the villages. Although SHGs were less likely to deal with forest issues than Other Groups, their interest in problems related to forests was not surprising because the livelihoods of many households depend on thriving

forests. Moreover, 29.7 per cent of the SHGs received training from PRADAN to improve their forest-based sources of income. Finally, some groups focused on problems related to dowry and child marriage. (Dowry problems and child marriage are not common among scheduled tribes (STs) and scheduled castes (SCs), the main caste categories in the area where we conducted our survey. Therefore, the number of SHGs that focused on these issues was limited and we do not consider these in the remainder of the article.)

As mentioned here in the introduction, the main focus article is on SHGs. The groups that we analyzed were all created by PRADAN. To start the SHG programme, PRADAN first selected administrative blocks that had high levels of rural poverty. In Odisha, there was no involvement of the government in this decision; there was also no evidence that the government had ever opposed the creation of the SHGs. Furthermore, the SHG programme had no explicit socio-political agenda. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the creation of SHGs was not influenced by the elected WMs.

This is not necessarily the case for Other Groups because an important subset of them was created with government interventions and for socio-political reasons. For completeness, we checked whether the inclusion of Other

Groups, in the empirical analysis, changed the results.

Table 3 shows the percentage of WMs, who dealt with public issues. It was important, in our analysis, to assess the timing of a WM's mandate as compared to the creation and

evolution of SHGs. Thus, we first classified WMs on whether their mandate had finished before the first SHG was created in the ward (Column 1) or after (Column 2). These simple descriptive statistics document a sharp increase in most of the problems.

**Table 3:** Public Issue Activities of WMs, Before and After the Start of SHGs

	Per Cent of WMs Dealing with the Issue in their Wards			
	Before the First SHG was Created	Once SHGs are Present		
		All	Before the SHGs Undertook Action	After the SHGs Undertook Action
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Village infrastructure	72.1	82.9***	77.9	84.9***
Welfare schemes	36.4	75.4***	62.1***	80.7***
Alcohol problems	2.3	17.1***	2.1	23.1***
School problems	5.4	15.0***	2.1	20.2***
Forest issues	21.7	37.5***	17.9	45.4***
Other	3.1	5.4	4.2	5.9
Average number of different issues (conditional on at least one)	1.7	2.4***	1.8	2.6***

This preliminary analysis can be slightly refined by taking into account the fact that SHGs do not undertake collective action from the very beginning of their existence. SHGs were created for financial intermediation and not for public good activities, and for this reason, on an average, they undertook their first collective action after about three years of weekly meetings. Thus, if the activities of WMs were influenced by the collective action of SHGs, we might observe a change only when SHGs started showing an interest. In other words, the mere creation of an SHG might not matter. For this reason, we further split the time -1 frame into after the creation of SHGs. We reported the percentage of WMs, who dealt with a

problem depending on whether their mandate finished after the creation of the first SHG but before the SHG undertook collective action in his ward (column 3) or after the first SHG did so (column 4). For most issues, we observed an increase after the creation of the first SHG in the ward but the main increase occurred after an SHG first undertook an action.

Notice that the activity of WMs before SHGs were created was very different across issues. Whereas about 72 per cent of them took care of village infrastructure, only 2.3 per cent became involved in alcohol issues, and 5.3 per cent in school problems. This is interesting because SHG members reported that these

issues were relevant in almost all the wards (See Table 4 for exact figures). This means that, in a number of cases, despite the existence of a problem, the WM did not intervene to provide a solution. There are two possible explanations for this. First, WMs may not have been aware of the problem or of the importance thereof for some of the villagers. Second, WMs, despite being aware of the issue, may have deliberately decided not to address it. The latter explanation becomes relevant when wards are composed of heterogeneous agents, differently affected by a particular issue. In this case, there can be a disagreement amongst the villagers about the importance or even the existence of a problem. More important, solving a problem could create a negative impact on a part of the population. When this happens, the WM, thinking of the costs and benefits for his voters, could decide deliberately not to take up an issue.

Given the context that we were analyzing, we believed that both the explanations were reasonable. In particular, the fact that the activities of SHGs seemed to be related to the increase in the provision of neglected public good suggests that the differences in preferences between women and men may be playing a central role. Moreover, women, in Odisha have limited participation in political life. Female WMs are elected mainly because of reservation. Furthermore, their profile is different from an average SHG member: they are better educated and own more land (see Table 1). So, some of the problems that the SHG members are interested in may be omitted from the political agenda.

*Women in Odisha have limited participation in political life. Female WMs are elected mainly because of reservation. Furthermore, their profile is different from an average SHG member: they are better educated and own more land. So, some of the problems that the SHG members are interested in may be omitted from the political agenda.*

PRADAN has also provided training to improve forest-based sources income of households. The process of sensitization creates new interests for women. Through their collective action, SHGs may be disseminating the messages learned to the community to which they belong.

### III. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY AND RESULTS

In this section, we analyze whether SHGs have influenced the problems that WMs have dealt with and whether WMs begin dealing with issues preferred by SHGs.

Our survey asked each WM, elected over the past 20 years, to recall the public issues that they visited an officer for or on behalf of which they intervened. The survey also recorded the characteristics of all these WMs. To assess when exactly SHGs began undertaking collective action, we asked them the names of the WM, during whose mandate they did so for the first time. The data provide information about four WMs for each of the wards.

To explore the impact of SHGs, we used the variations in the period in which SHGs were created and became active. SHGs were largely created between 1997 and 2007, and became active between 2002 and 2010. We compared the activities undertaken by WMs operating before an SHG was created to those operating afterwards. For those operating afterwards, we further distinguished between WMs whose mandate finished before SHGs started undertaking collective action and WMs whose mandate finished after the first SHG did so. We had to take into account



the fact that WMs might have dealt with different issues for reasons other than the creation or activity of SHGs. Therefore, our regressions included other variables. First, we took into account the fact that the wards might differ from one another (some wards run very well, others lack important public issues). To do so, we included a 'ward-fixed effect'. Second, we controlled the WMs characteristics: we included her/his education level, land ownership, number of children, age, caste category (ST, SC, OBC or FC) and gender. Finally, we included the year in which the WM was elected (elected in 1997, 2002 or 2007). These details were included to ensure that the influence of the SHGs does not pick up election-year effects, for example, the quality of WMs might increase for a period of time.

We first examined whether the SHGs influenced the different problems that WMs dealt with. From the data collected and analyzed, we concluded that WMs, who operated in wards where SHGs had undertaken collective action, dealt with almost double the number of issues than WMs, who operated in wards where the SHGs had not yet been created. In absolute terms, this implies that WMs dealt with about one extra topic once SHGs became active. The creation of SHGs itself did not influence the activities of WMs, that is, we see a change in the number of issues that WMs dealt with only after SHGs began to undertake collective action. We also found in our study, that male WMs dealt with fewer issues than female WMs.

Finally, we examined whether a WM began dealing with public issues preferred by SHGs. The analysis of the data shows that once SHGs began to undertake collective action,

*WMs, who operated in wards where SHGs had undertaken collective action, dealt with almost double the number of issues than WMs, who operated in wards where the SHGs had not yet been created*

WMs were 28 per cent more likely to deal with alcohol problems, 23 per cent with school problems and 25 per cent with forest issues. Thus, the estimates confirmed that WMs started dealing with public issues preferred by SHGs. These include issues that either have a negative impact on the other

villagers or the ones that a WM was not aware of. Alcohol production and consumption is the best example of an issue on which men and women disagree. Although welfare schemes are one of the main responsibilities of WMs, we observed that male WMs were less likely to take care of alcohol issues, school problems and welfare schemes and they were more likely to deal with village infrastructure. (We also ran the regressions taking into account that, apart from SHGs, Other Groups were created in a subset of wards. Thus far, we did not focus on those groups. However, because we did not want SHGs to pick up the potential influence of those Other Groups, we tested whether our results still held when we did take them into account. We conclude that the results are strikingly similar.)

#### IV. PUBLIC ISSUE PROVISION

A caveat of our empirical results is that we can focus on the *type* of public issues only and not on the quality and the intensity of the work done by the WM. Knowing how often each problem appeared, how often the WM tried to solve it and how successful she was would allow us to measure the impact of SHGs more precisely. Unfortunately, it was difficult to get such precise information. Nonetheless, we asked SHGs how effective their collective actions were, that is, whether they had obtained what they had requested or, at least, received the promise that a solution would be provided. The answers to these questions

are summarized in column 1 of Table 4. SHGs received a positive response in 85 to 90 per cent of the wards where they undertook collective action. Most likely, we overestimated the success of SHGs because there may have been a selection issue. SHGs undertook action only if they believed they would be successful. We tried to correct for selection in the columns 2 and 3. For each of the issues, we asked

SHG members if they had faced a problem related to it even once. In column 2, we give the percentage of success over all the wards where the problem appeared, independent of whether an SHG undertook action or not. Hence, we assume that SHGs that did not undertake action were not successful. Finally, in column 3, we assume that the problems appeared in all the wards.

**Table 4:** Success of Collective Action Undertaken by SHGs

	Success in Wards where SHGs Undertook Collective Action		Success where the Problem Appeared		Success Over All Wards	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	Ward	Success	Ward	Success	Ward	Success
	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)
Village infrastructure	98	88.2 (23.8)	144	43.6 (39.0)	147	37.8 (35.9)
Welfare schemes	63	88.4 (25.8)	120	37.8 (43.3)	147	22.0 (32.3)
Alcohol problems	71	90.9 (21.1)	127	36.9 (39.9)	147	30.4 (38.5)
School problems	38	85.1 (25.0)	105	19.5 (31.4)	147	8.9 (20.4)
Forest issues	77	91.5 (18.4)	130	39.9 (40.1)	147	31.0 (36.2)

Although Column 2 may underestimate the impact of SHGs, the figures are still remarkably high. The results suggest that having undertaken action for alcohol issues led to a solution in one-third of the wards. Therefore, despite some obvious limitations, we believe that our data allows us to give reliable evidence about the positive impact of collective action by socially disadvantaged women.

## V. CONCLUSION

We examined the impact of collective action undertaken by SHGs on a variety of problems with which WMs dealt. First, we found that WMs took care of a larger variety of ward issues when SHGs undertook collective action. Second, WMs started dealing with the issues preferred by SHGs. These included issues that either exerted a negative externality on other

villagers or whose importance the WMs were not aware of. In particular, WMs were more likely to deal with alcohol, forest and school problems once the SHGs began to exert their influence. With respect to issues that exert a negative externality on other villagers, the most controversial and, therefore, the best example is probably alcohol.

We, therefore, conclude that an important non-financial benefit of microfinance is that it provides a platform that allows socially disadvantaged women to meet regularly and discuss their problems. When they undertake collective action to solve these problems, they are recognized by the local authorities. Problems then are closer to the needs of women that seem to find their way into the political agenda.

*This article is based on our academic paper 'Public Good Provision in Indian Rural Areas: the Returns to Collective Action by Microfinance Groups'. We thank PRADAN, especially Narendranath, for discussions and support in facilitating the data collection; and Sanjay Prasad and Amit Kumar for their excellent research assistance.*

# Girvar–Where Differences Unite!

ADITYA KUMAR

*Forming an oasis in the desert of caste divides, women SHG members recognize and uphold the underlying unity of their humanity, honouring their interdependence and displaying tolerance and compassion for each other*

## INTRODUCTION

It was a regular SHG meeting in the Rebarivas hamlet of Awal village in Abu Road location, Rajasthan. The meeting proceeded like every other meeting, with familiar transactions and discussions, and facilitation. When the meeting ended, the group members asked me if I would like to have some tea. I knew that they belong to a community that specializes in dairy. They milk their own cows and sell the milk to a regular milkman. So the milk that was going to be used in the tea would be pure and freshly milked. I was never going to say no.

Soon the tea arrived. The woman, who served the tea, came in with a tea container and two different types of cups. One was made of brass and the other was a regular porcelain cup. The woman asked me, "To which caste do you belong?" I admit I was surprised because in my entire work experience, I was never asked such a question; I had no clue what a cup of tea had to do with my caste. I replied that I was a Thakur-Brahmin. Immediately, the lady poured the tea in the brass cup and served it to me whereas the community facilitator, Savita Bai, who belonged to the same village and stayed in a hamlet that was a stone's throw away, was served tea in the porcelain cup. She belonged to a caste called Meghwal, considered a low caste compared to the Rebari caste, to which the other members of the group belonged.

This discrimination had a mind-boggling impact on me. I knew that Savita Bai, with whom I had been working in the village to form so many SHGs for the past one-and-a-half years, was comparatively well-off and well-educated as compared to the Rebaris. Yet, she was being discriminated against because she belonged to a lower caste!



### The Caste Divide Within

The Rebaris are considered to be one of the highly placed castes in rural Abu Road. They neither dine in the house of a low-caste family nor do they invite them for a meal to their own homes. During community functions organized by low-caste people, the Rebaris take their own utensils, in which they are then served food and water. I noticed this during a tailoring training session organized under the MPOWER project. Tea was served to all but three girls, who were Rebaris. Although I was aware that a divide exists, the realization hit me hard that day. On enquiry, I discovered that the members of each of the SHGs belonged to a particular caste. There were separate SHGs for the Rebaris, the Garasiyas, the Meghwals, the Bheels and so on. In fact, the hamlets in the villages were divided on the basis of caste. Names such as Rebarivas, Bhilvas, Kolivas and Meghwalvas made this amply evident. It was natural for groups to be formed according to caste. I was worried. I had planned many activities in this village because there were 11 SHGs in the vicinity. I thought that this village would be the first one to have an SHG cluster. When I saw this deep divide, however, I wondered whether it would ever be possible to have a cohesive cluster of groups despite such deeply rooted divisions? Will these women be able to keep aside their caste differences and establish a functional entity that will require overall co-operation and understanding of each other?

The group under consideration, Mamaji SHG, initially did have three members that belonged to the Garasiya tribal community. But this group was made in haste because the project demanded only BPL members in the group and only those three Garasiya members were available in the vicinity. There was constant

*On enquiry, I discovered that the members of each of the SHGs belonged to a particular caste.*

*There were separate SHGs for the Rebaris, the Garasiyas, the Meghwals, the Bheels and so on*

friction between them and the other members. The Rebaris never trusted the Garasiya members because they feared that the latter would take loans from the cash box and not return them, and that it would be difficult to force them to repay the loans once they default

because the Garasiyas formed a majority of the population. Ultimately, the Garasiya members stopped attending the meeting saying that they lived far off and could not walk every week to the meeting. At that point of time, these members had taken loans up to Rs 1,500 from the group. The Rebaris would never enter the Garasiya women's houses, to recover the outstanding amount. With such a live example of discord between the residents of the same village, my hopes began to shrink.

During my sojourn in the area, construction work of various village infrastructure projects under MGNREGA was being carried out in the villages. The women, working on different projects, belonged to different castes. What was most shocking was that the workplace had separate provisions for drinking water—a telling sign of the prevailing discrimination. Water was kept in pots alongside the project site—steel pots for the upper castes and earthen pots for the lower castes. Women, who were working together for the same constructive purpose, were not regarded as equal. They were discriminated by these pots—one for lower caste and one for upper caste.

My mind was in a buzz through the day. I wanted to believe that this was an isolated case. So I picked up the data of all the SHGs we were promoting in Abu Road and studied them. What emerged was predictable. This was not an isolated case. As I kept on turning the

pages of the SHG data, I found that every SHG had members of a particular caste or community.

I continued my search and hit a pocket of four SHGs in a village named Girvar. I was intrigued to see that these four groups had members that belonged to variety of castes—Bheels, Garasiyas, Ranas, Meghwals, Rebaris and Muslims! This was significantly different from the others. When I shared this discovery with my colleague, K.R. Yadav, his comment was, “It will be an achievement if these groups continue for more than two months!” His comment was not a knee-jerk reaction. He belongs to Rajasthan and has a village background. He understands the caste structure that prevails in the state and how the dynamics play out in rural pockets.

However, it turned out that only one group of the four was 4 months old. The three others had been functioning for more than 8 months. It was like finding an oasis in a desert! In such a caste-ridden set-up, I found four SHGs that had a diversified caste composition. Although I was excited, I was not sure whether these groups actually understood this diversity or whether it was deliberate or they were ignorant of this fact. In a society where the caste system defines almost every aspect of the life of the people, any institution formation by default will have a homogenous caste composition. So was it by mistake that this had happened? Had these women formed this group just to procure the benefits of a government project? Or had they actually understood the dynamics of their community and were liberal? There were so many questions in my mind. I decided to explore this further in order to get more clarity.

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### **Intervention—The Story of Group Formation in Girvar**

I had been facilitating these groups for over one year. This aspect of the caste of each group with a specific caste composition had never crossed my mind until my experience in Awal. In Girvar, I had a good rapport with most of group members. During the formation of the groups in Girvar, I was helped immensely by a very active and intelligent lady called Hawa Banu. Prior to PRADAN entering the village, several NGOs and individuals had approached the people of this village with their schemes

and had duped them. They had formed groups of women in the village and had collected money from them, promising to open accounts for them in the nearby rural bank and had eventually fled without any trace.

PRADAN needed some local support to enter in the village and convince people about its intervention. Hawa Banu had some influence not only in Girvar but many other hamlets nearby and other *gram panchayats*. She helped us form the village's first SHG. She became a member of that group too and, in due course of time, was elected as the group leader (*adhyaksh*). The seeds of a diverse group were sown that very day because she joined a group that was formed in a hamlet of the Bheel community. She belonged to the Moyala (*kumhar*) community and was a Muslim by religion. At that point of time, she was the only woman in the group, who could write her name.

Within six months of its operations, the group picked up the vital and basic concepts of SHG. It was named Rekha SHG. SHG norms were established before the first transaction

meeting. All the members sat in a circle, according to their number in the SHG register, with the accountant. Inter-loaning started in the 8th meeting when they were in need of money for the *kharif* crops; later, women took loans for medical care for their children and to repair their houses. A bank account was opened and they received a grant of Rs 10,000 as revolving fund from the government under the MPOWER project; they are still rotating this money among the SHG members. By 2012, the cash available with the group including cash box and the bank account crossed Rs 22,000. The SHG received Rs 4,000 as interest from these loans. From the beginning, it became evident that women from different castes could come together to form an institution in the village. However, the functioning of the group throughout needed to be studied.

Two weeks after the formation of this group, another group, called Khimat Mata SHG, was formed close by. The villagers belong to a community called Rebaris and their primary occupation is goat and sheep rearing. They sell milk and wool to earn their living. Three women in this group of 12, however, belong to the Meghwal and Lakhara communities. Rebaris belong to the Other Backward Class (OBC) category; Meghwals and Lakharas are considered two of the lowest castes of society. The group started functioning harmoniously and many of the traditions witnessed in Awal were not followed. The group members ate and drank together...and that too in brass cups! In fact, Lalita Bai, a Lakhara, was elected *adhyaksh* because she was intelligent and the only one in the group who was educated up to the VIII class. She was also an active speaker, giving logical reasons and asking relevant questions to the facilitator. She had a tea stall

*From the beginning, it became evident that women from different castes could come together to form an institution in the village*

opposite to the *panchayat* office and an ornaments shop in the village.

Within 5 months of operations beginning in these two groups, three more groups were formed in the same village. They shared a common venue for their meetings—Hawa Banu's house. The groups had a mix of all castes and communities of the region. There were Garasiya, Meghwal, Bheel, Muslim, Brahmin and Harijan members! This was as diverse as it could get. All these groups revolved around three women, the respective group leaders—Hawa Banu, Hanja Bai and Lalita Bai. In due course of time, Hawa Banu helped me form four more groups in the same village but in different hamlets and a little farther from this cluster. At 50 years of age, her energy level is the point of envy for many people, including myself.

This was how these groups were formed. What would prove that women in these groups were not discriminatory? A couple of incidents happened during my observation period. The women from these groups, working at a site, abolished the custom of having separate water pots of drinking water for upper castes and lower castes. The women refused to discriminate their group members on the basis of caste. This was revolutionary, to say the least, in a society that not only discriminates on the basis of caste but also on the basis of gender and religion.

One of these groups included Sharda Bai, a Harijan, in their group. Not only was she a Harijan, her family was an outcaste in the society because her husband, son, daughter and she were HIV positive. They were not treated well in the village. They had to shift their residence to a corner of the hamlet. They

had no land for agriculture and sold brooms for their living. They required monthly medical check-ups for which they were dependent upon a government scheme. Wherever they went, they would be made to sit away from the regular villagers—be it the *gram sabha* or any other congregation. The group opposed this treatment and insisted that they sit with the other members and treated them like any other member. Sharda Bai could take the group register, key and cash box just like the other members in the groups would do on a rotation basis. There was no discrimination. The group members themselves took me to Sharda Bai's house to show me the misery that this Harijan family was facing. And even before groups were formed here, these women used to pool in money to help this family.

Such incidents assured me that these people lived in harmony, irrespective of caste divisions. I stopped worrying about the future of this cluster of groups any more. I had no more doubts that self-help institutions would keep functioning here and I could go ahead and facilitate them towards further development that would impact their lives. It was time now to speak to them directly about the topic of caste distribution.

The occasion arose when the leaders of 8 groups met at Hawa Banu's residence. It was a heart warming scene where these women from different backgrounds, castes, religions, communities sat together, played games, talked, discussed, sang songs, ate and drank tea. When I was asked for a feedback on the training, I voiced for the first time my delight at seeing women from such diverse castes and communities coming together under one roof.

*Such incidents assured me that these people lived in harmony, irrespective of caste divisions. I stopped worrying about the future of this cluster of groups any more. I had no more doubts that self-help institutions would keep functioning here and I could go ahead and facilitate them towards further development that would impact their lives*

*"Sahab! We don't care who belongs to which caste or community. We have been living next to each other for more years than we can count on our fingers. And we do not want any of us to miss out on any opportunity through which the lives of our children could improve. If we discriminate among ourselves, our groups will not function and we all will miss out on this."*

Lalita Bai

*"Arrey, Sahab! Before you spoke of this, we did not even realize that our group members belonged to a diverse community. Once we are in a group meeting, we forget who is a Garasiya, Bheel, Muslim or Rebari. I am a Muslim and I have rented one of my rooms to a Brahmin family, who has been living with us for past three years. All the food arrangements for this training have been done by her and everyone has eaten the same food. You tell me does food become something different inside the mouth of a hungry Bheel from that of a Garasiya?"*

Hawa Banu

*"We are all struggling with poverty. If we start discriminating among each other on the basis of these things, how will we do business with each other? If we do that, we decrease our opportunities to earn our living and improve the lives of our children."*

Hanja Bai

### **Understanding the Anomaly**

I was delighted with these responses. Clearly, these women do not care about the caste distribution of the SHG members. What could possibly be the reasons behind their thought process? It was true that they were passionate



about their unity in diversity; however, what were the practical realities that created such a situation? For such an 'anomaly' to exist in an area where caste division was rampant, there had to have been concrete and more pragmatic reasons.

That the SHG members live in harmony despite the differences in their caste and community seems to have been reinforced out of a strong interdependence on each other for sustaining their livelihoods. There are several examples of this within the SHGs under consideration. Ganga Bai is a member of Chamunda Mata SHG. She is a Brahmin woman and runs a grocery shop, which she has rented from Hawa Banu, a Muslim woman from the Rekha SHG. Ganga Bai pays Hawa Banu a sum of Rs 700 per month as rent. So this is a give-and-take relationship. Also, she buys a large chunk of her supplies directly from many women from the other SHGs. Mira Bai (Garasiya) of Chamunda Mata SHG supplies her with vegetables such as spinach and coriander. Indra Bai of Rekha SHG supplies her with onion and garlic. Gerki Bai (Rebari) of Santoshi Mata SHG supplies her with gourd, radish and milk for the tea Ganga Bai sells. Additionally, Ganga Bai provides a retail outlet for the broomsticks made by Sharda Bai (Harijan). Hawa Banu also makes earthen pottery and sells it to the villagers and almost all of the SHG members are customers of her products.

Hanja Bai (Bheel) of Rekha SHG has a water pump that she has installed on a large water reservoir in the village; it remains full of water

*Livelihoods can cut through all barriers and walls created by castes, communities and classes. The livelihoods and daily transactions of these people have bound them together—this augurs well*

that accumulates during the rains throughout the year. She provides water for irrigation to other group members such as Naseem Banu (Muslim), Gerki Bai (Rebari), Hawa Banu and Devi Bai (Garasiya). She charges Rs 70–80 per hour for running the pump as maintenance and fuel costs. Many such examples

of interdependence abound within these groups.

Most of the SHG members come from different places in Rajasthan, some from the neighbouring Reodar block, Gujarat; two members came from Nainital after their wedding! This diversity is deep-rooted and, in a course of 4–5 decades, the bonds have been strengthened further.

The location and dynamics of the village also present an explanation. This particular village is the junction of three *panchayats*, Chandela in the north, Chanar in the west and Bahadurpura in the south. The village is the common point of these three *panchayats* and villagers from Chandela, Bagheri, Ambaveri, Bahadurpura, Mahikhera and Fatehpura come here for several services including veterinary and public health services. It also has a hostel for both boys and girls, in which students from Bahadurpura, Girvar and Chandela *panchayats* stay. It also houses a very famous temple complex called Patnarayan, a religious centre, which is visited by people from various communities in Gujarat. The village is also a centre for Ayurveda, and ailing people from far away come here for treatment.

## Conclusion

I stayed in the village for long hours to observe the movement and dynamics of the villagers. I spent time talking and noting down what the villagers had to say while being extremely cautious not to affect the social fabric. That this fabric was not fragile gave me great joy.

Livelihoods can cut through all barriers and walls created by castes, communities and classes. The livelihoods and daily transactions of these people have bound them together—this augurs well. The dynamics of this village is certainly encouraging and it is an example that can be presented universally.

Tribe	Category	Primary Occupation	Origin	Description
Garasiya	ST	Agriculture labour	Mewar and Marwar regions	Some Rajputs, who were persecuted by the British, fled to the hills of southern Aravallis, married Bheel tribal women and settled here. Some stories even date them back to the times of Alla-ud-din Khalji (13th century AD). The tribe is further divided into numerous sub castes and clans.
Rebari	OBC	Animal husbandry	Thar desert	Consider themselves as the highest class. It is said that they are the decedents of Lord Shiva himself. They used to be nomadic tribals, who moved from place to place.
Bheel	ST	Hunting, Agriculture	Forests on the foothills of Aravalli	The original tribals of the Aravalli and Vindhya hills. Most aggressive people and expert hunters. References of them are found in epics Ramayana (Shabari) and Mahabharata (Eklavya).
Meghwal	SC	Weavers, Artisans	Marwar region	In ancient times, they were assigned the duty of praying for rains and that's why the name Meghwal. Expert weavers and leather workers.
Others: Moyala, Bhangi, Lohar, Rana, Lakhara, etc.				Have specific occupations such as potters, cleaners, blacksmiths, etc.

# Health Situation in Darbha Block, Bastar District—A Study

NEIL JOSEPH ARIINA

*Uncovering, documenting and understanding the existing health conditions in the Darbha block, Bastar district, the study highlights the preferences and practices of the community on the one hand and explores the reasons for the deteriorating health conditions of the community on the other*

## CONTEXT

PRADAN began its operations in Bastar district in September 2009. The organization conducted an initial survey of the area and after interactions with the various stakeholders such as the community, the government, banks, other NGOs and traders, it zeroed in on two blocks, namely, Darbha and Bastanar. PRADAN's plan was to focus on social mobilization by forming Self Help Groups (SHGs) and clusters on a saturation basis in the blocks of Darbha and Bastanar by 2010–11.

The study collected data of the SHG members, using various parameters such as resources, health, sanitation, and access to rights and entitlements. The data would help build a perspective of the area and help PRADAN become familiar with the current state, using baseline survey methods. The team extended its outreach to 32 villages (30 of them in Darbha block) of 17 *gram panchayats* and 86 hamlets. It set three primary goals for 2010–11. First, to cover 4,500 families in the SHGs (300 SHGs) and help promote livelihoods that would ensure an additional six months of food (cash/grain), providing thereby round-the-year food security; to ensure an additional Rs 15,000 income in cash from other sources in a sustained manner and to help reduce the dependence on existing livelihood sources. Second, the team aimed at helping to deploy the extra income productively. Third, to assist—directly and indirectly—in addressing the well-being and the issues of women's rights.

During the course of the study, the team realized that illness and health problems of the SHG members were obstacles to achieving their goals. The importance and magnitude of the health problems in the area led the team to focus on health issues as a separate goal. In order to form, deploy or assess any intervention strategy, the team had to understand the existing health status, conditions, problems, facilities and the overall health scenario of the community. Hence, the aim of the baseline study was to understand the existing state of people's health in the area, in order to make interventions more effective.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to:

- ♦ Understand the prevailing health conditions in the community, in terms of parameters such as sources of food and drinking water, hygiene and sanitation habits, prevalence of diseases, status of reproductive services and awareness levels among people.
- ♦ Identify and explore the major health problems and issues existing in the community as well as the possible factors causing them.
- ♦ Develop standard indicators related to health that will help in deciding the nature and type of intervention as well as in assessing the impact of the intervention.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Quantitative/Qualitative Research*

The nature of the research study was both descriptive and explorative. On the one hand, it aimed at revealing, documenting and understanding the existing health conditions, preferences and practices of the community; on the other hand, it aimed at finding the processes and linkages behind these existing conditions and practices. Accordingly, the type of data used to obtain information was both quantitative and qualitative. There was an effort to get some objective data, based on numbers and some close-ended questions, to identify the status and trends across the community, which could be used

*There was an effort to get some objective data, based on numbers and some close-ended questions, to identify the status and trends across the community, which could be used for aggregation and comparison. The focus was also on observing and understanding subjective behaviour, traditional beliefs, meaning and values behind the practices related to and affecting the health of the community*

for aggregation and comparison. However, the focus was also on observing and understanding subjective behaviour, traditional beliefs, meaning and values behind the practices related to and affecting the health of the community.

PRADAN currently operates in 20 *panchayats* of Darbha block, involving 34 villages, and covering 165 SHGs and 2,210 households approximately. A sample survey was undertaken in six *panchayats*, involving eight villages and covering 18 SHGs and 210 households as respondents (eight of them being non-SHG members).

The total population of the 210 households (including all family members) was 977. The six *panchayats* so covered were further clubbed into four clusters.

The area for the sample survey was purposively chosen, that is, the sampling technique was purposive, based on various factors such as:

- (i) Accessibility of the areas. The areas chosen were more accessible to the Community Service Providers (CSPs—local residents, who act as mediators between PRADAN and the local community) of PRADAN. CSPs also assisted in the survey as translators.
- (ii) The fact that time and language constraints restricted the researcher from undertaking random sampling and from covering a similar number of households.

Similarly, the clubbing of *panchayats* into clusters was done purposively, for the following considerations:

- (i) Koinar and Chitapur are the smallest and largest clusters, respectively, in terms of area.



- (ii) Chindavada and Chitapur are the smallest and largest clusters, with a population of 205 and 899 households, respectively.
- (iii) The forest coverage is low in Chindbahar (0.5 per cent) and Koinar (1.8 per cent) whereas Chindavada (17 per cent) and Chitapur (42 per cent) have higher forest coverage.
- (iv) Koinar and Chindavada are the closest and farthest, respectively, from the nearby town of Jagdalpur.

The objective was to first observe whether there were any differences in various health parameters among the clusters and then to

explore whether the above characteristics of the clusters influenced the observed outcome. After the sample area was identified, a structured questionnaire (comprising both open- and close-ended questions) was designed for the survey, to obtain data on the indicators mentioned earlier.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 1.1 Household Profile

A. Almost all the households surveyed had their own *kuccha* houses (Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1: Land Type**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Own	46	49	58	56	209
Rented	1	0	0		1
Total	47	49	58	56	210

**Table 2: Housing Type**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
<i>Kuccha</i>	44	49	58	54	205
<i>Pucca</i>	2	0	0	2	4
Others	1	0	0		1
Total	47	49	58	56	210

B. Approximately 88 per cent of the households belonged to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category and eight per cent to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. A majority of the households in

Chindavada and Chitapur were STs, whereas most of the households in Chindbahar and Koinar were SCs (Table 3).

**Table 3: Caste Distribution (in Percentage)**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
SC	9 (19)	7 (14)	0	0	16 (8)
ST	36 (77)	40 (82)	57 (98)	52 (93)	185 (88)
OBC	2 (4)	2 (4)	0	0	4 (2)
General	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)	4 (7)	5(2)

C. Approximately three-fourths of the households had BPL cards. Most of the

households in Koinar and Chitapur had BPL cards (Table 4).

**Table 4: BPL Card Holders (in percentage)**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Yes	34 (72)	43 (88)	32 (55)	52 (93)	161 (77)
No	13 (28)	6 (12)	26 (45)	4 (7)	49 (23)

D. The primary occupation of about half the households was agriculture and the others relied upon wage labour. A majority of the households in Chitapur and Koinar depended

primarily upon agriculture and wage labour, respectively, whereas in the other clusters there was an equal dependence on both agriculture and wage labour (Table 5)

**Table 5: Occupational Distribution**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
1. Farming, Animal Husbandry & collections	27 (47)	8 (15)	57 (51)	44 (79)	136 (49)
2. Self-employed	5 (9)	1 (2)	0	0	6 (2)
3. Service	0	0	0	0	0
4. Wage labour	22 (38)	45 (82)	54 (490)	12 (21)	133 (48)
5. Others	4 (7)	1(2)	0	0	5 (2)

E. Around 73 per cent of the total household population was found to be illiterate (could not read or write) and 18 per cent had received primary education. The least illiterate and the most educated (secondary or more)

households were in Chindbahar whereas in Chindavada and Chitapur most of them were illiterate and no one had received secondary education (Table 6).

**Table 6: Educational Status of Household Population**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Illiterate	147 (59)	173 (74)	198 (83)	156 (75)	674 (73)
Can sign	4(2)	5(2)	0	0	9(1)
Primary	47 (19)	37 (16)	32 (13)	52 (25)	168 (18)
Secondary	27 (11)	9(4)	4(2)	0	40 (4)
>Secondary	25 (10)	9(4)	4(2)	0	38 (4)

## 1.2 Food and Nutrition

A. The daily food intake of all the households was mainly rice and rice porridge, a high source of carbohydrates. There was found to be a deficiency of other nutritional elements

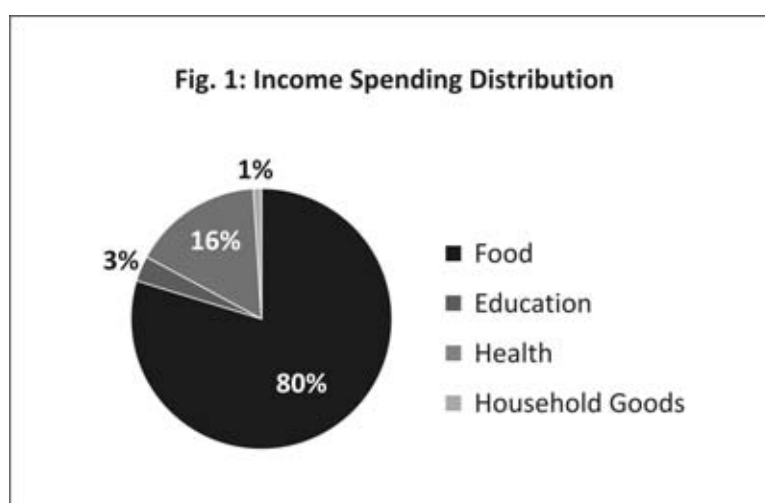
such as proteins and vitamins, owing to the dietary habits of the households. Moreover, rice porridge was consumed frequently in a day as a substitute to drinking water.

B. About 80 per cent of the income of the households was spent on food followed by 16 per cent on health. The people of Chitapur spent the largest share of their income on food.

Among the four clusters, the relative spending on health was the maximum in Chindbahar (Table 7 and Figure 1).

**Table 7: Income Spending Pattern**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Food	40	39	51	54	184
Education	4	1	2		7
Health	16	10	10	1	37
Household Goods	1	1		1	3



C. The majority of the households primarily depended on the market for their food whereas one-third of them depended on self-

produce and 14 per cent bought their food from a ration shop (Table 8).

**Table 8: The Main Source of Goods**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Self produce	16	14	33	54	117
Market	38	32	52	50	172
Ration shop	6	12	19	13	50
Forest	6	7			13

D. In case of food shortage, approximately two-fifth of the households borrowed from the moneylender and about one-fifth borrowed from SHGs or they migrated to other places for work. In Chindbahar and Chindavada, the majority of them were dependent on moneylenders; in Chitapur on the SHGs and in Koinar on working outside the village.

#### **Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in Darbha Block**

AWCs are the chief nodal agency across the villages and cities for the delivery of health services under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme of the Ministry of Women and Child Health. The scheme has been in existence in the country for three-and-a-half decades, with an aim to specifically promote and support the health of Pregnant and Lactating Mothers (P&LM) as well as children up to six years of age, through the provision of services such as supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, referral services, pre-school informal education and health and nutritional education.

The Darbha block has 72 villages that have been classified into six sectors, comprising 172 AWCs. The AWCs are spread out very unevenly across the villages, with some of the villages without an AWC whereas some have 10 to 20 AWCs. Whereas some of this is due to demographical differences, a large part is also due to the difficult topography (forests, lack of connectivity), administrative and security reasons. Around 5,500 children up to six years of age are enrolled in the AWCs in the entire block, with 900 on an average in each sector. Each AWC is run by an honorary *anganwadi* worker (AWW) supported by an honorary

*The scheme has been in existence in the country for three-and-a-half decades, with an aim to specifically promote and support the health of Pregnant and Lactating Mothers (P&LM) as well as children up to six years of age, through the provision of services such as supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, referral services, pre-school informal education and health and nutritional education*

*Anganwadi* Helper (AWH), both of them being women, who are paid Rs 2,000 and 1,000 per month, respectively. Both are selected through some pre-defined minimum criteria such as being local residents of a village, residing near an AWC, and having completed eight years of formal schooling in the case of an AWH and 12 years in case of an AWW. The task of the AWH involves preparing, cooking and serving food besides maintaining the cleanliness of the place and helping the AWW in other services. The AWW, on the other hand, supervises the former,

arranges the food, immunization and other services, and prepares and sends the monthly report of its activities to the block office.

The multiple functioning of the AWCs is supported by several stakeholders. First, as part of the supplementary nutrition programme, cooked food is given to children aged between the ages of three and six years and packaged food (ready-to-eat), introduced last year, is given on two days (Tuesdays and Fridays) to children up to three years of age as well as to the P&LM. The services of women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) are hired through some contractual procedures. They are engaged to supply the raw material for the food to be cooked and the finished ready-to-eat packaged food. One SHG can cover a maximum of 20–25 AWCs for a three-year period. Second, at the local sub-health centre, the auxiliary nurse & mid-wife (ANM) and *mitanins*, together with the AWW, arrange and provide immunization and health check-up programmes. They also facilitate the enrolment of new children in the AWC, and impart health and nutritional education to the P&LM.

### Challenges in the Functioning of the AWCs

The supervisors identified two main problems in the effective functioning and monitoring of the AWCs. First, most of the AWWs are old and not educated enough. Therefore, there is no timely preparation of the report with the requisite information. Many times, the report of an individual AWC has had to be made in the block office by the supervisors themselves because they had to send the report to the district office at the stipulated time. Second, the local people are not very aware, educated or motivated. They, therefore, do not send their children daily to the AWCs; hence, the problem of low enrolment and attendance of children.

With regard to the poor malnutrition status of Darbha block (which was recently reported to have the worst cases of malnourished children compared to all the other blocks of the Bastar district), the supervisors blamed the technical changes in the method of identifying and counting malnourishment levels among the children and the resultant reporting errors by AWWs, based on the new criteria. The shift from the earlier single category to the now three categories of low, medium and highly malnourished was jointly enumerated by AWWs without their classification, which then led to the large increase in the malnourishment cases.

### Case Study: Koinar

The village has seven hamlets, but no separate AWC of its own. Instead, one of the houses of an old widow is rented for Rs 500 per month, which sometimes acts as both a kitchen and a place to serve food, although many times the AWH prepares the food in her own house and serves it in the rented house. The AWH we talked to was quite old, probably in her late 50s, although she couldn't tell us her exact

age. She didn't seem too educated, although she has been working as an AWH for almost 15 years and receiving a payment of Rs 1,000 per month almost on a regular basis. She told us that hardly 15 children are enrolled at the AWC and about eight to ten of them come on alternate days, as and when cooked food is served, which is the only provision of supplementary nutrition by the AWC. When asked what the reason was behind the low enrolment and attendance rates, the response was familiar—non-interest shown by the villagers. Among the items of cooked food, the AWH told us that rice, millet and a vegetable were served. With regard to the status of other services that the *anganwadis* are supposed to provide, the AWH seemed unaware of them. Instead, she directed us to meet the AWW for further information because the latter was in charge of them and was authorized to give any information. However, we found that the AWC is non-existent and non-functional in the village.

### Case Study: Chindbahar

This six-hamlet village is covered by two AWCs—each of them located at two ends of the village. The AWC that we visited is located in Khaspara, the hamlet just at the entrance of the village. The semi-*pucca* centre is surrounded by a primary school (part of its vacant outer space serves as an *angandwadi* kitchen), the village *panchayat* office, a ration shop, a grocery shop (run by the husband of the AWW) and some *kuccha* houses in the midst of a solitary *pucca* house, which we found later to be the house of the AWW we were to meet. However, before meeting the AWW, we happened to meet her son, who worked as a distributor of a private health insurance company for the entire Bastar district. He volunteered information about his area of operation, the failure of the government-



sponsored nation-wide health insurance scheme called Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) and the need for awareness about private insurance in the village. This would help strengthen his business as well as perform social service. In the one year that he had been operating in the village, he had so far made around 60 customers. He also wanted us to help him market his product through some association.

The AWW of the centre is a 50-year-old lady, who has been working for the last 20 years along with an AWH. The AWW and the AWH were being paid an honorarium of Rs 1,500 and Rs 750 per month, respectively. Although 26 children were enrolled in the AWC, only 12 of them were present on an average on any given day. The timings of the centre had been changed to between 7 and 11 a.m. from the earlier 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The AWW complains that the children continue to follow the earlier timings. The AWC serves cooked food daily to children between three and six years, and provides packaged (ready-to-eat) food (called snacks) twice in a week to children up to three years as well as the P&LM. The cooked food comprises rice, millet and one vegetable such as brinjal or potato; the packaged food includes wheat and various sorts of local grains. The ingredients for the cooked food and the packets of ready-to-eat food are both purchased from two local women SHGs. The AWW told us that in case of delay in payments and fund shortages, the SHGs often contributed voluntarily to meet the daily food requirements for the AWC.

The AWW told us that the AWC works in collaboration with the nearby sub-health centre and the *mitanins*, for immunization and providing health education to the people. They identify and inform the people regarding the importance of vaccination and also provide the required doses on time. The AWW said she had noticed a significant increase in awareness among the villagers, over the years, regarding the need for immunization although there had not been any significant changes in health practices.

As far as the AWCs' role in pre-schooling and non-formal education was concerned, teaching resources and material were available; however, the AWW regretted being unable to devote the necessary time to teaching, both due to her health and other household work. Health check-ups were also quite sporadic. The AWW said that there was only one malnourished child in the centre, who was later sent to the sub-health centre for referral services because he was very weak and suffered from diarrhoea. She also told us that all the children are weighed on a specific day of every month although she finds it difficult to weigh them. She observed that the interest in and reliance of the villagers on the AWCs for supplementary nutrition had been declining over the years.

B. Half the households spent one-hour collecting drinking water and two-fifths took half an hour or less. In Chindavada, most households took less than half an hour whereas the Koinar households spent maximum time collecting water (Table 10).

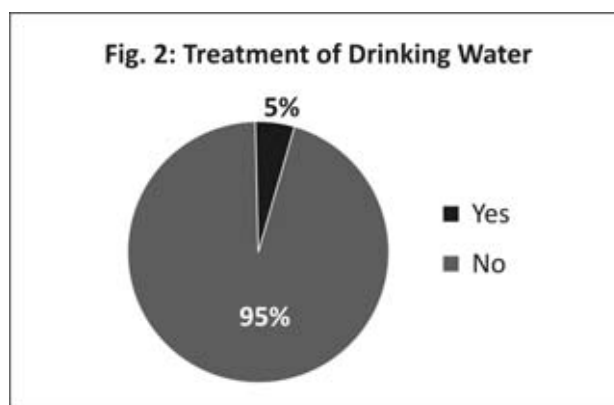
**Table 10: Average Time Taken to Collect Drinking Water**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
30 minutes or less	16	9	58	2	85
1 hour	35	26	4	54	119

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
2 hours	2	10	0		12
4 hours	0	3	0		3

C. Approximately 95 per cent of the households did not treat the water before drinking it. Of the five per cent of households that treated the water, half was in Chindbahar.

They treated the water either by boiling it or passing it through a cloth filter (Tables 11, 12 and Figure 2).



**Table 11: Treatment of Drinking Water**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Yes	5	1	3	1	10
No	42	48	55	55	200

**Table 12: Method of Treatment of Drinking Water**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Boiling	0	1	3	1	5
Cloth filter	5	0	0		5

### 3.4 Sanitation

A. One-fourth of the households surveyed washed their hands after defecation whereas two-fifths washed their hands before eating. Among the four clusters, most of the households in Chindbahar washed their hands after defecating whereas very few did so in Chitapur (Table 13, Fig. 3).

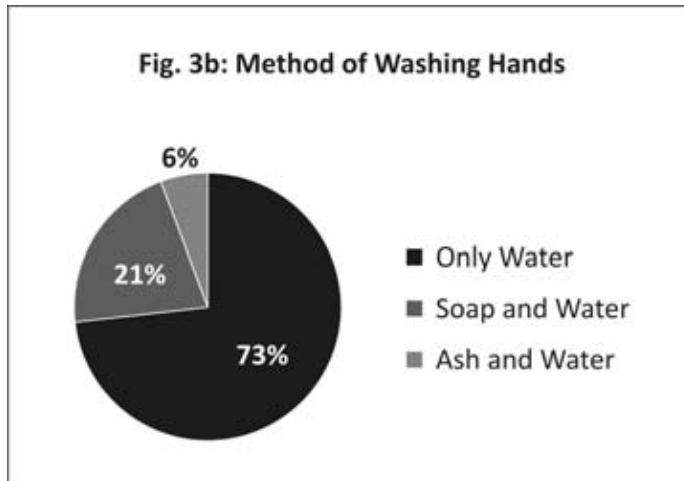
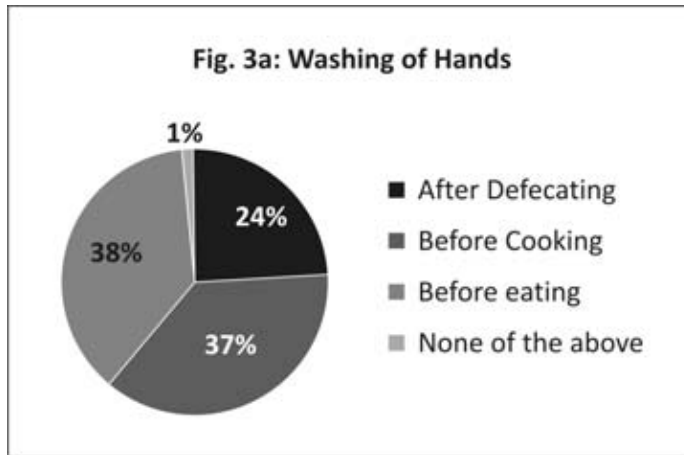
B. Most of the households washed their hands only with water. Only 21 per cent used soap. Almost all the households in Chindavada washed their hands only with water whereas Koinar had the maximum soap users. (Table 14, Figures 4 a and 4 b).

**Table 13: Washing of Hands**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
After defecating	43	46	32	5	126
Before cooking	47	46	54	45	192
Before eating	47	46	58	45	196
None of the above	0	3	0	5	8

**Table 14: Method of Washing Hands**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Only water	42	41	58	49	190
Soap and water	7	41	0	7	55
Ash and Water	2	6	0	7	15



C. All the households defecated in the open and most of them did so in an undesignated area. Only three per cent of them defecated

in a designated open area in Chitapur (Figure 15).

**Table 15: Place of Defecation**

	Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Designated area	0	0	0	7	7
Undesignated open area	47	49	58	49	203

D. Most of the households threw waste outside in an undesignated area. One-fourth of them buried the household waste.

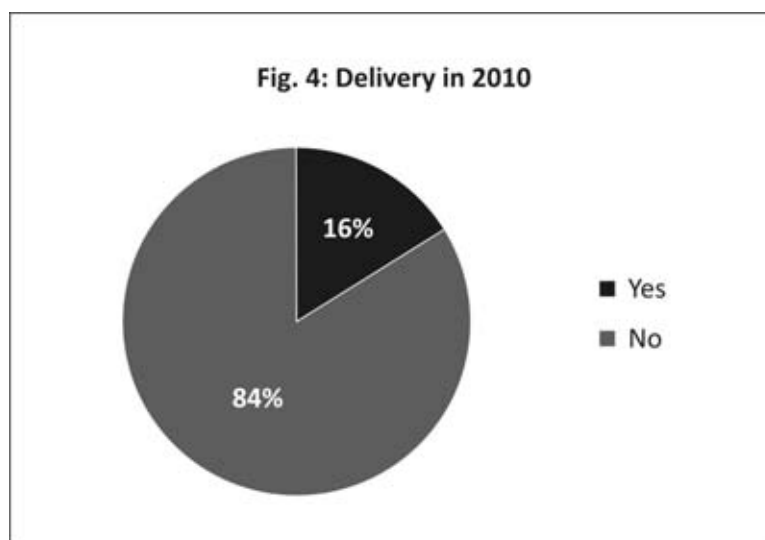
cent, a child had been born in that period. Chitapur had the maximum number of births among the clusters; in the other three clusters, there were three households each in which a child had been born. Chindavada had the highest number of households (55) among the clusters without any births (Table 16).

### Reproductive and Child Health

A. Of the total households surveyed, 84 per cent had not had a birth of a child in the previous 12 months; in the remaining 16 per

**Table 16: Delivery Taken Place in the Previous 12 months (in 2010)**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Births in 2010	Yes	3	3	3	20	29
	No	44	46	55	6	151

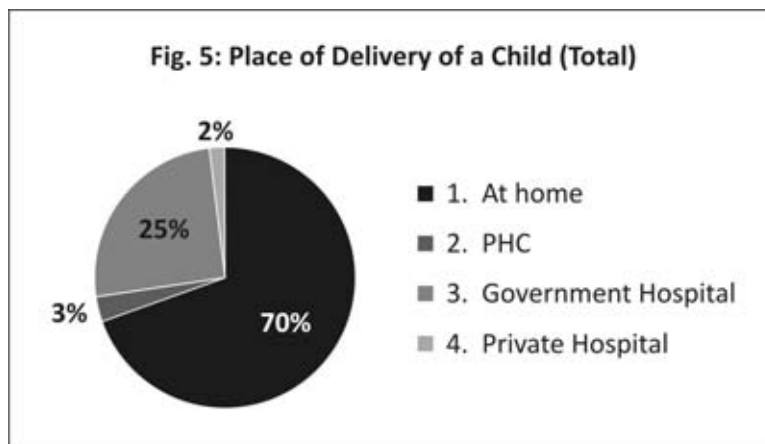


B. Of the surveyed households, 70 per cent of the women had their delivery at home, 25 per cent at the government hospital, 3 per cent at a Primary Health Centre (PHC) and 2 per cent at a private hospital. The most common place for the delivery of a child was at home

followed by in government hospitals. Very few people went to the PHC or private hospitals. At Chindavada, the delivery most often took place at home; Koinar was the only cluster where women also relied on a private hospital to deliver their babies

**Table 17: Place of Delivery**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Where did the delivery take place?/ Where is a baby usually delivered in your family?	1. At home	36	33	57	49	175
	2. PHC	0	1	0	7	8
	3. Government hospital	25	14	11	14	64
	4. Private hospital	0	5	0		5



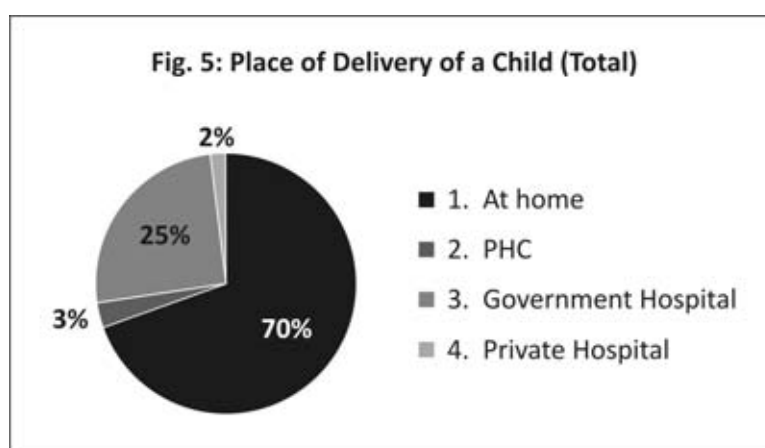
C. Of the 210 households surveyed, 33 per cent gave birth with the help of an untrained birth attendant, 25 per cent with the help of family members, 22 per cent with the help of the *mitanin*, 18 per cent with the help of an ANM and 2 per cent with the help of neighbours. In Chitapur, family members assisted in the

birthing process; in Chindavada, an ANM assisted; in Koinar, untrained birth attendants assisted in the process; and in Chindbahar, untrained birth attendants and *mitanins* often assisted in the delivery of babies. Of the four clusters, only in Chindbahar did women take help of neighbours.



**Table 18: Support during Delivery at Home**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Who helped in the delivery at home?	1. Family Members	0	0	4	56	60
	2. Untrained birth attendant	22	39	15	3	79
	3. <i>Mitanin</i>	25	13	13		51
	4. ANM	0	0	43		43
	5. Neighbours	4	0	0		4

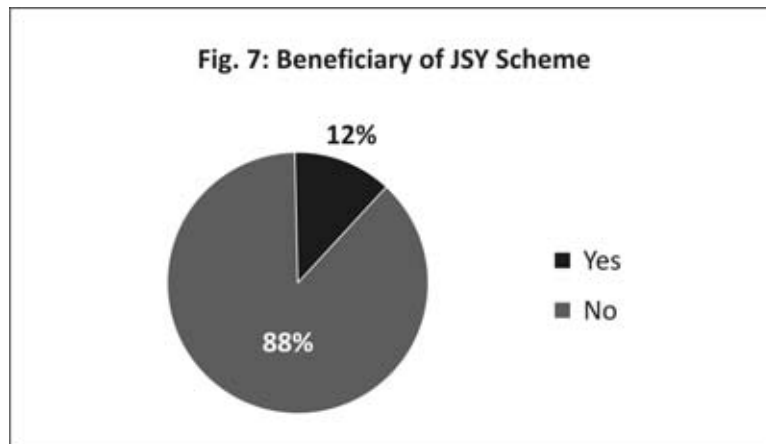


D. Only 12 per cent of the surveyed households benefited through the government scheme called Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). The other

88 per cent were not a part of the JSY. The scheme benefited the people of the Chitapur and Chindavada clusters the least.

**Table 19: JSY Scheme Benefits**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Were any benefits of the Janani Suraksha Yojana(JSY) availed of?	Yes	6	4	1	7	18
	No	41	45	45	2	133

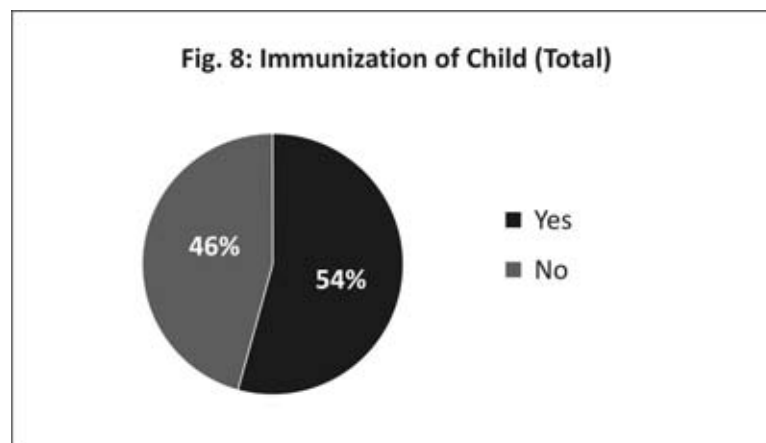


E. The study on the immunization of children found that 54 per cent of the surveyed households had their children immunized but the other 46 per cent had not. Chitapur cluster

led with the highest number of immunizations of children and Chindavada had the lowest rate.

**Table 20: Immunization of Children**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Are children under-5 vaccinated?	Yes	38	18	2	56	114
	No	9	31	56		96

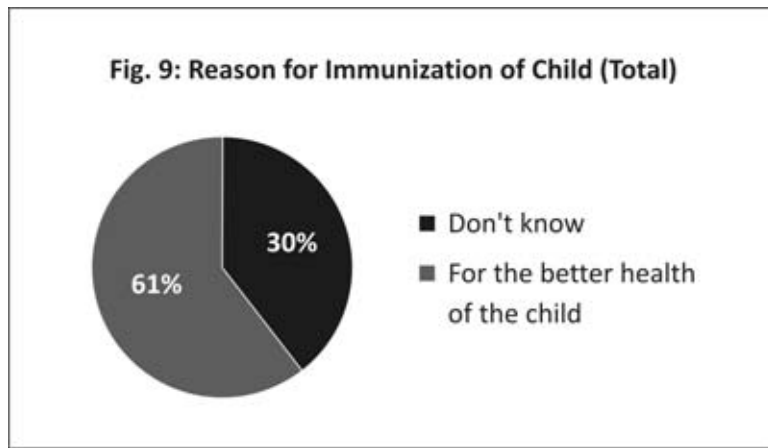


F. Only 61 per cent of the people were aware of the reasons for immunization. In Chindavada, none of the households surveyed knew why

immunization had to be done. In Koinar, on the other hand, most of the households were aware of the reason.

**Table 21: Reason for Immunization of Children**

		Chindbahar	Koinar	Chindavada	Chitapur	Total
Why vaccinate children?	Don't know	13	1	2	29	45
	For the better health of the child	25	17		27	69



G. The *mitanin* helps the women in the birthing process in the village. She also helps take women to nearby hospitals for their delivery. She helps the doctors and the villagers in immunizing the children in the village.

### CHINDBAHAR

The village has around 10 *mitanins*, at least one in each hamlet. Radhamani, the *mitanin* we interviewed, was from Khaspara. She was in her early thirties and she had been working as a *mitanin* for the last seven years. She was responsible for three villages. She was trained for three months when she was appointed and continues to go for short training programmes occasionally and for meetings of all the *mitanins*, once a month. As a *mitanin*, her main role is to support pregnant women both during and after the delivery of a child. She also looks after and arranges for the immunization of both the pregnant mothers as well as the newborn child. In order to perform this task, she associates with the AWCs and the sub-health centre of the village. Besides, she is also involved in spreading awareness and information, regarding the health and nutritional education to the P&LM. She is supposed to receive Rs 2,000 per month for her services from the government but according to her, she often receives her remuneration either quarterly or half-yearly. She said that the initial years were quite difficult for her because the work was new and the people were not aware and cooperative. Earlier, she said, she had to convince them to go for vaccinations, but over the years, the awareness levels have increased and many people voluntarily come to her for help at the time of delivery and vaccination. Overall, she finds the work quite challenging and satisfying.

The village has two *mitanins*, residing in two different hamlets—Maryapara and Schoolpara. The *mitanin* that we interviewed belonged to Maryapara and has been a *mitanin* for the last five years. She looked to be in her late twenties and had a small family—she, her husband and their small infant. Farming is her family's primary occupation; being illiterate, she treats being a *mitanin* more as a community service than a profession. Her work mainly involves supporting the nurses of the hospitals in a monthly immunization programme by taking the pregnant women to them and also supporting the pregnant women at the time of delivery, either in their homes or facilitating their travel to the nearby hospital. Apart from this, she also keeps medicines for common ailments such as fever, diarrhoea, stomach pain and cough, which someone brings to her from the Darbha hospital (Community Health Centre) on a weekly basis and which she distributes to the patients on demand, free of cost. She also works along with the *Sirah Gunias* in almost most of her tasks. She said that she had received some training for about a year for these tasks at Darbha and Tiratgarh. She also said that she does not receive any fixed monthly remuneration for her service from the government although she does receive Rs 100–300 for her training and Rs 350 per delivery of every pregnant woman taken to the hospital from nearby villages. Based on her experience so far, she finds her work difficult at times because she has to travel around the villages, often on an empty stomach. Her one complaint was that she does not receive enough money for the work.

The village has four or five *mitanins* located in the different hamlets. Sukhmani, the *mitanin* we interacted with, was in her late twenties and has been working part-time as a *mitanin* for the last three years. She initially received training and now visits the nearby village of Chingpal with other *mitanins* of the area, to attend the annual meeting. As a *mitanin*, she helps pregnant women during their delivery and provides vaccination services to them as well to the newborn child, although without any support from the AWCs or the sub-health centre because there aren't any in the village. Sukhmani complained that she had not received her dues for the last six months and though she had lodged several complaint she had not got any response. The lack of incentive has begun to show and she has begun to show disinterest in her work.

## Conclusion

The nature of the research study conducted was both descriptive and explorative. On the one hand, its aim was to uncover, document and understand the existing health conditions, preferences and practices of the community; on the other, it aimed at finding the possible processes and linkages that have led to the these health conditions and practices of the community. The data used to seek and obtain information for the above was both quantitative and qualitative. Data were collected primarily through surveys, interviews, observations, etc., and through secondary sources such as the Handbook.

Our research was conducted in collaboration with PRADAN. PRADAN began its operations in Bastar district in September 2009; after an initial survey of the area and interactions with the various stakeholders such as the community, the government, banks, other NGOs and traders, it zeroed in on two blocks namely Darbha and Bastar. PRADAN planned to focus on social mobilization by forming SHGs and clusters on a saturation basis in the blocks of Darbha and Bastar. Our research was based on the study of the household profile, food and nutrition, drinking water, sanitation, reproductive and child health practices in the

clusters of Chindbahar, Koinar, Chindavada and Chitapur.

Almost all the households surveyed had their own house and lived in *kuccha* houses. Around 88 per cent of the households belonged to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category and 8 per cent to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. Around 73 per cent of the total household population were illiterate (could not read and write) and 18 per cent had received primary education. Amongst the four clusters, the households in the area of Chitapur spent the maximum share of their income on food. The primary occupation of about half of the households was agriculture and the other half relied upon wage labour, due to poor economic conditions and lack of higher education.

The daily food intake of all the households was mainly rice and rice porridge, both high sources of carbohydrates. The diet of the households was found to be deficient in nutrients such as proteins and vitamins. Rice porridge was consumed frequently in a day by the households as a substitute for drinking water. AWCs are the chief nodal agency across villages and cities for the delivery of health services under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme of the Ministry of Women and Child Health.



About the reproductive health of the women, in 84 per cent of the households surveyed, there had been no births in the previous 12 months; in 16 per cent of households surveyed babies had been born in that period. Of the surveyed households, Chitapur had the maximum number of births. Three other clusters had three households each where a birth had taken place. Chindavada had the highest number of households (55), in which no birth had taken place.

There was found to be a high mortality rate in these clusters because:

1. Births in 70 per cent of the households took place at home.
2. Only 25 per cent of the households had used the government hospital facilities and 3 per cent had utilized the PHC.
3. Just two per cent of the deliveries took place in the private hospital.

*All the four clusters lived in kuccha houses; they were mainly dependent on rice for their nutritional needs; spent most of their income on food; spent much less on health; for the delivery of their children, they relied mostly on help from mitanins and preferred to have their children delivered at home*

At Chindavada, most of the births took place at home; Koinar was the only cluster where women also relied on the private hospital for the delivery of their babies. At Chindbahar most of the deliveries took place with the help of untrained birth attendants or *mitanins*.

It was found that there was inadequate nutrition and the sources of drinking water were poor and unhygienic because

a majority of the households obtained their drinking water from a hand pump. Only households in Chindavada relied on water from the stream.

In the final analysis, the study concluded that the households of all the four clusters lived in *kuccha* houses; they were mainly dependent on rice for their nutritional needs; spent most of their income on food; spent much less on health; for the delivery of their children, they relied mostly on help from *mitanins* and preferred to have their children delivered at home.

# Collective Action–My Dream of a Village

ARUNDATHI

*Seeing the women of Darbha standing upto domestic violence, organizing themselves into a sangh and taking part in the gram sabha proactively, the author dreams of a time when they stake their claim to equality and dignity, raising their collective voice for their rights and entitlements*

Aite *didi* lives in a home that she can confidently call her own. It's a home that she has built with her husband, Sonsingh, and their three children. The journey was not easy; and she covered the distance nevertheless. Aite stood up for herself against domestic violence, displaying strength and courage and, in the process, became a role model for many.

Over the years, Aite has learnt to assert herself and firmly communicate her stand to Sonsingh. Over and over again, she had to tell him that she was his equal in the relationship that they shared in marriage and that he had no right or business to physically and emotionally abuse her. She also had every right to stand up against his misdemeanours and abusive nature. Aite's fellow SHG members were her backbone in the journey. "It would have been simply impossible without my *samhooh* (SHG) *didis*," she says. "The village *kotwar* and the block *thana* inspector were very understanding of my plight and helped sensitize Sonsingh too."

Aite *didi*'s son, Anantram, recently graduated from ITI and is working with Samsung in the Jagdalpur–Darbha division. His job is to install the Samsung TVs that people buy, in their homes. Earlier, when he was studying in the sixth standard, he had contemplated quitting his studies. The situation at home was difficult, with his mother being the only earning member, his father drinking away all his earnings and his youngest sister being ill. However, his mother wouldn't hear of it. "We'll work something out," she used to say. "I am not alone now. My *samhooh* is with me, my *sankul* (cluster) is with me and my *sangh* is with me too. I'm hopeful, something will work." And true to what she said, things did work out. Aite *didi* and several other *didis*, all *samhooh* members across Darbha, worked hard to form a Federation, their very own *sangh* (*federation*). Besides being registered as a Society and being financially independent, the *sangh federation* gave Aite *didi* and her *sakhis* a collective voice to claim their rights and entitlements.

The *gram sabha* in Aite's village is spearheaded by the *didis* and the *dadas* (women and men) of the village (which unlike a few years ago used to be controlled by a powerful few) meet once every month, to discuss the progress in the village. They monitor and ensure the quality of roads, drinking water, schools, the quality of mid-day meals in schools and the *anganwadis* (village level health workers) give a report of the health status of the village during the *gram sabha* meetings every month. For example, they presented a longitudinal study conducted by them. According to this study, malnourishment amongst children in the age group 0–3 had decreased from 64 to 12 per cent over the past seven years. The *anganwadi karyakartas* workers, the school teachers, the *sarpanch* (head) and the *sachiv* (secretary) also present their monthly reports to the *gram sabha*.

On the agenda for discussion in meeting is the MGNREGS works planning for the coming year. Jaymani *didi* says that she wants a water harvesting structure to be constructed in her *beda zamin* (fallow land) in Kadri *beda*. The other *didis* and *dadas* agree that constructing a water harvesting structure there would, indeed, be useful. "How would this be useful?" questions the newly appointed *sachiv*. "Wouldn't simple land-levelling and bunding be better suited?" "No *dada*," explains Kamli *didi*, "The structure on Jaymani's land will be in continuation with the structures of 30 x 40, plantation, land development and harvesting structures done on the upper side of Kadri *beda*. This will not only help save, store and harvest water in her own land but also increase the ground-water level of all our lands around her piece of land." Tula *didi* adds, "And Jaymani is a single mother. Such a tank in her *beda zamin* will give her an opportunity to do

*Like a human child, a plant child or a sapling also needs proper nutrition to grow well and healthy. The more it grows, the more it eats and the more it needs to be fed, she had learnt*

fishery also. With that, she will be able to successfully save for her son Rohit's future studies."

Jaymani *didi* separated from her husband when she was five months pregnant. For a very long time, her single-mother status was either spoken of with

ill favour or not spoken about at all in the village. Things are different today. The villagers recognize her as a woman brave enough to be a single mother, and they support her in her struggle to educate Rohit.

As the *gram sabha* comes to an end, the *didis* and *dadas* linger on to discuss the festival of *Diyari* that is just around the corner. The *didis* discussed how many *poylis* (a unit of measurement used which holds 2<sup>1/2</sup> kg of rice) *dhan* they would grind to make *landa* this year for *Diyari*. Pide *didi* said, "This year I'm going to make three full *poylis* of *landa*. A local beer a delicacy which is a must for every occasion of significance in the village." The other *didis* also agreed on similar quantities and then walked happily back home.

On her way home, Pide *didi* thought of how things had changed over the past few years and smiled. There was a time when the *dhan* harvested from her land was just about enough to feed her family for a mere three months. There was a time when she had borrowed three *poylis* of rice from her neighbour to make *landa* for *Diyari*. Today, things are different. Along with discovering the best paddy seeds and best practices in paddy cultivation, Pide *didi* has also learned what it takes for a *dhan* plant to grow and multiply into several tillers. It was so simple yet so essential, she thought.

Like a human child, a plant child or a sapling also needs proper nutrition to grow well and healthy. The more it grows, the more it eats and

the more it needs to be fed, she had learnt. She had logically and scientifically understood paddy cultivation. This knowledge and some new technology helped her increase the productivity of her paddy fields exponentially. To clear any doubts that she may have regarding paddy cultivation or diseases and pests, she could call Balman, who was earlier a Community Service Provider (CSP) and was currently the Agriculture Officer for a cluster of three *panchayats*. He had become an employee of the Agriculture Unit, which is a sub-part of their *sangh*. Balman provided support and services for anything—from inputs to market linking the agriculture produce. He either would attend to the matter himself or guide a CSP to provide the help and support required.

Along with the blossoming paddy fields and the flourishing *imli* (tamarind) business with the *samhooh didis*, Pide *didi* also ran a small tailoring shop. She works on the sewing machine, less for the money that it brings her and more because she enjoys stitching and making clothes. She has overcome her financial problems. Her smile as she walks back home reflects more than just the joy of financial security; it is full of confidence and courage that she has gained over the past few

*She has overcome her financial problems. Her smile as she walks back home reflects more than just the joy of financial security; it is full of confidence and courage that she has gained over the past few years. She now has the strength to move ahead boldly.*

years. She now has the strength to move ahead boldly.

Pide *didi* skipped and hopped the last few yards to her home. She was going to take the three *poylis* of rice to the river to wash and dry and grind to make sweet *landa*.

Very soon, it was *Diyari*. Aite *didi's* mother-in-law from Jagdalpur and her brothers-in-law visited them. She had made *landa* and *chaapra chaakna* (a chutney made of raw red ants) for all the guests. Before offering them the drink with a twist of *chaapra*, Aite *didi* gave her guests mugs of water and some soap to wash their hands, "Washing hands with soap before eating saves us from contracting many diseases," said Aite's youngest. This made Aite and Sonsingh look at each other with raised eyebrows and a smile on their faces and the guests teased her, saying, "Accha aase *madamji*."

That night on *Diyari*, all the *didis* and *dadas* of the *para* (hamlet) got together to drink, sing and dance just as they had been doing over the past so many years. The songs and dances applauded their spirit, with every beat and every step.

# The Women of Chindbahar—Moving Ahead

SHASHIKANT RAVI

*With support from development professionals and information about the various activities under different projects, the women in Chindbahar take up the responsibility of improving their lives, taking charge of projects and interacting with the community and the government officials with ease and confidence*

On the 5 February 2012, I received a call from Laxman Netam, the *sachiv* of *Panchayat Chindbahar Panchayat*, inviting me to attend a *gram sabha* meeting the following day. I went there with Nandini, my colleague in PRADAN, and was happy to see that about 200 villagers had gathered and of these at least 50 per cent of them were women. These women were a part of Self Help Groups (SHGs). The *sarpanch*, the *janpad sadasya* and the *zila sadasya* (the people's representatives at block & district levels respectively) were in the meeting as well. This was a special *gram sabha* called to discuss the problem of land and water work through MGNREGA. I was happy that the villagers were taking the initiative to talk about MGNREGA, without any influence from government officials or NGOs.

Having been to the village today and seen the enthusiasm of the villagers, I began to think of our initial days here. Pradyut formed the first SHG, 'Lal Genda Mahila Swa Sahayata Samooh', in 2009, and I started working here a year later. Chindbahar is a village in Darbha block in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, which is about 22 km from the district headquarters, Jagdalpur. There are seven hamlets in this village with about 350 households. Around 65 per cent of the population belongs to STs, 20 per cent to SCs, 10 per cent to OBCs and 5 per cent to the general category.



In the beginning, when I met the sarpanch and I discussed the strategy for our work,

we decided to keep our focus on the members of the SHGs and their interpersonal relations, ensuring that the groups meet regularly and that we keep a continuous interaction with them. I thus began work in Chindbahar and with it my exploration to understand the village. The *zila sadasya* (Shyamvati Korram) and the *janpad sadasya* (Kamala Kashyap) are from this village, as are many others who are involved in the local political process. These people are very powerful and have a big influence on the villagers. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) representatives were either from the BJP or from the Congress and were, therefore, possibly politically influential. I maintained a good rapport with the villagers as well as with the people's representatives and the other powerful people of the village. My primary focus, however, was to enable and empower the members of the SHG. We interacted with the SHG members in group meetings and one-on-one in their homes. I spent time talking to them about their problems, their joys and their sorrows, and shared information about myself with them. I wanted them to understand that I was in the village not only to work but also to become one of them.

I think I was somewhat successful. During Raksha Bandhan in 2010, I was sad because I was unable to go home. The women of Chindbahar understood this. I was invited to the village for the festival and about 30 women tied rakhi on my wrist and told me, "*Hamare karan aap apne bahan ke paas nahhi jaa sake; koi baat nahhi, hum sab aapko rakhi baandhege taaki aapko dukh naa rahe ki aap raakhi nahhi bandhwa paaye* (You were unable to go home to your sister because of us. Don't be sad; all

*Another positive was that the people's representatives, that is, the sarpanch present on the occasion, saw the confidence of the women and how they spoke with the officials. The major gain from this event was the confidence of the women*

of us will tie Rakhi on you)." This statement really touched me and I felt that they had accepted me as one of them.

We started a land-and-water activity in the village in April 2010 with a grant from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT). The programme was led by a governing body (the *gram sabha*) and a Programme Execution Committee (PEC). The

PEC comprised members of the three SHGs, selected by the group. The responsibilities of the PEC were to monitor the work, withdraw money from the bank and pay the labourers every 15 days. It was a difficult and painstaking task to check who had done how much work. They also encouraged the labour to work well. This helped bring about a change in villagers' perception of the PEC members. The villagers began to respect the PEC members and seek their advice.

The PEC members also invited some of the powerful people of the village to the meetings; by having those people appreciate their work, they were able to strengthen themselves, creating an overall positive energy and impression. We also encouraged them to participate in meetings with external resources, in order to give them an exposure to the outside world. Initially, we invited the CEO of the *zila panchayat* (Mr. R. Prasanna) to the village. The women seemed a little nervous to begin with. However, when the CEO reached, Dinmani, Ahalya, Manjula and Kalwati (all PEC members) began a discussion with him, and the other six PEC members stood behind them to give them support. They were able to explain the planning process, how they were working, what the output was, what the response of the villagers was and their overall experience. The CEO seemed very impressed by them. Another positive was that the people's representatives,

that is, the *sarpanch* present on the occasion, saw the confidence of the women and how they spoke with the officials. The major gain from this event was the confidence of the women. We, therefore, decided to call government officials, people from outside Bastar, professionals from PRADAN posted in nearby places and villagers from other villages to Chindbahar.

We realized that should women become the people's representatives, they would contribute to the uplift of the village. We began to strategize accordingly. The first step towards this goal would be help the women understand the PRI system, their rights and entitlements and the meaning of a *gram sabha*.

We organized exposure visits to Narharpur for the women of the SHGs, to meet the people's representatives of Kanker block where PRADAN had been working for the last seven years and where many works of MGNREGA are in progress. The women interacted with the SHG members and the PRI representatives, and learned about how MGNREGA schemes have helped the village. They also learned how the work was delegated and how everyone contributed to the smooth running of the work in the village. On their return, we found that the women were more confident and they had a greater understanding of and belief in the work being done by PRADAN. They became more serious about the meetings, started talking about various issues in the village such as the MGNREGA work and its status, the behaviour of the PRI people with them and how they can help the people of the *panchayat*.

At the same time, there was a shift in the people's representative's perception about PRADAN and its work. Kamala Kashyap, the

*We realized that should women become the people's representatives, they would contribute to the uplift of the village*

*janpad sadasya*, encouraged the women of her neighbourhood to form an SHG and asked PRADAN to support and to strengthen it. Her husband visited some of the neighbouring

villages with me and told the villagers about the land-and-water activity at Chindbahar and the working of the SHG there. He encouraged and motivated the villagers of all the other nearby villages to do the same. This helped in forming SHGs in other villages and hamlets.

Of course, not all the people's representatives were happy with this arrangement. Some thought they would lose their hold on the villages or that funds may be blocked if the villagers tried to get the money themselves. Problems did arise because of these fears.

For example, one day I had gone to the village for an SHG meeting. In that meeting, one completely drunk man came very close to me. He said, "*Aap yahan aake logo ko bewakuf bana rahe ho aur hamaare ghar ki auratein kaam dhaam chodke aapke saath samay barbaad kar rahe hai* (You are making a fool of people and our women instead of doing the housework are wasting their time with you)." Though I was very pained by his words, I did not reply and listened to him with patience. On my way back, my thoughts were centred on the incident and I was determined to change the perception of that man. I continued my work in the village but this time with a new strategy. I invited the men of the village to the SHG meeting so that they could understand what was happening in the SHG meetings. The strategy was helpful and I was able to establish a rapport with the men of the village.

On 25 October 2010, the women of the Darbha block celebrated their first Mahadhivesan. They set up a core committee to organize the function and four of the

members were from Chindbahar. They were very enthusiastic and worked very hard. Dinmani, one of the SHG members from the Chindbahar, was the anchor for the programme. She was very confident and spoke fluently before an audience of 1,500 women and government officials. Some of the other members of the PEC from Chindbahar made a presentation on the land-and-water activity. I was in the audience then and overheard a person from another village say that these were the same problems that they faced as well and admired how the people from Chindbahar had been able to solve theirs. I felt happy to hear this and was reassured that I was moving in the right direction with the women of Chindbahar.

After the Mahadhivesan, I noticed a renewed energy in the women. They began to speak up and even, on occasion, confronted the PRI representatives and the *sachiv* for their rights.

During the social audit of the *gram sabha* in January 2011, the women raised a common voice in front of the PRI representatives, the *sachiv* and the government officials. They asked for the detailed expenditure of the MGNREGA work and the future plans. The *sachiv* was unable to answer and the women became very angry and even seemed to forget who they were talking to. They spoke sternly to the *sachiv* and gave him a warning to correct the mistakes. Later, when they found that the *sachiv* had not made the corrections, they made a written complaint to the CEO of the Darbha block.

As time passed, the PEC members strengthened their technical skills about the measurement of work, giving layouts, negotiating with the labourers, making their payment, etc. By the end of 2011, we helped the *panchayat* and

*As time passed, the PEC members strengthened their technical skills about the measurement of work, giving layouts, negotiating with the labourers, making their payment, etc.*

the villagers to submit the plan of work under MGNREGA. They did so and work of about Rs 13 lakhs has been sanctioned.

When the MGNREGA projects were sanctioned and work began, we decided to end the SDTT project. The villagers were

not very happy but over many meetings with the SHGs, the PRI representatives and the villagers, we were able to disengage, and the women decided to work on the MGNREGA projects.

I am happy and satisfied with the way things are moving in the village. It is now time to think about a strategy to help the villagers keep this energy up so that the work in the village moves as fast as possible. I believe that if the work under MGNREGA goes smoothly in the first year, it will continue for a long time. It is important to create awareness, unity and a feeling of ownership among the villagers, to be able to implement any kind of scheme or plan in the village successfully.

I would also like to share what I have learnt from this experience. Being development professionals, we think we have to generate ideas and options for villages and communities. We assume that the villagers will not be able to work on their own. They have not worked on these developmental issues before, so how will they be able to handle it. But working in the field, I found that the tribal people also have a mind and they are thinking people and we should not judge them just because they have not been exposed to the working of projects. If they are shown what needs to be done, they will do it in their own way and style. They may make mistakes in the beginning but they will learn from their mistakes. I learnt that as a professional, I have to have patience and keep an open mind.

The villagers of Chindbahar are on the road to development and they will move ahead and achieve many things on their own. They just have to keep the spirit of unity and have the belief that they can change their status by working together. My work now is to invest time in the village to increase the energy and the feeling of ownership of the group and help

them visualize the development of their life and the village.

As I conclude, I remind myself that I should always look at the positives, no matter what the situation or condition, so that I can help the villagers to move ahead in a positive way.









In several regions of rural India, women are relatively disadvantaged. They are restricted in their physical mobility, their public role is minimal and access to information is limited. In such a context, SHGs provide a platform that allows women to meet regularly and discuss the problems they face in their daily lives. We provide evidence that the SHG members have undertaken collective action to solve these problems. These actions include manual interventions, campaigns in the village or visits to a government officer to seek solutions

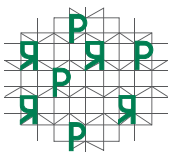
# PRADAN



**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 monthly journal is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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