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SHG Women: Leading a Political Uprising

MEHMOOD HASAN, BANDANA DEVI AND MADHAVESH KUMAR

Getting a foothold into the existing male-dominated Panchayati Raj Institutions seemed a Herculean task for the women of the SHGs—a challenge they took up with zest and determination, leading to their victory and the beginnings of change

The active participation of the Self Help Group (SHG) women in the November 2015 *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) elections in Poraiyahat block of Jharkhand's Godda district was something remarkable. From the selection of the best persons to be the *mukhiya* or members of the *Panchayat Samiti* or Ward Members of their *panchayat* to going with them to file the nominations to campaigning for the candidates, these women extended their active participation.

Due to their efforts, one *jila parishad* member, five *panchayat mukhiyas*, seven *Panchayat Samiti* members and 72 Ward Members, who won the elections, were SHG members. They also helped many others, who were not from the SHG, but could play, according to the SHG members, a pivotal role as PRI representatives.

In some instances, the SHG women won the election unopposed. The reason for such enthusiasm among the women and their involvement is a long one, and the journey towards this change has not been an easy one. The Ekta Mahila Vikas Manch (EMVM) Poraiyahat is a block-level women's SHG Federation. It came into existence on 23 January 2005, with a total SHG membership of 2,685 spread over 196 SHGs. Poraiyahat is a very big block. There are 31 *panchayats*, comprising 197 villages. There are 37,594 families and the total population of the block is 1,87,989. At the time of the PRI elections in 2015, EMVM Poraiyahat had 13,745 rural women members from 1007 SHGs.

The SHG women, associated with EMVM Poraiyahat, had discussed their problems with PRI representatives. These discussions took place at different levels such as in SHG meetings, in Village Organization (VO) meetings and in Federation meetings. They were somewhat dissatisfied that PRI representatives neglected their issues.

Whenever they approached the *mukhiya* or the *Panchayat Samiti* member, their issues were not addressed. Sometimes, PRI representatives did not show any respect to the collectives, whether it was the SHG, the VO or the block-level SHG

Federation. When the women asked the PRI representatives to attend their meetings so that they could tell them of their problems, the PRI representatives rarely came. Sometimes, when the SHG women went to meet their PRI representatives, they were not heard out.

The PRI representatives were involved in many cases of corruption. The *mukhiya* of one *panchayat* openly accepted in a VO meeting that he charged Rs 3,000 for every Indira Awas Yojna Scheme. He justified it by saying that since the government didn't give any transport allowance for travelling from one area to another, he charged the amount from every beneficiary for meeting these expenses. In another case, a *mukhiya* asked for Rs 200 to make an identity card of a villager. The villager wanted to open a savings account in the bank, for which she needed two identity cards. The bankers in Godda district have allowed the *mukhiyas* to issue identity cards for opening savings bank accounts. Many PRI representatives, especially *mukhiyas*, shifted to Poraiyahat—the block headquarters, or Godda—the district headquarters. Because of these shifts, they became inaccessible to the common people.

Very few PRI representatives have earned respect because of their work. The *mukhiya* of Baksara *panchayat*, Hemant Kumar, is one such. He did extensive work in his *panchayat* and because of that he was elected again, and this time with more votes.

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The problems that the common people faced with PRI representatives became one of the reasons for the active participation of SHG women in the elections.

The participation of SHG women also increased because of their collectives. After interacting with other SHGs and becoming more aware through discussions and training, members became more aware and developed greater understanding about the PRI and what could be done through it. The PRI was always on the agenda of discussions in their meetings. And the women took steps to strengthen the PRI by participating in *gram sabha* meetings. They also went to meet the PRI representatives. They asked the PRI representatives to attend the meetings of their collectives. Sometimes, they stood against their PRI representatives, and there were times they supported them. Since their bitter experiences with PRI representatives far outweighed their positive experiences, they were motivated to bring about a change in the local political set-up.

Getting elected to the PRI was the first step for entering the arena of politics for many SHG women. And the women's collectives were there to help them win. The SHG women wanted to bring change in their villages and in their *panchayats*. For that they wanted to contest the elections.

Here's the story of how this uprising happened.

THE PRI WORKSHOP

PRADAN'S work at the grass roots brought great clarity that it was important to focus on the empowerment of the poor rural women so that they could contribute to increasing the household income, and also participate

in the governance system of the family, society and village. When talking of the governance system, the emphasis here is specifically on providing the space for women to be part of the decision-making in any forum, which directly or indirectly influences their life, for instance, family, *jati panchayats* and the local governance system.

Most villagers are not aware of the power of the gram sabha and the people's role and responsibility in making it strong and functional

With this broader objective, PRADAN organized a two-day workshop on 'Preparation for influencing PRI elections for better local self-governance' at Ranchi on the 27 and 28 September 2015. The main objective of the workshop was to motivate women's collectives to influence the *panchayati raj* elections of Jharkhand, to be held in November 2015, through imparting knowledge on the workings of the PRI.

SHG members from different parts of Jharkhand were invited. Four members—Anita Devi, Bitiya Hembram, Poonam Devi and Namita Kisku, from the EMVM Poraiyahat also participated in the workshop. Ajit Singh from State Institute of Rural Development, Jharkhand, and Gurjeet Singh, an independent consultant, were the resource persons.

The workshop began with an inspiring presentation by Ajit Singh on the *gram sabha*. In this session, the stress was on making women aware of the importance of the *gram sabha* for the people. The *gram sabha*, he said, was the most powerful body in the local self-governance system, as envisaged in our Constitution. But our experience is that this has not been recognized in our rural society fully. It has been seen that this powerful structure of local governance has always been by-passed and the Vidhaan Sabha and the Lok Sabha have always been what people have looked to for development. The *gram sabha* is

a permanent body, of which any person, 18 years or above, can be a member; it is her/his right to participate in each and every process of the *gram sabha*. Every decision, be it passing the Village Development Plan or implementation of government schemes, can only be passed with the consensus of the *gram sabha*.

But the real scenario is different from what has been envisaged in our law. Most villagers are not aware of the power of the *gram sabha* and the people's role and responsibility in making it strong and functional. The workshop discussed the probable reasons for this. One reason was that, perhaps, the villagers did not consider the *gram sabha* to be an important body or a place where they could exercise their rights. Instead, they handed over their power to the elected *panchayat* representatives as well as to *panchayat* officials. In most places, the process of organizing the *gram sabha* and informing people about it is neglected because of which these people remain outside in the decision-making process. Many of the schemes and plans, therefore, get sanctioned in the presence of a few so-called powerful and influential people of the village.

The innocent women and men of these villages are being made to sign or put their thumb impression on a blank register. This is only on paper. The set-up, therefore, is being dominated by a few, powerful persons along with a few PRI representatives, who have become the main decision-makers. Ajit Singh also shared that usually the villagers go to the *gram sabha* without any preparation of plans and hardly ever participate in the discussions; the plans passed then far exceed the allocated budget, which leads to chaos among the villagers, and a few people take advantage of the situation. The chaos also provides them

with a reason for not involving the villagers in the process.

The need of the hour, then, is to make the people aware how this democratic set up functions and the power of the *gram sabha*, without which it will not be possible to draft a developmental discourse of the area in favour of the people. Stressing on the importance of spreading awareness among the people regarding the *gram sabha*, Ajit Singh raised some questions, "In a democracy, whose responsibility is it to think of development? Is giving a vote and electing representatives our only responsibility? After being elected as the people's representative, should one think only about fulfilling one's own aspirations, forgetting all the promises made to the people when asking for votes?" Above all, he raised another question, "Which is the better option: only 543 MPs (Members of Parliament) deciding the welfare of more than 100 crore people or all the people participating in this process?"

The whole audience responded in favour of people's participation. And for this, there is no other way than to create awareness about the *gram sabha* and its power was his conclusion.

For creating awareness about the *gram sabha*, it is important to know its technicalities. Some of the key points discussed around it by the resource persons were: in a revenue village, any resident, who is more than 18 years old and has her/his name in the *panchayat* voter list, is a member of the *gram sabha*; the *gram sabha* should meet at least four times a year; a *gram sabha* should be announced within three months of the previous *gram sabha*; in a non-PESA (Panchayats Extension to Schedule Areas) area, for fulfilling the quorum, one-tenth of the members of *gram sabha* should be present, of which one-third should be women; in a PESA area, it is one-third of the

total members, of which one-third should be women.

Based on five years of experience, the resource persons shared that women have claimed a significant amount of space in local self-governance, covering 54 per cent of the seats at all levels such as the *panchayat*, the *Panchayat Samiti* and the *jila parishad*. *Panchayat* buildings are also being constructed in villages, thus, increasing infrastructural development, leading people to acknowledge that PRIs exist.

There is always some failure behind any success. PRI was developed but the power/provisions for it to function smoothly have not been given to the extent needed by this institution. For instance, *panchayat* offices are under-staffed and funding is less than required. The areas where corruption can occur have increased as has the impact of middlemen. Earlier, people had to approach the block or the district to avail of any rights or entitlements. Now, there is an additional layer, the *panchayat*. In the rural areas, it is observed that even though the gap between the common people and the government has decreased, they still have to pass through middlemen to access their entitlements. Women have created a space for themselves in the system but the key has remained in the hands of their husbands.

Gurjeet Singh, another resource person, compared the present-day *panchayat* with a bus. The bus symbolizes a *panchayat* and the *mukhiya* is its driver, who takes to the wheel without deciding where to go. The members of the *gram sabha* are the passengers, who are asleep. They are not even aware of the direction in which the bus is moving. Even if the driver is going in the wrong direction, the passengers are unaware of it. A bus needs four tyres to move; in the present system, there

are less than that, that is, the *panchayat* is under-staffed. So with less than four tyres, how can the 'bus', or the *panchayat* here, move. The bus is not being given adequate fuel by the government; thus, it cannot move properly: inadequate funding, inadequate development. This simple and clear analogy by Gurjeet Singh helped the participants relate it with the present situation of the PRI and realize where the gap lay.

The discussion then moved to the role of the women's collectives and how the forthcoming *panchayat* elections could be influenced to ensure that a proper representative is elected for the people. Some of the points for action that came up were: that the collectives should select one candidate unanimously at the Ward level. This would be without a contest so that there would be no bitter feelings among the villagers because no one would be in competition with each other. The fundamental basis of this selection will be that the 'candidate should be one whom the people want and not one who wants to contest by herself/himself'. The SHG women, along with other villagers, were to take a collective decision as to who they wanted to be their representative for the coming five years. They would also bear the election expenses collectively. This process will create pressure on the candidate to perform better because she/he would have been nominated collectively by the villagers. The collectives could also come up with an election manifesto, mentioning how the villagers envisaged their *panchayat* and *panchayat* representatives to be before the candidates started their campaigns. Also necessary was to parallelly by create awareness among the people about the *gram sabha*. The process of filing nominations, the criteria of the candidate to contest elections, the fee for different candidates and their expense limits were also

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presented in the workshop by the resource persons.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

After attending the two-day workshop, members of EMVM, Poraiyahat, came back energized and motivated to do

something collectively in their area. First, they shared the entire experience of the workshop with the Federation members, comprising one representative from each *panchayat*. Together, they decided to hold meetings at different *panchayats*, the dates of which were finalized. The agenda for discussions in *panchayat*-level meetings was as follows:

- ♦ What is a *panchayat* and what is a *gram sabha*?
- ♦ What is our experience of the last five years—what has been our expectation from our representatives and what has been met and what has not been met?
- ♦ How do we want our next representatives to be? What should be done so that we can have a proper representative of the *panchayat* for the coming five years?
- ♦ Choosing the candidate for contesting the election collectively.

Besides this, the Federation also came up with an election manifesto, in which they envisaged their *panchayats* as an ideal place for the villagers—men and women. The main points were:

- ♦ Regular meetings of the *gram sabha* to be held in the *panchayat*.
- ♦ Information to be provided about the *gram sabha* to all the villagers.
- ♦ Doors of the *panchayat* to be open for women and the poor of the village.

- ♦ The *mukhiya* to behave properly with women and the poor.
- ♦ The *mukhiya* should be a person with a long-term vision for the *panchayat*.
- ♦ She/he should have an attitude to work for the people with evidence that she/he has done something in past for the village and its people.
- ♦ She/he should not be corrupt.

The Federation representatives then made six teams, with two Federation representatives in each team. They started to conduct *panchayat*-level meetings with SHG representatives, focusing on the *panchayat* election. They interacted with SHG representatives at least once and, when necessary, twice. Although they faced resistance from the influential people of the village, they did not lose their focus. They were finally able to influence collectives to identify a candidate they wanted as their representative rather than voting for a candidate, who was contesting on her/his own.

PREPARATION FOR THE UPRISING

Once the collectives were able to select a candidate of their choice for elections to the PRI, they helped candidates at each and every stage, right from nomination to campaigning to the day of the election. They faced many challenges, which they handled successfully. For example, the opponents tried to suppress the candidates by muscle power, by offerings of money, and even by using socio-religious dogmas to restrict the candidates from contesting the election. At every point,

The opponents tried to suppress the candidates by muscle power, by offerings of money, and even by using socio-religious dogmas to restrict the candidates from contesting the election. At every point, however, SHG women helped their selected candidate and made sure that they stood by her

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The SHG women went in large numbers with their selected candidates for filing the nomination, to show their strength. Similarly, they stayed with the candidate during door-to-door campaigns, when conducting the *chunaavi sabhas*, participating in rallies, etc. They

were also with their candidate on the day of the election, at the booths, to ensure a free-and-fair election. They were with their candidate on the day of counting. The collectives not only took on the responsibility of the selection of the candidate but also ensured that she wins the election.

TARKHUTTA PANCHAYAT

On 18 September 2015, a meeting of the *panchayat* women was organized in Tarkhutta village of Tarkhutta *panchayat*. Every SHG member of all the SHGs of this *panchayat* participated in this meeting. The topic of discussion in this meeting was: who should we elect as our *panchayat* representative? Some names such as Jayanti Devi and Poonam Devi came up for the position of *mukhiya*, but there was no finalization of candidate.

The women met again later in the day to finalize the name of the *mukhiya* candidate from among SHG members. The same names Jayanti Devi and Poonam Devi came for the post of the *mukhiya*; however, some of the members did not agree to Jayanti Devi as the candidate. Jayanti Devi was around 55 years and was illiterate. On the other hand, Poonam was young, in her 20s, and had studied till class 12.

Keeping in mind all these aspects, Poonam Devi was selected as the *mukhiya* candidate from the Tarkhutta *panchayat's* women SHGs. Poonam was surprised by this decision. She was not able to understand what to do—whether to go for it or not. She did not give her acceptance in the same meeting. She discussed the selection with her family members later. They were not in favour of this decision. Their main reason for rejection was the money.

It was decided that all the SHG women would go for the nomination. They decided to meet at the block where the nomination had to be filed. Almost 500 women reached the block. The people were surprised and the opposition was nervous seeing so many women

and was collecting money for election expenses.

NOMINATION DAY

Nomination day was 29 October 2015. The SHG women were tense about how to file the nomination for the election because they had never been through such a process earlier. Again, they sat together and discussed it. It was decided that all the SHG women would go

for the nomination. They decided to meet at the block where the nomination had to be filed. Almost 500 women reached the block. The people were surprised and the opposition was nervous seeing so many women. Poonam Devi filed the nomination paper for the position of *mukhiya*. After she filed the papers, the women raised slogans: Poonam Devi, Zindabad, Zindabad Zindabad! Mahila Mandal, Zindabad, Zindabad, Zindabad! *Hum sab ne thana hai, Poonam ko jitana hai!*

On 25 October, another meeting was organized in which the family members of Poonam Devi also participated. They shared the cause of their inability to contest the election. This time, Lata Devi, from EMVM and the representatives from the SHGs of Tarkhutta *panchayat* were also present at the meeting. The SHG representatives, initially, were of the view that they would not spend even a single rupee in the election. This election would be contested by Poonam free of cost. But later on, they realized that some money would be required, at least for printing the banners and the pamphlets.

All the SHG representatives decided that they would contribute Rs 200 per SHG for funding the election expenses. Poonam Devi's family then gave their consent. The SHG members, then, took an oath to help Poonam to contest in the election. She took an oath that if she were to win, she would work for the people honestly. A committee of eight members, comprising Nootan Devi, Jayanti Devi, Sangita Devi, Shanti Devi, Shanti Murmu, Paarvati Devi, Jhuma Devi and Tilotma Devi was formed to make all the SHG members aware that Poonam Devi was going to contest the *panchayat* election for the post of the *mukhiya*

CAMPAIGNING

Poonam started campaigning with Jayanti Devi, Shanti Murmu, Sangita Devi and Paarvati Devi. During the day, they organized meetings in various hamlets of the villages and in the mornings and evenings, they went from door-to-door to meet people. They also organized rallies. One day, the SHG women organized a rally on cycles. Every day, they campaigned in one form or the other. People raised many questions such as, "Poonam is a woman; if we need her in the night for some emergency, will she come to help us when she is *mukhiya*? She is a new daughter-in-law of the village, what will she be able to do? Her husband is illiterate. Many became *mukhiya* earlier too, none of them did anything. What will she do for us?"

She heard these questions and apprehensions, and responded to each one animatedly. She said, "I am an SHG woman too. I am one among you. You should choose a woman like you, who can understand you and your issues. Trust me."

As the days passed, the opinion started to turn in the favour of Poonam. During Chhat Pooja, Poonam went to her parents' family in Kusumi village, Mahagama block. People from the opposition started spreading rumours that Poonam was not going to contest the election and that she had taken Rs 1.5 lakh for this. And that is why she had run away from the village.

When Poonam returned, she started campaigning again. At that time the people raised the question, "You are already sold. Why should we cast our vote for you?" Poonam and her campaigners explained to the people that these were just rumours that her opponent had spread.

"If it were true, why would I be here campaigning? My opponent is scared of me and he wants me to withdraw my nomination," she reassured the people.

To resolve this issue, another meeting of all the SHG women of Tarkhutta *panchayat* was organized. This time Shubhadra Devi, President of EMVM, herself came and promised all the SHG women that Poonam was going to contest the election and that she had not withdrawn her candidature. She told the women, "We should not get trapped in this."

The SHG women promised that they would not get diverted by such tactics of the opposition. They promised to cast their vote in favour of

She heard these questions and apprehensions, and responded to each one animatedly. She said, "I am an SHG woman too. I am one among you. You should choose a woman like you, who can understand you and your issues. Trust me."

Poonam. In the same meeting, the woman also discussed that the contribution of Rs 200 per SHG was insufficient and that the amount should be more. The members decided to contribute Rs 500 per SHG and a total of Rs 11,500 was contributed from 23 SHGs from Tarkhutta *panchayat* for the election.

THE DAY OF THE ELECTION

The day of the election, 22nd November 2015, arrived. On the evening of 20 November 2015, all the SHG representatives of Tarkhutta *panchayat* met and divided their roles and responsibilities on election day. Four SHG women and two men would be placed at every booth, to ensure that voters get a fair environment to cast their vote freely. For Titiyatanr booth, 14 SHG women took the responsibility. Titiyatanr booth was the most sensitive booth of Tarkhutta *panchayat* because the opponent had deployed paid goons there and nobody wanted to take the responsibility of that booth. The SHG women decided to be there in sufficient numbers so that nobody would harm them.

As was expected, when the voting started, the SHG women found some cases of bogus voting. They reported it to the officials. In the afternoon, when the villagers were casting their votes, there was a sudden sound of a bomb blast. Somebody told Jayanti Devi that her son had died in this bomb blast. She rushed towards Titiyatanr booth. While she was on the way, the goons hired by the opponent hit her on the head with sticks.

Hearing this, the villagers went to save Jayanti. Eight persons were wounded in this violent clash. The *mukhiya* candidate, Poonam,

somehow was safe in all this. The SHG women called the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Superintendent of Police (SP), and the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and told them of the situation there. The DC assured them that the police would certainly reach the spot. Before the police reached, the goons poured water into the ballot box and hid it.

When the police reached, the goons went away. The police tried to find the ballot box but were not able to. The SHG women helped the police in the search and the box was found. Voting started again, but after this bomb blasts, most of the people didn't turn up to cast their vote. At the same time, it was very difficult to send all the wounded to the hospital. A *jila parishad* candidate helped and the wounded reached the Poraiyahat Community Health Centre.

This news was published in the daily newspapers. The environment of Tarkhutta *panchayat* was totally disturbed. The goons went every day to the houses of women, who campaigned for the election along with Poonam. Sometimes, they threw stones and, sometimes, they abused the women. Sangita Devi, the SHG Community Resource Person, who campaigned very actively for Poonam, was not even able to come out from her home because of these goons.

COUNTING THE VOTES

Finally, judgment day came. It was time to count the votes and to declare the results. The counting of votes started. It was a tough contest for both the candidates. Mahadev Marhaiyya, the other contestant, was two votes ahead all the time. And then, only the counting of the last round remained. At the end of the counting, Poonam Devi was six votes ahead of Mahadev Marhaiyya. But

the opposition did not accept this result. He entered the main building where the counting was being done. But Poonam was not allowed to enter.

Poonam Devi, Lalmuni Devi and Lata Devi went to meet the SP. There too were denied entry. When the BDO of Poraiyahat also refused to meet them, Lata Devi told him, "*Chaliye Poraiyahat me aapka ilaj karenge*. (Let's go to Poraiyahat, we will treat you there)." The women entered the cabin forcibly and asked the BDO and the SP to announce the result. Mahadev protested. The BDO of Poraiyahat and the SP asked Mahadev what the problem was. He said he wanted a re-count of votes of two booths of Dhobai. The officials agreed to his demand. The votes of these two booths were again counted. And it was again found that Poonam was six votes ahead of Mahadev.

Finally, the result was announced. Both the candidates signed on the declaration and it was time for celebration. More than 50 SHG women felicitated Poonam, shouted slogans and played with the colours. It was something that the SHG women themselves had not expected a few months ago.

The SHG women had created history. Poonam was silent because she began to feel responsible to the people. After winning the election, she said, "*Chahe mujh par kitna bhi dabav kyu na aaye, mein paise se bikne wali nahi hu. Ye to manzil ka pehla kadam hai, aage raaste lambe hain* (No matter how much pressure is on me, I am not going to take money for my work. This is the first step of our journey and the destination is still far away)." She further added, "*Apni panchayat me keval main hi nahi, sab mukhiya hain* (In our panchayat, not only I...everyone is a *mukhiya*)."

THE OUTCOME: PANCHAYAT ELECTION RESULT

The efforts of the Federation representatives brought outstanding results, in terms of the number of candidates elected. A total of 86 SHG women were elected for various positions in the PRI elections of November 2015.

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have been sanctioned. She is fully engaged with her official work. As *mukhiya*, she deals with government officials and, since these are initial days, she is taking time to understand the system and the administrative functioning. Now, she says that she will get in touch with women collectives and work on the issues raised by them.

SITUATION AT PRESENT

Poonam Devi is living a new phase of her life as *mukhiya*. Although there are many challenges along the way, she has done a remarkable job in these six months. If we go through her score card, we will see that she has helped sanction 48 old-age pension schemes, 25 widow pension schemes, 13 small and four large ponds under MGNREGA, repaired 40 hand pumps, and issued 10 new ration cards. Her *panchayat* also received Rs 6.5 lakhs for various development projects under the 14th Finance Commission, under which two sitting places (*chabootara*), one meeting hall (*sabha bhavan*), two PCC roads, and nine latrines

CONCLUSION

Although 86 SHG women have entered the active politics of the local government, time will tell whether they will fulfill the expectations of those who have elected them. The expectation is that they will bring a positive change and will create some milestones in the days to come. We have planned to conduct a workshop with these women in July 2016 so that they understand the whole system in these six months. The system before them is very challenging. How will they respond to this challenge? Will they be able to change the system or will they become the part of the existing system? Only time will tell.

Youth Interventions in Mohgaon: Expanding Options

SHACHI SETH, SUMENDERA PUNIA AND M.CHANDRASHEKHAR RAO

Helping the youth become active, creating opportunities for their employment, and getting jobs that provide them with dignity, the PRADAN team finds newer ways to train them in vocations that are not dependent on agriculture and that will empower them to travel away from their homes, find jobs and support their families

An economy's growth story can be linked to its population in various ways. India has seen rapid growth in its population while the country has been trying to achieve a standing in the global economy. On the one hand, India's growing population acts as a burden on its natural resources and infrastructure, and makes the implementation of rule of law a challenge. On the other, it is this very growing population that provides India with abundance in at least one very important resource—labour. India has the world's largest youth population, making it a human resource-rich nation, and if managed optimally, this population can be a boon. With proper health, education and investment in human capital, this demographic dividend can be turned into an economic gain for the nation. But the lack of proper social security and inaccessibility to education, among other reasons, act as impediments to this realization.

An overwhelmingly large percentage of workers in India (about 92 per cent) are engaged in informal employment; less than 30 per cent of the workforce has completed secondary education or higher, and less than one-tenth have had vocational training, either formal or informal. Disadvantaged social groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and large sections of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are mostly concentrated in low-productivity sectors such as agriculture and construction and in low-paying jobs as casual labourers.

There are the youth, who work as farmers and contribute on family farms; because of this, the number of people dependent on the land for income increases, despite little or no increase in productivity. Most of the youth in the village are unemployed. Women are not, usually, a part of the income-earning workforce, and live in conditions of poverty, even though they work long hours in their homes and in the fields.

As per the Employment Situation Index, Madhya Pradesh ranks 18th out of 22 states (India Labor and Employment Report 2014, Institute for Human Development, Delhi). The inequality in the employability of the youth is high as we move across states, and from urban educated classes to rural uneducated classes. Without proper education and skills, a large section of the population comes in the pool of unskilled labour, and is usually employed in minimum-wage physical labour, working in harsh conditions. At a time when the economy is expanding, and new players are entering the market each day, it is unfortunate that a large portion of the youth still stays unemployed, facing disguised unemployment, or working in inhuman conditions.

INITIATION OF THE PROGRAMME

When PRADAN practitioners from the Mandla team (in Mohgaon block) started noticing the potential energy of the youth in the area, they were concerned about it going unutilized, and wondered whether an intervention could be made to target this young population. Family income for the villagers would also increase if the youth started actively contributing to their respective families. The women from SHGs, whom these practitioners regularly worked with, shared the same concern for their

Most of the youth in the village are unemployed. Women are not, usually, a part of the income-earning workforce, and live in conditions of poverty, even though they work long hours in their homes and in the fields

children. The PRADAN team conducted a household-wise survey and spoke to individual youths in order to understand their present lives, future goals, ambitions and interests.

The boys in the area spend a large part of the day grazing cattle, helping in the field, playing cards, etc. They had

some aspirations for themselves but there were no discussions on such issues and they did not have a clue on how to achieve them. The girls, on the other hand, only went out to fetch water and to work on their household farms. Most of them were made to stay within the confines of their homes for the rest of the time. Their fate is usually pre-determined and they are married early without ever being asked what their aspirations are. The girls, therefore, despite harbouring aspirations and ambitions for themselves, are usually discouraged if they choose to be vocal about it. Their personal desires and ambitions go unnoticed or are ignored and they are bound by their families' decisions in most matters.

Among the girls and the boys both, there is a high rate of dropping out from formal education; they often have no vocational knowledge and, hence, no income-generating skills. The drop-out rate is also high due to the low marketability of the education received by the students. Because there is no tangible economic benefit of sending their children to school, there is little encouragement from the family as well. Even those young people, who have completed their schooling, usually remain unemployed and do not contribute to the family income.

The Yuva Shaastra (YS) Programme, as it is known among its target audience of tribal youth in Mandla district, began in July 2013,

with the aim of helping the area's youth in becoming employable and getting jobs that provide them with dignity. In collaboration with SHG Federations in Mandla district, the programme is hoping to make a 'generational impact in the poverty spiral'.

Most of the youth in the area are either unemployed or are seasonally employed. The usual drill involves contractors coming to the village and quoting an amount that the youth will earn at the end. All that the *thekedaar* mentions is that the work will pay Rs 10,000 for three months and lures the youth into agreeing. There are no further details provided of the work or the working conditions. Often, the work is dangerous with long working hours. Since the youth have no discernible skills, the wages are low and the job is strenuous physical labour. The YS Programme was founded on the belief that everybody has a right to work with dignity, to be paid appropriately for the work they do and to be compensated for doing erratic, dangerous and exploitative work.

STEPS IN THE PROGRAMME

Mobilization: In order to ground the programme, mobilization of people is essential to stimulate social discussion on issues and allow for the community to understand the proposed solutions. The core objectives of mobilization are concept-seeding, to generate interest in and create awareness of the programme, the possible opportunities, and to initiate the movement of the youth to the PRADAN office for enquiry and enrollment.

Aptitude assessment and mental preparedness: In order to assess, classify and counsel the students, residential workshops are conducted on an on-going basis at Tindni in Mandla. Assessments for mental preparedness and aptitude are held. Basic interpersonal skills

and group dynamics are worked upon so as to increase the learners' ability to communicate. Stress is placed on self-awareness and holding oneself responsible for one's success in life. The idea is to create self-aware, ambitious and motivated youngsters. The students' aptitudes and interests are taken into account, along with their family's financial conditions so that a suitable field of training can be determined for each candidate.

Technical training: Once this phase is complete, the interested youth move on to a technical training at recognized and accredited vocational training centres. Before the training is begun, various financing options are discussed with the family so as to help fund the training. Don Bosco Pune, PACE Pratham, Larsen and Toubro (L&T), Helen Rose School of Nursing at Umri are some of the training partners in the programme.

Placement: Upon completion of the training, the participants get placed through their training providers and through the linkages established among organizations, or they choose a vocation of their interest and pursue it independently. Organizations such as Taj Hotels and Resorts, L&T, Mahindra, Knorr Bremse are some of the training and placement partners.

In cases where participants are unable to secure a job despite undergoing the training, PRADAN offers assistance and helps the youth find possible employment opportunities.

Post placement: Once the students have completed at least a year in their jobs, they can contact the programme if they wish to explore other prospects for themselves. Additionally, a contact number is provided to the students and they can call any time they need help or support.

The role of SHGs in the programme:

All women, who are a part of the Federation, have routinely raised concerns about their children, and the lack of income-generation prospects for them. PRADAN Mandla team's brainchild, the YS Programme, came as a respite for the concerned women but it required hard work on the part of the SHGs as well. They contributed in creating awareness among the villagers by talking about the benefits of the programme, convincing them that it was okay for their children to step out and work, etc. Most women in SHGs faced opposition and interrogation during their initial days as members, and did not wish for their children to undergo the same.

The Village-level Committee (VLC) in each village was contacted and help was sought from it for promoting the YS Programme. The role of SHGs and VLCs in the integration of interventions and mobilization of people was essential for the programme to have an impact on the community. The VLC helped mobilize villagers, made them aware about the programme, encouraged youth to take up the opportunity, alleviated parents' fears about the programme, discussed finances with parents and in SHGs, and even checked for regular updates on the status of the youth.

One of the bigger challenges for those who wanted to get involved was the lack of finances. They didn't have the necessary resources to pay for their child's training so the Federation decided to come up with a system to help poor families. It didn't want poverty to be holding people back; therefore, SHGs decided to start giving loans to needy families. A repayment plan was worked out for when

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the children began earning. PRADAN ensured that the youth had active bank accounts so as to make it easier for them to receive loans, as well as send money back home.

The villagers are not as apprehensive about the loans from SHGs as they are about

loans from banks. In fact, membership in SHGs has increased since the youth programme was introduced. This is because the prospects of a better and brighter future for their children encourage the women to associate with it. It is also relatively easier to get bank loans for women, who are members of a SHG, and hence previously inaccessible avenues for financial assistance have emerged for them.

Some of the non-SHG members, who were approached for the programme, have reacted with unprecedented enthusiasm. They consider YS to be a concrete step toward engaging the youth and working for their betterment. The leadership group and the SHGs have used the programme as a significant example of the SHGs success. In places where new SHGs are being formed, this initiative is being discussed both as an issue and as a mobilizer.

In cases of bad debts, or in instances in which the youth leave their job mid-way and return, the women talk to the family and try to get the amount back. They usually try to explain to the youth and his family how the other children of the community may suffer due to lack of finances if loans aren't repaid. Often, families understand and arrange for the money to be repaid. If it is still tough, the SHG waits until the family is in a position to repay. Since SHG members are members of the same community, they usually find it easier to keep track of their debtors.

The programme, all in all, uses the community's resources to help the youth of the community in accumulating social and cultural capital, skills and capacities that are vocational in nature. The programme is still quite seminal in the community's experience and whereas many hurdles do come up, the impact has also been sufficiently heartening.

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she developed self-confidence, independence and an ability to make decisions for herself and her family. Whereas the economic sustainability of the programme is low due to low job retention among the youth, it definitely helps them to step out of their homes and explore

the world by learning skills and negotiating their own terms.

EXPERIENCES

Varsha, a young woman of Indra *to/a*, is part of the Youth Programme. PRADAN had initially conducted a Halla Bol programme for youth, in which it held an awareness meet, ice-breaking exercises and socially relevant discussions. After attending the Halla Bol programme, Varsha, with PRADAN's encouragement and under its guidance, formed an SHG for young women drop-outs in her village. It was a forum for them to read, learn and interact. Later, she attended the vocational training provided by PRADAN and secured a job as a call-centre employee in Pune. This was the first time that young women of the village were told they could go to the city alone and work.

There were many doubts about the idea, however, and families initially refused to send their daughters out. Despite some fear of the unknown and the big city, Varsha was confident that she wanted to go out and work. Slowly, a few girls from the village stepped out, and once their parents went to drop them and were convinced of their daughters' safety, the support for the programme grew. Although she returned to her village after a brief stint at the BPO job, Varsha continues to benefit from her experiences of the training by PRADAN and its associates. She had to return because her father met with an accident; in the time, however, that she spent in Pune,

Twenty-four-year-old Sukhchain Marawi from Pauri village finished his training in hotel management from the PACE training centre in Dhamtari, after which he moved to Hyderabad for the third phase, that is, placement. When employed in Hyderabad, he started sending money to his parents in the village because his father could no longer continue as a farmer, owing to his ill-health. His mother, Phuljhar Marawi, says, "When we told him of the situation at home, Sukchain started sending us up to Rs 10,000 per month. We can now employ people to work on our farm, which was also purchased with money sent by him. In fact, we are planning to save money and build a house for our son, a dream that was near impossible for us. His training has not only given him opportunities but has also given us the chance to enjoy in our old age." Sukhchain is currently a trainer at the PACE training centre in Dhamtari. He is closer to home and manages to earn enough for a comfortable life, and his parents are extremely proud of him.

Gansiya Pandro, from Malwathar village, has not only been working for over 18 months in Pune, but has also helped her family get out of debt and poverty. She works at a hotel in Pune, which provides her accommodation, in addition to a salary of Rs 7,000 per month. Gansiya's mother was a member of the Lakshami SHG and learned about the YS

programme during one of the meetings. Soon, Gansiya started attending the first phase of the programme. As Gansiya puts it, "I really enjoyed the initial exposure and training in Tindni. What I enjoyed the most is that they made us play games, and on the basis of those games, we had discussions and learnt many things. I hadn't thought much about what I wanted to do when

I went for the Tindni training. I thought that I wanted to work in a tailoring centre but at the end of the training, I didn't opt for tailoring; I opted for hotel management instead. My own choices broadened from the very first step of the programme. I changed my decision from tailoring to hotel management, on the basis of a video that was screened in the training. I saw in the video that tailoring was an intensive task. The thread and the needles were so fine that it looked like really tough work. The video on hotel management was really good. So, a few of us decided that we will go for hotel management. I went to the PACE Training Institute to do a course in hotel management."

After undergoing the training, Gansiya worked in Bhopal, Hyderabad and Pune. Her contributions have helped her family reclaim their mortgaged lands and jewellery. Additionally, she has also managed to start some savings of her own and is a breadwinner for her family, despite coming from a patriarchal set-up in which women are usually confined to their homes.

IMPACT

Creation of individual identities: A significant part of the intervention has been about giving the youth a voice of their own. Not only does the training wish to impart skills, it aims to set a foundation for self-determination and

A significant part of the intervention has been about giving the youth a voice of their own. Not only does the training wish to impart skills, it aims to set a foundation for self-determination and self-worth, and create a pool of highly motivated individuals

self-worth, and create a pool of highly motivated individuals. In a community where conversations are not very common, it is tough to initiate such thought processes. As PRADAN practitioner, Chandrashekhar, put it, "People in these areas don't usually talk much, barely even among themselves, let alone to outsiders. This is even more so with women. I play

football with the boys in the villages. They play really well but they never talk even while playing. Usually, while playing sports people tend to get charged and communicate loudly among team members. These boys usually just communicate in gestures, and it shows how little the culture of talking exists here."

The people in the area have little interaction with outsiders. *Anganwadis* and schools are usually the places where the youth come together but a culture of discussion or of sharing views does not exist. In schools, the teachers usually deliver lectures and leave. Marriages take place fairly early, and employment is usually restricted to manual labour and farming. Most of the residents of the villages in the district have never stepped outside of Mohgaon and barely a few have travelled farther than Jabalpur.

For youth coming from such a community, PRADAN's YS Programme has helped create individual identities. Starting off with little or no ambition, the young people have now found their own interests and leanings. They have travelled to states outside of Madhya Pradesh, lived on their own, and learned how to work in a professional environment. They can now participate in discussions and have an opinion on professional and personal matters. These youth, earlier restricted to following the decisions made by family elders, are now

consulted for opinions and can make choices for themselves.

More and more girls and boys are getting married later, studying and moving out of their villages to work. The creation of this culture of independence and self-reliance is new to the area and essential for broadening the scope of income-generation and ensuring the welfare of the families.

With high-quality training and placement linkages provided by PRADAN, the programme creates an easy transition for the youth. For the first time, youth from the area are forging ahead rapidly and stepping outside the cycle of seasonal migration and contractual labour, into jobs with dignity and regular income

Breaking the barriers of

gender: The formation of SHGs in the area was a seminal step in the development of the target group of women. It helped break many traditional restrictions, barriers and challenged the culture of social ostracism towards women, who stepped outside their houses. The youth programme, through its encouragement of and involvement with girl students, is taking development up a notch as well as deepening its roots. Working with and educating young girls and women is leading to emancipation and empowerment at a younger age. Vocational platforms outside the village are expanding their areas of learning and growth. In fact, practitioners remark that women work better in cities outside, and stay in cities for longer. Having been restrained by various norms and biased traditions back home, women cherish and enjoy their freedom relatively more than the men. The freedom, the personal income and the financial independence that the jobs generate are a great motivation for women to retain their jobs.

The training includes a number of games played by both boys and girls so as to create healthier interaction between them, rather than isolating and segregating them. In fact, women participate in male-dominated games such as football, and challenge notions that

limit them to domestic games and activities.

Skill-building and income-generation:

Whereas it is essential to inculcate interpersonal and social skills, income-generation continues to be the best form of motivation in today's world. The need and desire for money and a better standard of life are almost universal. The technical aspect of the training provided by

PRADAN's partners helps build skills, capacity and income generating abilities among the youth. Not only do the youth pick up sellable skills as per their interest, the training is conducted by leading names across a variety of fields such as Construction and Supervisory Training Institute (L&T) in construction, PACE-Pratham in hotel management, MIEC to train motor mechanics, electricians, beauticians, carpenters, welders, fitters, etc., IL&FS in tailoring, Don Bosco to train motor mechanics, workers for the retail and BPO sectors, Umri Christian Hospital in nursing, etc.

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LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Finance: Finding finances for the training is to be done by the students themselves. Most of the programmes under the technical training segment are to be paid for, except stitching. Thus, a large number of students enroll in the course for stitching and undergo training. The fees for the other courses vary from Rs 15000

for training in hospitality to Rs 2.5 lakhs for nursing. Most families are unable to pay such large sums of money at a time, therefore, many students cannot avail of the opportunity.

PRADAN has financial linkages with training organizations but most of the financial assistance offered is in the form of loans, which is where the SHG becomes a great source of financial help for the youth. Villagers prefer to be financed by SHGs due to their proximity, familiarity and the trust formed between the members and the community. Nonetheless, the finances available with the SHGs are limited as well, and not nearly sufficient to cover the needs of all the youth in the area.

Many needy families and their children lose out on opportunities due to the lack of money or proper sources of finance. Sometimes when the student shifts to a new city, her/his expenses in the city are high vis-à-vis the income and she/he cannot send back much money to the family. With the burden of the loan, high expenses, and low rate of retention, often repayment of the loan becomes a task for the families.

Returning youth: Until now, the trend shows that many of the youth, who move to cities for jobs, return within six months. There are only a handful of exceptional cases in which they have retained their jobs for longer. And the reasons for returning are many. Many who return are not entirely sure of what they wish to do in the long run. Additionally, the movement and urbanization is rather new and frightening for both the families and the youth.

The women are rarely sent out of the village due to fear of their safety and are usually called back home soon for marriage, or to help with the household. The sons are called back during harvesting season, and often come back of their own will. In a number of cases, the

people call their children back to the village if he/she falls sick or does not get proper meals. Whereas these are superficial reasons that may present an immediate cause for a move, the problem is more deep-seated than that.

As first generation migrants, it is extremely challenging for young people to acclimatize themselves to the routine, settings and habits of urban society. The seemingly small discomforts of living alone in a city are often a tough transition, with regular challenges of not liking the food, the water not suiting them, etc. Often, these become big enough reasons for the youth themselves to return to their villages soon after.

The low rate of retention in jobs worsens the financial burden on the families and the youth because they need to pay back the loans taken for the training period. Another major reason for their return is the lack of conviction in career choices and the youth wish to revisit the choices they had made. A new training makes more sense to them, once they have visited the city and compared the possibilities, earnings and experiences across fields. Here are two personal stories of youth, who went to the field and returned for different reasons.

Sanjo Vatiya's experience: I was working for Pratibha Syntax Ltd. in Pitampura. I used to do tailoring work there. This was in 2013. I worked there for six months. The work was fine but they used to make us work over-time a lot. They used to pay us Rs 6000 per month and then some Rs 200-300 for overtime. The food was also a problem. Kerosene was expensive, but that apart, they didn't allow us to cook. They expected us to eat in the canteen. The food was terrible. The stay too was not satisfactory. They had arranged for some kind of hostel facility. It was a very dirty place. I used to keep falling sick. They wouldn't allow us to go outside either. Even if we were

allowed, it was for a very limited time. When I fell sick, the company didn't give any kind of medical support, I had to do everything myself. They used to give some 2–3 tablets, which were useless. It didn't make me get well.

After working for six months, I asked for leave to attend my brother's wedding in the village and they didn't give me permission. So I just resigned. Despite my asking many times, they didn't give me leave. If they had granted me leave, I would not have resigned. When I returned home, I fell sick. I had already started falling sick when I was there. When I came here, it became worse. I was diagnosed with typhoid. I was admitted to the government hospital for a month. I was in a bad shape, and barely had any money. My parents had to spend money on me.

After I got back, I got married. Now, I am not engaged in any livelihood. I have a one-month-old child and all my time goes in taking care of the child.

I dream of doing something nice and proving to everyone that I can do it. It looks like I will have to explore working from home. Maybe get a sewing machine at home. I still want to tailor, I want to earn.

Leelavati Marko from Patadih was one of the first women to go out to work. She travelled to Pune where she worked in a BPO. In 2013, which was the first year of the programme, Leelavati saw a pamphlet about PRADAN's programme, gave the aptitude tests and assessments, and underwent the 21-day training that enabled her to be a BPO professional. The organization used to take trainees' parents to the training centre so that they could be sure that their children would be safe. This was one of the reasons that her parents did not oppose her staying away for such a long period, for the first time

in her life. In Pune, Leela stayed in a working women's hostel and slowly learned how to talk to strangers, handle people, and manage her affairs by herself. She, now, works with PRADAN locally and owes her experiences and learning to the programme. Her experience is as follows:

"I was in Pune for around two-and-a-half years. I used to earn some Rs 5000-6000 a month and I could barely save any money. Pune is an expensive place to live and I used to miss home as well. Even though no one at home asked me, I wanted to send home some money, but I could save nothing. All the money went in travel, food and clothes. This year, my father told me that I should get married soon. In our villages, girls get married young, and I am now of a marriage-able age. I am 23 years old now. So my father asked me to come back, that it has been long too. So I decided to come back. I came back in November 2015. I didn't get married this year because it is not auspicious as yet. I am the eldest in the family, so these things matter.

"I really enjoyed myself in Pune. Cities are so different from villages, full of vehicles and different sounds. In the village, everything is so open, so calm and quiet. In the city, though crowded, there used to be nice gardens where we could go and spend time. When I came back, I felt very bored here. I am thinking of going again for a while, especially now that I am getting married next year. I am also getting some work opportunity with PRADAN here, but I like working in the city. I am confused. I have been applying for government jobs for some time now, but haven't got through any. Government jobs are permanent, that is what appeals to me. Private jobs are such that you get money as long as you work with them. You will get paid only if you work, on a day-to-day basis. If you miss work, your payment will get cut. But government jobs are not like that.

Even if you don't go to work, your salary doesn't get cut. I hope I can work in the Forest Service someday."

Skewed gender ratio: Ever since SHGs have managed a strong foothold in the community, the discrimination between boys and girls has significantly reduced in the area. Nonetheless, women are under-represented in the youth programme, and families often discourage their daughters from participating. Most girls, who do participate, are limited to the stitching course and learn it as a life-skill rather than as a vocational activity. This is chiefly due to two reasons, that is, families do not wish to spend money on their daughters' careers because they will eventually be married off, and second, girls and their families are scared of the move to the city.

Having always lived within the village, that too with a limited degree of socialization, it is often a task for the women to navigate and negotiate their way through a big city space. The fear of a big city, of being taken advantage of, etc., are major reasons for the cynicism about women in the programme. Nonetheless, women who have gone out show great promise and often outperform the boys. They stay longer in jobs, perform better, and manage to live in hostels in the big city. However, more women return to the villages than men, due to social pressure.

Limited Outreach: The training costs and the focus around and through SHGs may limit the outreach of the programme to families that are well-off and/or involved with the Federation. The low-income families that are not involved with SHGs may be left entirely out of the scope of the programme. Although the programme

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is catered for low-income groups (because they have no local options to pursue and depend instead on seasonal and fluctuating migration), when people return abruptly from the cities and jobs, it may be an additional burden on the family.

WAY AHEAD: FUTURE PLANS AND IDEAS

Agriculture support: A module is being created to link the youth interested in farming to the existing government schemes, agricultural training programmes, farmer Federations, etc., such that they can stay connected to their land while increasing their productivity, marketability and income.

Opportunities for government service: A number of students wish to work in government organizations and services, such as defence and forestry. Usually, these jobs require them to take a basic aptitude examination and interview. The team at PRADAN is still in the process of finding suitable linkages to help train students and, in the meanwhile, has started remedial classes to train these students in basic mathematics. A linkage was being set up with a coaching facility in Dehradun, for competing in defence/armed forces services programme. However, not only was it too expensive for the local families, the distance was also quite challenging for the local youth.

Rural fellowship and governance training: During the training, PRADAN identifies students who wish to work locally for the community. There is a plan in the pipeline to start a one-year Fellowship Programme for these students, who want to work in strengthening governance systems. This shall be done by building a cohort at the village level

by associating with the agenda of women's collectives and influencing the community's development agenda while tapping the youth commune's energy. The programme will be a voluntary programme and the Fellows will work with professionals, to help identify and act on the gaps in local governing bodies.

Financial security: PRADAN hopes to establish better financial linkages so as to overcome the major hurdle of financing the training programme for the youth.

CONCLUSION

The YS Programme by PRADAN is a novel and noble idea in a community that has been marginalized for decades now. Whereas PRADAN has enriched the lives of the women in the area through Federations, this programme aims to cover the gap in terms of utilizing and helping the youth become active contributors in the family's income. As the economy moves towards industrialization and the youth get increasingly distanced from

agriculture, the programme provides avenues of a stable income for the youth. Additionally, the training extensively works to inculcate self-awareness, respect for others and general communication skills, in the otherwise quiet community.

The programme still struggles at a few basic stages, chiefly due to its novelty in the community, social taboos against women moving out, financial limitations of the community and lack of dedication in the youth towards the jobs. Nonetheless, has created a positive net, not only in financial terms but also in the ideological and foundational set-up that it provides for the youth, and in the move towards self-realization. The team in Mandla has actively utilized the discretionary powers given to its practitioners by PRADAN and has created an intervention that may help elevate the importance of SHGs, the income of families and bring about a new sense of identity for the community's youth.

Gender Struggle: Changing Beliefs, Challenging Patriarchy

ANAM FATIMA

At the core of all the struggles, in history, is belief. The belief to be liberated, the belief to be treated as equals, the belief that we are not wrong! How does one fight for equality if we don't even consider ourselves as equals, or believe that men and women should have an equal space in society?

INTRODUCTION

"Didi, phir maine bhi bhaiyan ko ek thappad mara aur pucchha...dard huaa? Mujhe bhi roz aise hi dard hota hain. (Didi, then I also slapped bhaiyan back and asked him, Did it hurt? I feel the same pain every day)."

I can't forget that time, when the room with 40 people fell completely silent when Laxmi Bai said these words. Her large eyes were moist, conveying more than her words ever could. She told this story on the very day it happened, her face still bruised from the beating, but with a strange serenity in her demeanour.

This was one of my first experiences of interacting with women like Laxmi Bai and I thought to myself, that through this one act of courage, she has defied all her previous generations and altered a norm for generations to come. All it took was that one little retaliation in the form of a slap and a question, "Did it hurt?" A moment and that's all. How must she have felt after that? What would have gone through her mind? From where had she got the strength to say enough is enough?

WHAT IS THIS 'GENDER', *BHAIYAN*?

Many social anthropologists and experts have tried to explain gender. Some have identified gender as a framework, which is the genesis of all inequality of power and control, finding its relevance in the notion of patriarchy. For some, its centrality lies in describing and critiquing the attributes associated with one's sex, attributes of being feminine and masculine. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word 'gender' has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term, but it did not become common until the mid-20th century. Every year, for the past six years, the women we work with have been innocently asking us this question, "*Bhaiyan, yeh gender kya hai* (What is gender, *Bhaiyan*)?" For them, gender simply implies all the discrimination and the biases they face by virtue of being born women.

Gender cannot be defined merely from the perspective of women and the oppression they face. Gender has much wider connotations. It is a way of understanding the life-politics of the social construct, the identity of the players and how each member of society—women, men, transgender, minority groups, other disadvantaged groups, etc.—is being affected by this process of socialization.

At PRADAN, however, we are consciously working only with women with the hope of changing their own views about their so-called 'destiny'.

WHY WOMEN?

When 'a boy' is born, the reaction usually is: *"Didi, yeh bhaiyan ko chaar betiyon ke baad akhir baap banne ka sukh mil gaya, pichle saal isko ek beta huaa (Didi, my brother has finally been blessed as a father. After four daughters, a son was born to him last year),"* said a *bhaiyan* referring to his brother, while his five-year-old daughter stood beside him, holding his hand.

At an age when a child should be sent to school, 'a girl' is: *"Hamara padhai karne ka mann tha par ghar me chhothe bhai-behan thay unko kaun sambhalta, aur ghar ka kaam seekhna bhi zaruri tha, is liye school nahi gaye. (I really wanted to study, but I didn't go to school because I was the oldest and had to take care of my younger siblings and learn household work, which is also important),"* says a woman, who is learning to write her name.

When 'a girl' is about to get married: *"Woh to didi bohat hi neech behan hogi, jo bhai se apni zameen mangegi, (Only a woman, who*

When a five-year-old girl hears every now and again, that four daughters combined don't have as much value as one son, she begins to question her very existence. Was she a mere attempt for a son? Would she have existed if a son had been born before her?

doesn't have any morals and values, will ask for her share of land from her brother)," expresses an *anganwadi* teacher.

When 'a girl' has family: *"Ab bhaiyan thoda maarta bhi hai toh kya huaa...woh bhaiyan hi toh hain. (If my husband beats me a little, so what...? After all, he is my husband),"* says a mother of two.

In another such incident; a woman asked me, *"Didi aapki kitni umar hogi? (How old are you?)."*

"I am 26," I said

"Aur abhi tak shadi nahi hui; 20 saal mei to mere do bachey bhi ho gaye they aur operation bhi. (Really, and you are not married yet! By 20, I had two children and I even had a sterilization operation)."

I asked, *"Accha, operation aapka, ya bhaiyan ka (Who got operated, you or your husband)?"*

She replied, *"Mera (mine). Bhaiyan to nahi kara sakta na, woh bhari kaam karta hai, hal chalata hai. (He can't get it done because he has to plough the land. It is heavy work)."*

I asked, *"Aur aap nahi karte (And you don't work, right)?"*

She smiled and said nothing.

These are some of the discussions I had with women at various junctures. These represent the usual opinion of women about themselves and how the socialization process contributes immensely in formulating that image, ever since they are born. When a five-year-old girl hears every now and again, that four daughters combined don't have as much value as one

son, she begins to question her very existence. Was she a mere attempt for a son? Would she have existed if a son had been born before her?

Whether all these questions arise in her mind or not is not the relevant point; she is certainly going to carry an image of herself as an undesired child, which will come into play in all the crucial aspects of her life—education, access and control over assets, making decisions in family matters and, above all, her importance in her family, village and even society! She grows up as a carrier of inequity when she defends the physical violence of her husband, when she contributes the most to the labour force and still believes that her husband does the more difficult work, when she works day and night on agricultural land and yet cannot buy even a saree without her husband's permission.

At the core of all the struggles in history is belief. The belief to be liberated, the belief to be treated as equals, the belief that we are not wrong! How does one fight for equality if we don't even consider ourselves as equals, or believe that men and women should have equal space in society?

The Bhoura team in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh has been working on gender sensitization over the past few years. In 2011, we started holding discussions to design our engagement so that we could bring about a realization among women about the prevailing discrimination and we came up with a schema. We envisioned that in all the villages the women would talk about gender in some form or another. They would become familiar with the concept of gender and be able to,

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at least, differentiate between what is natural—sex—and what is acquired—gender. We hoped that momentum would be built among women through this process, that the discussions and consequent awareness would lead to realizations and the inspiration to join hands to change their situation collectively.

The broad strategy for moving towards this end, we thought, was to start with building an understanding of the concepts

of gender and sex, power and patriarchy. We would begin the process with one or two women 'leaders' from each village, and, presumably, they would disseminate this understanding among the other women. Together, these women would be able to identify issues in their lives that arose from patriarchal thought and would begin to act upon them. The focus was also on planning some action so that the leader could take the movement forward, as well as plan the action on behalf of other women, who were part of the collectives.

LET EVERYONE BE A LEADER

When we reflected upon our approach to gender, through consolidating the sharings of women leaders, we found a major disconnect. The leader-centric approach, we realized, would leave the 'leader' feeling alone, without any support on a subject, which was so complex and so deeply ingrained in society. As a leader, she would face many impediments in her efforts to build some understanding of the subject with fellow women and also in moving forward.

Often, women leaders expressed their inability to explain to the others adequately about gender, especially when they were cross-questioned. This was made even more difficult because this 'new concept of equality' was immoral for the women.

The appointed leaders would often demand that training be conducted for the women, "*Didi, baiyan to aisee nahi samjhegi. In sabko toh aap chaar din wali training mei hi le jao* (Didi, these women will not understand. Please give all of them 'that four day training')," referring to a four-day residential training session on gender and the manifestation of patriarchy, facilitated by PRADAN professionals. Sometimes, these leaders would face fierce criticism for even sharing their views on gender; "*Yeh kya bekaar batein seekh kar aate ho. Kya yeh sab seekhne jaate ho* (What rubbish you are talking about. Is this what you have learnt)?"

Added to this is the fundamental question, "Who is a leader?" Or, "Is there a need for a leader at all, when the fight is for equality?" We soon realized through these discussions that the only way was to consider every woman as a leader. A woman who is trying to change the situation of her own house is no less a leader than the woman who has been a *sarpanch* for 10 years. This churning and reflection needs to take place with as many women as possible, so that they can join forces while continuing to transfer this understanding to others. There is nothing technical about this struggle because the effort to bring about equality doesn't need any statistical analysis. It just requires the lived experience. It is a journey in which every woman has felt the pain and is aware of the struggle that another woman is going through. And this is what needs to be highlighted.

Often, women leaders expressed their inability to explain to the others adequately about gender, especially when they were cross-questioned. This was made even more difficult because this 'new concept of equality' was immoral for the women

"We are weak. We get scared easily. We are afraid of going anywhere. Everyone calls me *bai*." These are the beliefs that the women live by. They are weak because no one has paid attention to their health. They get scared because they are never allowed to move outside, not allowed to talk to anybody and not allowed to participate in meetings. Everyone calls

them *bai* because they have only one identity, that of a woman. Their name has never really mattered. If their name were to be used, they would, perhaps, have an identity as an individual which, of course, would be a threat to the existing system.

When we talk to the women, we need to bring up these issues and invite them to share their experiences so that they can understand gender through these stories of struggle. This will have more significance for them than explaining a totally alien concept of equality to them first and then finding out where they stand. An understanding of gender and patriarchy is more helpful when it comes from the purview of the issues faced by the women because they immediately connect with these examples. To familiarize the women with the issue of gender, we need to work on the subjective identity of women and not impose upon them a leader-centric approach.

The primary focus of the team, based on its current understanding, is to work in concentrated areas. There has to be a focussed engagement of professionals in these areas/villages, providing inputs around gender so that a concrete understanding can be synced in all the women members in a short time span. The need is to unite the women as a whole, not just one, two or four 'leaders', but a collective that will inspire women in adjacent villages.

For this to take place, PRADAN professionals need to engage in the following first steps.

Make the village-level forum more reflective: There is need to motivate members to share with each other their day-to-day dilemmas, their self-image and what makes them happy and how they feel, being a part of this women's forum.

Provide conceptual knowledge through trainings to most of the women members: Through the reflections of women, in the village-level forums, it is hoped that the spirit of solidarity might develop. However, for a deeper and more thorough understanding, the women need to be equipped with some knowledge. This forum needs to have hands-on knowledge on, at least, gender and sex, and the root cause of these discriminations, that is, patriarchy and its manifestations in their lives.

Be a part of reflective discussions at village forum: Discussions that the women have need to be complemented with the knowledge of gender and its inter-play. Here, self disclosure of all members, including the facilitator, is crucial because the facilitator, too, is affected by this play of patriarchy, though the degree or intensity may differ. The experience and understanding of the struggle is not very different. It will be a process of discovering oneself and the immediate environment by analyzing the present situation. A continuous process of self-reflection supports and strengthens the sense of the collective, unity and oneness. The groups will themselves realize that the only means to end this disparity is to join hands and move forward together.

This is a cyclical process, in which these reflections will be shaped further by the experiences of the action taken by the women. They may require more conceptual clarity for including other women, who too are going through the same journey and want to take part in this quest for equity.

SAMAJH TO GAYE PAR YEH HOGA KAISE?

During the training, the women participants were heard repeating this sentence: "*Samajh to gaye par yeh hoga kaise?* (We have understood the concept, but how are we going to bring about this change)?" After every discussion, every reflection, these women were very motivated but were extremely concerned about how they would make the change happen.

Following are three villages that have taken steps in the direction of HOW. In the first one, they have understood the necessity of transferring the knowledge. Baby steps are being taken in the second for addressing the larger issues of discrimination. The third describes how women are right in confronting stereotypes and challenging the status quo.

TANGNA VILLAGE

The women thought that understanding the concept was a crucial first step. They decided to use the medium of a street play to sensitize women because everyone enjoys watching one. In it, they depicted the plight of a child, who is born as a girl. Their logic was, "If we discuss this subject with the women, there will be resistance and they won't understand it completely. It has to be presented to them visually. They will, at least, watch the play till the end...it will help."

PALASHPANI VILLAGE

Women from different villages underwent a four-day training session. One of the key discussions centred around the nutrition and health of women. Later, the discussion was linked with how health is inter-connected with many other aspects of the position of women in society. The notion of women being 'weak' was brought up. A connection was made between their weakness and nutrition and how they were the last to eat at home and

they ate only what was left over. They were also encouraged to question the low priority that the health of the girl child received, in every household. Since then, the women of Palashpani have taken the initiative to take care of the nutritional aspect of all the members belonging to a Village Organization (VO). The women have started weighing all the members in the VO. On finding anyone underweight, the VO takes the responsibility of helping her to gain weight by the next month's meeting. They support her by personally contributing food or money if she herself is unable to arrange for these. The members of the VO took up the health of the women as their collective responsibility. The VO has even collaborated with the *anganwadi* and asked the workers to take care of this concern by providing the required supplements.

POLAPATHAR VILLAGE

The women in this village stood up against domestic violence. If they heard noises indicative of violence, coming from any house, they immediately gathered in front of that house and made it clear that the violence was unacceptable and had to end! Even if there was a meeting going on or a fight took place at an odd hour, a suggestion of violence was all that was required for the women to act. By now, they have many achievements to recount. It is not just that they help the woman in that moment; if domestic violence takes place regularly, they support the woman completely. In a few incidents, they have even resorted to some coercion. For example, they once tied a man, who even after several warnings did not mend his ways, to a chair and left him like that for the whole night in the backyard of his own house. The message was clear to everyone!

That there is some transformation in the attitude of women is evident from these stories; beginning from sensitizing others

Another challenge was to free women from the belief that patriarchy is the 'normal/accepted/cultured' way of leading a life

about gender to putting an end to the discrimination finally. However, it has not been a smooth journey. The foremost challenge was to talk about such a deep-rooted and sensitive topic, which basically questions the moral values that people

hold very close. Our interactions with the women in village-level forums helped us to, at least, initiate the discussion and motivate women to talk about the subject among themselves. Another challenge was to free women from the belief that patriarchy is the 'normal/accepted/cultured' way of leading a life. Here, a four-day residential training proved quite fruitful because it focuses on being logical and reflective. It directly targets the psyche of women.

The women we work with have come a long way to establishing that equality and they practice it in their families. This only came by deliberating on their current state, by involving others in this journey, by taking action and by reflecting on their journey regularly, by sharing their life experiences and by building an understanding for moving ahead.

Our (professionals) focus is to engage as co-travellers and help build these village-level forums and encourage the women to be reflective and open to sharing as much as possible. Another crucial point has been the attitude of the team. We are not engaging with the villagers as professionals or as people with all the solutions, who are supposed to get things done and who are always ready with a plan A or plan B. On the contrary, we ourselves are evolving with the community and accepting the change taking place within us. This is working like a catalyst in challenging our own belief systems and helping us refine ourselves, inspiring us to redesign our methodologies and our way of engaging with these women because change is the only constant thing in this world!

Breaking the Chains of Patriarchy: Shanti Tekam's Quest for a Life of Dignity

PANDIT ARJUN

Reflecting remarkable tenacity and courage through many adversities, Shanti's life is a powerful and hope-inspiring journey from helplessness and dependence to belief in the collective, empowerment and leadership

THE BEGINNING

Shanti was born in Talabodi village, Chaparvahi *gram panchayat*, Paraswada block, Balaghat district. Her village is 55 km from the district headquarters and lies in the interiors of a dense forest. Despite there being no school facilities in the village, her father, who had studied till the IV Standard, wished to provide proper education to his children. Her brothers were already married and settled when Shanti started going to school, 12 km from her residence. Her father taught her the basics, and eight-year-old Shanti soon took admission in the 1st Standard. Shanti thoroughly enjoyed studying and had a close group of friends. When she was in the 7th Standard, Shanti lost her mother, and suddenly, her life changed and she had to live a life that she hadn't imagined for herself.

Shanti wanted to continue her studies but her family did not support the idea. Instead, they wanted her to get married when she was barely 15 years old. As is the case with most women who dream of an education and have an ambition, she was discouraged by people around her. Her sister-in-law called her education 'redundant', for women were just meant to serve their husbands' homes and had nothing to gain from being educated. Shanti was sure that if her mother had been alive at that point, she would have definitely supported Shanti's education. But now, without a mother, Shanti slowly lost support from her father as well. He also seemed to believe that Shanti would be more secure once she was married. He wanted to fulfill his paternal responsibilities before he died.

Her marriage was soon fixed to Shivcharan. Her prospective husband was from Amoli, a village in Balaghat district. He worked in the police force at Rupjhar Kotwali. Shanti knew him from the time she was studying in Baiher. Disturbed and upset at the decision, she left her house and went to a relative's place in a nearby village. This did not work out for her and finally, she had to get married and move to Amoli. Suddenly, there were restrictions on her movements within, and outside, of the village. Alone and house-bound, Shanti began to miss her school friends.

After a year, she shifted with her husband to Rupjhar and then to Balaghat. They lived together for 12 years and had four children, two sons and two daughters. Shivcharan spent most of his time outside of home and never found enough time for his family. Shanti heard from other policemen that Shivcharan was seen with other women before their marriage and the meetings may still be continuing. Initially, she did not believe her husband's colleagues; however, she soon realized that Shivcharan was not giving her enough time or money at home.

Additionally, he would regularly inquire about any visitors who came home and would cast doubts upon her character. Shanti found this hypocritical, and became angry because according to what she had heard, it was Shivcharan who was being unfaithful. Through subsequent fights and conversations, Shanti found out that her husband only married her under parental pressure. He had always wanted a wife with a fair complexion and found Shanti's dark complexion unpleasant. Shanti was also subject to physical violence and while she was angered by it, she chose to accept it for the time being.

Shivcharan soon stopped giving her money altogether and she could not send her

children to school. She asked for help from the other policemen but nobody helped. One day, Shivcharan brought his second wife home. Shanti could not tolerate the presence of another woman in her house, with her husband, and decided to leave him and come back to Amoli. Their two children were kept with each of the parents.

In 2000, Shanti started to live with her mother-in-law (in Amoli). She was a cooperative woman. Shanti did not have many livelihood generation options apart from doing manual labour. Shanti's mother-in-law owned two acres of empty, less fertile land, which she gave to Shanti so she could use it to generate some income. Shanti didn't know how to be a farmer and had little knowledge of agricultural practices; therefore, she started renting this land to other farmers. Meanwhile, she worked on other farmers' fields, did MGNREGA projects, and earned some money through wage labour.

The money wasn't sufficient for Shanti to send her children to a good private school. She had always been an advocate for education and was now worried about the education of her own children. With no support from her husband, and meagre income from her labour, Shanti tried to save as much money as she could for her children's education but still fell short of the stipulated fees. She eventually had to withdraw her children from their private school in Lamta. This was 2009, and Shanti was becoming disheartened by the day. It was at this time that Shanti was introduced to the Jai Narshigh Paat Self-Help Group.

Involvement with SHGs

The group was formed in March 2009 in Lohari *tola* (Shanti's *tola*) and was promoted by PRADAN. Initially, Shanti and the women around her were skeptical about SHGs and

feared that someone may run away with their money. After multiple trainings on the benefits and functions of SHGs, the PRADAN team was eventually able to build trust among the women. Because the money was to be in the safe-keeping of the women themselves, the fear diminished, somewhat. Shanti joined the group and started saving Rs 10 per week. The SHG was envisaged as a bank for the women.

The weekly meetings soon started and Shanti began attending them. The trainings helped her understand gender discrimination and made her aware of the secondary status that women had in society, both of which she had experienced first-hand. The importance of women's collectives, SHGs and village-level committee (VLC) resonated with her and she felt compelled to work harder for the cause. In her words, "For the first time in nine years, I sat with the women of the village and I listened to them, and I shared with them my story. It felt like I had friends again, that I was reliving my school days. It felt especially great after I became the accountant in the SHG, because now I had an important responsibility."

As she became more involved, Shanti shared her experiences and her life story in other SHGs, in the VLCs, both, in her own village and also in other villages. She actively participated in trainings organized by PRADAN on gender, rights and *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs).

These increased her knowledge and understanding immensely. Having suffered due to patriarchy, she resonated deeply with the gender training; she was also able to see that the women around her were

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suffering too. The game of Kamal-Kamli demonstrated how women lost out at every age due to widespread gender discrimination; Shanti could personally identify with the situation as she herself had had to give up her education and get married at a very early age and suffer violence at the hands of her husband.

Participating in the trainings and meetings, Shanti realized that majority of the women she met had undergone some

form of physical abuse in their homes but had accepted it as a part of their fate as women. Shanti was disturbed by this and decided to take it up as a critical issue. She organized the women to speak up against incidents of domestic violence and successfully resolved issues that came up, with the support of other women.

The story of a newly married woman, Laxmi, in Lohari tola, which was not a part of the SHG, is a telling example of the sufferings of women. For six months after her marriage, Laxmi was beaten and tortured by her husband and her in-laws; because she was new to the village, she did not know who to approach for help. Shanti learned about this while talking to other women. Laxmi too had heard about Shanti and the SHGs being active and supportive of women. One night, when the family was very violent with her and it seemed as though there was no other way out, she managed to escape from her home. The only person she could think of approaching for help and support was Shanti.

Laxmi stayed the night with Shanti and, in the morning, a meeting was organized by the SHG regarding this. The woman's family

blamed Shanti for instigating their daughter-in-law but Shanti stayed strong and took up the issue in the VLC, involving men and women from outside the SHGs. The family was told that if the violence continued, a police complaint would be filed. Until then, all decisions, in such matters had been made by men in the *samaj ki baithak* (caste *panchayats*). This was the first time that the norm had been broken and the women not only participated in the decision-making but also the final decision was made in favour of the woman.

In 2009, motivated to engage in a public forum, Shanti participated in the local elections and was elected as the Ward Panch of her village. In the capacity of the people's representative, she undertook various developmental works for her village—getting Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards made for vulnerable families; getting a temporary road made that led up to Amoli by approaching the MLA; she demanded work under MNREGA and ensured that the payments were made, etc. She also motivated the women to participate in the *gram sabha*.

She developed good connections with the agricultural department and MNREGA officials during her tenure as a Ward *Panch*. This set a great example for the women and men, who were caught up by the '*mai-baap* ideology' with regard to high-ranking officials and saw them as demi-gods. Bringing up crucial issues that act as an impediment to a life of dignity, she decided to take action to make women aware of their rights. From time to time, she organized and led women to fight for their rights and entitlements. The coming together of women gave them more agency and power

Shanti's efforts, inspired by PRADAN's training, helped promote a culture of demanding accountability from officials rather than being submissive to them. Owing to her dedication and her motivation, Shanti was appointed Community Service Provider (CSP) in 2011 and became the bridge between the Federation, the women and PRADAN

than before and the women, who once felt vulnerable, were now backed by a large community of women.

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and PRADAN. Over time, Shanti took up several responsibilities such as Federation Representative, Federation Secretary, *Ajeevika Saathi*, *Gender Saathi* and *Pashu Sakhi*, across different areas of intervention by PRADAN.

AJIVEEKA SAATHI

The farmers in the area had been practising traditional methods of planting paddy and vegetables; this, over time, caused low productivity and high costs. PRADAN was involved in grooming the local resources around agriculture and livelihoods. Shanti was a participant in many of the trainings centered on agriculture.

When the first training for agriculture took place, there was skepticism among the women. Farmers could not bring themselves to believe this new practice. Successful demonstrations and field trainings, however, helped build the confidence of the women farmers. As the training progressed, the women were shown films about the practices and the benefits of Srividhi (System of Rice Intensification, SRI) as compared to conventional agriculture practices.

Shanti tells us that the film, *Ek Ropa Dhan*, made by PRADAN, helped her understand SRI, and that was true for many other women as well. The screening of the film became the starting point of a belief in organic practices. Shanti learned the SRI paddy cultivation method in her 70 decimals of land after attending a training held by PRADAN in 2010. Her yield doubled to 14 quintals, as compared to the previous year's 7 quintals. This was the first demonstration in her village.

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In the same year, a Cluster-level Adhiveshan was organized in Amoli village. PRADAN suggested that for promoting and scaling up agriculture-based livelihoods, a Resource Person from each SHG, something like an Ajeevika Saathi, be identified. Shanti's name was suggested for the post of Ajeevika Saathi by the SHG members and she willingly accepted the offer.

She also attended the second phase of the gender training, during which she became more aware of the biased social norms and the stronghold of patriarchy, especially within farming. She decided to claim women's identity and role in agriculture, and made confident claims about women being farmers. She faced numerous taunts from the men around but she continued to fulfill her duties. She learned farming practices and demonstrated them across villages and clusters. She was also involved in imparting training on SRI and organic farming of vegetables with the community. She travelled to other villages to create awareness about adapting new techniques in farming. She reached out to over 100 farmers, promoting SRI and organic practices.

She also participated in an organic workshop at Chandigarh. This workshop was a national-level organic forum organized by ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture) Kisan Swaraj Manch. As a part of the organic farming training, Shanti was chosen to go to Jharkhand; when she returned, she had a new viewpoint. She met

women farmers, who made their lives better through organic farming, which improved the environment around them, leading to better health of the people.

She supported other families by helping them prepare a crop-based livelihoods plan. Shanti understood the power of participation and encouraged discussions among women. She took up the reviewing and monitoring of members in the group, and held regular discussions on integrated crop management.

GENDER SAATHI

A basic gender training was organized in Amoli by PRADAN, in which Shanti participated and found words to define and categorize her experiences of the patriarchy and discrimination against women. The Resource Person, her namesake, was the dynamic and eloquent Shanti Amma (gender trainer), and watching and learning from her was an amazing experience for Shanti. Shanti was also a participant of the advanced gender leadership workshop at Ukwa, a *gram panchayat* in Paraswada. Jagori (a non-government organization) was the resource for this training. Shanti attended a number of trainings such as a four-day block-level workshop by PRADAN on gender, a four-day leadership camp on gender and patriarchy by PRADAN and Jagori, and a three-day workshop on viewing things

from the gender perspective by PRADAN and Jagori.

After the gender trainings, the Federation started to work intensively on women's understanding of gender and patriarchy. Two Resource Persons were to be appointed in each VLC. Shanti had always been someone with strong views on gender and showed a lot of interest in the Cluster

meetings. Because she was personally invested in these issues, she played an active role in the Cluster, and even attended SHG meetings of other villages voluntarily, so as to promote the Federation.

Shanti, thus, became the unanimous choice of the Cluster members for the role of Gender Saathi. She received basic and advanced gender training, and organized small training sessions at her village. As a trainer-facilitator, Shanti felt she could better relate with the world around her and she could often find connections between her life and the training she gave. After the training, she has been stimulating discussions around gender in her group and in the VLC. During the trainings, she usually plays the game of Kamal-Kamli and conducts discussions with the women, listens to their problems, and helps them find solutions. She undergoes thorough reflection and review sessions by PRADAN professionals after her engagement with the groups.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Shanti is glad that the gender training took place and she was able to participate in it and she was able to find the vocabulary for all her experiences. She says, "Everybody is so used to discrimination. It starts showing up right from childhood, so we stop fighting against

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She gives an example, "Women are considered impure and have no permission to enter the kitchen and some parts of the house when they are menstruating. Discussions

around this were a part of the

training and it was the first time we spoke about this. Since the training, some women have started to break these norms. They enter the kitchen even during their periods. But change is not an easy process and will take some time."

She recounts her own experience, "I made the change with my own self and my family. I have always treated my children equally. Before this training, I was afraid of sending my daughter out for higher studies; now I am convinced that the investment in her education is worth it. I have suffered because of the discriminatory practices in our society, and I don't want our daughters to undergo the same. A man can re-marry without any social backlash; a woman does not have the privilege of a second marriage even if she suffers with her husband. If a woman becomes a widow, society imposes so many restrictions upon her—she cannot wear bangles, beautify her own self or even wear sindoor."

She encourages women to go against the norms, "I asked the single women in my training sessions to wear things of their own choice, such as bangles and saris, even in social functions. When the men questioned this, I replied that times have changed and if the men are free to dress how they want and remarry, women should be too."

Shanti has changed over the years and has been rewarded for her courage. "Today, I have reached a point where I have won *Panchayati Raj* elections uncontested when I stood for the Ward Seat. Women have been my cadre and have supported me from nomination, through the canvassing and continue to help me now in fulfilling my duties. I can talk confidently to the District Collector now, something that was unimaginable for us women; I can even fight to get our entitlements. I have found financial, emotional, social, and political support from being a part of the SHG and through PRADAN's involvement."

Being part of an SHG has helped her become financially independent; she is outspoken about her financial rights vis-à-vis her husband. "Being in the SHG has helped me send my children to school again. Initially, I took a loan of Rs 500 from the SHG for paying their school fees. Last year, I took Rs 20,000 from the SHG for paying my son's tuition fee. With the income from organic farming, I am now paying off the debts and hoping to move towards a self-sustaining income. I have even found the courage to stand up and fight against my husband. I openly demanded money from my husband for our children's education and, also, for the expenses at home."

Apart from the financial rights, she is able to stand up for herself against him in other ways as well. "Shivcharan came to Amoli and threatened me while I was in my paddy field. Angered by my refusal to take back my demands, Shivcharan raised his hand to strike me; I stopped him and asked him if he had lost all his shame. I also warned him about his second marriage because I am aware of my legal and constitutional rights, ever since the gender training. I subsequently called a meeting in the village and it was decided that Shivcharan would have to provide money for our children's education. Since that

intervention, he has been giving child support regularly and my children are doing well in their studies. There are fewer financial hurdles now. My son, Rajeshwer is pursuing his BE and is preparing for the competitive exams simultaneously. My daughter Rajeshwari has completed her polytechnic and nursing, and has also found a job in nursing."

The Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh of Paraswada, the Federation of SHGs in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh, was registered as a Society under the Society Act in 2014. Shanti is a member and the current Secretary of the Federation. There are over 6,000 women voluntary members of the Federation and it covers over 142 villages in Balaghat district.

Shanti attends Federation meetings and is focussing on the regular and active participation of women in the *gram sabha*, having made this her chief objective. She is deeply involved in the participatory approach practices just started, aiming at different aspects of household-wise planning in 10 villages.

Furthermore, the government's agriculture and horticulture departments are supporting the women in scaling up their organic approach. The Forest Department and the *gram sabha* have also been involved as instruments to promote planning around sustainable use of forests and forest resources. The Federation's focus is on a sustainable approach for



livelihoods and 4,135 women are now involved in practices of organic farming and have even established linkages with the market. Recently, the work of the Sangathan was acknowledged by the 6th Jindal Steel Works Ltd. and Times of India Earth Care awards, 2015.

Shanti was chosen by the women to attend this award function on behalf of the Federation. She travelled to Delhi to receive the award at a glittering ceremony. In fact, she even gave a much applauded speech, where she dedicated the award to the women in her village and added that the success was possible only with the support of each member of the Federation and the SHGs.

Besides working as Ajeevika Saathi and Gender Saathi, Shanti excels in animal husbandry and is now Pashu Sakhi. Lamta Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh planned for allied activities in poultry farming for landless people. There was need to create a pool of doctors (Pashu Sakhis) for poultry from the Federation members. Shanti passed the exam, trained for being a Pashu Sakhi, thus breaking the idea that only men could become animal doctors. She led the vaccination activity conducted in her village and the nearby villages in June. Initially, she was scared to do the vaccination but she overcame her fears, believing that this could help the landless in her village earn some money and improve their lives.

With her immense experience and expertise in the area of sustainable and organic farming, Shanti, along with three other women, participated in the state-level organic and sustainable workshop for Master Trainers, conducted by the State Rural Livelihoods Mission. She shared and demonstrated her field

She travelled to Delhi to receive the award at a glittering ceremony. In fact, she even gave a much applauded speech, where she dedicated the award to the women in her village and added that the success was possible only with the support of each member of the Federation and the SHGs

experiences of various organic crop practices. Impressed with her confidence, knowledge, skill and her understanding of women as farmers and their rights, the judges selected Shanti for the role of state-level Master Trainer.

She was selected as a state-level Resource Trainer for Haryana and worked in the villages of Kethal district for 15 days. Later, she went to Jhabva district of

Madhya Pradesh for 10 days. She engaged with the communities of these two districts, demonstrating organic practices for 25 days. Her engagement did not just stop there. After coming back, she engaged with the women of her village and the Federation regarding the same.



In spite of all the good work she has done, seeing her house shut for almost a month, some people started spreading rumours about her. There was talk of how she had gone away without informing anyone and where she could have possibly gone. There were also rumours that she had run away.

All the motivation, confidence and happiness that she had gained from her experience was shaken when she heard that this is what people

are saying and insinuating; she was upset. She, however, did not lose hope, and called for a meeting immediately. She asked the villagers what the problem was if she represented her village and the Federation at the state and the national levels. She asked the people why she was liable to answer them.

Shanti is reaching new heights with her dedication and her hard work and is being recognized at the national level; yet for all the work she does, she still has to continue fighting for herself in her village

Shanti is reaching new heights with her dedication and her hard work and is being recognized at the national level; yet for all the work she does, she still has to continue fighting for herself in her village.

Shanti's has undergone extreme challenges and hurdles in order to reclaim her rights. Beginning with her experiences in a small hamlet, she has fought her way through

innumerable harsh experiences and has become one of the few people of her village to have ever visited Delhi, the capital city.

What sets her apart is her will-power and her enthusiasm to share her learning with as many people as she can. Her dedication, belief and generosity

are reflective of her undying courage to resist discriminatory practices in society.

Shanti beams as she recounts the sights of the big city and fancy hotels that she saw. Her story so far gives hope for all women like her—a hope that others will be able to nurture their dreams and fulfill them, unbridled by social taboos.

My Journey in Araria

JYOTI BALA

Providing a safe space in the SHGs and VOs for women to share and discuss not only issues related to livelihoods, savings and credit...although these are important...but also themselves, their lives, their health, their choices or the lack of it, their decision-making abilities, and their self-image, the PRADAN team in Araria is working with women and teenage girls to bring about fundamental changes in mindsets by challenging age-old beliefs and traditions

'As-Salaam Alaikum' is a greeting one hears as one enters any of the villages in Araria district. The greeting, meaning 'Peace be upon you', is sometimes replaced by 'Aadab', another Muslim greeting.

BACKGROUND

Araria district, in northeastern Bihar, occupies an area of 2,830 sq km and is situated in the northern part of Purnia and Madhepura in Bihar. Araria is surrounded by Nepal on the northern side, Kishanganj in the east and Supaul in the west. From the point of view of security, the district is important because of its border with Nepal. Jogbani is the last point of Araria, after which the Virat Nagar district of Nepal begins. The major rivers of this district are Kosi, Suwara, Kali and Koli.

Araria is one of the 90 minority concentration districts, comprising 70 per cent Muslim population, mainly Kulahaiya Muslims. The community speaks a special dialect, also called Kulahaiya. The women are more comfortable speaking the dialect and can also speak Hindi. The district is traditional, with high value placed on joint family kinship, religion, caste and community. The villages of Araria have old social hierarchies, and caste equations still shape local development. The society is feudal and caste-ridden. Nearly 13.7 per cent of the population is Scheduled Castes (SC) and 1.3 per cent Scheduled Tribes (ST). In at least 13 per cent of the villages, the SC population is more than 40 per cent. Some of the most backward communities are mushahars, turhas, mallahs and doms.

Araria ranks 19th in terms of population (28,11,569) and 15th in terms of area in Bihar state. It is a densely populated district with 993 persons per sq km. About 90 per cent of the population migrates seasonally to other parts of India such as Delhi, Bangalore and Kolkata, for jobs as masons, tailors and construction workers. With most of the male population migrating as soon as they attain the age of 15, the women become burdened with additional responsibilities. Most men, it was found, send home money every two or three months; the women have to manage the home and family without money or they depend on moneylenders for credit.

The land-holding pattern is also skewed. Many of the families are landless. There is an increase in the size of the families but the resources are not increasing proportionately. There are a number of families with an average land-holding pattern of four to six decimals. Recurrent floods, that is, flash floods, are a major problem in the region; agriculture, therefore, is an unreliable source of income and makes the community vulnerable.

STARTING WORK IN ARARIA

I had never worked with the Muslim community before. My lack of awareness about the community, its traditions and culture worried me. I was not sure how I would carry forward PRADAN's aim of 'a just and equitable society'; how I would bring about change, and how I would mobilize the people. I was not clear about how I would organize marginalized Muslim women in an unfamiliar area into collectives, and make these collectives the drivers of change.

The Maulvi sahab and the Hazi listened to us, understood our objective and promised to help us to move ahead. Our continuous engagement with these two men helped in building rapport with the villagers

The villagers had seldom seen a girl moving about on a scooty. They would stare, and the children and women would scream, "See a *chhori* (girl) is riding a scooty." When I stopped, they would surround me and I would feel awkward.

I believed that Muslim women in purdah were reticent; on the contrary, the women in Araria were quite vocal. Before one woman could finish speaking, another would start. Many times, I was not able to understand why there was so much aggression in their words.

During our initial days, we had a situation. A rumour spread among the villagers that the women professionals (my colleague and I) of PRADAN were trying to convert the Muslims into Hindus. The rumour spread across the villages and this was cause for great concern. We realized that we had only been conversing with the women and had not included the men in any of our discussions.

The men were more aware and would often ask me what schemes I had for them or what I had brought for them. Annoyed by their questions, I stopped interacting with them and began conversing with the women directly. The men were not happy with that and hence the rumours. To clear the matter, we went to the village and began interacting with men of influence such as the *Maulvi sahab* and some others. We found that the culprits of rumour-mongering were some young men, who did not understand why outsiders came to the village and interacted with the women. The *Maulvi sahab* and the *Hazi* listened to us, understood our objective and promised to help us move ahead. Our continuous engagement with these two men helped in building rapport with the villagers.

Over time, and after several discussions, we learned that the major source of cash flow in the village was from migration. The men, who travelled to the cities for work, sent money home every few months. In the interim, the women at home managed with very little money or depended on moneylenders for credit. They said, usually they had to repay the moneylender double the amount of money they had borrowed because of the interest that had accrued over time.

When I shared the concept of 'savings and credit' with the women, Bibi Raiboon remarked, "*Kyun nahi hum apne paise ko toongni mein jama karein* (Why don't we collect our money in a box)?" The women started discussing how they had to take loans, and the different sources from which they took loans because they did not have any savings of their own. The women readily accepted the concept of 'savings and credit' and wanted to know how they could begin. To clarify the workings of the system, a movie called *Meri Samiti* was shown to them. This is how the first SHG was formed in the area in March 2015. The group is called 'Bismillah Swayam Sahayata Samuh'; it had ten members between the ages of 20 and 60, and the members agreed to save Rs 20 per week.

After two groups were formed, a *tola*-level training on the importance of having an SHG in every village was held. To my utter surprise, when I visited the group on the day after the training, I found that the group members were not ready to sit. They seemed agitated and there was a general feeling of disillusionment. The group members were not even willing to talk to me.

When I shared the concept of 'savings and credit' with the women, Bibi Raiboon remarked, "Kyun nahi hum apne paise ko toongni mein jama karein (Why don't we collect our money in a box)?"

However, I continued to visit them, in spite of the fact that they were unwilling to attend the meetings. One day, Biwi Sarla said to me, "*Didi aap kyun itna kharcha kar rahe hain ham log par, koi toh maksad hoga? Kya jab paisa zyada ho jayega tab aap sifli se baksa le jayengi* (Didi, why are you spending so

much on us? What is your objective? When we have more money, will you take the box away by doing black magic)?" Another member, Biwi Saira asked, "*Khel kyun khilawaya* (Why did you make us play games)?" It was hard for them to believe that anyone would invest time and money on them without seeking some favours in return. They wanted to identify the reasons behind the organization of such a training and the investment on snacks.

I showed them pictures of other trainings in PRADAN. They were, then, able to correlate that it was merely done to make them understand the importance of such a platform. Games were played to make the training more enjoyable and participatory.

I then asked them what they thought were my reasons for coming to their village. One of the usually silent members, Bibi Jaigoon, spoke up, "*Ye hamare akal fariyaane ke liye ye sab kar rahe hain* (You are coming here to increase our understanding)." The others nodded and agreed to sit down for a meeting once again. Similarly, there were a number of incidents when our actions were suspect. The people were not ready to trust us and our identity was questioned. Reflecting on the situation and conversing with the women and clarifying their doubts, however, helped me remain confident and to move ahead.

Initially, a few groups were formed, mainly for 'savings and credit', which they realized slowly was an effective tool in emergencies. They were not, however, able to visualize beyond 'savings and credit' and were unwilling to associate with more women. I thought it would be helpful to organize a visit to other SHGs for them so that they could see the various areas in which women of SHGs could work. When I shared the idea of group members going for a visit to the nearby Bahadurganj district (Kishanganj Team), about 50 km from Araria, the members did not agree because they knew that they would not be allowed to travel alone. I then asked some of the older members of the households to accompany the women; after an initial struggle for a few months, they agreed to go and we set the date for the visit.

On the scheduled date, as I entered the village, the men surrounded me. They began to question me about where I was taking the women and when we would return. Some of the men were busy noting the number of the vehicle that was to take us to the neighbouring village. Some others were muttering under their breath, mocking the women, "Allah alone knows where they are going!"

For a moment, I thought of calling off the visit. However, when I saw the women in colourful clothes, excited and getting ready for the outing, helping each other complete household chores to be able to leave in time, I was overwhelmed. Bibi Nagma said, "*Didi ham taiyaar hain, mahni bhi kar diye hain maghrib tak ke liye* (We are all ready. We have even prepared the evening meal)."

As we moved, Bibi Najmin said, "*Akele mard ke bina pehli baar jaa rahe hain* (For the first time we are going without the men)."

I asked: "So, how are you feeling?"

The women shouted in chorus, "*Sirf doctor ke liye hum bahar jate hain par pehli baar kahin ghumne jaa rahe hain* (We only go to the visit the doctor. for the first time, we are travelling to some other place)."

We visited Sadhna Gram Sangthan in Aambaadi village, Bhatabari *panchayat* in Bahadurganj. The members of the host SHG were there to welcome us. It was a group comprising Hindus and Muslims. After the introductions were made, for a few hours the Village Organization (VO) members spoke of their life journey and their experiences of being in a group.

When we returned to the village, the women were surrounded by the other villagers wanting to know how the visit was. Bibi Sahaliya shared, "*Dusra mulq pehli bar dekhe* (Have seen the other place for the first time)."

The next day when I went for the group meeting, I heard the women talking about the drainage system of the village because of which the village they had visited was more neat and clean. The women shared their experiences with the villagers and spoke about how, in the other mulq (place), a similar SHG exists. After the visit, the women became more confident and began to extend themselves to have more women join the SHG. There was more trust after the visit.

The women began to share their confidential issues in the group. There were discussions about multiple pregnancies and the lack of a gap between children or about having children at an early age. Bibi Navras shared in a group meeting, "*Mard to bihari kar jata hai, par kitna mushkil hai itne bache ko sambhalna* (Men migrate and have no idea how difficult it is to take care of so many children)." They also began to talk about the implications of an early marriage. They began to share their life journeys, about how they get married so

young and spend the rest of their lives listening to abuse from their husbands for each and every mistake. The older women spoke about how the husbands control them and when the husbands migrate the women have to do as the in-laws want and then later the control lies with the son, who interrogates and questions them on all their activities.

There were still times when the motives of my colleague and I were suspected and questioned. Fortunately, each incident was clarified in the team. Being a reflective practitioner, these clarifications helped me learn something new every time. It was not always that I had the solutions just because I was a professional or that the community only had queries. We were both mutually dependent on each other for moving ahead.

I needed to do a lot of preparatory work to engage with the community. I got to understand its culture, customs and religious beliefs. I maintained journals and district handbooks, collected secondary data from documents, and examined the various development schemes run by the government. I needed to understand the cultural characteristics of the people of the area, talk to the influential people in the community, and encourage sharing and discussions. Studying the secondary data on the Muslim community and breaking the activity into sub-elements for an in-depth understanding helped me build perspective of the area, the context and the people.

Slowly and steadily, a few more groups were formed. It was in these groups, these informal associations, that women began talking about themselves for the first time. When I first asked the women to tell me about themselves; they would begin with, *"Didi, bhaat raandhte hain aur bachon ko dekhte hain"* (We cook rice and

It was in these groups, these informal associations, that women began talking about themselves for the first time

look after the kids)." And when I asked what else they did, the answer would be, "Nothing!" If asked them to speak about their daily routine, and it would always end up with a long list of activities, which they never considered as work.

The women of Araria are one the most deprived groups, unable to fully enjoy equal rights. They don't have any say in the decision-making in their homes or in their communities, and they do not participate in the social sphere. Although, due to reservation, they are nominated for elections to the posts of ward member or *sarpanch*, none of them has their own agenda. On pamphlets too, the husband's face is prominent. I asked one of the SHG members, Darkhsan Khatun, who was nominated for the *samiti*, why her husband's face instead of hers was on the pamphlet, she replied, *"Log mujhe nahin jaante. Main apne pati ke naam se jaani jaati huun"* (People don't know me. I am known only by my husband's name)."

In another meeting, I asked, *"Aapka kya hai"* (What is your own?)" The answers began with, *"Sab kuchh mera hai. Ye ghar, bachche"* (Everything is mine. This house, the children...)."

"Apne naam se kya bech sakte ho ya kiske liye phaisla kar sakte ho" (What can you sell by yourself? And what can you take decisions about...without asking for permission from anyone?)" The women said that they had nothing in their own name and they could not sell anything without asking for permission. This reflection, on what they really 'own', created a disturbance.

During our interactions, women shared how they were often called *zaahil* (illiterate) and

naali ka keeda (insects found in the drain) by their men-folk. Whenever I introduced myself, using my own name, and asked them to do the same, their voices would be choked with emotion because they were usually known by their husband's or their son's name. It was hard for them to even recall their names.

Biwi Asmati of Jama Masjid, Peechaili, said, "*Rishto ka makarjaal hai par apna koi naam nahi* (There is web of relations but we don't have a name of our own)."

I asked the women if they were to be born again would they like to be born boy or girl. They thought about it and answered, "I want to be born a boy." Reason? If they were boys, they would not have to be answerable to anyone for any of their actions and they would have the power to do everything. The women suddenly felt connected, realizing that they were in the same boat. If they were to group together, they might have a voice and a platform, where they could share their problems and be understood.

The women are mainly in *purdah* and are considered the *noor* (light) of the family. Culture and customs do not allow them to go out of their homes without the prior permission of the head of the family, who is usually a male. Wearing the *hijab* (head covering) is a common practice among them. The men earn the money and work for the family; it is the women's duty to care for the children and look after the home. It is required by religion for the women to be in a *purdah* and follow all orders, otherwise "Allah will punish them."

The men say that according to the *hadiath* (practical interpretation of the Quran), it is important for women to maintain a "social

. Whenever I introduced myself, using my own name, and asked them to do the same, their voices would be choked with emotion because they were usually known by their husband's or their son's name. It was hard for them to even recall their names

distance while interacting with men."

Sahista, a young girl, of Tola Kamat, said, "*Woh jo apna sir nahi dhakte unko dhakna padega jis se unke baal unke shauhar ke alawa koi aadmi na dekh sake. Kyunki wo paap hai aur Allah unhe saja dega* (All those, who do not cover their head in their community, need

to cover it; their hair should not be seen by any man other than their husband because that is a sin and Allah will punish them)."

The girls are married at an early age because they do not contribute to the family. They are considered part of another family, and the drop-out rate of girls after primary education is very high. As a result of this social evaluation of her biological activities of child-bearing and child-rearing, the only appropriate activity for a woman is to marry and give birth to a child because that will give her fulfillment.

In Araria, the men in most families migrate; and the women become victims of violence, exploitation and discrimination, both physically as well as mentally. Bibi Rukhsaar of Kamat (Duba *panchayat*) who is just 16 years old says, "*Mera ek mahine ka beta hai, mera shauhar pardesh chala gaya, kuchh mahino se usne paise dene band kar diye aur phone pe baat bhi nahi karta. Main pareshan ho gayi. Maine gaon ke aur logon ko phone kiya jo uske saath kaam karte the to pata chala ki wo jail mein hain. Ab mere liye akele bahut mushkil hai. Main apne abba ke ghar aa gayi* (I have a son of one month; my husband moved to the city. He stopped sending me money a few months back and does not talk to me on phone. I got worried and rang up another person of the village, who is also working there, and found out that my husband is in jail. It was hard

for me to manage, therefore, I returned to my parents' home. I don't know when he will return).

The women are busy caring for their children and working in the fields, but their labour is not counted as work because they do not contribute to the family income, in terms of cash. Although, there is a direct and indirect participation of women in agriculture, secondary data reveal that the work participation of women as cultivators is just 14.36 per cent.

Additionally, by and large, the women are not concerned about their health. Repeated pregnancies, overwork, high gender differentials lead to their ill health. Skin disease is very often seen among women and children. A woman takes care of the health of the entire family but hardly does anyone take care of her. Most of the women prefer a *dai* (midwife) instead of going to the hospital to give birth to their baby. Only 20 per cent cases are institutional deliveries and only 18 per cent of the children are fully vaccinated. The number of PHCs and sub-centres per one lakh population is also low in the district. Bibi Saubin, who is pregnant, shared in a group meeting, "I prefer to go to the *dai* because when I go to the hospital, I am ill-treated. Many a times, the doctor says, "*Tum phir se aagayi delivery karane* (You have come again for delivery)?" Other women of the group agreed that this embarrassment was the reason that they do not visit the hospital.

Another issue that bothers the women is the issue of triple *talaq*. Bibi Navras, who has been an active member of the SHG, had not been attending the meeting for a few weeks. When I visited the group, all the members surrounded me saying that her husband had given her

The women are busy caring for their children and working in the fields, but their labour is not counted as work because they do not contribute to the family income, in terms of cash

talaq, so she had gone back to her parents. Her husband had alleged that she wasn't taking care of her children properly. The women started telling me about the uncertainty in their lives. Bibi Mangli, aged 70 said, "*Mujhe itni umar mein bhi ye darr hai ki mera shauhar mujhe kab chhod*

dega (Even at this age, I am afraid that my husband could leave me at any time)."

Women started sharing all this in their meetings. Those who were shy also began to open up. The SHGs and the VO have become a platform for the women, where they can raise their voices. As a facilitator, active listening and analysis have helped me understand them. Discussions have resulted in inputs from the usually silent members as well. I had to steer the conversation in direct ways to new directions through thoughtful inquiry.

I always kept in mind that there are no right or wrong opinions, and one opinion is not more valid than another. In this manner, I tried to ensure that everyone contributes to learning and knowledge sharing. Initially, I laid emphasis on creating a trusting and neutral environment, in which everyone felt safe to express their honest opinions without feeling judged or attacked. This helped the women feel comfortable to reflect and share their thoughts, logic, dreams and aspirations. I did not merely pay attention to their words and what they said but also included valuing their opinions and giving credit to their views.

TEAM'S APPROACH

We asked the group in one of the meetings, what they thought was the most important requirement for them. Bibi Rukaiyaa replied, "*Roji, dhandha jis se aage badh saken* (Employment, job through which we can

move ahead)." Bibi Kishwari shared, "*Jaankari. Duniya mein bahut suvidha hai par hamein pata hi nahi* (Awareness is an issue. There are many facilities available but we are unaware of them)." Another woman said, "*Bachchpan mein shaadi, jis se sharir kharab ho jata hai aur sara paisa barbaad ho jata hai* (Marrying the children early is an issue because it affects the body and also there is loss of money)." Some others said, "*Sailaab nahi aayega tab kheti aur sabji dono kar sakte hain* (We can do farming and vegetables if the floods don't come)." One woman shared, "*Gusal khana, kyunki bahut aabadi hai toh bahut mushkil hota hai jane mein* (Bathroom, because there are so many people and it is a problem going in the open)."

We also talked to young girls between the ages of 14 and 18, who belonged to the group called 'Sunnet Swayam Sahayta Samuh'. They shared, how hard was it for them to manage during menstruation and how insecure they felt when they had to go to the toilet in the day time.

These interactions with the community helped us to understand that each household is unique and every household has different requirements. The community has multiple identities, attitudes, values, beliefs and patterns, and because of that, team members had to have different strategies and approaches, keeping the area context in mind. The team's approach was to first understand the area context comprehensively and then develop approaches and strategies.

Agriculture, the primary activity of a family, is usually controlled by men. Whenever we talked about any agricultural activity, the women were uncomfortable because they found it to

The emphasis was more on enabling the community to take ownership for helping women and to have as many women as possible be associated with collectives such as the SHG and its tiers

be a sector where the control completely lay in the hands of men. But they were involved in all activities, except ploughing, of agriculture and especially so in harvesting. This gave us an opportunity to talk with the women about crop practices and other related activities. Initially, the women used to say that the men would answer our questions.

I decided to break each activity of a crop into its sub elements. Slowly, the women realized that they were involved in agriculture directly and indirectly. Our engagement with the women in agriculture boosted their confidence and they learned new technologies and practices.

The emphasis was more on enabling the community to take ownership for helping women and to have as many women as possible be associated with collectives such as the SHG and its tiers. To begin with, the team focussed on a hamlet-level approach, sharing organization identity, helping the community to do a 'needs analysis' and finding a common reason to associate. The concept of 'savings and credit' was also shared, building on their experiences of being dependent on moneylenders in case of emergencies. Emphasis was laid on the group process and inputs for strengthening the group, with the SHG as a basic unit.

We also aimed at stimulating discussions among the women and helped them reflect and revisit their understanding of themselves as a unit. We tried to help the women experience being part of a group by having them interact with members of older SHGs. After six weeks of the SHG formation, we held a training on 'Why SHG?' During the training, the group learned the need for collectivization and solidarity. After one such training Bibi

Jalkho, a member of 'Laillah Swayam Sahayta Samuh', said, "Ham aur logon ko jod lenge, akele kuchh nahi kar payenge (We will invite more women to the group; we can't do things on our own)." Bibi Maijoon Aara shared, "Sabka dukh ek hai, sab aurat hai isliye sabko samjhane ki koshish karenge (Everyone has the same problems because all of us are women. We need to understand each other)." This training helped them come up with their action plan, which included the formation of more SHGs. The group members took it upon themselves to saturate the area with collectives in which they take ownership of helping other women.

The other strategy the team used was the formation of a VO with four or five SHGs. Training on the importance of SHGs and the need for solidarity is consistently given in the VO. The VO takes charge of extending oneself to associate with other women of the hamlet.

The team also encouraged the formation of groups of young girls, in the age group of 14-18, who were willing to have an association of girls, to discuss their issues. The team, after some discussion, wanted to engage with young girls because being in a collective would help them become more conscious about themselves and more aware of their abilities. This would also help them to become attached to their communities and understand their roles in initiating positive change, however small. One girl, Najo, of the 'Sunnet Swayam Sahayta Samuh' said, "Ladkiyon ko aage padhne nahi diya jaata jabki ladke padhna nahi bhi chahte hain tab bhi jabardasti padhate hain, jabki ek ghar ke liye ladki ka padhna bhi jaruri hai (Girls are not allowed to study whereas boys,

Girls need encouragement, education and the skills to lead their life with dignity. And because a person's belief system is in its critical stage of development during the teenage years, investing even a little time in building the personality and raising the self-esteem of teenagers can yield big returns, in terms of empowering the future of these teenagers

even if they don't want to study, are asked to study. But it is very important for girls to study)."

Our engagement with young girls helped us understand that girls need encouragement, education and the skills to lead their life with dignity. And because a person's belief system is in its critical stage of development during the teenage years, investing even a little time in building the personality and raising the self-esteem of teenagers can yield big returns, in terms of empowering the future of these teenagers.

Investing in teenage girls helped us identify issues associated with young girls and also to understand their aspirations.

Besides this, the team noticed that a number of young girls were involved in skill-based, home-based activities such as sewing, running grocery shops and teaching small kids. The team is trying to work with them, to enhance their skills.

The other strategy the team introduced was 'a group promoting a group in a village'. We organized a batch of volunteers responsible for mobilization in the area. This batch has undergone in-house training provided by professionals so that the participants develop a shared understanding of SHGs. In the next phase, these volunteers will deliver their understanding to the community and identify other pools of volunteers in the community. In the third phase, these volunteers will accompany fresh new volunteers and the same process will be repeated with the new volunteers. It will, therefore, become a relay of volunteerism, where youngsters will understand the four pillars of the SHG and help in mobilization of people.

Inclusion of other existing groups will also be a part of the mobilization process, and working together with the existing collectives of women and other stakeholders will be one of the other strategies.

WAY FORWARD

While sharing about the experience of a year in the SHG, Bibi Gaisoo says, "*Ab dikkat nahi hai, aaram se jarurat par karz milta hai, painchaa nahi karna parta hai, ham jeevan bhar ye karte rahenge* (Now it is not a problem. We get a loan as and when needed and we don't have to ask for money from anyone. We will continue to do this throughout our life)."

Members from Bismillah Swayam Sahayta Samuh shared, "*Ye baksa bahuton ko madad kiya hai* (This box has helped many)." Similarly, many more statements speak of the 'before' and 'after' of being part of an SHG when it comes to savings and credit; when asked about the self, however, they are still a little hesitant to talk.

The team has initiated a project on 'Gender and Health'. A survey of three cash books of the SHG reveals that the maximum amount of credit has been taken for health issues. Women have poor health and most of them suffer from gender discrimination, early marriages and giving low priority to one's own health. SHGs are beginning to discuss issues such as children's health and the large amount of cash required for consultation with doctors and for medicines.

There is need and scope for enhancing the identity of women. The women have poor self-image and are overburdened with work. There is huge potential for harnessing, both at the SHG and at the village-level organization, the collective voice of women and taking action accordingly. The capacity of the women and the communities needs to be built further, to enhance their capabilities around their needs.

The Power of Collectivism: A Showcase

SANTHANALAKSHMI SUGUMAR

Having tasted victory once and having experienced the power of collectives, the women of Sundro village are unstoppable...they are better informed about their rights and entitlements and speak as one, demanding changes and challenging corruption in public services

It was a bright day on 24 June 2016 when the Minister for Food and Civil Supplies of Jharkhand, Shri Saryu Roy, visited the small village of Sundro. For the first time, women's collectives and community level institutions took on the powers that be and demanded the regularization of the Public Distribution System (PDS).

One woman from a small tribal hamlet in Sundro stood in front of more than 100 villagers and various functionaries, and courageously enumerated the struggles of the people. She spoke of the disappointment and dissatisfaction of the villagers at how rations were being distributed and how people were being treated by the dealer. What she said was not just bold but a strong statement against all the humiliation and mockery that the women of the collectives, including she herself, had been subjected to when they walked to every house to gather the support of the people in their struggle to regularize PDS.

BACKGROUND

Sundro has about 140 households and is located in Jaridih block of Bokaro district, Jharkhand. There are three main hamlets in the village—Gotwari, Mahali and Neeche tola. All houses in the hamlet, barring a couple, are *kuccha*. Of the 12 sub-divisions of Santhal tribes, some common ones in the village are Hembrom, Murmu, Tudu and Soren. The major language spoken in the village is Santhali, because the village is dominated by Santhal tribes.

Agriculture, livestock rearing and wage labour are the livelihood options in the village. To earn a living, the men migrate from the village to the cities. The age group of the men, who migrate, is between 20 and 35 years.

The main crops cultivated in the area are paddy, maize, potato, tomato and brinjal. Agriculture is main livelihood, engaged in for food sufficiency, at least for the first few months after the harvest. Apart from the agricultural practices, most households participate in livestock rearing. They rear hens, goats, ducks, cows and buffaloes either to meet their family needs (hospitality) or for selling in the market during hard times (shock management).

Even today, the villagers look at wage labour as the best viable livelihoods option available to them. The work for the day begins at six in the morning. Both men and women can be seen walking towards the river where they spend the day breaking stones in a quarry and earning Rs 100 by the evening. Every adult in the village is driven to picking up this limited opportunity.

In the words of Phoolmani didi, "*Hum log ke gaon mein aise kuchh rojgar nahi milta, isliye mein apna ghar ka saman aur mere do bachcho ki jarurat ko pura karne ke liye paththar todti hoon* (In our village, there are no proper employment opportunities. So, I am forced to break stones in the quarry to meet the household needs)."

The staple food of the hamlet is rice. They have rice for all three meals in a day—before leaving to work, during the course of the day in the afternoon, and at night. Roti is made only on certain occasions because they do not cultivate wheat (enormous amount of livestock grazing that takes place in the village) and have to purchase flour from the market. In addition to rice, they eat dal and vegetables such as potatoes, lady's finger, brinjal and bitter gourd.

Drinking water is sourced from the local well and is consumed without boiling; some health problems such as vomiting and dysentery

occur because of this. Cooking is done on *chulahs* (clay kilns), with firewood collected from the nearby forest.

With respect to the food consumption pattern and the fulfillment of nutritional and balanced diet norms, there is a large gap. The recent document of the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, mandates that an ideal sample meal for an individual should have constituents such as milk, sugar, fruit, vegetables, cereals and pulses. When this is compared to the existing consumption measures, two trends are clearly visible: i) there is a complete ignorance about components such as milk, sugar and fruit, and these are absent from the daily consumption pattern and ii) with respect to the pulses and cereals, the range and the variety consumed are very narrow and, therefore, the mandated nutritional parameters are not fulfilled.

The impact of this kind of an imbalanced diet, with no inclusion of fruits or dairy products can be seen in the health of the villagers. For example, many cases of malnutrition and stunting are found in the children of the village.

The geographical positioning of the village is such that it is totally disconnected from the *panchayat*. The village is at a distance of about 3 km from the main road, making the habitation even more isolated and disconnected from the happenings in the *panchayat*. And even though it is a Santhal-dominated village, it hardly receives any attention from the administrators or PRI members. This is not just the story of Sundro but of most of the villages in this block. Being at the periphery of Jaridih block geographically, these villages escape the purview of the block administration.

There is a government primary school and an *anganwadi* centre in the village but there is no proper service delivery mechanism for

health needs, leaving the people at the hands of quacks. Even the *panchayat* office remains closed on most days of the year and villagers are unable to access government schemes and facilities. If people need anything, the usual custom is to give their petitions at the residences of PRI representatives.

We began our work in Sundro by identifying the needs of the village. A 'needs-identification' workshop was conducted in the village; it gave me an insight into some hard realities of the village besides savings and credit, and livelihoods

they were not involved in any interventions and remained isolated. In my first intervention, I tried to clusterize them at the village level to bring cohesion in the village. But they were not ready to spare their valuable time for the VO meetings. In my opinion, the underlying truth in this phenomena was a lack of visualization among the

OUR EARLY INTERVENTIONS

PRADAN began its interventions in the village in 2010 by implementing the Integrated Watersheds Management Program (IWMP). This gave it the scope for forming SHGs in the village. With the creation of water harvesting and land development structures, the picture began to change. People now had an opportunity to do manual labour in their village and receive regular payments. This gave them an alternative livelihood option to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which the villagers were wary of because of untimely payments. The micro-watersheds in these areas were fully managed and administered by the women. This increased the mobility of the *didis* and they began to visit places outside their village. By the creation of such water harvesting structures in the village, people now have easy access to water for their daily use. This has addressed the practical needs of the women.

NEED IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION

When I started working in the village in November 2015, as a part of the institutional set-up, there were only four SHGs (PRADAN promoted) and a fragile Gram Sangatan / Village Organisation (Kiya Dadi Gram Sangatan). All though there were many other SHGs (promoted by other organizations),

members. Therefore, I decided that instead of giving lectures on collectivization, it will be effective if they experienced it practically (primarily handholding and mobilizing community with a prime need of theirs) to the needs of collectivization. These practical demonstrations led to the revival of the Kiya Dadi Gram Sangatan.

We began our work in Sundro by identifying the needs of the village. A 'needs-identification' workshop was conducted in the village; it gave me an insight into some hard realities of the village besides savings and credit, and livelihoods. During the workshop, we identified various issues in the village, including:

- ♦ Lack of proper infrastructure—roads, drinking water facility, transportation, etc.
- ♦ Improper outreach and leakages in entitlements—to name a few, PDS, MGNREGA, Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and Widow Pension.
- ♦ Lack of proper employment opportunities
- ♦ No response from elected representatives when approached
- ♦ Lack of educational infrastructure and manpower in school
- ♦ Lack of proper health facilities in the area. Villagers have to travel almost 25 km to Jainamore (the nearest town) for medical attention.

Post the workshop, the women, as a group, decided to work on PDS. They thought that regularization of PDS may help them address the question of food sufficiency. Because this was a new adventure for the PRADAN team as professionals, we developed our perspective around PDS and also made an effort to understand the context of this block, both de jure and de facto.

The women, as a group, decided to work on PDS. They thought that regularization of PDS may help them address the question of food sufficiency

FIGHTING BACK

With the needs identification having been done in the village, a training programme on the PDS entitlements was conducted for VO members on 15th March 2016, in which the villagers were informed about their rights and entitlements under Right to Food (RTF) and PDS. The new aspect highlighted during this training was that the rights and entitlements were the responsibility of the government to its citizens. The VO members decided that it was necessary that every card-holder of the village should be aware of his/her entitlements, in order to join hands in this claim for rights.

Therefore, VO members took the initiative and called for a village-level meeting of both men and women on 11th April 2016. Naveen (my colleague) and I again shared the information about entitlements according to the RTF Act and PDS. Post this sharing, various issues, with respect to distribution of ration by their dealer (Ankur Mahila Mandal—an SHG present in the area), were discussed. The following were the issues that came up:

- ♦ Non-supply of any ration for the months of February and March.
- ♦ Deduction of a kilogramme of rice in both the Primary Household (PH) and Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards.

- ♦ Money charged for rice in both the cards is one rupee extra.
- ♦ Money charged for sugar is Rs 20 per kg (mandate is Rs 18.35).
- ♦ Money charged for oil is Rs 19 per kg (mandate is Rs 15.05).

- ♦ Every month there were irregularities in the ration distributed, especially, salt, sugar and oil, which are distributed only occasionally.
- ♦ The behaviour of the dealers with the consumers is objectionable. They use foul language and threaten people that they will transfer their card to some other dealer if they ask any questions.
- ♦ In one instance, the dealer claimed that the people need to pay for the transportation and, therefore, he deducted a kilogramme of rice per card.

On 23rd April 2016, the people decided that they wanted to fight for their rights. Their discussions also led them to think that if they had some papers on such entitlements, it would help them to make their allegations against the dealer stronger. Therefore, with the help of Parminder (my colleague), I was able to gather the supporting facts such as dealer payment slips and dealer allocation reports for March and April from the website of the Jharkhand government. These reports confirmed the allocations and the payments made to the dealer.

In the meantime, when the people went to the shop to collect their ration on 29th April 2016, the dealer, as usual, deducted one kilogramme of rice. This time when the people questioned him, the dealer claimed that this deduction would definitely happen and that the people

could take the ration as given or they could walk off without collecting it. The villagers decided to call for a village-level meeting to discuss their issues with the dealer. They also thought that it would be better if their PRI representatives took part in the meeting. They sent separate letters to the dealer, the *mukhiya* of the *panchayat*, the *up-mukhiya* and the Ward Members to attend this meeting. They gave the letters in person and collected a receipt for them.

On the day of the meeting (1 May 2016), at about 11 a.m., the villagers gathered in the school and waited for the officials. Time passed. Even after having accepted the letters, neither the PRI representatives nor the dealer turned up for the meeting. When the gathering started to disperse, the dealer came in and began quarreling with the people. He claimed that all the allocation reports and the payment slips from the Jharkhand government website were false. He threatened the people saying that they should drop their fight or their entitlements would suffer.

He argued that the role of the SHG was to take care of the savings and credit and not to intervene in all these affairs. He began to abuse the women for putting their heads into the business of others. Finally, he warned the people that they could do anything they wanted but nothing would change. After such exchanges, when the people clearly elaborated on the law and their entitlements, the dealer requested for eight days to look into the matter. With hopes that their issue would be sorted out, the villagers left for their homes. They did not know that the situation needed them to showcase their strength on a large scale and the fight would be taken to another level.

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After a week had passed and there was no communication from the dealer, the villagers decided to give another summons to the dealer and other *panchayat* representatives. In the meantime, PRADAN's acquaintance with the State Advisor to the Supreme Court on the RTF Act, Mr. Balram Jo, gave it an opportunity to call for a public hearing. Mr. Balram was willing to come for a field visit. This was a boost to the

movement. The people decided to combine their second village-level meeting with the dealer on the day of the RTF training. They also sent the summon letters to the dealer and PRI representatives to attend the public hearing.

On 16th May 2016, the training on RTF, with a discussion on PDS irregularities, was conducted in Sundro primary school. Mr. Balram Jo, Mr. Halder Mahto, Sub-divisional Officer (SDO), Bermo (Bokaro comes under this sub-division), Block Development Officer (BDO), Jaridih, Block Planning Officer Jaridih, Marketing Officer (MO) Jaridih, various other block officials, professionals from PRADAN and people from villages of Sundro, Beldih, Gopalpur, Arajua, Adasaram, Kamlapur and Bhaski attended the meeting. Information was shared on various social-security schemes such as RTF, MGNREGA and welfare of women and children.

Finally, the women shared their various problem with the PDS in their respective villages. In fact, the *didis* from all these villages raised a uniform concern on rice deduction by the dealer and the extra money collected on the grounds that transportation costs were not paid to the dealers. The government functionaries responded that in order to take

disciplinary action against the dealers, they would need a formal written complaint to be submitted.

They assured the people that stringent action would be taken against those who did not abide by the law. Belarani didi (a member of the Kiya Dadi Gram Sangathan) spoke to the gathering on the situation in Sundro. The MO and the BDO gave the villagers an assurance that these issues would be addressed as soon as possible.

When people from the other villages also complained that they faced similar issues, the MO promised to call a block-level meeting with all the dealers and assured them that ration was distributed as directed by law.

In the words of Puthla didi, "*Hamare liye jo haq adhikar hai, usse sahi tarah se maangna bhi hum log ka jaroori kaam hai, iske liye agar humko kisi ka virodh karna pad raha hai to wo galat nahin* (Claiming our rights is also one of our duties. If for this we have to oppose someone, it is not wrong)."

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRAINING

After a week, the people decided to track the progress of their complaint and whether the MO had taken any action after the social and public hearing. They wrote a letter from their VO to the MO, with copies marked to the BDO, the SDO, the District Supply Officer (DSO), the District Collector (DC), the District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO) and Mr. Balram Jo, requesting for their immediate intervention and action in this matter.

Ten days later, there was still no reply to their communication, leaving the villagers puzzled

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at the kind of administrative accountability that the State of Jharkhand ensures to its citizens.

Belarani didi said, "I run my family by working at breaking stones in the quarry. If I don't get work, it becomes very difficult. I cannot make food at home. At times, it becomes difficult to even pay the school and hostel fees for my son, who studies in a residential school. Ever since we heard about the PDS system in the training, we have been fighting for our rights. No one

gives us a satisfactory reply. We know that we are fighting for our rights yet, so far, neither has someone come to address this issue nor has anyone answered us."

Mr. Balram Jo took up the matter with the Minister of Food and Civil Supplies, Shri. Saryu Roy. Following this, the Minister decided to visit the village.

PUBLIC HEARING

On 23 June 2016, at around five in the evening, the PRADAN team received a message regarding the Minister's visit. For people who had been waiting for just an acknowledgement letter, the message of the Minister's visit was unbelievable and put the didis in high spirits. On 24 June 2016, the Minister made a personal visit to the village to conduct a public hearing.

Chhayamuni Devi said, "After writing the letter, we did not receive any communication for 20 days. We did not even know whether our letter had reached or not. Finally, when we decided to write a follow-up letter, we got the news of the visit. It is really good to know that we are also being listened to and our matters are also being looked into."

The next day, the village was in festive mood. The villagers were elated that their grievance had been heard and that the Minister was coming to their village to address their concerns. They made all the preparations for the public hearing. By nine in the morning, the *didis* of Sundro

The next day, the village was in festive mood. The villagers were elated that their grievance had been heard and that the Minister was coming to their village to address their concerns

gathered in the school and started discussing the problems that needed to be shared, who should share them, and whether they should call the dealer or not, etc. The people from the other *panchayats* occupied their places, waiting for the Minister. They continued to wait as the hours passed. It was 11, then 12, then 1, then 2, then 3, but there was no sign of the Minister. The gathering began to get restless and they began to call up people in the administration to find out if the Minister had crossed the neighbouring villages. At last, at around 3.30 pm, the Minister arrived in Sundro.

The Minister was accompanied by the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), the *mukhiya* of the *panchayat*, the Ward Members and the *up-mukhiya*. As soon as the Minister arrived, he asked PRADAN professionals, who were present, what the problem was and what had made the villagers write the grievance petition. He was given a brief about the context and then the *didis* of the VO spelt out their issues. It was a sight worth seeing. There was such a transformation in the *didis* of Sundro—from being hesitant about placing their views in public forums to coming forward voluntarily in front of such a large group to speak up about their issues.

When they began spelling out their issues in the PDS and their struggle in claiming their rights, the Minister called the dealers to have a discussion with them. However, only the husband of the Secretary of the Ankur Mahila

Mandal had turned up; when asked about the whereabouts of the women in the group, he said that they had gone to collect the ration from the godown. When the Minister said that, according to the Act, rations were to be delivered free of charge, the Secretary remained silent.

The Minister called for the MO and found that the MO was not present. He called the MO on the phone and had a conversation with him. When the MO did not have any answers to his questions, the Minister instantly suspended the MO and cancelled the license of the dealer. The minute this decision was taken, the people of Sundro heaved a sigh of relief. The villagers' faces lit up with smiles. The Minister offered the dealership license to the SHG and said that they could choose a person of their choice to be the dealer.

Seeing this, the women from the other *panchayats* also approached the Minister and began expressing their issues. The Minister asked his Personal Assistants to note down the village and the dealers' names, to follow-up and look into the issues.

After this, the Minister also shared with the people the various movements and processes that are being framed in the light of the RTI Act, to avoid duplicities and to facilitate the proper distribution of ration in the villages. He encouraged the people to raise their voice against such distributional leakages and join hands with the government, to realize the dream of an accountable and transparent PDS.

Before the intervention of PRADAN in the village, there was no awareness about the rights and entitlements of the people. Now, not only are the villagers more aware but they are also looking at rights and entitlements

from a new perspective—as a responsibility and accountability of the government. This has made the people realize that there had been a failure on the part of the government to fulfill its responsibilities. This led them to take up this fight on a large scale. People rejoiced that their first struggle against the system had been successful. The highlight of the day was to see the women speak up to the Minister with courage and put forth their concerns.

I realized that there had been a point in this process when the spark had been lit. The people had taken ownership and that had given them the push to move forward

CHALLENGES FACED

Having seen and experienced the nature of governance in the past years, it was a challenging task for the community to visualize this change from being in the beneficiary syndrome (the government as the benevolent giver of social schemes and the public the receiver, with no say in governance whatsoever) to becoming rights-entitled. Constant motivation was needed to make people realize that they were capable of taking action and that they occupied the space of an equal stake holder in governance. The challenge for the professional engaged in the area was to take this idea to the field.

Second, language was a barrier, restricting gradual flow of discussions in common forums, sometimes restricting the exchange of ideas. This was a hurdle in the trainings and meetings too. But when I reflect now, it was this language barrier that led me to explore new ways of facilitation. It was in this context that the power walk module (a tool that is used to bring to light the various socio-economic and political dynamics existing in the society) was followed. This helped me in the process of visualizing the depth of the deprivations prevalent in the society. The various strata

and divisions in society became clear and with this came the realization and demand for an equitable society.

Last but not the least, the major challenge was during the collectivization. Throughout the

whole process, various questions popped up when engaging with the community. Some of them were: Who should lead this struggle? Should men be called for the meetings and the trainings? How can more women (who are not in the SHG fold) be included in this struggle?

That people did not turn up in full strength for the meetings, making it difficult to arrive at decisions, was another challenge. This was raised as a concern in one of the meetings. After discussions, it was decided that the information about the meetings would be sent to the people through the *manjhi hadams* (the head of the judicial, executive and the administrative functions in the Santhal community). This evolved in a very organic manner in the discussions. I had been concerned about how to address the issue of lack of participation and attendance, and the villagers demonstrated to me that they could evolve and develop a viable option with the available resources at their disposal.

During the initial stages of my engagement, when I called for meetings, the women were reluctant to attend. I sensed often that I was being a bit ahead of the people and that they took things very lightly. After some time, however, the picture changed. The community became enthusiastic and it was I who did not have enough time to manage between my engagements. I realized that there had been a point in this process when the spark had been lit. The people had taken ownership and that had given them the push to move forward.

LEARNINGS

As I recapitulate the journey, I have framed the progression of events into a process cycle. Although communities, their needs, their processes and speed of resolving issues may differ from one another, this is an attempt to narrow down into a common process that can be followed by professionals. This could be used as a rough framework while we engage with the community, especially when working in the arena of governance, rights and entitlements.

The first step began with understanding the context of the village, the different dynamics of the place, the livelihood options, the cropping pattern, the land use, the access to resources, etc. This exercise will help a professional to understand the happenings in the village and analyze the causal linkages to the larger context.

Having gained a fair understanding of this, the next step was to understand the needs of the community. To address this, needs identification workshops were conducted at the village level, in which women from various SHGs took part and analyzed the issues in their village. Post this, a consensus was arrived at, amongst them, as to which issue they wanted to work on.

Once the working agenda was identified, the next step that needed attention was knowledge building by the professional. This means both theoretical knowledge on Acts, Laws, etc., and a reality check of what is in place in the field. This knowledge gathering helps one to recognize and identify the gaps between theory and reality. This knowledge and the identified gaps were further shared in the community to help as a triggering point against the inequalities. In addition, training programmes on PRI and the *gram sabha*

helped develop the confidence of the people of their influence in governance.

The community was then given the time and space to decide whether they wanted to work on that particular issue. This is as an essential step, providing the community with an opportunity to a) spread the word on the gap between the on-paper mandate and the reality and, b) mobilize as a collective to work for their issues.

Next, it is time to brainstorm various actions that could be taken as a collective, to resolve issues. In the initial stages, the community required support and assistance of the professionals at every step. This is, in a way, helpful for the confidence building of the community. A major concern, however, is the sustainability of these institutions and their independent functioning, independent of PRADAN or any other external body.

THE WAY FORWARD

Although the villagers were successful in getting the dealer's license cancelled, it was, however, more an external decision. The VO needs to evolve and occupy the space of a key decision-making authority in village affairs. Another key step would be to make the people realize the strength of collectivization and the push that it gives to the movement. This would mean that more women need to come into the SHG fold and to engage more actively in this on-going struggle to become equal stakeholders in governance.

Seeing the changes in this village, neighbouring villages have also started to raise their voice against the irregularities in the PDS system. Having seen many such struggles spread out in this block, we are now thinking of collectivizing SHGs at the VO level to help villagers claim their rights.

CONCLUSION

Kiya Dadi Gram Sangathan has had a remarkable three months of engagement in regularizing PDS. Today, the heroic story of Sundro is quoted in many other VOs, to bring to light the potential of women's collectives. As the struggle stands, however, there are many challenges and questions that need attention. One question is: How does one work with the supply side? Although there have been many positive outcomes such as the women realizing their potential, mobilizing and collectivizing themselves to take action, the biggest challenge is of working with the supply side. It has been really difficult to handle the major stakeholder (the government). Even after the efforts of community-based collectives to bring to light such leakages, the administration (in specific terms, the local administration such as the *panchayat*, block and district) seems to have an unwelcoming attitude to such initiatives.

Also, in some places, the claims of the dealers are that they are not given their transportation costs, leading them to resort to such actions. This clearly shows that there needs to be transparency brought into the system to prevent people from misusing the system or misguiding villagers.

In our ongoing efforts to collectivize various panchayats, the prime area of focus is to maintain stakeholder relationship with the government, so as to make it more accessible to both us and the community. Whereas on one hand the whole process was crucial in demonstrating the importance of collectivization, the crucial area of intervention that is needed is to formalize the movements under a self-sustainable institutional framework.

सुंदरो गांव में अधिकारियों ने की जनसुनवाई, खाद्य सुरक्षा कानून के विशेषज्ञ ने डीलरों को चेताया

कम राशन दिया तो रद्द होगा लाइसेंस

कटाक्ष | प्रसिद्धि

ग्रामभास विकास महिला संजल द्वारा जरीडीह इन्डस्ट्रियल एंड सुंदरो गांव में सोपवा को खाद्य सुरक्षा कानून को लेकर जनसुनवाई कार्यक्रम का आयोजन किया गया। कार्यक्रम में खाद्य सुरक्षा कानून के विशेषज्ञ एवं यूरोप कौट के राज्य सलाहकार बलराम कौर मुखर्जी अतिथि मौजूद थे।

इसके अलावा हलधर माहली, वैरधो अर्धराज पट्टाधिकारी कुन्दन कुमार, जरीडीह इन्डस्ट्रियल एंड सुंदरो गांव में अन्य कई विकास के पट्टाधिकारी भी कार्यक्रम में उपस्थित थे। जनसुनवाई में जरीडीह इन्डस्ट्रियल के बलराम कौर मुखर्जी, अर्धराज पट्टाधिकारी से आगे बैठकों लोगों को संवेदित करने हुए बलराम ने कहा कि खाद्य सुरक्षा कानून के तहत अब अगर कोई भी डीलर लवचुकी को राशन देने में

असमर्थता या लवचुकी करे तो उसका बोधी कानूनी कार्रवाई होगी। लाभुकी को निर्धारित मात्रा में निर्धारित दर पर राशन मुहैया कराने की जिम्मेवारी डीलरों की है।

कहा: डीलरों द्वारा राशन कटौती, सरकार द्वारा निर्धारित दर से ज्यादा पैसे लेने की लगातार शिकायतें मिल रही हैं, लेकिन अगर लवचुकी की एक छोटकी भी कम राशन मिला तो डीलर का लाइसेंस रद्द किया जाएगा।

अगर लाभुकी को किसी मात्र का राशन नहीं मिलता है तो सरकार उसके बदले लाभुकी के बैंक खाते में नगद रशिज भेजेगी। बैरधो एरस्टोरम कुन्दन कुमार ने कहा कि शायीनों की हर शिकायत संबंधित से ली जाएगी। मौके पर पट्टाधिकारी आकेत कुमार, नोदल पट्टाधिकारी पंकज दुबे, आभूति पट्टाधिकारी दिनेश कुमार सिंह के



सोपवा को सुंदरो गांव में जनसुनवाई में उपस्थित महिला-सुंदरो। • अनुमल

अलावा प्रधान संस्था के परमिन्दर सिंह, सांतना लक्ष्मी, जयवीर पासाहन, मोतीष कुमार, अमृता, तुलसी कुमार, शिखा

श्री, जयवी, शीरष, महादुर तापी, सुभाषिण के अलावा उपमुखिया सुप्री हांसरा, श्री दुद, जीवन दुद,

कृष्णाकिशोर होम्बर, जगेंद्रका मुनू, श्रीकांत सोहन, बेला राय व अन्य लोग मौजूद थे।

Press note of Public Hearing held in Sundro village, Bokaro district, Jharkhand.

Earlier, the women of the SHG had no awareness about their rights and entitlements. Now, not only are the women more aware but they are also looking at rights and entitlements from a new perspective—as a responsibility and accountability of the government.



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

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